

The author being briefed by Karo warriors on the need for AK-47s because of tribal warfare

Into the DANGER ZONE

The trek from Kenya's Lake Turkana up Ethiopia's Omo River is not for the faint of heart. Undaunted, **MARK SHAND** takes on what has been described as a "hard, hot, pitiless place" and experiences an adventure like no other.

THE PHONE RANG AS A SMALL gray squirrel ran across my garden in Kew, London. "Shand," the caller said when I picked up the receiver. "It's Don. Do you want to go somewhere really extraordinary?"

"Where?" I asked suspiciously. The last few trips I embarked on with my friend Don McCullin—the 70-year-old photojournalist and war photographer—we had narrowly avoided being eaten by cannibals, lined up in front of a death squad, and getting shipwrecked. In fact, we both ended up in the hospital with malaria.

"To Africa—northern Kenya and Ethiopia, to be exact," he replied. "I've been going there a lot lately, photographing some stunning tribespeople for my new book. There's this great young guy, Will Jones, who organizes fantastic specialized journeys, and we now have a chance to go into a really remote area. We would cross northern Kenya's Lake Turkana by boat into Ethiopia and then travel up the Omo

River, to coincide with the flooding of the river and delta in September. Only a handful of people get in each year."

"Is it dangerous?" I inquired.

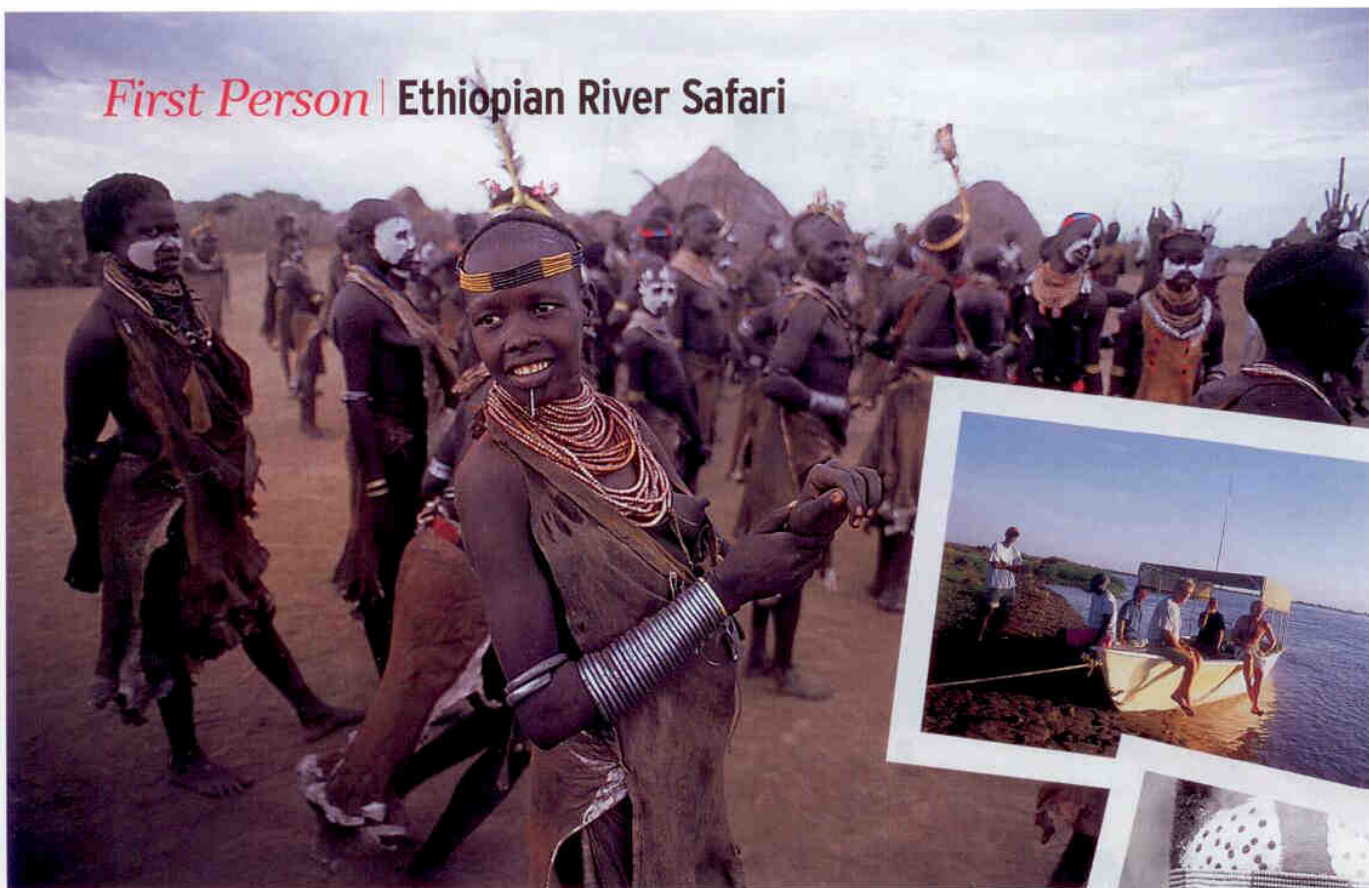
"What's the matter with you? You're getting soft!" Don exclaimed. "As I know, you like your comforts." This was a little below the belt since Don is the only person I know who travels with his own tea bags. He added, "Will has arranged for us to stay in one of Kenya's most luxurious camps, Little Shompole, at the end of our trip."

