

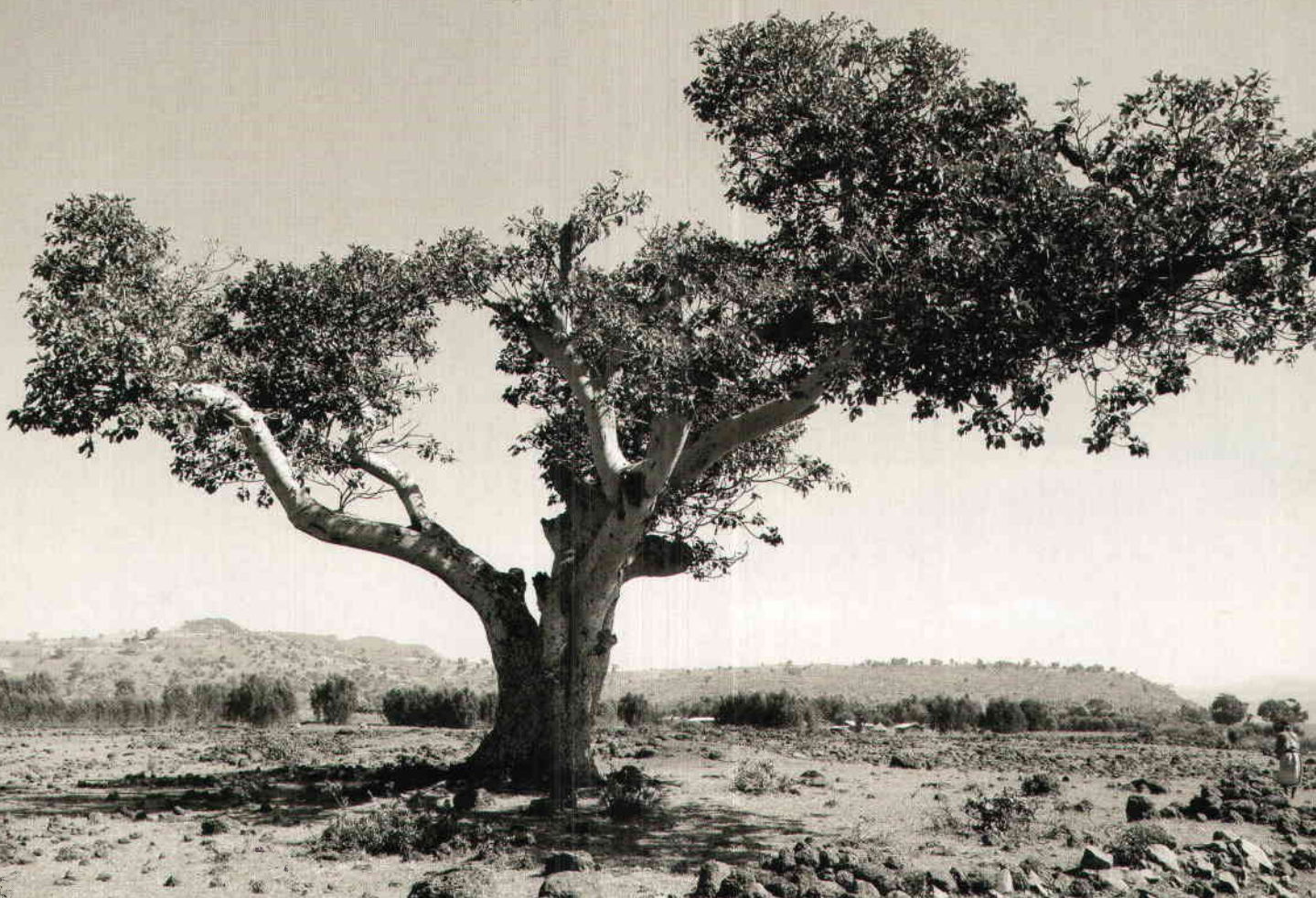
| gourmet traveller



# HAILE RECOMMENDED

Ethiopia is a land of dramatic landscapes, and people with a proud sense of national identity.

