In the back of the noisy 12-seater Cessna, David Coulson twists around and points down at one of the islands dotting Lake Victoria. It is Mfangano, 25 square miles of fishermen’s shacks, subsistence maize plantations and volcanic crags lying just off the lake’s Kenyan shore. Painted on the wall of an ancient outcrop on the island are a series of concentric circles and sunbursts believed to be the work of artists who lived here as long as 3,000 years ago.

Coulson first came here in the late 1990s. He had noticed a dot on a sketch map in some academic literature that suggested the presence of rock art somewhere on the island. Intent on finding it, he scrambled up mountains and navigated the island’s shores in a small boat. Enthusiastic guides dragged him to high peaks on wild goose chases – ‘We’d be ripped to shreds with thorns,’ he remembers – only to find that at the top there was no sign of any artwork.

Coulson made a drawing of what the art he was searching for might look like, which he showed to perplexed fishermen. Eventually, someone recognised what this strange, tall Englishman here on their small island was talking about. Together, they hiked for an hour up to the point overlooking a bay below. There, painted on panels of cool volcanic rock, he found what he was looking for.

The works here at Mfangano are among the best-preserved examples yet found in Kenya of Africa’s astonishing spread of rock art paintings, a continental exhibition of early humans’ records of what mattered most in their lives. Coulson, 65, is the world’s pre-eminent chronicler of this wealth of treasures.

During more than 40 years living in Africa, this Paris-born British adventurer, photographer and archivist has rediscovered and documented more rock art sites across the continent than anyone else alive or dead. They range from a

No stone unturned

For the past 40 years David Coulson has been a man on a mission. He has driven the length and breadth of Africa determined to document its ancient rock art before a combination of vandalism, erosion, neglect and terrorism results in its destruction for ever. By Mike Pflanz

Above (clockwise from left) painted images of shamans found in Tanzania.
Right David Coulson photographed the 18ft-tall Dabous giraffes in Niger in 1997
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Above (clockwise from left) painted images of shamans found in Tanzania. Right David Coulson photographed the 18ft-tall Dabous giraffes in Niger in 1997 Coulson made a drawing of what the art he was searching for might look like, which he showed to perplexed fishermen. Eventually, someone recognised what this strange, tall Englishman here on their small island was talking about. Together, they hiked for an hour up to the point overlooking a bay below. There, painted on panels of cool volcanic rock, he found what he was looking for. The works here at Mfangano are among the best-preserved examples yet found in Kenya of Africa's astonishing spread of rock art paintings, a continental exhibition of early humans' records of what mattered most in their lives. Coulson, 65, is the world's pre-eminent chronicler of this wealth of treasures. During more than 40 years living in Africa, this Paris-born British adventurer, photographer and archivist has rediscovered and documented more rock art sites across the continent than anyone else alive or dead. They range from a...
Coulson reckons he has driven the equivalent of at least three times around the Earth, most of it alone and in a VW Kombi camper van that today sits grounded in his Nairobi garden, spray-painted in hippie motifs by his twin daughters, who are now 22. He has been charged by elephants, lost in desert sandstorms and scared witless by things that went bump against his van in the night. (Needless to say he has a very supportive and understanding wife, Deborah.)

He has worked with Laurens Van der Post and Mary Leakey, spoken at countless conferences and has a consisting of some of the world’s leading rock art experts and Africa-focused anthropologists, many of whom now count him as a close friend. His reputation for adventure appears to have lost little of its burnish as he has aged. Tall and with a slight stoop, he remains boyishly enthusiastic about every rock painting and engraving he has seen, about the probability that an enormous amount more lies waiting to be documented, and about these ancient artists’ ability to move us still.

‘There’s such a sense of connection with the past, with the land, with those people, it’s incredibly humbling,’ Coulson says. ‘At times it is completely overwhelming to think that this stuff was happening so long ago. It is art that symbolises, and offers, an extraordinary connection through time.’

The Trust for African Rock Art (Tara), the organisation he co-founded in 1996 with three friends–Alec Campbell, Tom Hill and Bruce Ludwig–is the world’s premier repository of photographic and documentary archives about the continent’s ancient artworks. Until recently these were accessible only to academics and students on a subscription website backed by an American philanthropic foundation, Aluka.org, or at Tara’s headquarters in Nairobi.

Now the British Museum and Tara have begun a partnership with grants from the London-based Arcadia Fund, a culture and nature conservation charity, to transfer a copy of Coulson’s entire archive of more than 21,000 images to the museum, meaning anyone interested in Africa’s rock art will be able to study it via an open-access website without having to jump on a plane all the way to Kenya, or pay pricey subscriptions.

