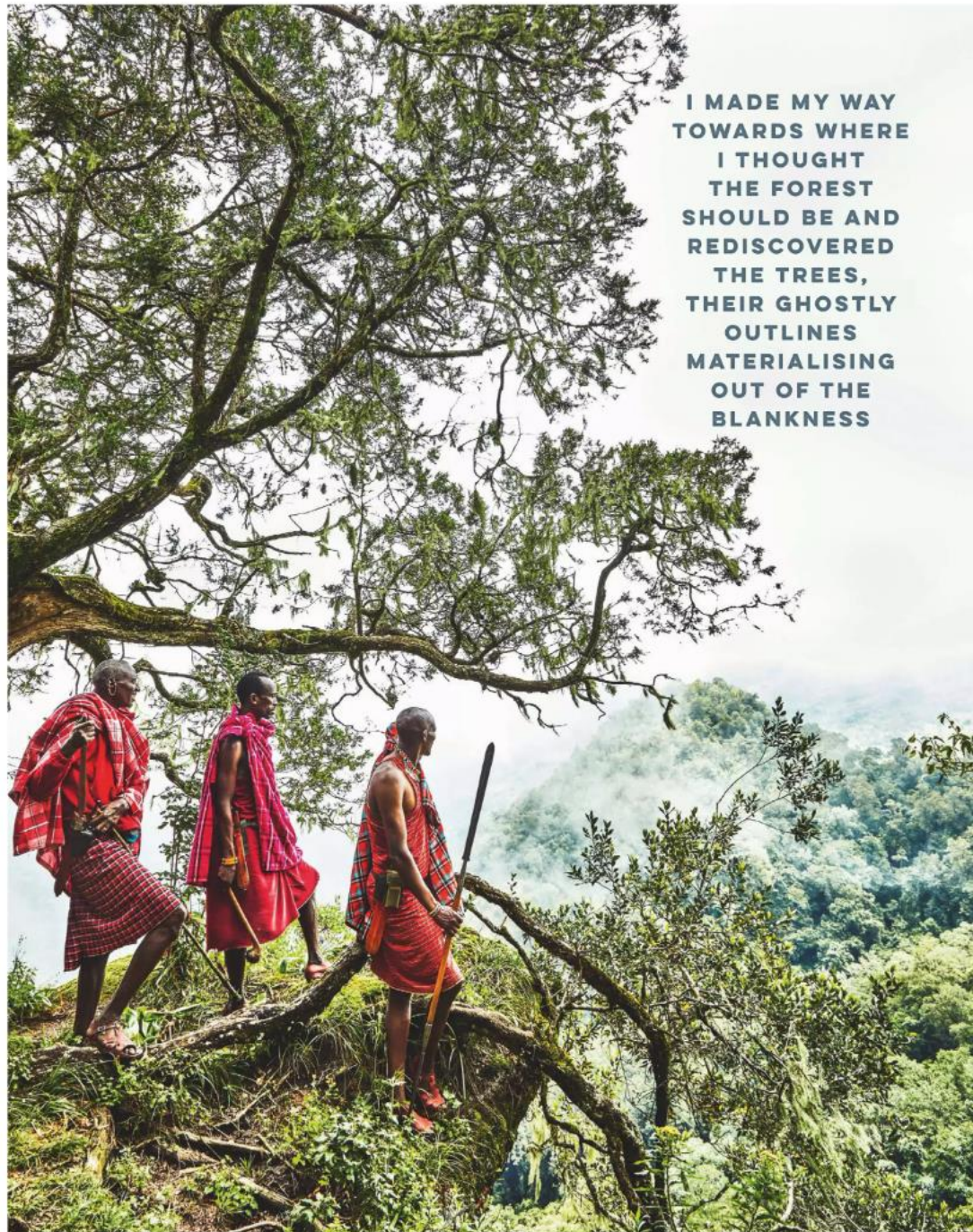




# GETTING INTO THE STRIDE

IN A DESIRE FOR QUIETNESS AND CONTEMPLATION,  
THE REFLECTIVENESS OF PUTTING ONE  
FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER, STEVE KING  
JOINS THE BEST WALKERS ON THE PLANET IN  
KENYA'S LITTLE-KNOWN LOITA HILLS  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIEN CAPMEIL





