

South Sudan: Tribal Wonders of the White Nile Tour

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I've always had a great affection for South Sudan. Before I visited Africa's newest country for the first time a few years ago, I used to help South Sudanese refugees fleeing from the war of independence just a mere 14 years ago, to settle into their new homes in Australia. Since then, when I've been lucky enough to have the chance to return to one of the world's newest countries, it's been like watching a child grow up. Gone are the days where Juba was almost all rugged dirt roads. South Sudan is growing fast and Juba now has more bitumen and sprinkles of modern hotels, restaurants and a burgeoning commercial centre.

So it was with some excitement that I met my expedition group in Juba for our tour this year. Joining me were some wonderful intrepid photographers who shared our adventure in one of the most remote yet spectacular corners of Africa.

We met in the hotel lobby before heading down to the edge of the White Nile. A gigantic, fast flowing river that pulses its way through Juba, we sat down at the edge of the river to enjoy a cold beer and a welcome dinner. Our view was to an old passenger ferry that had somehow wrecked in the middle of the Nile's fast flowing waters and was now sitting there, like a ghost ship adrift in one of the Africa's largest rivers. In the shade of giant mango trees, we sat and enjoyed meeting each other to the sounds of wheeling African Palm Swifts overhead. It was a wonderful introduction to this incredible tour that not only went off without any hitches, but saw us all going to celebrations like Mundari weddings, Lopit rainmaker dances and Jie women dancing for their favourite cows. Combine the beautiful ceremonies with so many amazing village visits and portrait shoots and this expedition truly was one to remember!

Toposa

The following morning we all boarded the small flight out to Kapoeta. Our expedition crew had travelled by road ahead of us and when we arrived on the dirt air strip, we were met by air conditioned 4wd vehicles for the transfer out to the Toposa region of Eastern Equatoria.

On our way out into the countryside we stopped to visit a well on the side of the road where we met a number of esteemed Toposa elders to say hello. It is always the most polite approach to introduce ourselves before we wander off into people's villages and this stop allowed us to meet some lovely people including some very beautifully decorated Toposa women.

Further up the road we made a brief pit stop at a tiny Toposa village where we had stayed on our previous expedition. I wanted to see if the clinic director from Uganda was still there. He apparently is still working there but when we arrived he wasn't around so we continued onwards, crossing a couple of dry river beds before finding some shady trees to enjoy our boxed lunch.

A short time later we arrived at our camp for the next two nights, in a shady krall area that the Toposa had fenced off with thornybush branches. Just nearby was a makeshift 'church' where local Toposa gathered to pray each night.

Our first afternoon with the Toposa was spectacular! From where we camped we made a short walk to an extensive village where we wandered around meeting people and taking photos until sunset. During our meanderings through this stunning, hand-sculpted village with its pretty huts and stilted granaries (Ekore), we gained our first glimpses into bucolic Toposa life. Meeting women making houses, grinding grain, smoking large pipes (ljoo) and small children climbing around familiar housing structures. As the light turned to golden hour we were surprised by five beautifully decorated Toposa women who danced their way towards us and let us take photos in the most glorious glow of the late afternoon.

Faced with so much intricate and beautiful decoration it was hard to tear ourselves away but it was getting dark so we started on our walk back to camp, stopping to photograph baby goats in an Ekore, old women smoking pipes, campfires being lit and women sweeping the hearths in front of their sculpted homes. It was all just breathtakingly beautiful.

That night we fell asleep to a lullaby sung by braying donkeys and a small assembly of Toposa people who had gathered in the makeshift church for a night prayer and singing.

The Toposa people live at the edge of the wild. Spotted Hyenas are a regular feature of their daily lives and that night, as we slept we heard them whooping and yelping in the middle of the night. At one point one sounded very close to us and it felt quite magical to know that these creatures were roaming close to us.

The following morning we returned to the village at sunrise to find women up and about making new homes. While we watched and took photographs we noticed a couple of them had amazing body scarification, our introduction to this remarkable keloid scar practice that helps to define a Toposa woman in her culture and her clan. Around the village we saw wild animal and cow skins being stretched and pegged out to dry on the ground. These would later be used as sleeping mats for the most part.

