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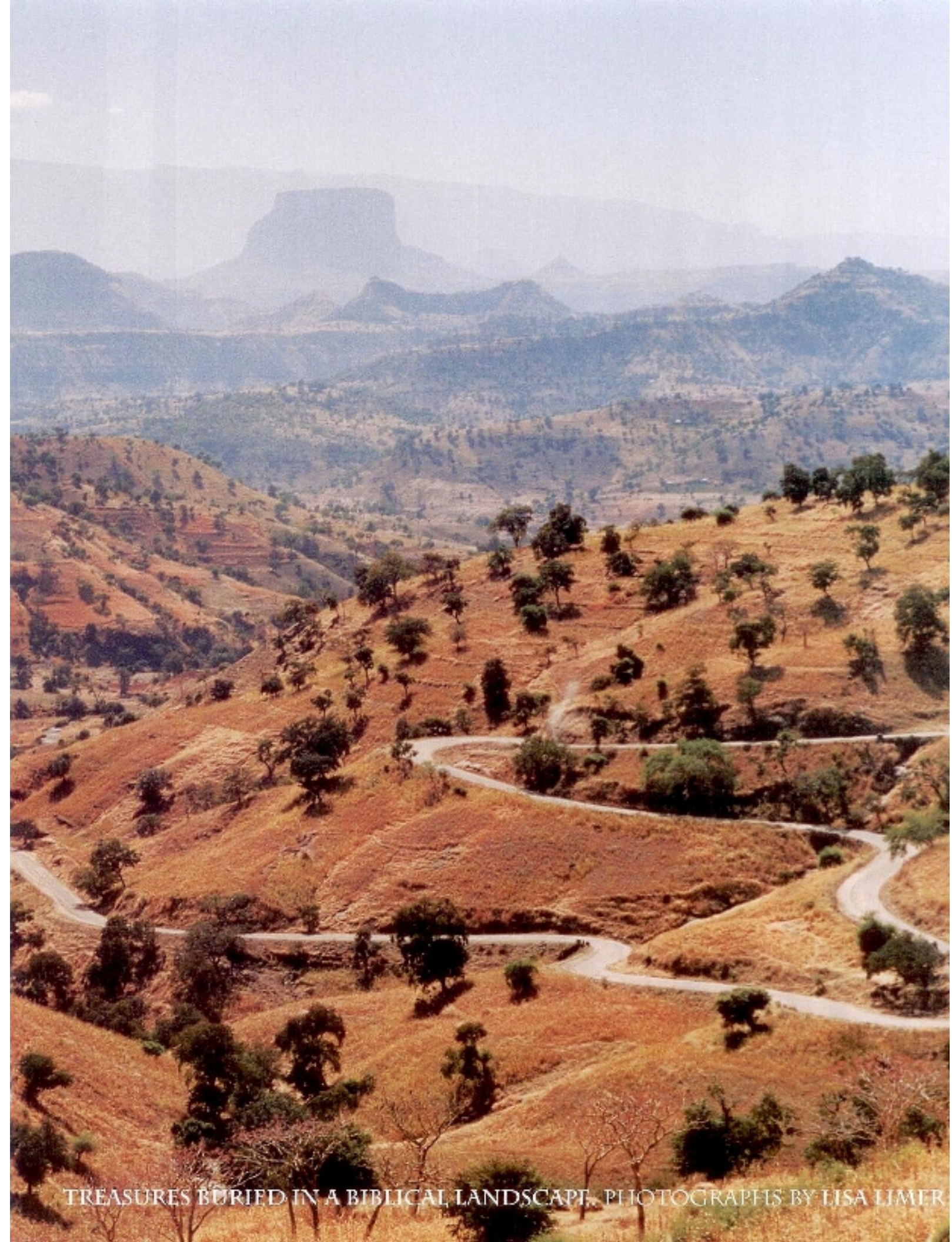


The Simien Mountains  
National Park, a UNESCO  
World Heritage Site

Survival of the fittest: the rock spire of  
Borale Abay, the highest and most isolated  
peak in the Simien Mountains National  
Park, Ethiopia. The mountain is a  
UNESCO World Heritage Site.

