



THE ALLURE OF EAST AFRICA

Beyond the dramatic wildlife eastern Africa is also one of the richest tribal regions in the world. These unique cultures have drawn the attention of photographers since the medium's beginnings.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIPER MACKAY

From the thunder of the herds storming across the Great Plains to the elusive, but endangered mountain gorillas to the ancient tribes of the Omo, East Africa is a tapestry of dramatic ecosystems and ancient cultures. From the minute your feet hit that rich red soil, this magical world offers unparalleled diversity contained in a relatively small corner of the continent.

We all see things differently. It's why we pick up the camera, after all—to seek out places that we've probably viewed through another's eyes. A great photograph doesn't have to be new; it has to be you—your vision and your experience. As you travel through East Africa creating stories for the rocking chair, consider also the opportunity be in the moment. Where do you want to see the footprints of your life when looking back through the photographs you've taken?

Photographing The People Of Eastern Africa

As a veteran who has led photo expeditions to the region, a frequent question often posed to me is how do I gain such close access to the people? The answer is deceptively simple: I participate in their lives. Usually, I arrive at a village during midday—the harshest light—so I put off photography and instead take time to greet the chief and chat over an African-style cold beer (stored in the shade rather than sitting in the sun). I camp in the village, participate in village life and partake in their ceremonies. Becoming immersed into the surroundings releases my creativity. Wandering slowly through the village, I smile, chat and exchange the greetings of the day, all the while, scouting for interesting backgrounds, studying any potential lighting challenges and noting the stories I want to capture during the golden hours. This familiarity pays off when I do bring out my camera.

I also guide my subjects into participation, often handing them a camera (my guides think I'm crazy) so that they might shoot along beside me. I enlist their help with the creative process, holding reflectors or speedlights. Trust builds throughout the session as



To create images that show the rich tapestry of the people and cultures in eastern Africa, think beyond snapshots taken at a distance. To show the story, start by building trust. OPENING SPREAD: A Kara woman looking out over the Omo Valley along the Omo River, southern Ethiopia. INSET: Portrait of a Kara women preparing morning coffee in the Omo Valley, southern Ethiopia. LEFT: Members of the Kara Tribe along the Omo River, southern Ethiopia. BELOW: Beyond the people, this part of Africa is known, of course, for wildlife, like this group of young cheetahs in Kenya.

does interest in seeing the photographs they create and the ones in which they pose. As in all aspects of life, it simply comes down to building relationships.

Success in East Africa comes from two basic tenets: know your subject, and be open to their traditions and ceremonies. Your aim is to capture the important moments—decisive, riveting and emotional. This visual overload is particularly challenging to photographers in an exciting exotic location. Our instinct tells us to shoot everyone and everything that’s happening. Showing patience

Eastern Africa Destinations

Kenya: Known as the Mecca of African wildlife photo opportunities, the Maasai Mara needs little introduction. What photographer doesn’t dream of capturing the great herds crossing the Mara River, relishing not only the first wildebeest to take the plunge, but the 20,000 that will soon follow? Ah, but with the wildebeest also come scores of tourists, photographers and vehicles encamped along the river. If the crowds are more daunting than the crossing, take advantage of the off-season. True, no migration but the Mara holds the highest concentration of predators and exotic wildlife but fewer people to get in your way and in your photographs, plus, you’ll save a little money.

Tanzania: The sheer beauty of the vast Serengeti—dotted with the kopis and the lions sprawled on top—is unsurpassed. Wildlife photo opportunities overflow, but for me, the February mass birth of the great herds is not to be missed. Approximately 750,000 wildebeest synchronize their birthing with all calves born within a three-week period. This phenomenon draws the predators, which in turns attracts the wildlife photographers. Tanzania also is home to the Ngorongoro Crater, the eighth wonder for the world with its own enclosed ecosystem and home to the Big Five: elephants, rhinos, buffalos, leopards and lions.

