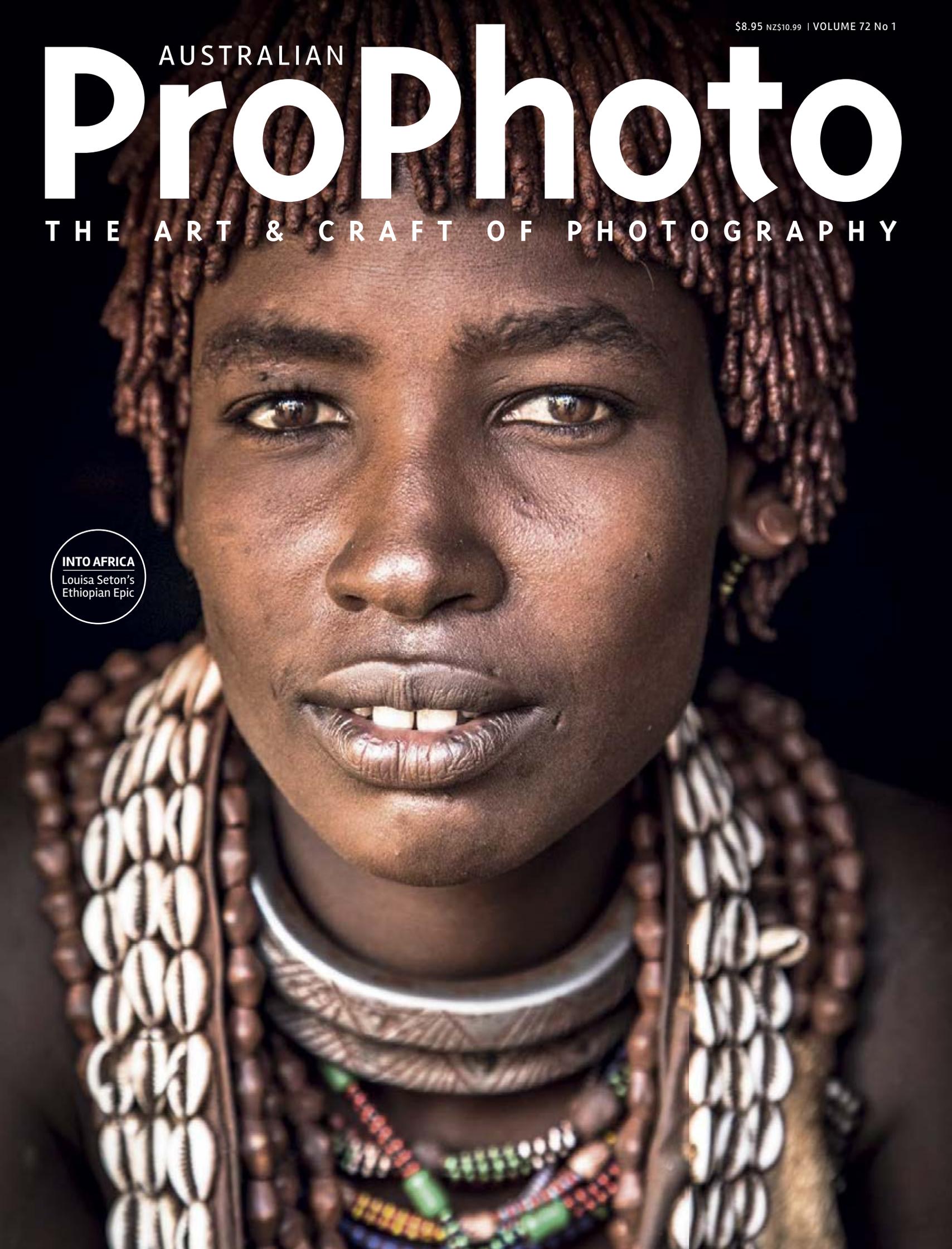


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INTO AFRICA
Louisa Seton's
Ethiopian Epic

