Take Me to the

R I V E R

Setting up camp in the Omo Valley, where **Ethiopia**'s age-old tribes still dance to their own beat

Words and photos by
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I watch the naked man with a Mohican thrust himself high onto the spine of a bull in one single athletic bound. He then leaps across the undulating contour made by the backs of eight other bovines lined up in a long row side by side. Low mountains follow the distant horizon, resembling spikes on a crocodile's tail, and what seem like waterfalls of glittering gold light disperse as the apricot sun smoulders and the day begins to dwindle.

I'm in the hot, humid Omo Valley in southern Ethiopia, and this is the cattle jumping done by most Hamar men as part of their initiation into manhood. Crowds orbit, towering ostrich plumes swaying in their hair, to see how many bulls each competitor can cross without falling. Lale, my guide and host, explains that this man – if he succeeds – will marry afterwards. "You complete the bull jumping, and then wait for your family. It's not your choice who you marry," Lale says.

All afternoon the Hamar, a pastoralist tribe who are scattered throughout this dry acacia scrubland, have been gathering to the sounds of bells jingling and the boisterous blowing of copper horns. Women dressed in heavy aluminium necklaces, their twisted hair red with ochre butter, impatiently wait for other recent bull jumpers (many jumps happen at this time of year) to arrive, because they're the only ones eligible to whip them. Finally, as these men appear on foot the ecstatic women run up to them, brazenly thrusting lengthy sticks into their hands.

I watch as the bullet-like lashes open previous welts: blood trickles out of the raised ridges on the women's naked backs. Yet they continue to dance, taunting the men and begging for more. "The women are all from the bull jumper's family. This pain is how they show him their respect," Lale explains. It certainly seems consensual, yet I can't help but feel somewhat uneasy. "The women are free to choose whether they take part," Lale says. "Let them decide, not today, but tomorrow, if they change this age-old tradition. It's certainly not for outsiders to impose," he continues. "Bull jumping and whipping is important in our culture [Lale is from Kara, a neighbouring tribe which also customarily carries out bull jumping] and is linked to marriage and honour."

I've come to Ethiopia to try out the country's first mobile tented camp. Wild Expeditions, an operator that started in 2016, imports tents from South Africa to give visitors the freedom to stay in remote places far from familiar routes. Ethiopia's tourism is still – thankfully – inexperienced in comparison to the fully-fledged machinery of neighbouring Tanzania and Kenya, and finding the right accommodation can be hard.

I stay first at Lale's camp on the steep banks of the Omo River, the only permanent camp owned by Wild Expeditions. The turmeric-orange road ends long before we reach the camp, releasing us into the Omo's wilderness. We then drive off-road through bushes that thump the car like an elephant tramping through virgin forest, unleashing the fresh smell of foliage. This untrodden part of the Omo liberates me from a well-worn circuit that has become circus-like in parts, full of camera-toting tourists. I'm freed, in fact, from any kind of familiar world: this stretch of the Omo is wild and surprising, although much of Ethiopia liberates me from what I already know. Even the time is different. I glance at the watch of Getachew, my driver. It reads contrary to mine, as time in this part of the world is mapped in 12 hours and a year is made up of 13 months. It's currently 2013 here.

Lale was lucky enough to be educated in Kenya: his mother chose him from among his siblings to go with the Swedish missionaries who came to his village, Dus, one day. "I went with 15 other Kara boys but all the others returned, because village life is strong; you're surrounded by your family and life here is good," Lale says. "I was the only one who stayed and became the first Kara to get an education." He's now back, however, and just outside his village is where he's set up his camp. This hideaway, ►►

which consists of seven green tents with hammocks hanging outside, is concealed in a fig-tree grove. Each tent has sunshine-yellow bedspreads, hand-woven rugs and a bathroom with shower water that is heated over a fire. Kingfishers shoot across the river like electric-blue propellers and leaves pad to the ground as colobus monkeys spring in the trees above. The solar-generated camp is exclusive and only one family or group can stay at any one time. Kara women with necklaces piled high traverse the glade and climb down to the tea-coloured river to collect water, yellow jerry cans strapped to their backs like rucksacks.

I've been to Ethiopia many times over a span of two decades, and change is happening quickly. This is the first occasion I'm able to visit the formerly secretive president's palace, for example. "It's open to the public as Abiy Ahmed, the new prime minister, wants to show this is now a free country," my guide explains. Ethiopia has also become Africa's fastest-growing, non-oil-producing economy and plans to be the continent's leading manufacturing hub.

However, few places are experiencing change as swiftly as the Omo, where it's being foisted on the people and not always for the better: they are finding it increasingly difficult to live their lives as they did previously. For thousands of years six Omo tribes have farmed along the river, depending on seasonal flooding. But since a series of dams have been built, the river flooding has stopped. Although the Hamar still bull jump, the Kara do not, as they have fewer animals and rely almost entirely on farming – bull jumping is a huge ceremony that goes hand in hand with fruitful harvests for feasting and marriage dowries.

