



Turkana tribespeople perform a traditional dance, the edong'a, at Lobolo Camp

In the lake district

Kenya With its live volcanoes, scary wildlife and high winds, Lake Turkana isn't the place for a relaxing holiday. But for beauty, history and sheer invigoration, it's hard to beat, says **Lisa Johnson**

ON THE MAP, Lake Turkana looks like a silk stocking hung out to dry. It stretches down for 250km from the Kenya-Ethiopia border, a splash of blue in the rocky desert. If certain anthropologists are to be believed, this desolate region of saltwater, sleeping volcanoes and swirling dust devils was the Cradle of Mankind. It was here, in 1972, that Richard Leakey discovered the skull of a two-million-year-old *Homo habilis* or 'handy man' (the supposed evolutionary stage between the *Australopithecines* and *Homo erectus*); and here, in 1984, that 'Turkana Boy', the complete skeleton of a 1.6-million-year-old *Homo erectus*, was found. According to the out-of-Africa theory he was our direct ancestor, and left the Cradle of Mankind to migrate to Europe and Asia, thence to populate the world.

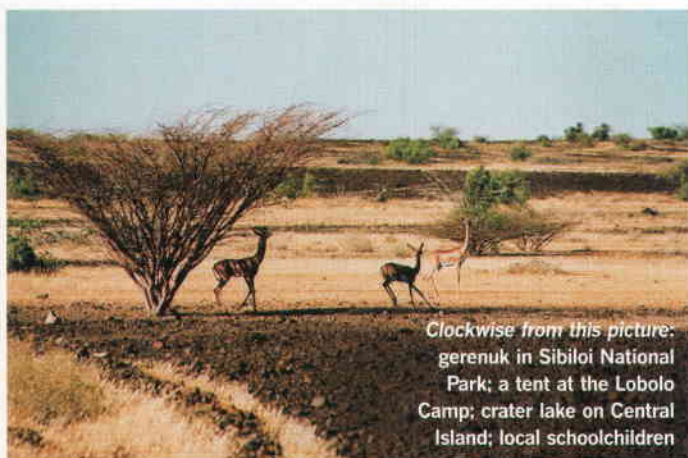
My sister Kirstin (an anthropologist who now works in Kenya for VSO) and

I had wanted to visit the lake for some time, but had previously been foiled by logistics. Turkana is a vast region bordered by Sudan and Somali Kenya, sparsely populated by nomadic pastoralists, and with a history of intermittent cattle-raiding. It's tricky to get to by road, and tricky to negotiate once you arrive, not least because, apart from a run-down lodge at Loyengalani (featured in *The Constant Gardener*) and a defunct one at Eliye Springs, there is nowhere to stay. It's also blisteringly hot, there are Nile crocodiles in the lake and scarcely a soul to turn to if things go wrong.

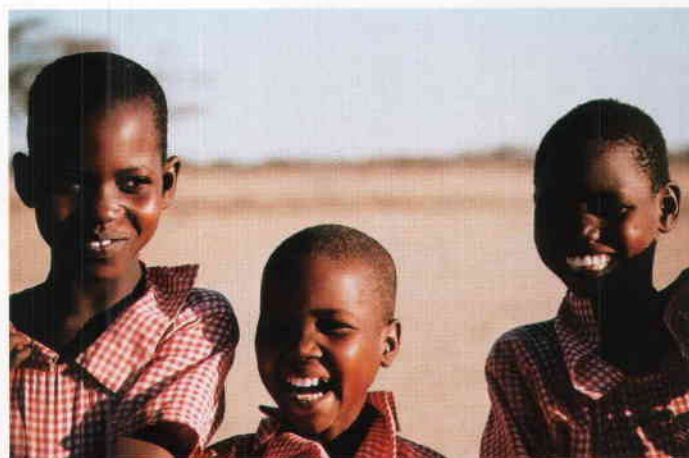
So Jade Sea Journeys is something of a godsend. Run by Halewijn Scheuerman, a multilingual Dutchman with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the area, and his Kenyan wife Joyce, the company provides motorboats as well as customised Toyota Landcruisers, Mercedes Unimog trucks and assorted

