



W A L K I N G  
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M A A S A I

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LOCATION: KENYA

The first thing I notice about Nkoitiko are his feet. Toes with missing toenails protrude from his black sandals, which appear to be made from a familiar material: repurposed car tyres. Noticing my attention, he smiles and remarks, ‘These sandals have carried me over hundreds of savannah hills, across hundreds of riverbeds.’ This man – at least 6ft 3in, shoulders square as a bus – will be my Maasai guide.

Chief Salaton made the introduction. Earlier, Salaton and I had walked side by side through this small Maasai community, 7km from the main thoroughfare. People stopped in line to shake his hand; in the other hand he carried a stick cut from the sandpaper tree (later I find out it was traditionally varnished with ash from the fire and rendered goat belly fat). Salaton’s demeanour struck me as calm, gentle, confident, respectful – but with an immediately palpable sense of status and position. Tall with freckles and short hair, wrapped in the traditional Maasai *shuka*, the chief spoke softly as we toured the village before dinner.

Now, at the dinner table while tackling the last of his goat stew, Salaton gestures with a fork. ‘Ian, meet your Maasai guide and my friend, Nkoitiko, who was born 5km from here.’ In broken English, Nkoitiko says, ‘I look forward to journeying with you – many miles to walk.’ His huge smile instils an immediate trust, overriding my uncertainty for what lies ahead. Soon his car tyre sandals will carry him over many more hills and rivers as we journey through this land.

After dinner we listen to Salaton talk about his international travels as Maasai ambassador to the world. More warriors come wandering through, and I notice that car tyre sandals are the trending fashion. I begin to second-guess my own footwear choices.

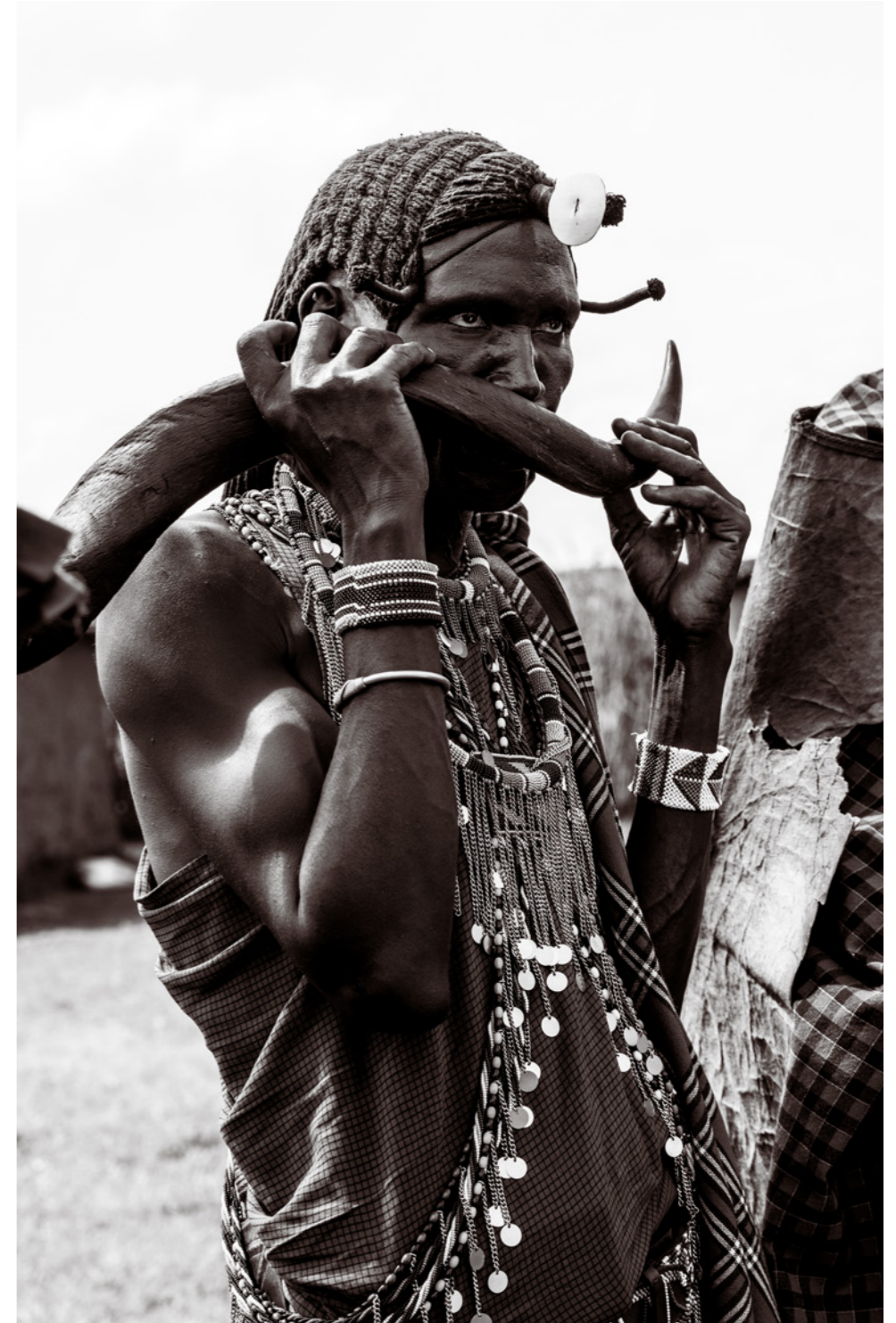
Nkoitiko pulls me to one side. We discuss route choices, daily distances, and the greatest danger in this region: large wildlife. ‘Short days ago, lion killed many zebra near here,’ he says. ‘Close to where we’ll be?’ I ask hesitantly. With a half-smile, he replies, ‘A short distance from where we sleep in cave.’ Our 50-mile route on foot, to a cave system and another two tribal communities, will be accessed by a