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**D**AYBREAK AS COLOURLESS as a daguerreotype. The mist a luminous silver ocean without edges. We had pitched our camp, the previous evening, in a glade surrounded by acacias and podocarpus – luxuriant, imposing trees, some of them more than 100ft tall, difficult to lose sight of. But at first light it was as though they had vanished. Dissolved into the mist. I made my way towards where I thought the forest ought to be and rediscovered the trees slowly, one at a time, as their ghostly outlines materialised out of the blankness. The local Maasai call it the Forest of the Lost Child, a name which might ordinarily prompt a question but which, given the conditions that morning, seemed to require no further explanation.

This was in the Loita Hills, on the western edge of the Great Rift Valley close to the Kenya-Tanzania border, where I had arranged to spend a few days walking with Maasai guides. Starting in the Ol Lasur Valley, not far from the trading post of Entasekera, the route would involve a brief ascent followed by a long descent of the hills, across the Nguruman Escarpment and onto the scared plains between Lake Magadi and Lake Natron.

My reasons for wanting to do so were partly sentimental. My wife is Kenyan. She and I have been coming here together for more than 20 years. Her grandparents, Mary and Louis Leakey, made important archaeological finds in this region – not in the hills but

*Clockwise from top left: near Lake Magadi; spears at camp; breakfast; monkey in the canopy; leopard prints; gloriosa lily. Opposite, en route to Makalia waterfalls. Previous pages, Maasai walking through the forest*



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on the plains below, on both sides of the border – discoveries that fundamentally changed the understanding of human evolution. Various members of the family live nearby. When I think of Kenya, it is this stretch of Maasailand south of Nairobi that I think of first. Though the Maasai Mara, to the west, and Amboseli, to the east, attract large numbers of visitors, this corridor in between as a rule does not. The broad, flat floor of the Great Rift Valley is incredibly hot. The hills that rise from it are thickly forested, forbiddingly difficult to access and sparsely populated. But for those willing to approach this dramatically beautiful landscape with a degree of patience and fortitude, the rewards are tremendous. There is a particular quality to the dust that I love. Its fineness and its faint, delicious scent, for which I know no word. The whole country is for me contained in this unnameable dusty perfume. I tap my toes when I am standing still, to raise a little dust and watch it settle on my boots.

Much of Kenya has changed beyond recognition since my first visit. Parts of Nairobi seem to change beyond recognition from one visit to the next. Here, though, hardly anything has changed at all, or not to the naked eye. Almost 50 years ago, in *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, Peter Matthiessen wrote of the Loita Hills as 'roadless and little known... that epic Africa of hope and innocence'. They are as roadless and little-known today as they were then, except to the Maasai who live among them.

Through the shadowy lushness of the Ol Lasur Valley we followed the habitual paths of wild animals or of Maasai cattle. Where no path existed we made our own by clearing the undergrowth and lopping off low branches with long-bladed

*pangas*. The contrast between this landscape and that of more familiar parts of Kenya is striking. The gently undulating plains of the Laikipia Plateau, for instance, with their uninterrupted vistas and endless skies, where getting your bearings is easy and you can watch the weather change from miles away. In the Loita Hills the impression is one of congestion and enclosure. This is a feeling not of smallness – the scale is immense – but of terrific density and looming vertical pressure. There were so few gaps in the canopy that I found myself thinking of murky corners of lower Manhattan where narrow streets are overlooked by buildings tall enough to block direct sunlight at any time of day.

WITH A DISTINCTIVE STYLE of dress and jewellery, the Maasai are perhaps the most recognisable tribe on earth. They look as if they exist outside of and untouched by time. But the past century has been far from easy for them. While other of Kenya's 40 or so tribes have adapted to post-colonial and post-independence conditions, the Maasai by and large have not. They reached the height of their tribal pre-eminence in the mid to late 19th century when their territory extended north and south along much of the Great Rift Valley and, intermittently, as far east as the Swahili coast.

