

Among Kalashnikovs

Life in Ethiopia's Omo Valley is a world away from Africa's designer lodge circuit, Lucia van der Post reports. Photographs by Don McCullin

Halewijn Sheuerman, whose Jade Sea Journeys operates in some of the most inhospitable, wind-blown and remote parts of Kenya, makes it quite clear that he doesn't do designer camps. "My guests, you see, don't come all the way here to meet Kenya cowboys," he says. "They come to meet Africans. They come for more of an anthropological than a wildlife experience and I'm here to share with my guests my passion for these different places, to share with them what I love - the spirit of Africa."

Which isn't to say that you don't eat splendid food and sleep in perfectly comfortable circumstances. It's just that the co-ordinated cushions, the croissants, the smoked salmon and the spas don't make it into the starkly beautiful country of Kenya's north-western corner or down into the wetlands of the Omo Valley. Which is precisely why we're here.

We're looking for the parts of

Lake Turkana is a shimmering inland lake 200 miles long and 40 miles wide that has the biggest concentration of Nile crocodiles in Africa

Africa that designer lodges haven't reached. All of us, Mark Shand (adventurer and chronicler of elephant lore), Don McCullin (the distinguished photographer) and I haven't come for posh lodges and fancy grub. We've come for something more precious - a glimpse of an Africa that few get to see, a journey up an entrancing river into lands where the peoples and the cultures are as pristine and unpolluted as it is possible to find in these fast-changing times.



Halewijn is the perfect guide and companion. He's one of those classic adventurers; a Dutchman who first ventured into Morocco and then wandered around Africa until he found a place to make his own. He's tough and he's enterprising, which he needs to be, and he's spent years getting to know the Omo Valley and its people.

This is very remote country with few of the amenities most tourists are used to and it needs a Halewijn to take you there. The tribes that live along the Omo, a magnificent river that rises in the Ethiopian highlands and empties itself into Lake Turkana, are some of the most diverse and colourful in Africa. They still practise their ancient rituals, abide by strict tribal taboos, use body-painting, elaborate hairdos and scarification as a means of identification and self-expression. They own little beyond their cattle and their few personal artefacts but theirs is a life rich in symbolism and full of meaning.

History tells us that the Omo Valley was an ancient migratory route, where tribes met as they migrated. Today people come from all around the world to see the Mursi (famous for their women's lip-plates), the Kara, the Hamar, the Nyagatom, the Dassanech, the Surma and many others, but mostly they fly into Addis Ababa and make day sorties into their territories, where they have rather dispiriting encounters with small groups intent on milking the occasion financially (and who can blame them?). None make it as far as the tribes that live along the river, where there are no cars, no roads and just a few scattered traders. Few tourists, no more than about 50 a year, get the chance to live among them as we do for a few magic days. For this you need Halewijn and his boats, his local guides and his vital con-



Ancient art: the women of the Kara tribe use clay and vegetable pigments to paint their bodies

nections with the all-important tribal elders.

We start off by flying up to Koobi Fora, the desolate, wind-blown area on the shores of Lake Turkana where Richard Leakey, the famous palaeontologist, did his most famous research, uncovering both Australopithecenes and Homo habilis.

Somewhere in these rich soils lie the secrets of man's early evolution and if you're a bone and fossil man it's the place for you. The research station is in a state of heightened excitement, sure that at any moment they will find the missing link between homo habilis and homo sapiens sapiens.

Lake Turkana itself - more romantically known as the Jade Sea for the deep turquoise colour of its water - is a shimmering inland soda lake 200 miles long and 40 miles wide that has the biggest concentration of Nile crocodiles in Africa and, more to the point for keen anglers, some fantastic Nile perch as well as other huge fish that are relics of prehistoric times.

The Turkana themselves, who we see wandering along the shores, are a tall, handsome wild tribe of herders. We spend a few days in their eerily stark country, talking to the researchers still dusting down the bones and fossils and visiting the little museums and relics.

But then it's time to set off into the Omo Valley and up into Ethiopia. When the river floods in September, October and November after the long July and August rains, the waterways of the delta become navigable and it's a good time to go visiting.

We go across the lake in two boats - one for us, the privileged guests, the other for the tents and the food. What makes the

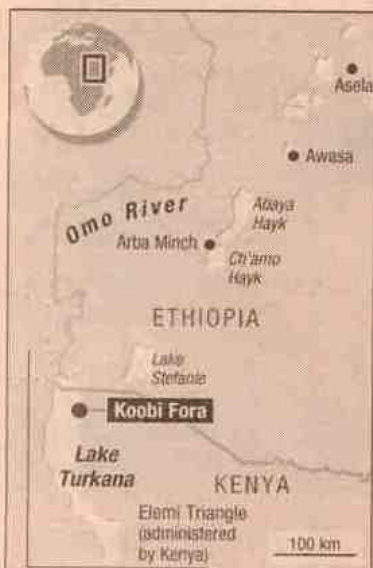
expedition so fascinating is that all along the river there are settlements and we're always the big excitement of the day so the men, women and children rush to greet us.

