

DEPARTURES

October 2013

WILD
KENYA

EAT
SLEEP
GOLF
CAPE
TOWN

HOLY
ETHIOPIA

THE VANISHING
SERENGETI

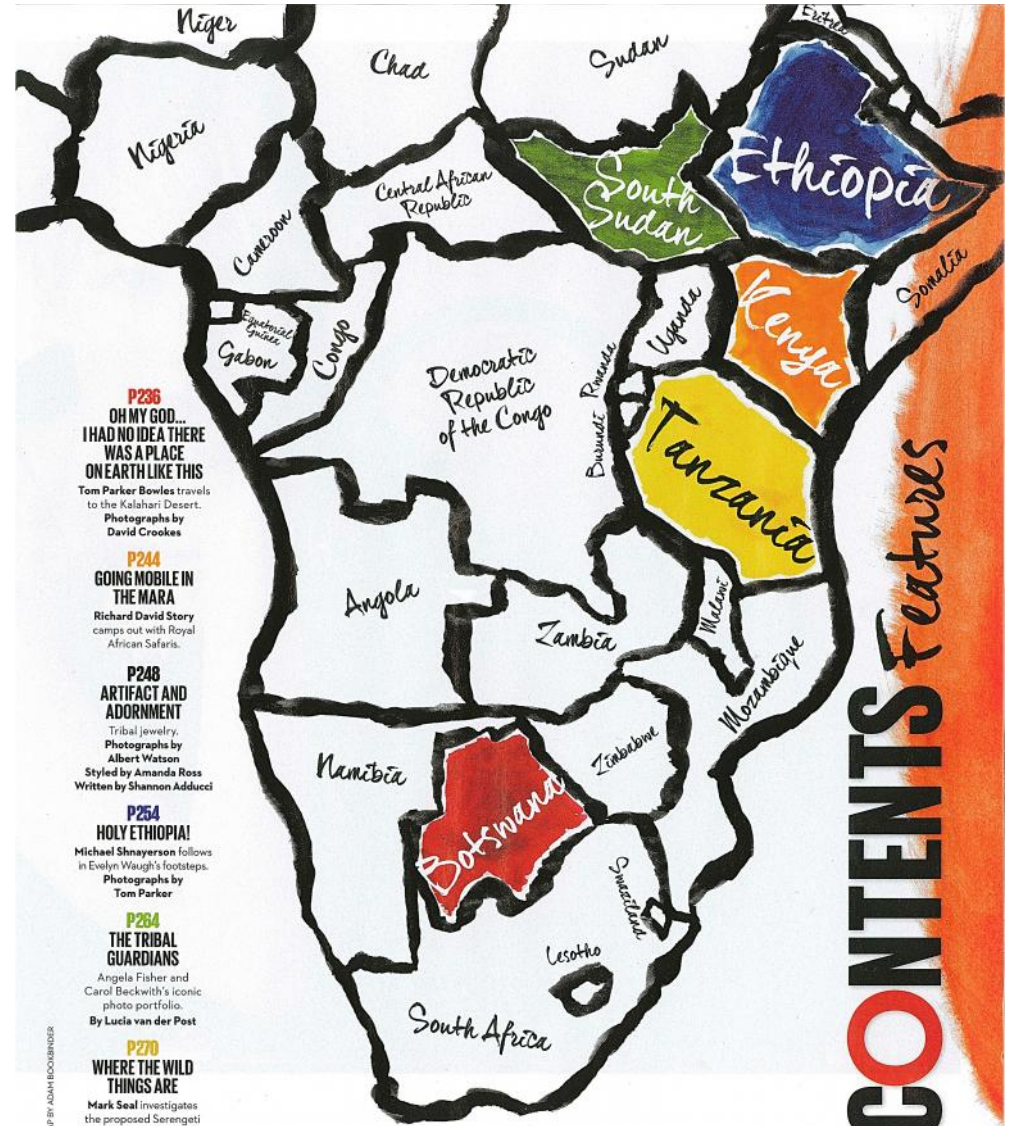
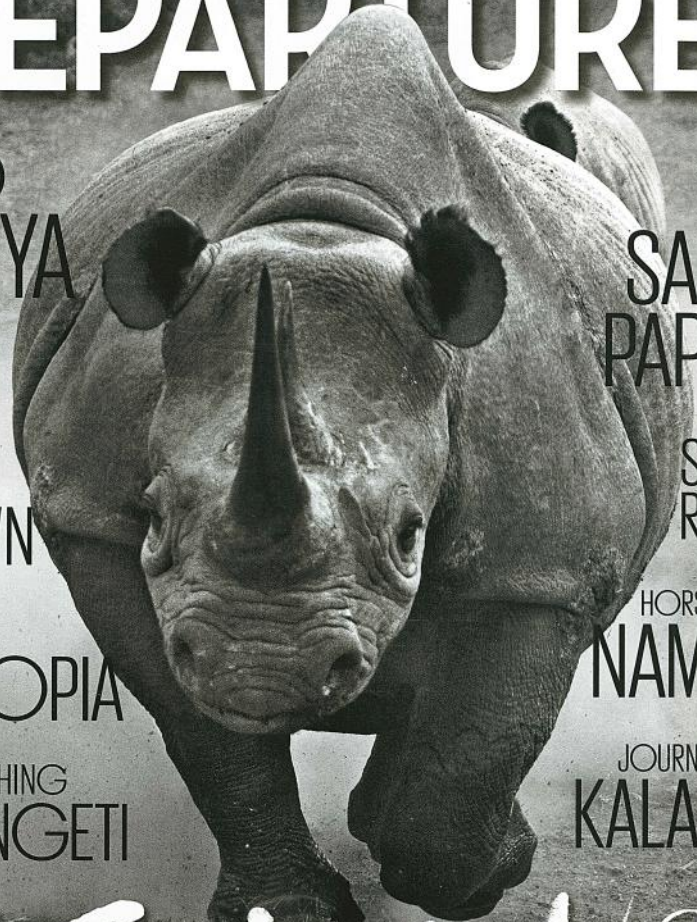
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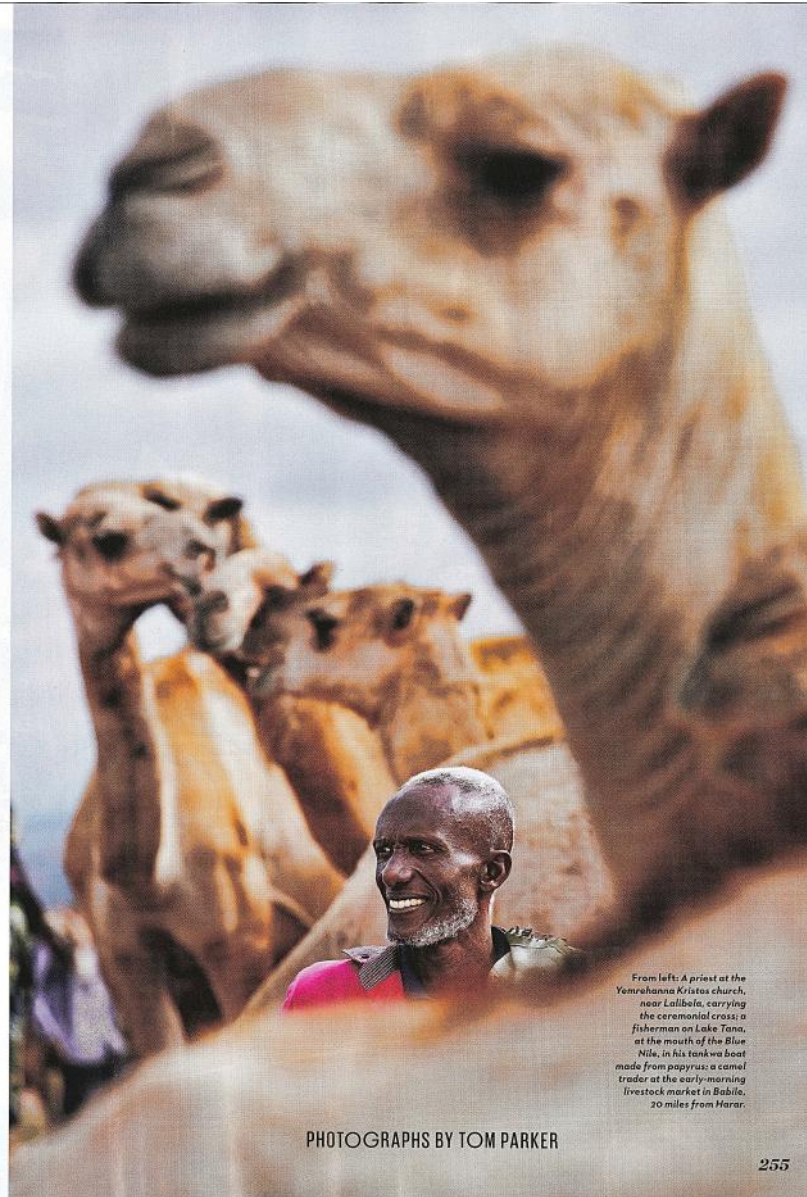
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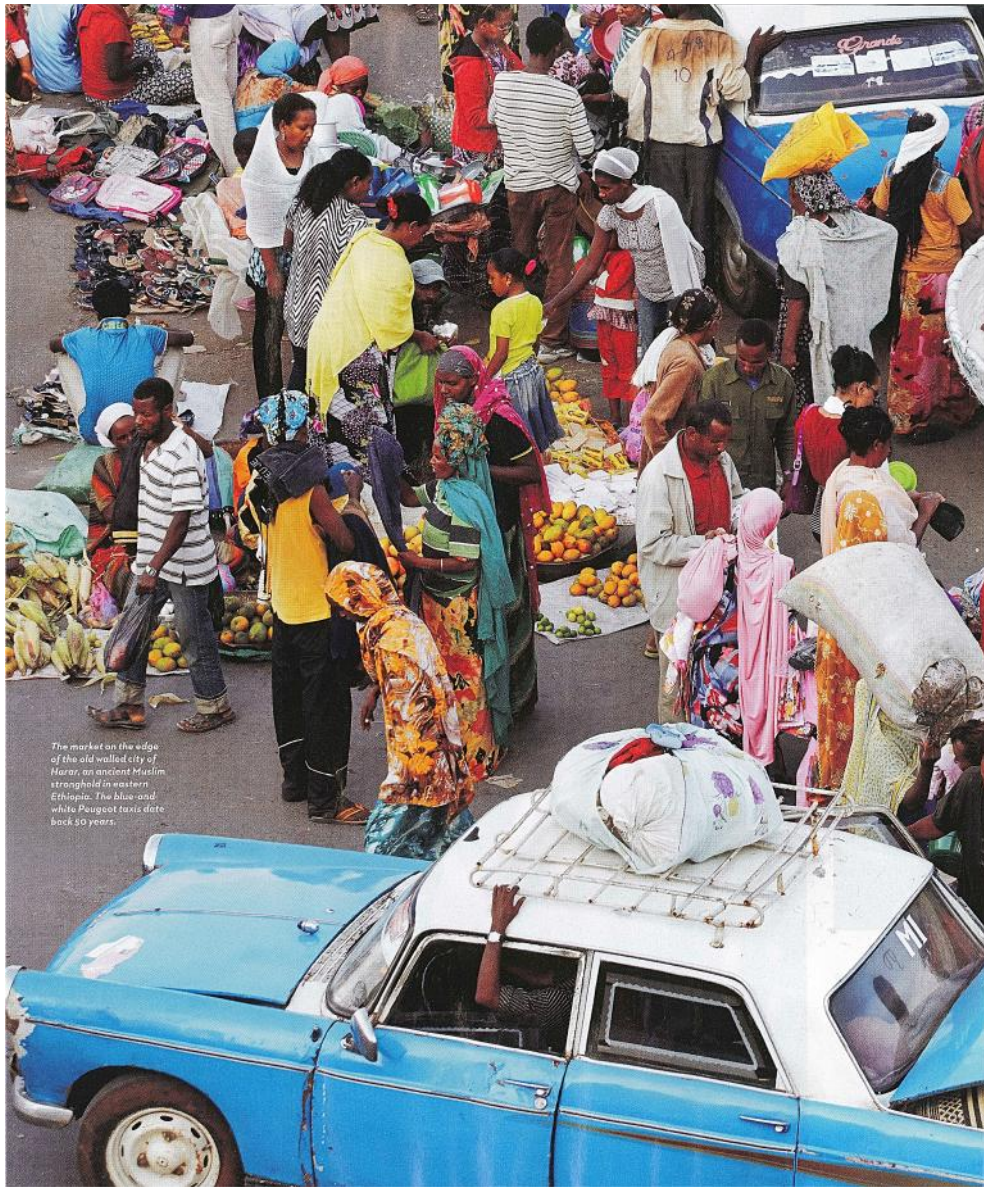
INSPIRED BY TWO OF BRITISH JOURNALIST EVELYN WAUGH'S MOST FAMOUS NOVELS, **MICHAEL SHNAYERSON** VISITS THE EAST AFRICAN COUNTRY TO DISCOVER WHAT'S CHANGED AND—MORE ASTOUNDINGLY—WHAT REMAINS THE SAME.

