

# True tribal style

Venture into the mysterious world of Ethiopia's Surma and Mursi tribes with this striking book of portraits

**D**awn breaks in Ethiopia's isolated Omo Valley. For the tribespeople it's another typical day: collecting water, herding goats and... getting dressed up.

Life here can be bleak; the arms and ivory trades flourish and guerrilla warfare is commonplace. But all this is punctuated by rather more innocent pursuits. Just for the fun of it, the Omo's men, women and kids indulge in a daily, centuries-old rhythm of fancy dress. And we're not talking a half-hearted effort either: when it comes to costumes, make-up and elaborate headgear, the Omo tribes really go to town.

Photographer Hans Silvester has journeyed to their homeland 12 times. His latest tome is bursting with dazzling portraits showcasing their penchant for body adornment. The shots reveal theatrical headdresses fashioned out of banana leaves, necklaces made of snail shells and naked limbs smeared with volcanic body paint.

Other more unsettling get-ups involve monkey skins, butterfly wings and lip disks – women create painful holes in their lower lip and insert round



plates, thus increasing their chances of snagging a rich husband.

The book doesn't offer an intimate peek inside the tribes' daily lives. Indeed, some of the portraits look so exquisitely styled they smack of a *Vogue* photo shoot, leaving you wondering if it's all just a contrived show for the camera. But this is an intrinsic part of their culture, and would continue regardless of whether our eyes were on them.

"Body painting, as practised here in east Africa, the cradle of humanity... represents a way of life that dates from prehistory," muses Silvester. "Perhaps underlying it all is the spirit of the hunter, accustomed to camouflage... or perhaps it is simply an unconscious homage to Mother Earth."

Whatever drives the Omo people to get kitted out in their finery, it's impossible not to marvel at the visual spectacle. You'll be entranced by this striking record of a fascinating but increasingly fragile community. **Anna Webber**

**NATURAL FASHION** Hans Silvester  
(Thames & Hudson, £18.95)

## MY FAVOURITE TRAVEL BOOK Tim Butcher



**JOURNEY WITHOUT MAPS**  
Graham Greene  
(First published 1936)

"The list of good books written on Liberia is not a long one but Graham Greene's *Journey Without Maps* sits at the top. I first came across it as I struggled to make sense of the chaotic West African country when sent there as a journalist during its recent civil war. I stuffed it in my rucksack and read it as child soldiers ran amok outside my Monrovia hotel.

Greene wrote it in the 1930s and yet it is timelessly relevant in its ground-level description of the country's dualism – traditional African clans in the thrall of omnipotent devils and modern freed slaves from America often behaving like the worst white colonialists. But what makes it a great of travel writing is the way Greene reached places and people who have been largely inaccessible for the past 20 years. It inspired me to go the extra mile in Liberia and elsewhere. And that must be the hallmark of fine travel writing."

Tim Butcher's latest book **Blood River** (Vintage, £8.99) is out now



## BOOK OF THE MONTH

**OUT OF STEPPE: THE LOST PEOPLES OF CENTRAL ASIA**

Daniel Metcalfe  
(Hutchinson, £18.99) ★★★★★

The idea of chronicling the disappearing peoples of the world is not a new one. What is more unique about Metcalfe's book is that it's set in Central Asia, amid the wind-blown cities and steppes of the 'Stans'. From Turkmenistan to Pakistan, he crosses near-derelict metropolises and mountain passes attempting to track down the region's surviving ethnic enclaves.

With some knowledge of Persian, he receives help along the way to counterbalance hindrance and suspicion. From a Turkmeni lawyer desperate to flee to the west to a Pakistani student wanting to improve his English, via sundry taxi drivers

baffled by his journey plans, Metcalfe tries to get closer to the 'lost peoples'. He is forced to slip into character several times – he becomes a Jew tracing his genealogy in Uzbekistan and an Iranian in Afghanistan – to break down the barriers. Generally he succeeds and discovers many lives changed inexorably by the former USSR and the shifting sands of migration. There is much poignancy in the struggles of those who, in many cases, have also had to suppress their identity to fit into the ever-changing ideologies of their 'homeland'.

