



Tamed by Turkana

No matter how tough you think you are, you'll be humbled by Kenya's Lake Turkana: a windswept desert lake full of crocodiles. **Nick Dall** couldn't wait to go there.

When my family decided to go on holiday to Kenya, I could think of only one thing. Forget the Maasai Mara and the beaches of Mombasa, I yearned only for Lake Turkana. I knew my conservative parents would never include it on our itinerary, but I was able to convince my younger brother Alex to join me on my mission.

Why Turkana? A few years before, I'd seen a photo in a fly-fishing magazine of a 50 kg Nile perch that had been pulled from that remote, salty place. Unlike the author of that article, however, who had flown to a private lodge kitted out with ski-boats and professional guides, Alex and I would fish Turkana the old-fashioned way.

We dispatched with the family formalities in the more touristy parts of Kenya, then caught a bus from Nairobi to the dust-bowl town of Maralal, 200 km south of the lake. In Maralal we took a

room in a so-called hotel. One of the filthy walls was decorated with a government poster of a guy being bitten on the toe by a crocodile. "Resist Corruption", it urged.

We met a guy called Tony Blair in a bar who claimed he could arrange a truck to the lake. "Fifty dollars each," Tony said. "Be at the market at 4 am."

We woke at 3.30 am to find that the hotel's askari had gone AWOL with the key to the front gate in his pocket. Tony Blair tried to negotiate a way out for us, but even a man of his political nous couldn't get around the heavy-duty Tri-Circle padlock. We watched from behind iron bars, distraught, as our truck rumbled off towards Turkana.

At 9 am, by which time we'd managed to check out, a red bakkie came through town. A hundred dollars did the trick and soon we were sitting on the back surveying the hilly scrub of north-western Kenya. Bandit country, a place where the man with

the biggest gun prevails. Teenage goatherds carried AK 47s across their shoulders, singing as they guided their flocks to greener pastures.

We stopped in Baragoi for lunch. "What's on the menu?" I asked.

"Anything your heart desires," said the smiling waiter.

"A sandwich?"

"No, we don't have that."

"Eggs?"

"Not today, sorry." An even bigger smile. "Does your heart desire stew with chapatti?"

The stew was good, the chapatti was excellent, and the tea – stirred with a smouldering stick from the fire – was revolting.

Scrubland gradually faded to something more arid. The road was carved from rock. The wind was infernal. Without warning we summited the escarpment and the jade lake was laid out in front of us. I've never been quite so astounded by a view. Reddish-black basalt footballs littered the sides of the bowl that contained the lake; shimmering, overexposed in the equatorial sun.

When the road met the lakeshore we tapped on the window of the cab and asked the driver to stop. "You don't go Loiyangalani?" he asked.

"No." I showed him my fishing rods. "Here is perfect."

We jumped off and he just laughed. "Good lucky!" he shouted as he drove off.

We found a little dip about 100 m from the shore, which would have to pass as "flat" and "protected". The roaring wind was persistent and we struggled to pitch our tent. We tied guy ropes around rocks and wedged them into crevices.

We also had to cook. With no stove, this meant lighting a fire. After an hour we had gathered enough firewood to boil rice, but in the wind we were unable to light a match, let alone start a fire. Just as things were starting to get desperate a young boy appeared. He took the matches without fuss and got a blaze going. We gave him some chewing tobacco (brought for this very purpose), which he balled in his cheek. Then he disappeared. Rice and mayonnaise for dinner is better than just plain mayonnaise.

At some point in the night our tent gave way. The roof caved in and we slept with nylon in our faces. When the sun came up we saw that the poles weren't damaged, they'd just come apart. We would live to camp another day.

The wind was too strong to fly-fish so we hurled heavy Rapalas into the lake and cranked them back with the coffee-grinder reels I usually use for galjoen fishing. It was hard, unrewarding work.

And then the wind stopped. It didn't get lighter or change direction, it just stopped. I got out my fly rod and waded into the lake. The 22 000 crocodiles

would just have to keep to themselves. I caught loads of small tiger fish, but still no Nile perch. After about four hours of calm the wind came back, from the opposite direction, but just as strong.

We hiked closer to Loiyangalani and made camp in another rocky nook. Out of nowhere another kid arrived. He looked at our fishing tackle and pointed to an unremarkable section of lakeshore. We gave him chewing tobacco and obeyed. Soon enough I had my first Nile perch. It was by no means a monster, but it was a Nile perch. Alex caught some kind of bream, which we ate for supper. Things were looking up.

The routine continued for a few more days: excruciating nights of backache and wind; tranquil doldrums of respite at noon; hot, windblown, scratchy hiking every afternoon; stodgy rice and stodgier fish for dinner, washed down with barely potable alkaline water from the lake that softens your bones if you drink too much.

On about day five we made it to Loiyangalani. We checked into a campsite with a swimming pool and bought a stash of beer and some meat. The swimming pool turned out to be empty, but we insisted it be filled. The water gushed from a thick PVC tube diverted from a nearby hot spring, and we sat in the deep end drinking our beers as the bathwater filled around us.

From Loiyangalani we chartered a fishing boat to South Island. We'd still only caught one Nile perch and we were sure that the island, with its steep drop-offs and limited fishing pressure, would fix this. The boat's sails were a patchwork of USAID maize bags and its hull leaked: Three of the five crew members' only job was to bail water.

There was to be no more Nile perch, but I'm glad we went to the island. The two nights spent camping on the beach were the most pleasant of our trip. The grassy slopes glistened in the light of the full moon and the fish and rice prepared by the fisherman was well-seasoned and not at all stodgy. The wind even seemed to blow a bit less.

We scored a lift back to Maralal almost as soon as we docked in Loiyangalani's muddy port. The driver – an Indian merchant – didn't want payment, but he did insist that we sit upfront with him, where he played a dance remix of ABBA on repeat.

Rumours of bandits forced us to stop in Baragoi for the night, but finally we made it back to Maralal. Almost immediately we both contracted some strange viral fever which rendered us shivering and smattered in boils. Needless to say, the long drive back to Nairobi and the subsequent flight home were ordeals I'd prefer not to think about.

Now, years later, the question must be asked: Did one 5 kg Nile perch warrant all that effort? Hell yeah.

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