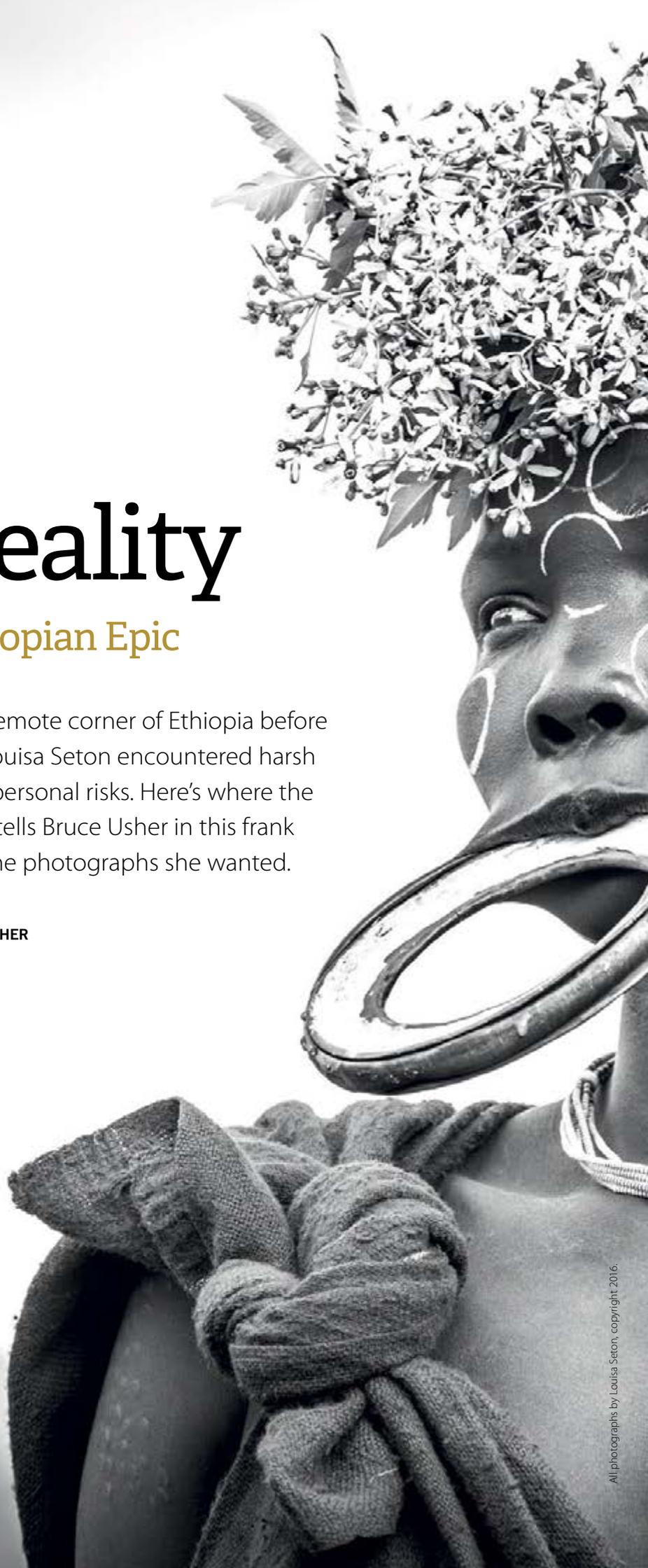


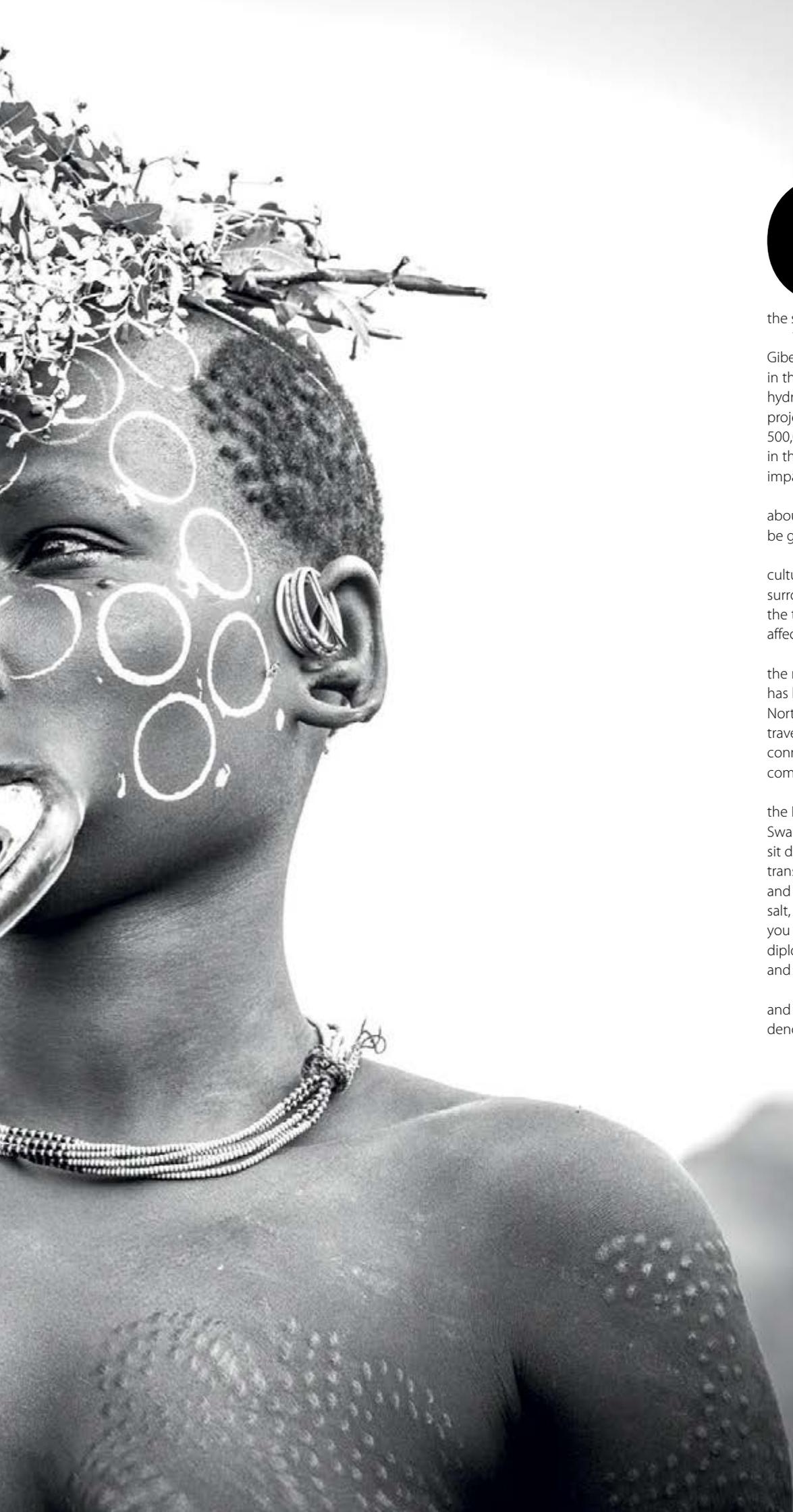
Facing Reality

Louisa Seton's Ethiopian Epic

Determined to photograph tribes living in a remote corner of Ethiopia before a dam project changed their lives for ever, Louisa Seton encountered harsh realities and, on several occasions, extreme personal risks. Here's where the passion for an idea is sorely tested. As she tells Bruce Usher in this frank interview, Louisa had to dig deep to get the photographs she wanted.

INTERVIEW BY BRUCE USHER





Growing up in Kenya, Louisa Seton has become passionate about tribal cultures. She recently returned from a “heart felt” journey, photographing tribal groups of the remote Omo Valley in the south west corner of Ethiopia.