HOLY ETHIOPIA!

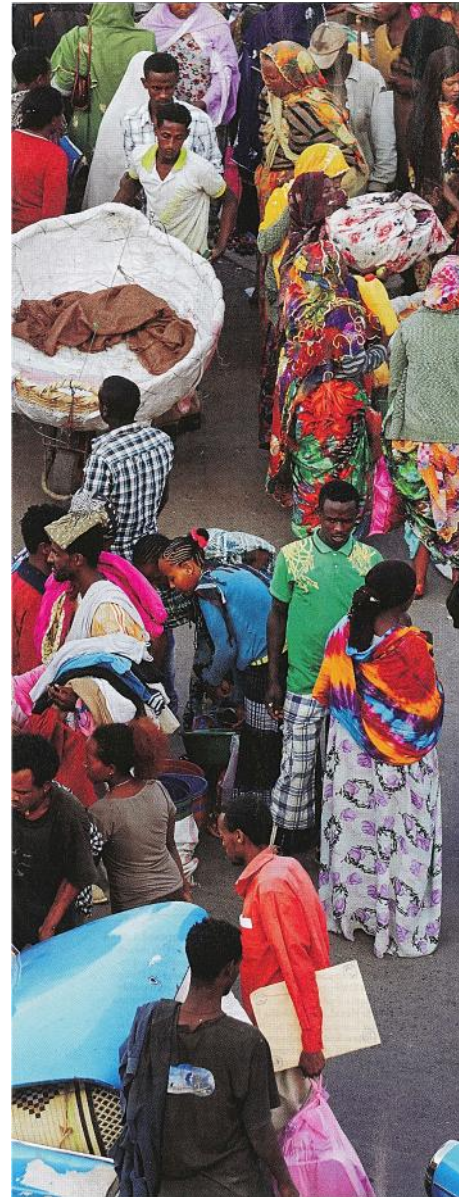


From left: A priest at the Yemrehanna Kristos church, near Lalibela, carrying the ceremonial cross; a fisherman on Lake Tana, at the mouth of the Blue Nile, in his tankwa boat made from papyrus; a camel trader at the early-morning livestock market in Babel, 20 miles from Harar.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM PARKER



The market on the edge of the old walled city of Harar, an ancient Muslim stronghold in eastern Ethiopia. The blue-and-white Peugeot taxis date back 50 years.



A stylish woman in Manhattan, wife of a major institutional asset manager, had just returned from Ethiopia. "I travel with a very intrepid group, ladies all," she told me. "We went to Iran, then to Burma..." She paused. "They were luxuries by comparison."