# ROCK OF AGES

EXPLORING THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS, THORATTO CLARE FINDS CELESTIAL



TREASURES BURIED IN A BIBLICAL LANDSCAPE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA LIMER





**T**HERE ARE BANDITS HERE, and here,' said the nice man, waving a finger over the map of Ethiopia. 'And there are separatists there [pointing bottom left] and *shifto* here.' *Shifto* are

bandits. 'And obviously you want to stay away from the Somali border. But where you are going is fine!'

The nice man was Will Jones, who owns Journeys by Design, a tour company specialising in Africa. Now he moved his hand to the middle of the map, covering the central highlands of Ethiopia.

'Like most of Ethiopia, the highlands are perfectly safe,' he said. 'And you can go all the way up here, into Tigray, to the rock churches.'

Ethiopia, with its own script (curly-wurly letters that float off the lines), its own church (Ethiopian Orthodox, the oldest national Christian church in the world), a unique landscape (vast crowds of sheer-sided, flat-topped mountains) and its own calendar, is unlike anywhere else. A ticket to Ethiopia pretty well guarantees adventure.

Arriving in Addis Ababa I set my watch three hours ahead of London, then turned the date back seven years. The Julian calendar has 13 months (thanks to a very short month called Pagume,

between August and September). Having left a snowy England in 2009, I had arrived on a bright, hot Ethiopian morning in 2002. Outside the airport, cut grass smelled like summer.

Addis has a famously vivid nightlife that involves drinking a lot and dancing like mad. And the mix of races from Arabia, the Red Sea and North Africa, of which modern Ethiopians are composed, has ensured a great many of the city's residents are ridiculously beautiful. Other attractions include the National Museum, where you can visit 'Lucy', who is 3.2 million years old, plus the 20 she lived, and the Mercato, the largest market in Africa: a bustling quarter of blocks of sheds, crowds, livestock, donkeys, lorries and sacks of feed and goods.

I ended up in Tomoka coffee shop on Winston Churchill Road. Coffee drinking was invented in Ethiopia, either by a goatherd who noticed its effect on his livestock, or by a starving man (accounts differ). Over coffee as delicious as any I have ever tasted, my guide, Tesfai Fanta, laid out the plan. We would journey hundreds of kilometres through the highlands, through centuries of time, on a kind of pilgrimage, tracing in art and stone