Photography Roderick Field





Elisabeth Luard finds that the local cuisine is more than a diet, it's a powerful unifying force

SOME 90 PER CENT  
OF ETHIOPIANS  
STILL PURSUE A  
RURAL EXISTENCE





In the labyrinthine Mercato you'll find everyone from beady-eyed cotton spinners to prosperous spice-grinders and butter-makers still cow-scented from the milking

Fertile and temperate in spite of her nearness to the Equator, blessed with physical strength in her men and beauty in her women, the land which bred the Queen of Sheba – Ethiopia has all the heart can desire on earth. And heaven too, since the Rift Valley, cradle of mankind, bisects the land from north to south, giving her fair claim to the Garden of Eden. You need look no further than the sun-bleached skeleton of little Lucy, *Australopithecus afarensis*, discovered in 1973 by Donald Johanson in the ravines at Hadar and now laid to her final rest in the National Museum in Addis. Her descendants (let the palaeontologists argue who came first and when) took up subsistence farming, with cattle for milk and meat, and cereal for sustenance. Even today, most people still grow their own crops, rainfall permitting.

Only a tenth of the population are urban dwellers, and most of them live in Addis Ababa, the sprawling capital. Sophisticated Addis has become a draw for all Africa. The commercial centre and hub of government, the city is a labyrinth of humble single-storey one-room dwellings punctuated by broad boulevards, the well-protected presidential palace and the occasional high-rise building. Among these is the ultra-luxurious Sheraton hotel, where you can take tea and cream cakes under the chandeliers, or the buzzy, cosier Hilton.

To find out how ordinary Ethiopians live and work, book a guide, treat yourself to a macchiato at the stand-up counter in the Tomoco Coffee House, and then take a wander through the Mercato, the fascinating labyrinthine central market. You'll find everyone from beady-eyed cotton-spinners to prosperous spice-grinders and butter-makers still cow-scented from the milking. Have a stab at the language (Amharic): *aba'kwo*, 'please', and *amasekana'lu*, 'thank you', will earn you happy appreciative smiles and lively discussions of the state of English football, with particular reference to David Beckham.

Most of the wares are much like those of any Middle Eastern market:

big bundles of parsley, leaf coriander, assorted roots, pulses, rice, split peas, charcoal for slow cooking and kindling for the bakestone, all in their allotted corners. Competition is no discouragement to trade. In the dairy corner, butter is sold by the scoop from huge plastic sacks; its by-product, tall pyramids of cut curds dripping with whey, is also sold fresh, as Ethiopia makes no cheese that can be stored. The dairymaids, a bawdy bunch, share their space with wrinkled grannies busily engaged in producing the food of the poor: the soft interior of the stem of the falso banana, a tree-sized grass which grows in every urban yard, producing a bland but highly nutritious porridge. In the corner where the butchers ply their trade, men in bloody aprons carve freshly killed beef to order. Their customers shout and point: this cut or that, fat or lean. Customers carry their raw meat to be prepared next door, eating it then and there, well spiced, at table. Meat killed at dawn must be consumed or cooked before dusk, a wise precaution in the tropics.

Raw meat is the only available market takeaway: you won't see anyone eating in the street. And there's no word for restaurant in Amharic; meeting-place is the closest the language comes to the idea of a public eating-house, proof that hospitality begins at home. Restaurants were unknown here until the Italians arrived, short-term winners in the race for Africa in the decades before the Second World War. By the time they were displaced by the British – a liberation gratefully commemorated in Addis by Churchill Avenue, one of the few thoroughfares which actually has a name – Ethiopians had acquired a taste for pasta and a handful of excellent Italian eating-houses.

One of these, Castelli's in Piazza, is a city landmark. Run by the same Italian family for 50 years, it serves expertly-sauced homemade pasta and exquisite imported seafood. The quality is high and so are the prices: a thorough bodysearch at the door is the price of brushing shoulders with customers who need bodyguards. —————>>