In Ethiopia, my new friend related, the roads were dusty, the villages dirt-poor, the electricity intermittent. At one stop the electricity never came on. "We ended up sleeping in tents beside the hotel," she said, "in a garden that was a field of weeds, by a pool without water."

Yet this hardy group had crossed paths with another posse of wealthy New York women, all Ethiopia-bound. Off they were to see the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, carved right out of the ground, and the island monasteries of Lake Tana. For all the discomforts, my friend admitted, the sights were astounding. "And I'll say this," she noted wryly, "we got there before the tourists."

I was intrigued, more so because in 1930, one of my favorite travelers, British writer Evelyn Waugh, had braved far more primitive conditions to cover the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie in the country then known as Abyssinia. He wrote it up with his usual wry asperity, mocking one and all. Five years later, Waugh was back for the Italian invasion that sent Selassie into exile until the Allies restored the emperor to his throne in 1941. Again he wrote up his adventures.

The accounts gave rise, in turn, to two of Waugh's best comic novels: *Black Mischief*, about coronation misdoings in an African country quite like Abyssinia, and *Scoop*, the brilliant satire of glory-seeking journalists sent to cover an African war that keeps not happening until they're forced to start making it up. Yet Waugh managed to write both of these books about the country without saying why he liked it. Something had hooked him. But what? And was it still there—in a place on the cusp of rediscovery? I set off to find out.

MOST VISITORS TO ADDIS ABABA ARRIVE FEELING ILL, Waugh observed. He came to the capital by boat and train, a trip of nearly two weeks. I, too, felt ill—dizzy, short of breath—as I left Addis's airport. For good reason: Addis is the world's third-highest capital city, some 8,300 feet above sea level. It's also close to the equator, so its altitude has the blithe effect of giving it balmy weather year-round.

Waugh found a city of dagger-wearing, white-robed Ethiopians followed by slave boys carrying rifles. He noted men walking hand in hand past "wretched tin stores." The streets were lively and crowded, he wrote, the "universal white costume being here and there relieved by the brilliant blues and violets of mourning or the cloaks of the upper classes." I saw no daggers or slave boys with guns, but I did see young men hand in hand on every block, oblivious to Western connotations. As for the shops, they'd spread in every direction. Since 1980, Ethiopia's population has more than doubled to 84 million. Traffic in Addis is epic, with no stoplights, at least none that I saw. Traffic cops monitor the largest crossings; human nature rules the rest. Worse, for a visitor, the city has virtually no street names or numbers. I got used to handing my cell phone to the taxi driver and having the person I was to meet give directions.

Waugh's first impressions were, alas, not improved by his return visit. "They had no crafts," he wrote. "It was extraordinary to find a people with an ancient and continuous habit of life who had

produced so little. They built nothing; they made no gardens; they could not dance." This was patently untrue: The woven baskets of Harar were then, as now, marvels of craftsmanship; the monolithic churches I was about to see were considered an eighth world wonder; Waugh himself would see fabulous dancing, as would I. But by then he was simply playing to his British colonial readers.

On my first evening in Addis, I passed a shop that restored my spirits, both in the city and its people. The store was the size of a picnic table, except there was no table in it. Under a bare bulb, eight men sat on the floor shoulder to shoulder, drinking coffee and talking. In the country where it originated, coffee is serious business. The coffee ceremony starts with scattering grasses across the floor. Then incense is burned, beans roasted, water boiled, all on bits of glowing charcoal. At three cups a sitting, three sittings a day, Ethiopians are probably the most caffeinated people on the planet.



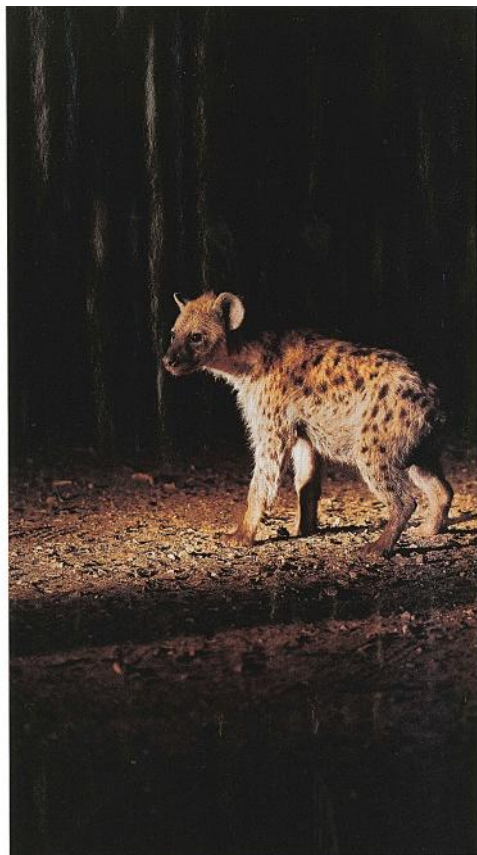
On his first trip, when the pomp and silliness of Haile Selassie's coronation were done, Waugh took an "American car"—I picture a black Packard—north to one of Ethiopia's holiest places, the monastery at Debre Libanos, where a piece of Christ's cross is said to be kept in the sanctuary.

It wasn't a casual choice: There wouldn't be an Ethiopia without its ancient religions, mingling and mystical, as palpable today as they were 2,000 years ago. An orthodox Christianity flourished in the north and down as far as Debre Libanos, Islam colonized the east, and the black southern tribes retained their African faiths. All those influences remain. Yet so does Judaism, after a tenth century B.C. visit by Ethiopia's Queen of Sheba to King Solomon in Jerusalem—so goes the legend—which led to romance and a son who brought back the Ark of the Covenant, along with 1,000 Jewish followers. That son, Menelik, began a dynasty of Judaism-infused Christian emperors that continued—again, by legend—right through to Selassie. The Ark, with its Ten Commandments on two stone tablets, is said to reside still under guard in a church in Axum, though other countries make similar claims.

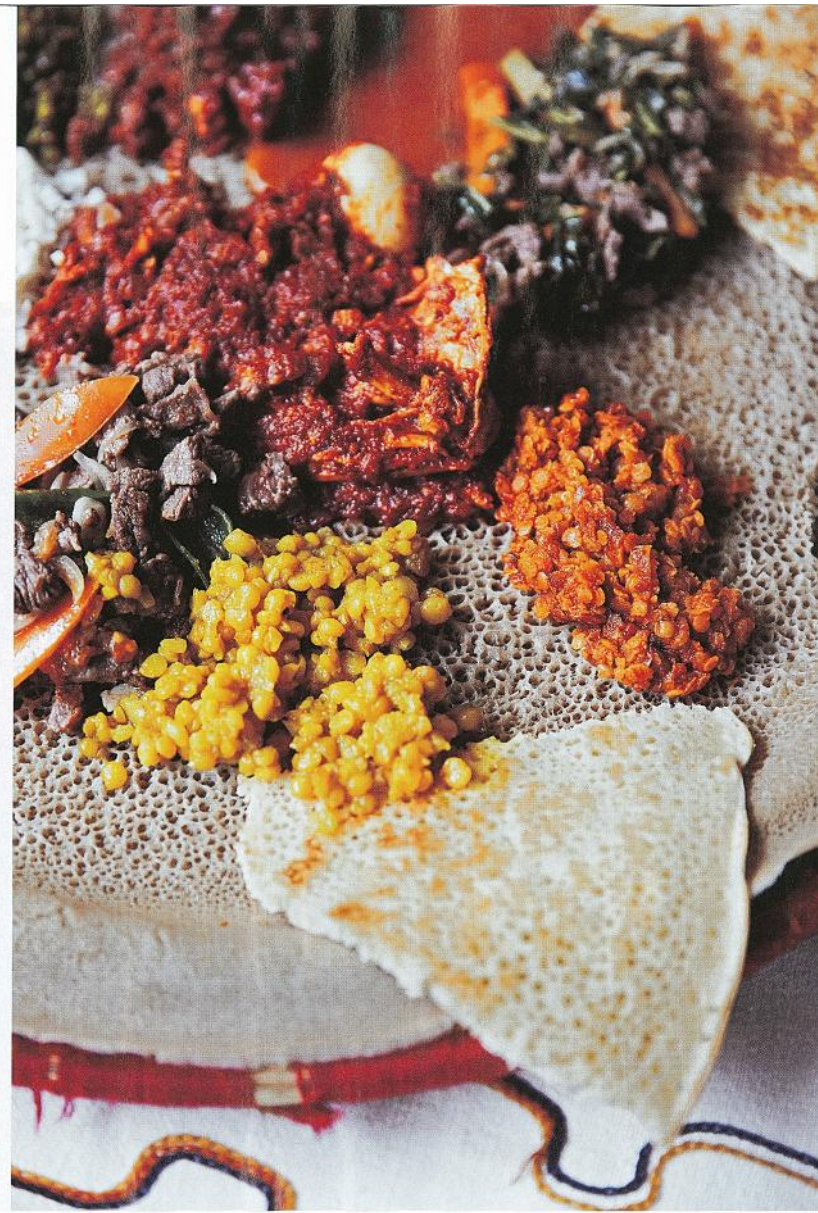
Waugh drove across roadless fields, following wheel ruts and markers. Today there's a two-lane blacktop, but little else has changed. From Addis, the road rolls down through a wide valley with mountain ridges on each side. Cattle graze on deep green fields. It's Wisconsin with thatched huts—the furthest thing from famine one could imagine.

