



**PHOTO ADVENTURES**  
*By Joey Lawrence*

# ETHIOPIA

Commercial and portrait prodigy Joey Lawrence decided to take a different approach to travel photography – on his most recent photo adventure, he took his studio set-up along with him, to capture the jungle tribes and mountain-based holy men of Ethiopia

WORDS **MATT HENRY** / PICTURES **JOEY LAWRENCE**



**M**ANY PEOPLE BELIEVE that humankind first blossomed from an area near the Ethiopian/Kenyan border, because of strong archeological evidence; but regardless, it is safe to say that perhaps some of mankind's first peoples originated in this region, and its people remain ancient and diverse. However, in the present day, they are also people of change.

"Ethiopia actually means 'land of the burnt face', but I prefer its original name - Abyssinia. It isn't a political thing, I just think it sounds nicer and refers to the more ancient within Ethiopia. The Lower Omo Valley, in the south, has a hugely diverse concentration of different tribes who, for the most part, have very ancient lifestyles. There are probably few other places in the world where you can photograph so many diverse people in such a small area. I spent some time in the north of the country too, which has a completely different vibe. There, I photographed Orthodox monks, to expand my project on Holy Men that I started some time ago. Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley has been photographed dozens of times, by better photographers than me. I have no shame in admitting that it was those masters who inspired me to visit the remote area - a three day drive from the capital city. What I found there, however, was not an immaculate depiction of untouched tribal beauty, but a clash of the two worlds meeting.

"Missionaries have been working in the area for years, building schools, stopping wars and providing medical attention, but also teaching monotheistic values to the animist tribal populations. The government has done its part too, taking control of the land, assimilating tribal leaders. Some label it as cultural genocide, while some call it relief. I feel the best method to measure change in a people is not by their environment or what they wear. ▶



**OPENING IMAGE:** "Two young boys of the Bodi tribe. One is clothed, wearing a garment that was given to him by a missionary, while the other remains naked and shameless."

**RIGHT:** Joey, up a tree with the young girls of the Daasanach tribe. "They have no shame in being bare breasted."



"Ethiopia actually means 'land of the burnt face', but I prefer its original name - Abyssinia. It isn't a political thing, I just think it sounds nicer"



**ABOVE:** "A woman of the Bodi tribe fell ill and died. The men perform a ceremonial death procession and will keep the body safe for three days, after which the tribe will eat the body as a sign of respect, and to ensure passing to the next world. The missionaries have failed to ban this practice."

**LEFT:** "Bull jumping is a right of passage for young men of the Hamar tribe. To become a man, he will run across the backs of many cows, lined up. He waits nervously for the ceremony to begin."

**LEFT:** Nadogomi, 21 years old, Mursi tribe: "I don't care about losing my culture, I'll be free from staying at home, grinding maize and making my husband food."



"It's pretty obvious that this is not going to be the same place in five years' time"

The best method of investigating change is in a people's beliefs. I have focused on this area through personal interviews with each subject. These words are just as important as the photographs.

"I saw tribal people wearing basketball shorts and T-shirts, but that doesn't mean they're changing. It's the belief and insight that moves a culture. Most tribes believed in things like tree spirits, and not just one god, but nowadays, there's a spread of Christianity, Islam or whichever other missionaries are in the area. The younger generation seem particularly susceptible to the change, and seem to engage with the missionaries. They're certainly more impressionable than the tribal elders, suggesting that in a generation, the ancient customs could be wiped out. The government also encourages them to move out of the jungle and onto the road for tourists to take pictures, promising them money. It's obvious that it won't be the same place in five years time. It's not my place to judge, but it's clear where my opinions lie. All my images will be displayed with quotations, rather an overview of what is going on. Of course, the choice of quotes invites bias but I'm not putting myself up for photojournalistic integrity!"

"I visited seven different tribes. Each has different stories of how the world was created, and a unique look. The most well known and visited are the Mursi tribe, with its huge lip-plate piercings. Most of the tribes have their own method of painting themselves with different pigments and have piercings that represent things, such as

**ABOVE:** "A young woman of the Arbore tribe, well known for its headdresses. The girls shave their heads as a sign of virginity, and start growing it again after marriage."

**TOP LEFT:** "A boy of the Hamer tribe. I spent a lot of time in this village, sleeping in a hut and feasting on one of the tribe's goats."