At the end of our trip, I thought unhappily. If we ever got there...

The trip took exactly 12 hours door-to-door. We flew from London to Nairobi on Kenya Airway's new flat-bed service, connecting seamlessly to a private charter that left us standing in the Cradle of Mankind—the scorching, arid, windblown, and fossil-ridden landscape of Sibiloi National Park at the Koobi Fora Research Project, on the eastern shore of Lake Turkana. It was here in the sixties and seventies that Dr. Richard



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Leakey and his famous “hominid gang” discovered the fossils of early man.

Running our expedition four decades later were Will Jones of Journeys by Design, a niche operator producing tailor-made safaris, and Halewijn Scheuerman, a local guide and the man, Jones declared, who was going to keep us alive. Of Dutch origin with a Spanish soul and a French education, Scheuerman possesses a lifetime of travel experience across this remarkable continent—leading camel treks over the Atlas Mountains, walking safaris through the deserts of Sudan and Namibia, and for the past ten years running these unique boat and fishing trips on Lake Turkana and the Omo River delta.

He met us with three of ten boats he had built himself from the mold of an old Italian wreck he found locally. Each is 32 feet long and made of fiberglass. Powered by 115hp engines, they're equipped with canopies, VHF marine-band radios, and portable generators. In “safari configuration,” they can carry six passengers, three crew members, a chef, camping gear, plus a weeklong supply of fuel and food. But best of all are the two large refrigerators—which meant ice in my Scotch.

Lake Turkana is the largest permanent desert lake in the world, with a shoreline

longer than Kenya's seacoast. It's known as the Jade Sea because of its striking color. But that afternoon, as we surfed across choppy caramel waves topped with foamy white spray that whipped in our faces when a demonic wind picked up, there was nothing colorful about it. At this time of year, after the long rains of June and July, the lake is at its most unpredictable.

Then suddenly, in the late afternoon, it was as if some greater power had simply flipped a switch. The wind died, the sun burst through the haze, and the lake became as calm as a millpond. We were nearing land. Little tropical islands—chunks of the delta torn away by the power of the Omo River in full spate—floated gently past us. Like uniformed captains standing on the bridge of their ships, black-and-white African fish eagles were hunched imperiously on the trees, their baleful topaz eyes scanning the water for prey.

We were now in no-man's-land—the wild, gray, and lawless grounds separating Kenya and Ethiopia, over which, according to Scheuerman, neither country wants nor cares enough about to enforce any semblance of governmental control. The fishermen we saw were Turkana from Kenya. They come up to the border at this time of year, Scheuerman explained, to take

From top: Karo girls ready for a dance ceremony; on the Omo River delta; Karo man in full traditional body decoration.

GETTING THERE

Journeys by Design will customize a private two-week safari by boat along the Omo River and into Lake Turkana starting at \$6,000 per person, including all meals, drinks, and private transfers. The best time of year to travel to the region is from July to October, when the Omo is in flood and the delta becomes accessible. ☎ 212-568-7639; www.journeysbydesign.co.uk

Kenya Airways has daily service from Heathrow to Nairobi. Round-trip coach starts at \$880 a person; a flat-bed in Premier World starts at \$2,845. 866-536-9224; www.kenya-airways.com

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advantage of the fish-rich waters of the flooding delta. But, he added, they know exactly how far to venture. If they drift too close, they most certainly will be attacked and killed by the Dassanech peoples of the lower Omo River, a consequence of the rampant tribal warfare. We really were, I thought with some trepidation, entering Africa's Wild West, a region that is raw, beautiful, relatively untainted, and, no question about it, dangerous.

