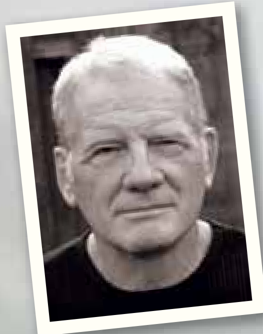
CAPTURING THE HUMAN SPIRIT

Around the World Through the Lens of Victor Englebert



VICTOR ENGLEBERT is an adrenaline aficionado who has traveled to four corners of the world. His photographs have earned him the respect of many industry peers. From his very first journey to the Belgian Congo, Englebert has always worked to travel and traveled to work. He's paid his dues—spending days in the desert fighting starvation and thirst, being mistaken for an Israeli spy, riding a Vespa from Belgium to South Africa—all the while capturing the human spirit.

Read on as Englebert recounts his travels from the comfort of his Allentown home.

The Peruvian Andes

In 1971, I spent seven months traveling around Latin America, from Mexico to Argentina and Brazil. At some point, pressed among a crowd of Indians at the back of a dilapidated bus, my itinerary was taking me from Ayacucho to Cuzco, in the Peruvian Andes. Holes and stones in the unpaved road shook the bus in a cloud of dust, and a pot flew off the roof. The driver stopped, and a passenger ran to pick up the pot.

Less than a minute earlier, I caught sight of a little girl sitting by herself along the road, and could have cried with frustration for being unable to photograph her. The flying pot was a miracle. The bus's central aisle was crowded with people sitting on bundles, but I scrambled over them toward the door, just as the passenger was returning with the pot.

"Where are you going?" the driver shouted.

"To urinate," I lied, almost unconsciously. And I ran with a Leica in hand.

"This is not the moment!" the driver yelled.

"But what the devil are you doing? Come back!

"...All right. Stay here and wait for tomorrow's bus." And having said that, he pulled off.

My luggage and most of my film was on that bus, but I refused to worry about them just then. I shot three quick pictures, gave the little girl a bag of avocado pears I carried in my camera bag, and ran back. The bus was far already, but not going very fast, and I was a runner. Even so, my heart was in my mouth by the time I got back on board. The driver shrank in his seat, but the Indians applauded. I felt like telling the driver what I thought of him, but decided against it. It occurred to me that for a small tip this man would have given me all the time I needed. That lesson would serve me well on future occasions.

Photography & Text by **Victor Englebert**

As a child growing up in my native Belgium, I dreamed of becoming an explorer. I despaired for many years after learning that the age of exploration was over, so I became a sailor. I worked on a ship that landed me in the Belgian Congo. While taking pictures of a village there, I had an epiphany. I would become a magazine photographer, a job that would allow me to travel to the world's wildest places and study their little-known denizens. I knew that this would not be easy, but that did little to dissuade me.

Since then, I have documented in pictures and text for *National Geographic, Smithsonian, International Wildlife, Natural History, Geo, Paris Match, Archaeology,* and many other periodicals that have long since met their demise. I have also had the privilege of providing images for 17 books, and recorded the lives and cultures of 35 indigenous peoples in Africa, South America, and Asia.

It has been 51 years since I took off on my first expedition on a 125cc Vespa scooter originating from Brussels, my French-speaking hometown, to Cape Town, riding across the length of Africa. I still travel off the tourist map, but for shorter times now, as funds for four-month expeditions have become harder to come by. I now suffice with more conventional travel stories. I even remain sharp of mind and eye by photographing an occasional wedding story.

The words and pictures that follow are just a sampling of my many past expeditions.

Borneo

In 1968, in a four-month journey across Borneo, the world's third-largest island, I traveled west to east, up the Kapuas and Bungan rivers and down the Mahakkam, from Pontianak to Samarinda. That was long before the loggers' invasion, and long before any road was first hacked or bulldozed through the forest. I journeyed first by Chinese houseboat, and then by Dyak canoe. When rapids impeded our progress, which was often, we walked through the forest.