So, although the dams may be beneficial for the rest of the country, the Omo people have not profited. "We don't need electricity, just food," Lale says. "My main fear is that if there continues to be no bull jumping or marriage, the

young will leave." Recently Lale went to America to find a sustainable solution: solar pumps for irrigation, which a percentage of Wild Expedition's revenue will fund. Meanwhile, Chinese-run sugar plantations have taken over swathes of traditional grazing lands and another tribe, the Bodi, are being forced (sometimes violently) to disarm their AK-47s. The government maintains this is necessary to secure the plantation's safety, which brings burly profits to its coffers. Yet guns are a status symbol here, as well as providing protection from wild animals and rival tribes. "Change must happen slowly and bring benefits to local communities," Lale tells me.

However, although the tribes are being displaced from their land, here in these far-flung reaches they continue to live beyond the realm of the outside world. Many are still nomadic, upping sticks with their animals and expressing themselves in their body painting. When we visit Dus a dance is just beginning. The Kara perform them weekly as a way of celebrating and coming together as a community. White spirals or zigzags that look like ski slaloms are painted on chests and legs, and bone-white clay faces are freckled with daubed black dots. In the late afternoon sun there's a nimbus of gold dust as the whole ground vibrates with their dancing. Everyone is singing and clapping as they shoot upwards in graceful leaps.

The following morning we travel two hours upriver in Lale's boat to spend a couple of nights in one of the fly camps close to another tribe, the Mursi. This particular village is isolated with no road access; it's only reachable by boat and there's no clinic, school or market. Crocodiles stand still on the riverbanks, their humongous mouths wide open, and tornadoes of butterflies caper. We arrive with stretchers full of coffee and grain because Wild Expeditions doesn't want to distort these cash-free communities with money.

Despite being so distant, the camp is impressive – although the tents are smaller than at Lale's, there are ►►

camp beds inside with fresh linen and a dining tent is also set up. I immediately notice the women: they wear enormous clay lip plates, their lips stretched wide around them. The bigger the plate, the more alluring the woman is considered to be. We're far from the confines of how we normally see beauty. This in itself is beautiful.

The plates are cumbersome so only worn for a while before being removed and then placed back in throughout the day. The rest of the time the women's bottom lips hang down in a loop like long, limp earthworms. I watch as a line of tall men enters the clearing, returning from the bush where lions and elephant roam, AK-47s slung over their shoulders. They exude natural style and a warrior's confidence, swaggering with such poise and posture.

I spend time with the women among their domed grass houses as they grind chilli. They teach me Mursi words, laughing as I repeat them back. I observe one of the women's faces as she sucks an ice cube from our food supply, experiencing the coldness for the first time. It's strangely sensual to watch as this diamond-like chunk is gingerly touched with her tongue in sheer amazement, then passed around between sagging lips as the other women gather to taste it too.

At dusk, I go into the forest with the men as they climb trees with burning branches to collect wild honey. The following morning I squeeze the nectar-sweet liquid, fresh from the comb, into my coffee as I sit by the embers of a fire, around which some men have slept. I watch them stretch and shake out their blankets, under which they're naked. In the day, they wear nothing except these blankets wrapped around their lean bodies.

Next we stay in another fly camp set up in a parched river wadi, close to where some Hamar live. We climb high onto the banks and herds of goats and cows move inwards like a closing fan as they're brought home. Later from my tent I hear singing and giggling as the young Hamar dance in the dark: timeless entertainment in a world without internet. Early the ensuing morning some Hamar men wander past the camp with their short skirts and hipster-esque hats. As they examine the cutlery on the breakfast table in wonder, I ponder whether us being here is upsetting their equilibrium – or is the car crash of change inevitable whether we come or not?

Later, we visit a nearby family. Their home is like a hollow haystack of silver branches with a low doorway opening. Steam rises from drinking calabashes and corn hangs in the rafters. They have few possessions. I ask the matriarch about a Hamar man who I heard married a German anthropologist. "He's now back," Lale translates. "He was born in the bush and is used to sitting around telling stories, drinking coffee, walking around with AK-47s and lots of animals. Life in Germany was too fast." It's this freedom that I, rightly or wrongly, romanticise.

As we leave to return to Lale's, I spy another family heading into the thicket with their animals. The man holds a small wooden footstool that doubles as a seat or pillow, a necktie made from a giraffe's tail shooting out like an arrow behind his head. Beads fill the frills of the woman's goatskin skirt. They follow a tiny trail and two young children and a dog walk behind as they pass sword-silver desert roses blooming with flamingo-pink flowers.

I feel free, too, untethered from my phone and any commitments, leaving communication behind, giving myself entirely to this place.

THE LOWDOWN

Far and Wild Travel offers five nights with accommodation in a mixture of Lale's camp and fly camps from £4,225 per person, based on four people travelling and including full board, domestic flights and all guiding.

Find out more at *farandwild.travel*

OMO VALLEY, *ETHIOPIA*