



Central Island is made up of more than a dozen craters and cones, three of which are filled by small lakes. Picture: SHAAN HURLEY/FLICKR

Sunday Times
TRAVEL

JOURNEY TO THE JADE SEA

Harsh and inhospitable, remote and rugged, Lake Turkana in northern Kenya is also a place of wonderment and mysticism for those passing through. By Barbara Adair

We must go on a journey, somewhere, a destination; after all “we are a seeking generation.” We choose Lake Turkana in northern Kenya, often called the Jade Sea, for its waters glitter like a precious stone against the harsh, dark, dry skin of the land.

It is the land’s nourishment, but also not as it is saline, undrinkable – a paradox? Also up there is a building designed by Francis Kéré, who was the first African to win the Pritzker Architecture Prize, in 2022.

And so we go. Along the Trans-African Highway, the main route into Uganda, Ethiopia and South Sudan.

In Lodwar, the capital of Turkana County and the only major economic hub in the area, there are many people on the new road and the bridge that crosses the Turkwel, or Tir-kol. Its name means a river that withstands the wilderness. The river begins in Mount Elgon, on the border of Kenya and Uganda, then crosses the southern Turkana Plains and the Loturerei Desert before finding its destination in Lake Turkana.

Lake Turkana, like Timbuktu, is a mystical place. It is here that Peter Beard photographed the Nile crocodile and the Turkana and El Moyo people for the book *Eyelids of Morning*. After his work with the crocs, Beard said the land was filled with dragons that roamed at will, and recalled



A Turkana woman outside a village shop in Lokitaung, a few kilometres inland from Lake Turkana. Picture: CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY IMAGES

meeting a Turkana man who laughed at him when he said the Earth may be round.

At the Oasis Lodge, as guests of Beard, David Bowie and Iman enjoyed their romance on the lake’s exotic shore. David Cornwell stayed for three days and then left to write a book under his pseudonym, John le Carré, *The Constant Gardener*.

It’s a wild and exciting place; and yet, for the Turkana people, excitement is not a concern. In this arid land, dead flat and endless, where the wind hisses cruelly and

the land is punitive and exacting, they are tenacious. Squads of motorbike taxis, called boda boda, carry people from town to town; camels, which do not need much water, are used to transport goods. They fish in the lake, taking what is there to make it work.

In 1888, Hungarian explorer Sámuel Teleki de Szék named the lake Lake Rudolf to honour Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria (heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Teleki and his expedition’s cartographer and diarist, Ludwig von