While we were wandering around a couple of Toposa women approached us to see if we would like to buy some of their handmade Nyandol skirts. These lovely items fashioned out of beaded goatskins and worn by little Toposa girls at ceremonies really caught our eye so a few of us agreed to purchase some as souvenirs.

Before we returned to camp, the final highlight of our morning visit was the appearance of an incredible Toposa woman carrying a large Kudu skin. In all of my travels in Africa, I had only seen this once before and that was during my first visit to the Dassanech people of Ethiopia, who use Kudu skins to line their baby cradles. I hadn't expected to find a Toposa woman carrying one until this shy lady emerged from the village to show us the most amazing skin. Even though the light was getting harsh we found a spot in the shade to photograph her carrying it, the white stripes offsetting her appearance beautifully.

During the middle of the day, and before the heat became too intense, we invited many of the beautifully decorated and scarred Toposa women to visit us in the camp where we set up a shady, impromptu studio to photograph them all.

Finally the heat was becoming intense so we decided to wait for the worst of it to subside while having a siesta before going out for a late afternoon shoot in the villages. Thankfully as the afternoon wore on, some clouds rolled in and during our afternoon stroll around the village we actually could smell and feel a few drops of rain. We met a lovely young Toposa girl and we photographed her wearing a ceremonial Serval skin in the doorway of a home and also as she sat in an Ekore. While we enjoyed taking photos of her, we were joined by a young Toposa hunter who kindly allowed us to photograph him also. The clouds subsided a little to leave us with another glorious late afternoon glow so we wandered around again, until sunset, photographing buildings, people and their end of day activities. That night we fell asleep again to the Toposa people singing prayer songs at the nearby church. Called "Nyokorot" this lively song was accompanied by drumming, summoning people from the nearby village to pray in the moonlight. Although this was a Christian gathering, the Toposa still largely adhere to their animist beliefs even despite the influence of missionaries.

When it finally ended and people went to bed, the night sounds of hyenas and Toposa herders bringing their animals back to the village were the only things we heard.

Our final farewell with the Toposa started the following morning at sunrise. As we dined on an early breakfast we started to realise the whole village was assembling in the open area near the church. Upon joining them the Toposa women broke into this spectacular ceremonial dance in their masses, inviting us to sit centre stage and just be surrounded by their athletic dances and melodic singing. Towards the end of it, two elderly Toposa women joined them, dressed in ceremonial Serval skins to signify their elder status. We were completely overwhelmed by so much beauty with these women. Even the younger women all wore ceremonial Nyandols, elaborate beaded jewellery, adornments made from Colobus fur and anklets featuring loud metal bells worn above rustic sandals. What an incredible way to end our time with these extraordinary people. It was hard for us all to leave!

Jie

After we packed up camp we drove north towards the Kathangor Hills and the Boma Plateau, both home regions of South Sudan's spectacular Jie people.

Related to the Toposa yet even more remote, the Jie also live in hand-sculpted villages, except the architecture of them is slightly different. Often living in multi-story homes, each with their own private plot to grow crops like tobacco, we visited two large Jie communities in the flatlands without the aforementioned mountains being visible. As we arrived we began to see the struggles that the Jie were having with water. A purpose built reservoir had been constructed by NGOs in their area but sadly this was dry. The ground beneath the Jie villages doesn't hold a lot of water so building wells where they live is out of the question. Consequently a lot of Jie people were having to travel great distances to get water to survive.

We set up camp in a fenced compound that is often used by visiting NGOs to help the Jie with issues like water, medical care and agriculture. It was hot, dry and rugged but it provided a couple of trees for shade, one of which shared a colony of Little Free-tailed Bats (*Chaerephon pumilus*) which kept us amused in between visits to the local Jie villages.