spiderweb of dried riverbeds and irrigation systems that flood in the rainy season. During the start of the dry season, the Maasai – as well as dangerous wild-life – use them as highways to access fertile areas and as routes across the open plains.

As the morning sun drifts over the lower hills, shadows of the small and thorny acacia trees begin to shorten, and the warbled calls of wild birds echo left and right. There is a distinct feel and smell to the plains. It’s arid, flat, and pepper-potted with formidable cacti and aloe vera. Quartz pebbles shimmer and sparkle underfoot. In the near distance the Loita Hills rise up out of impenetrable shrub and pockets of dense forest.

Nkoitiko and I, along with another local guide, make our way up onto these arid summits. We take intermittent breaks for them to pick and eat berries and survey the vastness of the savannah they have called home all their lives. Scanning the lowlands like an eagle, Nkoitiko expresses his deep love for this territory – and his concerns about the great migrations that have passed through it and up onto the Maasai Mara for thousands of years. In recent times mass fenced areas have been created for cattle, aiming to provide meat for the entire country. This shift is slowly moving the Maasai away from subsistence lifestyles to a more commercialised way of life. The fences alter the yearly movement of nearly two million wildebeest, zebra, and gazelle. ‘Not far from my home, fences have stopped the migrations – they must travel elsewhere now,’ Nkoitiko explains. There is pain in his expression. I watch his shoulders drop as he speaks. Behind his gaze I see an irrefutable acceptance that times are changing – and in time his people will have to change with it. My shoulders drop with his. >>





We follow a narrow track down into a fertile pocket of flat land. Squadrons of white butterflies dance around the tiniest trickle of brown stream water, and we cross a dry riverbed, then walk on into a lush overgrown corner of primary forest. I notice that in the fertile areas, where Maasai communities have settled, the yellow acacia grows grand and tall – its distinctive flat top can be seen for miles. This tree is a natural signal to the Maasai (and wildlife) that a water source is close by.

Arriving at our small enclave, I notice what appear to be seven mattresses in a semicircle around a central fire still smoking from last night. Walking closer I see that they aren't mattresses at all, but layered beds of velvety leaves and branches from camphor trees. The result is a mattress matching even the most luxurious.

As the day draws to a close, we are serenaded by the calls of birds and animals. Fresh burning firewood begins to illuminate our camphor beds with a fluttering orange glow as seven tall warriors arrive with a goat. Before long the men slaughter, skin, and quarter the animal. We all participate as the blood is consumed from the throat, kidneys are cubed and eaten raw, and the tubular windpipe, seen to bring the breath of life to the animal, is placed on a stick, roasted, and consumed as a delicacy. Bones are boiled and the highly nutritious broth is drunk after the meal, ensuring that everything is used, nothing wasted.

**I begin to chant with them in my head as I lie motionless beside the embers of the fire. To me, nothing has ever sounded more primal.**

To the Maasai, singing and dancing are as important as the warm savannah air they breathe each day. As our food digests, we all hold hands, dancing and singing with deep vocal chants around the fire. One space is left in the circle. This allows the prayer – to

Enkai, the god of nature – to be released into an easterly direction, that of the rising sun. These ancient, harmonic, hypnotic chants promote warrior unity and togetherness.

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Next morning, accompanied by the Maasai warrior guides who joined us the night before, we begin a three-day journey on foot averaging 12 to 15 miles a day, staying in remote settlements bordered by thorned acacia trees. With Nkoitiko translating for me, we sit with community members and elders, ask questions, learn, laugh, and delve into the heart of Maasai culture.