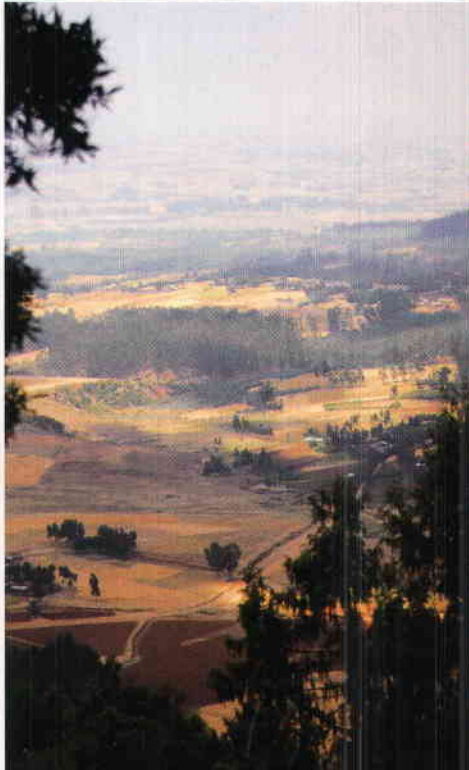
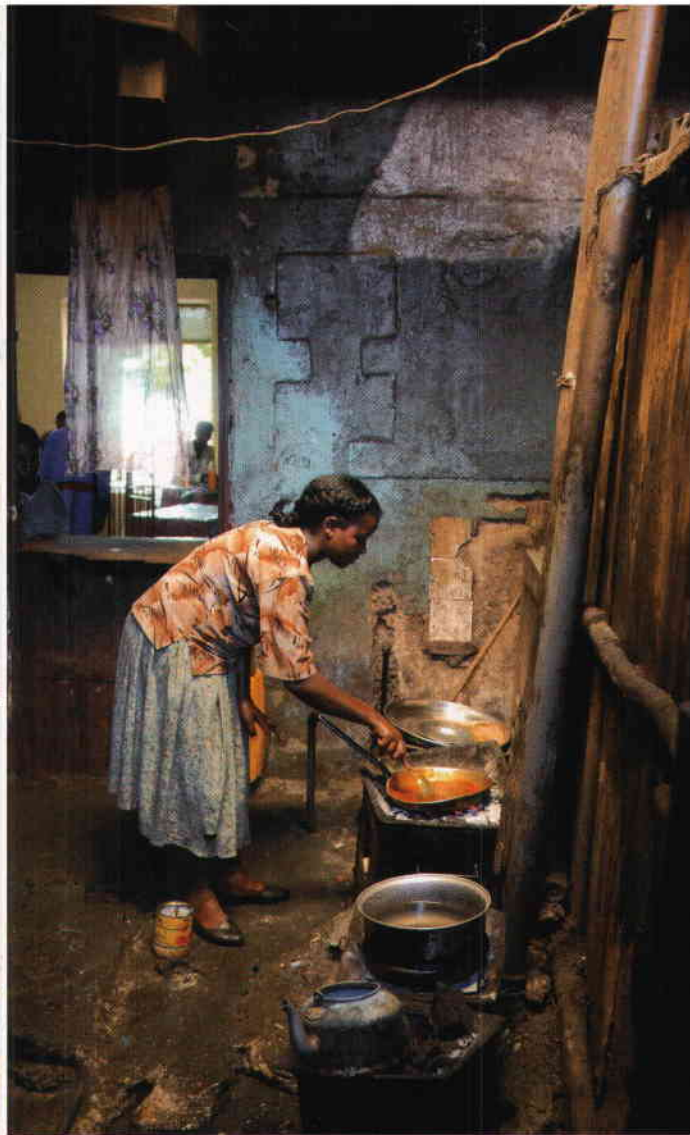
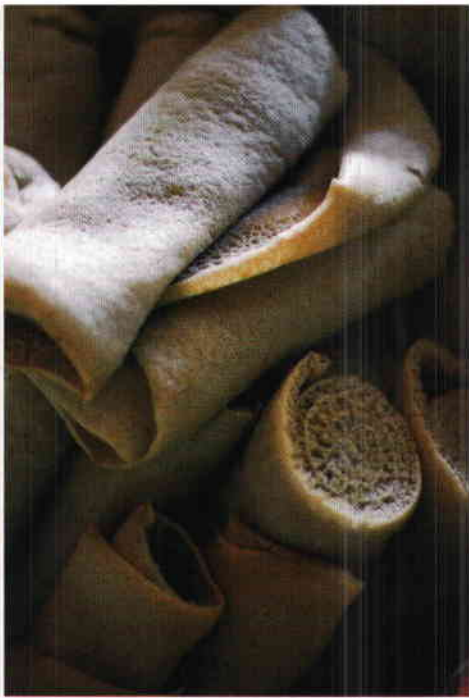
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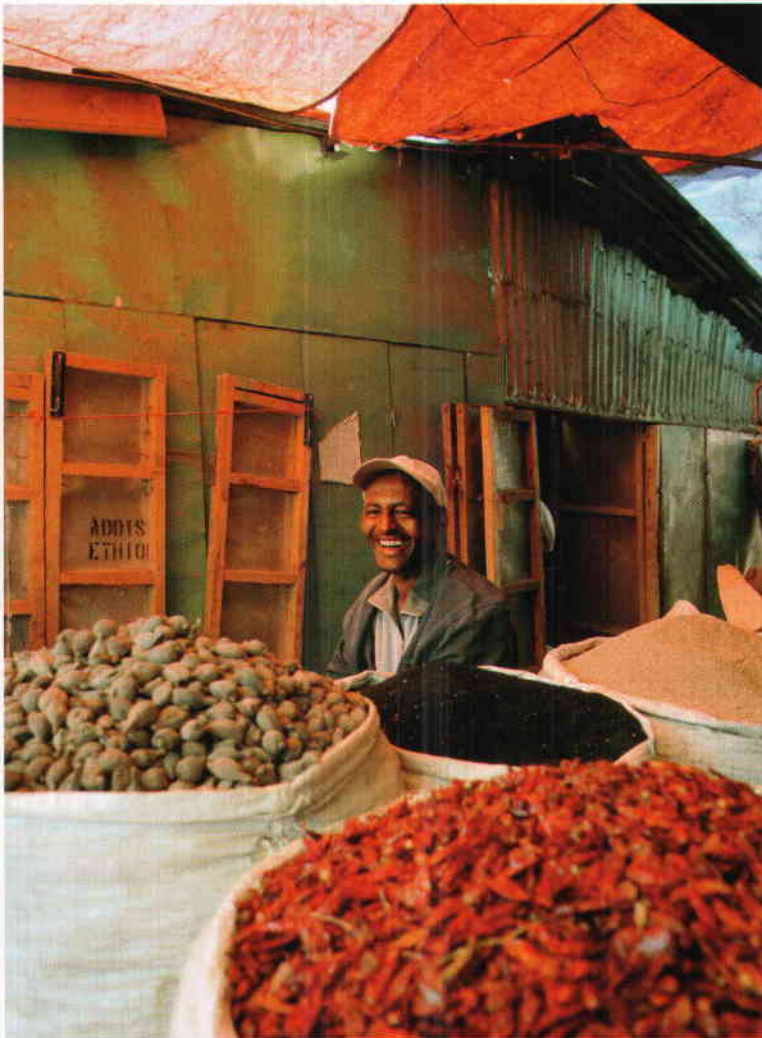
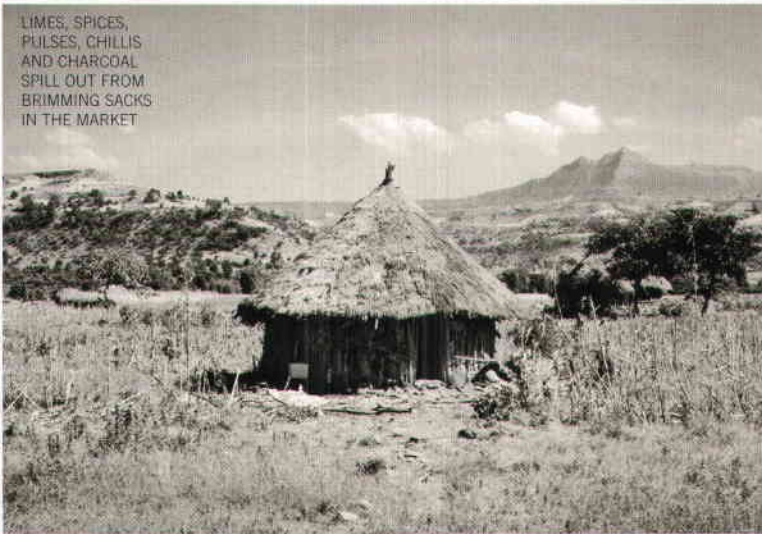
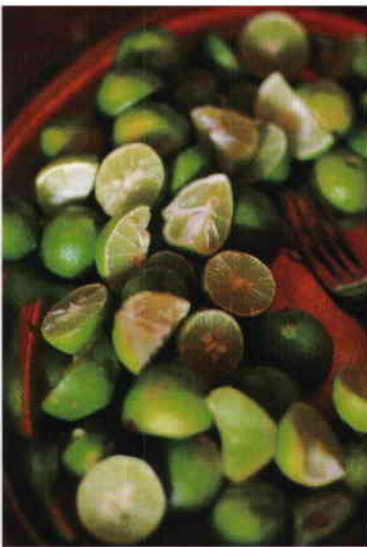
(alich'a) or elegant (tibbs) – there are as many recipes as there are cooks, and behind them lies the cooking of Arabia and India. The sweet, spicy w'ett is the perfect counterpoint to the sour, bland injera.

