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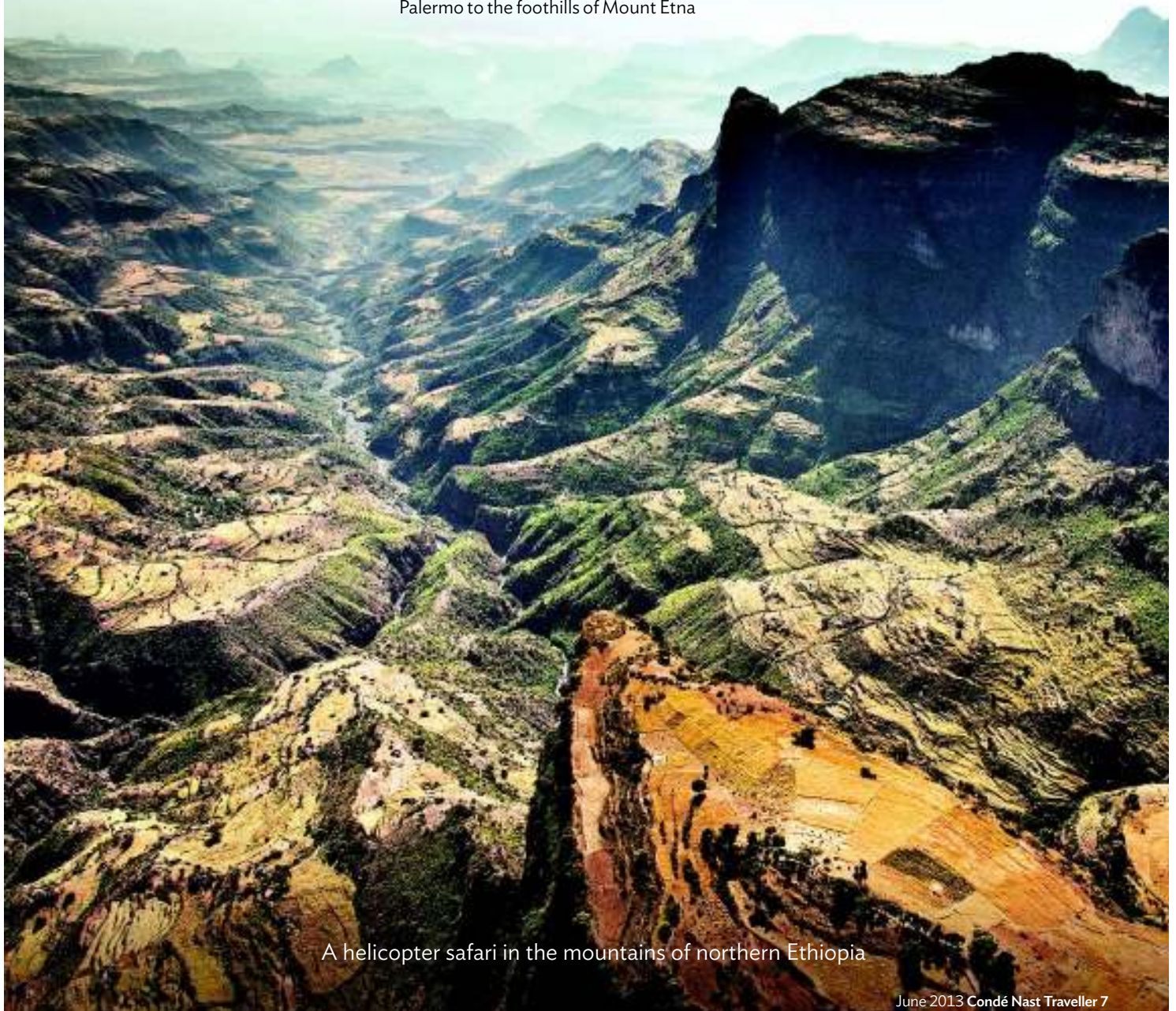
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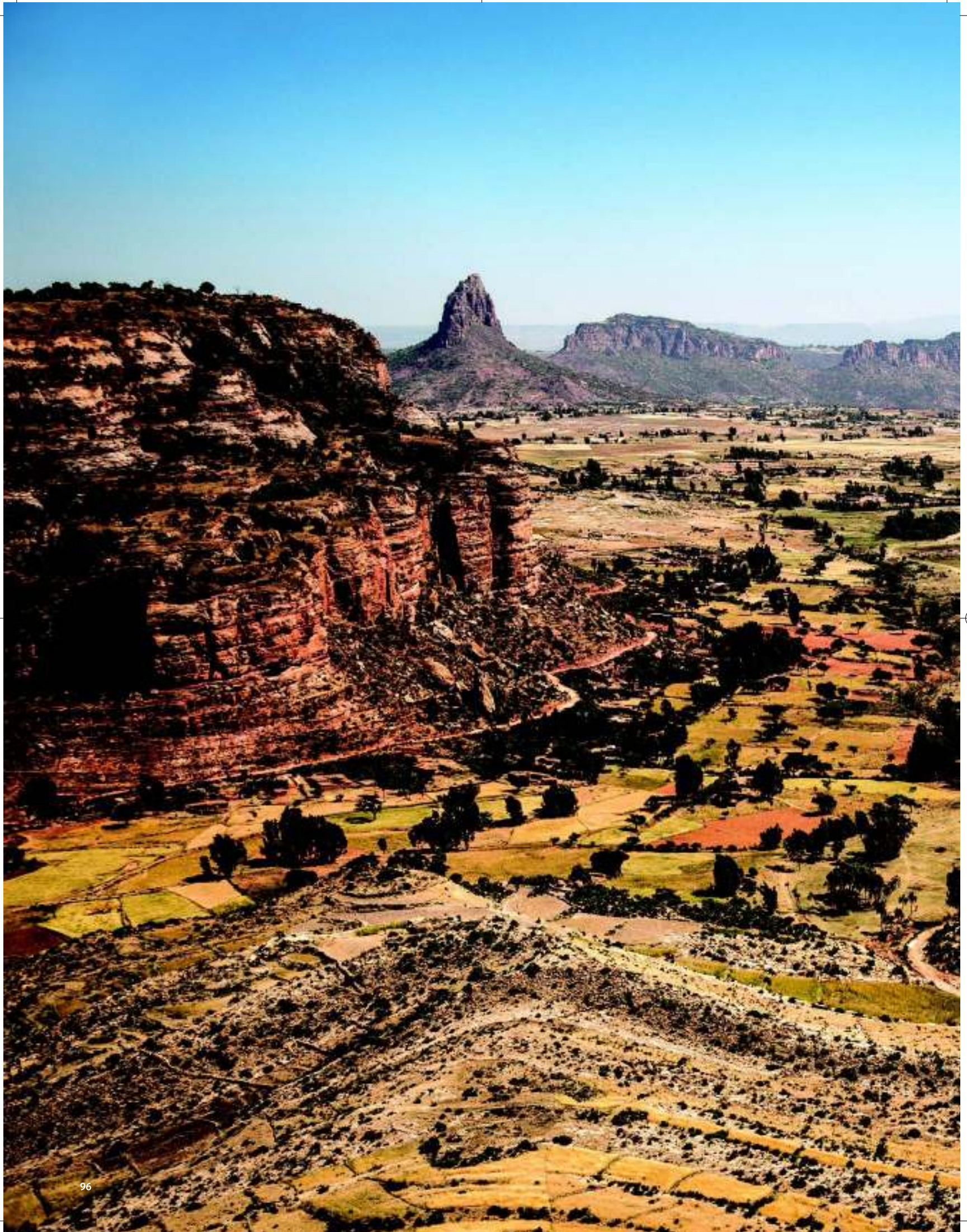
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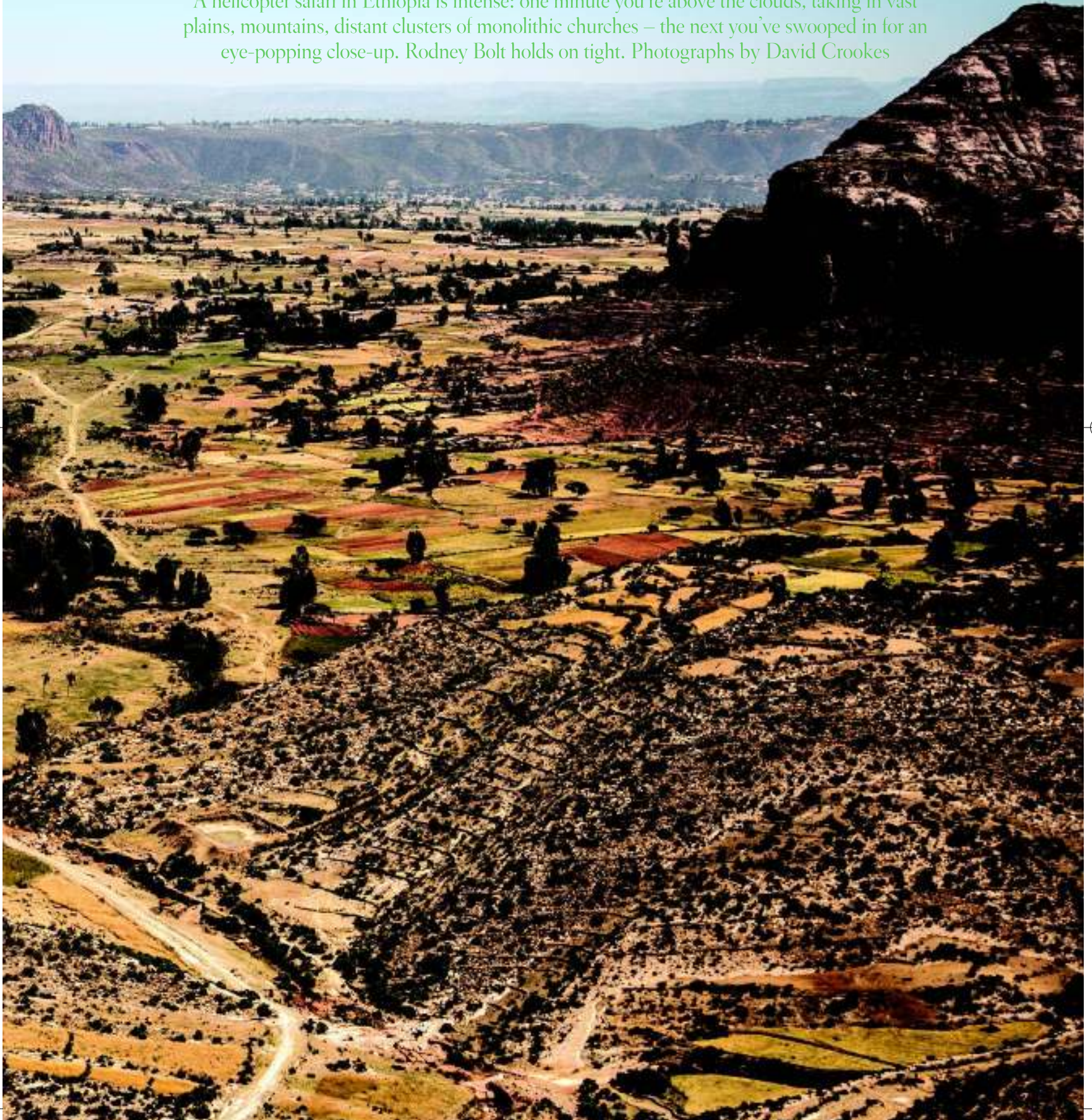
A helicopter safari in the mountains of northern Ethiopia