‘The ultimate aim is to record all this incredible heritage for humanity before it’s too late,’ Coulson says. There are grave threats – vandalism, terrorism, erosion, neglect. ‘The worst-case scenario is that everything we’re trying to do to keep this stuff pristine fails, but at least we know we’ve documented it, it’s in the bank for future generations.

‘This is not just Africa’s rock art, it’s the world’s – Africa occupies that very special position in that we all, ultimately, come from here. Here’s a great news story out of Africa, the preservation of thousands of years of history and culture about which we would know nothing if not for this art. That’s what should motivate us all to preserve it.’

Coulson’s father was a British diplomat, posted to Paris, where Coulson was born, to Washington, DC, where he was the acting ambassador during the Suez crisis, and eventually to Stockholm, where he was the ambassador before leaving the Foreign Office to head the European Free Trade Association in Geneva.

There was, however, little direct connection to Africa. A close school friend of his brother was from a white Kenyan family, and Coulson remembers being ‘enthralled’ by stories of lions being shot on the tennis court and night-time visits from leopards.
Right a bas-relief engraving depicting cattle drinking, believed to be c6,500 years old, and another of a hippopotamus found at Tassili n’Ajjèr in the Algerian Sahara.

In one bone-dry site in the Sahara Coulson saw outline engravings of hippopotamuses. ‘Hippos, in the Sahara! It’s just astonishing, isn’t it?’

course – ‘to get some letters after my name’ – then took a job in Paris as a management consultant. Considering where he had been, and where he would end up, this seems an odd choice. ‘It was a miserable job with some pretty miserable people,’ he says, but necessary in order to appease the need to be seen to have a ‘proper job’.

None the less, he lived in a flat in the 15th arrondissement near the Eiffel Tower, stuffed with artefacts from Africa, and stayed close to his contacts and friends from the continent. That, eventually, was how he, already a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, was offered the chance to exhibit photographs from his earlier African adventures in 1979, soon after the society’s 150th anniversary. On the back of that, he was offered a commission for a photographic book of the high peaks and ranges of seven southern African countries, which became Mountain Odyssey, his first book (with text by James Clarke), and the start of adventuring that paid. ‘That book took me to huge numbers of wild areas, and there was rock art in most of these places,’ he says. ‘It’s not that I was going looking for it, I was just there and suddenly I was seeing far more of it than most people, even those who live in southern Africa, had seen before.’

Still, Coulson was primarily a photographer, not yet a rock art expert. He talks of photographing ‘stunningly beautiful places, the kinds of stuff showcased in Out of Africa’, often from the air. Some of his time was with the Bushmen, or San, in the Kalahari Desert, where he had photographed and documented their ancient art. His passion for that work reached the attention of Laurens Van der Post, who called Coulson in to his Chelsea penthouse to suggest a collaboration, which became an illustrated
Van der Post was his ‘right brain’ guru: visionary, spiritual, erratic, poetic. His ‘left brain’ mentor, who pushed him to go the final stretch to focus his photography on rock art, was Mary Leakey, the palaeontologist who in 1978 discovered the 3.7 million-year-old Laetoli footprints in Tanzania that proved man’s ancestors walked upright. She showed Coulson the little-known Kondoa rock paintings in central Tanzania so he could photograph them. Her motivation – as is Coulson’s – was that people all over the world needed to see the beauty and transcendental nature of the art, so they would fight to preserve it.

‘She suggested we do a book about rock art,’ Coulson says. ‘Then I said we couldn’t do it without spending a significant amount of time in the Sahara. She paled and said, “Goodness I’m too old for that.”’ Coulson, looking for someone else to accompany him, took no time at all to pick up the phone and call his old mate Alec Campbell.

It is clear that desert places hold Coulson in their thrall more than any other, and the Sahara is the most alluring of all for him. He remembers a German friend in Namibia having a wall of Michelin maps of the Sahara taped together in his house in Windhoek. ‘He had all these little flags from all his trips and where he’d been. I was completely fascinated by it,’ Coulson says. ‘Without doubt the greatest adventures of my life have been in the Sahara.’

During one trip to Niger, he and his team camped for several nights in a dinosaur graveyard that covered several acres, their bedrolls laid on ground strewn with bones millions of years old and strange fossilised skin plates. On another occasion, Coulson, Campbell and a long-time Tuareg guide and friend, Mellakh Cheikh, made what Coulson calls ‘a two-week-long 2,000-mile dash right across the Algerian Sahara’ just because someone said there might be some huge carved giraffes at the end of it. There were: the eight larger-than-life size depictions of the animals cantering across the rock, including the 27ft-tall carving, the biggest single image of rock art on the continent.