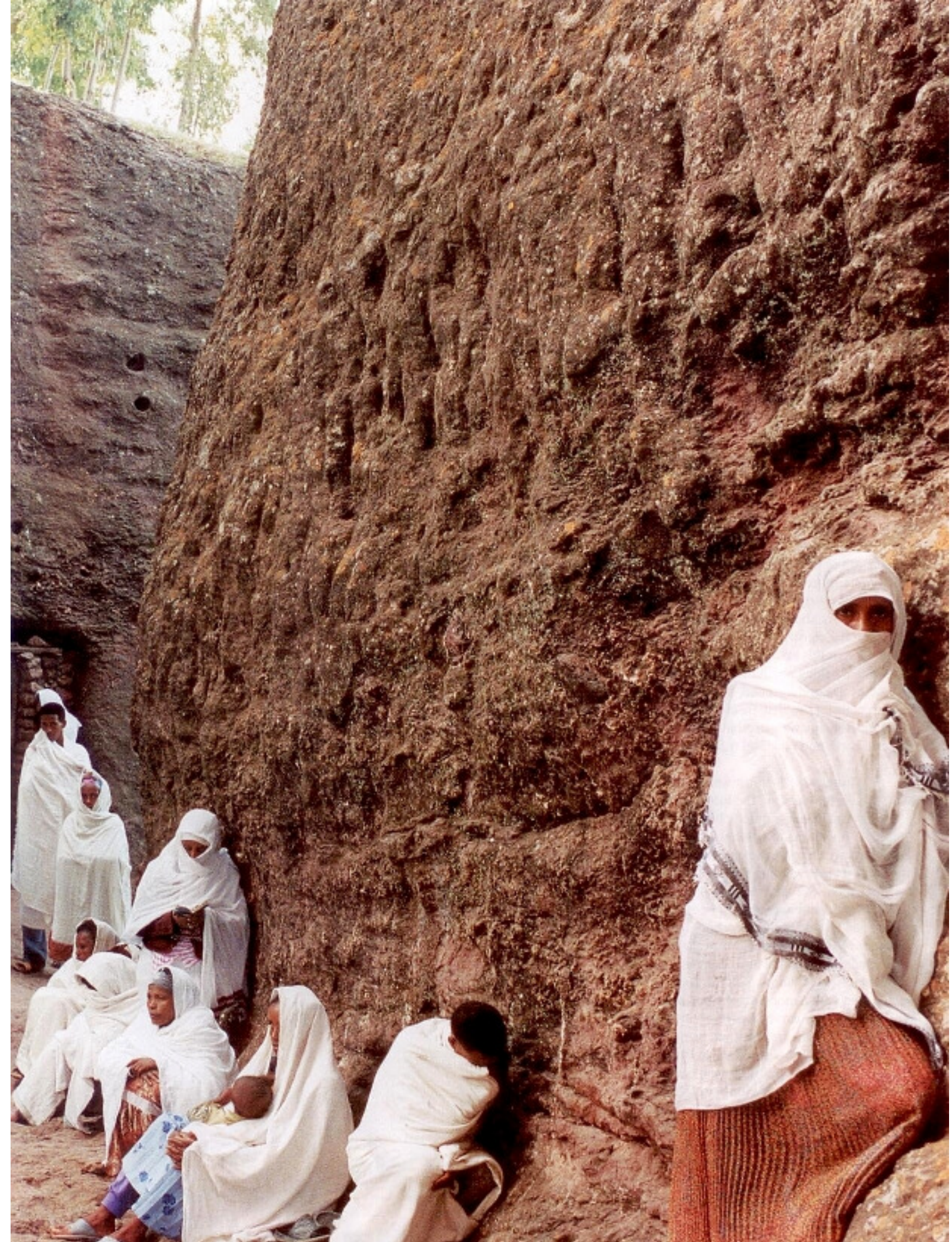


**Above, Bete Giyorgis, one of the churches carved from the rock in the historic town of Lalibela. Opposite, priests in the church of Bete Medhane Alem**

STANDING  
WITH A HAND  
AGAINST THE  
COOL, MASSIVE  
STONE IT IS EASY  
TO UNDERSTAND  
WHY ETHIOPIANS  
STILL WORSHIP  
WITH THEIR  
BODIES PRESSED  
AGAINST THE  
ROCK OF  
CHURCHES



◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆  
Prayers at Medhane Alem  
church in Tigray, carved from  
a cave in the fourth century



the coming of Christianity to Ethiopia, more than a millennium and a half ago.

Leaving for the airport before dawn – we were to fly north to Lalibela, saving days of road travel – we came upon another driver approaching the wrong way up a one-way street.

'Inappropriate person!' cried Tesfai. 'They will kill him for sure!'

In a country which in living memory has borne the medieval incompetence of Emperor Haile Selassie's rule, a murderous Marxist dictatorship, a vicious war of liberation (which ended it in 1991), repeated famines and a senseless conflict with Eritrea, Ethiopian humour displays a morbid familiarity with death, crossed with a quizzical take on the rest of the world. Bad drivers are 'Al-Qaeda' ('They kill you, they kill themselves, they kill everyone,' as Tesfai put it); huge Russian army trucks, a common sight in the north, are 'I can't see you', because 'You can't see me, I can't see you!' Inevitably, anyone driving a motorbike without due care is 'Taliban'.

Our fellow passengers on the flight were a mix of engineers, doctors and the kind of traveller who has been looking forward to coming here for a long time. For Ethiopia has treasures, undisputed wonders of the world. And foremost among them are the rock churches of Lalibela.

King Lalibela ruled from 1189 to 1229, and in a mere 20 years, so the story goes, ordered and completed the construction of 13 churches. He was assisted in this endeavour by angels. The extraordinary thing about these beautiful buildings is that they are underground, dug into the rock beneath your feet so that, from any distance, they are completely invisible in a landscape of cumin-coloured earth and pink and ochre rock.

**U**NDER A HIGH MOUNTAIN, cool and bright in the clear air, the little town of Lalibela was quietly busy at sunrise.

It was one of Ethiopia's numerous saints' days so we joined a peaceful throng wearing long white shawls, winding steeply down a path to a stone moat. We filed through the gap in a rock wall and came out between a dug-out cliff and the first and largest of the churches, Bete Medhane Alem: the House of the Saviour of the World.

