

I stood in my room in bathing trunks, looking out over the lake 100 metres away, anticipating the feel of the cool water on my skin.

There was just one small problem: the large, male Anubis baboon blocking my door. He was being groomed by a female. I tapped on the glass and did a little theatrical cough. Our eyes locked. He rolled back his top lip to reveal incisors like daggers. I wanted my swim; he wanted his grooming. They say a baboon can rip a man's arms out of his sockets. My swim, I decided, could wait.

The day before, I'd arrived from Addis Ababa at Bishangari Lodge in Ethiopia's Oromiya region, on the shores of Langano, one of a series of lakes that run along the Rift Valley, five hours' drive south of the capital.

Bishangari, with its eight lovely cabins (called *godjos*) set back from the lake in a forest of podocarpus and wild fig trees, was the country's first upmarket lodge when it opened in 2002. Others sprang up in the far north, serving the vast majority of Ethiopia's tourists, who tend to head to the Unesco sites of Lalibela, Axum and Gondar. But the south's luxury travel potential remained untapped beyond Bishangari.

Until now. This year a \$290-a-night eco-lodge will open in the gloriously wild Bale Mountains, five hours southeast of Bishangari, creating for the first time a southern circuit for luxury travellers in Ethiopia.

And it was this two-lodge experience that I had journeyed south to try. But that wasn't going to happen if I couldn't even get out of my room.

Eventually, the baboon moved away from the door and I tiptoed my way through the 40-strong troop, saying "good mornings" as I went, figs



raining down on me like hailstones from the tree above. Can baboons snigger? Undoubtedly. I hadn't encountered such bullying since school.

After my swim, I walked along the shore of the lake. In the shade of an acacia, I sat on a rock and watched a procession of birds wing past, like an avian superhighway – there are 450 species around the lake, eight of them endemic. Hemprich's hornbills followed a huge black crowned crane, a lone pelican flapped noiselessly inches from the lake surface. There were northern carmine bee eaters and starlings like winged sapphires, each more vivid in colour than the last. A pied kingfisher hovered right in front of me, split the water with its razor beak, then came and sat on a branch above my head to eat its breakfast.

I walked into the forest, past the spring that gave the lodge its name (*bishangari* means clear, bubbling water in Oromo). A giant warthog crashed out of the bushes right in front of me. In the canopy, colobus monkeys, with their white beards and doleful eyes, like sad little old men, watched me pass. White-cheeked turacos clucked away. I came to a clearing, in which stood a dozen *tukels*, or horses, with conical thatched roofs and walls of mud. It was a scene probably little changed since the birth of Christ. Children ran up to me, grabbing my hands, rubbing at the pale skin, as if trying to wipe it off.

This is how lazy days are spent at Bishangari, its remoteness freeing you from any guilty sense that you should be doing anything other than immersing yourself in its tranquillity. After



The company of wolves

A luxurious new lodge will draw visitors to southern Ethiopia, where stunning landscapes and wildlife await. By *Mike Carter*

Clockwise from top: the Hareanna forest in Bale Mountains National Park; an Ethiopian wolf and pup; horse riding in the Web Valley; a marketplace in Chiri, a village 50 minutes from Bale Mountain Lodge Getty, Pam Robb



dinner, served in a thatched open-sided structure, and a couple of beers in the treehouse bar set in a 500-year-old ficus, there's nothing else to do except lie in bed listening to the forest, as the guttural screams, rustling and grunting gradually fade into deep, sonorous silence.

Next day we headed southeast, across wide, expansive plains of barley and *teff*, the pale golden crop that forms Ethiopia's staple bread, *injera*. Carts pulled by donkeys outnumbered the few vehicles on the road. Churchgoers, wearing the traditional brilliant-white *shama* and carrying the beautifully embroidered umbrellas for which Ethiopians are renowned, were strolling along the jacaranda-lined road like Victorian seaside promenaders.

We pulled in at a dusty truck stop for lunch. Large yellow-tailed kites swooped down looking for scraps. A waiter poured water over our hands from a copper decanter, then brought out the *injera*, a grey dustbin-lid sized slab of it – essentially tablecloth and eating utensil, as well as food – on to which he sploshed various chilli sauces, collectively known as *wat*, each a different colour, so that the whole thing looked like an artist's palette. Then came the *tibs*, strips of beef coated in salt and deep-fried until crisp, which we grabbed with torn-off pieces of *injera* and dunked in the fiery sauces. Delicious.

