



Tribal traits and traditions tour – Lower Omo Valley, South West Ethiopia

(10 days/9 nights) 10 – 19th February 2025

with a **Harar and Lalibela extension**

(6 days/5 nights) 19th - 24th February 2025



Our photo tours focus on taking you to places which have unique appeal to photographers. We seek the beauty of landscape and seascape, the heritage of cultural diversity and the bustle of streets and marketplaces – effectively photography through geography. We also strive to promote eco photo tourism where we have a sustainable, un-intrusive, approach to our photography.

We strive to seek the best moments, light and opportunities to compose shots which reflect upon those inimitable moments. There is also great value in the immersion in local customs and culture, making the journey and photography more meaningful.

It is recommended that participants bring a laptop or tablet to enable us to review the images or get help with editing if wished.

We welcome participants, whatever their photographic experience, as well as partners or family members who simply would like to join in the journey!



‘It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.’ – Henry David Thoreau

The **Omo Valley of Ethiopia** is part of the Southern Nations and Nationalities Peoples Region (SNNPR) and is a relatively isolated area of the country, renowned for its indigenous people or tribes. There are approximately 40 tribes in the region, with many living as they have existed for millennia. It is these tribes that we have come to photograph – in their villages, the bush, roadside and local markets.

The photography

With tribal peoples, photography is different – a very good local guide is necessary but here the precedent of paying villages and/or individuals is almost universal. This was something the tour companies seem to have instigated decades ago when tourism was in its infancy. We always try to give to the village instead of the ‘person’ because it is less discriminating, and we get our local guides to deal with payment to take pressure off photographers. We are sensitive to the impacts that tourism can cause, aiming to make visits sustainable and a positive cultural interaction! It is all a delicate balance, and the local guides are often best in deciding which strategy to adopt.

In some cases when we have stayed in a Suri village, for example, we wander around the village without a camera just to become a familiar sight. It is interpersonal skills, which make the moment count. And in that moment, we want to capture light, colour, emotion, insight, character and spirit. We try to shoot in the golden hours or at least where there is shade from the intense African sun. In the right light, at the right time, the ordinary becomes extraordinary – bringing incredible opportunities for portraits of tribal life and street markets. Some of the tribes we will encounter are Arbore, Hamar, Kara, Nyangatom, Banna, Ari, Suri, Dassenech and Tsemai.

The travel

Villages are sometimes remote and this is what makes the photography rewarding. We travel in comfortable 4X4s (Toyota land cruisers or similar) to get to some of the very best locations. There is always a plan B if plan A has to be abandoned due to the occasional downpour, for example, making unsurfaced tracks impassable. It is also possible that we change the itinerary spontaneously if we hear of a local festival or celebration, such as the Hamar tribe bull jumping.

You do need a sense of adventure for this trip, but I will help with good preparation and packing advice. There are a few essentials, such as a good first aid kit with Malaria prophylaxis, but I will send out a list well in advance. We will be off the beaten track but will not be doing any arduous treks but will walk short distances to and around some of the villages.

I first travelled to the Omo Valley in 2000 and lived in Ethiopia from 2006–2010, so I know the country very well and love it. In the last few years, since living there, I have been back once every 12–18 months to capture those moments unique to the Omo.

We will often have very early starts to catch the best light with the tribes! Where possible we will visit markets throughout the tour.

Day 1 – Monday 10th February: Addis Ababa

ARRIVE in Addis Ababa. Group members gather in the lobby of the Capital Hotel and Spa. Tour overview, briefing and Q&A session at 5:30/6pm followed by a welcome dinner at a local restaurant.

Overnight stay at the **Capital Hotel**

Day 2 – Tuesday 11th February: Addis Ababa – Jimma

Flight from Addis Ababa to Jimma.

Drive from Jimma to Mizan Teferi – stay overnight at the Salayish Hotel or similar.

Day 3 – Wednesday 12th February Mizan Teferi to Kibish via Bebeke

Here we camp and spend two nights with the Suri tribe.

Day 4 – Thursday 13th February

The Suri (sometimes referred to as Surma), one of the remoter of the Omo Valley tribes in Ethiopia. The Suri, in many ways, have changed little over time. The men remain naked under their blankets, the women still have lip plates, but in decreasing numbers and they still retain their pastoral roots with some bartering of cattle for goods and indeed, guns. They are proud, resilient and one still gets the feeling that survival of the fittest ensures their longevity.

As roads encroach and telecommunications advance it is inevitable that their culture will change and the seeds of homogenisation are already sown. The same applies to all the Omo tribes but the Suri have, perhaps, remained more untouched due to their location and resilience.

Tourism is perhaps a way in which the Suri, and the other Omo tribes, can retain their cultural integrity. The Suri have always used clays to decorate their bodies for camouflage and special events, such as stick fighting or weddings. They still scarify themselves using razor blades and sap from plants to create patterns of keloidal (raised) scars. There are fewer young tribes women retaining their clay lip plates which was, until recently, a very distinctive part of their tribal adornment. They also use clay plugs in their ears.