**LEFT CENTRE:** "Mursi children look through my camera. They jumped back in shock when I appeared in front of the lens!"

**LEFT:** "Akeri, a Karo elder. His headpiece is a sign of respect, accomplishment and his age. The Karo people originated from the Hamer tribe."

**BALO, DAASANACH TRIBE:** "Hah hah! Nothing is different about me from the rest of the tribe. We are one complete unit and have our different roles."





**AYI TECHIE, DAASANACH TRIBE.**  
"When I was young, I believed in spirits. A long time ago, the tribe didn't have many visitors, but now a few come. I converted to Orthodox Christianity four years ago, after hearing about it from my neighbours. I went to my wife's church with a curiosity, and was converted."



"The men of the Bodi tribe pride themselves for being fat, and have huge stomachs because of the cow's blood they drink"

as how many wives they have. They scar themselves, to denote how many enemies they've killed in battle; they cut themselves and rub mud into the wounds to stop them from healing. Some have a wavelength pattern which is pretty beautiful – almost tattoo like. You can tell a little bit about their past just by looking at them.

"Some tribes migrated from Kenya, so have different skin colours or facial structures. The men of the Bodi tribe pride themselves for being fat, and have huge stomachs because of the cow's blood they drink. Some live on the Omo River, while others are further into the jungle. Even trekking into the bush for hours, I was never the first white guy they'd seen, and they often wanted money to take their photograph. I didn't mind, as I believe strongly in giving back – the tribes have become dependent on money and trade. I am taking their time, so I must give in return. I get paid for my time, and so should they; but this can't be the essence of the encounter. I don't care only about the photos, and this is what helped me to gain their trust. I am interested in history, belief, culture. I want to experience, not only take. Once they realised I was staying for weeks, I tended to earn their trust; but it's a long way from the romantic encounter I imagined, with mutual respect.

"Things have changed, but it's not exactly Disneyland. As the tribes are relocated, and their borders become closer to each other, tensions rise. For this reason, many tribesmen walk around with Kalashnikov rifles. It's not a great combination; a primitive (no negative connotations meant) viewpoint and owning such weapons. They use them for hunting too, although there ▶



**TOP: Saragolea, Bodi tribe.** "I do not do as the others in the tribe do, I have my own personal God. I walk over to my favorite tree, look upon the skies and pray."

**INSET ABOVE: Joey crosses the Omo river in a traditional 'ogolo' boat carved from a tree trunk.**

**RIGHT: A man of the Mursi tribe.** "It is a man's duty to hunt and become a warrior, to defend the tribe from enemies."





"Things have changed, but it's not exactly Disneyland... One Mursi child I met actually shot a hyena while it was attacking their cows!"

are restrictions on that now as well. One Mursi child I met actually shot a hyena that was attacking their cows! "I took a Profoto flash head with me, which got a lot of interest, though I'm sure they've seen a camera flash before. It's hard to explain to my dad what a softbox does, let alone a tribesman! There was always a huge crowd gathering and gasping every time it flashed. There's always an element of posing in my portraits, but it wasn't hard to get something natural. Most tribes do not grow up 'visually trained', so they have no stigma of how they should look and they end up looking very natural and relaxed. Most of my images are contrived. I think it is wrong to think this is less realistic than a photojournalistic approach. I believe that 'purist photojournalism' is a strong form of communication, and has its place in the world, but it is not my calling. Every photograph undergoes some kind of process, be it light reacting to the film, rendering color and tonality, or a digital signal being reassembled and compressed. If you take snapshots, wishing them to not look contrived, then they are contrived to be snapshots. Every image ever taken is contrived in some way or another. No process is purer than another, and no color truer.

"All the girls are bare breasted, and there's no shame over things like that; but, where most of the men were traditionally fully naked, they now cover themselves with



blankets, especially for photographs. In one case a man made a girl cover up for a photo because he knew that it's taboo in my culture. The really remote families don't tend to care at all. It's interesting though, as it shows their rising awareness of the outside world and its customs. For thousands of years, they were at the centre of their own universe, but now, I imagine they must feel a bit like animals at a circus with all the tourists.