After setting ourselves up there we ventured out to meet our first Jie people in a nearby village until sunset. The alarming lack of water meant that we saw mostly beautiful buildings and young women and girls on this first visit. Many of the older women had gone out for the afternoon to fetch water. Still, it was a nice introduction to the Jie houses (Akaie), with their stilted granaries (Ekuru). Wandering around we instantly noted that the Jie are known for their fierce ability to hunt. Not a single animal skin in their communities came from a domestic animal. Every skin was from a wild gazelle or other ungulate that the Jie hunt. This came in stark contrast to the similar Toposa who used a mix of domestic and wild animal skins in their homes.

We also met a number of young girls getting ready for the evening by grinding grain while elderly Jie women smoked large water pipes (Ebolo) nearby. As we walked a young Jie child approached us to offer some desert fruits called Nyeromit. I tried one and I quite enjoyed its sweet taste and fibrous texture. It's the sort of fruit you chew on until the sweetness fades and then you spit out the large centre seed. They were quite delicious actually!

On this walk we got to see our first Jie piercings, the most striking of which is Alikitik, or upper lip piercing and Nyagilai, or lower lip piercing. Started as young girls, these piercings form a part of the trademark body decoration in Jie women and they are really striking in appearance. We also met a lovely, handsome young Jie man and finally, just as the light was getting low, a few elderly Jie women with their beaded jewellery and 'guineafowl' facial scarification (Labaran).

Just as the sun was setting we wandered back to our cars through a labyrinth of beautiful homes.

At sunrise the following morning we enjoyed a quick coffee before driving out to a Jie community that had better access to drinking water. The contrast between this village and the one we visited the previous afternoon couldn't have been more profound. We arrived to see a beautifully dressed Jie woman preparing for the day, fetching grain and other food from her pretty granary (Ekuru). Upon seeing us she dug out her finest jewellery and started donning it for us to take photos. Given that the backdrop of the villages makes for some quite frustrating photos we decided to meet her in a nearby open place, on a plain at the edge of the village. As we began photographing her more and more Jie women emerged from the village and soon we found ourselves in a visual overload surrounded by so many incredible looking women that it was hard to know where to start with photos. We met some truly incredible women that morning and even the more plainly dressed women carrying firewood, food, water and chickens were amazing. Literally everytime we turned around there was another beautiful Jie woman or child standing nearby. We stayed until the light became too strong and the heat began to intensify before returning to our camp for a late breakfast.

After we dined we set up our studio again, this time to photograph a succession of stunning Jie women and girls in a portrait environment. This endless stream of women fascinated all of us and we worked with them until lunchtime creating portraits of as many as we could

During the siesta the heat of the camp really set in and most of us struggled to get cool even in the shade. It was so hot and dry that one of the tiny bats who shared our camp simply dropped out of the sky mid-flight!!!! I grabbed my shirt and picked it up gently then gave it a small sip of water from the lid of my water bottle. I uncovered it and let it sit on my lap to help cool it down. It soon recovered and flew off thank goodness.

That afternoon we drove out to the same village to attend a ceremonial dance called Okorot, where Jie women celebrate the colours of their favourite cows. This lively dance involves a large circle of women clapping their hands and singing while singular women burst out from the crowd to dance solo. It is very similar in structure to the ceremonial dances in the culturally similar Toposa people and although this dance was a bit more chaotic than the one we saw with the Toposa, it will still be pretty amazing to see so many stunning Jie women around us. When it concluded we gave out gifts as a thank you for allowing us to join them and we headed back to our camp for our final dinner in the Jie area.

Our final morning saw us go for another sunrise shoot in a Jie village where we met some of the women from the previous night's dance, elderly women sitting on wild skins and we stumbled across a newly made Ekuru where we photographed a young Jie boy who climbed inside it. While doing so we met the elderly woman who had crafted this structure and it was amazing to see how tough her hands were to make such a strong, large, woven basket to store food.

It was our final morning with the Jie, a group of people I had yearned to meet for such a very long time and I was so pleased to have finally made it to them. My only hope for them as we left was for more water. Out of all the people we visited on this trip, the Jie really were in the most need of help on that front.

We had to return and pack up our camp so we went back for a late breakfast before leaving for Kapoeta. On the way back one of our vehicles got bogged in the soft sand of the Lotien riverbed so we had to arrange for it to be winched out by another of our expedition vehicles, making me feel thankful we weren't on our own in such a remote place.

