

# Nyala Safari In An Ancient Land

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Published in Sept/Oct 2004 SAFARI

I dutifully got my shooting sticks in place. It was a 100-yard shot, roughly 45 degrees uphill. Additionally, I would have to skim – and not hit – the edge of the tree in order to slip the .340 into the nyala's brisket and heart. The obvious challenge was to get the shot as close as possible to the tree without touching it to avoid deflecting the shot. One of the trackers assisted me by putting his knee under my left elbow, providing additional support. I had a good sight picture.



**Women and children in a neolithic Karo village. The majority of the men carried AK-47s. Bullets are sometimes used as currency.**

Among the Eucalyptus

Spiral-horned antelope are unusually difficult animals to hunt. They are quite intelligent, extremely alert and often found in challenging terrain. This family comprises the elusive and rare sitatunga, unbelievably beautiful bongo, huge but furtive Lord Derby eland and the mountain nyala, found only in Ethiopia. I had specimens of the first three but lacked the last.

My wife Pam and I attended the 2001 SCI Convention. While there, we spoke with Nassos Roussos of Ethiopian Rift Valley Safaris as well as his 25-year-old son, Jason. Nassos is, to my mind, the “dean” of Ethiopian hunting, especially when it comes to mountain nyala. Pam and I were impressed by their expertise, knowledge and confidence, as well as their evident enthusiasm for the beautiful mountain nyala.



**Ethiopian priests have kept Christianity vibrant for almost 2,000 years.**

Their U.S. booking agent, Rich Elliott, assured us he would arrange for our licenses, assist in air reservations and advise us on visas, gun import permits and other details. We liked Ethiopian Rift Valley Safaris so much that we booked a 21-day mountain nyala hunt that also offered a three-day Omo Valley add-on.

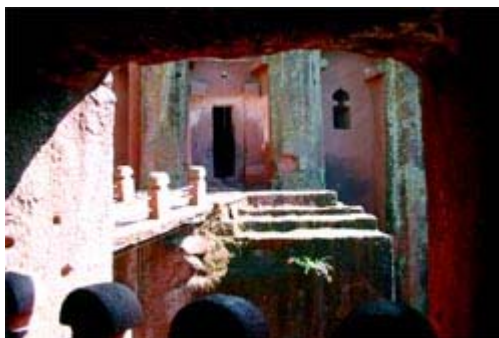
We left San Francisco toward the end of October 2003, bound initially for Frankfurt. We continued on to Cairo and then to Addis Ababa, our final destination. There, Jason promptly met us and delivered us to the Saudi-built Addis Ababa Sheraton (which simply has to be seen to be believed).



**This cruciform church is carved from a huge granite boulder and is accessed by carved stone steps that descend 70 or 80 feet to entry level.**

Jason picked us up early the next morning, and we began our four-hour drive to the Arsi Mountains/Munessa concession. As we drove, we got to know him a bit better. We quickly realized he would be an excellent and perceptive guide and a fine and cheerful companion. We also discovered that Jason was a trained wildlife biologist and avid photographer (who we hoped would help Pam take some truly stunning photos).

Shortly after midday, we arrived at the tented camp that would be our base for both mountain nyala and Menelik bushbuck, also uniquely indigenous to Ethiopia. The camp consisted of four tents set in a stand of pine and eucalyptus



trees. Our tent was clean and neat, with roll-up canvas windows, comfortable cots and a bath area directly behind. The dining and cook tents were nearby, along with Jason's sleeping quarters. A large campfire was centrally located. The camp's overall quality appeared excellent and, due to the piney mountain environment, it reminded me a good deal of a typical North American elk camp.

### **The First Curl**

Mountain nyala are both nocturnal and diurnal, so our hunting days began at 4:15 a.m. After a quick breakfast, we would drive to a point one or two miles from that day's glassing point and walk silently up the mountain in the dark. Flashlights were essential until the first glimmer of dawn allowed us to put them away.

After arriving at our day's glassing point, which often overlooked a salt lick, Jason would send scouts out along all the adjacent ridgelines to check any likely areas. We often spotted small groups of females, along with an occasional young bull or two. However, they were nothing to really throw a stalk on.

Because all the game was bedded down by 11 o'clock or so, we always returned to base, enjoyed a leisurely lunch and then went back out in the afternoon. The likelihood of stumbling upon a big nyala in the waning afternoon was not great, so our afternoon emphasis centered on Menelik bushbuck (unfortunately, we passed up a dandy on the first day).

On the sixth day, we decided to try a slightly different area and left camp very early. We hunted parallel to a beautiful little stream that danced artfully over granite boulders. Our trail followed the stream.

We were making a small turn when Jason urgently whispered, "Down!"