The tribes are still very distinct, most of them have unique cultural and social structures that are still largely intact. Halewijn has studied them and helps us to understand.

The tribes vary in size from tens of thousands (the Dassanech) to a few hundred (the Kara). They are a curious mixture of ancient and modern. They're not so ancient that they don't fully understand the value of the birr (Ethiopia's currency)

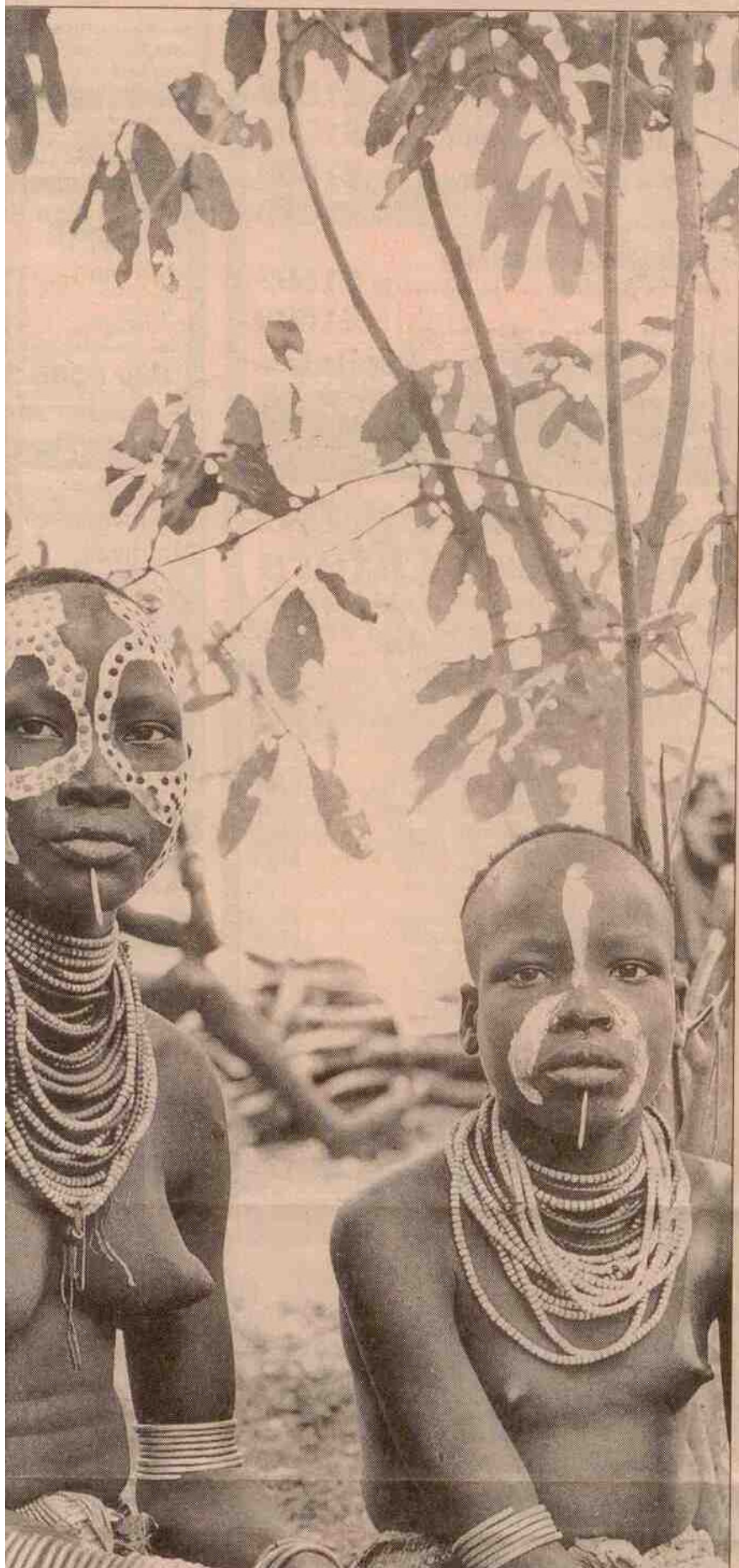
and no photograph may be taken without financial negotiation. But they're ancient enough still to use clay and vegetable pigments to adorn their bodies (the Kara); to smear their dense ringlets with mud and oil and top them off with aluminium head-dresses (Hamar women); and to wear clay plates in their lips (the Mursi).

Halewijn understands the nuances of the Dassanech men's fancy hair-dos - each is fashioned elaborately and uniquely out of mud. Some sport little beads and tufts and we learn to be wary of the ones with knots because they signify that its owner has killed another man.



War paint: men of the Kara tribe carry Kalashnikovs, like many men in Ethiopia

and crocodiles



Turkana carry spears while in Ethiopia they carry a Kalashnikov. As Halewijn puts it: "if your neighbour has a gun, you need a gun."

We travel along the river by day, stopping off to take photographs, to see the villages, for Halewijn and his guides to chat with the local people, all the while telling us of their different rites and customs. We come upon a group of young river Nyagatom hunting for crocodiles. They're a tough warrior Nilotic tribe that are uncircumcised. Many of the women wear elaborate jewellery.

