

The Wild Side

by Dave Gibson

The Maasai

Western Culture has greatly influenced or completely changed the lifestyles and practiced social traditions of indigenous peoples across the globe. One half million Maasai of northern Tanzania and Kenya stand as a testament of resiliency to change, instead preferring their own ways over those of a world which sometimes seems to be spinning out of control. The governments of each country have implemented programs to encourage assimilation but most of the independent Maasai proudly live as they always have.

Cattle is king here and the number in your herd greatly dictates your status. In this patriarchal society, the more wives and children a man has, the greater his wealth. However, a man with a large herd and no wives, or a man with many wives and no cattle is considered poor. The milk, meat, and blood of the cow sustain them nicely but goats and sheep along with maize meal, rice, potatoes, and cabbage (which they call goat leaves) have crept onto the menu. Fruits are gathered by the women who seem to do most everything else including milking, gathering of firewood, cooking, and most arduous of all, hauling water. Often I would see women lugging one or two large containers of water alongside the roads for miles. It seems to me that this one task alone would take at least half the day. The man's role is to herd the livestock and protect his land, cows, and family, possibly in that order. Women build the temporary 3 meter by 5 meter by 1 ½ meter high home called an "inkajajak" with interwoven sticks caked in mud, grass, cow dung, urine, and ash. The men encircle the camp with an "enkanj" (a fence of Thorny Acacia to keep the lions and hyenas out).

Even the Maasai haven't escaped secular influence completely. I'll never forget when I saw my first purple and red draped, "shuka" clad, warrior talking on his cell phone. Much of the Maasais' historical territory has been taken from them in the way of ranches, government projects, and game parks. I am here as a direct result of the latter. Some of the Maasai now supplement their livelihoods by giving tours of their villages and selling handicrafts. I am fortunate

enough to visit one of these settlements near the Serengeti in Tanzania. A tall handsome people, they are wirily muscled (I suspect from all the hard work that they do). The women are adorned in beautiful beadwork as we are graciously greeted into their world. The men begin performing a traditional dance known as an "adumu." Facing us with colorful staffs in hand, they chant as each one takes his turn springing repeatedly into the air. The three foot height that even the middle-aged in their group attain is impressive. Encouraged to join in, I match my jumping ability to theirs and am quickly outclassed and shown to be inferior. The outcome never in dispute, I suspect that they delight in the pitiful predictability of it all.



As a dark cloud approaches, a wind blows through camp scattering dust everywhere. Our visit is cut short as we hurriedly thank our hosts and depart for our vehicle. One of the warriors is following me trying to get my attention. I am still wearing the "lion tooth" necklace that that he had placed there in hopes of making a sale. Having forgotten all about it, I return what I later learn to be cow bone and worth about ten dollars.

The existence of the Maasai seems a hard one – a bit like camping for your entire life. After traveling through exhaust-filled and poverty-ridden places like Arusha and Nairobi, I know that they have made the right choice.

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