

Mwapo started whistling: a sweet, piercing melody that rose and fell, with shades of Vivaldi’s “Spring”. From somewhere in the distance came a second whistler, the tune the same. Mwapo touched his ear with his finger, pointed towards a line of acacia and beckoned me to follow him.

Nearby, on a dead tree stump, sat an angry-looking little bird the colour of milk chocolate. As we approached, it started whistling. Here was our duet-tist. “*Tik’iliko*,” said Mwapo. The bird took flight. In the languid dawn light we followed, bird and Mwapo whistling constantly to each other as if in a scene from *Mary Poppins*.

Eventually we came to an enormous baobab tree. Mwapo pointed up. There, on a branch, sat the *tik’iliko*, or honey-guide bird. Next to it, barely visible to the human eye, was the entrance to an African honeybee nest. Mwapo looked happy. Like all Hadza people, he loves honey, and honeyguides love the wax and larvae. Without the bird, man can’t find the nests; without man, the bird can’t get into them. Mwapo cut fresh stakes from a bush to drive into the tree trunk to make a ladder. I stared up at the bird, sitting patiently. A few days earlier, I could barely have conceived of this symbiotic miracle. But even a short time spent with the remarkable Hadza, Africa’s last true hunter-gatherers, had taught me that their life is one long miracle.

My journey to meet the Hadza had started in Arusha, northern Tanzania, from where I’d driven a few hours south on a paved road and then for many more off-road through dense acacia and scrub, deeper and deeper into the wilderness, heading for the Hadza homeland in the Lake Eyasi basin, bordered by the walls of the Great Rift Valley.

With me was Daudi Peterson, 64, US-born but raised in Tanzania since his Lutheran missionary parents moved to the country when he was two. Daudi first met the Hadza when he was 10 years old and a life-long love affair was born. Since 1994, through his company Dorobo, he has been taking anthropologists and tourists to meet them, keeping numbers to between 200-300 a year, split between the Hadza’s various camps. “It is structured tourism, but not staged,” he said. “We simply follow them around in their daily lives and observe. Cultural dignity is key.”

As we drove, Daudi told me something about the nomadic Hadza. They now number around 1,300 people, although of these only 200-300 still live exclusively as hunter-gatherers. Their group structures are egalitarian, without hierarchies. Their “crops” are earth’s natural offerings, foraged; their “livestock” wild animals. According to

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genetic testing, the Hadza are perhaps more than 100,000 years old, which makes them one of the oldest branches of the human tree on the planet. Until the birth of agriculture just 10,000 years ago, the Hadza lifestyle was the human norm. If the genus Homo evolved 2m years ago, then for 99 per cent of our time on earth, through the development cycles that made us such successful animals, this is how we lived.

“At a time when developed nations are consuming ever more resources,” Daudi said, “what can we relearn about sustainability from the past? These people live within the limits of the earth, and they take care of the less fortunate. No Hadza falls through the slats.”

Night was drawing in as we finally arrived at camp, set just under the ridge line of the Mukenggelko kopje (*kopje* being the Afrikaans for “small hill”), with spectacular views across the wide basin, dotted with lumps of gneiss the size of town houses, and the salty Lake Eyasi, shimmering like mercury, beyond. Our tents had been set up around the foot of a giant baobab. It would be our base for the next few days.

Nearby in the gloaming, under an acacia, a group of 20 or so Hadza men, women and children sat on their haunches, bows and arrows leaning against the tree. On the ground were the remnants of their evening meal: the empty shell of a leopard tortoise.

We sat around the fire. Through Daudi (who speaks fluent Swahili and some Hadza), I asked the group what we should do tomorrow. There followed a lively debate, with everyone, from wizened male elders to teenage girls, contributing. Many of the words of the Hadza language (which is similar to the Khoisan linguistic group but considered a language isolate) are spoken in clicks and glottal stops, so it sounded like a cross between people arguing and whales communicating.

On and on it went. Daudi explained that because the earth has always provided the Hadza with abundant food found naturally, they’ve never known the starvation that comes with crop and cattle failure. It was arguably the development of agriculture, he continued,



The good life

So-called ‘tribal tourism’ has earned a bad reputation for exploitative interactions and embarrassing

dance shows. But in northern Tanzania, *Mike Carter* finds the real thing – the chance to live alongside

Africa’s last hunter-gatherers and experience their ancient, harmonious relationship with the land



Above, clockwise from top: Mwapo and Musa rest while hunting; a young Hadza boy scoops honey from a tree; a Hadza man in ritual dress as part of the ‘epeme’ ceremony; men use stakes hammered into a baobab trunk as a ladder

Mike Carter: By the Light of a Million Fires/Dorobo Fund

neighbouring camp, a collection of little huts made from grass draped over a lattice framework of branches like upside-down birds’ nests, which melt back into the earth when the group moves on. Under a baobab, the men were all making arrows – slender branches were being heated on the fire and then gripped between toes and lips and twisted to straighten them.

One young man was dressed up in beautiful bead armbands and a head-dress of feathers and grass, an initiate in the Hadza coming-of-age rite of *epeme*. Babies wore necklaces of sedge bulbs, thought to keep them healthy. A group of young boys were practising their archery skills on small birds. “There are a lot of children in this camp,” said Daudi. “That is a good sign. The Hadza would never have more children than the land can sustain.” Everywhere there was laughter and smiles. “I’ve never been with happier people,” Daudi said. “They are not hung up on what will happen tomorrow or what happened yesterday. If you know what you are doing, this is a very benign, plentiful place. It’s no accident that this was the cradle of humanity.”