The driving force behind this project is the Gibe III dam that is expected to be completely filled in the next two years and create vast amounts of hydro-electrical power for Ethiopia. However, the project will also profoundly affect the lives of over 500,000 indigenous tribal people who are living in the Omo Valley. The social and environmental impact is a subject of huge controversy.

Louisa heard about the hydro-electric project about five years ago and knew the tribes would be greatly impacted.

“I’ve always had an avid interest in the tribal cultures since I was a child, having grown up surrounded by them. I knew I had to photograph the tribes of the Omo before changes started to affect their culture and traditional way of life.”

Louisa says her Ethiopian trip was one of the most challenging adventures of her life. She has been photographing the tribal cultures of Northern Kenya for over ten years and often travels with her bush pilot father. Through local connections, she was able to access villages completely off the beaten track.

“I’ve always managed to find a local fixer in the Kenyan tribal regions who speaks English, Swahili and the tribal language. It’s far easier to sit down and speak to a village chief with your translator before taking photographs. It’s polite and often small tips of money and gifts – like salt, rice and razor blades – are exchanged before you can have free reign and take shots. It’s more diplomatic, and then the chief talks to his village and there are no disputes.”

In Ethiopia, though, it was completely different and Louisa had to take wads of cash in small denominations. The official language is Amharic.

English is hardly spoken and it's extremely hard to get around unless you have a translator, especially in the tribal lands. "They all wanted money in exchange for photos," she explains, "and it's near impossible to take any shots without negotiating the cash exchange first. Extremely tricky, when you have many people to go through, rather than one village chief. The lower Omo is the more popular tourist route due to its accessibility and the whole photo exchange for money has become a well-known means of earning easy cash from tourists. A fair enough trade if you consider the uniqueness of the subject matter."

The Upper Omo Valley, Ethiopia

Louisa found her guide – a laid-back, dreadlocked Ethiopian called Golden – via the recommendation of another photographer. She flew in from Nairobi and met him in Addis Ababa. He worked with an Ethiopian driver called Dennison. He was to guide her to the Upper Omo Valley to the least-photographed Suri tribe, then head down into the Lower Omo.

"Very few people go to the Upper Omo unless they're professional photographers or anthropologists. Because it's so hard to get to, I knew I had to go there."

It was a three-day drive to the upper Omo. On the second night Louisa sat down with Golden to go through the schedule. She realised he was completely disorganised. He didn't even have a map.

"Instinctively I knew I had to be very intuitive if I was going to get through in one piece. Having grown up in Africa, I knew things don't often run smoothly. People have a different mindset and time schedule."

Luckily, Louisa met an English-speaking Ethiopian man in a small town on route to the Omo who gave her a map. She didn't realise at the time, but that map was gold. During this interview, Louisa unravels the almost one-metre-square map on the lounge room floor of her Sydney apartment and it all comes into perspective as I see her pen marks and names.

Negotiations

"After three days we arrived in Kibish, on the South Sudan border, where there was a small Suri tribe village. We stayed there because it was supposed to have a military presence. But it wasn't exactly a huge military presence, and I realised it wasn't the safest place to be staying. However, it was the only place we could camp where there was some form of law enforcement in the area.

"We paid a tribal elder to put our tents on his land and then hired a scout with an AK47 to guard our belongings. My equipment (two D-SLR bodies, three lenses and a small flash plus sail cloth for the back ground) was always in the vehicle. It was at this point that I realised Golden didn't have all the camping gear he had promised. We literally had two tents, two old sleeping bags, no gaslights or a gas stove. I'd asked him if I needed to bring

anything with me and he'd assured me he had it all. It turned out I was the only one with a torch, a map and a satellite navigation system. I understood then that Golden's reliability was questionable. Later, we walked to the Suri village to get the feel of the place and that's when I realised that sorghum beer is a huge part of daily Suri tribal life. It is locally brewed, and both men and women drink it in vast quantities.

