



Gilbert's 8' x 10' tent is a bohemian paradise—with a bed, an antique Swahili lantern and a vintage carpet that fashions a colorful veranda for morning coffee.



Gilbert hitches a ride in a friend's Land Cruiser in the Great Rift Valley.



Portraits of warriors with lion headdresses fill the pages of Gilbert's first book, *Broken Spears: A Maasai Journey*.



A Pentax camera hangs by the door on the back of a low Afghan chair, allowing Gilbert quick access to equipment.

the life nomadic

Photographer Liz Gilbert gave up flak jackets to lead an itinerant existence while chronicling ancient tribal customs in the Cradle of Mankind. But her canvas tent is more than a temporary shelter—it's a well-appointed haven.

photographs by PAUL COSTELLO produced by SARA RUFFIN COSTELLO
text by ALEXANDRA POLIER

AFTER A DECADE COVERING WARS in Africa as a news photographer for *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Life*, sleeping on blown-out bathroom floors, Gilbert decided to turn her lens on the continent's rich and vanishing heritage and trade bomb shelters for a more romantic setting. She has spent the past 10 years documenting tribal ceremonies in the furthest reaches of Africa, from the Danakil Desert to the Pygmy-populated forests of Congo—all from the sanctuary of an old-fashioned canvas tent, where she resides six months of the year (the rest she splits between Nairobi and New York City.) In light of the postelection violence in Kenya, it seems more worthy than ever to commemorate traditional cultures in this rapidly modernizing country—and in Africa at large. Before she hits the open road with her translator, Gilbert packs her four-wheel-drive with necessities: Besides an A-frame walk-in tent, she brings a folding bed and a nylon-mesh mosquito net. She also totes luxuries—ethnic carpets, a coffee press, an iPod—that transform each campsite into a charmed oasis. "With so much time spent on the road, I felt it was important to create a beautiful camp that felt a little like home," Gilbert says.

BOOK "Broken Spears: A Maasai Journey" \$14.99 amazon.com

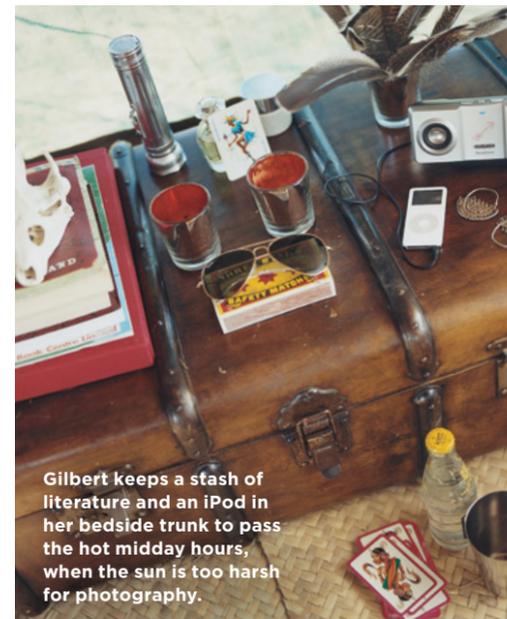
opposite page: **TENT** (similar to shown) Custom from \$3,950 rajtents.com for information
CHAIR (similar to shown) Leather "Salon" \$655 drake.net
MOSQUITO NET (similar to shown) Cotton \$87.99 shopwildthings.com
HURRICANE LANTERNS (similar to shown) Dietz \$29.99 each, cabelas.com
RUG (similar to shown) 5' x 10' vintage Caucasian Kazak \$6,000 ABC Carpet & Home (212) 473-3000



Careful to conserve resources, Gilbert sticks to a straightforward morning routine with a canvas washbasin and a mirror hung from a tree.

daily rituals

While Gilbert's life seems lifted from the pages of *National Geographic*, staying in far-flung locations for weeks at a time can be challenging. On short field trips, the seasoned photographer travels light, with a simple pup tent and a sleeping bag, but for longer safaris, she has a more elaborate setup. Her vintage trunk is loaded with tableware, flashlights and the weathered leather journal she carries everywhere. Breakfast is enjoyed at sunrise, and after a day documenting ceremonies and interviewing elders about local histories, she returns to her tent and brews a pot of tea from the Kenyan highlands to share with area tribesmen. "When traveling, I want to immerse myself in African life and the people I am photographing," she says.



Gilbert keeps a stash of literature and an iPod in her bedside trunk to pass the hot midday hours, when the sun is too harsh for photography.

