

# Eden on a lip plate

Big mouths mean more goats: local customs are drawing travellers to Ethiopia. By Stanley Stewart

Until recent years, the tribes of the Omo River basin, in the remote southwest of Ethiopia, had not even heard of the nation of which they were a part. For all they knew of it, Addis Ababa might have been the dark side of the moon.

Theirs is a traditional world. The men count their wealth in cattle, their wives in goats and their status by the number of enemies they have murdered. They paint their bodies for war and celebration, and drink cow's blood to revive their spirits. The women, among the most beautiful in Africa, scar their torsos in elaborate patterns for erotic effect, and, in preparation for marriage, insert plates the size of Frisbees in their lower lips.

"This is what one dreamt about as a child," a seasoned African traveller told me once. "An Africa untouched by our own culture."

Ethiopia is a museum of peoples, a rich and varied mix of ethnicities with 83 languages and more than 200 dialects. But even in this crowded cultural mosaic, the tribal diversity of the Omo River basin is unparalleled. They lack almost any form of material culture beyond personal adornment, but they inhabit a richly symbolic universe.

Tribal warfare is a way of life in these regions, and cattle raids and killings are part of the initiation of any young man of good family. Like notches on a gun belt, horseshoe-shaped scars on the upper arms of Mursi or Bodi warriors mark

the number of their victims. Serial killers are much sought-after as husbands. The Omo is oddly reminiscent of the American West in the 19th century. Life revolves around cattle, gun-play and getting the girl. Only the guns are different. In the Omo, AK-47s are *de rigueur*. Of all the modern technologies that the world has to offer these peoples, the only one to make an impact is the automatic rifle.

I LEFT Addis Ababa with a small but motley crew, heading south for the Omo. The central highlands of Ethiopia are a dense agrarian landscape: the people are serious and hard-working, the women keep their tops on and the middle classes are distinguished by umbrellas. As we pushed west and south, though, the road became rougher, the vegetation wilder, the faces blacker, the clothes more bedraggled and the smiles wider.

On the third day, somewhere beyond Dimma, we began to drop out of the highlands. The fields and the villages fell away. The hills unravelled. The views lengthened. Breaking free of its confinement, the landscape was spilling out on all sides towards distant escarpments. We were falling into an empty world of savanna and acacia. Long waves of grass commandeered the horizons.

After the crowded uplands, the emptiness of this new country was almost unnerving. The land shimmered in the heat. A sentinel figure appeared on a rock above the road, silhouetted against a pewter sky — a tall, naked tribesman with a spear, the archetypal image of



Africa, like a guardian on the frontier of a new world.

We were entering the lands of the Surma, one of the largest tribes west of the Omo. After that first figure, others appeared — boys herding goats, men melting away into the grass, a young woman naked in a river.

In the late afternoon, we arrived at Tulget, a Surma settlement straddling a long ridge. Few things were as novel as white folk in a car, and the whole village immediately dropped what they were doing to get a look at us. Men with spectacular elongated ear lobes and women with huge lip plates crowded round to gaze at us as if we were circus freaks. I knew they were dying to poke us. They giggled behind their hands — our pale skin, our watery eyes, our bizarre clothing. In this barefoot, bare-arsed and bare-breasted company, I felt I had arrived a trifle overdressed.

After a time, a fellow in shorts and a T-shirt emerged from the scrum. He was the Mr Kurtz of Surmaland, a highland Ethiopian who had come here 18 years ago looking for gold. Unable to find a lift home again, he married a Surma woman and settled down. He lived here now, in his own heart of darkness, as a trader. He ran a shop that sold life's essentials — candles, soap, salt, stale biscuits, cotton. The cash economy, he admitted, was somewhat limited. People tried to pay him with bowls of cow's blood.

"This is how it is now," Kurtz said. "In the old days, they pounded one another with their sticks. A few bruises, maybe a broken bone, and that was the end of it. Now that they are all armed with automatic rifles, the smallest argument can be fatal."



Surma snake-dancers: 'They lack almost any material culture beyond personal adornment, but inhabit a richly symbolic universe'

"They think I am pathetic," Kurtz said. "A man with no cattle is no better than a dog to them."

