

SOUTH SUDAN



A miniature tribal
expedition

February 2021



Back again in South Sudan

Flight from Stockholm via Addis Abeba to Juba with Ethiopian Airways. Arriving at Juba around 3 PM on Saturday 13th of February. Just as chaotic as last time, if not worse, I have rarely seen a more disorganized airport anywhere else in the world. Since I had not been provided with a local contact phone number, I had to wait until last, before being allowed to enter through Immigration. Yes, they did check my PCR-test, electronic visa as well as my Yellow fever card. Then you will have your luggage thoroughly checked through, before let out from this shack for an airport.

The driver was however waiting outside for me and took me to a different hotel – The Dembesh Hotel. This, as the government had thrown out all the guest from the Royal Palace Hotel, where we had been booked to stay, to use for other guests. I met up with the rest of the group, the local guide – Mayom – and our Irish photo-guide and cicerone for the trip. *We went down to eat at the Da Vinci Lodge on the Nile front.* It turned out it was actually *next door to the old Juba Bridge hotel, where I had stayed last time.* The food took ages to get, but was good and very, very expensive. We paid some 30 \$ / person for a main dish and a beer. Quite extraordinary considering the place we are at. To bed early as we have a very early flight from Juba to Kapoeta and Boya Hills tomorrow morning at 07:00 AM.



Kapoeta region



To the airport at 06:00 AM for our flight to the south-east corner of the country. Well, well, well, surprise, surprise. The flight did not leave on time. In fact, we were let in to the tarmac and the runway at 08:30, packed up at the small propeller aircraft and then nothing. After another hour we were informed that the flight we had been booked on was now redirected to another destination. A lot of commotion and arguments erupted. Eventually we walked back to another small propeller plane. Now we just needed a pilot. So, we finally took off some 4 hours later. The flight to Kapoeta took one hour and we landed on the non-tarmac runway.

Stopped at Mango Lodge to change vehicles och change some money and then set-off to visit the first tribe – the Larim (also known as Boya). Mango Lodge is a place where one can stay/camp, but I would not recommend it. Very scruffy. The two 4-wheel drive vehicles drove all the way from Juba (9 hours) to meet up with us at Camp 15 where we waited for them. They had our tents and gear to be used during camping. We also picked up our local guide – Anjelo (Lomoi). We visited the village of camp 15, and all the Larim people. We were well received and they loved having photos taken. There was an orphanage here and many widows. Widows, as many of the men have been killed. Killed while stealing cows from the other tribes. We were told at least some 10-15 men are killed every month while trying to steal cattle. The women who had recently lost their men, carried a white cloth around their arm.





Kimotong – Boya Hills

Went up at 05:00 AM – still pitch dark – and got into the vehicles to move to the Larim village nearby - Kali. We wanted to get there in time for the sunrise. ...and it was amazing. We got to take as many photos as we wanted of the villagers. This is truly a tribe which does keep to its traditional customs and dressing. Our local English-speaking guide was born in the village, but had been through school in Nairobi, Kenya. This made it possible to access the people and also being able to take photographs without difficulties. We spent 2-3 hours in the morning before the heat got unbearable (40 centigrade) and went back to camp to rest up and have breakfast. We spent the middle of the day under a huge Acacia tree in the shade to rest-up before the evening. We went back around 4 PM, by which time all the people had put on their best dresses and performed a welcoming dance for us. The light was perfect for photography and we stayed until around 6 PM when it was getting dark quite quickly. Back to camp and dinner. We had a very good day and the Larim tribe were very friendly and let us take as many pictures as we liked.