We instantly knelt down in the foliage while Jason and the trackers peered intently up a slope. I, too, spotted the big-horned male nyala as he, in turn, observed us from behind a large tree. I couldn't tell how big he was because he was staring straight at me. In fact, all I could really make out was the first curl.

Jason whispered, "Get ready!" I quickly set up my shooting sticks, prepared for the shot, aimed and squeezed the trigger.

One of the few problems with a .340 Weatherby is that between the recoil and muzzle blast, you lose your target for a fraction of a second. I cranked another .340 into the chamber and caught sight of the nyala, bolting along the slope and already 150 yards away. He suddenly disappeared.

"He's down!" Jason yelled.

I joined the jubilant crowd at the creek bottom, where the bull nyala had fallen into 12 inches of ice-cold water. Jason and the trackers were beside themselves with satisfaction. I didn't know how big an nyala had to be to elicit this sort of wild rejoicing, but I had a feeling it must be really, really big.

And he was. I looked at his wonderful, lyre-shaped horns and realized they were bigger than anything I'd ever seen. At 38 inches, they were among the largest taken in all of Ethiopia in many a year.

### **Into the Omo**

After skinning the nyala, the trackers arranged for a mule to pack out the meat. We hiked the couple of miles back down the trail to the Land Cruiser and were back at camp by noontime. We hoped some of our monumental luck would hang around while we hunted bushbuck. We hiked and hiked – to no avail.

Jason informed us that the charter aircraft for Omo was available only at certain times. As a result, we decided to take advantage of an aircraft availability and broke camp. We could always return to Munessa for bushbuck at a later time.

We returned to Addis Ababa and then flew out to the Omo Valley via a chartered Caravan. The flight began over the farmland surrounding Addis, but the checkerboard topography soon gave way to rugged, mountainous country. Slowly, the terrain flattened, and then the wide, green Omo Valley, a World Heritage site, materialized. It is on the Kenyan border and is reminiscent of a location from Out of Africa – absolutely beautiful.

Ethiopian Rift Valley Safaris' Omo Valley camp is permanent and comprises concrete bungalows with en suite baths, thatched roofs, well-tended walkways, a veranda that overlooks the roiling, rushing Omo River, and a dining hall. The site is well-shaded because the Omo can be unbearably hot.

The Omo is famed for its variety of antelope, including lesser kudu, northern Grant gazelle, gerenuk and tiang (as well as buffalo in some areas). Lesser kudu are usually hunted in the foothills, with spotting accomplished from ridges. They are creatures of heavy cover, but we were informed that a few were seen in the riverine brush adjacent to camp. We decided to cruise the brushy areas, even though the odds of spotting kudu weren't good. We rolled along through the brush or hiked along old logging roads.

Lesser kudu are notoriously difficult. When we finally located one, I made an impossibly quick shot through a screen of thornbush. The .340 was true, however, and I downed the kudu bull of my fondest dreams. He was a heavy, old battler with worn-down tips, torn ears and scars on his flanks. At 30 inches, he wasn't the biggest lesser kudu in the books, but oh, boy did he have character!

We interspersed our Omo adventure with some great fishing in a lake near camp. The Nile perch weren't biting, but big, ugly African catfish were. The boat bottom was soon writhing and wriggling with dozens of indignant, struggling catfish. Jason vainly tried to put them in a closed area under the seat, but there were simply too many fish. Laughing, we kept a few for a tasty, crispy catfish-fry dinner and gave the rest to the villagers.

We took wonderful specimens of northern Grant gazelle and Guenther dik-dik and photographed gerenuk and endless tiang. We were also able to get striking pictures as unseasonable rains cooled and cleaned the landscape, bringing its colors into sharp contrast.

We returned to Addis Ababa after a full week in the Omo and then drove back to the Munessa concession for the elusive and notably uncooperative Menelik bushbuck. It is found only in Ethiopia and is much darker than other bushbucks. This time, luck was on our side. We got a dandy, gold-medal specimen with a snap shot on the first afternoon.

Counting zeroing-in shots, I fired my trusty .340 Weatherby nine times during this trip, while Pam took more than 5,000 digital images. I began to wonder who had gotten the better deal. In fact, it would be difficult to overstate just how well this hunt had gone –



**The Omo Valley is a World Heritage site. The tall, chimney-like structure is a huge termite mound.**



**This is one of the finest mountain nyalas taken in Ethiopia in many a year.**



**A truly stunning old lesser kudu. Note its brightly striped coat and heavy horns – a fine trophy.**



**The color of the mountain nyala is**

after all, each hunt can't be the "best." Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine a more enjoyable trip than our trip to Ethiopia. .

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