The builders must first have dug a deep, rectangular trench. Working on the inner walls, they created a pit with a monolith of stone in the middle. Tunnelling in, they carved out the church from the inside: pillars, beams, benches and ornamentation, everything is one unbroken body of stone, covered in chisel marks like ripples of wind on water, betraying the arc of the mason's arm. Once you have seen the churches you cannot look at a hill in Ethiopia without imagining what it might conceal.

At Bete Medhane Alem the congregation overflowed; now the space around it filled. People crossed themselves, bowed, touched their foreheads then their lips against the stone. We







◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆  
A priest walks the narrow passages between the Lalibela rock churches



could hear the priest's voice inside, and the muttered responses, and then singing, and nothing else. Not a baby cried. The singing comes from the songbook of St Yared, who took his melodies from the songs of three birds. In the sixth century he composed five volumes of hymns and praises, in his own notation. To this day it is the music of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, and Ethiopia's system of musical notation.

It was very moving to be among the white-wrapped figures, like slender ghosts, all turned towards God through song and stone. Time dissolved: whatever happens, every saint's day white-robed figures will gather here, as they always have, before sunrise, for as long as we live on earth.

Lalibela's churches are close together, linked in some cases by narrow passages and tunnels. The king's intention was to construct a new Jerusalem: the original, in his time, was in Muslim hands. Islam has lapped around the base of Ethiopia's central massif since its beginning in the early seventh century. Notwithstanding Mohammed's injunction that none of his followers should harm Ethiopians, an invasion in 1529 came close to overturning the kingdom, and its Christianity.

Some churches are tiny, some darkly eerie, some elaborately worked and ornamented. Everyone's favourite, the most photographed and the most accomplished, is Bete Giyorgis (St George's), a perfect little cruciform creation, a compilation of geometric complements and echoes that delights every visitor. If a church can be a flourish, this is it.

An hour's drive from Lalibela is the church of Yemrehanna Kristos, in a cave at the top of a steep path, beyond trees hung with tendrils of moss and mist-catching lichen. The mouth of the cave has been walled up; removing your shoes, you pass through a door into a straw-strewn cavern like a great manger, and there is the church, as if hidden by a giant. It's a beautiful little structure all swaddled in peace but for the dripping of a waterfall and the cooing of a dove. It was not carved but built of stone and timber; it floats on a layer of olive wood that prevents decay spreading up from the cave floor. Yemrehanna Kristos is thought to predate the marvels of Lalibela by 80 years. Inside, in the gloom, surrounded by decorative stars, is a painting of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. At the back of the cave are the skeletons, skulls and semi-mummified bodies of pilgrims who have come to die here. The priest, opening a spectacularly ornate umbrella,

said that some of the bodies were those of 3,000 'companions' who had left Egypt to follow the call of Christianity in the 12th century. The fictions of *King Solomon's Mines* and Indiana Jones, you see, have nothing on the facts of Ethiopia.

Towards the evening, the hills rang with the sound of voices. Ethiopia is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, and even in its barest wildernesses, people are never far away. Then the voices were replaced with the barking of dogs. (Unlovely curs are everywhere but, thankfully, even the meanest turn tail when you stoop to pick up a stone. Ethiopian children are spectacularly good stone-throwers.) As the light died, the sound of crickets took over, the stars came out, the planets like small blazes of white and red fire, and the moon rose, on its side, riding in the blue like a silver boat.

I would see a lot of that moon in the next 10 days, and sometimes it looked no more distant, and no less strange, than the rest of planet Earth. As we moved further into Ethiopia and the highlands, the rest of the world receded.

**T**ODAY IS many hours," said Tesfai at dawn.

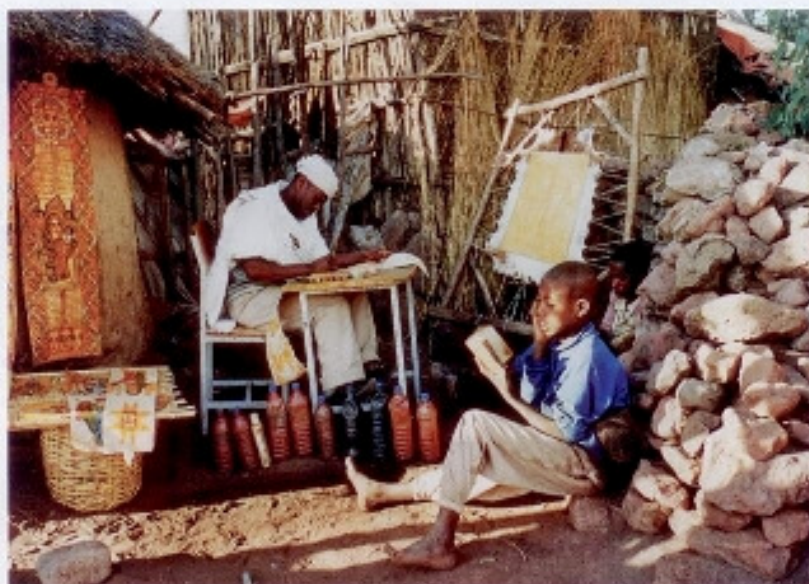
"Today we go up, up, up into Tigray!" A Tigrayan himself, Tesfai looked cheered by this. Our driver, an Amhara, rolled his eyes.