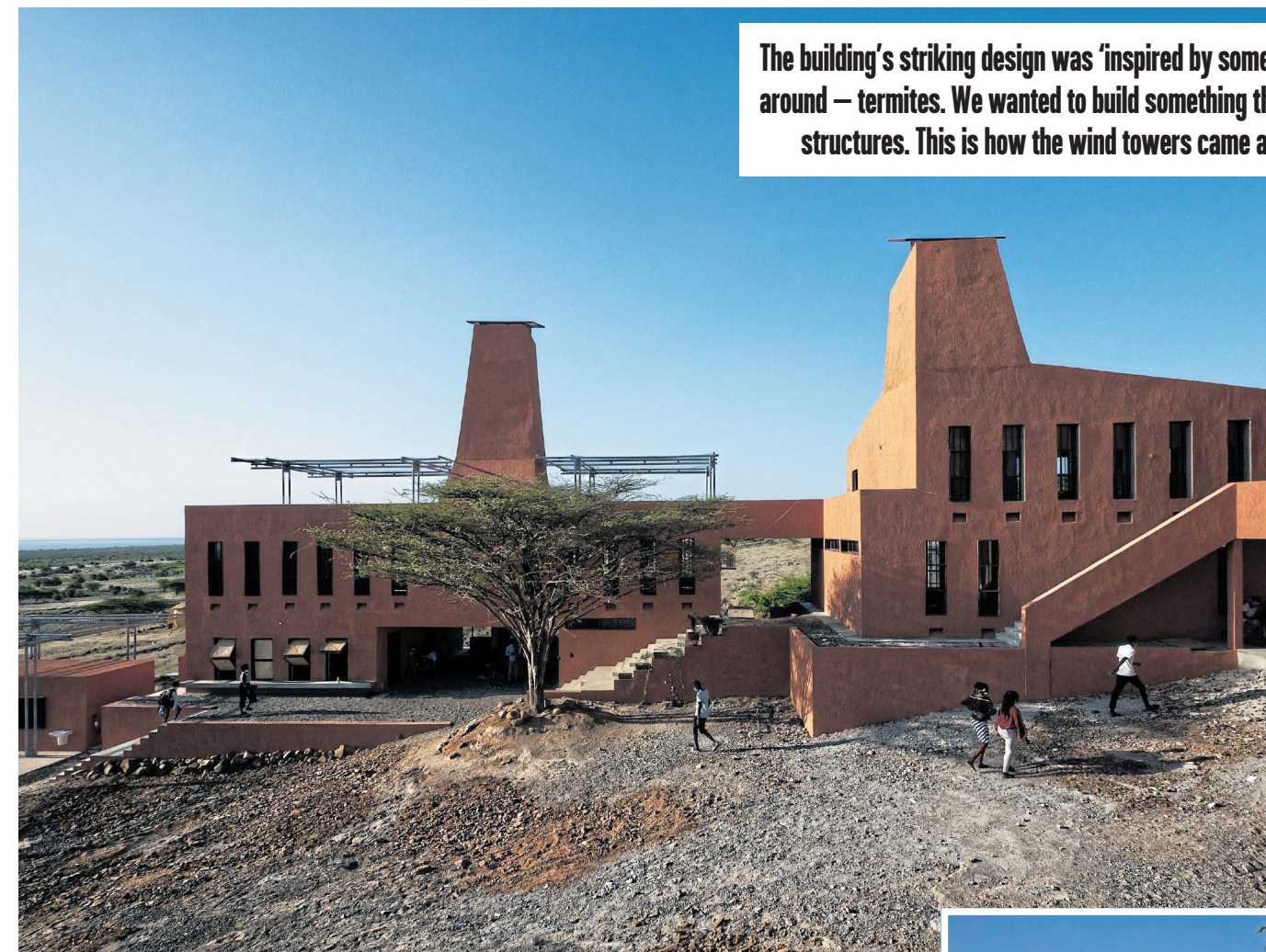
Höhnel, were the first Europeans to stand on its shoreline. The pair made observations on the climate and flora and fauna of the area. But they were also enthusiastic hunters who enjoyed shooting indiscriminately at anything that moved.

The Turkana who lived there never knew who Rudolf was, or where Austria was, and neither did they care. They continued to call the lake Anam a Cheper. In 1975, it was renamed Lake Turkana.

Lake Turkana is situated in the Kenyan Rift Valley, with its northern end crossing into Ethiopia. With a surface area of 6,405km², it is both the world’s largest permanent desert lake and its largest alkaline lake, as well as the fourth-largest lake in Africa. The rocks in the surrounding areas are predominantly volcanic and its three islands, North, South and Central (all named for where they are in the lake), are all volcanic. They spit and sigh as if there is a murder taking place on the shore. Watching Central Island, it seems as if there are figures dancing with death in the black sand.

For the Turkana, these islands are not quixotic or wonderfully scenic; they are merely there, a geographical location in the waters. There are often sudden violent storms over the lake, for the winds that blow off the islands are hot and strong, warming and cooling the water more slowly than the land.

A BRILLIANT BUILDING
In 2019, Kéré, an architect from Burkina Faso, was asked by Prince Ludwig of



The Startup Lions ICT campus, by celebrated architect Francis Kéré, was inspired by some of the best architects around – termites. Picture: KINAN DEEB FOR KÉRE ARCHITECTURE

Bavaria, a humanitarian who worked in the district on water-aid projects, to design and build an educational facility in Turkana.

The prince and his friend Brizan Were had a dream to establish an IT school in a place with few educational facilities. Ludwig, German, white and privileged, and Were, a local teacher, were an unlikely pair, and yet with a mingling of like-minded caring, they did it. The result is the Startup Lions ICT campus, on the banks of the lake, which provides training and work stations for students across various ICT professions.

Kéré said the building’s striking design was “inspired by some of the best architects around – termites”.

“We wanted to build something that mirrored their incredible structures. This is how the wind towers came about.”

The three geometrical towers that emerge from the building’s mounds, beautiful and imposing, are also functional – a passive ventilation system. As air enters the room below, the hot air inside is pushed up and out.

“Like termite mounds, the building is made from local material; rock was taken directly from the site. This makes it durable. What is there weathers the harsh climate. It is built over two levels that cling to the natural slope, mixing inside and out through a series of external staircases, walkways and terraces that envelope the structure so that occupiers can almost crawl all over it, as if it were another part of the natural landscape.”