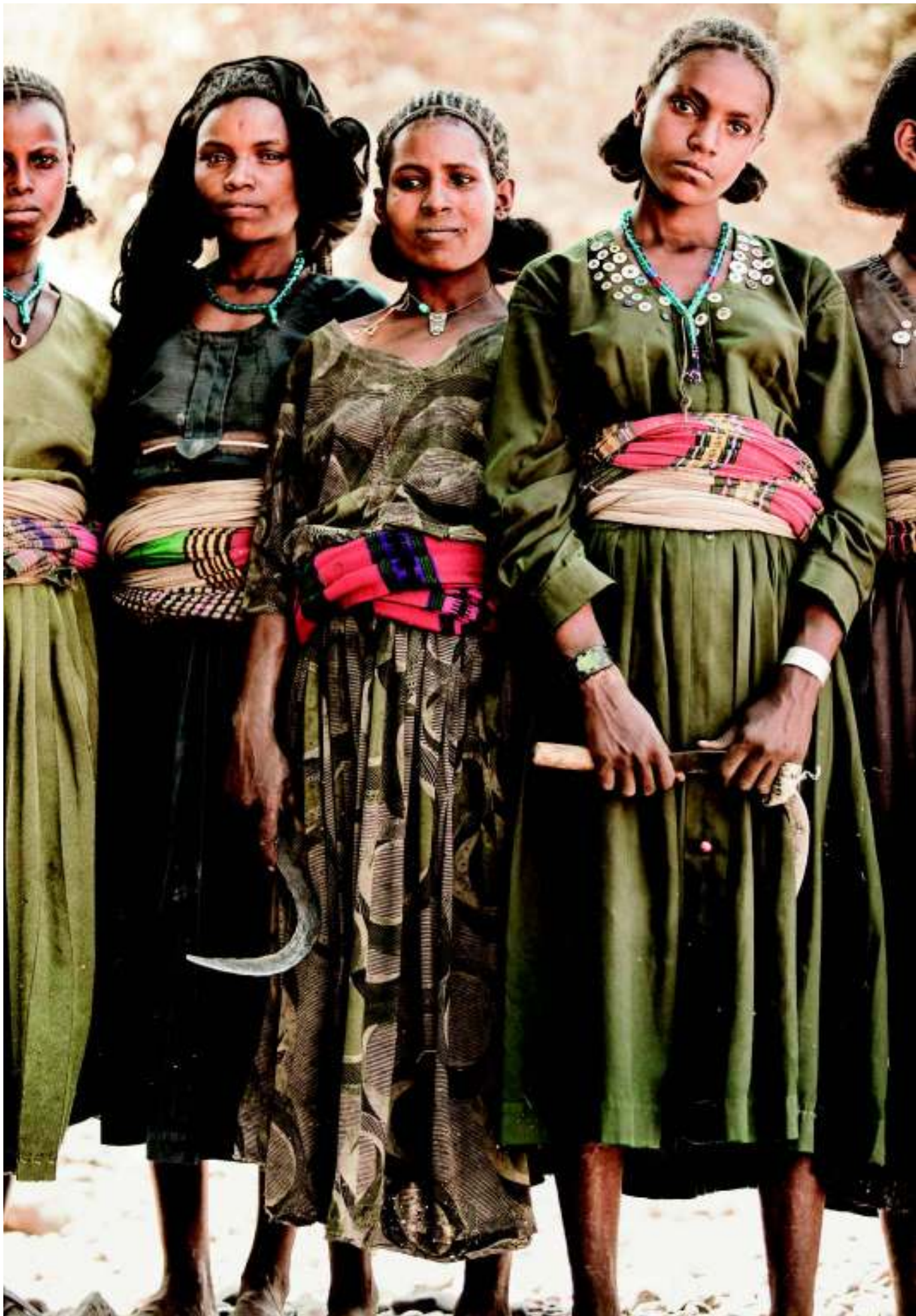
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# YOU WANNA GET HIGH?