Yet with so much to recommend it, the cooking of Ethiopia has not yet claimed its place among the great national cuisines. The reason, to some extent, lies in the presentation. While an Ethiopian can judge the excellence of a w'ett by a tiny taste on the tongue, subtle variations in texture, colour and fragrance are not so obvious to the untutored palate. All the more so when everything comes as a round of little dabs on an injera plate. As a brief guide, a whole boiled egg indicates a chicken w'ett; if the sauce is scarlet, expect chilli; if it burns, take a mouthful of fresh white cheese; oiliness means butteriness (Ethiopians adore their butter). If your visit is on a Wednesday or a Friday, fast-days in the Orthodox calendar, the order of the day is vegetarian dishes cooked with just enough oil to prevent sticking. Don't worry if you forget the rules: ignorance is expected of children and farange, foreigners.

For a tutored tasting, grab a local and head for the Finfinay Addarash in central Addis, where the service is buffet-style but also authentic and cheap. Everything is presented in little dishes, some sizzling away on braziers, with a choice of rolled-up injera, white rice or yeasty little bread rolls. In the evening, you can apply your hard-won knowledge at the chic Fasica restaurant – which is also great for professional singing and dancing – where the injera and its accompaniments are presented for sharing on the traditional basketwork table.

For conviviality, there's tella, the local beer, and tej, a rather delicious honey drink, but above all, there's coffee, Ethiopia's joy and the crucial source of export dollars. The coffee ceremony is a ritual as formal as any Edwardian lady's tea party. Preparations begin soon after the midday meal. Fresh grass is spread on the floor, participants take their places around the walls and the lady of the house settles herself gracefully on a low stool. All must be placed in order of use. Raw beans and their roasting pan; the brazier primed with charcoal, pestle and mortar; incense to sweeten the air; the all-important traditional black clay coffee-pot with elegant curved spout; water-pot ready boiled; a tray of little cups, sugar and salt. Salt? Salt is tradition, sugar Italian. Ethiopia is full of surprises. As soon as the coffee is poured and everyone served, talking begins. News is exchanged, visitors encouraged to contribute, children permitted to address their parents. Three washings of the coffee-grounds are taken: the first ————>>







OPPOSITE AND LEFT:  
AN ETHIOPIAN  
DINNER USUALLY  
COMPRISES TWO  
ELEMENTS: THE  
SCOOP AND THE  
DIPS. THE SCOOP IS  
INJEERA, A LARGE,  
GREY, CRUMPET-  
LIKE PANCAKE,  
WHILE THE DIP  
IS W'ETT, A SPICY  
STEW WHICH CAN  
BE FIERY, GENTLE  
OR ELEGANT

## TRAVEL INFORMATION

Currency is the Ethiopian birr (£1=17 ETB). Bring dollars and change them when you need to. You need a small sum of dollars to enter the country; the amount varies, check before arrival. Ethiopia is three hours ahead of GMT. Best time to visit is October to March to avoid the rainy season. A visa is required for visitors from the UK; the British Embassy advises against travel to the Gambella region. Malaria tablets are recommended, and it may take time to adjust to the high altitude of Addis Ababa.

### GETTING THERE

**British Mediterranean Airways** (0870 850 9850; britishairways.com) flies from London Heathrow to Addis Ababa five times a week. Return fares from £340, excluding taxes.