We hit the foothills of the Bale Mountains. Gone were the plains, replaced with Alpine-like meadows flecked with wild geraniums. Gone, too, were the umbrella-toting walkers, replaced by people on horseback, the animals richly caparisoned, male

riders wearing *taqiyahs*, the women in *niqabs* – for we had crossed from predominantly Christian Ethiopia into its southern Muslim heartlands.

The tarmac road petered out, replaced with a dirt track. My ears popped. The trees disappeared. Then, too, the low sagebrush and St John's wort. Clouds kissed the flat, barren, empty land. We were crossing the Sanetti Plateau, the roof of Africa – at 4,000 metres, the highest drivable road on the continent. Just an hour or so earlier we had been basking in Technicolor Africa; now we were shivering on a grey moon.

We parked and went for a walk, layered up against the chill wind, crunching on the permafrost, puffing hard in the thin air, weaving between small, oily tarns that sparkled like mirrors. We seemed to be walking through the most lifeless, uninhabited place on earth. On closer inspection, though, the ground was alive, black blurs scuttling everywhere, appearing and disappearing in the blink of an eye. These, as Endele Teshome, our guide, explained, were the giant mole rats and grass rats that thrive in the conditions up here.

"There! There!" Teshome said, pointing. Walking towards us, russet in the monochrome, was an endemic Ethiopian wolf. With only 450 surviving, 250 of them in the Bale Mountains National Park, it is one of the rarest mammals on the planet, driven to near-extinction by hunters and the rabies their dogs carry. My heart stopped. It was one of the most stunning animals I had ever seen.

"He's out hunting," Teshome said. He explained that the mole rat forms



Details

Mike Carter was a guest of Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.com), which offers a 10-night Ethiopian trip from \$7,440 per person, including three nights with the Ethiopia Wolf Conservation Programme, two nights at the new Bale Mountain Lodge and five nights on lake Langano, with private guides, transfers and full board. Bale Mountain Lodge is having a "soft opening" period in the first half of 2014 and is expected to be fully operational by September.

the wolf's staple diet. So for the Ethiopian wolf, the site is an all-you-can-eat buffet. The wolf caught sight of us and disappeared behind some rocks. "Don't worry," Teshome said. "We will see more before the trip is out."

We drove to the edge of the Sanetti escarpment. Far, far beneath us, stretching to the horizon, cloud forest so lush and viridescent that it hurt your eyes. This was the Hareanna, the third-largest forest in Africa.

We descended through the low, gnarled trees, which were dripping with old man's beard and ancient creepers, dense and foreboding like a forest from a Grimm fairytale.

The trees parted, and there was the Bale Mountain Lodge. Well, what will become the Bale Mountain Lodge. When I visited in December, it was still a building site, with work having fallen months behind schedule.

The brainchild of former British army colonel Guy Levene, the 18-bedroom luxury lodge will be the first to operate within an Ethiopian national park. Guy's wife Yvonne told of the setbacks they had encountered, the frustrations and bureaucracy (Guy was in Addis Ababa trying to liberate building materials from customs).

She showed us around the one completed lodge, with hay-bale walls, hardwood floors and wood burner; and another, half-built, which is romantically reached via a staircase through the tangled roots of a giant tree, with a terrace overlooking the cloud forest and, looming above, the craggy peak of Mount Gujerale, a giant thumb hitching a lift in the sky. It was a stunning setting and easy to imagine how the Levenes lost their hearts when they first saw it in 2011.

We walked in the forest, alive with birdsong, the floor carpeted with purple acanthus, the 500-year-old scheflera trees festooned with traditional bamboo basket beehives for the honey the lodge will serve.

"We saw a big lion in this very spot last week," Yvonne said. I picked up a stick. I'm not quite sure why.

