

# A Girl's Own African adventure

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The short rains are late coming to southern Ethiopia, but no one seems unduly worried. Kudi Manou, a coffee farmer in the Konso highlands near the north Kenyan border, shrugs and tugs on the strap of his AK-47 and says: "Nature is kind to us here."

We are standing in an acacia grove, looking north towards the largest concentration of Rift Valley lakes between Djibouti and Mozambique. Around us are green terraces of coffee and cotton. A thousand metres below, a Batleur eagle is drifting on the thermals and there are vervet monkeys in the tamarinds.

The southern Ethiopian region of Gamo Gofa is largely unknown to outsiders. Of the annual 30,000 overseas visitors to Ethiopia, only around 5,000 make it to the south, and perhaps as few as 1,000 reach the Omo Basin on the Sudanese and Kenyan border. Gamo Gofa is untouched by the modern world; home to arguably the highest concentration of traditional tribes in Africa and two of its least visited game parks. It's an Africa of Boy's Own adventures; expansive game-rich plains, mud-coloured rivers, craggy, forested mountains and as much solitude as a person can take.

Fifteen years after Live Aid, Ethiopia is still struggling with its image as a famine-prone desert. The country's recent war with Eritrea didn't help, although the fighting was confined to the northern border. Until the overthrow of the Soviet-friendly dictator Mengistu nine years ago, Ethiopia had been virtually closed to tourists for 30 years.

## Melanie McGrath ventures into Ethiopia's remote Gamo Gofa region



A young Karo girl wearing necklaces of shells and beads

Ethiopia is a vast country, five times the size of the UK, and extraordinarily varied. To get to the Gamo Gofa you have to drive two days from Addis Ababa on a road which snakes along the bottom of the Rift Valley, beside the six dazzling blue Rift Valley Lakes, bubbling with baboons and pelicans, then rising to the high, red terraces of Konso, lush with cotton and coffee.

I'm travelling in the company of genial and garrulous local guide Lule Fessha, who knows everything from the call of the carmine bee-eater to the bride price of Konso women, and tour operator Will Jones who would fill in the gaps if he could get a word in edgewise.

Konso is a giant sweep of blood-coloured peaks and craggy upland valleys, terraced and farmed by Konso people for more than 300 years with pick ploughs and well-composted human muck. Myth has it that Konso women are reincarnations of an extinct species of men because they work so hard.

Outside the mud-walled villages men, women and donkeys on their way to market form small living waterfalls down the mountain-

sides. The road to our next destination, Key Afer, drizzles into a stony track among the cotton plants. This is fierce terrain, fantastically tamed. Not surprisingly, Unesco is likely to declare the area a World Heritage Site soon.

We reach Key Afer on market day. Hamer men, tree-tall and kitted out in beads and earrings, strut among the heaps of tobacco and maize, competing for the attentions of Hamer women. There is drumming and a great deal of dust. The air smells of the rancid butter both sexes use to dress their hair.

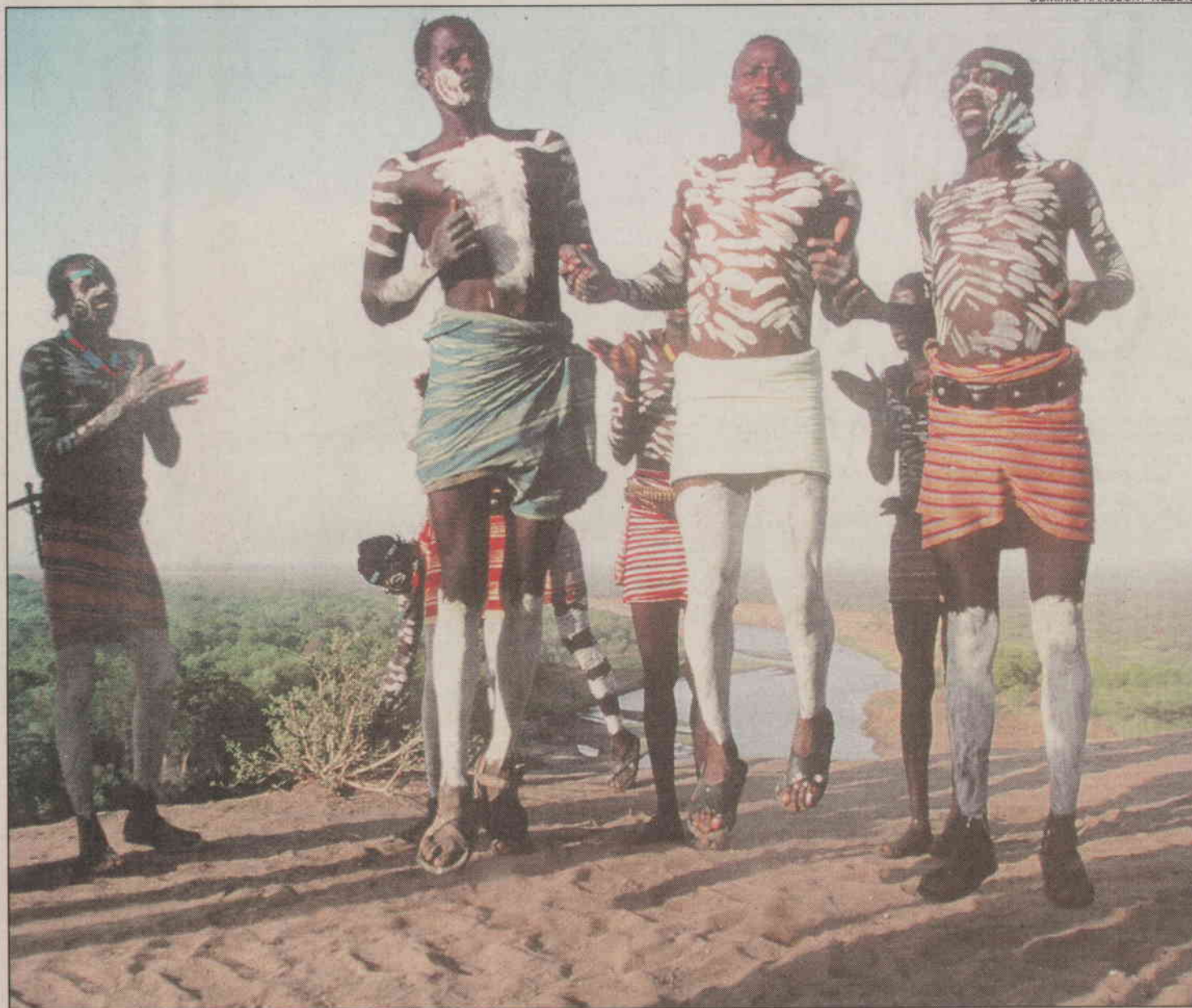
On reaching puberty Hamer men must walk over the backs of eight bulls to prove their manhood. Whenever a man loses his footing, his sister is beaten. Hamer women wear the resulting welts and gouges on their naked backs as badges of honour. After an inspection of my body by a couple of Hamer women reveals no scars, they swiftly douse my head in rancid butter to render me at least part normal.