Tourism is perhaps leading to a reinvention of their tribal traits and traditions. The young girls and boys use innovative ways to adorn themselves. The use of clays has become a human art form. They compete with each other to attract tourist interest and financial gain from photography. Is this a bad thing, or merely evolution of traditional practices? They proudly show their scars, body art and enhance this with floral decoration. They use corn, berries, warthog tusks and cow horns to embellish their appearance. They work singly, in pairs or in clusters to draw interest. This brings the tribe an income to get medicines, food from markets but also, sadly, can lead to alcohol abuse. Tourism is, unquestionably, a double-edged sword but it is going to grow, hence there might be a case for encouraging tribal sustainability through these innovative forms of adornment? Whatever the case the tribes must be the change they want to see in themselves. Self-determination is integral to a sustainable future. Can they do this, or will the external forces of change homogenise and result in their demise?

Camping in Kibish.

Day 5 – Friday 14th February

We then have a long drive to Kakuta/Kangaten, a remote and less visited tribal area which is home to the [Nyangatom](#), who are said to be descendants of the Toposa and Jiye tribes in South Sudan. Here, we will have opportunities to photograph the tribe, who live in a climatically challenging area of the Omo. The women wear numerous strands of beads, which they build up over their lives – an integral part of their culture. The area is semi-arid, and water has to be collected from rivers each day. Their villages are surrounded by thorn bush fences and their ‘tukul’ huts and stilted granaries are very distinctive.

Overnight camping close to their villages.

Day 6 – Saturday 15th February

A very early start to visit the [Kara/Karo](#) people in Dus, the second of three village settlements of the Kara tribe. Sited on the banks of the Omo River, the Kara are known for their creative and decorative body chalk painting. Many of the Kara women have pierced lips and insert nails, flowers and pins. In addition to various photographic opportunities in the village and on the banks of the Omo River, we may be able to photograph the ceremonial, communal dances performed by the people of Dus or early morning goat-herding. This is dusty and very atmospheric – photo opportunities abound.

Camping with the Kara.

Day 7 – Sunday 16th February

We drive to Turmi, where we are based at Buska Lodge for two nights. An opportunity to recharge batteries and relish being in a small simple lodge. Here we will have an evening photographing the [Hamar](#) tribe. The Hamar are a very resilient and culturally proud tribe.

Like most of the tribes, the men often have more than one wife; the first wife is always recognisable by the type of necklace she wears, and the second and third wives wear thinner neckbands and can be readily distinguished from the first.

The Hamar women have high cheekbones, wear thick copper/metal necklaces, elaborate beads, and goat-skins and their hair is often coloured with red ochre and butter. The men often use coloured clay on their hair and take real pride in their appearance and culture. Like all the tribes, they are very photogenic.

Overnight at [Buska Lodge](#).

The order in which we visit the tribes may change depending on the possibility of celebrations such as the Hamar Bull Jumping.

Day 8 – Monday 17th February

An early start to visit the [Daasanach](#) tribe who live in the fertile Omo River delta, close to Kenya and Lake Turkana where they hunt crocodiles. They are pastoralists, living in one of the more arid areas of the valley.

Overnight in [Buska Lodge](#).

Day 9 – Tuesday 18th February

Another very early start to visit the [Arbore](#) tribe. We drive approximately two hours to Chew Bahir (Lake Stefanie) to visit an Arbore village and photograph daily life. After our visit to the Arbore, we drive onwards to Jinka to visit the Ari and the Jinka Museum, which is great for insight into the lives of the tribes. Jinka is home to the [Ari people](#). They are quite westernised but there are opportunities to participate in a coffee ceremony, watch them making injera (a flatbread made from Tef) and possibly a visit to a flour mill.

Overnight at Eco Omo lodge.

Day 10 Wednesday 19th February

Then we fly from Jinka to Addis Ababa.

Capital Hotel day-use if needed and then transfer to Bole Airport for your flight home.

If you are doing the extension your tour continues...

Extension to Harar and Lalibela 5 nights (6 days)

Day 10 – Wednesday 19th February

We fly from Addis Ababa to Dire Dawa and drive for 90 minutes to Harar.

Overnight at the Ras Hotel.

Day 11 – Thursday 20th February

An early start to wander the narrow cobbled streets of the ancient walled town of Harar. It's easy to feel lost, both geographically and in time, when you're in eastern Ethiopia's UNESCO World Heritage-listed Harar. The ancient walled city, scattered over hundreds of narrow alleyways clustered together like a maze, has plenty of old-world charm. Wherever you look, there's a noteworthy feature: traditional Harari houses, 16th-century gates, watchtowers, and uniquely constructed mosques and shrines. Harar continues to bear the significant handprint of the trade that once flourished here, from India, the Middle East and the rest of Africa.