THE WATER LEVEL HAD DROPPED dramatically, from nine feet to three. Scheuerman steered our flotilla along a tiny channel through a maze of treacherous eddies and hidden silt banks into a deep outflowing tributary. We came upon a riverine estuary that proved to be a bird lover's paradise. Over ice-cold beer and chilled white wine, Jones and Scheuerman patiently identified the myriad species indulging in the feeding frenzy that was creating a deafening cacophony around us. Apart from the pelicans—the pink-backed and the great white—I was particularly taken by the yellow-billed storks. With their long, bright yellow legs, they reminded me of women in mod outfits strutting their stuff around London during the Swinging Sixties. And there were the crocs—lots of them, of all sizes, including a couple of monsters—sunning themselves on the mud banks and then sliding, quietly and menacingly, into the river each time we tried to get closer to take photographs.

As we pushed on upriver toward our camp, we were now officially in Ethiopia. It was getting dark and the river took on a sinister feel, as the mass of vegetation along

both banks seemed to be closing in on us, hastened by the incoming mist that was creating ghostly cobwebs just above the water's surface. My imagination ran riot: I became Captain Willard of the film *Apocalypse Now*, on his mission to take out the mad Colonel Kurtz. On our left the forest had thinned out, and silhouetted against the darkening western skyline were giant termite hills with needlelike points, mirroring the beautiful spire-shaped stupas and wats in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

We reached camp after dark, situated under a fretwork of giant ancient fig trees high on a bank overlooking the river. And what a camp, the standard of which, considering just where we were, was beyond belief. The spacious high-domed tents came complete with proper camp beds, crisp sheets, and, most important of all, comfortable pillows that were perfumed with the smoke of local incense to keep away the millions of malarial mosquitoes.

There were also two showers, two excellent bathrooms, a canopied sitting and dining area illuminated by soft electric light and powered by a strangely silent generator, plus food and drink to die for. That evening we dined on the catch of the day, Nile perch wrapped in herbs, followed by a rich chocolate mousse and French Brie; we washed it all down with a delicious dry white South African wine and, in my case, single malt with ice. Bliss.

We also had security in the form of three immensely tall Dassanech elders—Scheuerman's friends from a nearby village. Carrying little wooden stools that double as pillows, they wore tartan shawls, satin shorts, and not much else. More to the point, they were suitably armed with heavy sticks, knives, leather ammunition pouches, and the omnipresent AK-47s, which had flooded the underground market after the fall of the oppressive Ethiopian Communist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime in the nineties. Slung nonchalantly across their shoulders, the guns scared the life out of me, as did these tribesmen appearing in and out of the darkness like spirits while they patrolled against marauding hyenas...and humans.

The next day Scheuerman took our passports to the little township of Omorate to officially check us in to Ethiopia. The rest of us headed to another village nearby.

BACK IN THE HIGHLIFE: LITTLE SHOMPOLE

After roughing it on our two-week safari up Ethiopia's Omo River, we were more than ready for the star treatment awaiting us at Little Shompole, the new and superluxurious two-suite addition to the Shompole resort on the Kenyan-Tanzanian border. With breathtaking views of the Great Rift Valley and Lake Natron, this unique zenlike property on the edge of the Nguruman Escarpment is famous for the design and sheer size of its bedrooms, which is why the place is affectionately known by its many local and international patrons as Shagpole. Still, Little Shompole defies the imagination. Just up the hill from the main building, each of its two suites is so large you could waltz in the loo, tango in the shower, and break-dance on the bed. Turned out we were its first guests, and the couple of days of R&R we enjoyed before flying home capped off our perfect African adventure.

From \$350 per person; 212-568-7639; www.journeysbydesign.co.uk.

—M.S.



From top: A suite with an oversize bed surrounded by cooling water; the guest pool with Mt. Shompole in the distance; the suite's private deck.



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From top: Dassanech homesteads and granaries on the Omo; Karo warriors posing for photographer Don McCullin.

The Dassanech are just one of the ethnic groups in this wild, undisturbed part of Africa whose ancient customs have remained intact. For instance, they still practice female circumcision, animism is still the religion, and most of them are agropastoralists, cultivating sorghum, tobacco, millet, and cotton. Their livestock is of utmost importance; the number of cattle and goats they own indicates not only wealth but also prestige. This village alone boasted 30,000 head of cattle. And the hostility this creates among neighboring tribes is fierce. Cattle raiding, blood feuds, and land issues spark off internecine warfare with fatalities increasing, owing to the accessibility of automatic weaponry, namely the AK-47.

When we arrived at the village, we were mobbed—or rather Don was. He was the photographer.

And the hands were out for money. Jones explained that money for photographs is endemic in Africa now. It's a way these people, too, can benefit from tourism. A very reasonable price of two birr (one Ethiopian birr equals approximately \$7) per photograph was negotiated.