Sometimes we come upon ceremonies - amazing courtship dances, where all the warriors elaborately paint their bodies. To witness these Halewijn's guide has to negotiate carefully with the tribal elders. We don't get to see the famous bull-jumping ceremony of the Hamar, when, after many preparatory rituals, young warriors have to jump the bulls in order to earn the right to marry, but we do spend our days in and among the river tribes.

By night we sleep in two-man tents and we eat under the stars. We're never uncomfortable and we're amazingly well fed. Mark and Don, who've been shot at by tribes in Borneo, who've had adventures all around the world, are astonished by the comfort.

Not that there weren't some moments when I wondered what I was doing there and longed to

Sometimes we come upon ceremonies - amazing courtship dances, where all the warriors elaborately paint their bodies

be safely back home in London. Like the time I was woken in the middle of the night by the shocking sound of a Kalashnikov going off (hearts, you may be interested to know, really do "race"). Just as I was wondering if my life was to end here, being slaughtered by tribesmen in the wilds of Ethiopia, there was another round of gun-shot. There were men running, voices shouting, the flash of swinging oil-lamps as Halewijn rushed to see what was up. "It was only the night watchman, scaring off a hyena that was lurking round the camp." Ah!



Don McCullin

Scarification is another indicator of status and of the number of enemies killed in battle. Cattle-raiding is still rife largely because cattle signify wealth and pastoralists need "bride money" – that in practical terms is cattle.

One of the anthropologists working in the area who comes to lunch one day is cock-a-hoop because he has just brokered a settlement ending a damaging, long-running feud between the Kara and the Nyagatom.

The first tribe we come across is one of the largest and wealthiest, the Dassanech. Here we can see Africa's problems in microcosm. We're here a little late in the historical day. It is still possi-

ble to see little glimpses of the "aboriginal man of Africa whose old ways fade among the colours of the people who came after", as one observer writes. But it's just a glimpse.

When Halewijn first came here 12 years ago the Dassanech lived in perfect equilibrium with their surroundings. Health services, although sporadic and far-flung, are bringing improved health, the population is exploding, we see healthy naked children everywhere. The forest is being slashed for firewood, which strips the bush bare and along the river causes the bank to collapse, which makes it broader and shallower and will eventually affect the flooding.

Cattle are grazing everywhere, the rivers no longer have hippo, the bush is empty of game. There is the odd antelope, the occasional hyena, a few warthog. Apart from the marvellous sound of myriad birds, the bush is silent, which induces a huge melancholy in me. I am reminded of the wonderful words of a Native American chief: "If all the beasts were gone man would die of a great loneliness of spirit."

When Halewijn first came the hunters wore skins or went naked. Today, almost every man wears brightly coloured underpants. The missionaries have seen off the notion of the noble savage. They brought in underpants six or seven years ago and today they're flown into Addis Ababa by the container load. In the ramshackle local village of Omo Rate, the only one we come across, they're displayed proudly in the shops – all are extra large. And long before the underpants came the Kalashnikov.

You know when you've crossed the border from Kenya into Ethiopia because in Kenya the local

As the time comes to leave, we are all aware that what we've seen won't be around for much longer. We've seen peoples culturally poised between a precarious past and an uncertain future. Colin Turnbull in *The Lonely African* put it thus. "There is a void in the life of the African, a spiritual emptiness, divorced as he is from each world, standing in between, torn in both directions. To go forward is to abandon the past in which the roots of his being have their nourishment; to go backward is to cut himself off from the future, for there is no doubt about where the future lies... There seems to be no bridge, and this is the source of his terrible loneliness."

I am left with poignant memories of some extraordinarily beautiful people. I can see them still, clustered round us in their brightly-coloured underpants, a blanket thrown round a shoulder, a Kalashnikov in the hand that once held a spear and in the other hand a headrest-cum-stool which, one senses, is a precious symbol of his manhood and of his ancient roots.

If this sort of trip interests you, do it soon. Each year Halewijn has to go deeper and deeper into the Omo Valley to find what the Kenyan writer Kuki Gallmann called "unpolluted humanity". In 12 years, Halewijn says the changes have been enormous. I have no doubt that in another 12 years little of what we saw will still be there.



Don McCullin

INTO AFRICA

- 'Africa' by Don McCullin is published in August by Jonathan Cape.
- Journeys by Design – tel: +44 (0) 1273 623 790 (www.journeysbydesign.co.uk) – is a specialist operator that designs tailor-made safaris into the Omo Valley. Prices for a two-week safari by boat along the Omo River and into Lake Turkana start from £3,300 a person and include all meals, drinks and private transfers.
- The best time of year to visit is July to October, when the Omo River is in flood. The next departure by Journeys by Design into the Omo Valley is mid-October. The river journey visits all the cultural groups, from the more northerly Mursi to the southerly Kara.
- For international flights contact Kenya Airways, tel: +44 (0) 1784 888222 (www.kenya-airways.com), which operates a daily service from London Heathrow to Nairobi. A return economy fare costs from £490 per person, a bed in Premier World costs from £1,600 return.