

Travel

Gebre, our guide, was getting exasperated. “It’s easy,” he said. “Women come up here with babies on their backs – it’s easy.” It was not easy. I’d been paralysed with fear for five minutes, stuck half-way up a cliff with no rope, spread-eagled on the sandstone, starfish-like, my hands and bare feet, slick with sweat and terror, slipping from the tiny crannies. Twenty feet below was the narrow ledge I’d set off from; 1,000ft below that, the valley floor. Above, somewhere up there, was the clifftop rock church of Abuna Yemata Guh. And above that, only heaven. Ending up at any of them was distinctly on the cards.



If the 100 or so ancient cliff churches of Ethiopia’s Tigray region in the country’s far north are difficult to get to, the same could have been said until very recently for the area as a whole. Remote and mountainous, it was blighted by civil war from the 1970s until the 1990s, and in the 1980s was also the centre of the famine that horrified the world. Since then, any tourists who do venture north of Addis Ababa tend to stop at the country’s headline attraction, Lalibela’s rock-hewn churches, rather than carrying on to Tigray.

But a new chain of community-run *hedamos* (guesthouses) dotted through the gloriously stark landscape of mesas and deep ravines, means that Tigray, with its rock churches, its pastoral culture unchanged for millennia and so much besides, is now more easily accessible to trekkers. Built by NGOs, the guesthouses are basic (but often with astounding views) and treks can be booked by stays at two luxury lodges, the Agoro at Adigrat and the Gheralta near Hawzen.

We had planned a three-night, four-day walk of about 40 miles, setting off from Agoro, the first of the luxury lodges, built in 2011 just outside the town of Adigrat. Our group was made up of four British walkers, Endelee Teshome, our guide from Addis, and the two donkeys we’d hired to carry our luggage, for where we were going there were no roads.

We climbed, through forests of eucalyptus, the floor carpeted with wild sage, the fragrance kicked up by the donkeys’ hooves, the thin air 6,000ft above sea level making us work hard. A mule train came the other way, carrying grain to Adigrat.

After a couple of hours, we reached the top of the ridge. Spread before us was a landscape of such epic scale and grandeur that it took a while to take it all in: vast canyons for miles, and buttes and mesas topped with juniper forests, with the ragged, shark-teeth Adwa Mountains forming the backdrop, like some lost world imagined by Hollywood animators.

On the edge of the escarpment, we sat under a giant wizened olive tree and looked out, the soundtrack of this world drifting up to us in snatched fragments: children laughing; a howling dog; a woman’s voice, sensual, singing softly. We descended and

On foot through a forgotten land

Great walks In the second of a series on hiking holidays, *Mike Carter* treks to the ancient cliff churches of Tigray in Ethiopia



walked along the valley floor, through villages of stone Tigrayan *tukul* houses, past people in white robes winnowing maize by hand, or threshing millet with pairs of oxen. Clear springs fed fields of onions and cabbages, and everywhere we went, we were trailed by a coterie of small giggling children. Everyone waved at us, smiling. “They will not have seen too many outsiders before,” said Endelee. It was a scene, he added, that would have been little changed since biblical times.



He pointed out the birds as we went – the black-winged lovebird and the white-cheeked turaco (both endemic), the African firefinch and cinnamon-breasted bee-eater; brilliant flashes of colour, all completely tame. A troop of gelada monkeys watched us from a giant fig tree. There was a real sense of Shangri-La about these Tigrayan valleys.

The path rose again. After an hour we reached a door in the mountain-side. Endelee disappeared and returned with a priest, with silver hair and chaotic teeth. The door was unlocked and we entered a cave. In the gloom, I could make out carved sandstone Aksumite pillars, a barrel-shaped knave and pews of rock. Covering the walls were frescoes in primary colours depicting familiar scenes from the

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Bible but with the unfamiliar twist for a westerner such as me that all the faces were African.

According to Endelee, nobody is really sure why Tigray’s churches were carved into cliff faces. Just as nobody really seems to know when they were built, with guesses ranging from the fourth century – when what was then the Kingdom of Aksum became one of the world’s first official Christian states – to the ninth, making them older than the churches of Lalibela, 150 miles to the south. Until the mid-1960s, when the churches were first chronicled, they were almost unknown outside Tigray – even to Ethiopians. But in many ways, the mystery only deepens the sense of wonder about Ethiopia, the only African state never colonised.

“Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion,” wrote 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon, “the Ethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten.”

We walked on, along the rim of the mountains, the sun starting to fall, gradually turning the sandstone from vermilion to ochre. A Verreaux’s eagle was being mobbed by a dozen ravens, the whole like some graceful dogfight. Right at the end of the ridge, the only man-made structure for miles, and inches from the cliff edge, was the *hedamo* at Enaf. A simple stone building of rooms set around a courtyard, based on the traditional Tigray farmhouses, it had been built by two NGOs, Adigrat Diocese Catholic Secretariat and Tesfa Community-based Tourism. Dinner was cooked on an open fire and served by villagers who run the guesthouse as a cooperative. After the meal, tired from the five hours of hard walking, and with no electricity to provide night-time distractions, there was nothing to do but drift off into the deepest kind of sleep on mats laid on traditional mud beds, listening to the wind howl.

The next day we walked across rolling plains of golden *teff* (Ethiopia’s staple grain for making *injera* bread), spiked with cypress trees, the whole scene redolent of Tuscany. Then along valleys of giant candelabra cactus and aloe, riven with sparkling brooks, so visually perfect and ordered that they looked as if they had all been formally landscaped. Following tracks walked by Tigrayan highlanders for millennia, we climbed up escarpments, eyed



Clockwise from main picture: a priest at the clifftop church of Abuna Yemata Guh; Mike Carter’s group have breakfast at Enaf; climbing towards one of the churches; a woman prepares a coffee ceremony for the group; a priest at the church of Gohgot Eyesus

Mike Carter

Great Journeys

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Into the swing of things in Wales

Once a derelict maternity hospital, Celtic Manor has grown into a golf resort grand enough to host Nato’s next summit. *Neville Hawcock* checks in

Celtic Manor is like a miniature country run by a benign but golf-obsessed government. That’s true of most golf clubs but this Welsh resort is a bigger deal than most. It may not yet have an army or a space programme but it does have a kind of capital, in the form

of the 330-room Resort Hotel, the twin-winged slab of a building that looms over the M4 motorway as you head towards Newport. This would be more than grand enough for any self-respecting parliament, especially one whose members felt the need for spa facilities; maybe David Cameron and Barack Obama will opt for some pampering when Celtic Manor hosts the Nato summit in September.

It has regional centres, too, with clubhouses scattered here and there, such as the one it built when the Ryder Cup was held here in 2010. It worries about education, laying on a Golf Academy to make sure its shifting populace of guests can hold their heads high in the global golf economy. And it does infrastructure, with roads connecting its facilities and the three courses on Celtic Manor’s 2,000 variously hilly, wooded, watery, grassy, putting-greened and bunkered acres.

It has come a long way since 1980, when technology entrepreneur Sir Terry Matthews – Wales’s first billionaire, as a staff member



proudly told me – bought the derelict maternity hospital where he was born and set about doing it up.

Now Celtic Manor has embarked on a housing programme, building 10 “Hunter Lodges” on a stretch of track along from the 2010 Clubhouse. The aim is to extend the resort’s appeal by providing high-end self-catering accommodation for families and groups of up to eight.

The “Hunter” designation is meant to make you think

of outdoorsy adventure, nothing more: I don’t think they’d be too impressed if you turned up with a gun and a retriever. But is a golf course – or even a golf statelet – any place for a family to spend the weekend? Especially a barely sporting, definitely non-golfing family, lightly frazzled after a cab ride and a crowded train journey from London to Newport?

In fact, that grumpy commute made our roomy, immaculate lodge all the more appealing. Like its neighbours, the Plucky Pheasants had a congenially silly name (next door: the Kooky Kestrel), was largely made of wood, giving it a shake-that-city-dust-off feel, and was highly spacious. I think ours could have comfortably swallowed up the family home but that may have been an illusion caused by the lack of clutter. The main living room, though, was certainly as tall as a house: looking up, you saw the inverted “V” of the roof, all in pale planking, as you would in a church. It had three ranks of windows too: a whole house façade for a

single room. It reminded me of that scene in *Help!* where the Beatles each go into their apparently separate terraced houses but it’s one big groovy space inside.

