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ANDY HASLAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

EXPLORER

Of Rivers and Rituals

Touring Ethiopia's Omo Valley, with a sustainable travel outfitter.

By ANDREW MCCARTHY

"Your George W. Bush came here two years ago and not a person recognized him."

"No one?"

"No one knew who he was."

"Would they have known Nelson Mandela?"

"No. No one here would have seen TV. No one here thinks beyond Omo."

I was speaking with Lale Biwa, a member of the Karo people, in Ethiopia's Omo Valley. We were surrounded by low, circular huts made from sticks, with pitched grass roofs, in his home village of Dus, on the banks of

the Omo River. A woman, heavily adorned in beads and bracelets, ground sorghum on a large stone in the nearby shade. Men, some carrying AK-47s, sat in clusters. Small naked children scampered past. Goats and cattle roamed freely on the dusty flood plain. There was no electricity, no running water, no cars. Mr. Biwan, who guesses his age to be "about 40," looked around. "It is a good place," he said. "The people are true." I had come to the Omo Valley with the innovative tourism entrepreneur Will Jones to get a view into the lives of some of Africa's most traditional tribes. "I'm particularly interested in the Omo," Mr. Jones told me.

"It's an at-risk ecosystem, with at-risk communities. But it is still a very wild place." Mr. Jones was born in Nigeria of English parents, raised in East Africa and educated in England. "When it came time to put on a suit and go into town," he said, "I came back to Africa."

Mr. Jones, 45, has been creating customized tours to the continent for more than 20 years. Wild Philanthropy is his latest venture — an enterprise designed to build sustainable tourism with a mutually beneficial exchange between visitors and the people and land they visit. Mr. Jones also operates

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

Sunset over the Omo Valley. The valley is largely dry savanna, with the Omo River cutting a nearly 475-mile-long swath down to Lake Turkana on the Kenya border.



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