**Ethiopian Airlines** (020 8987 7000; flyethiopian.com) flies from London Heathrow to Addis Ababa five times a week. Return fares from £470, including taxes.

### TOUR OPERATORS

**Journeys by Design** (01273 623 790; journeysbydesign.com) is one of the UK's leading Ethiopia experts. A two-week holiday mixing the historical highlights of north Ethiopia with the southern Ethiopian Rift Valley costs from £1,955.00 per person excluding international flights. The itinerary has a private English-speaking Ethiopian guide who show you the best of the country's cuisine. £20 per person from your holiday will be donated to a local Ethiopian school built by the directors of Journeys by Design.

**Solomon Berhe Tours** (07710 285283; solomonberhetours.com) is Addis Ababa-based with a UK partner. Prices for a 15-day historical tour start at £1,461 per person (flights not included).

### RESOURCES

**Ethiopian Tourism Commission** (tourismethiopia.org). Provides a cultural overview and contact information for local tour agencies.

**Ethiopia and Eritrea** by Matt Phillips and Jean-Bernard Carillet (Lonely Planet Country Guide, £15.06) is a comprehensive guide to all aspects of the country, from culture to cuisine.

**Ethiopia** by Philip Briggs (Bradt Travel Guides, £15.99) provides practical information for first-time visitors, including details of the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

### FURTHER READING

**In Ethiopia with a Mule** by Dervla Murphy (Century Travellers, £5.99). First published in 1968, this is a charming account of travels through the Ethiopian highlands. Memories are made of this.

You'll find more homely Italian cooking (as well as some German) in the African Queen restaurant in African Avenue: delicious creamy risotto, juicy apple strudel, a modest bill and no bodysearch.

The dominant religion, Ethiopian Orthodoxy – evangelised Christianity descended from ancient Judaism – claims three-quarters of the population. The Christian majority, you will be told with pride, has coexisted with the Muslim minority for centuries without conflict, a tolerance confirmed by a shared food culture and a common decision not to eat pork. Table manners are within the Arab tradition of dipping into the same dish, eating with the right hand only, starting and ending the meal with cleansing water poured over the fingers.

These customs are a declaration of a shared Ethiopian cultural identity. While restaurants tend to specify the content of foreign food on their menus – steak and chips, and so forth – Ethiopian dishes are listed simply as 'assorted national food'. An Ethiopian dinner is made up of two elements: the scoop and the dips. The scoop is injera, a large, floppy, dove-grey crumpet-like pancake (never call it bread) with a pitted surface, a pleasantly sour taste and a rather beery fragrance. Injera is traditionally made with teff, a tiny, upland grain endemic to the Ethiopian highlands, a foodstuff as ancient and primitive as Lucy's bones. The seedhead flops earthward when ripe and must be laboriously gathered by hand, making it unsuitable for machine-cropping. Primitive cereals are invariably ill-adapted to the human gut, but happily for teff, nature has equipped it with a useful yeast growth much like botrytis, or 'noble rot'. When the grain is ground and mixed with water to a batter, this growth triggers a process of fermentation, the source of injera's beery flavour. It also promotes the production of an enzyme, the source of its yoghurt sourness, which allows the human digestive tract to absorb all the available nutrients.

So addictive is the flavour of injera that Ethiopians emigrating to America planted the necessary crop on the plains of Idaho. It caught the attention of America's biochemists, earning itself classification as one of three grainfoods (the others are quinoa and amaranth) so nutritious they may one day save the planet. For now, injera is not prepared commercially; you're unlikely to find it on sale in any bakery. Households bake their own supplies two or three times a week. Equipment is simple: a grindstone, a plastic bucket, water to mix the batter, and time – three days to complete the fermentation. To complete the process, an earthenware bakestone is set over a stick-fire in the yard. Once baked, the injera is stored in a woven basket under a dome-shaped lid, with any leftovers torn and dried to make a porridge.

