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Desert Blues



The jarring in my back suggested painfully that our little open topped jeep didn't have a lot of suspension. There were six of us in the back and the task today was to find Black Rhino, which given the sparse vegetation and level terrain seemed pretty easy to me. But they are rare sightings in the Lewa savannah and our search was not being aided by loud exclamations from the bankers that made up our party. A wave of relief swept over me when we finally left a Lion crèche to play in peace and I had renewed respect for the lot of a wildlife photographer. Banking is a dirty word in the current economic climate, but these were no ordinary finance gurus. They formed the vanguard of an innovative five year collaboration between, science, nature conservation and HSBC Bank. This was my first time in Kenya and an opportunity to document some of the creative projects the Earthwatch Institute undertakes around the world teaming up scientists, volunteers and locals.

Further north in the district of Wamba, we visited Leneepe's home, a collection of small huts and enclosures surrounded by acacia thorn bushes. Known locally as a Menyatta, this simple compound out in the desert scrub on the edge of the Rift valley, is life on the edge and a world away from our two ups and two downs, double glazing and plasma screens. Leneepe is a Samburu tribesman, proud of his ability

to support his family and was keen to help Earthwatch investigate how best to conserve and protect what little water there is in this harsh environment. None of the Samburu communities we visited considered this land to be desert but each of them had developed their own way of dealing with the lack of water and the Menyatta bore distinct parallels with desert oasis, inhabited by their distant tribal cousins in North and West Africa.

The desert was not an environment I had been drawn to either before or immediately after I began taking photographs. It was music that eventually triggered my interest. Oddly, it was a song from 1972, which has stuck in my head and emerges unannounced every time I have been to the desert since. The repetitive and strangely hypnotic rhythm of America's, 'A Horse with no name' would break into the utter silence, an anthem to dust, dry heat and survival. But the desert blues emanating from Mali and Niger had entered my veins long before it reached the heights of its current popularity and like so much music, it conjured up images of the landscape, people and culture which got me thinking, I must go.



Niger was not a happy country when I first went there in 1999. A government crackdown on the nomadic Tuareg threatened their whole way of life and continues to curtail their very nature. A fledgling tourism industry emerged allowing them to continue to roam the expansive and uniquely mountainous Tenere desert with their camels. Rocky bluffs and ridges provided a unique perspective on what would normally be a very two dimensional landscape. Joining a caravan destined for the Oasis of Timia, we traveled early mornings and late afternoons to avoid the life sapping midday heat. At night, temperatures plummeted, dew forming on the dunes. Like most other landscapes, dawn is a magical time in the desert, not only for its subtle colours but also to discover a spaghetti junction of nocturnal insect tracks imprinted on the sand like some ancient script; proof if we needed any that we were certainly not alone. Alas the desert is not camera friendly and no matter how careful I was with protecting and cleaning, dust and grit always found a way in. One morning, the sound of grating from the pre digital motordrive ground to a halt. I rescued the film and hurled the camera in disgust. It might eventually emerge from the sands of time

It is the hardiness and resilience of desert peoples that has fascinated me, characteristics without which so many civilizations would not have survived. Look no further than the Middle East to see how old and new have successfully adapted. I have yet to discover the oil rich urban metropolis of Dubai or Qatar, both of which not so long ago were part of the backbone of tribal desert nomadic life. The great desert explorer, Wilfred Thesiger never considered himself to be a writer or a photographer, yet his classic travelogues and intimate photographs of years traveling with the Bedouin and the Marsh Arabs over sixty years ago bear witness to traditions and lifestyles of which little remains beyond the glass and steel risen from the new Oases.

There is a silence you 'hear' in the desert, which appears to be a reoccurring theme amongst both travelers to the desert and those who live there. This might not make a lot of sense, but I have found it deafening at times given that we are so used to the cacophony of our own surroundings. Even where I live in the Yorkshire Dales - farmers quad bikes, cows, sheep and that annoyingly jovial thistle thrush which sits on the satellite dish outside my bedroom window!

I think on my next visit to the desert, I am going to try and find a way of photographing that sound of silence.

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