In one bone-dry site in the Sahara where today rain almost never falls and river beds are only sand, Coulson saw outline engravings of hippopotamuses, one 15ft long, which he suggests were created during a 4,000-year-long wet stretch when the desert bloomed and rivers flowed. That period ended roughly 5,000 years ago. ‘Hippos, in the Sahara!’ Coulson guffaws. ‘It’s just astonishing, isn’t it?’

To reach these sites, many of them today ‘on the way to nowhere’, in Coulson’s words, is not easy. ‘These are inhospitable places, but I have never had anything but complete trust in the people who were with me,’ he says. His many tales of peril seem all to have occurred when he was alone.

He has wandered off for a midnight pee in the dunes, become disorientated and lost his camp until dawn. He has been driving through sandstorms completely unaware of where he was going until he came across fresh tyre tracks that he thought would offer a path to safety until he realised they were his own, and he had been travelling in a wide, lost circle. He has had ‘endless’ run-ins – many while he was on foot – with inquisitive elephants, angry rhinos and thankfully uninterested lions.

‘Once, high up in a spooky, uninhabited pass in a mountain range in South Africa so deep that sunlight only penetrated for a few hours a day, something ‘large, and I mean elephant large’ bumped his camper van twice soon after he had gone to bed. Frightened – there had been no sign of wildlife on the drive to his campsite – he opened the door, rifle at the ready, and found ‘nothing, only silence’.

Coulson is the first to acknowledge that this is a gilded, if occasionally punishing, life of adventure that many would wish for the opportunity to emulate. But it has all been in the service of tracking down as much of that art as possible, as Coulson says, before it is too late. It seems unthinkable that this ancient heritage, which has stood undisturbed in many cases for millennia, today faces very serious threats to its continued existence, threats that could destroy it in what would be, in terms of time, the blink of an eye.

Increasing swaths of the Sahara, where some of the best examples of Africa’s rock art lie, are falling under the control of Islamist militia, putting it at risk. And in many places graffiti sprayed directly over the art, or threats to its continued existence, threats that could destroy it in what would be, in terms of time, the blink of an eye.

To Coulson, though, ‘the greatest threat we face is neglect’. Africans appear to have a widespread lack of appreciation of their historical heritage, something that clearly perplexes Coulson. ‘The biggest challenge has been getting people in Africa to engage with what is essentially evidence of their glorious past, something they should be hugely proud of,’ he says. ‘What you really want, and we’ve not managed to achieve anything close to this yet, is that rock art should be an integral part of school curricula here.

‘Instead, they’re teaching them about William the Conquerer and bloody 1066 in some of the English system schools here. In 1066 the king of ancient Ethiopia, where increasing amounts of rock art is being discovered. In the remote village of Mawanga, Coulson’s discovery of what villagers now call ‘the rock’ was a pivotal moment in their recent past, something they want to tell Tara’s Ethiopian visitors about. Income from donors and tourism helped the community here at Mfangano open a small primary school, supported by Tara. These are the kinds of projects that Coulson and Tara are trying to get moving wherever there is rock art that tourists can come to see. Daniel Ochieng Obwogo, the chairman of the Mawanga community, says, ‘Our fathers did not go to school and we too failed. When the rock came, it gave us the opportunity to send our children to school,’ he adds with pride that his son was the first to finish senior school.

Without Coulson and his team identifying ‘the rock’ and its value, in status as well as income, these people would not have that school. Such projects need the energy and drive of someone like Coulson, and outside of his colleagues at Tara, there appears to be no one with anywhere near the same zeal. He admits it himself, saying ‘if I go tomorrow, it’s a pity, I haven’t yet found someone with my passion for this. I hope I never retire.’

Coulson hopes the British Museum partnership will bring a host of new converts to the cause of Africa’s rock art, which can only help increase the numbers of those who would defend it. He talks of how more minds thinking about rock art can perhaps widen the debate about its origins and – a tricky word for Coulson, this – its meaning. Again and again, he shies away from absolutist positions on what any of the art might signify.

‘People ask me that if we don’t know what that geometric symbol means, or whether that is a lion or an elephant or what, then what’s the point of the art,’ he says, with what sounds like a suppressed sigh. ‘To me, it should not be about whether it’s this or it’s that. This art is the only window we have on to an ancient world about which otherwise we know absolutely nothing.

‘Sure the glass is a little fuzzy at times, we can’t see things that clearly. But I think there’s nothing wrong with a bit of mystery. It can get very boring to have all the answers, can’t it?’

David Coulson will be leading trips to the painted caves of the Sahara and the lost engravings of Gabon and Burkina Faso in 2015, and safaris to Namibia in September 2014 (afrikanrockart.org)