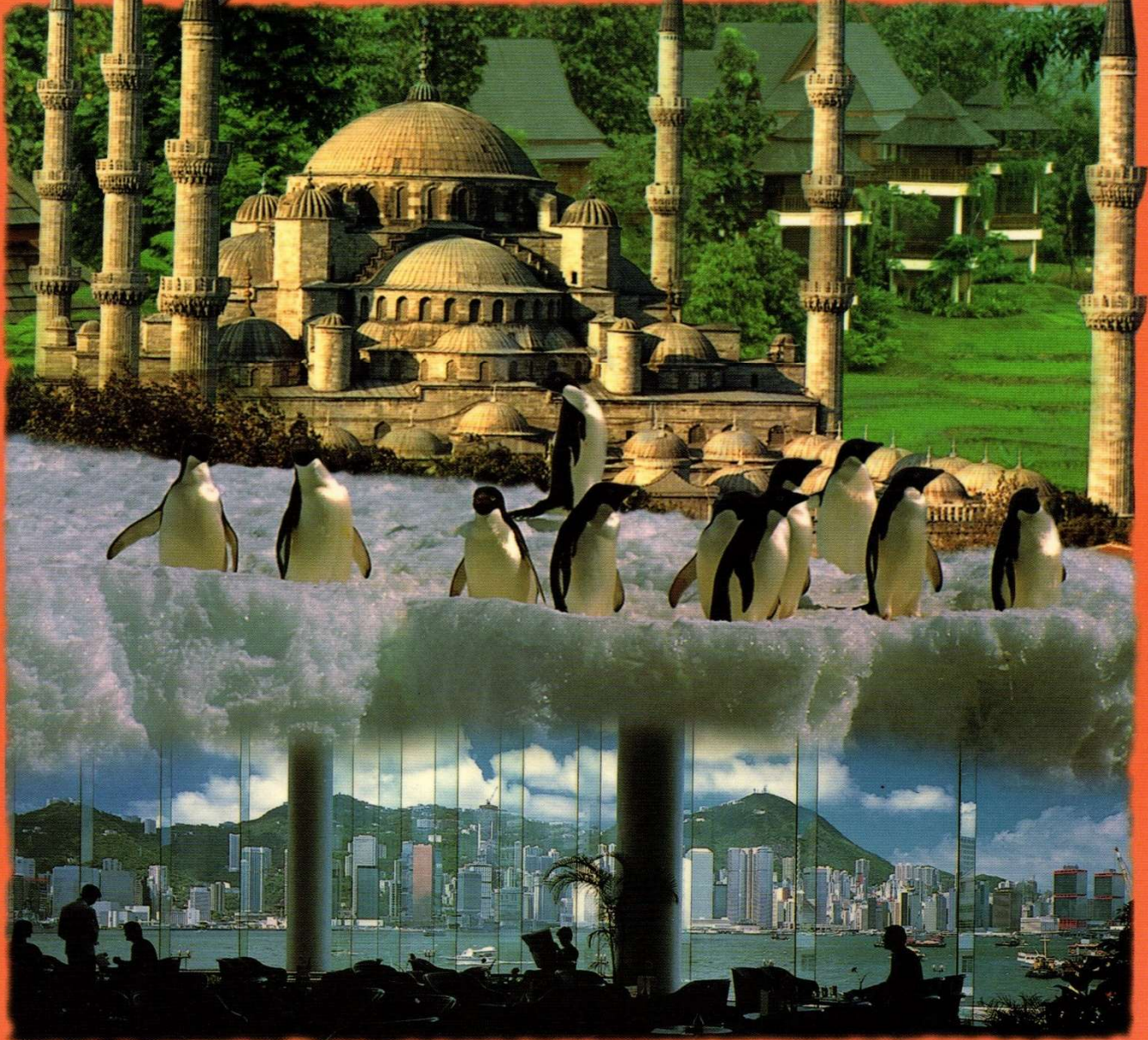


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# Expeditions

THE TRAVEL MAGAZINE



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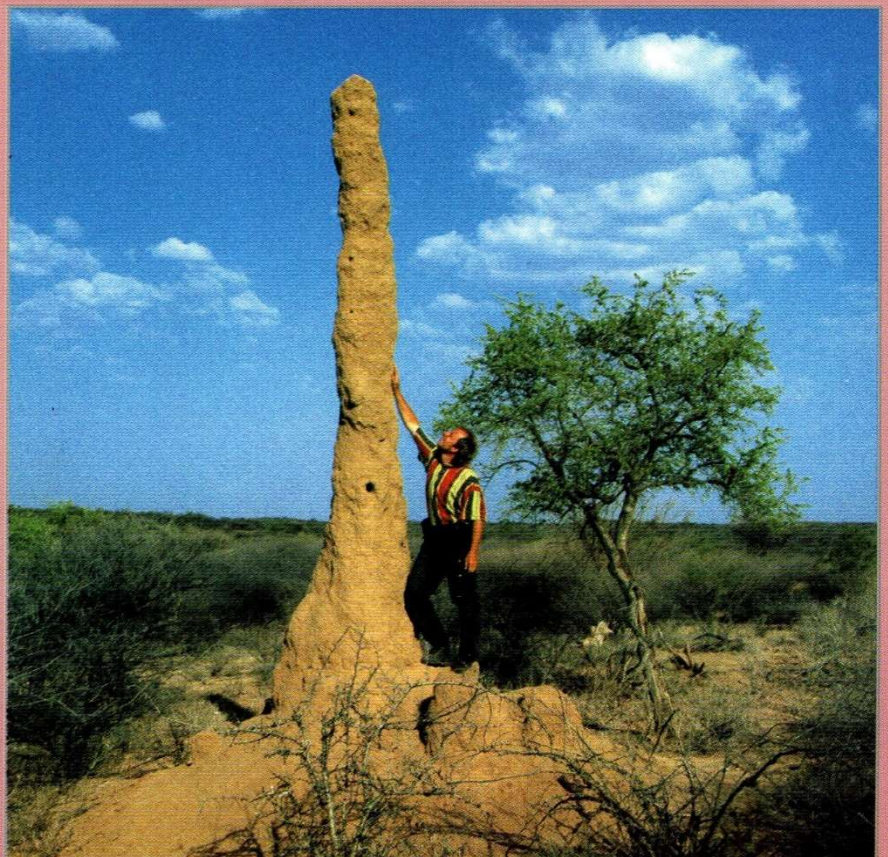
# *Omo – a journey into Ethiopia*

*text and photos by Christian Rommel*

To most people, Ethiopia conjures images of hunger, civil wars and drought. But to those who are passionate about unusual trekking tours in remote parts of the world . . . are fascinated by ethnic minorities . . . or love the challenges posed by an expedition, in the purist sense . . . Ethiopia is Paradise.

It was this magical attraction of Ethiopia that lured me and three other Germans to head out to the southwest areas of the African country. Right next to the border of Sudan, these places are like a desert furnace with among the poorest infrastructure in the world.