BLANKET (similar to shown, below) Wool "Chevron" \$100 pendleton-usa.com



Even in the bush, teatime is a must—hence, this indestructible local-supermarket kettle and plenty of bottled water.



A cooler has all the fixings for a special-occasion gin and tonic.

spontaneous entertaining

At home in Karen (a Nairobi suburb named after Karen Blixen, of *Out of Africa* fame), evenings tend to involve a mix of artists, writers, conservationists and archaeologists. Gilbert and her fiancé, Anthony Russell, designer and builder of Shompole Lodge, East Africa's most eco-friendly luxury-safari destination, cook steaks and toss salads from their garden. When in remote savannas, she alters her custom. She unpacks a folding table and chairs as well as a picnic set, and strings lanterns from an acacia tree while her translator lights a fire. Village elders ghosted in ceremonial ash and young warriors adorned with red ochre face-paint partake in a meal of roasted goat meat and tell stories about their ancestors under the starry sky. "Sometimes I wake during the night and hear them still murmuring by the embers," Gilbert says.



Gilbert's favorite location to set up camp is the Kenya-Tanzania border near Lake Natron (pictured), where she met her fiancé.

meanwhile, stateside...

translating africa to new york

Over the years, Gilbert has accumulated an eclectic collection of artifacts on her forays across the Great Rift Valley, from Ethiopia to Malawi, many of which she has carted back to her one-bedroom in NYC's West Village. Vintage photography books, African literature and travel writings by early explorers dominate her bookcases. "My apartment is an extension of my life in Africa," she says. It's also where Gilbert expresses her modern side, preferring a contemporary milieu—white sofa and bookshelves, white walls, sisal rug—for her vintage zebra skin and African side table. With the addition of a few needlepoint pillows, fresh flowers and a fat rack of current magazines, she indulges her interest in things not readily available in the bush.



While working on a book project in her home office, Gilbert sits at her desk on a bamboo and rattan chair to edit thousands of photographs.



Reflections of Gilbert's upbringing include the flamingo needlework pillow from Jacksonville, FL, where she grew up.

STILLS: DOMINO DIGITAL STUDIO

SOFA 76" "Carlyle" from \$3,360 carlylesofa.com **PINK NEEDLEPOINT PILLOW** "American Flamingo" \$155 Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens (904) 899-6035 **STOOL** (similar to shown) "Bamileke" from \$150 Bangally African Expo (212) 627-6489 **LAMP** #00010015 \$210 and **SHADE** Silk #00139787 \$160

Gracious Home (800) 338-7809 **RUG** (similar to shown) 9' x 12' \$499 potterybarn.com

opposite page: LAMP (similar to shown) "Format" \$24.99 ikea.com **FILE CABINETS** (similar to shown, under desk) "Bedford" \$279 each, potterybarn.com

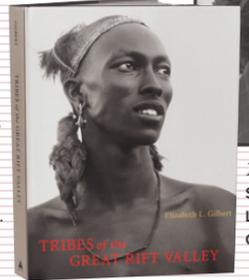


Her grandmother's pewter mint-julep cups mingle with a monkey candle as well as shells and starfish gathered on her travels.

gilbert's artistic endeavors

her latest book

Tribes of the Great Rift Valley, 271 pages of black-and-white images illustrating the cultures and traditions of 19 tribes, from Eritrea to Mozambique, is Gilbert's second compilation of portraits. \$45 AMAZON.COM

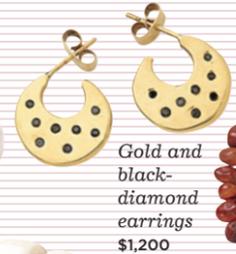


16" x 20" print \$1,800 E-MAIL LIZGILBERTPHOTO@GMAIL.COM

her jewelry collection

Gilbert and her fiancé work with a team of local artisans on a line of handcrafted jewelry—replicas of tribal adornments made from 18k gold, diamonds and other gemstones—for their boutique business, Shompole Collection (shompole.com). The collaboration supports the livelihoods of dozens of families.

Bone, gold and emerald ring \$275



Gold and black-diamond earrings \$1,200

"Savannah" agate necklace with bone and gold pendant \$1,500



"Mafupa" bone, gold and diamond bracelet \$375

TO PURCHASE JEWELRY, E-MAIL LIZGILBERTPHOTO@GMAIL.COM.