expedition tents, not to mention Lobolo, a tented camp. Yet Scheuerman insists it's the experience he's selling, not the logistics. And he's right: we may have been in safe hands, but we felt like real adventurers. Flying the two hours from Nairobi, Dennis Finch Hatton-style in a tiny, six-seater Cessna 206, is all part of the old-Africa experience, and underlines how remote the region is. We flew low, over the bright patchwork of Kenyan tea country, the dark forests of the Aberdares and the reddish plains of Laikipia, passing Mount Kenya on the right. And then we crossed Suguta Valley, a forbidding stretch of salt pans with daily highs of 60°C that was once part of the lake, and entered unfamiliar territory. As we gazed down at the lake and the southernmost of its three islands, I imagined us floating around peacefully on an unruffled expanse of jade, gloriously comatose in the midday heat.

I had reckoned without the wind, which, rushing down from the mountains to replace the hot air rising from the lake, usually dies down by lunchtime. But not this time. As we climbed down from the aircraft at Loyengalani, we were almost blasted away by what felt like hot air from an enormous hairdryer. Down on the shore, the water was more an angry grey



Clockwise from this picture:
gerenuk in Sibiloi National
Park; a tent at the Lobolo
Camp; crater lake on Central
Island; local schoolchildren



than an exotic jade, with waves shooting off in all directions. I felt a stab of alarm: not only do I suffer from seasickness, there were also those crocodiles to contend with. Scheuerman shouted to us not to worry: he had custom-built the boats himself to withstand the Atlantic. We wouldn't get sick because there was no swell, although we would get wet – especially Scheuerman's teenage daughters, Jalida and Ngalivia, who had joined us on the trip, and were sitting up at the front.

The trip took us 30km, to the south end of the lake. It was a wild, bone-shuddering ride – we all got drenched and laughed like hyenas – but it got us to our destination, where we alighted by a perfectly round volcanic crater that the locals call *nabyatom* ('elephant's stomach'). This was where the lake was 'discovered' in 1888 by a genial Austrian game-hunter called Count Teleki von Szek and his companion, Lieutenant Ludwig von Höhnel. It had taken them 13 months, several hundred porters and an armed Somali escort to get there from Mombasa; and after a particularly excruciating final stretch, over 500km of desert from Lake Baringo, they felt they had arrived in heaven. But the briny lake water was nauseating to drink, and fish eluded their

grasp. 'No living creature shared the gloomy solitude with us,' wrote von Höhnel, 'there was nothing to be seen but desert – desert everywhere. To all this was added the scorching heat, and the ceaseless buffeting of the sand-laden wind.'

The place still has an ominous beauty. A second volcano, named Teleki's, erupted over 100 years ago, leaving a trail of black basalt in its wake. Acacias extend branches of vicious thorns, and a maze of crater pools, choked by green algae and edged in

The tented camp is beautifully simple, and so quiet that life seems to happen in slow motion

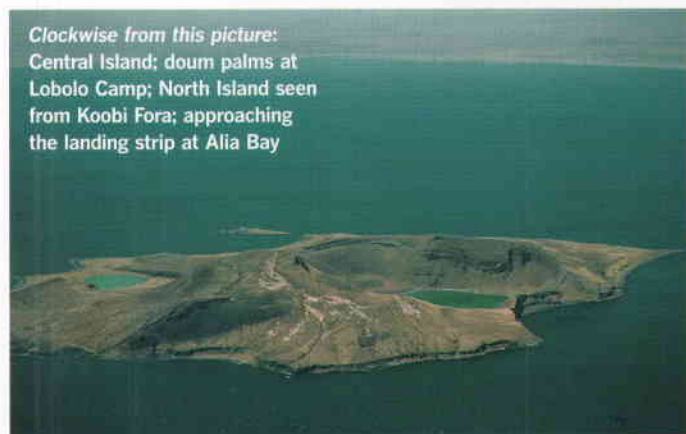
white froth, serves as a nursery for young crocodiles. According to Scheuerman, they are eaten by hyenas: he once left a goat out as bait to prove their existence. Sure enough, the hyenas appeared at 1am and, as if to prove a point, demolished the creature in 10 minutes.