The lower reaches of the Omo





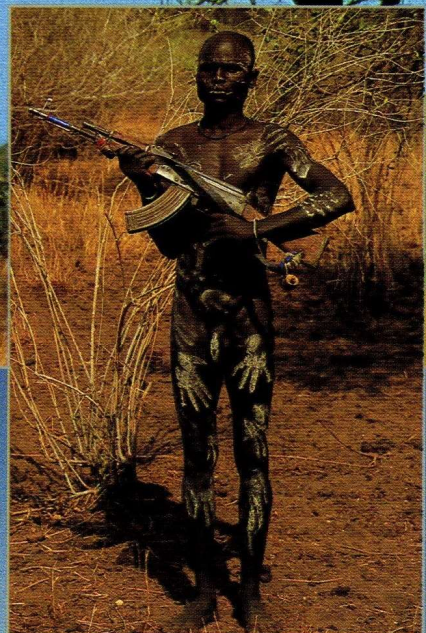
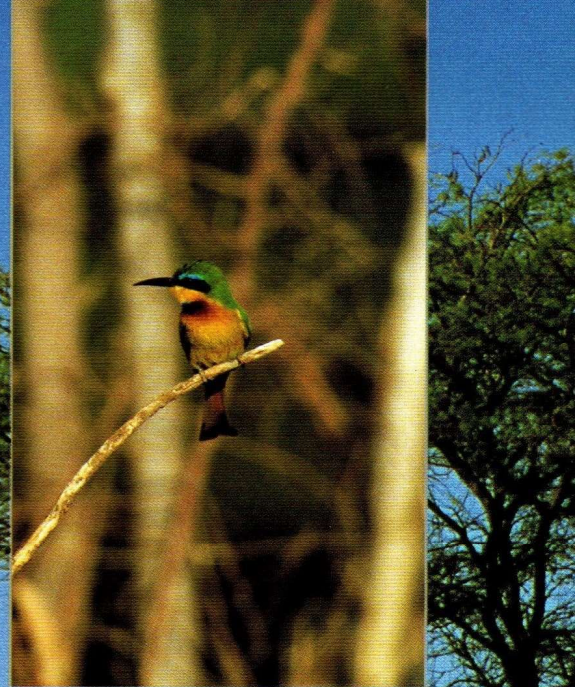
River in the National Park of the same name are an ethnological phenomenon – a Mecca for ethnologists and hard core outdoor fanatics. Here in a relatively confined area, a wide range of highly varied semi-nomadic people have settled. Each with traditional ways of life that have remained untouched by Western culture and civilization to this day due to their extreme isolation.

On a Canadian Twinotter, we took off from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa into Tum – to negotiate for a team of guides for the trekking part of the tour. Tum was nothing more than a small collection of dilapidated grass huts and lopsided shacks of corrugated

metal, next to a bumpy landing strip in use only during dry season.

Joining us were two rugged, not particularly confidence-inspiring soldiers armed with Kalashnikovs. Armed guards are obligatory in Southern Ethiopia, especially as all men carry guns – whether as a sign of manliness, a status symbol, a demonstration of power, for hunting purposes or waging wars.

Our trek first led us through a wonderful plateau with lush dense vegetation, magnificently fresh and cool air, and a fantastic view of the endless coffee plantations. From time to time, our tracks are lined with seas of flowers and blossom. None of us ever





imagined that a Garden of Eden would exist in this place. But as we descended into the lowlands, it became hotter and drier.

We spent the nights in small sleepy villages, in the middle of nowhere. Our guides would ask the village chiefs for permission to stay, gave them our gifts such as tobacco and razor blades, and negotiated for a collective fee in the national currency – birr.

After eight days of trekking, we reached the Omo River. A jeep awaited for us as the rest of the journey can no longer be explored on foot. On the average, we passed by new ethnic group settlements every 50 kilometers.