After a hard drive we arrive at Mago National Park. An advance party, arranged by Will, has already set up tents and there is a chicken stew simmering on the fire. We fall asleep in our tents to the barking of distant lions and wake to a chorus of Colobus monkeys.

We take to the road once more and head west towards the Omo River, bringing a driver and a zabagna, or guard, with us. The zabagna's rifle looks suspiciously like some leftover from junior woodwork class and he doesn't seem clear whether he is protecting us from the wildlife or vice versa.

Mago covers 1,350 square miles and today we're the only visitors. The zabagna can't recall when the last lot came through. We drive across a spectacular stretch of acacia savannah running between the Mago mountains, passing oryx, African buffalo, Thompson's and Grant's gazelle, lesser kudu, dikdik and warthog en route.

Like most of Ethiopia, the Mago and Omo parks are a twitcher's paradise. By 8am Will is in bird heaven. Binoculars poised, he ticks off pale chanting goshawks, kori bustards and marabouts as well as a few endemic species: thick-billed raven, wattled ibis and Abyssinian ground hornbill, a massive beast known as "the Devil's Horse".



Young Karo men paint themselves with chalk, for decoration, and urine, which acts as an insecticide, before performing a traditional dance

The Omo basin is also home to the Mursi, a group of around 5,000 semi-nomadic pastoralists whose fortunes mirror those of the river. When it's full, so are they. Whenever the water-level is low, their numbers shrink along with it. The Mursi are well-known for the lip-plates worn by the women. A couple of years ago, an American missionary advised the Mursi (perhaps reasonably) to charge tourists to take photographs and it has now become impossible to visit them without being menaced. The Mursi's environmental vulnerability and the general lack of tourism only makes the atmosphere more hysterical. Women bitterly compete to have their lip-plates photographed and the men and children are left out altogether. Everyone ends up feeling like a heel.

We continued on to Korcho, a neat roundel of mud and thatch huts on a cliff above the Omo and home to the Karo. For a small fee they'll dance a traditional Karo dance, first painting themselves in chalk and urine (decorative and an insecticide). Their chanting sets off the monkeys and the sun sets over the Omo to the joint whoops of human and monkey song.

We arrive, finally, at the Omo Murle Explorers' Lodge, an oasis of shola fig and acacia along the steep bank of the Omo. This is the terminus on every southern Ethiopian route, the only lodge of any kind for hundreds of miles. We drink our beers watching Nile crocs slide across the mud banks into the fudgy water. In ten days we have seen almost too much to take in but at the same time, not nearly enough.

## Need to know

■ **Getting there:** Melanie McGrath travelled with Ethiopian Airlines and Journeys by Design. Ethiopian Airlines (020-7491 9109, [www.flyethiopian.com](http://www.flyethiopian.com)) has three flights a week in winter, four in summer from Heathrow to Addis Ababa. Prices from £476. Journeys By Design (020-8332 2928, [www.journeysbydesign.co.uk](http://www.journeysbydesign.co.uk)) offers tailor-made holidays to Southern Ethiopia. A two-week driving journey costs from £2,634 per person; flights excluded. Ten per cent of all profits are redirected to Farm Africa — Africa's long-term development project.

■ **Reading:** *Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti* (Lonely Planet, £13.99); *Guide to Ethiopia* (Bradt, £11.95).

■ **Medical requirements:** The Department of Health recommends immunisations for polio, typhoid, and hepatitis A. Consult your GP or visit a private health clinic, which will charge £15-£50 for consultations — try the Royal Free Travel Health Centre (020-7830 2885), or British Airways Travel Clinic (01276 685040). Website: [www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice](http://www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice).

■ **Red tape:** Visas cost £43 from the Ethiopian Embassy (020-7589 7212).

■ **When to go:** The best/driest weather is from September to March.

■ **Tips:** Take strong walking boots and suncream, which is especially needed in higher altitude regions.

