

Our helicopter skims fast and low over grassy plains, scattering thousands of grazing antelope. It sweeps across swampy pools, causing scores of crocodiles to slide into the muddy waters until they boil with jumping fish. Flocks of storks, cranes and egrets take to the air. A monitor lizard two yards long wriggles away into the undergrowth. Two hippos duck beneath the liquid brown silt of an ox-bowed river channel.

Our great mechanical bird of prey then soars skywards to give us a panoramic view of one of the last real wildernesses left in Africa – a largely unmapped, undocumented and unvisited territory at least half the size of England but almost entirely unknown to the outside world.

In every direction an epic landscape of lightly wooded savannah and lush green flood plains stretches away to the far horizon, its flatness punctuated only by



a few lone hills. Save for a handful of villages, no human construct scars its natural beauty. No paved roads or power cables traverse its cloying black soil.

“It’s one of the most stunning landscapes I’ve ever seen,” our South African guide, Kyle de Nobrega, tells my fellow passengers, a wealthy Filipino named Andoni Aboitiz and his son, Kasen.

The pair are visiting as tourists, which is surprising to say the least. This is South Sudan, a country whose people have been ravaged by war for most of the past seven decades; a country where the AK-47 remains ubiquitous; a country to which most western governments strongly advise their citizens not to travel under any circumstances. Aboitiz and his son are pioneers, and as if to underscore the fragility of South Sudan’s present peace, a fresh conflict erupts in northern Sudan during their trip.

A little history: in 2011 South Sudan secured independence from northern Sudan following two long, bloody wars that first erupted in 1955. The world’s newest state was swiftly engulfed by a civil war of its own that killed 400,000, displaced four million and left two-thirds of the population dependent on food aid.

The factions finally agreed a peace deal in 2020, and in August last year South Sudan’s government offered African Parks (AP), a Johannesburg-based conservation organisation, a 10-year contract to resurrect two huge national parks. Boma and Badingilo were created in 1977 and 1992 respectively but scarcely existed except on paper.

AP, which now runs 22 national parks in 12 countries and employs more than 4,000 full-time workers, accepted on its usual terms: that South Sudan’s government gave it complete managerial autonomy to pursue a jointly agreed strategy, including the power to hire, train and if necessary fire rangers and other employees. AP’s advance guard, an American conservationist named Mike Fay and David Simpson, a Yorkshire farmer’s son who had previously saved the Central African Republic’s Chinko reserve, arrived last autumn.

They feared most of the wildlife would have been slaughtered during all those years of conflict, but were thrilled by what they discovered: despite, or perhaps because of, the war most of it had not only survived but flourished. The rival armies were evidently distracted by the fighting, or unable to penetrate some of Africa’s most inaccessible and roadless terrain, or they frightened away the international poaching cartels that have ravaged other countries.

The relatively easy-to-poach zebra and rhinos were gone, as were most of the buffalo. Only a few hundred elephants remained. But the more mobile, migratory creatures abounded. AP’s team found healthy populations of lions, cheetahs, leopards and hyenas. They found rare Nile lechwe and sitatunga. They found herds of Nubian giraffes, a critically endangered subspecies.

The birds were astonishing, too. Here were huge numbers of vultures, poisoned almost to extinction elsewhere in Africa and Asia, and rare shoebill storks, eagles, cranes, herons, pelicans, buzzards and bustards. “For large birds alone it’s like a World Heritage Site times 10,” says Fay.

Above all, they found that vast herds of antelope



On wildlife tourism’s frontline

South Sudan | A trickle of very adventurous – and

very wealthy – visitors are pioneering tourism in

the world’s youngest country. By *Martin Fletcher*



– white-eared kob, tiang, reedbuck and Mongalla gazelles – were still migrating down to the parks from the north and east during the rainy season in what they believe to be the biggest movement of large mammals anywhere in the world, beating even that of the Serengeti’s wildebeest.

“The migration is absolutely spectacular,” says Simpson, who reckons there are more than 2mn kob alone with perhaps as many tiang, reedbuck and Mongalla gazelles again. “My first flight over I was nearly in tears it was so incredible and unbelievable.”

Fay had some idea what to expect, having surveyed the parks from the air 16 years ago, but he too was mightily relieved at how much wildlife remains. “If you’re me it’s like you’ve died and gone to heaven. You’re in Shangri La,” he says. “I never thought that in 2023 I’d be flying over completely unprotected animals in the hundreds of thousands.”

But the sheer scale of the migration has had an unexpected consequence. AP’s mandate is to manage not just Boma and Badingilo, but the entire “migration area”. Instead of 13,000 sq miles, it now finds itself managing possibly three or four times as much – a miraculously intact ecosystem stretching from the White Nile in the west to the Ethiopian borderlands in the east. “We keep going further and further and finding more wildlife,” says Simpson.

He and Fay have been recruiting staff, training rangers, restoring bases and repairing airstrips. They have imported



three fixed-wing planes and two helicopters. They have collared about 120 kob, elephants, lions and giraffes, and established a command centre in Juba, South Sudan’s rough and ready capital, to monitor the movements of the animals and aircraft.

They have begun reaching out to the villagers living in and around the parks, seeking to persuade them that while hunting antelope on foot and with spears to feed themselves is fine, poaching on a commercial scale using motorbikes and AK-47s is not. It will be a hard sell, but “they’ve received us with broad open arms,” says Fay. “They really want to get something done.”

AP will soon begin an aerial survey of the territory’s wildlife, and it expects surprises. “The probability that there are lots of species and ecological processes that no one knows about is huge,” says Fay. Fellow conservationists even harbour hopes of finding northern white rhinos, of which only two known specimens survive – both female and in captivity.