Leaving Don and Jones (lugging a trunk of cash) to sort it all out, I wandered around the village with a translator. It was fairly large, consisting of about 30 or 40 huts shaped like giant honeypots, surrounding an acacia-thorn *boma*, or stockade, where the prize livestock were safeguarded from

hyenas. A curious crowd of young girls, topless and stunningly adorned with necklaces made of colored beads and cowrie shells, soon gathered around me, due only, I regret to say, to their fascination with my own tattoos. The body decoration of scarification and painting practiced by the Omo tribes is among the most beautiful and extravagant anywhere in the world, and has both social and cosmetic significance.

Escaping from the group's clutches, I cannoned straight into the midriff of a towering elderly warrior whose whole upper torso was so scarified that it resembled the skin of a crocodile. Scarification is done with a sharp stone, a knife, a hook, or a razor blade. Ash is then rubbed into the wound, which causes infection and promotes the desired knobby scar tissue. This man was Scheuerman's friend, a member of our security detail from last night, and, it turned out, the headman of the village. I was fascinated by the sheer number of welts he bore, because I had been told that

TRAVEL ADVISORY

Ethiopia, according to one old African hand, is a place in which "innocents should not mess around." Even so, the country is not on the State Department's watch list, although they do recommend you to take caution in the areas surrounding the country's border with Kenya because of tribal warfare and a lack of security in the region. That said, if you decide to live out your Indiana Jones fantasy, check the Consular Information Sheet on Ethiopia at the State Department's Web site (www.travel.state.gov), which is updated frequently, for any new developments that may create some cause for concern.

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men are not allowed to scarify themselves unless they have killed at least one foe in battle. (I was a little hesitant to ask just how many he had killed; Scheuerman reported it was six men, and a lion and a hippo besides.) He owned a beautiful long whip made of some animal's skin that stank of rancid milk and smoke. Being an avid collector I wanted it at all costs, but being a conservationist at the same time, I wasn't setting much of an example, particularly when I learned that the whip represented one of his scarification marks: the hippo. The headman had killed it honorably—with a spear—one to one. That was good enough for me, so I bought it for 15 birr.

Over the next couple of days, we made daily forays from camp with Scheuerman and were afforded a real and rare insight into the culture of these proud and dignified peoples. The region has been called a

believe in an old tradition that if children are born deformed in any way—even if their teeth form first in the top of the mouth rather than they do normally, at the bottom—it is considered a bad omen for the people and they're killed. They are speared or, worse, abandoned in the forest and left for the hyenas, their mouths filled with ash so the tribe cannot hear their terrified cries. Perhaps even more shocking, though, is that the village parliament, which selects the unfortunate child, is so disorganized it sometimes takes years to pass sentence and by then the victim is old enough to understand his fate. Ethiopian friends of Scheuerman's knew of one such child and adopted him just before it was too late. They bring him back regularly to visit his parents and keep him in touch with his roots and traditions. But he never steps out of the car. He is still too terrified.

OUR CAMP WAS BEYOND BELIEF: SPACIOUS HIGH-DOMED TENTS COMPLETE WITH PROPER CAMP BEDS, CRISP SHEETS, AND, MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL, COMFORTABLE PILLOWS PERFUMED WITH THE SMOKE OF LOCAL INCENSE TO KEEP AWAY THE MILLIONS OF MALARIAL MOSQUITOES.

living museum—and also, it is warned, has maybe five years before it is ruined. South Omo now has less than one percent of its forest cover left. A slash-and-burn approach is the main culprit: too many people, too much livestock, too little land.

Because of our tight schedule, we covered a huge stretch of the Omo, some 130 miles, in one day. We stopped for lunch in the shadow of a giant fig tree, where a herd of olive baboons rained down rotten fruit on us for disturbing the peace. Late that night we reached the village of Dus, home to the Karo tribe, where our vehicles were waiting to take us back into Kenya. The Karo are thought to be the most endangered group of the Omo, with a population of barely 1,000. Their cattle were wiped out by disease a few years ago and they now scratch out a living by growing such crops as sorghum and maize. There is a much more macabre aspect to their demise, however. The Karo, like some tribes I have come across in remote parts of Asia,

Yet, Karo warriors are considered to be superstars. They are the masters of body painting, using chalk, charcoal, powdered yellow rock, and iron ore to transform their near-naked bodies and faces into astonishing and bizarre art forms. On their flesh they re-create the mottled plumage of guinea fowl, the stripes of zebras, and the white whirls and loops of skeletons. The women, not to be outdone, sport elaborate hairstyles: They dye their hair ochre and braid it into long strands tipped with bulbous knots. They create intricate necklaces and jewelry out of Bic ballpoint-pen tops, nails, beads, cowries, and empty cartridge shells. Their dancing is provocative and all about sex, sex, sex as they thrust their hips and frantically gyrate their backsides. The men respond in kind, literally shaking the ground as they leap into the air and land in unison, obscured by clouds of red dust. Nothing, barring the appearance of AK-47s, has changed here. It is as it has been for hundreds of years: magical. ■