At the end of our upriver trip, we left our canoes on the Bungan and walked for eight days to the Mahakkam through the jungle of the water divide. Because the Dyak had no use for money, I needed eight porters to carry the trade goods that paid for services.

Countless leeches hooked onto us along the way, drawing streams of blood from our arms and legs. The smoking Dyak burned them off with cigarettes. A non-smoker, I plucked them off by hand, sometimes leaving the head inside my skin. And since the leeches squeezed through my shoes' eyelets to lodge under my toenails, I had to walk through the jungle barefoot so as to spot them quickly.

The Dyak, former headhunters, still had skulls hanging from their longhouses' rafts, but they were as hospitable as any people I had known, though they forced me to sing and dance before giving me a place to sleep. Compared to their own artistic shows, mine looked dismal, which I could see on their faces.

Halfway down the Mahakkam, I ran out of trade goods when every hand was needed to harvest the hill rice. I had to give away everything I owned except the clothes on my back and my photographic equipment to find the help I needed to get out of the jungle.

EVEN IN THE RAIN FOREST, HUMANS CARE HOW THEY LOOK. FOR DYAK WOMEN, THAT MEANS LOADING THEIR EARS WITH AS MANY METAL RINGS AS THEY WILL BEAR WITHOUT BREAKING. EARLOBES DO BREAK SOMETIMES, HOWEVER, WHICH TURNS ADMIRING GAZES INTO MOCKING ONES. BOTH MEN AND WOMEN PAN STREAMS FOR GOLD. THEY ASK CHINESE DENTISTS DOWNRIVER TO CAP THEIR TEETH WITH IT.

Danakil Depression, Ethiopia

A few months after my Moroccan adventure, I traveled to Ethiopia's Danakil Depression along the Red Sea Coast. At 500 feet below sea level, it may be the world's hottest region—an inferno of volcanoes, boundless lava fields, sulfurous sources, and salt lakes—a sight I would compare to witnessing the birth of a new ocean.

I know from experience that people of all races, religions, and cultures are fundamentally good. But there was in the eyes of the men there, the Danakil nomads, a light that spoke of evil. Not because of any basic wickedness, but because of the utter harshness of their lives, spent in the constant embrace of thirst, hunger, disease, and inhuman heat. And so, to prove his manhood, so essential there, a Danakil man in those days had to kill another man, castrate him, and offer his trophy to the woman he wanted to marry.

One night that I was walking through the desert to avail myself of the lower temperature, I was threatened with death by a group of young warriors that intercepted me. Armed to the teeth, they harassed my Eritrean interpreter, who walked behind me, and drove him to despair. Hoping to give the impression that I might give them a bad surprise if they touched me, and though feeling half dead already, I feigned utter serenity as I kept walking without looking back or stopping to argue with them.

Thankfully, I had two Danakil guides. They had somehow got stuck way behind with our camels, but sensing my trouble, they came running. Seething with rage, they warned our would-be killers away, telling them that I was under the protection of their chief, which was true.

Later, my interpreter told me that when he had warned the men about the problems they would face if they messed with me, they had laughed. "If that man is too poor to own a firearm," they said, "nobody will miss him after we kill him—and you."

Later in the trip, lost in the desert in a rented Jeep, I fell into the hands of Eritrean rebels, who were fighting the Ethiopians for their independence. The chief put a pistol to my head and screamed: "F... Israeli spy, you're going to die." He didn't believe my Belgian passport was genuine, but relented when stamps in that passport showed that I had been in Algeria twice in the last two years. As an Israeli I would have been barred from entry there. The rebels kept me inside my car until the following morning. Then they let me go, and within hours I had to jump out of the Jeep with my hands up because now I was facing two-dozen Ethiopian soldiers aiming their guns at it.

"Are you crazy?" the captain asked. "We haven't seen a car in three years. No wonder you got lost. There are no paths left. We thought you were part of an Eritrean attack."

A GROUP OF DANAKIL MEN GATHERED FOR A COUNCIL.