Ethiopia's varied wildlife did not show its best to us. The herds of

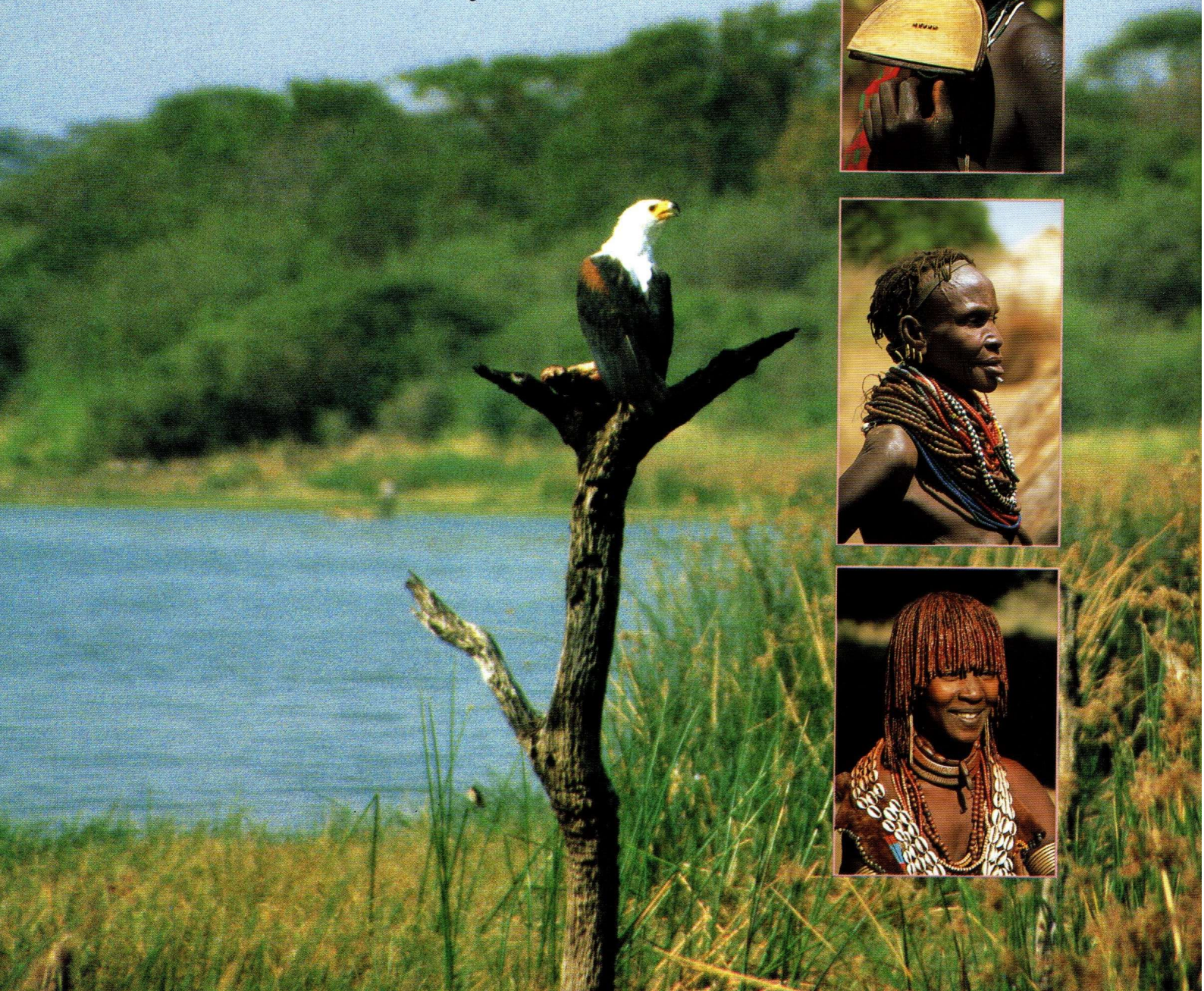
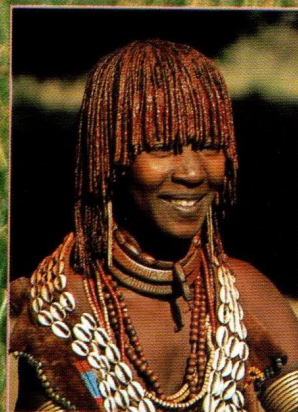
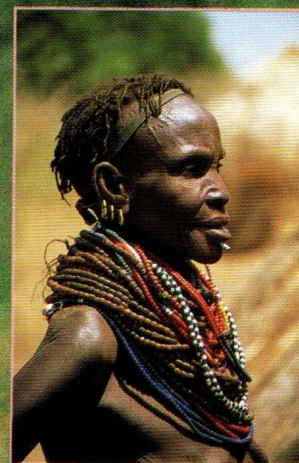
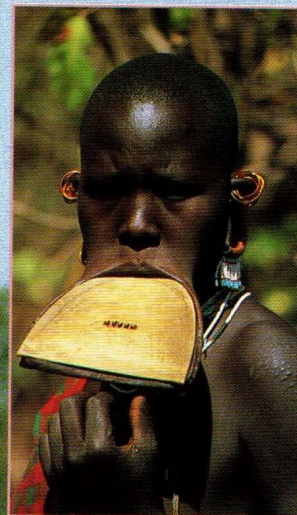
antelopes, graceful gazelles, impressive elephants and water buffalos were very reserved and disappeared into the undergrowth after making brief eye contacts. Once, a majestic pair of ostriches sauntered leisurely across our path, but we only heard lions roaring at night.