"I shot the series on Phase One's new camera, with its P45 back. They'd contacted me, asking if I was planning anything and whether I'd like to borrow the camera, so I gladly obliged. It's a great system. It's a lot slower than 35mm, but that suits my style, which is more commercial than photojournalistic. The 80mm lens was on 90 percent of the time and it is awesome – absolutely pin-sharp! I'm not a guy who thinks he has to have millions of megapixels to capture a good image, but I believe that the camera does make a difference. I think the right tools can make a difference in the right hands. I'd mostly use my Profoto head with a bare bulb, but ▶

**TOP:** "Aba Geafael Asyashaye 52, is the monk and keeper of Abuna Yemata Guh."  
**INSET ABOVE:** "My assistant, Ryan, setting up the Profoto head and softbox at Debre Damo."  
**INSET LEFT:** "Meeting the monk. In order to reach him, Ryan and I had to climb 90° vertical rock walls using only small footholds!"  
**OPPOSITE:** "Mother Harya, a nun of Abraham Atsbeha, by the ancient doors of a former Pagan church (now Orthodox Christian). One day a year, the stone pillars inside leak holy water."



"Visiting the Holy Men in the North of the country was probably the most gruelling thing I've undertaken so far"

sometimes with a softbox. I expose for the flash and underexpose the ambient backdrop by half to a full stop. "Visiting the Holy Men in the north of the country was probably the most gruelling thing I've undertaken so far. In the Omo Valley, we lived in a Jeep or camped and ate crappy food, but it was easy to track down the subjects to photograph. In the north, there is much more of an infrastructure, so it's easier to find places to sleep and eat, but actually tracking down the monks was much harder. It might involve driving for three hours, walking for two, through a valley, and then climbing a mountain just to find a single monk in some cave; and all the way carrying the camera equipment along with the flash and battery pack. I had an assistant with me (who is my friend from high school) and also paid local people to help me carry the equipment when needed. Some monks were less difficult to reach, but the ones very close to the towns tended to be more like crooks, wanting to scam the tourists. Those at the top of a mountain are the real deal though, and won't take your money for a photograph, even when you offer it.

"So I'd work many days on one photograph, where with the tribes, I could find too many subjects. I photographed about ten monks in total during my three weeks in the north. They're Orthodox Christian. The religion reached Ethiopia in the fourth and fifth centuries, so there's a long Christian tradition there. The monks choose to practise Christianity in near seclusion, with some monks performing church services in their caves once a week. It's so difficult to get people to go to Church in my country – imagine how difficult it would be if we had to climb a mountain first! None of the monks claim to be a saint or a perfect being, they just want to commit themselves to their religion.

"The monks are self-sustained with their own cattle or goats, but sometimes people visit them to offer food and other donations. One monk actually asked us to drive him to the market. They're not like the Indian holy men, who would eat practically nothing and fast for days, away from all forms of temptation, but they are

**ABOVE:**  
"Aba Gebha Madhen Bahta lives in Debre Damo, a remote monastery in Ethiopia, only accessible by a rope leading up a 17 metre wall. No woman are allowed to enter."

**RIGHT:**  
"Aba Gebeha Argawe, another monk of Debre Damo. The monks are self-reliant, and have even brought cattle up the 17-metre wall by rope!"



**Joey's kit**

Joey shot on a Phase One 645 camera that features the 39-megapixel Phase One sensor. He mostly used the standard 80mm lens (50mm in 35mm terms) and a Profoto head with battery pack and softbox.



extremely strict and ascetic. We met this 101 year-old monk who was the most genuine. He was so happy to see us. He'd been in his cave and nearby church for 70 years and had not left. Considering that most people in the country only live to 40 or 50 years old, this is pretty amazing. Every five minutes or so, he would burst into prayer, almost like a constant mantra. "The idea of using the softbox is actually quite important to me. I had all these other commercial images in my portfolio, all shot with flash and given a real glossy treatment, but then I'd go abroad and shoot native people in a very natural, photojournalistic way. Then I thought: 'Why?' What's the need for the difference? Aside from the fact that I wanted consistency in my portfolio, I also felt that these people deserved to be treated in the same way as any of my other subjects. This is the first trip I've made where I've really attempted to do that. It's not necessary to produce something low-tech simply because that's what has always been done before. I've tried not to change my mindset." ■

"Gashaw Mesganaw, a deacon of Abuna Aron, Ethiopia, will continue to study under his elders for 30 years, to become a monk. The monastery, in a cave, is highly worshipped for its beam of light, which casts only for short periods during the day, when the sun is aligned with a hole in the roof."

"Fear? I have no fear, because I follow God!"