"Walking round the village was interesting. We sat at a hut and watched a local woman make her brew. My guide then offered the scout with the AK47 some sorghum beer. Silently, I thought that wasn't a clever move. Why would Golden offer the only guy with a gun protecting us a beverage that gets the locals drunk? Later we found the scout completely comatose by our tents. Warning bells were starting to go off."

After a meal of spicy meat and *injera* (a sourdough-risen flat bread), they headed back to camp. In her tent Louisa was excited – and not quite believing that she was about to fulfil her dream at six the next morning – when she heard their vehicle drive away.

"I headed out into the darkness to ask Golden what was happening. With our scout passed-out, I didn't feel comfortable about not having our vehicle close by. It turned out Dennison had driven to the village to sleep. I felt incredibly vulnerable and told Golden that the vehicle wasn't allowed out of my sight for the duration of the trip. I then went back to bed with every single piece of clothing on. It was a sleepless night.



The romantic vision of being able to go into a village and take photos of beautiful village people... well, it doesn't really work like that.

"We arrived at the Suri village of Naregeer, 30 minutes up in the hills from Kibish at sunrise. Negotiations began as soon as we arrived. I had wads of cash that I was trying to keep hidden and I would have liked to calmly walk around the village and figure out my moves, but it didn't seem to work like that. I knew we had limited time – maybe two hours max before arguments about payment would break out. The Suri are some of the most aggressive people I've ever had to negotiate with."

It was quite a process to explain what she was trying to do photographically.

"They wanted money for every click," Louisa recalls. "It was hard for the guide to tell them it wasn't the clicks; it was about getting the right photo. A lot of stuff was lost in translation."

Just Business

"You're trying to capture their character," Louisa explains. "You're miming, trying get them to laugh, keep it fun. The lip plates were amazing."

One of the most famous traditions of the Surma (the collective term for the Mursi and Suri tribes) is the clay lip plates inserted into their lower lip. This practice happens when women reach marriageable age. The two lower teeth are knocked out – usually by a rock – and a slit made in their lower lip in which a small wooden plug is inserted. This plug is replaced by a larger one until the lip is stretched enough to hold a clay plate. It is both for beautification and for social status. The larger the lip plate, the bigger the dowry price. The dowry price is usually about 38 cows and an AK47.

"The kids were great... more natural. In the end, the easiest way to photograph the adults was to create a small studio. It kept the background clean and easier to control. It was a stressful process trying to get the portraits. Looking back on these photos, I don't know how I managed to do it. We were in a field of sorghum, trying to get the best location without lots of bush in the backdrop. I had an old woman getting angry with me because, unbeknown to me, I was stepping on her crop. I paid her for her trouble. It was a case of constant ongoing negotiations. The individual payments are only 50 cents to a dollar, but they all add up to a couple of hundred dollars for each village. On top of the individual payments, there is a village fee, a fee for the village translator, and for another person to keep the peace... it's just business.

"The romantic vision of being able to go into a village and take photos of beautiful village people... well, it doesn't really work like that."

The Lower Omo Valley

Louisa decided to go to the Lower Omo Valley as it was safer and the people were more used to being photographed. There were also more villages and a few little towns, plus more vehicles.

There was a short cut from the upper to the lower Omo that

she thought they would try. It would get them there in a day and they had plenty of water. Louisa was given a sat-nav to send co-ordinates to her contact in Addis. They had had signals until Kibish, but they were now off the grid. They crossed a large, rain-engorged river, then all of a sudden they were stuck in the mud on the track. They spent eight hours trying to dig the vehicle out, but it was useless in the thick sticky, black cotton soil. They could see across to South Sudan and were surrounded by thick bush.

At nightfall it started to pour. Louisa and Golden shared a tent while Dennison slept in the vehicle half-submerged in the thick mud. After a sleepless night, Louisa woke surrounded by an internal moat and disheartened to see the

■ The large bottom lip plate is both for beautification and for social status. The larger the lip plate, the bigger the dowry price.



downpour had now completely submerged the vehicle.