A helicopter safari in Ethiopia is intense: one minute you're above the clouds, taking in vast plains, mountains, distant clusters of monolithic churches – the next you've swooped in for an eye-popping close-up. Rodney Bolt holds on tight. Photographs by David Crookes





**T**HE BLACK KITE FLOATED in midair, single feathers on the tips of its wings splayed like fingers as it paused, turned slightly, then dropped earthwards in an instant, to a treasure only it could see. With a beat or two it was up again, circling higher and higher over the Addis Ababa traffic, and away to the hills.

The first scene to grab me in a new city, after leaving the hurly-burly of the airport, always makes an indelible mark. In Addis, it was that black kite – and it proved a fitting image for what Ethiopia had in store. Within hours I'd be off on a helicopter safari across the northern highlands: drifting over mountain-tops, swooping down to savour some delight below, then flying off across vast, open landscapes. In a region of rough roads and long, dusty journeys, I'd be flitting with ease from ancient, rock-hewn churches to dizzily high escarpments, the chopper reducing travel hours to mere minutes.

'Ready to go?' asked pilot Ben Simpson, who met us after the short hop from Addis to the northern town of Mekele. Four passengers, travelling light. He ushered us through the departures hall at Mekele airport, and across the tarmac to a nippy-looking blue-and-white Squirrel B3+ helicopter. We put on headphones and strapped ourselves into our seats before he eased the craft off the ground, edged it forward a little, then darted directly upwards, curling over Mekele and out, northwards, through a craggy valley under a powder-blue sky. Within minutes, there was barely a road to be seen – and not a single vehicle – just solitary walkers and little groups with pack mules on dusty tracks, miles and miles apart.

We dropped down to fly low through a gorge, past a sturdy green-and-pink church standing alone on a ledge of rock. Two large birds took off below us, their white-tipped wings flapping heavily to get them airborne. 'Ground hornbills,' said Simpson. 'It's considered lucky to see white on their wings.' Gelada monkeys, which had come to the river to drink, scattered and clambered up a rock face as we flew overhead. As if taking a small step, the helicopter climbed slightly, skimmed the tops of the cliffs that lined the gorge, and transported us in an instant to another landscape entirely.

Fields of golden grain, patched by deep green and thickets of trees, faded to haze in the distance. Here and there stood a farm compound: a round hut with a conical thatched roof, square outbuildings, a low stone wall. One of the passengers slid back a side door to take photographs; wind whipped through the helicopter as we banked over two men forking straw into a pile, a spray of kernels in the air following the arc of each stroke. Alongside the men, a pair of oxen circled ceaselessly, threshing grain. 'It's biblical,' said Simpson. 'And you saw how clear the river was. That's a testament to the clean way these guys farm.'

Soon, the distant haze began to resolve itself into a jagged mountain range, jutting abruptly from the plain like a line of heavily fortified castles. This was the Gheralta Escarpment, our

first stop. We flew closer. The farm compounds below changed colour, taking on the red of Gheralta's sandstone cliffs. Here, houses are built from what's nearest to hand. Simpson took the helicopter right up to a sheer precipice and hovered until we were able to make out the façade of an ancient church – carved into the rock near the top.