Overnight at Ras Hotel

Harar - a long history:

- 7th Century: Part of Coptic Christian Kingdom of Axum, area adopted Islam
- 1007: Harar city founded
- 16th Century: Capital of Harari Kingdom, major centre of regional trade and Islamic learning
- Said to be the first city Muslims migrated to from the Arabian Peninsula
- 1887: Becomes part of Ethiopia
- 2006: Named UNESCO World Heritage site

The city's fortified walls, built between the 13th and 16th Centuries, even have small holes in them to allow the hyenas to enter the city at night.

The daily hyena-feeding spectacle is just one example of this city's unique heritage. Local historian and guide, Abdulswamad Idris explains, "This is one of the world's ancient civilisations. Some of the mosques you see here were built in the 10th Century." The people of Harar are conservative and taking photos is possible but challenging.

Day 12 – Friday 21st February

Drive (1.5 hrs) Harar to Dire Dawa, en route visit Awaday khat market, Kafira spice market and Dire Dawa Railway Station. Flight from Dire Dawa to Addis Ababa.

Overnight at Capital Hotel and Spa in Addis.

Day 13 – Saturday 22nd February

We fly from Addis Ababa to Lalibela. Visit the first cluster of rock-hewn churches in Lalibela. It's known for its distinctive rock-cut churches dating from the 12th and 13th centuries, which are pilgrimage sites for Coptic Christians. Carved out of rock, the subterranean monoliths include huge Bete Medhane Alem, and cross-shaped Bete Giyorgis. Many are joined by tunnels and trenches, and some have carved bas-reliefs and coloured frescoes inside.

Overnight at Maribela hotel

Day 14 – Sunday 23rd February

Visit an early morning service and the second cluster of churches in Lalibela. In the afternoon, we visit Yemrehane Kristos church. Lalibela is history and mystery frozen in stone, its soul alive with the rites and awe of Christianity at its most ancient and unbending. No matter what you've heard about Lalibela, no matter how many pictures you've seen of its breathtaking rock-hewn churches, nothing can prepare you for the reality of seeing it for yourself. It's not only a World Heritage site, but truly a world wonder. Spending a night vigil here during one of the big religious festivals, when white-robed pilgrims in their hundreds crowd the courtyards of the churches, is to witness Christianity in its most raw and powerful form.

Overnight at Maribela hotel

Day 15 – Monday 24th February

Another early morning visit to the churches. We seek light coming from windows and doors as flash is not permitted but the atmosphere is unforgettable. A good opportunity to experiment with auto-ISO. We then fly from Lalibela to Addis Ababa and have Capital Hotel day-use if needed. Evening dinner at a local restaurant and then transfer to Bole Airport for your flight home.

Services included

- Meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner for the time of the tour. Meals may occasionally be local depending on location but for the most part, the food is unsophisticated western fayre. Meals will also include water and soft drinks.
- Entrance fees/permits for villages.
- Transfer to and from Bole airport to the hotel.
- Accommodation as stated but the nature of the destinations that we operate in, may sometimes mean that we need to change hotels, but we'll always endeavour to keep the same standards. Please be aware that in countries where tourism is in its infancy, hotel standards may not be the same as you're used to elsewhere.
- Photo tour leaders and local guides.
- Travel by Toyota land cruisers (4x4) or similar.

The cost of the main tour is €6550 To reserve a place there is a deposit of €1500 The single supplement for the main tour is €300

The cost of the Harar/Lalibela extension is €2500 The single supplement for the extension is €200

It is highly recommended to fly with ET as ET discounts internal flights substantially when flying long haul with them. A surcharge of **€120pp** is applicable if your international flight is not with ET and **€165pp** surcharge for the extension. Please note that you may fly to a European destination on another airline as long as you arrive in Addis on ET. Payment is possible by Bank Transfer and also by PayPal, in this case, an additional **5%** will be added to cover the transaction fees (PayPal). The final balance is due three months prior to departure. The cost above includes internal flights when ET is used for the international flights.

Services not included / additional costs

Alcohol and paying for photographs if there is a special ceremony – eg Bull Jumping. We will try, where negotiable, to pay a lump sum to the village but sometimes this is not possible. **I recommend approximately €300 per person for ‘photo fees’.** This needs to be converted to small notes (Birr) on arrival in Addis Ababa (I will try to do this in advance so that you can get the money directly from me in new notes). Some photographers take thousands of photos! **The local guide/s will handle payments.** You will also need some extra money for tips for drivers, cooks, guides etc. Approximately **€30** for each driver, guide and cook per day. This is shared between all participants.

I will send out medical forms, gear lists, additional information on the tribes, travel liability forms at a later stage.

If you have any questions, please contact me by email trevcole1@me.com or phone/WhatsApp +353 872 82 5851



'The land of origins'