Reaching Kapoeta we stopped for a break at a local hotel where we all enjoyed showers and a much needed cold beer! It was a chance for us to jump on the internet, have something to eat and prepare for the next leg of our journey, to the Kimotong Mountains west of Kapoeta, home to another beautiful tribe, the Laarim.

Laarim

South Sudan is largely flat geographically, that is, until you hit these 'islands' of granite peaks like the rugged Kimotong Mountains, whose spiralling needle-like summits pierce the African sky above your head. In contrast to the hot flatlands, these mountains act like an oasis of life, with natural sources of water feeding great stands of Doum Palms and pretty semi-arid succulents like Desert Roses. Surviving in such a stunning landscape are troupes of both Patas Monkeys and Olive Baboons, a wide variety of birds and also Rock Hyraxes and other shy wild creatures.

Culturally the Kimotong is home to the Laarim people. These smaller, beautifully decorated people live in immaculate villages at the base of the Kimotong, in whimsically shaped houses whose spiral peaked roofs almost emulate the shape of the mountains towering above them.

We arrived at our thatched fencing campsite shortly before sunset after a spectacular drive along the western edge of the mountains. Upon seeing us a few of the Laarim children recognised me and one of my guests from our last visit. Suddenly they yelled out "Nauren! Nakoyen!" their words for the 'short one' and the 'tall one' and we instantly had little hands in ours while we walked to the nearby village. There weren't a huge amount of people around that afternoon but we did enjoy our first views of pretty Laarim houses with their beautifully hand formed clay walls, painted motifs and spiral roofs. We met two women, one of whom was beautifully adorned with jewellery and another younger woman whose scarification took our breaths away so we spent a little time photographing them until the light became too dim, forcing us to return to camp.

That night we watched a full yellow moon rise over the mountains and as we slept we were serenaded by the calls of Olive Baboons, Donaldson Smith Nightjars and a Greyish Eagle Owl. What a magical night it was in the Kimotong.

The next morning I had hoped to show the group their first Laarim grinding pits. We arrived at the villages near to them, however, and got so distracted with photographing people and houses that, by the time we reached the pits it was already too late in the morning and the women had stopped using them. It didn't really matter though.

After our sunrise shoot we returned to camp for a late breakfast before heading out to an abandoned school where we had planned a rendezvous with a number of pretty Laarim girls to photograph their decoration, piercing and scarifications. As we arrived a number of them broke into singing. Of all the people we meet on this tour, it is perhaps the Laarim who sing the most amazing songs and listening to them we were all enthralled.

That singing was to continue for our afternoon shoot which involved us attending a pretty ceremony of young Laarim girls until sunset.

On that visit we went to see the flour mill that our last tour donated to the community. We also met a young woman dressed in her widow's attire, for her husband had been recently killed in a cattle raid, most likely by Toposa men. I asked gently if we could photograph her. I am never so sure about these requests and I'm always happy if they are declined. After all this person was mourning. It is completely understandable that they wouldn't want to be photographed. She initially declined so I left it at that.

Our guides told us that women were up at the grinding pits so we walked up to them and spent a glorious time both taking photos and videos of them using these ancient pits to grind sorghum into flour stored in stunningly beautiful decorated kalabashes.

After another beautiful evening at camp we went for a final sunrise photo shoot in the nearby Laarim villages, scaling the small hill of one of them to get a view over the surrounding landscape. We met some young Laarim children herding goats and we stopped to photograph our last village scenes before we returned to the camp for breakfast.

Just as we were packing our camp up to leave two amazing things happened. The widow of the previous day arrived at our camp. She had decided she would be OK with photographs so, in complete appreciation of her acceptance we donated a larger than normal sum of money to help her with supporting her four children, left behind by the death of their father.

If that wasn't wonderful and humbling enough, just as we were leaving the Laarim girls decided to visit us in a large group to perform a truly beautiful farewell dance for us as we packed up our camp!