Niger

IN THIS PICTURE, THE TWO MEN, PART OF A LONGER LINE, DANCE THE GEREWOL, THE TRIBE'S SUPREME BEAUTY CONTEST, WHICH PITS CLAN AGAINST CLAN.

In 1970, I spent two months following the Wodaabe nomads of Niger on their nearly daily moves through the Sahel, the dry savanna bordering the Sahara to the south. They were heading northward to salted pastures, tirelessly leading their long-horned zebus in search of fresh grass. Finally, and to the utter delight of the nomads, the long-awaited rains finally fell. For a few weeks, there would be no need to keep moving. The sparse yellow grass would now be thick and green and abundant. So much so that families and clans who were forced to scatter and wander the savanna for nearly a year, far from each other to ensure enough food for each herd, could now gather for a while. The time had come for weddings, birth celebrations, dances, and beauty contests—male beauty contests.

The Wodaabe belong to the great Fulani family, a race of light-skinned, fine-featured Africans that spread from Senegal to Chad. The Wodaabe are darker than the others, but their canon of beauty is the same: tall, elongated, and graceful silhouettes, light skins, thin noses and lips, and high foreheads.

And so the men shave their foreheads high, lighten their skins with a yellow powder and draw a line down the middle of their noses to make them appear sharper. They blacken their lips and eyelids to enhance the whiteness of their teeth and eyes. As they dance, the young unmarried men show their attributes to the women standing in a line parallel to theirs. In funny grimaces, they roll their eyes and peel their teeth to show their whiteness. The elders examine the dancers close-up, one by one, mock those whose features do not fit the norm, and threaten those lacking stamina—they will be fitted with a donkey pack saddle.

Like the men, the women have tastefully painted their faces and artistically decorated their bodies with things found at the market, like keys, small shiny padlocks, paper clips, broken zippers, and buttons. Folded blankets cover their heads. They will use them to later lie in the bush with the dancers of their choice.

UPON RETURNING FROM DISTANT ABANDONED GARDENS TO COLLECT FRUITS AND VEGETABLES STILL GROWING THERE, A GROUP OF MEN SPEARED A WILD PIG ALONG THE WAY. THE MEN ARE SEEN HERE CUTTING IT UP FOR DISTRIBUTION.

The Amazon Rain Forest

Long before Time-Life Books asked me in 1982 to illustrate *Aborigines of the Rain Forest: the Yanomami,* one of the books in their People of the Wilds series, I had read several books about those Indians. Their reputation was so frightening that I thought that by accepting the assignment I was taking a great risk, but how could I refuse? Fortunately, experience had taught me that I was much safer among indigenous peoples anywhere than in certain American neighborhoods, and that travelers have a way to make their adventures appear more dangerous than they really were. Thankfully, I was proven right once again.

I discovered a well-organized society with an amazing sense of humor. I marveled at personalities that I had known among my family, my friends, and my neighbors—the politician, the leader, the lawyer, the clown, the mediator, the inventor, the businessman, the troublemaker, and even the paper shuffler. It would only have been the matter of dressing their naked bodies with the appropriate clothes to complete the impression. This for a people who may have been isolated from the rest of the world for 5,000 years before being first contacted in the 1950s.

And so, for a month I shared the space of a yano, a vast donut-shaped communal house surrounding a central plaza with around 100 Indians, each family around its own fire, and each person, including myself, centered in a hammock. For a month I followed the men on hunting expeditions and the women on gathering ones. Every day, with one group or another, I walked to see them get manioc, bananas, or papayas from their forest gardens; to climb trees for honey; or to catch crabs, frogs, grubs, and mushrooms. I watched them cook, paint each other red with urucu, make new arrows for their bows, prepare poison for their arrowheads, and play with their babies. And I wondered what the shamans saw, who now and then asked someone to blow a powdered hallucinogen into their nostrils through a long tube before looking to the sky, dancing, and talking to spirits.