For eight hours we drove through the mountains, crawling up and down them

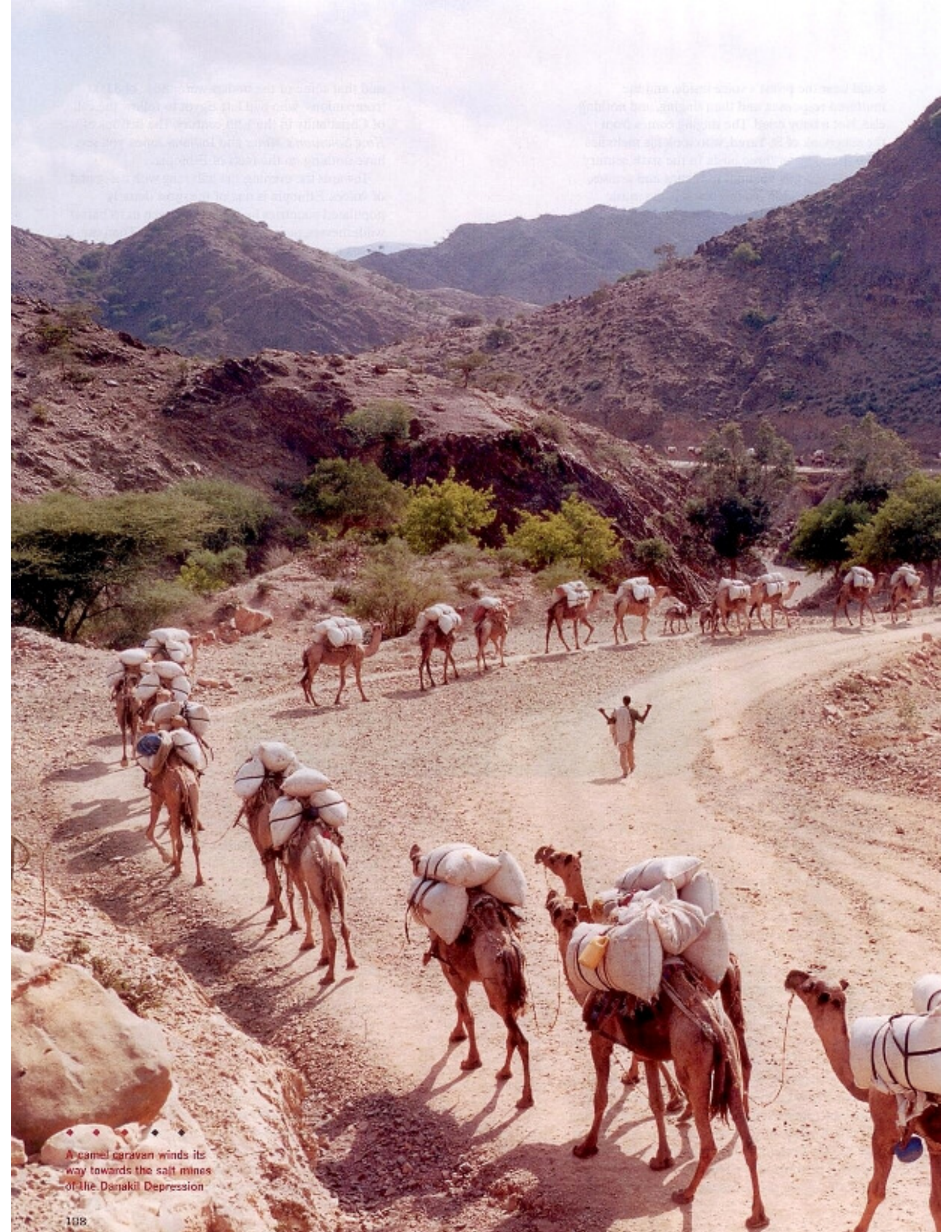
like a caterpillar making its way through treetops. We gasped at the views, but life amid this spectacular beauty is hard and short; we saw few villagers older than 40 or 45. Adults and children carry huge loads of wood or straw. We stopped at one village, a cluster of huts behind a brush stockade. The nearest secondary school and clinic were 20km away over a ridge, the top of which was 3,000 metres high. Flies swarmed around the faces of toddlers. There was something malevolent in the air. The rains had not been good, the farmers said.