Yet there are many life-affirming moments, too, as Metcalfe is welcomed into



people's lives without a second glance. There is also some mild comic relief when an American traveller joins his journey temporarily in Tajikistan.

The construction of the book – one journey to a 'lost people' after another – means it occasionally provokes a sense of déjà vu. Also, it's dotted with annoying spelling and grammatical mistakes. Overall, though, this is a fascinating document of how the political turmoil of the past century is threatening far more people than many of us realise. Metcalfe's journey is a worthy addition to the canon of books capturing these moments at the crossroads of history. **Simon Ward**

**BLUE RIVER, BLACK SEA**

Andrew Eames  
(Bantam Press, £17.99)  
★★★★☆

'I was plopping myself into Europe's open mouth, submitting to the whims of its interior plumbing, and hoping to emerge unscathed from its rear end.' So says Eames at the start of his journey, a 2,840km bike, walk, train and sail along the Danube, from source in Germany to splayed finale in Romania's Delta. Along the way he pedals through bucolic Austrian countryside, gallops (painfully) across Hungarian plains and sips tea with aristocracy, popping into various castles en route to meet the gentry still in residence.

Eames is following the river (with a few detours); he's also following Patrick Leigh Fermor, who traced a similar path in 1933. He often recounts Fermor's travails alongside his own, an insight into how times have changed in New Europe. Sadly, Fermor's exploits sound the more fun; Eames finds less misadventure and fewer mad aristos. However, for a pleasant float through our emerging continent, he makes a good navigator. **Sarah Baxter**  
**Wanderlust subscribers can buy this for £14.99 – go to [www.wanderlust.co.uk/subsclub](http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/subsclub)**



**SURINAM**

Andrew Westoll  
(Old Street, £10.99)  
★★★★☆

Surinam could almost be another world. Its 'invisibility' was what pricked Andrew Westoll's interest but its jungle credentials really sealed the deal. He spent five years there studying monkeys then returned in another guise, as a writer, to pen this compelling travelogue. Whether he's boogying at a jungle rave, floating through a drowned rainforest or tracking the rare okopipi frog, it's a privilege to go along for the ride.

Don't expect utopia though. 'I feel I'm making a cameo in a strange post-colonial theatre,' Westoll reflects. The country is bruised by external forces, and the thoughtful narrative reveals an uneasy marriage (think Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton) of natural wonders and corruption. Wildlife and ancient forest magic collide with gold mining, drug trafficking and ecotourism. However, local clans still cling to their traditions, and you'll be riveted by the tribal cosmology where 'dangerous' menstruating women are confined to moonhouses and snakes are given VIP funerals. **Anna Webber**

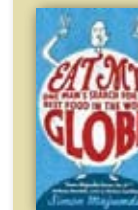


## Best of the rest

Whatever compels you to take off to foreign climes – wildlife, bizarre grub, middle-aged malaise – there's a little something for everyone this month. Dip into Horatio Clare's *A Single Swallow* (Chatto & Windus, £17.99) and feel as free as a bird as you glide through 14 countries hot on the trail of migratory swallows.

If you just want to shun the daily grind, follow 41-year-old Mike Carter's European motorbike misadventures in *Uneasy Rider* (Ebury, £7.99).

Or if you're a slave to your tastebuds, you'll love *Eat My Globe* (John Murray, £8.99), Simon Majumdar's search for the world's best food.



"Feel as free as a bird as you glide through 14 countries hot on the trail of migratory swallows"

Travel triumphs and tragedies also abound. Read about the victorious overland odyssey from earth's lowest (the Dead Sea) to highest (Everest) in Dominic Faulkner's *The Longest Climb* (Virgin, £18.99).

Or find out why tropical paradise isn't always what it's cracked up to be in *A Shadow Falls: In the Heart of Java* (Faber and Faber, £12.99) by Andrew Beatty.

If you want to sit back and dream, pore over Peter Conrad's *Islands* (Thames & Hudson, £14.95).

Or float away to the ultimate island escape with *Galapagos: Through Writers' Eyes* (Eland, £12.99).