Just an hour earlier we had been basking in Technicolor Africa; now we were shivering on a grey moon

On the way back to Addis, we headed for the Web Valley in the national park, a two-hour drive off-road along hideously rutted tracks, once more leaving the trees behind as we climbed, the landscape now punctuated only by the spikes of giant lobelia. We camped outside the research hut of the Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Project where, overnight, the temperature plunged to -10C. In the morning, we mounted horses (the wildlife is used to them, and doesn't see the humans) and rode off across the frigid steppe, the surrounding mesas beginning to glow gently golden in the morning sun. It was like being in your own Sergio Leone movie.

The valley's hunters were starting their day shift. A serval cat slunk across our path. The sky grew full of giant raptors – Verreaux's, tawny and golden eagles, augur buzzards, kites, all as common here as pigeons in a city park. An Abyssinian hare ran across the ground at cartoon speed, as well it might. A group of handsome mountain nyalas, an antelope endemic to Bale, snorted, the frozen air sending great plumes of steam from their nostrils.

We rode until, in the late afternoon, we found our prey: there, 100 metres in front of us, in the rocks, was the entrance to an Ethiopian wolf den. Teshome explained how a wolf community works: how the adults all take responsibility for the pups; how they live as a pack but hunt during the day in solitude. Through binoculars, we watched as four tiny pups, about a month old, rare, precious bundles of fur, frolicked. A shadow flew across the lens. A tawny eagle landed inches from one of the pups. "They take young wolves," Teshome said. I held my breath. The pup and eagle eyed each other.

A bark. We scanned left. There, striding through the gloaming under the infinite sky, was a big male. The eagle flew off. The pups ran to greet the returning adult, mobbing him, dancing around his feet. The wolf sat down, sniffed the air and then locked his eyes on us. He threw back his head, the plaintive, haunting howl echoing around the valley.

On location Inside Llewyn Davis

The film

The early-1960s folk music scene of New York is the setting for *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the latest film from the Coen brothers. Inspired by the memoirs of musician Dave Van Ronk, who was working the bars and coffeehouses of Greenwich Village at the same time as Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg, it follows a week in the life of penniless singer-songwriter Llewyn Davis (played by Oscar Isaac) as he struggles to make his mark in the bitterly cold winter of 1961.

On location

The centre of Manhattan's alternative music scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s was MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village, where Van Ronk and his contemporaries would perform at

venues such as the Gaslight Café and Café Wha? – known as "basket houses" because a basket would be passed around the audience at the end of the night for tips.

The Gaslight, where much of the film's action takes place, is now a basement cocktail bar called simply 116 (116 MacDougal Street), which puts on regular poetry and music nights, though the bohemian spirit that attracted Beat poets such as Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac has long since left the building. Next door, the Café Wha? (115 MacDougal St, cafewha.com), where Dylan made his New York debut, is still a popular music venue but Gerde's Folk City (11 West 4th Street), another venue mentioned in the film, shut down in the 1980s. Scenes set in

the Gaslight were filmed on a set in Brooklyn but much of the film was shot on the streets of Manhattan. One venue that required little in the way of artifice to recreate a retro vibe is Caffe Reggione (119 MacDougal St), which has a small cameo in the film as a



Oscar Isaac and Justin Timberlake in 'Inside Llewyn Davis'

meeting place for Davis and his friend Jean (played by Carey Mulligan). This neighbourhood coffee shop, which has changed little in appearance since it opened in 1927, is no stranger to the big screen, having featured as a backdrop in *The Godfather Part II* (1974) and *Shaft* (1971).

Another instantly recognisable location is Washington Square Park, which, in the late 1950s, was a hub where young folk and bluegrass musicians would gather to perform and share songs. Although it has undergone a facelift in recent years, the square is still a popular hang-out for students from New York University, political activists and buskers, and it hosts its own folk festival in September (facebook.com/wspfolkfestival).

Where to stay

Hotelier and restaurateur Sean MacPherson has cornered the market in hip West Village hang-outs. In 2008 he scored a hit with the opening of the Jane Hotel, a bohemian chic bolt-hole in a former sailors' hotel with some of the best-value rooms in the neighbourhood (113 Jane St, thejanency.com; doubles from \$225 per night). His new project, the renovated Marilton Hotel, combining Parisian style with impeccable Beatnik credentials (Jack Kerouac penned *The Subterraneans* and *Tristessa* while staying here) looks set to be a similar success (5 West 8th Street, marilton.hotel.com; doubles from \$150).

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