We drove over the ridge and down the other side, around hairpin bends, towards a golden valley and a plain, far below. We passed rich farmland around Lake Ashenge and in the evening came to Mekele, capital of Tigray, the most northerly of the nine ethnically based regions into which the country is divided.

That night Tesfai took us out to eat *injera* in a restaurant on the top floor of an unprepossessing hotel. *Injera* is a doughy pancake made from tef.



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Above, in Lalibela, a father paints religious motifs while his son recites passages from the Bible. Opposite, a priest at the church of Yemrehanna Kristos



A camel caravan winds its way towards the salt mines of the Danakil Depression



an Ethiopian cereal that is the staple diet of the farmers who comprise 80 per cent of the population; and it is the perfect foil for lamb in spicy sauce. And there was another treat: *rej*, a sort of honey wine that tastes a lot more like honey than wine, smuggling its alcohol in a sweet cloud. We argued politics like radicals, laughed and slept, later, like angels.

We were up again before the sun, hoping to catch a camel caravan. The caravan would leave before dawn, Tesfai said, and he was keen we should see one because the salt trade, which is their business, has been going on in this part of the world, very little changed, for the past 2,000 years.

There were at least 30 camels in the caravan, attended by six men. They were carrying feed: on the 21st of every month they are brought to Mekele for a health check, then depart on the week-long trek back to the salt mines. They no longer carry salt the whole way but ferry it to a point where lorries can meet them. The caravan paced up the escarpment then branched off towards the rising sun. Larks sang. Ethiopia is a birdwatcher's delight. I saw lammergeiers (or bearded vultures, which do not look much like vultures, being much prettier), white-winged cliff chats, which are endemic to the country, choughs, which are my favourite bird, fat-billed ravens, olive thrushes, Alpine swifts... Every day brought new birds and, perhaps because shotguns are unknown (although AK-47s are common), they were not shy or fearful.

We looped ahead of the caravan and drove on, dropping dramatically towards the Danakil Depression, one of the lowest and hottest places on earth. Here, in a narrow valley, we found hundreds of camels, donkeys and mules, all heading for the mines. The footfalls of the camels in the dust made a soft, soporific crunch like steps in soft snow. Their hind legs moved stiffly, their forelegs placed carefully forward, like dancers'. Watching the passing river of animals were the local people, the Afar, who dress in black and wear bright beads, and who have always lived in this hot, remote region. They used to have a ferocious reputation: young Afar men achieved manhood by killing an enemy, and proved the deed by emasculating their victim.

We turned back up the valley and crossed the Gheralta plateau, heading for one of Tigray's rock-hewn churches. The plateau is an intensely beautiful land of tall gum trees and low, stone homesteads. It is overlooked by the distant Gheralta Mountains, a series of rock pinnacles standing close together, sharp conical crests and sheer sides clustered like giant stalagmites. Turning off the main road, we drove between farmhouses to the base of a long ridge of cliffs. A path led upwards, steepening to a scramble, until the view behind us was a great bowl of fields, trees and plateau land running all the way to the mountains.

We joined a circle of young men sitting on the ground with two priests, passing around a paint tin



Frescoes at Abreha  
Atsbeha church in the  
Gheralta Mountains

containing a villainous-looking black liquid – *tulla*: home-brewed beer. It seemed rude to refuse, especially since Tesfai appeared to be in disagreement with one of the priests about a receipt for visiting the church we had come to see. Ethiopian priests do not enjoy a universally good reputation. The travel writer Dervla Murphy was mugged by one during the journey she recounts in her classic *In Ethiopia with a Mule*.