The ride back to South Island, where we were to spend our first night, was defined by drama of a different kind: there was a storm off to the north, and brilliant white lightning flashed across the night sky. The camp had been set up while we were away, and looked wildly romantic

with its central dining area and individual camp beds, each with its own mosquito-net canopy. We were too late for our sundowner but had one anyway, followed by a supper of tilapia (a tasty local fish), vegetables and papaya salad, which we had to anchor down with our forks. Scheuerman rushed around yelling *weka mawe!* ('put stones!') at his staff, and told us the wind speed was at about 40 knots.

Talk, inevitably, turned to crocodiles: they had taken one of the Scheuermans' donkeys once, and a nesting female had attacked his boat. But, he added, a crocodile would never drag a human being from a camp bed, although a hyena might – if there were any on the island. Apparently there weren't, but that didn't stop the wind whistling around the latrine from sounding like one. I thought I'd spend the whole night starting at the merest rustle, but both Kirstin and I slept surprisingly soundly, bar the odd sudden gust of wind grabbing hold of our pillows.

After the excitement of that first day, Lobolo (where we headed next morning) was an oasis of calm. Set among stunted doum palms on the western shore, the tented camp is beautifully simple, and so quiet that life seems to happen in slow ➤



Clockwise from this picture:
Central Island; dour palms at
Lobolo Camp; North Island seen
from Koobi Fora; approaching
the landing strip at Alia Bay

➤ motion. Behind the line of trees, which cast spiky shadows across the sand, were six huge canvas tents under palm shelters, each with a separate bathroom and long-drop loo. Down on the shore, yellow-billed storks and long-legged plovers picked about in the shallows; Turkana herdsman bring their cattle, goats, sheep and camels to drink here; and women fetch water from the tiny spring.

It was difficult to equate such peaceful scenes with the warlike Turkana of history books: early-20th-century maps bore captions such as 'Nomads: treacherous', and fighting was brutal, using wrist and finger knives (banned under British rule). No doubt this was only part of the picture, but the Turkana still have a fight on their hands: simply to feed themselves and protect their cattle. That evening, Scheuerman, who has lived among and alongside the local tribes for years, offered to drive us into the hinterland to visit a local village. We were initially hesitant – we would be paying for the visit and were wary of a tourist sham, or feelings of awkwardness, perhaps – but any doubts we had soon gave way to a feeling of awe at the villagers' resourcefulness. (This was later increased by reading Nigel Pavitt's books on the Turkana culture. If ever a people could be described as creating

something from almost nothing, it is they).

The homestead we visited belonged to a family comprising a man of around 50, his three wives and a considerable number of children. When we arrived, the women and girls were milking their goats and curdling the milk in gourds, but seemed happy enough to show us their homes: the closed huts of acacia and palm where they store their ceremonial clothes including headdresses of Somali ostrich feathers and beaded goatskin apron skirts; the

We continued up round the crater rim. Our guide told us that the volcano could erupt at any minute

raised huts they use as shelters for baby goats; the open-air *bomas* where they sleep (the men, apparently, prefer the river bed). In another *boma*, a blackened tin container lay beside the embers of a dying fire and a bone mounted on the end of a stick: it was a goat's vertebra, used to whisk maize flour into porridge. Our guide, Peter, explained that the Turkana eat just once a day, after sundown, and that their diet largely consists of the meat, milk and blood of their cattle, sheep, goats and camels. Life is hard: the land is dry and dusty outside the rainy season, and what little is left is overgrazed.

Three of the girls were wearing neat pink-and-white checked uniforms: they were among the few who didn't have to board at the local school, which is attended by children from up to 30km away. The school had barely any facilities – just a few benches and blackboards under palm shelters. On the day of our visit, Scheuerman had the task of presenting the children with a new leather football, a gift from a previous Lobolo guest. The young headmaster was one of

those people who make any of one's own achievements seem feeble in comparison. He had taught his pupils to play with a bundle of plastic bags on a patch of dusty earth; the new ball was like an early Christmas present. While the kids ran off shrieking, we chatted to the headmaster. Being posted to one of the remotest spots in Kenya hadn't stopped him from staying in the loop on football: he could rate the recent performances of all the top teams in the Premiership.