The drive is the point of the journey, for Debre Libanos, though spiritually important, is architecturally ho-hum. Waugh visited the seventh edifice on the site since 1284; I saw the eighth. "A mob of ragged boys, mostly infected with disagreeable skin conditions, surrounded us," an irked Waugh reported. I found that with an Ethiopian guide, here as elsewhere, the importuners kept their distance. Waugh climbed, as I did, to the nearby holy spring in a mossy hillside cave. He saw corpses to be blessed; mercifully, I didn't. Both of us wanted to head farther north to more dramatic sights. "But this would require camping equipment and the organization of a caravan," Waugh raved. I just hopped a plane.

Inland flights, more than anything else, have transformed Ethiopia travel. No more weeks by car on dusty roads to trace the northern historical circuit; now each next stop is an hour away, and good hotels have followed. I did the loop from the west, starting in Bahir Dar, on Lake Tana. With its palm-lined boulevard from the airport,

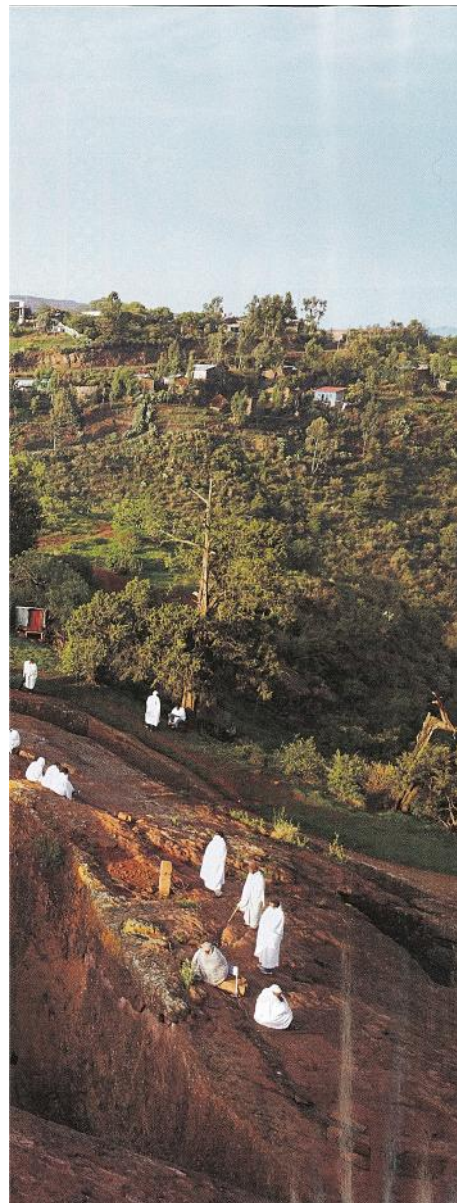
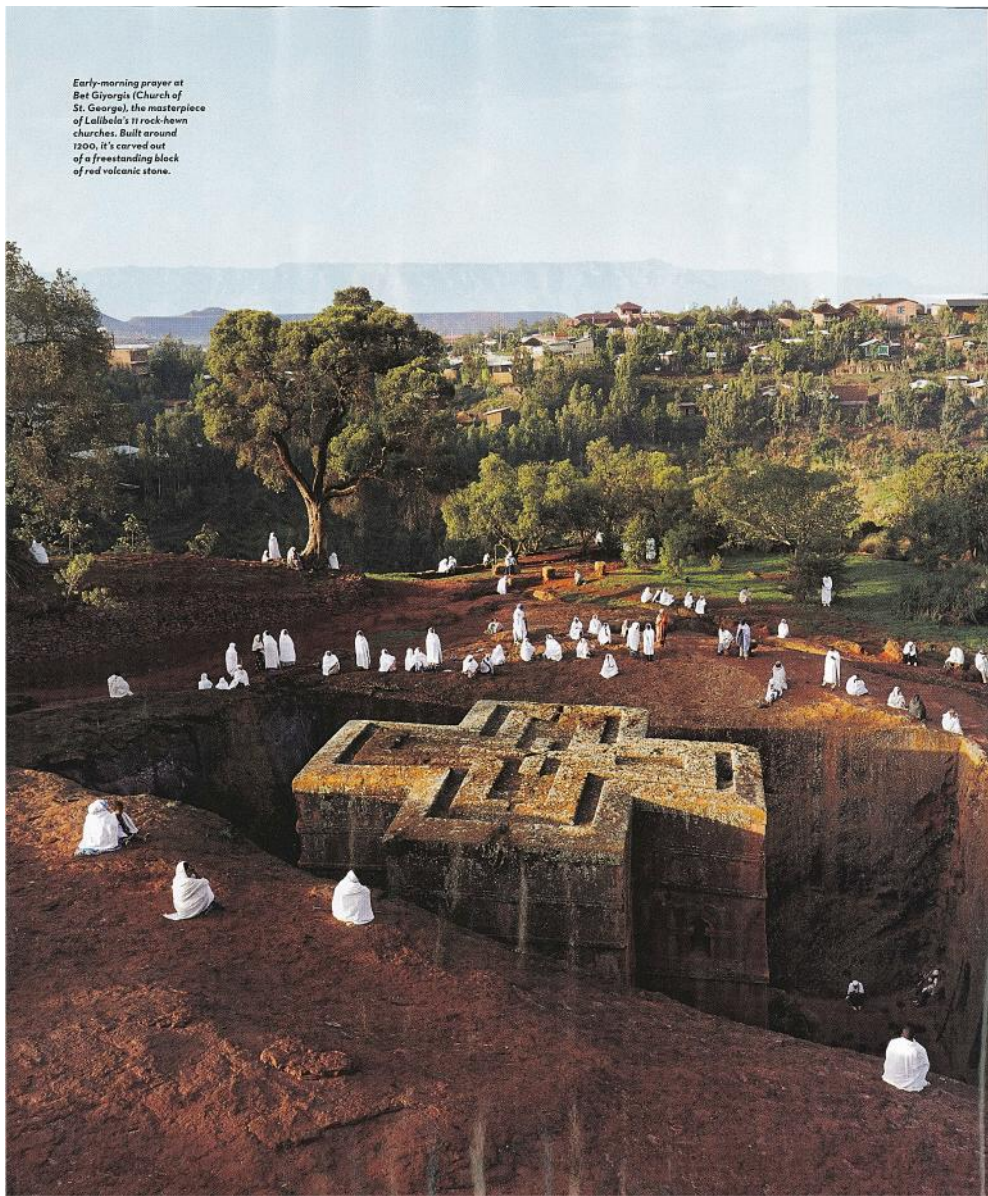


A young hyena arrives for the nightly feeding ritual outside the gates of Harar; a traditional shiring plate of injera (bread), with a selection of wat, kitfo and other vegetable curries at the Seven Olives Hotel restaurant in Lalibela.