The rock-hewn churches of Gheralta intertwine history with legend. Ethiopia, tradition has it, was first settled by a great-grandson of Noah. The imperial dynasty that ruled for 3,000 years and ended with the death of Haile Selassie in 1975 was, most Ethiopians believe, founded by the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. It is a matter of historical record that Christianity was the official state religion by the middle of the fourth century, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has ploughed its own (often isolated) furrow ever since. The churches around Gheralta, and in the surrounding region of Tigray, mark its path through the course of many centuries. It was time for a closer look.

**W**E LANDED AT Gheralta Lodge, an unobtrusive collection of traditional stone-walled bungalows looking out over the mountains, barely 30 minutes after leaving Mekele; the same journey by road would have taken well over two hours. After a lunch of pasta with fresh pesto that could have held its head high in Genoa (owner Silvio Rizzotti is a devotee of the Slow Food movement, and it shows), we piled into a minibus with thick acrylic fur on the dashboard and fringes on the sun visors, and bumped off along a rutted road, through rich farmland. Gebre, our guide, listed the crops as we passed: wheat, lentils, millet, sorghum. The cruel famines many people still associate with Ethiopia were exacerbated, in a

normally fertile country, by the political ineptness and malice of governments now overthrown. Around us, people were busy with a good harvest.

When the minibus could go no further, we walked, followed by a burgeoning flock of children, little girls of barely four or five carrying younger siblings on their backs. The church of Kidus Giyorgis Mai

Kado (St George of the Running Water), carved from a monolith but free-standing, lies uncharacteristically in a hollow. Local oral tradition and Western academics disagree on the antiquity of the Tigray churches. Current European speculation is that the oldest probably go back to the 10th century, but Gebre believes the origins of Kidus Giyorgis date from at least 600 years before that. He pointed out an outdoor stone lectern that pre-dated the church and rang an ancient bell made from four dangling pieces of slate, perfectly in tune. A call from Gebre's mobile phone brought the priest, still sweating from work in the fields. He kicked off his sandals, put on a shawl and unlocked the church. Momentarily, he lifted the curtain of the tabernacle, allowing us to glimpse the holy ark, a privilege few Westerners are afforded.

Our second stop was Abreha we Atsbeha, where an 18th-century frontage has been built over a carved cliff church of far

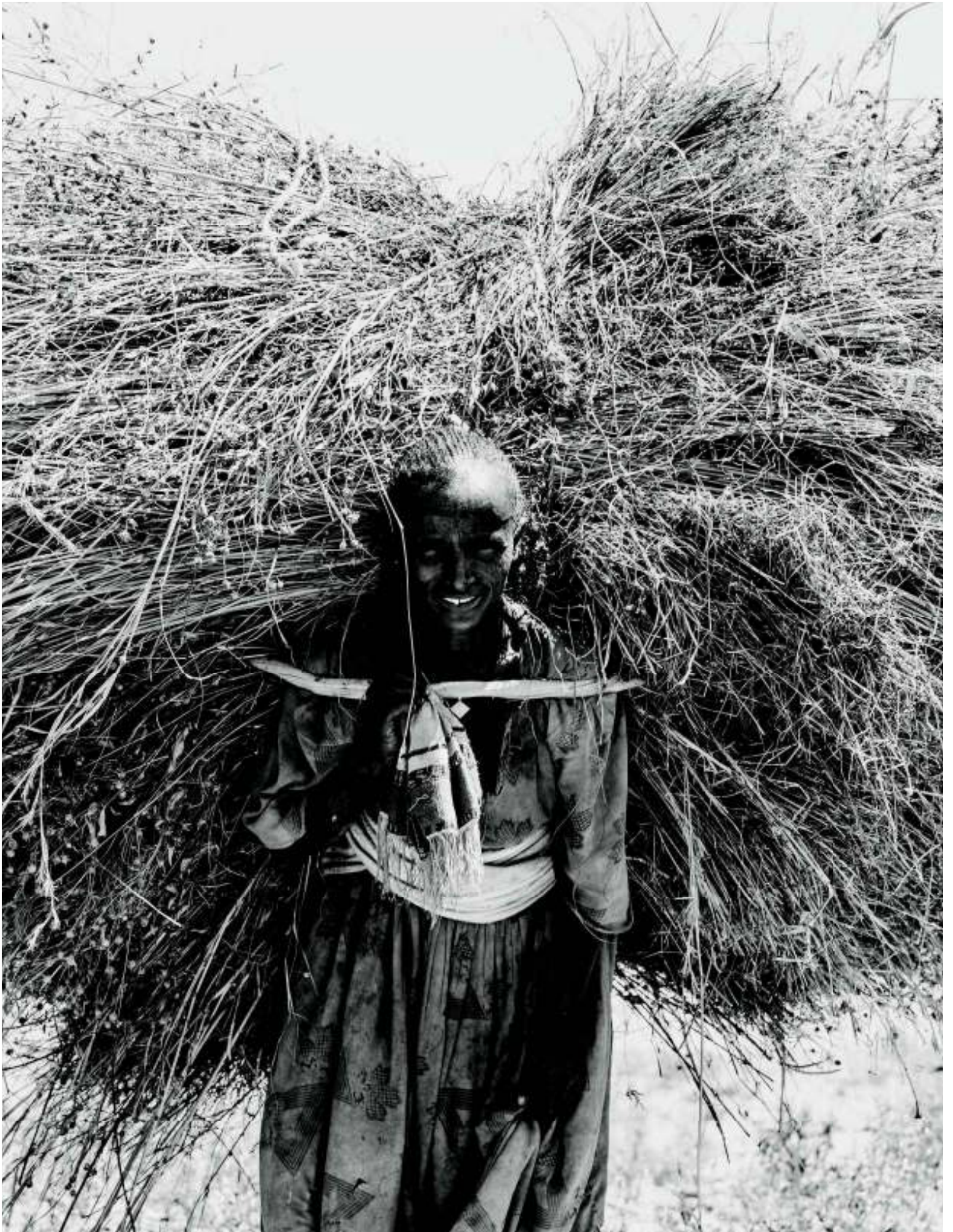
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An Ethiopian man wears a *gabi* as part of a religious service. *Opposite*, conical thatched houses between the Simien Mountains and Lalibela







greater antiquity. We stood alongside white-robed pilgrims as Gebre pointed out a fresco showing the cannibal Belai, who was saved from damnation because the single drop of water he had given a leper in the Virgin's name outweighed the 72 corpses he had devoured, after St Mary cast her shadow over the droplet on the Scales of Judgement. Then it was back to the lodge, for cocktails of Campari and *tej* (local honey wine).