After a dramatic rocky incline, we sit under an aptly named umbrella tree, using its shade to cool our overheating flesh. Nkoitiko says, 'Our cave is up across one mountain. We follow towards the sun – maybe two hours.' On our steep ascent he had explained: 'Many Maasai come here to the cave to live during warrior training.' I later learn that this process takes two to three years of living in the wild with experienced elders, following and learning the true way of the warrior Maasai. As we watch the sun descend behind a strip of darkening cloud, we begin to drop into an area owned by another Maasai guide who had accompanied us here with Nkoitiko. The volcanic soil, cattle, and trees here had been passed onto him by his uncle many years ago. Now at the mature Maasai age of 23, his stewardship will see this land protected and sustainably used many years into the future. Looking past Nkoitiko, I watch the guide, his eyes glistening as he overlooks this immense, forested, rolling terrain. There is pride and wonder in his expressions. I feel that he cares for the very stone under our feet and every tree that has taken root here.

We're picking our way down though the rocks when one of the warriors stops abruptly. Behind, I am motionless, expecting that they have spotted the pride of lions we were warned about.

For 10 minutes they scrutinise a gap in the acacia thickets 400m away at the top of the hill. I stand still beside them, watching the trees and the warriors,

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seeking resolution to my curiosity. All I can hear are birds screeching in the distance and the ebb and flow of the winds now gusting across the ridge. Then I see them.

Two figures step cautiously between the thickets at the top of the hill, directly in Nkoitiko's line of sight. As the silhouettes of the two distant Maasai emerge, each wearing a shuka and carrying a spear, they begin to make their way down to us. When they arrive, everything in their posture and attitude speaks of caution. And suspicion.

I observe from the sidelines, fascinated. I'm unable to ascertain their intentions nor understand their mannerisms and fast-paced language. Nkoitiko's gaze darts from the wood their spears are made of to the metalwork on the upper shafts, as if gauging its quality. This information, I assume, will tell Nkoitiko of their status and positioning within their tribe – maybe even the region they are from. I also notice that our other guide keeps a firm gaze on both men's hand positions.

After another 10 minutes pass, and tense conversations in Maa, the Maasai dialect, come to a close, I sense the atmosphere ease. With a few words – as well as gestures that need no translation – the two warriors are allowed to continue. Nkoitiko watches them as they walk into the distance, tracking their route until they are lost in a distant treeline. Alone again, we make our way down to the cave and clear an area for sleeping.

Later, as we lie on our camphor bed, the fires – one positioned at each of the two entrances of the cave – burn so vigorously that I've unzipped my sleeping bag down to my knees, turning it over to create a blue down blanket. With my back to the cold wall of the cave, I ask Nkoitiko about the chance encounter at the top of the hill. He is sitting next to me, poking away at the embers with a stick. His response amazes me. 'I hear them from one kilometre away. I wait for space in strong winds, turn my head. I can hear voices between strong wind.' Nkoitiko continues, explaining why we have two fires tonight. 'The

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warriors track pride of lions seen here yesterday. They kill two zebra somewhere close by.' And Nkoitiko gives another of his legendary half-smiles. I wonder if he enjoys telling me these things.

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The following morning, I wake to shards of sunlight splitting the dwindling campfire smoke like glass. I am the only person on the camphor bed. The others have left their blankets in a messy ball beside me. As my head falls back to the velvety leaves and I pull the down duvet up to my shoulders, I hear voices above me, at the upper rim of the cave – voices chanting in ancient harmonic tones. I begin to chant with them in my head as I lie motionless beside the embers of the fire. To me, nothing has ever sounded more primal. Above, Nkoitiko and our local guide are singing, praying, towards the sun as it rises through dark cotton-wool clouds.

Leaving the cave and picking my way up through the vegetation to the overhanging cliff, I join them. I wait for my moment. My head and shoulders begin to jut and move in the way they taught me days before. As we stand and sing, I am synchronised in movement, orientation, and voice with Nkoitiko, facing the eastern sun.

That last day, the storms roll over like clockwork, dropping vertical walls of rain. As Nkoitiko and I watch the storms ahead, he instinctively tracks their path with his eyes, then chooses our route through the dense vegetation leading us away from the trajectory of the oncoming weather. Like an architect Nkoitiko surveys the movement and design of the storm, then chooses our path. Once again in these final miles of our journey it strikes me how much of his life as a proud and respected warrior is linked to the landscape, the wildlife, and the ebb and flow of the seasonal weather. Every ounce of it. His senses are sharpened through repeated exposure, learning, and immersion; his heart full of song and ceremony – and his future filled with uncertainty. Here, between the passing of the storms, I expect more half-smiles, or for him to find another sweet fruit found on some new thorny tree. Instead, he asks me a question. 'Tell me about your life back home, Ian – do you have savannah like this?' And I reply: 'We have beauty as far as the eye can see, my friend. You should visit one day.'

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