THE DETAILS Given that I wanted to follow in Waugh's footsteps, I made my own arrangements through a local Ethiopian travel agency. This meant paying in cash, which brought its own complications. For smoother end-to-end service, see "Guide to the Superguides" (page 92). Journeys by Design is particularly strong on Ethiopia. In Addis, the top hotel is unquestionably the **Sheraton Addis** (rooms, from \$275; Taitu St., 251-11/517-1717; sheratonaddis.com). The **Radisson Blu Hotel, Addis Ababa** (rooms, from \$215; Kazanchis Business District, Kirkos Subcity, Kefelele 251-11/515-7600; radissonblu.com) is also good, while the **Hilton Addis Ababa** (rooms, from \$205; Menelik II Ave., 251-11/551-0004; hilton.com) is okay but tired. In Bahir Dar, the **Kuriftu Resort & Spa** (rooms, from \$225; Bahir Dar, 251-11/662-3605; kurifturesortspa.com) is swell—as is its sister lodge (rooms, from \$100; Debra Zeit, 251-91/109-7185), south of Addis in Debra Zeit. The **Mountain View Hotel** (rooms, from \$50; Kefelele 3, 251-53/536-0804; mountainviewhotel.com) in Lalibela is clean and well-kept, and the **Heritage Plaza Hotel** (rooms, from \$45; Harar, 251-28/666-5137; plazahotelharar.com) in Harar is clean but not much else. —M.S.

Early-morning prayer at
Bet Giyorgis (Church of
St. George), the masterpiece
of Lalibela's 11 rock-hewn
churches. Built around
1200, it's carved out
of a freestanding block
of red volcanic stone.



tiny tuk-tuk taxis and donkey-drawn carts piled with hay, Bahir Dar reminded me of Babar's Celesteville. I checked in at the lakefront Kuriftu Resort, a fairly new arrival on the circuit. The Kuriftu and its sister lodge south of Addis are virtually leading the country's nascent hotel industry into the 21st century. Its rooms have lovely canopied beds, dark African furniture and stone fireplaces; the grounds include a lakefront pool and a regal dining room.

My guide insisted that one of Bahir Dar's great attractions—the falls at the start of the Blue Nile, before it heads into Egypt's White Nile—remained worth seeing. An hour's jouncing drive on a dirt road, past sugarcane and small boys with grown-up frowns herding cattle, confirmed what I'd heard: The once-great falls is now a modest brown flow, thanks to a hydroelectric plant upriver. "But look," my guide said, pulling out a one birr note. He showed me the engraving on back: It was the falls as it once had been, wide across the cliffs. No more. And yet the plant has electrified thousands of homes. What was a guide to do? In a country as poor as Ethiopia, with an average annual household income of less than \$400, the answer was obvious: Enjoy the juice and tell the tourists nothing has changed. I'd have done the same.

The day was saved by a fast motorboat ride across Lake Tana to the unspoiled Zege Peninsula. Vervet monkeys jumped about as we walked a path to the 14th-century monastery of Ura Kidane Mihret. Within the circular church's massive wood doors were brightly painted Bible scenes. They looked freshly done, and probably were. ("When they begin to grow shabby and the church can afford it," Waugh wrote, "a painter is called in to repaint them, as in Europe one calls in the paperhanger.") A monk showed me gold and silver relics. The greater treasures lay inside the church's sanctuary; only priests allowed.

The next day, we journeyed to two of the island monasteries. On a hilltop sat the circular church of Kebran Gabriel. One monk greeted us shyly at the pier. At the start of the steep climb, a sign read "No Intranee for Ladis." Women are, in fact, prohibited from several of the island monasteries. At Daga Estifanos, where we arrived as some two dozen monks were returning on a boat resembling the *African Queen*. They jumped into the waist-deep water with their robes on, struggling under the weight of huge rocks they'd found somewhere to add to a handmade jetty. Whether for practical reasons or as another cause of self-inflicted discomfort, it was hard to say, since they spoke only Amharic.

I preferred Dek Island: subsistence farms untouched by time. As we stepped ashore, three children ran to meet us, astounded by the sight of visitors. Behind them, their father was working his field with a hand-hewn, horse-drawn plough, the same kind I would later see in the national museum, from thousands of years ago. How many generations of his family had farmed here? He hesitated. "Ten?" But maybe 20. Who knew?

Bahir Dar by comparison was a great metropolis, but it had its quirks. The power went out. The next day, Kuriftu's credit card machine was on the fritz. (Outside Addis, it turns out, most generally are.) How would I pay for my two nights? A hotel worker drove me to an ATM. Fortunately, the power was on again. The machine kicked out 9,000 birr: about \$485. I spread the 6,000 birr I owed across the reception desk. Smiles returned, and I made my plane after all, to Lalibela.

Up the mountain road to Lalibela, hundreds trudged with heavy

bundles, headed for Saturday's market. By midday it was in full swing. Livestock in one area, spices in another; fresh honey here, rock salt from the Danakil there. The churches on market day were empty, silent—and astonishing. Starting in the 12th century under King Lalibela, the churches began to take shape like sculptures within the ground. First the stone cutters carved a deep four-sided crevice, like a moat or a picture frame. Then, from below, they carved inward, creating windows, doors and vaulted spaces. In one after another of the 11 belowground churches, linked by tunnels and chasms, my guide, Hailu, pointed out Greek and Roman patterns, Maltese crosses and the pale hues of fading frescoes. Also, the occasional Star of David.

At one point Hailu grinned and led the way into a black tunnel. I felt a brushing of bat wings. The route, he explained as we went step by step in pitch blackness, was called the Tunnel of Hell: Through it prisoners were herded up to a church probably used as a court. My heart was in my throat. If that tunnel had gone on another 25 feet, my claustrophobia would have gotten the better of me.

That evening, after resting at the well-run Mountain View hotel, I went with Hailu to a local restaurant for standard Ethiopian fare: a big, communal platter piled with bits of grilled meat, bean paste, salad greens and more. First we washed our hands. Then we dug in together, using strips of *injera*, the thin, damp, bread-like staple that Ethiopians use as an edible napkin to scoop up the food: no flatware, just fingers.

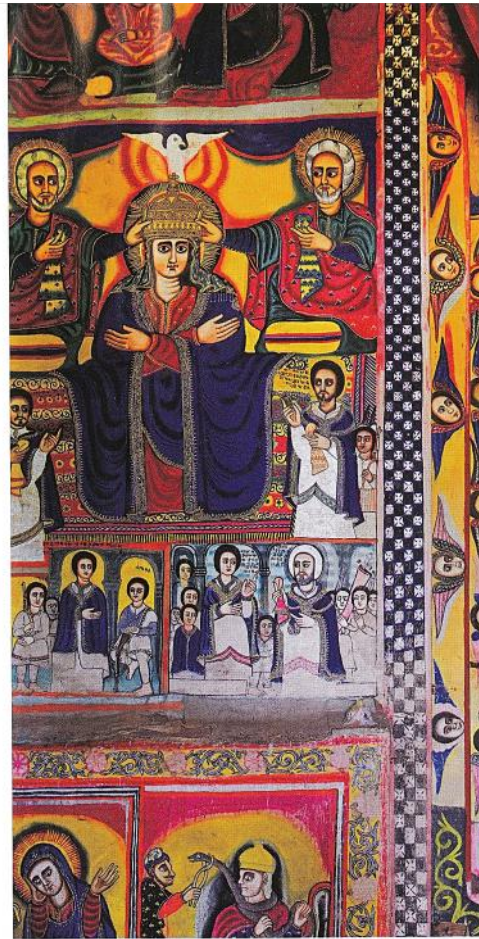
Afterward we went to a marvelous café called Torpedo. In the grotto-like setting, amid Christmas-light strings of red and green bulbs, a musician played his *masinko*, the size of a ukulele with just one string. As he sang, two female dancers joined him, doing a fast shoulder shake that moved more than their shoulders. Waugh had seen the same in Addis. He had the singing pegged, too: The performers focused on one member of the audience, literally singing his praises, with the hope of a tip in return.