Injera is eaten with small amounts of dip, or w'ett – the generic name for a spicy stew or sauce. If injera is the heart of Ethiopian cooking, w'ett is the soul – the magic which transforms the merely edible into the sublime. W'ett can be fiery, gentle —————>>



THIS PAGE, WITH  
FERTILE LAND AND  
TEMPERATE  
CLIMATE, MOST  
PEOPLE STILL  
GROW THEIR OWN  
CROPS. NOW,  
RAINFALL  
PERMITTING,  
OPPOSITE TOP:  
MEN GATHER  
FIREWOOD TO  
FERRY IT TO ADDIS





The Ethiopian coffee ceremony is as formal as any Edwardian lady's tea party. News is exchanged, visitors encouraged and children permitted to address their parents

is good, the second less so, and the third must be drunk for politeness.

If you want to see something of the country away from the noise and crowds of Addis, accommodation can be a mixed bag, particularly in the countryside. Ethiopia, a traditional society which preferred evolution to revolution, nevertheless experienced violent change in the Seventies when the old order, absolute monarchy under Emperor Haile Selassie, gave way to Marxism under Mengistu. The new regime set about building guesthouses in inaccessible places to provide a playground for its chief allies, trigger-happy Cubans and good-time Russians. These establishments – members of the Ghion chain – still offer acceptable comfort in places where little else is available. Increasingly, however, crumbling accommodation with dodgy plumbing is being replaced by privately-owned rural retreats, including a vast spa resort as yet uncompleted on Lake Tana in northern Ethiopia. Others, such as the newly-opened Simien Lodge, are designed to attract a different kind of tourist, ecologically aware and drawn by the beauty of the wildlife. Much of it is rare and endangered, none more so than the lovely Walla ibex in its last stronghold – the vertical cliffs of the Simien Mountains.

Lake Tana itself, the source of the Blue Nile, is a beautiful place to visit. Monasteries, some of them centuries old, flourish around its shores and on its islands. Thirty kilometres away the waters hurtle over the spectacular Blue Nile Falls. The area is rich in birdlife – gaze across the silver surface of the lake to admire the fishing skills of a goliath heron, or catch the agile weaver-birds flitting through the rainbow which arcs across the tumbling waterfall. The town of Bahir Dar on the southern shore of the lake makes a good base for exploring.

There are many reasons to visit Ethiopia, but peace and solitude are not among them. Even in the countryside, take a walk across the rippling grasslands for a glimpse of a crowned eagle high in a distant tree, and in two shakes of a donkey's tail, you'll be surrounded. But as the locals say, 'better never to have been born than to be alone'. And since the people possess both beauty and charm, their company is no hardship.

*Elisabeth and Roderick travelled with British Mediterranean Airways (britishairways.com) and Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.co.uk).*

## WHERE TO STAY

**Sheraton Addis** Taitu Street, Addis Ababa (00 251 11 517 1717; starwoodhotels.com). Located in the mountainous countryside, this hotel is one of the grandest and most luxurious in Africa.

There are lush landscaped gardens, lavish reception areas, a great patisserie and a good bookshop. Double room from £122.

**Hilton** Menelik II Avenue (00 251 11 517 0000; hilton.co.uk/addis). A buzzing, homely hotel that is popular with birdwatchers, UN staff and business travellers. Sunday brunch is a big draw for wealthy local families. Lobby services include spa, gym, travel agency and tourist shops. Double room from £76.

**Tana Hotel** Bahir Dar (ghionhotel.com.et/tana.htm; email ghion-coma@telecom.et). Owned and run by the government's Ghion chain, this offers reasonable comfort and a fabulous position on the shore of Lake Tana. The Blue Nile Falls are a short drive away.

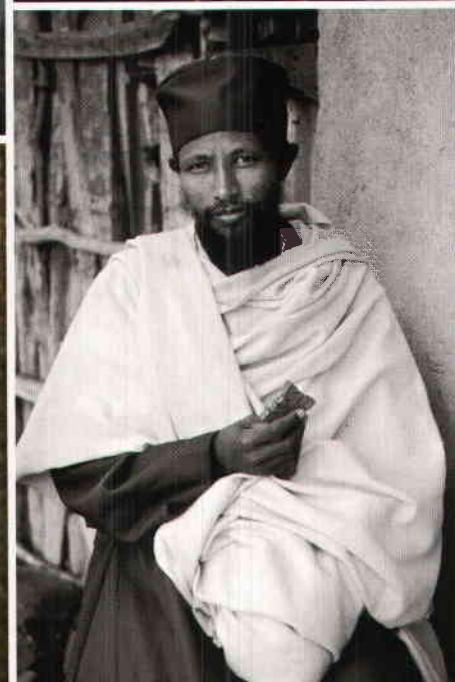
**Simien Park Lodge** (00 251 11 552 4758; email simien\_ethiopia@yahoo.com). Newly opened in the heart of the magnificent Simien mountains, this makes a superb base for hiking, birdwatching and catching a glimpse of baboons. Stay in upscale tukuls, the traditional round huts of the Ethiopian highlands. Doubles from around £55 per night.