A group of women were walking out of camp and beckoned us to join them. After a while, some started gathering berries, others the fallen fruit of the baobab (containing six times as much vitamin C as oranges), which they pound with rocks to make flour for porridge. Some stopped by a tree and pointed to a vine going into the ground, the sign of the tubers growing underground that are a staple of the Hadza diet. With sharpened sticks called *ts’apale* they tapped the earth to locate the tubers and then dug deep until they had amassed a pile. Most animals can’t get to these tubers so they’re always available, and the Hadza only ever take the top 10 per cent so they can grow back. Once an area is exhausted, it is left to regenerate as the camp moves on.

One of the women lit a fire in 30 seconds using a stick and knife-blade. A few minutes later we were feasting on succulent roasted tubers. “When they kill a giraffe or zebra, or scare a big predator off its kill, they gorge like lions until it’s all gone,” Daudi told me. “Word gets out and Hadza come from miles around.”

Some young boys had found a nest of stingless bees at ground level – the best honey there is – and smashed it in with an axe. Using fingers and grass stems as spoons, they scooped out the nectar, their faces lost in a trance-like reverie as they slurped it down. Sated, the boys spontaneously broke into a sort of line dance, huge grins on their faces. The Hadzas’ love of honey is matched only by their love of dancing.

On the walk back to our camp, we came across pastoralists from the Datoga tribe with emaciated cattle. This tribe, among others, has for the past 5,000 years been encroaching on the Hadza’s homelands. The domesticated animals denude the grazing and drink so much that the water table shrinks. Wild animals are slaughtered because they are a threat. The Hadza have no warrior class. They have never had to

develop a fighting mentality. If there is ever any conflict, they simply leave camp and walk into another one. “Maybe when we had the space, that is how all humans lived,” said Daudi. The whole issue of land rights is absurd to the Hadza. Nobody owns the earth.

But for a people whose very survival has always relied on symbiosis, it is a relatively new and mutually beneficial relationship – with tourism – that just might prove wrong the pessimistic commentators who predict that the Hadza are ultimately doomed. The fees from visitors (\$51 per person per night as a bed tax, \$10 a day for each Hadza guide) go into a Hadza bank account. This fund, managed collectively, helps pay for healthcare and for some children to go to boarding schools. A few of these kids have gone on to university, after which they have returned better equipped to fight for Hadza rights. In 2011, perhaps partly in recognition of the Hadza’s value to tourism and their newfound campaigning strengths, the Tanzanian government granted them three strips of protected land, amounting to 23,305 hectares. It is a mere 10 per cent of their original homeland, and neighbouring tribes still encroach, but in a situation that remains on a knife-edge, it is a glimmer of hope.

“It was the Hadza who suggested tourism,” Daudi says. “We said no, it would be too messy, that people would want to change them. But they are too strong to be changed.”

On my last day I went out hunting alone with Mwapo. Fewer people should mean better hunting, although as he floated his way noiselessly through the scrub and I crashed behind him, getting tangled in the whistling thorns with their spikes like cocktail sticks, bleeding profusely and cursing loudly, I don’t think I was helping him in his quest.

We met the honeyguide bird and Mwapo climbed the tree. He was swarmed by angry bees and threw down the honeycombs. As the bird feasted in the tree and I feasted on the ground, Mwapo tended to his stings with the sap of a nearby tree. For as well as being a free giant supermarket, this land is also a vast chemist’s shop.

We walked through another camp. The men were eating some meat, which they shared with us, and it was really delicious, a bit like steak. I pointed to it,



putting my forefingers by my temples and making a mooing noise and a curious face. One of the men laughed and disappeared into a hut, emerging seconds later holding the severed head of a giant baboon, blood caked on its enormous fangs.

We came to a kopje and Mwapo stalked off on the trail of rock hyrax and impala. I sat and waited for him to return. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. We were hours from camp, under a blazing equatorial sun in the middle of nowhere. I was surrounded, I was convincing myself, by the watchful, hungry eyes of lions and leopards and hyenas.

After 30 minutes, I was genuinely afraid, as helpless as an infant. I thought back to Daudi’s assertion that this is a benign place if you know what you’re doing and I felt ashamed – ashamed that my ancestors would have felt so intrinsic to this place but that now, to me, it was an alien, terrifying world. By now, the “primitive” Hadza felt like supermen to me.

Finally Mwapo returned. We climbed the kopje and sat there, unable to speak to one another, looking down over a land unscarred by human hands. An elephant trumpeted. Lake Eyasi was in the distance, the Rift Valley beyond. It was a scene unchanged since man, near this place, first walked on the earth.

High above were the straight vapour trails of an aircraft and, at the tip, the tiny shape of a plane, like an arrowhead on a shaft. I thought of those people up there, thrusting through space, impatient to arrive somewhere else. I looked at Mwapo and, suddenly fearful for the future of the Hadza and the joyful way of life I had glimpsed, I started to cry.

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Mike Carter was a guest of Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.com) and Kenya Airways (kenya-airways.com). A three-night trip staying with the Hadza in a mobile camp, including full board, private guide, transfers and internal flights costs from £1,970 per person (based on two travelling). Kenya Airways flies daily from London to Nairobi, and on to Kilimanjaro airport (near Arusha) from £760 return. ‘Hadzabe: By the Light of a Million Fires’ by Daudi Petersen, is available from dorobofund.org