Why come to Ethiopia? By now the reasons *not* to come were all too clear: The big game was gone; there was birdwatching here, and the occasional baboon, but no safaris to speak of. The cuisine had its fans, but I wasn't one of them. And Addis was a mess. The landscape was gorgeous—that much was for sure. From the mountainous north to the stark desert south, with the Great Rift Valley as its spine, Ethiopia had natural splendors aplenty. But the people and their faith—faith that had sustained them since early Mediterranean times, faith that had brought them through countless famines and imbued them even now with pride and strength despite their abject poverty—were the reasons to experience this magical country.

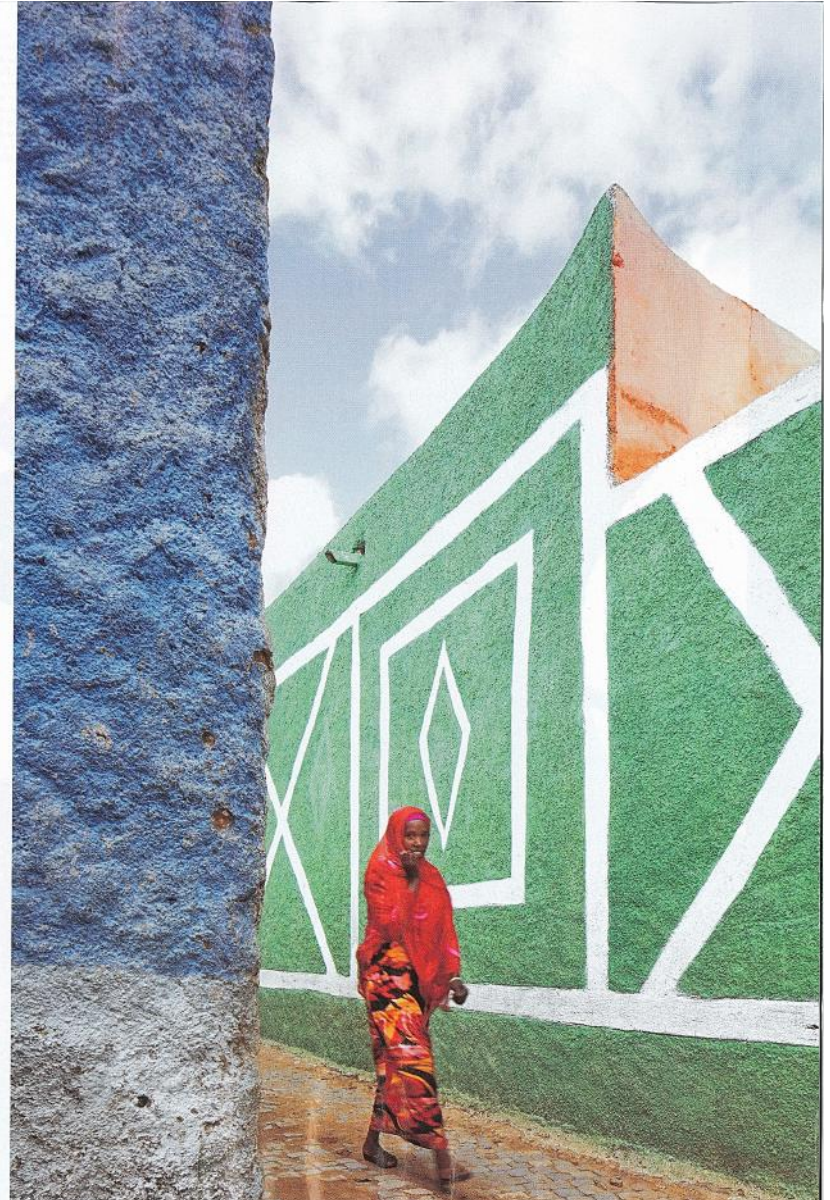
At the early Sunday service, with the white-robed faithful everywhere, filling any available space and soaking up the prayers of a thousand years, I got that. And I wondered: Had Waugh?

With an extra week and a good pair of hiking boots, I could have gone farther north to Gondar, gateway to the splendid Simien Mountains, and trekked the ridge road of that World Heritage site, keeping an eye out for baboons. Dichards camp; tenderfoot stay in one of the two simple lodges; either way you bring provisions by mule, which certainly captures the flavor of Ethiopian backcountry travel in Waugh's time. I might have flown north again, to Axum and Mekele, completing the northern historical circuit and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 277 ■



Inside the 300-year-old Azuwa Maryam monastery on the Zago Peninsula, where paintings have been used to teach illiterate monks stories of the Bible; a woman walls alongside the brightly painted walls of Harar, whose original five gates date back to the 16th century.



seeing more rock-hewn churches, if not the Ark in its guarded sanctuary. Instead, with an itinerary of eight days and a curiosity about the Islamic east, I flew to one of Ethiopia's least-visited places: the walled city of Harar.

Waugh had approached Harar with uncharacteristic excitement. "There was glamor in all the associations of Harar," he wrote. An Arab city and market crossroads ruled from across the Red Sea until its 19th-century conquest by Ethiopia, Harar remained as strongly Islamic as the rest of the country was Christian. Today, with its 82 mosques, it still is.

Waugh took an 18-hour train trip from Addis to Dire Dawa, then a two-day pack-mule ride over a mountain ridge to Harar. Stuffy and elitist though he might have been, Waugh was one tough traveler. On my own painless hour-long drive from Dire Dawa, I passed a pickup full of young Chinese wedding revelers. China has made inroads here, as all over Africa. I saw a crowded roadside town called the Khat Express, filled with young men hoisting bundles of the green, fresh-picked narcotic leaf that has become a major export.

By now I'd noticed that almost everyone in Ethiopia is young: The median age is 17, the average life span 60, in a country of high birth rates, still-high rates of HIV/AIDS, dire poverty and low levels of care. Buoyant and friendly, facing formidable odds, Ethiopia's youth can break your heart.

Waugh reached Harar amid camels and donkeys; I rode in amid ancient sky-blue-and-white Peugeot 404s—Harar's taxis, some more than 50 years old, from the former French colonial outpost of Djibouti. At the market, I saw stalls heaped high with precious Peugeot parts. Around a corner, my guide led me into a sheikh's traditional home. It had three U-shaped tiers of seating, with pillows and brightly painted walls. A young woman sat tending her child. She looked morose; the sheikh, my guide later explained, was off that day with one of his other wives.

Waugh was a prude, or appeared to be, yet on his first trip he got excited about the women of Harar. He wrote, "They had all the slender grace of the Somalis, their narrow hips, broad straight shoulders and high, pointed breasts..." Yet by his return in 1935, he felt embarrassed that he'd talked it up to his journalist friends. The city was "declining fast." Of course! It was about to be seized by Italian fascists.

Harar survived that occupation, but I myself found the city dilapidated and less than adver-

tised. French poet Arthur Rimbaud had lived here through the 1880s as a coffee trader and gun smuggler, but his purported house, now a museum, likely belonged to an Indian trader who razed Rimbaud's home for his own. Haile Selassie's father is said to be buried in an imposing mosque I saw, only no one's sure he's there. A five-star hotel is rumored to be coming, but it isn't here yet, and the others are dreary at best. Perhaps I should have chewed khat with the locals—that, I was told by an American expat, is the way to experience Harar. But for me, only the hyenas lived up to their billing.