In four weeks, we visited no fewer than nine different ethnic groups – all of which had distinct dialects, cultures, life-styles, homes, clothing and body decorations. We could even find distinct differences in their anatomy and hair color.

First, we visited the Dizzy – whose Western clothing made them looked civilized. They mainly live in the highlands near Tum. The Bume

women, on the other hand are made distinct by the huge number of necklaces they wear day and night. The colorful glass beads had probably been brought to the region from Kenya.

The Geleb live on the edge of Lake Turkaka, by the Kenyan border. They are the only ones who still use animal hides, not only to make clothes but also to cover their round huts in the endless expanses of the black savannah. The





Erbore have, by far, the darkest skin color. So black, the automatic light meter in the modern auto-focus camera was outwitted.

The Baya, numbering only 80 members, are very slim and tall, similar to the Masai warriors. They are a proud, beautiful group of people who are happily contented in their isolated habitat – living in complete harmony with nature. Well known among ethnologists, the Karo now only number around 500. They have characteristically distinct decorative body painting in earth colors.

The most imaginative hairstyles are displayed by the Hamar. The women set their hair in ponytails colored with a mixture of fat and red dye. The vain men have theirs artfully plaited, some dyed and with feathers, giraffe hair or tufts of animal fur.

A large part of our time was devoted among the Surma and Mursi. The strange practices of the Mursi

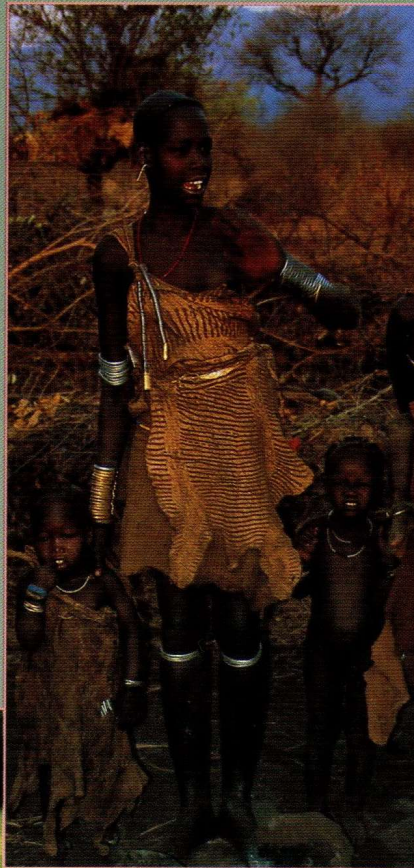
women has earned the tribe a somewhat scurrilous fame among the Western media with their plate lips or duck bills.

A cut is made in the skin parallel to the lower lip when they are in their teens. As soon as the cut is healed, increasingly larger clay discs, which have notches on the sides and held in

place by the lower lip, are inserted, stretching the skin further. To keep the round discs in position, the girls had to have all their lower front teeth knocked out around the age of eight. The disc is then pressed into this huge gap for support.

The bigger the disc, the more beautiful and attractive a woman is, and the higher the dowry becomes. Extremely grotesque-looking lip plates up to an incredible 18 cm in diameter are not uncommon. The Mursi women feel naked without their discs, especially when receiving visitors and on all special occasions.

On the other hand, the widespread decorative scars, mainly found on the arms, chests and stomachs of many people in the Omo region do have a certain visual appeal. In men, the bulging, snakelike scars on the upper arm that would always fascinate the civilized – are visible signs for having killed an enemy.





Using thorns, nowadays, needles or razor blades, the skin is pierced, slit or cut open. Tree resin or plant sap is introduced into the open wound for it to become infected and inflamed. Only by doing this can the large, beautiful, permanent and visible scars be created.

At the dawn of the new millennium, it is difficult to imagine that such an untouched region still exists. And in the heart of this inhospitable wilderness live a special group of people with amazing customs, rituals and practices – that would always fascinate the civilized. As I looked back at my journey, I feel so privileged to have witnessed the alien and mysterious world, that is Ethiopia.