Faced with a relatively long drive ahead of us we drove out of the Kimotong and headed west towards the next range of mountains, the Tchalam, whose northern end is crowned by the Lopit Hills.

Lopit

After turning off in the Tchalam, we stopped for lunch in the only shade we could find – some trees adjacent to a makeshift tin shed at the base of the granite peaks. It was almost as if the midday sun had turned the rocks of these mountains into an oven as, even in the shade of trees, we could feel the heat radiating off them as we ate.

We finished up and drove the roughest track of our entire expedition – the only road that takes you to Immehejek, home to the wonderful Lopit people.

After traversing many potholed stretches and dried riverbeds filled with rocks we reached Immehejek in time to set up our camp in the village and do a short walk up to the nearby Lopit village where we met our first decorated Lopit warriors in the central village dance arena.

Their appearance instantly took our breaths away. Adorned with huge headdresses (Sikirate) which are normally worn for funerals and other celebrations, this small group of men proudly came wearing these to allow us to photograph them. We could only stay for a short time but their appearance was so overwhelmingly decorated it was hard to wander back down the hill!

Ethnically the Lopit are culturally related to the Lotuho people and their villages, which spill down the sides of the Lopit Hills, are equally as labyrinthine as their relatives. We stopped for a short time to plan a sunrise hike for the following day and also to admire the large Lopit houses which looked a bit like shaggy conical homes but were quite charismatic in their own way.

The next morning I arranged for us to have coffee at 0430 for we had planned to do a hike to the summit of a nearby hill to photograph the Lopit warriors at sunrise in the mountains. It was quite a scramble to get up there with our head torches but thankfully it was still dark so at least it was cool. Our Lopit friends were a little late but they made it up to join us while the light was still good so we enjoyed being up there with them on the rocks before we climbed down to enjoy a late breakfast at camp.

We found another lovely school in the village where we could set up a studio for portraits with the Lopit guys so that is how we filled our time until lunch and a siesta.

That afternoon we explored the nearby Lopit village homes taking photos of people, homes, the makers of Sikirate masks and finally a sunset shoot with more Lopit guys on a nearby granite kopje before enjoying a dinner under the stars at camp.

On our final morning we went up to the dance arena where we were to witness one of the most extraordinary ceremonies we would see on our entire tour – that of Oriaha, or the dance of the rain makers, in Lopit culture. We were joined by our warriors and also a group of beautifully dressed Lopit women with their lacy beaded collars plus a throng of excited children and onlookers. What a spectacle! It was hard to work out who was enjoying it more in the end – them or us!

When it had concluded the village head man invited us over to his home to drink some local beer and meet his family. We graciously accepted and as we sat in the immaculate courtyard of his house, we drank a fermented drink made from sorghum that tasted like a lightly alcoholic yoghurt. It was served in a ceremonial gourd and some of us quite enjoyed it.

The highlight of this visit, however, was meeting his mother, an elderly Lopit lady who still had her ears clipped as part of the traditional Lopit decoration. This tradition, along with so many others in South Sudan and across Africa, is dying. This lovely elderly lady was one of around 10 women only in the Lopit Hills who still are alive with their ears like this so meeting her really was a privilege.

We finally meandered back to our camp to pack up for the long drive to Juba.

It was our night off so all of us enjoyed showers, dinners, battery charging, air conditioning, a soft bed, photo downloading, internet access and a luxurious sleep in the following day.

Mundari

The magical Mundari. There are few people in Africa that are more mesmerising than its last true cattle nomads. These people have an almost symbiotic relationship with their giant Ankole Watusi cows and we arrived at their camp just as Mundari men were bringing their cows in from grazing.

The smoke of fires and dust was already billowing above the camp and none of us could resist getting out of the cars to go and visit them. While we did so, our team found a shady spot between two Mundari camps, under the trees beside a river.

When we arrived I was a little surprised to see so many Mundari people there. In comparison to my previous visit where there quite a lot more people at our camp. When I asked why we were told that they were there for a wedding, that an exchange of cows for the bride was taking place and that we would be here at a time of great celebration for the Mundari. What an amazing and lucky treat to be there then!