We took off from Gheralta just after dawn. Morning haze draped the mountains and gave soft focus to the farmland below: thatched farmsteads, people walking out to the fields, a caravan of camels getting underway. One minute we were skimming mountain-tops, the next the land dropped suddenly beneath us and we were thousands of feet above a plain. The light slowly strengthened. We aimed south-west towards the Simien range.

'This is where it really starts,' said Simpson, 45 minutes into an already spectacular flight. We banked around a cliff-face to find ourselves in a gorge of the wide, glassy, green Tekeze River. 'It's Africa's answer to the Grand Canyon,' he said, as we dropped down to 30 metres, almost skimming the water's surface, to spot crocodiles, goliath herons, a pelican. Then up again, sometimes lingering to view a waterfall,

sometimes speeding over the tops of craggy hills at upwards of 160km an hour.

At one point, Simpson seemed to be flying directly at a cliff. As we got closer, what had appeared to be solid rock face took on an odd 3-D perspective, then revealed itself as a series of pinnacles, one behind the other. The helicopter slowed. Simpson lowered it towards a blade of rock extending from one of the pinnacles. I shut my eyes. When I opened them again, we had landed – the tail of the chopper jutting out over one cliff, the nose almost touching another. We slid back the doors. The scent of thyme from the bushes around us filled the air. A Rüppell's griffon vulture, reputedly the world's highest flying bird, eyed us as equals as it passed, then rose even higher, to put us in our place. 'This is the coolest breakfast I've ever had,' someone said, as we tucked into coffee, fresh bread rolls, and smoky-flavoured honey from Gheralta.

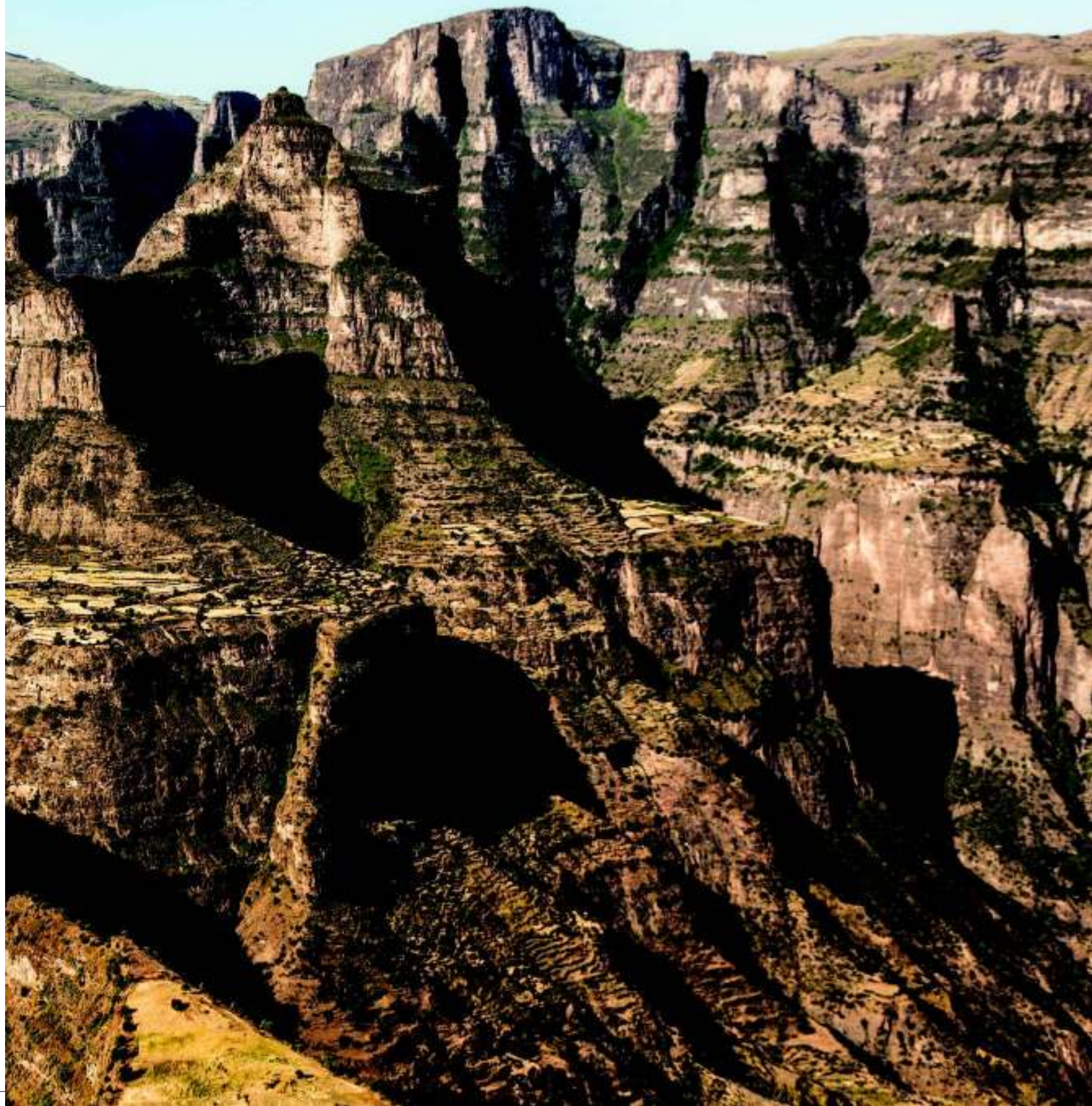
On we flew, through crags, over crevices, past some of the highest mountains in Africa, climbing for a God's-eye view. 'Hikers have no idea,' said Simpson, 'you really can't see this when you are on it.' We landed again on a vertiginous grassy shelf, scattered with semi-precious stones, where it seemed no human had ever been, then flew on to the lodge of the Simien