'This priest is no good,' Tesfai hissed, between volleys in his argument. 'He is messing up.'

After some time, an agreement was reached and Tesfai was permitted to lead us through woodland to a cave, partly excavated, inside which was the most miraculous church, Medhane Alem.

This church was carved out of the cave in the fourth century. Its massive sandstone columns are decorated with roses and crosses; the capitals are carved and the pillar bases spread out like the exposed roots of oak trees. The church was one of the first to be consecrated when Christianity came to Ethiopia, introduced by a young Syrian named Frumentius. Standing with a hand against the cool, massive stone it is easy to understand why Ethiopians still worship with their bodies pressed against the rock of churches. The stone is unmoved by time. It seems to carry within it all-but-perceptible vibrations, echoes from the first moment of its carving: a literal vessel of faith, conveying it undiminished across the centuries.

The prospect below us as we left the church was magical. Birdsong from the wooded cliffs blended with the shouts and laughter of children from below. The landscape reclined in a dimming copper haze. It was like looking down from the top of the walls of paradise.

The priest may have been perfectly decent (objectivity was not Tesfai's strong suit), but the beer wasn't. I spent the next day being dramatically unwell as Lisa Limer, the photographer, who had wisely only pretended to drink, went out to take pictures of cave churches in the Gheralta, including the magnificent, 10th-century Abraha Atsbeha, while I repented.

I repented again the following day, fully purged, halfway up a cliff, clinging to a goatskin rope, hoping the priest at the top was one of the good guys. Debra Damo is a monastery atop a sheer-sided, flat-topped hill, called an *amba*, and no female creature of a higher order than a chicken has ever visited it. The rope up is the only access. At the top were young monks eating barley and drinking *tulla*. The founder was conveyed up here in the coils of a giant serpent some time in the fifth century. Aregawi was one of the Nine Saints, Syrian Christians who spread the word throughout Ethiopia in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Ethiopians date the founding of their nation to the dynasty of Menelik I, the son of Solomon and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, who ruled between 982 and 957bc. Makeda had been



## DISCOVER ETHIOPIA

### GETTING THERE

**Journeys by Design** (01273 623790; [www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com)) arranges private Ethiopian safaris. Prices for a two-week itinerary start at £2,950 per person, including full-board accommodation.

**Ethiopian Airlines** (020 8987 7000; [www.ethiopianairlines.com](http://www.ethiopianairlines.com)) flies from Heathrow to Addis Ababa.

### WHERE TO STAY

◆ **Addis Ababa** has a wide range of hotels, many both comfortable and reasonably priced. Journeys by Design uses the **Sheraton** (00 251 115 171717; [www.sheratonaddis.com](http://www.sheratonaddis.com); doubles from US\$270) or **Hilton** (00 251 115 170000; [www.hilton.co.uk](http://www.hilton.co.uk); doubles from US\$257).

◆ In **Lalibela** two of the best places to stay are the **Tukul Village Hotel** (00 251 333 360565; [www.tukulvillage.com](http://www.tukulvillage.com); doubles from US\$55) and the **Mountain View** (00 251 333 360804; [www.mountainsviewhotel.com](http://www.mountainsviewhotel.com); doubles from US\$55), a modern marble-and-glass concoction with superb views, a fine roof terrace and friendly service.

◆ In **Mekele** I stayed in the **Axum Hotel** (00 251 344 405155; [www.axumhotels.com](http://www.axumhotels.com); doubles from US\$40), a cavernous, old-fashioned place where the

commissionaire salutes you every time you come or go.

◆ **The Gheralta Lodge** (00 251 346 670344; [www.gheraltalodgetigray.com](http://www.gheraltalodgetigray.com); doubles from US\$35) is quietly luxurious, with stunning mountain views. Guests mingle over cocktails and have dinner together.

◆ In **Aksum** we stayed in the **Remhai** (00 251 347 751501; doubles from US\$41), a modern pile, not especially beautiful but well equipped with bars, restaurant, pool and even internet access.

◆ **The Simien Lodge** (00 251 115 524758; [www.simiens.com](http://www.simiens.com); doubles from US\$152) in the **Simien Mountains** is one of the highest hotels in Africa. It calls itself an eco-hotel and has wood fires, good food and a relaxing atmosphere.