Kali and Karenga Groups

Again, the day started this morning by taking off at 05:00 AM in order to catch the sunrise at another Larim village, Karenga. There are quite a few smaller villages scattered around the hill of Kimotong. It is so amazing to stroll around their huts and watch how they go about their daily shores. The people are so unspoiled by visitors from outside and live their lives, it seems, in very much the same way as they always have. The women wearing a white cloth on their right arm, keep this for a month after the death of their husbands. This is their grieving period. Our local guide tells me the women make up as much as 70-80% of the population. All due to too many of the young men having been killed while stealing cattle or through suicide. Suicide is apparently also very common among young men. Once back at camp we took breakfast and waited for them to disassemble the tents and everything else, for us to move on. We went through Camp 15 again to drop off Anjelo, our local guide, and then set-off for Kapoeta where we checked in to a local (very simple) hotel.

In the afternoon it was time to go visit the Toposa tribe for the first time. The road in this direction – east – was not much of a road at all. Mostly destroyed from the frequent flooding's. It took longer than expected but still only a couple of hours. We reached the village just before sun-set, in time to be introduced to the local chief, walk-about and take photos as much as we pleased. We were back in Kapoeta quite late in the evening. It is tricky to drive at night on these roads with people still out and about walking around seemingly in the middle of nowhere.





Toposa tribe, Kapoeta region

For today's late afternoon visit we went to a different Toposa tribe only 2 hours north of Kapoeta. We brought sugar, salt, coffee and spices along instead of distributing or leaving cash. We do not want to encourage giving money for/when taking photographs. This is often a problem at more visited "off-the-beaten track" sites, where they will only let you take a photo if give them some cash. Here, there are so few visitors and, in some villages, there hasn't even been any foreigners to visit at all. This means they are very genuine and unaware – in a positive sense – about the outside world. Actually, they are quite keen to have their photo taken, and love to see themselves afterwards in the camera where the picture comes up in the screen.

There is another tribe called Jiye another 3-4 hours from the Toposa village. This means 4-5 hours' drive from Kapoeta. They are supposed to be very nice to visit, but really would mean to stay overnight which is very possible. Driving back/forth during the day is not worthwhile. Especially since one would miss all the good light for photography. We did not have time for this unfortunately.





On the road to Juba

This was the day we were supposed to fly back to Juba, however, as much else in this country – the flight was cancelled. So instead of a short 1-hour flight we had to rearrange, pack up in our two 4-wheel drive vehicles and drive all the way back – puh. This was done in only 7 hours, which was actually better than could have been expected. So, all of us had breakfast and then set-out. The roads have been fixed up a little bit since a few years back, but are still in a very dismal condition. We only had one flat-tire during the hole trip.

Not long after having left Kapoeta we ran into groups of cattle being moved along on the main (only) road. They came in waves and must have come in thousands upon thousands. We talked to the men who were moving the cattle and were informed they needed ca: 16-18 days to get to Juba, where they intended to sell them at a profit. That is a lot of work.

We made a stop half-way in Torit for a lunchbreak which we brought with us. There is a tribe not far from Turit called Lutuko. They have a nice village, but otherwise a bit modern in their clothing and traditions. Our guide was there last time and said they were all stupidly drunk and that they left after only 30 minutes. Stay away was the message.





Kormanga – Mundari camp site

Well rested after a good stay at the Royal Palace Hotel in Juba, we had breakfast and set off to visit the Mundari tribe north-west of Juba. It wasn't a long drive, only an hour or so, but we had to cross a river on foot and have the cars drive along way around. The Mundari's had moved their herds to a place a long way from their village as they needed to find grass and water near the river. We set-up camp right at their site under a huge tree with our tents and all equipment. We spent 3 nights and 4 days at this site enjoying the days tremendously. It was a wee bit long with 3 nights. I believe 2 would have been optimal. It was much cooler here compared to Kapoeta region the first night and then it got hotter yet again.

During our 4 days at the camp we were able to walk around the camp site freely and take photos almost as much as we wanted. There were a few individuals which did not want their photos taken and only a very few who asked for money. The asking for money is never a good sign, and if anything, a sign that other groups have been before and handing out smaller notes to the people in exchange for posing for a picture. We organized it in such a way that we brought in salt, spices, tobacco and other things to the local community to distribute, not encouraging this money-for-photo routine. They normally stay up in Terekeka, where their village is located. Most of the elders, some women and children are also staying behind in the village.