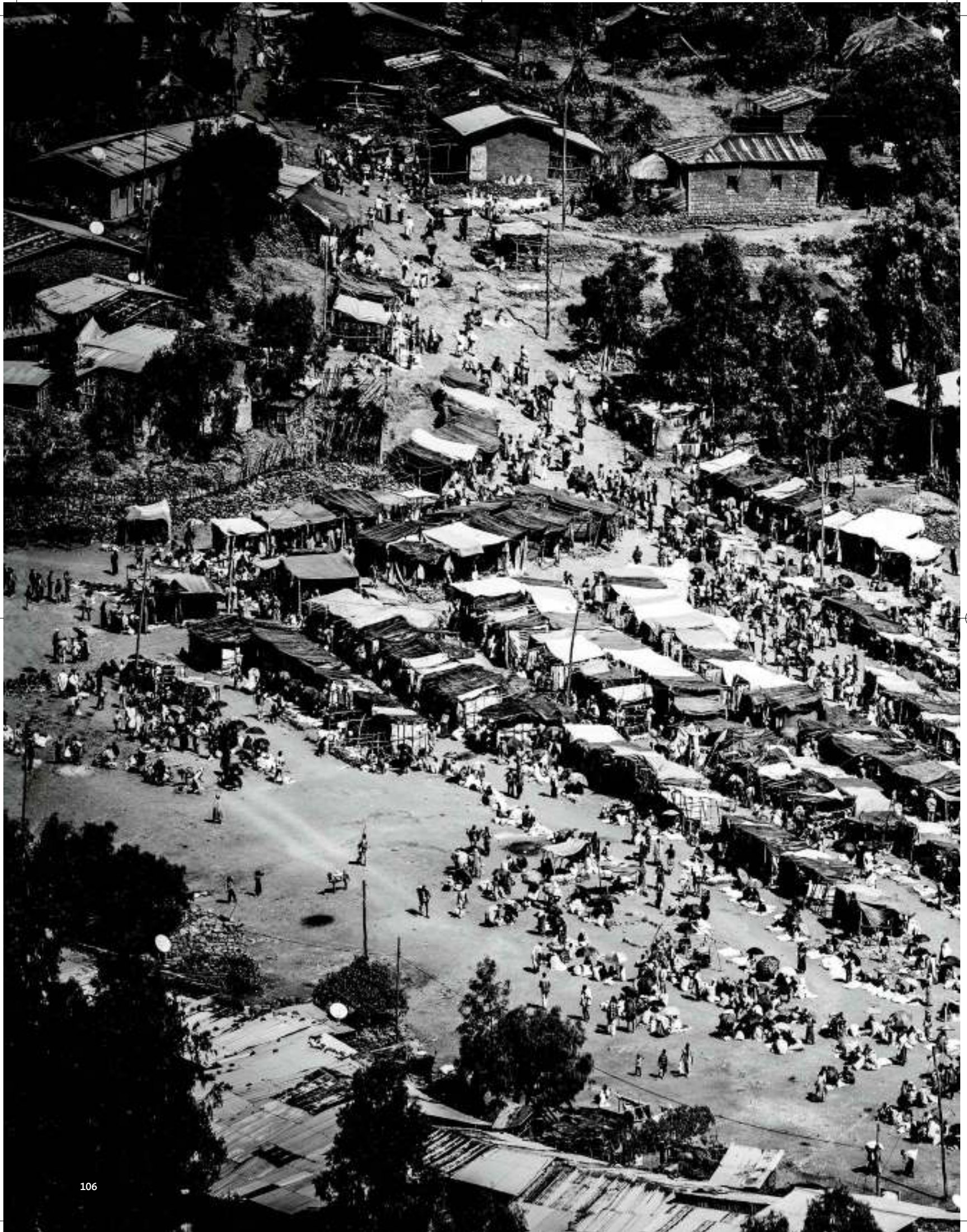
*Above, the church of Biete Giyorgis at Lalibela. Opposite, carrying dried grass back from mountain pastures. Following pages, the Simien Mountains*

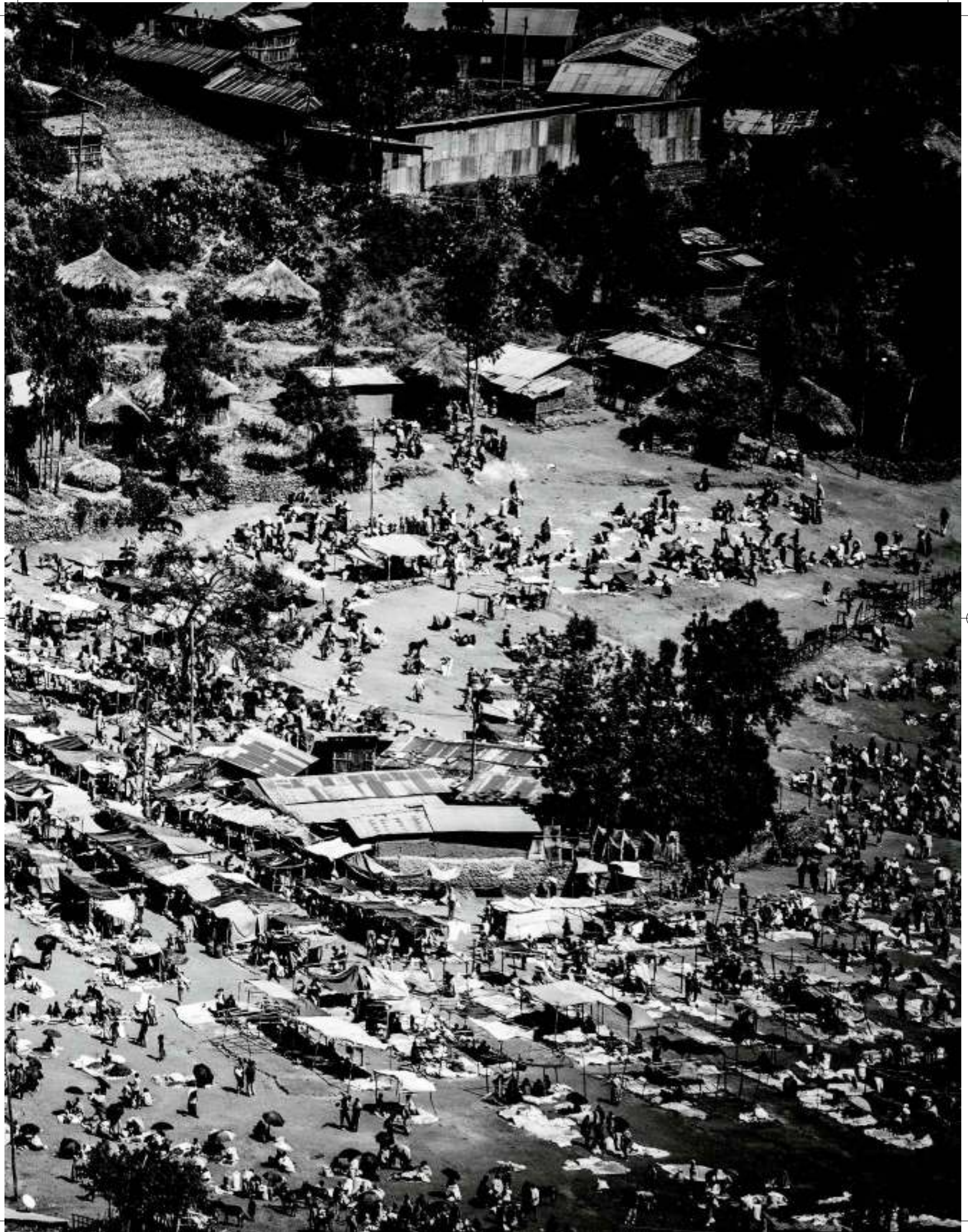
We flew past some of the highest mountains in Africa before landing on a grassy shelf,