"They didn't have a radio... which blew me away. They're a tour company so you presume they are equipped for emergencies. You get to that desperate situation in life when you know you're fucked! No one knew where we were. Our only solution was to walk, but we had no weapons and no communications. We each had about three or four litres of water and a couple of bananas."

Louisa calculated that they had driven 50 kilometres from Kibish so had around 35 kilometres to walk... which she thought could take a day. At this stage she knew that she had to abandon all her equipment.

"It simply didn't matter, it was too heavy to carry. It's surprising how much clarity you gain in a situation of survival. My mind was working very logically. I wasn't panicking, I was trying to figure out the best move to get to safety."

She took her passport and as much cash as possible, mosquito repellent, sun-block and her hat. They started to walk and, every five paces, a thick wedge of mud would build up on her trainers which she had to kick off. "It was like being on a military assault course," she recalls.

They saw lion and buffalo footprints, and being close to South Sudan, there was also a risk of running into militia.

which they knew their vehicle wouldn't get through. Finally, they got to a section that had dried out and, shortly after, Louisa heard some rumbling.

"It sounded like thunder. I stood still for a while and listened, as was Golden further up the track. Was it a lorry? I knew we were both thinking the same thing. Was it coming towards us or going away from us? There's hope, but you're still not sure if you're going to be found. I didn't care who was driving the truck. I knew I couldn't walk much further, I was cramping up.

It was indeed a lorry and the scene that greeted the driver must have looked quite surreal – a black, dread-locked Ethiopian and a mud-spattered white girl wandering around in the middle of nowhere.

In the truck were a bunch of Ethiopian road-builders accompanied by some Chinese in 4WDs. Golden organised a ride with the Ethiopians to their camp which was 15 kilometres away. They had tractors and road diggers back at the camp.

"They could rescue our vehicle," explains Louisa. "So I ran up to one of the Chinese guys in a 4x4 and was miming, please can you help? They had a phone, but just rolled the window up and drove away. I was left standing there in the dust, thinking, what just happened? Why won't they help us? It was the most bizarre situation."

They arrived exhausted to find a few tin huts situated on a dirt road. The only place they could stay was a *shebeen*, a bar and semi-whorehouse.

"It's not somewhere that you would ever want to be!" says Louisa.

The next day they tried to organise a search party to rescue the stranded Dennison, but no one would send a vehicle so, in the end, they organised three guys on motorbikes to go out and look for him. This trio returned at the end of the day, having had no success finding him or the vehicle.

"Three things could have happened," suggests Louisa. "They didn't go far enough. They didn't go at all and instead just took the money. Or the vehicle and Dennison had been taken by militia."

Then Golden disappeared for a couple of hours and Louisa was on her own so she decided it was actually safer to stay inside the *shebeen* compound.

"I was scared now and I really didn't want people to know that a white girl was shackled up alone in the *shebeen*."

Eventually Golden returned, "having had a melt-down". He had been chewing *chat* all day and drinking. Louisa knew he was worried, but needed him to remain calm and clear headed.

"You have to pull yourself together," she told him. "We have a guy out there that needs us to be completely clear. You're the only one who speaks Amharic and English. If we need to talk ourselves out of a situation you need to be sober."

That night she barricaded herself into her room, but to further test her resolve there was a generator outside her room blasting music into the bar where, at some point, a fight broke out. Louisa became even more frightened that someone was going to get in. She struggled to stay calm, but "...intuitively I was really on-edge. I was suspicious of the motorbike guys. I didn't trust anyone."

The following morning, although sleep-deprived from the previous four nights and in the same clothes she had now worn for four days, Louisa remembers playing in the courtyard with some little kids. Then one of them ran up gave her a big hug.

