

GIN ON THE JADE SEA

Barbara Adair revisits the celebrity-filled heyday of Lake Turkana, Kenya

In Café Loup, New York City, Iman, this supermodel, this African discovery, tells me the story of a lake.

"I remember the days that we spent there, Lake Rudolf as it was then called, the lake of decadence and fragmentation. Peter Beard, the photographer, was there. He loves the myth of Africa, he has no respect for Africans, he takes their photographs with the eyes of a Western man who does not understand their culture, but it's their continent, not his."

In Nairobi in the '70s, Beard, a renowned wildlife and fashion photographer, stumbled across a girl. Beard knew her face, he would always know it; and he wanted to know it before the world did.

"I have this man following me. He stopped me and said, 'Have you ever been photographed?' I thought, 'I've heard lines but this is ridiculous. What do these white people think?'"

Then he introduced her to the covers of Vogue and Vanity Fair. She lifts the glass of water to her mouth. "You can find him at 205 West 57th street, but no, go and find him in Kenya, at the jade sea, find his memory."

Early morning in Nairobi.

"This is the rainy season," the pilot says. "It's difficult flying in Kenya now, Nairobi is high, 2 000 feet, and the weather patterns are unpredictable but it is still early. At some point there will be a gap and when it comes, take it."

A handful of blue, we take a right turn out. I hold the map on my knees. In the lull, the sky is open. All around this space, it is grey; the clouds are opaque and ponderous.

"Storm clouds," says the pilot. "We will have to avoid them."

We sidestep a storm and fly over the Nairobi suburb of Karen, named for Karen Blixen; then the Ngong Hills, the clouds heavy around the four raised knuckles. Below us is Hog Ranch, the sometimes residence of Beard, its khaki cloth walls hold within them many journeys. I could die in the Ngong Hills, disappear in the indifferent sky — and who would know?



ALL'S WELL: An El Molo woman fetches water from Lake Turkana. The typical, dome-shaped El Molo houses in the foreground are made of reeds or palm fronds

There is a photo of Lauren Hutton with the lake in the background. It is beautiful, so was she

"Loyangalani; come in. This is Alpha Tango Sierra, two on board, request landing."

Below us is a barren landscape next to a jade sea, Lake Turkana. The plane is surrounded by people. A one-legged man offers to be our askari. "I will guard the air bird," he says.

A child holds out a rock, yellow and sapphire, prehistoric, "Buy, buy, some shillings?"

A man in uniform pleads, "When you leave, take me with you. I need a ride to Nairobi."

In 1888, the lake was named Lake Rudolf, to honour Crown Prince

Rudolf of Austria, by Count Sámuel Teleki de Szék, the first European to stand on its shoreline.

It is situated in the Kenyan Rift Valley, with its furthest northern end crossing into Ethiopia; it is the world's largest alkaline permanent desert lake.

I lean down and put the tip of my finger into the cobalt water, salty. The rocks in the surrounding areas are predominantly volcanic; Central Island is an active volcano. It spits and sighs, a murder on the shoreline, figures dancing death.

The winds off South Island are hot and strong. As the lake warms and

cools more slowly than the land, sudden violent storms are always a possibility. I hear the tinkle of glass and smell the empty bottles, which once contained laughter.

The Oasis Club, our room for the nights to come, lies at the southern tip of Lake Turkana, the closest village being Loyangalani. The lodge smells of decadence, a rotten palimpsest, a forgotten sparkling memory. Only the perfume of the glory days lingers, the nights of legend and revelry.

"Drink!" says Wolfgang Deschler, the German owner of the hotel. He drinks gin with a touch of

water. "You ask me to tell you stories ... why? What can I say that you cannot imagine?"

"Andy Warhol, he painted on the walls of room 16, or was it Francis Bacon? Bianca Jagger, a beauty, her eyes, aah ... the last thing left in nature after we have devastated it is the beauty of a woman."

Deschler lifts the glass. His hands are scarred, his fingernails black, his face covered in pustules of excess.

"Oh yes the Oasis Club was a famous place to escape. Mick Jagger, he was married to Bianca then. And David Bowie drank double gin with Iman; and Peter Beard, he hung around the pool calling to my cook, whom he photographed — look."

He points to the wall behind him. "She was Russian, the blonde, and that is Samson, the cook, Peter, half Tarzan, half Byron. Lauren Hutton was here with Peter, he loved beauty. There is a photograph of her with the lake in the background. It is beautiful, yes; so was she. She was magnificent."

"Iman and Peter, look over there, the footprints in the picture, the letter, they left their footprints behind ..."

We walk between the gods of Western iconography, touch the tattered photos that Beard threw away, kiss the footprints of Iman, and know how caught in the stars we are.

In my room, the window slats are rusted, the windows open, a green curtain is fluttering in the wind. In the bathroom, there are wall tiles decorated with the words Lake Rudolf; a picture of a jade sea.

"A few years ago," Deschler says,

"an elderly man arrived here. He said his name was Cornwell. He stayed three days and drank a few beers, then he left. Someone told me he had written a book under a pseudonym, John Le Carré. *The Constant Gardener*. Somewhere in it, there is a tribute to me, I believe — something about a man in an oasis of gin."

In 1968, when Deschler took over the Oasis Club, 500 people lived in Loyangalani; the current population is over 15 000. Very few people have jobs but the discovery of oil to the north will bring more, and a change to the lives of those who live here, just as Beard's pictures brought change.

"He would take photos of naked Turkana women, and the El Molo," Deschler continues, "the elders of the tribes hated him for this."

Deschler, with his staff of 25, is one of the area's biggest employers. Only regular food deliveries by Unicef sustain people in this harsh northern region.

I stand on the verandah where Mick Jagger once stood, pointing to the edge of the lake while Beard poured him mercuric champagne.

As the day comes to an end, the blood-red sun sinks into the lake and the trucks stir up dust. Deschler raises his glass to toast the trucks. "I'm an expert on futility," he murmurs. — © Barbara Adair



LADY OF THE LAKE: El Molo women were a popular subject for photographer David Beard

IF YOU GO ...

WHERE IT IS: The Oasis Lodge is located at the southern tip of Lake Turkana, Kenya. It can be accessed by road from Nairobi via Rumuruti, Mararal, Baragoi, South Horr to Loyangalani; or via Isiolo, Laikipia, South Horr to Loyangalani. Chartered flights from Nairobi can be arranged through the lodge.

WHAT IT HAS: The lodge has 16 double suites. Activities include guided drives to six local villages, including the El Molo village; boat trips to South Island in Lake Turkana, with an excursion to the volcano; day trips to Mount Kulal Forest; and fishing excursions on the lake.

RATES: All-inclusive rates from \$180 for a single, \$240 for a double, per night.

THE FOOD: Mostly fresh fish from the Lake which is excellent.

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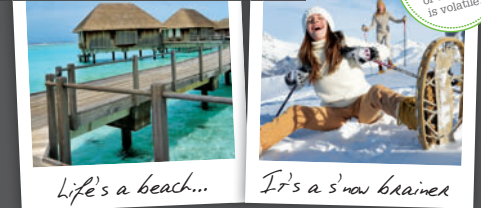
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