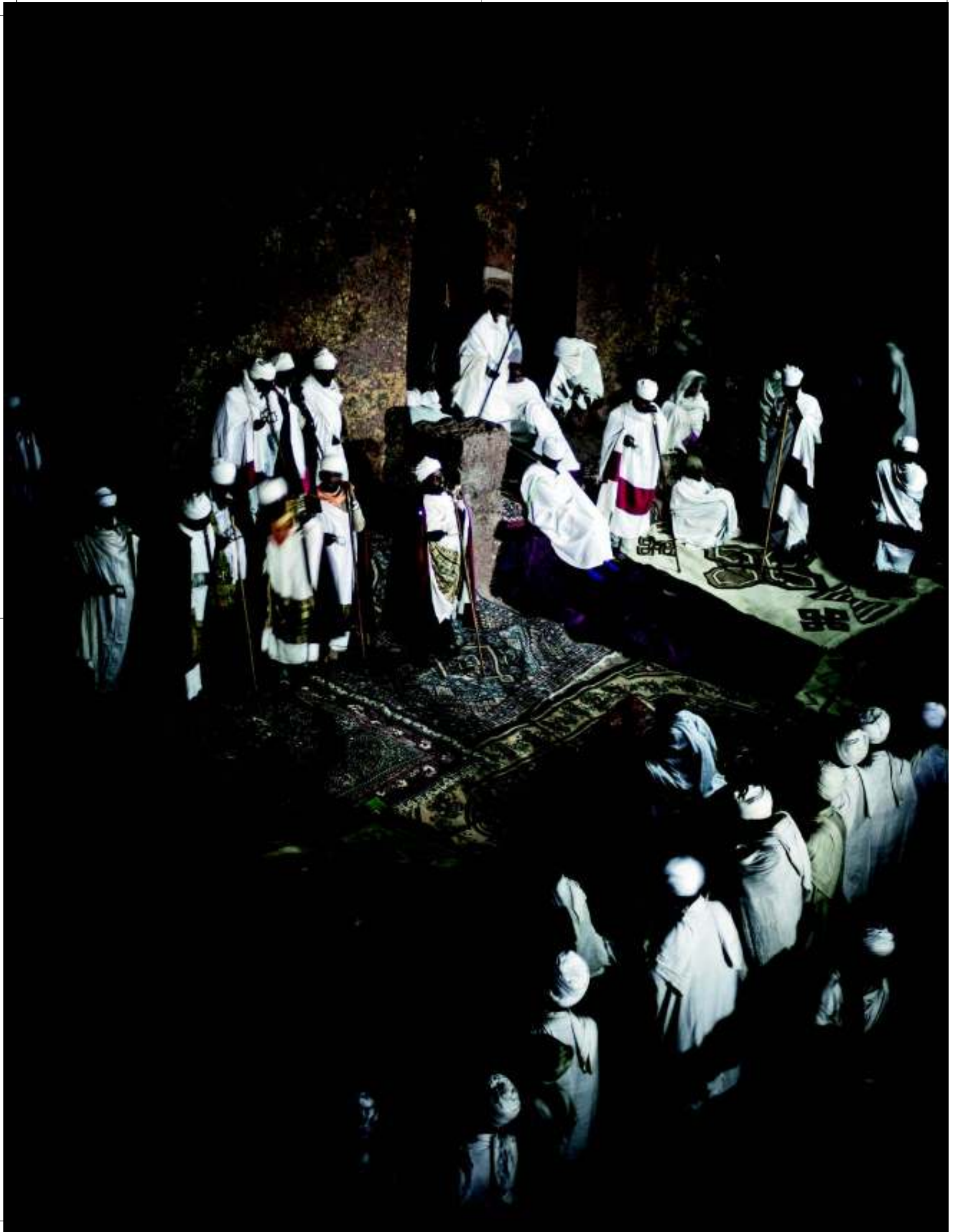


scattered with semi-precious stones, where it seemed no human had ever been









Mountains National Park, suspended at an altitude of 3,260 metres. It took only a short hop into the park in a four-wheel-drive before we spotted a troop of baboon-like Gelada monkeys, the males with red, heart-shaped chest patches and stylish manes. The monkeys nibbled placidly on grasses, their cooing baby-like gurgles and occasional shrieks mingling with the birdsong.