The first day, late afternoon/early evening, a few new cattle keepers came in with their herds to settle at the same camp. This was celebrated with a round of shots in the air with a machine gun. We got up around 5 to 5:30 in the mornings to be able to catch the sunrise and also shoot photos at the camp when they set the fires and started to clean around the cows. The cows are kept tied up in groups of 10-12 with a small fire in the center. The Mundari's start-out by cleaning up all the cow-dung around and move the piles to be dried before being put on the fires.





The Mundaris

After these shores are done and around mid-morning, the cows are being let free. They then immediately head out for grazing and water in areas outside of the camp. This is incredible to watch as they just take off in large groups of up to 2-300 hundreds in different directions. I would estimate there are more than a thousand cows in the camp we visited. After the cows have left, the Mundari's continue to clean the place from cow dung. However, after this there is not much to see or do in the middle of the day until 3-4 PM when the cattle come back in again. When they come back in again they immediately know where their circle is and move in this direction where they again are being tied up. Now they are also being cleaned with ashes and massaged. The Mundaris' really care for their cows.

We get to see a few very special traditions and rituals, such as washing the hair directly under the cow when the cow is peeing. This also gives the very particular color of their hair; orange-yellow. We also got to see the amazing procedure of inducing the cow with air through its vagina. This is done to encourage the milk production. This, the massaging and also watching when they drink milk directly from the cow is quite spectacular to see. Some of the Mundari's smoke pipes, when sitting around the fires with the others to chat and exchange stories. I had brought along 10-15 knives and some torches which came handy as giveaways to some of the Mundaris.

I caught one Mundari sitting under a tree reading the bible. He did speak a very few words of English and explained to me that he and most of the Mundari's had been converted to Christianity by missionaries earlier. On the Sunday morning, sure enough, we witnessed a service in the middle of our tented camp. It turned out we had set-up our camp under the tree where they do their service every Sunday. Quite a strange and sad exercise to watch. It was mixed up with some singing and music played on their traditional instrument: The cow-horn plus the drums. It was only after the service had finished that it exploded as the women stayed on and continued to dance around in a circle. A few of the girls did come around our camp in the evening, curious to see what we were up to. We gave away some plastic/flexible mirrors which was highly appreciated. The also watched behind my back when I was uploading pictures onto my computer. I showed them some pictures from Sweden with snow, something I am sure they never seen before.





The Mundaris

We de-camped after having had a last photo-round at the cattle camp. Back in Juba at around 10:30 AM. We went to a local Clinique to have a Covid-test taken. This was very professionally done and finished within 30-40 minutes for all four of us at 100\$ a piece. We were told to come back to collect after 4 PM which we did. However, we only received two of the four tests results at this time. Mine and Joxe – both came out negative. They told us to come back later for the other two, as the workload was said to be high. We did so on our way to the restaurant – Afex, which we tried before. Still no result. So back to the hotel after dinner. The driver went back later to collect the remaining two test-results. I was informed the following morning that they had come out positive.

Spent the morning until noon at the pool before packing up and heading to the airport. There is always something, not planned for. This time it was the so called “Alien registration stamp”, which had not been done upon arrival in Juba some 12 days earlier. We were given an option of paying 50\$ (no receipt of course) or going back into town for this stamp. We would still have had to pay a fine, so we decided to pay-up. This is a country founded on bribes very much. Our guide told us the Alien registration office was closed on the day we arrived in Juba (weekend) and since we were headed out the following morning there was no time for getting the stamp.

The flight from Juba to Addis was uneventful (1.40 h). I had upgraded my long-haul flight from Addis to Stockholm, as it was an over-night flight. Arrived back on the Wednesday morning with luggage and all.