The Tenere

Back in 1965, I traveled for over three weeks across the Tenere, the Sahara's most barren region, with a Tuareg salt caravan. The Tuareg had refused to let me go along. "No Westerner could survive such an adventure," they told me. "And we would rather not have to bury your bones in the sands of the desert." They changed their minds when I offered to share their hard work, and I returned to tell my story, which provided me with my first *National Geographic* cover article.

I soon understood the Tuareg's concern. Like them, I suffered extremes of thirst, hunger, and fatigue difficult to imagine, as I covered more than 650 miles of Sahara Desert on camelback between Niger and Algeria the previous year.

Sterile as the Tenere is, there was a tree there, a small acacia known as the Tree of the Tenere—the only tree for hundreds of miles around. Though much mangled by the axes of men and the teeth of camels, it was such an important landmark that it appeared on the map, and for good reason. There was a well at its foot.

A Foreign Legion sergeant had figured that there must be water under that tree, and he sent men to dig. That tree, however, had deep roots, for the water lies 135 feet below.

For many hours before reaching the Tree, the 102-camel caravan spread as widely as possible to make sure not to miss it, for we were already half dead of thirst. Our failure to spot the Tree in those scorching wastelands could have ended our lives.

The water smelled like rotten eggs, and gave us all instant diarrhea. But we would have drunk anything liquid.

TWO MEN PULL WATER FROM THE WELL NEXT TO A CAMEL. THREE OTHER MEN LOAD A CAMEL WITH GOATSKIN BAGS FILLED WITH WATER. THE TREE NOW STANDS IN NIGER'S NATIONAL MUSEUM. IN 1973, AN INTOXICATED DRIVER DROVE HIS TRUCK THROUGH IT.

North Kenya

In 1973, I spent six weeks with the Turkana, cattle nomads of North Kenya.

Their women do the hard work, but isn't it so in much of the world? They are charged, for instance, with digging water holes out of the deep sand of dry river beds. This they do using big wooden vessels that their strong hands carved out of tree trunks— not the perfect tools. And if that was not enough, they also have to lift the water in those heavy vessels from the bottom of the pits up to the men above to pour into the herds' troughs.

The men only move the herds to and from the water holes. Handling cows and camels is a man's job. Goats and sheep, which give no prestige, are generally better left to women and children.

Like cattle, debate is also better kept among males, even when frivolous. The women are so much better at taking care of the kids, the cooking, the loading and herding of donkeys when moving camp, and the beautiful handcraft they design, including wooden milk jars, and leather and skin butter vessels.

The utterly vain men always have a small wood headrest tied to one of their wrists. They lay their heads on them when resting in the sand or sleeping at night so as to protect their elaborate hairdos, caked as they are in dried gray and red mud topped by ostrich feathers. They also use the headrests to sit on when conversing, for long sharp thorns are always littering the ground (women sit on rawhide).

What redeems Turkana men is their dependability for aggressively and courageously defending their women and herds in times of war.

