

# **Kenya's "Jade Sea": The Road to Lake Turkana**

Those who have driven to northern Kenya will most likely agree that the region feels completely set apart from areas south of the Equator line.

North of Archer's Post - the nearest town to Samburu National Reserve - the fertile hills of the highlands dissolve into semi-arid desert framed by distant mountains. Sacred Mount Ololokwe looms majestically over the tarmac road, its façade varnished with the glaze of sunlight.

The vast terrain before us is Samburu land, a seemingly never-ending wilderness forgotten by time, where ancient folklore, coming-of-age ceremonies, and traditional pastoralism, continue to exist in semi-isolation from the modern world.

The region is currently in the midst of male circumcision ceremonies, which take place every fifteen years or so and demarcate the transition from childhood into a fifteen-year period of warriorhood.

We edge further into the backcountry, the Matthews Range to our west, before

leaving the highway at Laisamis and continuing off-track towards the Ndoto mountains and Losai National Reserve.

I count one other vehicle along the route during four hours of driving, and it's a jazzed-up piki-piki (motorcycle) blaring Bongo Flava. Otherwise, the journey is ingrained with a startling sense of remoteness and infinitude.

Located at the foot of Mount Poi, Ngurunit is the first night's stop – a typical Samburu village where children herd goats on a dry *lugga* (riverbed) and dusk brings the sound of camel bells and

distant chatter. The locals explain that Safaricom (one of Kenya's leading mobile network operators) is planning to erect a mast in the village to enable mobile network coverage. For now, one should expect to completely disconnect.

The next stop on our route is South Horr - a sleepy village oasis, with clusters of palms and brightly coloured flowering trees, two hours south of Lake Turkana.

For those arriving by road and stopping overnight, Desert Rose Lodge is a welcome break to the journey in a spectacular location (we also arrange

scenic lunch stops here for those who embark on one of our northern heli-safaris).

Here, we are right on the border between Samburu and Marsabit counties, the latter being the largest of Kenya's constituencies, bordered to the north by Ethiopia, Turkana to the west, and a huge chunk of its central region enveloped by the immense Chalbi Desert.

The region is a confluence of Samburu, Rendille, Pokot, Gabbra, Turkana, Borana cultures, and reaching Lake

Turkana will acquaint us with Kenya's smallest ethnic group, the El Molo, who live between the Kulal Mountain and El Molo bay. Culturally, linguistically and demographically, it is an endlessly varied and fascinating region to visit.

We push on through from South Horr until almost all trace of life vanishes from sight, the heat intensifies, and the landscape turns to granite-coloured volcanic rock.

Out of nowhere, the first wind turbines appear in the distance, signalling our approach to the colossal Lake Turkana

Wind Power farm – the largest of its kind in Africa, powered by the gusty desert winds, which whip through the region with astounding fortitude. A stony-faced guard quizzes us at the security barrier and with an ambivalent nod allows us through.

With the 365 turbines now behind us, the road returns to a rockier, ungraded version of its former self, which obliges us to slow down and allow the splendour of Lake Turkana to ascend into view.

When something has the alias “Jade Sea”, it naturally inspires curiosity and

the expectation of beauty. Yet, it doesn't quite prepare us for the first sighting of the world's largest permanent desert lake with its ever-changing colours, from jade to azure, turquoise to midnight blue.

The movement of the water, with the hot, howling desert wind, reminds us that life exists in all places, even the driest, rockiest of terrains.

Indeed, we know that life has been here since the beginning of time since some of the earliest remains of hominids have



been discovered in the Turkana basin, also known as “the cradle of mankind”.

On the eastern side of the lake, in the area called Koobi Fora, Richard Leakey led an expedition team in 1967, which uncovered tools and fossils belonging to our earliest ancestors, including the skull of a *Homo habilis* believed to be 2.5 million years old.

Leakey has commissioned plans for “Ngaren: Museum of Humankind”, the first center completely dedicated to the archaeological discoveries of the region.

The contemporary, monolithic design has been disclosed by Studio Libeskind - the architects who redesigned the New York City World Trade Center - and the museum is expected to open in 2024.

For now, we are happy to make do with the unassuming Desert Museum, which displays a variety of photographs and cultural artefacts in a homestead-style building, just outside Loiyangalani (meaning "place of many trees").

With its elevated position and spectacular, panoramic backdrop of the Jade Sea, this is an idyllic spot to drive

out to in the late afternoon in time for sunset.

Finally, we have reached our destination and it feels strangely like the beginnings and the ends of the earth.

The journey by road is not for the faint-hearted and temperatures can reach close to 50 degrees Celsius at certain times of year.

I wonder (on repeat) how anything can survive in such extreme temperatures and harsh terrain for any length of time. Yet, humans aside, Lake Turkana has a

large population of Nile crocodiles, is the only place in the world where you'll find the beautiful Mount Kulal chameleon and is one of the only parts of Kenya where softshell turtles exist.

There is a strength and resilience here - a stark, dramatic stateliness which leaves a resounding impression. It should be thought of as the holy grail of Kenyan road trips - difficult to reach, but the end reward is the crowning jewel of Kenya's Great Rift Valley lakes.