Rwanda: A close encounter with the endangered mountain gorillas is a lifetime experience. The good news is that gorilla numbers are increasing; the not-so-good news is that so is the price of the permits, up 50 percent from 2012. Now estimated at 820, over half of the world’s mountain gorillas live in the Virunga Mountains on the Rwandan side. Overcast skies and mist are the best conditions for photographing these black primates against a lush green forest. It’s simple to tack on a few treks to any safari, and don’t pass up photographing the chimpanzees while you’re there.

Ethiopia: Dropping into the Omo Valley is akin to being transported to an Africa of old. The tarmac turns to bumpy dirt roads; soon, you spot people in traditional clothing, living as they have for generations. Shielded from the outside world, these ornate tribes cling to ancient traditions that have almost vanished in Africa. Here is the most tribal-rich region in the world.

Inspired by the wild trees, exotic flowers and lush vegetation, these people wear colorful make-up reflecting bright yellows, startling whites and rich earth-reds created from the clay soil. With their flamboyant accessories and brilliant head decorations, they transform themselves into walking bodies of art, painting and dressing one another in bold style. Although they live side-by-side, each tribe sports a unique look which, in turn, offers you a rich and varied array of compositions.



Making Your Plan

This memorable trip demands meticulous planning. While it’s entirely possible to go on your own, ask these basic questions:

- What’s your tolerance for the unexpected?
- How much research do you want to do?
- Do you want the responsibilities, extra cost and problems from going it alone?
- Do you know the wet and dry seasons, and how they affect accessibility?
- Do you have the time to build relationships, get lost and learn the land, or is it better to go with someone who already has these relationships and experience?

Overlooked and undervalued, time is the critical factor in your aim to capture award-winning images. For a lucky few, time is abundant, but the reality is that most photographers have a short window. Limited to three weeks or less? It’s best to go with someone who will take you to where you need to be.

Some points of experience:

- Trekking with the gorillas is done in groups of eight, and it’s better to be with seven other photographers than with regular tourists. The guides determine which group of gorillas you get to visit.
- If you fly solo into a reserve and use the camp cars, you’ll ride with whomever they put in your vehicle, including small children who have a much different agenda than you!

is the most important skill to master; this is what will separate a good photograph from a truly great image. Slow down, observe, and be ready. That’s when the magic of East Africa begins.

Should You Pay For Photographs?

The answer is complicated because each situation is different. I try to find

ways, other than money, to compensate people for their time. Sometimes I take the warriors out to the local bar for drinks; other times, I bring flour to the women to free them from spending hours grinding it. Another approach is to make gifts of their session. Often, many people I photograph have never owned a photograph of themselves. A hand-sized printer

(Cont’d on page 00)

EAST AFRICA

(Cont'd from page 00)

that produces business card-sized images straight from your camera becomes a big hit and a nice way to show respect and gratitude. Create a relationship with

Accessibility

For U.S. passport holders, a visa can be bought at the airports in Kenya, Ethiopia or Tanzania.

No visa is required for Rwanda.

Access to the main reserves, mountain gorillas and eastern side of the Omo River is easy. Most of the roads are now tarmac. Where the roads are bad in Kenya and Tanzania, you can fly directly into the reserve. In the remote areas of northern Kenya, southern Tanzania, north and southwestern Ethiopia, access takes more time, research, experience, patience and understanding of the way things are done. You need visas prior to crossing a border on land, permits to get into certain areas, a knowledgeable guide who knows the roads and guards for security. From budget and self-drive safaris to luxury camps to traveling by helicopter, experienced outfitters can help plan your trip.

your subject, and you may be asked less often for compensation.

If I take a person from their work/livelihood for a three-hour photo shoot that I intend to market, then I get a signed release, and I pay them just as I would pay a model. My view is that for those few hours, they're working for me and should be compensated, which is much different than a short village visit.

Avoid handing out money for photographs in a local market or along the road; it promotes begging, which often leads to harassment just for taking snapshots. Every photographer has a different approach, but keep in mind that your actions will create a standard that may hamper the photographers who follow. **OP**

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