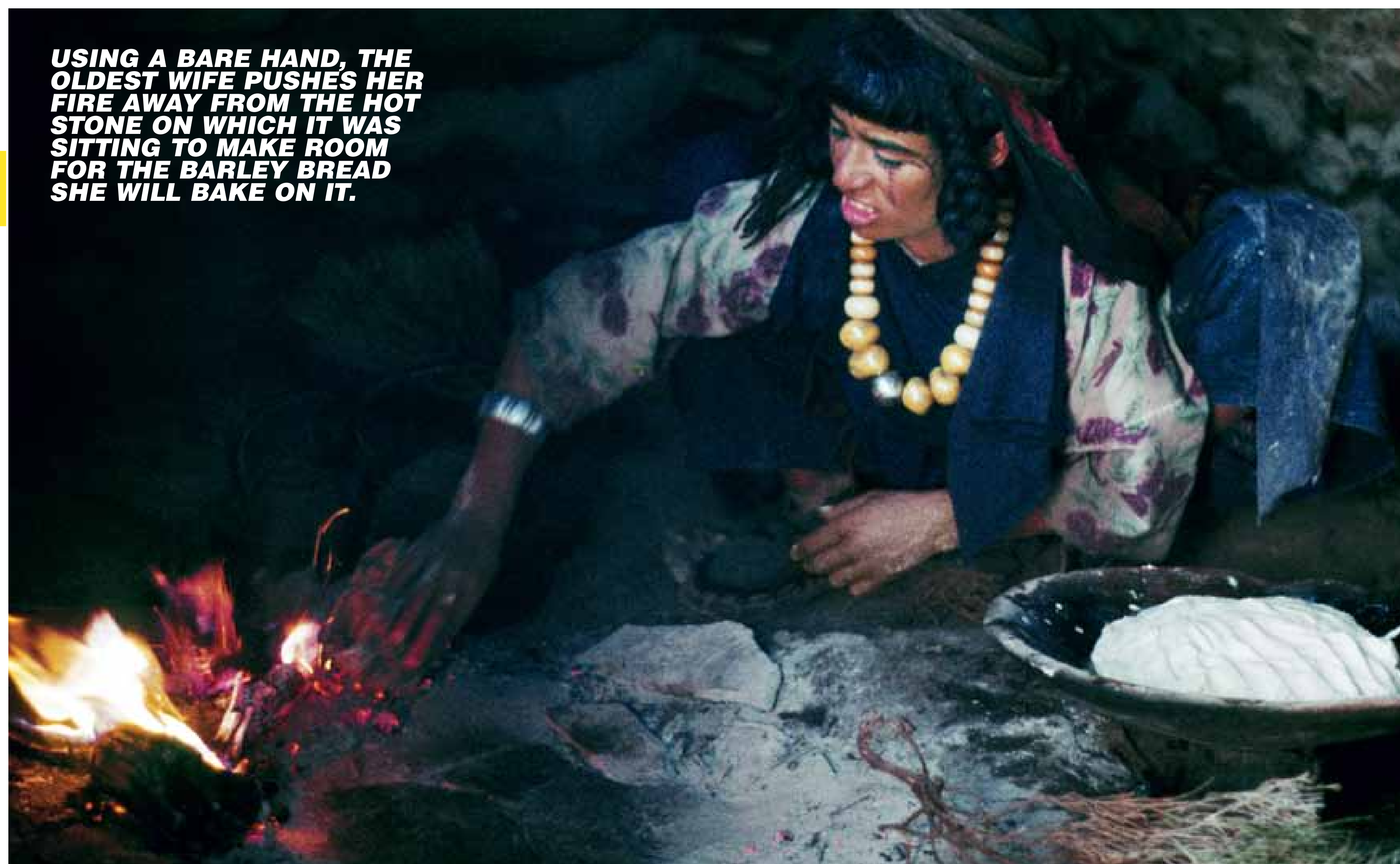
LANCES AND FLY-WHISKS, ATTRIBUTES OF MEN, MARK THE NEW AND HIGHER STATUS OF YOUNG WOMEN MARCHING IN PROCESSION AT THEIR DIKUNTIRI, OR INITIATION. NOW RECOGNIZED AS ADULTS, THEY MAY FORMALLY JOIN THEIR HUSBANDS TO WHOM THEY WERE LAWFULLY MARRIED IN INFANCY. WHEN A BRIDE ENTERS HER HUSBAND'S HOUSE, HE STABS AN ARROW INTO HER HEADDRESS OF ANTELOPE HORNS, SYMBOLIZING THAT SHE COMES AS A CREATURE TAKEN IN THE HUNT.

Morocco

In 1967, I spent four months in Morocco walking and riding a mule between Berber villages in the High Atlas Mountains. Everywhere, the local chiefs treated me like a prince, though as Moslems they were only following their religious precepts. One chief even asked me to stay and marry into his tribe. It might have been tempting, if only to live the tribe's life forever, but I was married already. And I wanted to live other tribes' lives.