Back at base, a group of children had gathered near the helicopter. They started to clap in rhythm. A lad of eight or nine began a low-voiced song, with which even the tiniest toddler joined in, while two other boys performed a wriggling *eskista* shoulder dance as we took off and turned to follow the Tekeze River south, to the town of Lalibela.

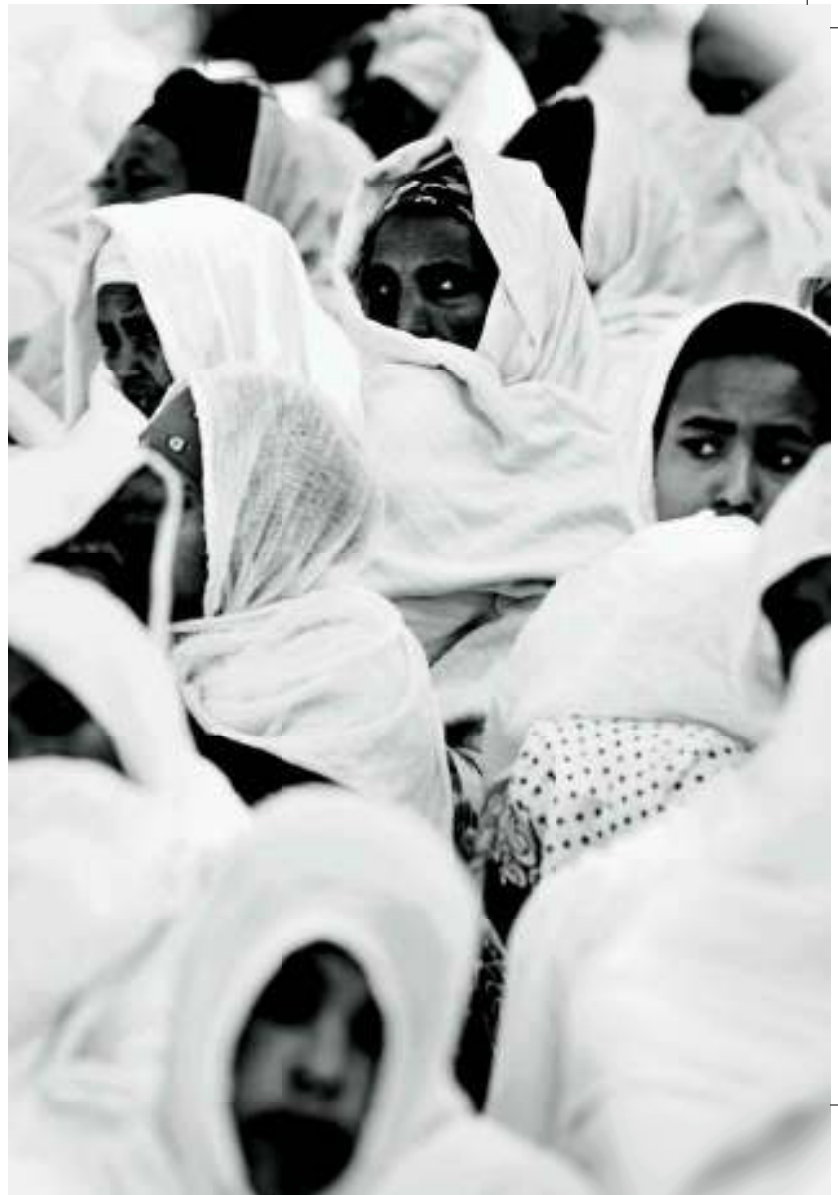
**I** KNEW THAT the 900-year-old churches at Lalibela had been cut out of rock. I hadn't realised that, in many cases, the chisellers started from the top down, first digging a hole around a monolithic block, then carving a façade on it, before tunnelling in to create an interior. Or (some say) possibly doing all of this simultaneously, carving the façade as they descended, while at the same time burrowing in through a loft 'window' to fashion the inside. Either way, it was a bewildering feat of architectural calculation – building in negative, and getting lines and proportions perfect.

We mingled among worshippers in a cluster of churches on the edge of town. Ethiopians retained their sovereignty in the Scramble for Africa. Theirs is not missionary Christianity but a home-grown religion close to its Judaic roots, with ancient traditions. Pilgrims prayed right by the rock face of Biete Medhani Alem (Saviour of the World) Church, as if at Jerusalem's Western Wall. Inside Biete Mariam (St Mary's), Stars of David were carved in the ceiling, and one fresco tapped an even older source, depicting the brown ox of Good doing battle with the black ox of Evil.

That night, when we returned for a festival celebrating the Virgin, priests danced and chanted to drumbeats; in the moonlight figures swathed in white filed along passageways cut into the rock, in scenes that seemed to short-circuit back two millennia. Ceremonies continued through to Sunday morning, when crowds gathered, sitting on the ground outside the churches; slightly out of sync, as each mass found its own pace, different strands of chanting drifted across the town.

Our return flight south towards Addis took us first along a tributary of the Blue Nile. Huge crocodiles slipped into the water as we passed overhead. We landed on a (crocodile-free) bank, and within minutes a group of Wollo people came from the fields to investigate: the women with braided hair and pretty buttons sewn on their dresses, many of the men wearing goatskin capes. Amid hilarity and sign language, one of the men offered to share lunch with me, then ran back to the fields and returned with a spherical covered basket containing *injera* (pancake bread). Simpson presented a precious jar of Gheralta honey, which he'd been saving for his children, in exchange. Then we pressed on. It was harvest time, the farmers had work to do.

The Blue Nile is muddy brown. The limpid tributary we had been following ran up against it with a sharp change of colour. We tracked the river gorge south, and as the Blue Nile turned to flow back north towards Khartoum, we left it to return to the corrugated-iron roofs, smoky air and circling black kites of Addis Ababa. **T**



## Getting there

**Journeys by Design** (+44 1273 623790; [www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com)) offers a 10-night helicopter safari through northern Ethiopia, combining Lalibela, the Simien Mountains and the Danakil Depression, from £19,550 per person, including a private helicopter with pilot, full-board accommodation and ground support.

*Top right, women in white robes attend Sunday-morning worship at Biete Medhani Alem, one of the 900-year-old churches in Lalibela. Opposite, a night-time ceremony celebrating the Virgin at Biete Mariam. Previous pages, the Saturday market in the Lalibela*