Over the course of the next two days we were out at sunrise and sunset taking photos of the camp and daily Mundari life. We were blessed to document their entire daily routine which started at sunrise with cows being rubbed with fire ash to protect their skin and eyes; young children collecting dung to dry and use as fire fuel; young Mundari people drinking milk directly from cows and goats; bathing in cow urine; milking and even blowing into the vaginas of cows to make them produce more milk. The young men would then take the cows out for the day to graze while we would have a rest back at camp.

In the afternoons, when the cows were being returned the camp burst into frenetic activity again as dried dung was collected to start fires; animals were tethered for the night; cooking dinner was on the agenda and the Mundari settled into an evening of singing and sleeping next to their beloved cows.

During our siestas, which were often unbearably hot, we set up a portrait studio in our camp to take photos of our Mundari friends.

At other times we were often visited by Mundari people who were on foot between the two camps and who were just curious about what was going on with us. At dinner on our first night, a group of young Mundari women hung out at our camp singing pretty wedding songs without any prompting from us. It was so lovely to listen to them getting excited about the forthcoming nuptials in their community.

This lovely camp being right next to a semi-dry river, also meant we saw some wonderful birds including Woodland Kingfisher, Hadedda Ibis, Blacksmith Lapwings, Black-headed Gonolek, Brown Babblers and several times we had a pair of gigantic African Fish Eagles swoop our camp with their hauntingly beautiful calls. Other avian highlights included a Square-tailed Nightjar roosting and calling one morning outside our toilet tent and also a Hammerkop excitedly flying off with his lunch of frog. At night all we could hear was the melodic chorus of a large group of African Bullfrogs singing from ponds in the river bed and the chatter of Mundari people in between their braying cows and ringing cow bells. It's hard to imagine a more beautiful night time lullaby in Africa.

A Mundari Wedding

We had two incredible highlights of our stay with the Mundari and one of them was the leadup celebrations to a wedding which involved the exchange of around 50 cows from the groom's family to the bride's family. This large gathering of people culminated in an utterly spectacular ceremony on the last afternoon of our stay where over 200 Mundari men and women gathered at the camp for singing, dancing and playing music in the dust. While men performed music using drums and large 'tung' horns, they also danced in extraordinarily high jumps into the air, surrounding a large group of Mundari women standing in the middle of them, singing and clapping. It was absolutely mesmerising to be involved in this event and when the dust of the dance arena became too much the whole group was moved to a place with grass so the celebrations could continue on into the night.

Recreating History in South Sudan

I have been in love with Africa and its people for over 35 years this year. Before I came on this journey to South Sudan I had decided I'd like to recreate a small piece of history that disappeared from the country at around the same time as my first visit to Africa in 1990.

I had seen some wonderful old photographs of the Dinka from esteemed African photographers Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher. Instantly falling in love with their decoration I sought antique pieces to buy as part of my own personal collection.

On this tour I took with me two Maluals (or large Dinka corsets), a beaded Maiaka (Dinka collar) and also a very old Guet (Dinka necklace) with me. My intention was to find several Mundari and Dinka (they are very similar culturally) to wear them for me in the cattle camps.

Our first introduction to Mundari girls wearing these beautiful items was at our camp when some girls volunteered to wear them for us at a portrait session.

The true highlight, however, was the arrival of two beautiful Dinka women – Aker an Nyanda – who donned the Malual and Maiakas to model them for us in the cattle camps. It was a wonderful final highlight of the tour and one that may never be repeated again on our trips. This is largely due to the fragile nature of these items and the sheer amount of work it took to organise this very special shoot for our group.

I'm not going to say "never again" as you never know what the future holds. Watching these two beautiful young Dinka women wearing these antique pieces as they wandered around the giant cows of our camp was a wonderful end to our time with the Mundari.

After a final sunrise shoot with our newfound Mundari friends we packed up our camp and headed back to Juba where we had an afternoon of rest, packing and enjoying the cool of the air conditioning after a very hot three days with the Mundari

That night we enjoyed a celebratory dinner by the river with our camp crew to celebrate a truly memorable expedition to South Sudan.