At some point in my High Atlas meanderings, I was stuck in a house for eight days. The mountain pass ahead had been buried under deep snow, as had the one I had come through. And so, while waiting for a chance to move on again, I spent much of my time sharing green mint tea and dates with my host.

That man had two wives and a 16-year-old daughter from the first one. Tired of her heavy labor, the 38-year-old wife had asked her husband to find himself a second wife to share the work. And so he had brought home a 16-year-old bride, who was now 18. The three women loved each other and made much fun of the man behind his back. He knew it, and as we sat on the carpet of his house's second story, he often stuck his ear to the floor to try to intercept their conversation.



USING A BARE HAND, THE OLDEST WIFE PUSHES HER FIRE AWAY FROM THE HOT STONE ON WHICH IT WAS SITTING TO MAKE ROOM FOR THE BARLEY BREAD SHE WILL BAKE ON IT.

Benin's Atakora Range

In Benin's Atakora range and its adjacent plain live more than 60,000 people known as Somba. Primitive as those farmers, hunters, and ancestor worshippers appear at first sight, they have, in fact, a complex culture and well-regulated society.

What also immediately sets the Somba apart from their neighbors are their miniature clay castles. Scattered around giant baobab trees on crests and in depressions, those castles once defended them against Moslem Bariba. The Somba forced those horsemen to disperse and fall under the volleys of arrows shot left and right from heights of 13 to 14 feet.

I visited the Somba three times over 10 years, the last one, in 1973, for a month. The second time, the year before, I had to fight a man and his dog, who would not let me get back into my car. I had photographed those beautiful clay castles from the top of a cliff, and he wanted me to pay for that. But he wasn't satisfied with the contents of my wallet, which was the equivalent of $11, and I did not want to show him where I hid the rest. As I finally started the car, other men came running. They hit the car with a couple of hard-pointed arrows.

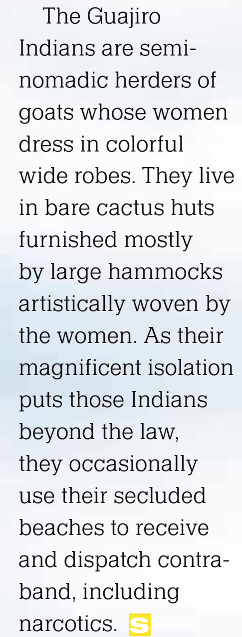
But I returned the following year. This time I went to talk to the priestess and negotiated a fee that would let me take all the pictures I wanted, including those of harvest and initiation celebrations.

Colombia

I lived in Colombia, where I published my own photo books, from 1974 to 1996, and over the years explored that country as few people have. One of my favorite people there, whom I visited several times over the years, were the Guajiro Indians.

They spread over a strip of desert, the Guajira, that stretches inside the Caribbean Sea at the northern end of Colombia and South America. Surrounded on all sides by blue and green waters, and crushed by a heavy sun, the Guajira is all sand and cactuses besides a few hardy gnarled trees. It's beautiful.

The Guajiro Indians are semi-nomadic herders of goats whose women dress in colorful wide robes. They live in bare cactus huts furnished mostly by large hammocks artistically woven by the women. As their magnificent isolation puts those Indians beyond the law, they occasionally use their secluded beaches to receive and dispatch contraband, including narcotics.



THE GUAJIRO, WHO ARE TOO POOR TO OWN EVEN A HERD OF GOATS, LIVE BY FISHING—FISH AND LOBSTERS—AND BY HARVESTING SEA SALT. BAREFOOT IN THE CORRODING SALT, MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN SHOVEL IT INTO WHEELBARROWS AND 135-POUND BAGS. IT TAKES TWO MEN TO LIFT THOSE BAGS ONTO THE BACK OF A WOMAN, WHO THEN CARRIES IT A FEW HUNDRED PACES TO A WAITING TRUCK. ANY WOMAN IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD COULD CARRY A MAN.

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