In the early years of the 20th century, treaties with the colonial powers saw their land reduced by more than 50 per cent. That loss has since been compounded by further fragmentation, subdivision and changes in land use, as well as a generational rethinking, by no means unique to the Maasai, that has seen a broader shift in values away from the collective towards the individual. Their staunch commitment to a pastoral, seminomadic way of life has become increasingly challenging. It would be difficult to overstate the impact this has had on a people for whom land has, historically, been not a private commodity but a common resource through which free movement is both a right and an essential condition of survival.

Awareness of these issues is, predictably, greatest in the parts of Maasailand that receive the most visitors and the most international attention, above all the Maasai Mara. Yet the same forces affect the virtually unknown Loita Hills. During our short walk we crossed several invisible property boundaries, at least one of which was in the process of being redrawn in order to settle a dispute among clans.

Though a compromise, this seemed to me a practical and uncomplicated one that was working well for everyone. Much of the land through which we walked is presently held in trust for the local community, which has an arrangement with a man called Adrian Hughes, who organises the walks under the name Maasai Trails. Because the ownership and borders are still being formally determined, he pays camp fees to the Maasai by means of disbursements to two schools on the edge of the forest. Meanwhile, the Maasai continue to use the land just as they have done for centuries, which is to say as a necessary space through which they and their cattle pass.

I walked with two guides, Ntiyani Kamonon and Lemeria Koyati. Lemeria was forever looking over my shoulder as I made notes. Occasionally he would take my notebook to correct a word, a phrase or a place name that I had got wrong. He wrote in a bold, clear hand. When I complimented him on his especially elegant penmanship, he said this was a benefit of compulsory primary schooling. Lemeria had been packed off to a boarding school in Narok. His eldest son was now a pupil at the same school. The fees



Clockwise from top left: making fire; flamingos over Lake Natron; Maasai spears; dry riverbed. Opposite, clockwise from top: the Loita Hills; wildebeest near Lake Magadi; red-oat grass; Maasai woman and baby; wild berries; camp lunch. Previous pages, dusk further north in Maasailand, at the end of the trip



ANIMALS ARE A CONSTANT IF INVISIBLE PRESENCE. THEIR SIGNS ARE EVERYWHERE AND THEIR SOUNDS INESCAPABLE



were high, he complained, but his son was doing well. I asked if he saw this as a disruption to a traditional Maasai boyhood spent outdoors learning to become a herdsman and a warrior – another form of compromise. Lemeria shook his head. 'He puts on his uniform and goes away to school and he's a Kenyan among other Kenyan boys. Then he comes home and takes off his uniform and he's a Maasai again.'

The Maasai believe in a single god, Engai, with a dual nature, one red, one black, associated with sun and rain respectively. Apparently the red god had been detained elsewhere at the time of my visit. The black god was running riot. Though we were walking through what ought to have been several different habitats, any clear sense of their distinctness was lost in the unseasonable greenness. At night the drumming of rain on the flysheet of my tent was relentless. When, occasionally, the rain stopped between downpours, the silence rang out as if the forest were drawing breath in the instant after someone had broken a glass at a dinner table.

THE BLACK RHINOCEROS, ONCE abundant across southern Kenya, is no longer found in the Loita Hills. But elephant, lion, leopard and buffalo remain. Hippopotamus, too, which ramble widely during periods of wet weather with an astounding degree of dainty sure-footedness. Before I set off, my father-in-law had reminisced about the forest lions, for which he has a special affection. Their coats are darker than those of their savannah-dwelling cousins, he told me, and they exhibit certain behavioural peculiarities. 'Such as?' I asked. 'Well, for one thing they arc, for lions, very curious. They will follow you closely, sometimes for hours at a time. Which' – he added with a smile – 'can be quite disconcerting if you are walking.'