Every night, for decades, the hyena man who lives just beyond one of the city's six gates has brought out a pail of raw meat. From the shadows, two, three, sometimes 20 hyenas appear, edging in as he calls them near. ("I don't know how hyenas have got their reputation for laughing," Waugh wrote. "Not once did I hear anything approaching a laugh.") They look very, very creepy, but of course I had to step up, take the stick with the meat dangling from it and feed one salivating hyena after another. Only later did I hear that occasionally the hyenas have bitten the hands that feed them.

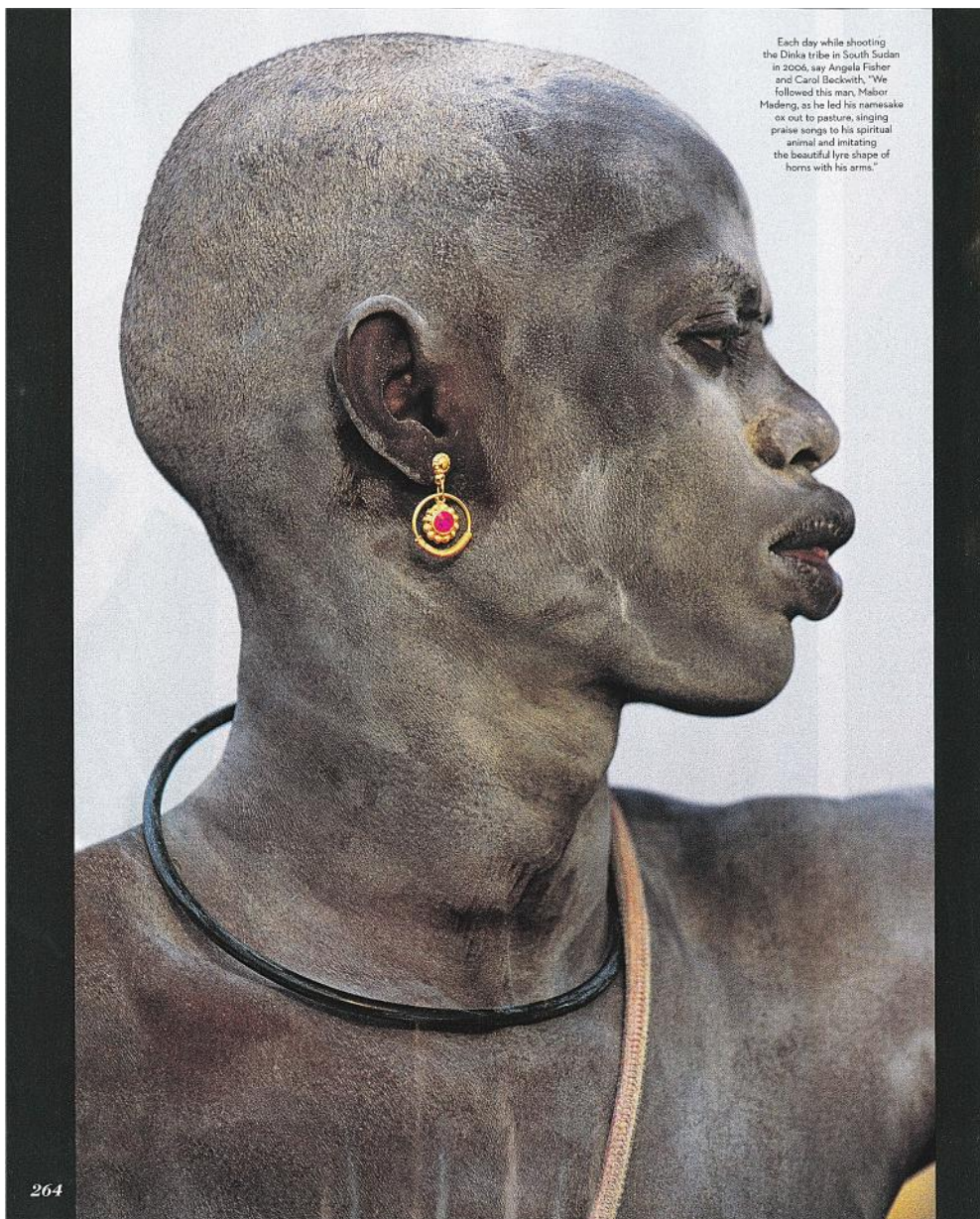
I wish I'd had time to drive south to Lake Langano, and the Bishangari Lodge, where I would have spent days birdwatching and eating good food. Instead, on my last night in Addis, I drove up to Entoto, a eucalyptus-thick hilltop compound. Beside the inevitable circular church with its brightly painted scenes was a little museum. With heart-breaking earnestness, its curator described every item on display: a mirror from Queen Elizabeth, a photograph of Menelik and his queen, a crown... Ethiopians love their royal history, though they themselves have gotten nothing from it but a few old relics in cases.

By now I'd realized that Waugh never did cultivate some private passion for the country. He'd gone on assignment to help make his name, gone again because he had a name and the war was a plum assignment. Then, like any resourceful novelist, he'd used the material he had. But none of it had changed him. If he'd listened to that curator talk, he would have found some way to mock it.

"Will you do me a favor?" the curator asked timidly. "Would you send me a book I could use to help me practice my English?"

I thought of sending him *Scoop*. But then I reconsidered.

I sent *To Kill a Mockingbird* instead. ♣



Each day while shooting the Dinka tribe in South Sudan in 2006, say Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith, "We followed this man, Mabor Madeng, as he led his namesake ox out to pasture, singing praise songs to his spiritual animal and imitating the beautiful lyre shape of horns with his arms."

THE TRIBAL GUARDIANS

Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith's goal to photograph every traditional culture on the continent is a race against time. BY LUCIA VAN DER POST

Over the course of 35 years, photographers Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith have amassed an oeuvre that is equal parts art and anthropology, as remarkable for its raw aesthetic power as it is for its unparalleled access to the ceremonies and rituals of Africa's tribes. The rapid pace of change on the continent, as children head for the cities, has given their work fresh urgency. Even as the pair continue to find new cultures to document, they estimate that about 40 percent of the rites and ceremonies they have shot have already disappeared into the mists of history. In other words, it will not be possible for anybody to repeat what they have done.

Beckwith, from Boston, and Fisher, from Adelaide, Australia, have published books individually but work best side by side, occasionally forgetting who took what shot. They have traveled more than 270,000 miles together, often in great discomfort, in pursuit of their images. To get to the Dinka in South Sudan, "Five miles a day was good going—the average was two," says Fisher. Sometimes logistics made access hard; other times, the obstacles were cultural. Permission to visit the Kuba kingdom came after 12 years of trying. When they eventually arrived, the duo

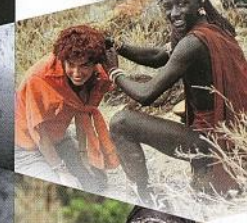
met children who had never seen a white face before. "It was," says Beckwith, "like walking through a doorway into the ancient past."

African Ceremonies (Abrams) is their best-known work. Last year they published *Painted Bodies* (Rizzoli), a Pan-African study of the art of body painting. They are now working on *African Twilight*, which will cover some 140 cultures in 50 African countries, including 22 peoples they have not previously photographed. It is set to come out in 2015 (Rizzoli).

Today Beckwith and Fisher share a large, airy house in London's Belsize Park, a wonderfully idiosyncratic home filled with the treasures they've accumulated on their travels. This is also where they keep their archive: more than half a million photographs, hundreds of hours of film, as well as 200 illustrated and annotated journals from 150 African cultures. Considering the value to humanity of such a priceless resource, they are looking for a more worthy home for it. (The Smithsonian in D.C. and London's Royal Geographical Society have expressed interest.) It's not just that "these ancient cultures are a living record of our shared past, a map of where we've come from," says Beckwith, but, just as important, they are "a guide for our future." What follows is a portfolio in their own words.