### WHAT TO TAKE

In the highlands you don't need to worry about malaria, but visitors to the south and the Lake Tana region should take pills and nets. Binoculars for the wonderful bird life, a hat, sunglasses and books are the only essentials.

### WHAT TO READ

◆ **In Ethiopia with a Mule** (out of print; available at [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)) by Dervla Murphy is

wonderful, and a great guide to Tigray.

◆ Wilfred Thesiger's **The Danakil Diary** (Flamingo, £8.99) records an epic expedition in the days when animals were for the shooting and the country was called Abyssinia.

◆ Philip Marsden's **A Far Country** (out of print; available at [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)) and **Chains of Heaven** (Harper Perennial, £8.99) recount travels in Marxist and modern Ethiopia respectively.

◆ **Scoop** by Evelyn Waugh (Penguin, £9.99) is a hoot – a portrait of a foreign correspondent's Abyssinia.

◆ Best of all, Ryszard Kapuscinski's **The Emperor** (Penguin Classics, £8.99) is an extraordinary collection of testimonies from the court of the late Emperor Haile Selassie.

### WEATHER TO GO

☀ You are always sure to find the sun, but June, July and August comprise the rainy season. **September to February** is probably best: the northern highlands are green and fertile after the long rains, and although the nights are cold the days are warm. March to May is Ethiopian autumn, with some rain. May is the hottest month.

# ROCK OF AGES

Continued from page 17

to visit Solomon in Jerusalem, and their union produced Menelik. He in turn journeyed from his mother's Sabaean kingdom of Aksum, in Ethiopia, to visit Solomon and when he returned, so the legends say, and as the Ethiopian Orthodox church faithfully maintains, he brought the Ark of the Covenant with him.

On our way to an encounter with the Ark at Aksum we stopped at Yeha, a small town in a circle of rounded hills, site of the Sabaeen temple of the moon. Built in the fifth century bc, its massive and smoothly interlocking stones and angular carvings of beak heads combine to make this a wonderfully strange and suggestive place, a Xanadu, a stone spacecraft, linking our world with another. A moon was rising between two of the hills as in the opposite quarter of the sky the sun sank down.

The next morning, in Aksum, we joined a large crowd of white-shawled men and women who sang softly with a sighing sound as they followed a replica Ark in procession around the church of St Mary of Zion. The actual Ark is kept in a vault and only seen by one man, the keeper, who hands on his keys to a successor at the end of his days. The procession takes place for the first week of each month, and the worshippers pray for the forgiveness of all our sins.

The hair stood up on the back of my neck as we followed the Ark, balanced on the head of a priest and covered with a rich red cloth. Although it is a replica, I felt I had crossed two millennia to take part in a rite straight out of the Old Testament. In the darkness I passed the stern, tall forms of the stelae of Aksum, monolithic granite obelisks carved to resemble multi-storey buildings up to 33 metres high. They are thought to date from around 300bc. For the first 700 years of the Aksumites' rise a sophisticated empire which traded with the Roman Mediterranean and India,

possibly even with China, according to some scholars. For a time Aksum ruled what is now Yemen. Something of the wealth and wonder of one of the great civilisations of antiquity is encapsulated in the mysterious stelae: we still do not know how they were carved and transported from the surrounding hills, what their function

was, or why they should have been decorated with representations of doors and windows.

Our Ethiopian journey ended with a drive south from Tigray, down 2,000 metres then up the same distance and more, to the Simien Mountains. The road, built by Italian engineers, floats like a scarf in the air. The drop below us was at once sickening and exhilarating, as all around us mountains rose as steep and sudden as stelae, a crowd of giants competing to reach the sky. The Simien Mountains National Park is a pristine wilderness in the clouds, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, home to gelada baboons, big beasts in silky fur coats, where the air is cold and thin and the views stretch for

hundreds of kilometres. A walk in the park here could take weeks, would make you as fit as you have ever been, thanks to the altitude, and would afford views to match anything on earth.

On our last night we saw a huge full moon rise as if from far below us.

"God is with us! Always with us!" cried Tesfai. It was his standard salutation to happy coincidences, always delivered with an endearing dash of self-congratulation, but you had to agree with him. Apparently some fortuity of orbits had brought the moon closer to the Earth than usual, and it hung in the sky so bright and so close I felt I could spin it, like a ball, on my finger. Eternal, unbelievable, at once distant and just there, it was a very Ethiopian moon.

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