A TRIP TO CENTRAL ISLAND

We take a trip to Central Island. The boat has an outboard motor. We put on red life jackets, for even though this is a lake it has the rough waves of an ocean. The searing wind howls ghoul-like as we forge across the waters.

Within minutes I am soaked, the boat jumps and bounces and I have nothing to cushion myself from the blows. All around are boats, their nets spread out and kept buoyant by old plastic water bottles. Our captain swerves, slows down, somehow avoids cutting through them or becoming entangled in the web-like tapestry.

The exhilaration cannot be put into words. It is a fire burning on water, raging and cooling, in terrible and terrific gusts. We rage into a space that is not of this world.

And then it is there, emerging from the blue-green waters: Central Island. It is made up of more than a dozen craters and cones, three of which have filled up with water to create small lakes, continually belching sulphurous smoke and steam. They are called Crocodile Lake, Flamingo Lake

and Tilapia Lake.

The volcanoes have created monstrous upheavals, leaving the land scoured with mountains, gorges and jagged boulders. The beach is coal-black lava that lies against the older red rocks. It is haunting and haunted. Here are the ghosts of a wilderness, a gift of nature that we create and destroy, something that the pace of human life hastens to diminish. I can hear the land spit and sigh.

And so the lake will grow and expand, dry up or flood. The island will one day fall and drown in the waters. The stories of Turkana and its mystique will fade. The building will one day be eroded by time and use.

Things always move and change, but I have been here.



A fisherman bringing in nets on the lake. Picture: WORLDIFISH/FLICKR

The building’s striking design was ‘inspired by some of the best architects around – termites. We wanted to build something that mirrored their incredible structures. This is how the wind towers came about’ – Francis Kéré, architect

GETAWAY AT A GLANCE

GETTING THERE

Lodwar, the largest town in Turkana County, is 630km from Nairobi by road. The writer went by car, taking two days to get there via Naivasha with a night’s stopover in Lake Baringo. She spent the second night in Lodwar before heading for the lake. On the way back, she went via Kitale for a night and then on to Nairobi. While there is much advice online about the dangers of driving due to bandits and bad roads, Adair calls this “Afro pessimism ... There is no danger. A few police who offer to escort you for a fee, but you don’t need to take them. Or if you do it’s just a short time. No bandits around.” The roads, she says, are also good, except for the last stretch from Lodwar to the lake. The private airline Skyward Express has daily flights from Nairobi to Lodwar, which take around 100 minutes.

WHERE TO STAY

The closest lakeside town from Lodwar is Eliye Springs on the lake’s western shore. The main town on the lakeshore is Loiyangalani, on the eastern side and accessible by charter flights (it has an airstrip) or on organised truck trips. Smaller lakeside settlements include Kalokol and Ileret.



A Turkana woman and her daughters collecting wood. Picture: CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY IMAGES

THINGS TO SEE & DO

1. Lake Turkana National Parks – comprising Sibiloi National Park on the lake’s eastern shore, along with Central Island National Park and South Island National Park in the lake – are a Unesco World Heritage Site.

2. Lodwar, also known as the town of many hills, offers several hikes that culminate in uninterrupted views of the town and its surrounds. The hill close to the Catholic mission also boasts Kenya’s own “Christ the Redeemer” statue, which you can visit with a relatively gentle ascent.

3. Fifty metres off the Lodwar–Kalokol Road near the western shores of Lake Turkana are the Dancing Stones of Namoratunga. This small cluster of cylindrical stones is said to date back to 300BC and some believe they functioned as an ancient observatory. Local legend has it that the stones were once men whom the devil petrified for failing a challenge to show no emotion.

4. There are several fascinating archaeological and paleoanthropological sites around the Nariokotome region on the lake’s northwestern shore. Perhaps the most significant is Turkana Boy, also called Nariokotome Boy, a fossilised skeleton of a youth who lived 1.5 to 1.6 million years ago. It is the most complete early hominin skeleton ever found. There is a monument to the discovery, complete with a metal cast of the skeleton in its original position when it was found, at the excavation site. The real fossil is now on display at the Natural History Museum in London.

5. The Start-up Lions Campus, near Lodwar, was established to provide digital learning and employment opportunities to young adults in remote Africa. It also has a programme through which it invites digital nomads to live and work at the campus, with housing as well as co-working spaces built for this purpose. The idea is that nomads can continue to work, exploring their surrounds in their downtime, and have the option to volunteer as mentors in the Learning Lions programme, helping to upskill the students in their particular fields. See startuptions.org