Animals were a constant if invisible presence. Their signs were everywhere – prints, pugmarks, scat, scratches in bark, patches of flattened grass – and their sounds inescapable. The bleeps and squalls of birdsong were like jazz, the notes either ahead of or behind the beat, never on it, never entirely regular. Such a syncopated soundtrack seemed right for this walk, throughout which, because of the arduous terrain and wet weather, evenly spaced strides and rhythmical footsteps were all but impossible.

Then there was the chatter of the Maasai. And their numbers, like their voices, rose and fell continuously. At times we were joined by three or four others, including an elderly Dorobo, an instantly likeable if inscrutable fellow who carried a toy-like bow and a quiver of poison arrows. When, on our second night, they roasted a sheep, the number of our party spiked sharply and for a few hours our camp resembled a small village.

I realised that part of my wishing to take this trip was the selfish desire to be once again among campfires and hurricane lamps, to be an anonymous stranger among anonymous strangers, to shower beneath an upended bucket, to lie down on the ground at night and wake up in the morning and simply take to my heels.

For the Maasai, this three-day outing was barely a stroll, and a leisurely stroll at that. I asked Lemeria whether he took pleasure in the act of walking. 'Oh, yes,' he said. Then he paused and added: 'But this is not really walking. This is sleepwalking.'

I tried not to take it personally. He meant, of course, that we were walking slowly by Maasai standards. Which should not have

come as a shock to anyone. The Maasai are among the greatest walkers on the planet. A young warrior might cover 40 miles in a day without breaking a sweat. Their gait creates a kind of optical illusion. Nothing about it looks as if it is contrived for speed. Though springy, their strides are not unduly long, and there is no hint of bustle or even of obvious effort. Yet glance away from a walking Maasai for a minute and he will have disappeared over the horizon.

But this was not a race and the more I pondered it, the more I came to think of speed as antithetical to the whole undertaking. There was no need to hurry. As the days passed I became increasingly content simply to put one foot in front of the other while keeping my eyes and ears open. I recalled Kierkegaard's line: 'I have walked myself into my best thoughts and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.'

Something happened shortly after we set off on the last full day of walking that I knew immediately would stay with me for a long time. We were passing through a field of waist-high grass, glossy and beaded with fresh rain, when a light breeze brought with it, suddenly and strongly, almost with the force of a slap, the intermingled fragrances of jasmine and wild basil. The others walked on ahead. I stopped in my tracks, wanting neither to speak nor be spoken to, neither to continue nor to return, but simply to breathe and remain in that moment indefinitely.

BY MID-MORNING THE RAIN had ceased and the clouds had parted. The red god was restored. Emerging from the Loita Hills we scrambled for nine hours, in hard equatorial sun, down the face of the Nguruman Escarpment, its surface composed of medium-sized loose rocks rolling around treacherously on a bed of slightly smaller loose rocks. It was like walking on a layer of cricket balls with a layer of golf balls underneath, all set at a delirious tilt.

My borrowed walking stick proved to be an especially good friend to me on this leg of the trip. A straight, slender branch from a green-olive tree, stripped bare, flattened at the top and pointed at the bottom with a few deft swipes of a *panga* – precisely the thing the Maasai use. Pleasing to touch and as good to lean on in weary moments as the zinc counter of a well-stocked bar.

When at last we reached the plains I felt a surge of affection for the flat silken earth after the steepness and stoniness of the preceding days, the wide-open space after the enfolded forest, the dry heat after the wet. There was no epiphany, just a bitter-sweet sense of pleasure tinged with regret that the journey was, for now, over. We said our goodbyes. I put aside my walking stick and tapped the ground with the toes of my boots, watching clouds of fine powdery dust rise and fall. 📍

## GETTING HERE

Abercrombie & Kent offers five nights in Kenya from £4,195 per person, including two nights B&B at Tamarind Tree Hotel in Nairobi and three nights in the Loita Hills with Maasai Trails, with meals, guides and transfers, and flights.  
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