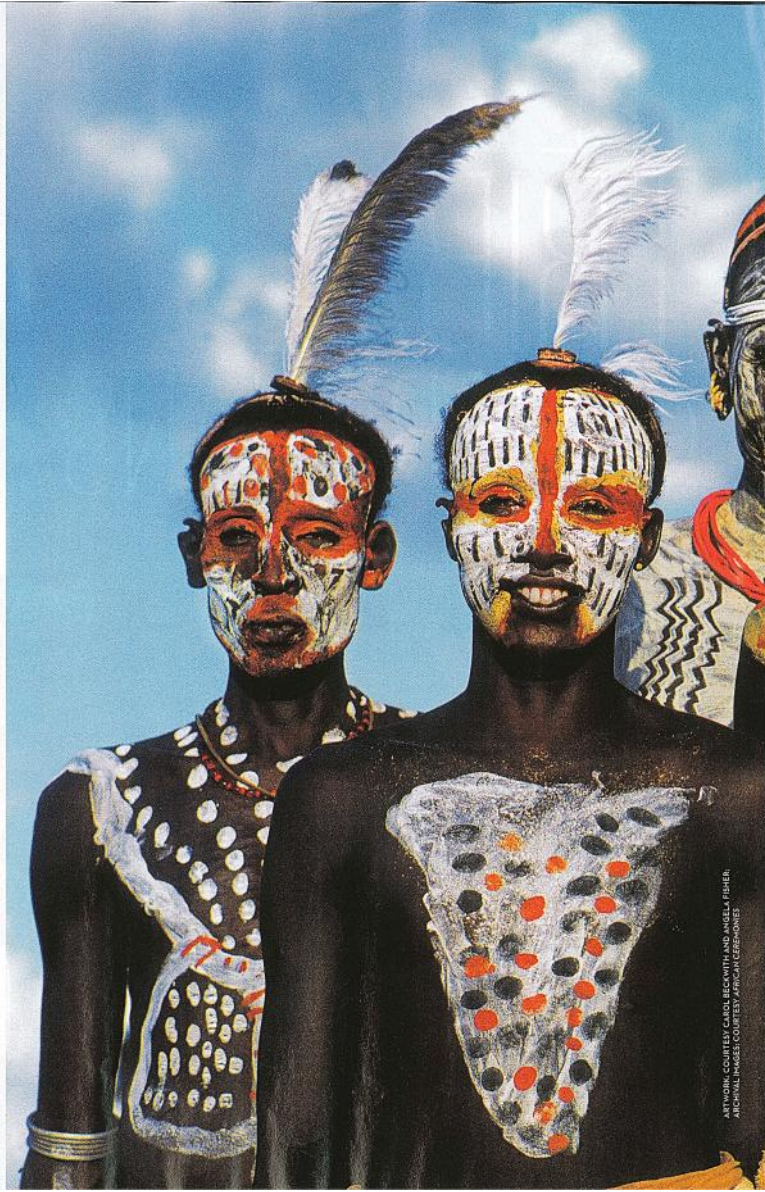


From top: Photographers/guardians Beckwith (top, far right) and Fisher (next to Beckwith) in Kenya in 2004, 1978 and 1980; Ethiopia in 1990, and Niger in 1987.

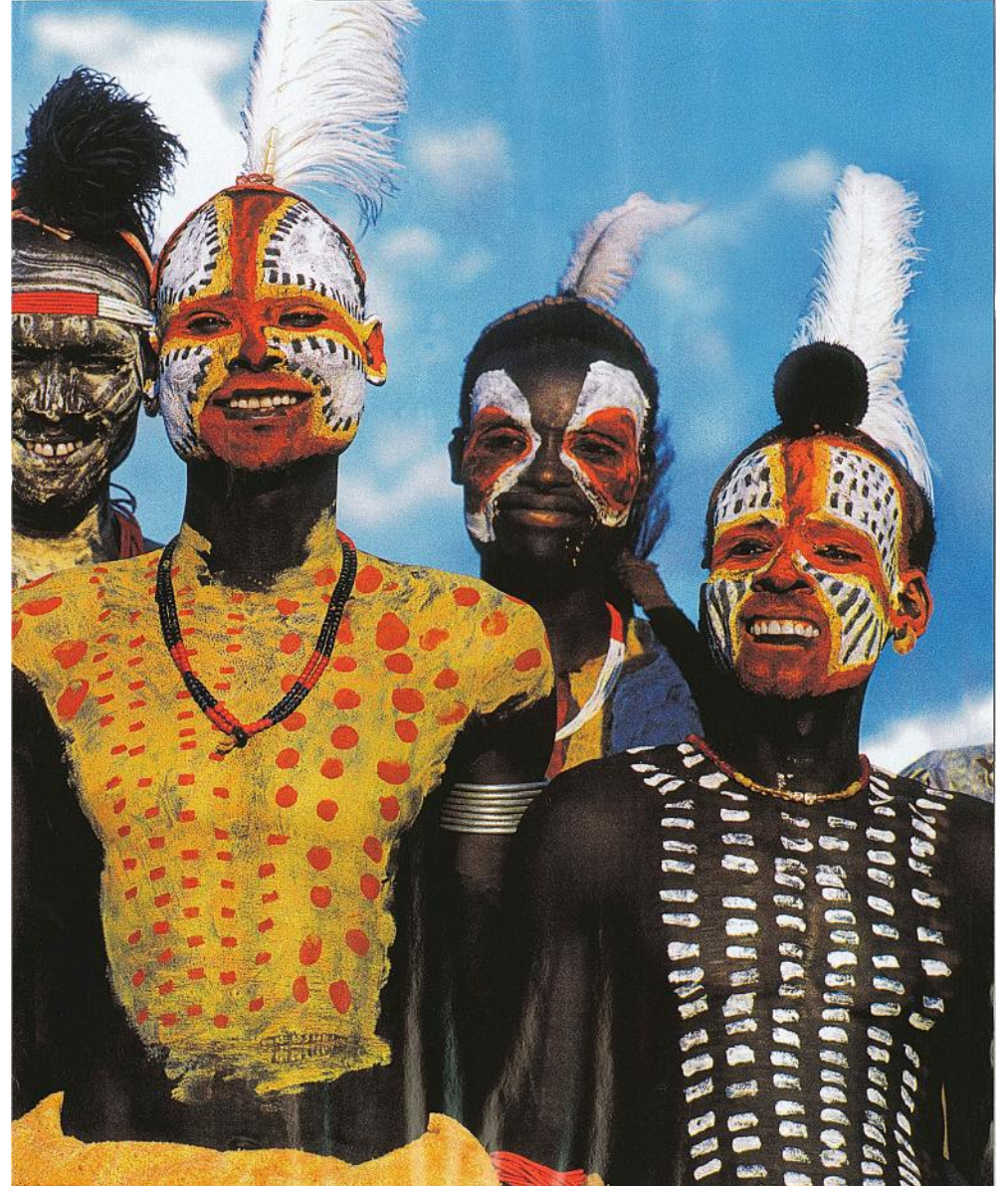


W

e lived with the Karo for weeks during courtship season," say Beckwith and Fisher. "Each morning the Karo men would appear in front of our tents keen to show off their freshly painted facial designs. They loved receiving Polaroids; these were some of the first images they'd ever seen of themselves." This photograph was taken near Ethiopia's Omo River in 1996.



ARTWORK COURTESY CAROL BECKWITH AND JAGIELA FISHER. ARCHIVAL IMAGES COURTESY VIRGINIA LEFFENHINES





I was always a joyous affair to watch the Suri girls beautifully themselves in the morning by the cool of the water, in preparation for the courtship dances in the afternoon, say Fisher and Beckwith of the Suri girl at left, shot in Ethiopia in 1990. Opposite: "We were deeply touched by the closeness of man and animal among the Dinka" of South Sudan, say the photographers. In this image, shot in 2006, a boy lavishes attention on his namesake ox, which will accompany him everywhere as he matures.