## DON'T MISS

**The Mercato** the vast, sprawling central market to the west of Piazza. You'll find everything under the sun from sacks of butter to spices, medicinal herbs and green coffee.

**Meskal Square** where you can join the joggers at dawn, play footie with the locals and watch the Gunners versus Manchester United on a giant plasma screen after dark.

**The National Museum** near Arat Kilo, beside the university. With a rich collection of antiquarian relics and archaeological artefacts, this is the final resting place of the Rift Valley's three-million-year-old Lucy (a cast of her skeleton is on display). Also don't miss the painting of Haile Selassie's banquet on the first floor.





TO UNDERSTAND HOW ETHIOPIANS LIVE, FIRST TREAT YOURSELF TO A MACCHIATO AT THE TOMOCO COFFEE HOUSE IN ADDIS ABABA

## WHERE TO EAT

There are many eating-places in Addis Ababa where you can eat injera and beans for around 50p.

**Finfine Addarash** Addis Ababa. Meeting-house with Swiss chalet-style décor in the national colours of red, green and yellow, and authentic basketwork tables. Serve yourself from a buffet of w'ett, salads, fried fish, courgette fritters, chilli fritters and beans with chilli, eaten with injera, rice or bread roll. Around £2.50 a head including beer.

**Fasica Restaurant** Bole Road, Addis Ababa. Good for an evening out, popular with locals and tourists, with a nightclub feel. 'National food' is elegantly served on plate-injera, with rolled-up injera in three colours on the side. W'etts and other accompaniments are ladled on from little bowls.

**Castelli's** Piassa, Addis Ababa (00 251 11 157 1757). Classy Italian family-run restaurant. You can choose antipasti from the buffet, and there's excellent homemade pasta and great seafood. Booking essential. Around £15-20, including apéritif.

## FOOD GLOSSARY

**Alicha** Mildly spiced stew, no chilli.

**Assorted National Food** Injera dotted with assorted w'ett.

**Ayib** Cottage cheese, which is usually made with whey left over from the butter-making.

**Berbere Chilli** The chilli, onion and spice paste which forms the universal seasoning.

**Bosena sho** W'ett served in a small earthenware pot set on coals.

**Bosena slivo** W'ett made from bean or pea flour served with a shelled boiled egg.

**Buna Coffee** Grown in the Ethiopian highlands and usually sold green for home roasting.

**Dabbo Bread** Usually homebaked rolls, yeasty and delicious.

**Doro Wat** Chicken stewed in red pepper paste.

**Fikirte** Fava beans eaten fresh or dried, also used for injera.

**Injera** A statement of national identity, a fermented-batter pancake pitted with bubbles which looks like an enormous grey crumpet. Typically and most authentically made with teff, though other grain-foods are also used.

**Inset** Large member of the grass family, false banana. Interior of stalk is used to make a nourishing porridge.

**Kurt** Raw meat, always eaten on the same day. Order from the butcher and take it to the restaurant next door to have it prepared.

**Talla** Barley beer flavoured with a herb whose effect is similar to hops.

**Teff** Rye-like upland grain, very tiny, indigenous to the region.

**Tej** Honey drink flavoured with 'hops'. Slightly bitter, pleasantly alcoholic.

**Tibbs** Dry version of w'ett, sometimes served in its own little bowl on top of a small brazier.

**W'ett** A stew or sauce, highly spiced. Usually eaten with injera, though you can also have it with bread rolls. Some are purées made with bean flour, lentils or split peas, while others are made with meat, chicken, cheese, fish or vegetables.

**Zigni** Minced meat stew.

**Zinjibil** Ginger root, sold fresh in the market, dried and used to flavour chilli or as an infusion.