AP, a non-profit NGO, is also beginning to think about tourism to help fund an operation in South Sudan that is presently financed entirely by America’s Wyss Foundation and various conservation organisations (the South Sudan government pays nothing).

Mass tourism is clearly impractical in a land lacking almost any roads or infrastructure, but allowing approved operators to organise a small number of high-value visits like that of the Aboitizes is another matter (an eight-night trip costs \$90,000 per person, including a \$15,000 direct donation to African Parks). Clearly helicopters are environmentally damaging; the organisers argue there is no other viable means of exploring the area and the funds generated outweigh the negatives.

By the time I joined the Aboitizes at a clean, simple AP base in Nyat, a village on Boma’s eastern fringe, they had already spent three exhilarating days exploring the Sudd, Africa’s largest wetland, in the north western corner of the migration range. They had also inspected “Lucy”, a gigantic German-built excavator that was digging a canal northwards from the Sudd when the project was abruptly halted 40 years ago. She was abandoned where she stood.

During the next four captivating days we joined two AP collaring and tagging operations, watching from our helicopter as a young British vet named Richard Harvey leaned out of a second chopper to dart fleeing giraffes. Minutes later, the animals buckled. Our job was to sit on the giraffes’ necks to prevent them getting up while Harvey tagged them.

“It’s hard to put into words without sounding melodramatic,” he said later. “It’s one of the most remarkable wilderness areas I’ve ever been to.”

We watched the savannahs – brown and sere during the dry season – turn a vivid green after a night of torrential rain. We tracked a lion from the air. We circled towers of rock festooned with vultures’ nests. We added honey badgers, baboons, roan, oryx, eland, hartebeest, ostriches and guinea fowl to our rapidly lengthening list of animals seen.

We landed on plains swarming with curious kob that had probably never seen humans before. We drank coffee and sundowners on the top of perfectly

conical hills, ate wild honey gathered by villagers, and cooled off in a hidden pool. “These are some of the most remarkable days I’ve had in my 30-year flying career, and I’ve seen a lot,” our pilot, Craig Mitchell, observed unprompted.

The scattered villages, occupied by people of a dozen ethnic groups, were fascinating too. Their ways of life have changed little in centuries. The villagers hunt, tend cattle and live in huts of mud and thatch. But for the odd solar panel they have no electricity.

Nyat is home to the warlike Murle people. In January it was attacked by Anuaks from another village, Otelo, 50 miles northwards, for allegedly kidnapping their children. More than 20 died in the clash, and we saw the remains of several torched huts.

From top: tourist Andoni Aboitiz (centre) assists in an elephant collaring operation in Boma National Park; cattleherders in the village of Kissangor; Aboitiz meets members of the Dinka people in the cattle encampment; Boma National Park — Kyle de Nobrega

DETAILS

Martin Fletcher was a guest of Journeys by Design (Journeysbydesign.com) and African Parks (africanparks.org). Prices start from \$90,000 per person for an eight-night journey shared by a group of four, travelling by helicopter, with \$15,000 of that going to support the work of African Parks as a donation

In Otelo we met King Akwai Agada Akwai, the big, ebullient chief of 20,000 Anuaks. Sitting on a pile of animal skins in the mud-floored compound, he hailed the arrival of the village’s first foreign tourists as “a historic day”. With more notice he would have celebrated by serving us kobs’ heads slow-cooked in sand heated by burning cow dung.

We admired a Toyota Land Cruiser that the king had been given by Sudan’s president in 2010 but never used for lack of roads, and the iron pegs to which the villagers tethered their cows: they were fashioned from British rifles abandoned here more than a century ago.

After I returned to Juba, the Aboitizes helped collar an elephant and visited Kissangor, whose Jiye villagers scarify their faces and arms for beautification. They then flew on to the beautiful Imatong mountains on the Ugandan border. “For me, it was not a holiday but a privileged educational trip,” Andoni Aboitiz enthused in a subsequent email.

But was it, is it, safe? South Sudan is a desperately poor country of hungry, traumatised and well-armed people. Even during my short stay there were clashes between ethnic groups, and Simpson readily admits that it is “the wildest place” he has ever been.

Andoni Aboitiz told me afterwards that he felt secure “99 per cent” of the time, and only twice felt “uncomfortable”. While inspecting Lucy, the abandoned excavator, the group heard someone poaching kob with an AK-47 nearby and left swiftly. On another occasion they were approached while picnicking by several men, one carrying an AK-47 and asking for something. The guides gave them cold Coca-Colas and they left.

During my visit I never felt threatened, though one road trip from Juba was cancelled because of a tribal skirmish on the highway. We avoided major population centres, stayed in well-guarded camps, trusted AP’s intelligence network and were generally welcomed in the villages. Indeed AP could prove a stabilising force, bringing a measure of hope, employment and law and order to a land where those have long been alien concepts.

There will always be risks involved in visiting untamed lands, of course, but the reward for intrepid (and wealthy) travellers to South Sudan is access to a vast, undiscovered jewel of a wilderness. And as Fay observed: “The more pioneers there are, the more people find it doable rather than not doable.”



UNDER THE HIGH PATRONAGE OF HSH PRINCE ALBERT II OF MONACO

mys

MONACO
YACHT SHOW

27-30 SEPTEMBER 2023

Facilitate your visit with the MYS concierge service

Severine Sciortino
Head of Private Clients & Public Relations
severine@monacoyachtshow.mc



f @ in t d y

monacoyachtshow.com

informarkets

Official sponsor
RICHARD MILLE