"I literally lost it and burst into tears. From then on it was like I had



The kids were great... more natural. In the end, the easiest way to photograph the adults was to create a small studio. It kept the background clean and easier to control.

"I had to keep telling myself how grateful I was for having enough water or for having a hat on my head... little things like that to stop me losing it!"

After walking throughout hilly areas for hours in the mud, Louisa says she was becoming exhausted. They hadn't seen any smoke which might signal a village, and they had been through ravines and rivers

Back On Track

"If the road-builders hadn't picked us up, I don't know where we would have been. Kangatan – the village we were heading for – was another 60 kilometres away.

"After having no luck trying to get help from the Chinese, one of the Ethiopian truck drivers said he was driving to Kangatan and could take us on."



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let all my fears and emotions out, because there was no one to talk to, the only thing I could do was write.

They found the District Commissioner of the town and luckily he spoke English. Louisa begged, cried and threatened him, including saying she would report him to the British embassy if he didn't help.

"There's a guy out there who possibly has run out of water and is going to die. You need to get someone out there!" she pleaded.



"I had to keep telling myself how grateful I was for having enough water or for having a hat on my head... little things like that to stop me losing it!"

She pulled everything out and eventually he agreed to send a search vehicle. A truck and ten men were paid – everything Louisa had left except a bit for emergencies – and dispatched. Shortly afterwards, Golden received a phone call from Dennison. They were elated that he was alive, but the bad news was that it was going to take him three days driving on good roads to get to them.

Knowing that Dennison was now out of danger, Louisa decided she had to leave Kangatan. It was just too risky for her to stay another night in the *shebeen*.

"There's another town on that map that looks bigger, called Jinka," she explained to Golden, "I'm going there. You can come or stay, but tell Dennison that he has to meet me there."

Louisa and Golden hitched a lift with the lorry driver who delivers soft drinks, but as they were leaving town, the police stopped them at a bridge. They wouldn't let them leave because they wanted them to wait for the rescue party to come back so they could give them more money.

"We said, 'We've paid everyone! Why do you need more money?' I was thinking, I just have to get out of here now!"

The police began harassing Golden and still wouldn't let him go, so Louisa marched off to see the District Commissioner once again. "You have to let us leave," she told him. "We're free citizens. We've paid the men for the rescue and we've had word that our guy is safe."

The commissioner called off the local police and, five hours later, Louisa and Golden arrived in Jinka.

Stressed

"We stayed in another shit hole," she comments, "but it was a grade up and I had my first shower in six days. I managed to call my Dad and he told me to cut my losses and get the hell out of there. However, the morning that Dennison rejoined them, they all headed off in the direction of another tribe, even though her father's words were still ringing in her ears. "There's no way I would have gone through all that, and then not photograph another tribe," she says.

They ended up photographing the Murci tribe in the hills of the Margo national park.

"Again, they aren't the friendliest of people," she notes, but Louisa still managed to get the pictures that she wanted. This involved the same negotiating process as with the Suri and, again, the photography wasn't easy.

"You end up very stressed and, just because you've photographed them, doesn't mean they want to be photographed. It's really weird... I just know what to do to get the job done." But, she admits, by now her heart wasn't in it anymore.

"I think, in the end, I was so upset and traumatised. I would have fought for these people's cause, but I found that in the greater scheme of things, they didn't give a shit!"

Before she left Ethiopia though, there was one more tribe to photograph in the lower Omo region, the Hamar.

"The Suri and the Murci are hardcore and quite primitive," Louisa observes, "but the Hamar are more gentle and used to more tourists coming through. They're incredibly good-looking, happier and always giggling."

The Hamar re-kindled Louisa's "faith and joy in what I was doing there". After photographing a few villages, she stayed one more night and then headed off on a long, two-day drive back to Addis.

Eight months later, Louisa now looks back and wonders, "How on earth did that unfold? It seems like a lifetime away now."

Would she do it again? "Maybe..." is the short answer. **QP**



To see more of Louisa Seton's photography visit www.Louisaseton.com.au