The village, Kurtz explained, was in a state of excitement, and it wasn't just our arrival. The previous day, at high noon, there had been a big shoot-out. One man had accused another of having stolen one of his cows. Had it been his wife, things might have ended more amicably. But cows were serious business. There was an argument, and the AK-47s came out. When the dust had settled, one man was dead, another had lost his arm.

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We pitched our camp in the grounds of the mission church watched by hordes of spectators. Later, strolling with Kurtz, I came upon a woman sitting on a log outside her house. She was stretching her lower lip with a mixture of charcoal and butter. In all the sad history of crippling female adornment, from bound feet to suffocating corsets, nothing quite compares with the lip plate worn by the Surma and the Mursi of the Omo basin.

It seemed like the moment to broach this delicate issue. I was keen not to cause offence to the young woman by implying that it was the hideousness of the plate that was prompting my inquiry. At first, I thought I might try: "Hey, love your lip plate. Do the fellows in your tribe find that as much of a turn-on as I do?" In the end,

I settled for the neutral brevity of "Why?"

Women do not insert the lip plate until they are preparing for marriage in their early twenties. An incision is made in the lower lip that is stretched over a period of months to accommodate a plate made of baked clay or wood. The two front lower teeth usually need to be extracted to make fitting easier. The plates are worn, rather like a veil in Islamic societies, in the presence of men. At home, and in the company of other women, they tend to take the plates out, allowing the stretched lower lip to dangle down below the chin in picturesque fashion.

One theory is that the plate was an antislaving device, a way of making your tribe unappealing to Arab slave traders from the coast. Another

theory is that it is a protection against evil spirits, which are said to enter the body through the mouth. But the girl herself, working on her own lip in the dusk, said that it was chiefly a question of goats. The larger the lip plate, the more goats her father could demand from prospective bridegrooms for her hand in marriage. In these societies, marriage is a kind of pension fund. You pay for a big lip plate on your wife when you are young in the hope that you will have plenty of daughters with decent lip plates to sell in your old age.

A COUPLE of days later, we were in the lands of the Karo, staying at a lodge at Murle, on the east bank of the river. In the afternoon, we walked up to Kolcho, a Karo village. Termite towers rose from the savanna.

We skirted a lake where tropical boubou birds were singing duets. In the woods nearby, families of colobus monkeys were quarrelling. We arrived at the village just as flocks of goats returned to their family corrals for the night.

There was a dance at sunset. The warriors appeared, their bodies decorated with white markings. They assembled in a half circle under a rising moon. The women clustered nearby, wearing thick bundled necklaces and skirts of oiled skins. With elaborate hand-clapping rhythms and deep mesmeric chants, the men took turns leaping in the air. The women, too, began clapping, and, one by one, they danced forward to select a man of their choice from the line. Amid rising clouds of dust, the couples thrust their hips at one another in a pantomime of sex. It was erotic but also happily innocent, full of laughter and teasing.

A trio of new women arrived on the periphery to watch the dance. Among the animal skins and the arm bands and the long strings of beads, they had on a startling item of clothing — brassieres. They had been to Addis, they had seen the future, and they were wearing it.

In this place, they seemed oddly indecent.

□ Stanley Stewart travelled to the Omo River as a guest of Journeys by Design

## TRAVEL BRIEF

Journeys by Design (01273 623790, www.journeysbydesign.co.uk) specialises in tailor-made holidays in Africa. A two-week journey to Ethiopia and the lower Omo basin starts at £2,950pp, including accommodation, private vehicle transport, guides and all meals, but not international flights. Ethiopian Airlines (020 8987 7000, www.ethiopianairlines.com) flies from Heathrow to Addis Ababa; from £444. UK regional and Dublin add-on flights are available on request. Other specialists include Tim Best Travel (020 7591 0300, www.timbesttravel.com) and Rainbow Tours (020 7226 1004, www.rainbowtours.co.uk).

□ Parts of Ethiopia are unstable. The Foreign Office does not advise against travel to the areas mentioned in this article, but the situation is fluid: check the latest travel advice at www.fco.gov.uk.