Seeing something of how local people live was an integral part of our trip, but many people go to Lobolo Camp simply to enjoy the fishing and bird-life. The prime spot is Central Island, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site and crocodile breeding ground, and the



On safari in Sibiloi National Park.
Right, the southern end of Lake Turkana



➤ only place on our entire trip where we saw any other tourists. We arrived at sunrise to find an Egyptian goose pottering about on the beach. After a steep climb, we dropped down through a mass of dry meadow grasses to the first of three crater lakes, emerald-green like the pools in the south. The resident flamingos – up to 40,000 of them – were somewhere in the north, so we continued up round the crater rim, following a seam of sulphur to the top, where steam issued forth from a vent. According to Scheuerman, the volcano could erupt at any minute.

The sun was burning off the clouds as we reached the second lake, which is far darker and bluer than the first: water seeps in from the main lake through underground channels. The water was perfectly still, white-necked cormorants skimmed over the surface, and a Goliath heron stood quietly on the rocks, beside two large blue eggs. Three-quarters of the way round, we saw some crocodiles gliding through the water by a beach. We sat and watched them for a while through our binoculars before heading off again in the boat to some rocky outcrops to

find pelicans, sacred ibis and an osprey with a catch.

The lake's third island, North Island, is a hell hole of sulphur jets and poisonous snakes and not generally visited. We passed it on our way to Koobi Fora on the north-eastern shore, where Richard Leakey discovered his fossilised skull (now on show in Nairobi). Thanks to the work of the Leakeys and their successors, this site, based in Sibiloi National Park and run by the National Museums of Kenya, has been established as one of the richest fossil beds in the world. You can sleep in the primitive *bandas*, visit the museum and explore the site with a guide; and there are some intriguing finds, notably the jaw of a hippo jutting out from a rock and the near-complete skeletons of an extinct, mammoth-sized elephant, a long-snouted crocodile and a giant turtle. Encountering these fossilised skeletons, all of them around two million years old, creates a curiously elastic sense of time, dramatically bringing the distant past closer. Apparently, sabre-toothed tigers once roamed these plains. These days, you'd be lucky to see a cheetah, although there are plenty of

zebra, and skittish antelope and gazelles (oryx, topi, Grants' and gerenuk).

As we drove to Alia Bay for our flight back to Nairobi, African hares zigzagged madly through the scrub, their ears glowing a gentle pink in the morning light, and Scheuerman talked to us about the history of the lake. It used be much bigger and linked to the Nile – hence the presence of the hulking Nile crocodiles, and the Nile perch that are such a draw for fishermen. Nowadays, water pours in once a year from the Ethiopian highlands via the Omo River and Delta, but there is no outlet and evaporation is extensive, so when there is no rain, the lake shrinks. 'In the worst-case scenario,' Scheuerman told us grimly, 'the lake could dry up completely within 50 years.'

Scheuerman also runs trips down the Omo River from Addis Ababa in Ethiopia to Nairobi. In 2003, he put them on hold while he waited to see what impact the new hydroelectric dam on Ethiopia's Gibe river would have. As it turned out, the dam filled up and water poured into the Delta and the lake, as normal. It would be tragic, on so many levels, if it didn't.

TURKANA LOGISTICS

GETTING TO KENYA

Kenya Airways (01784 888233; www.kenya-airways.com) flies from London Heathrow to Nairobi from £481 return in February.
British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.britishairways.com) also flies from London to Nairobi from £618 return in February.

TOURING TURKANA

Based in Kenya, **Bush Homes** (00 254 20 600457; [\[homes.co.ke\]\(http://homes.co.ke\)\) can arrange onward flights to Lobolo from Nairobi, as well as itineraries for a tour of the Turkana region led by Jade Sea Journeys. You can also book this kind of itinerary, and flights, with **Tim Best Travel** \(020 7591 0300; \[www.timbesttravel.com\]\(http://www.timbesttravel.com\)\) or **Journeys by Design** \(01273 623 790; \[www.journeysbydesign.co.uk\]\(http://www.journeysbydesign.co.uk\)\)](http://www.bush-</p>
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JADE SEA JOURNEYS

All tours around the

Turkana region with **Jade Sea Journeys** (00 254 20 218336; joycec@satellite-email.com) are tailor-made, but typically focus on the east shore of the lake, flying from Nairobi or Laikipia; a five-day expedition (minimum four guests) costs US\$2,475 per person, plus park fees and flight costs for charter planes. The company can also take you north of Lake Turkana into the Omo Delta.