It was all very open-plan: the lounge merged into the dining area, with its big, long chunk of a table, which merged into the kitchen, which had all the equipment you could wish for. There was also a bathroom with a sauna, and a sort of Zen games room, furnished with bean bags, a big screen and a games console.

Perhaps inevitably, there was a hot tub too, which sat in a spacious porch off the lounge. But if you’re going to wallow in luxury, then wallow: I’m a sucker for these things. This one had views across to the other side of the Usk valley, all cloud shadows sliding over patchwork fields and farmhouses and spinneys; on its putting-green floor, tiny players were intent on their rounds.

As the children lolled in their rooms in digital indolence, hypnotised by

YouTube *Team Fortress* tutorials and *Adventureland* cartoons, the grown-ups sipped tea in the tub and assayed various permutations of jets and bubbles.

The Hunter Lodges are self-catering but that’s an option rather than an obligation. You can order in hampers, for breakfast or afternoon tea, or takeaways (pizza, Indian, fish and chips). These cost roughly the same as you would pay your local takeaway and are pretty good. If you’re feeling hungry and flush, there’s a cook-it-yourself roast dinner hamper, serving eight, with a four-kilo rib of beef for £240. That wasn’t much good for my daughter, who is a vegetarian, but the caterers came up with a nice pulse dish for her; they were even unfazed by my gluten-free diet. (Yes, no one invites *us* for dinner twice.) Unless you’re a complete slob, those options still entail clearing up, loading the dishwasher and so on. Another option is to dial up a car – there’s complimentary transport for guests – and head for one of the six on-site restaurants.

For many, the main draw will be the golf. But since none of us had ever played before, we booked an introductory lesson on Saturday afternoon and, before lunch, got in the mood by playing mini-golf on a course that replicated the most challenging holes of the world and bore the grandiose name Kingdom of Legends.

I went two under on the tricky long green at Valderama, and the thrilling possibility of a dormant talent opened up – only to snap shut again when we began our lesson. As patient pro Michael taught us the rudiments of gripping the club and driving the ball, it became clear that, like a risky investment, success in the Kingdom of Legends is no guide to future performance. For every ball that I watched sail past the 100-metre mark, 10 scattered wildly to the left or right.

Yet if you can do one immaculate shot, with the ball lofting obediently into the sky, you can surely do more... and so the interest takes hold. Maybe if I focus more on stance this time? Or adjust my fingers just

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One of Celtic Manor’s new ‘Hunter Lodges’



traditional Ethiopian honey wine. A man stood up and started thumping out a metronomic beat on a kebero drum. “Shall I start this party with my drums?” he sang, Endeles translating. “The sunshine is in my room!”

People got to their feet in that tiny space, began shuffling around the fire, clapping, singing, leaping, turning, twisting. The dancers’ faces were now rapt, transported. Then the ululation began, a trembling wave of sound that seemed to fill every inch of that room.

I went outside. The wind was fierce now, banging the shutters. Through the cracked wooden door, I could see the dancers, flickering shadows against the fire. They were singing in Tigrayan, and the only word I could understand was “Hallelujah”.

I went to the cliff and sat down, my legs hanging over the edge into the abyss. From my vantage point I could see for maybe 30 miles yet there was not a single light.

Tomorrow, I would get stuck up a cliff and disappoint Gebre, the local guide at Abuna Yemata Guh. Then I would return to the world; my first hot shower in a week at the stylish Gheralta Lodge; a drive to the airport along the fast Chinese-built roads that have helped shrink the country and drive a decade of Ethiopian economic growth; a boy would ask me about the American wrestling he sees on TV – whether it is real or faked. For only in small, shrinking pockets, such as the Tigray highlands, can this still be considered a country “forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten”.

But for now, I could just sit on a cliff, in the dark, listening to soft voices behind me singing “hallelujah”. In front of me, a huge crescent moon lay recumbent on top of the Adwa mountains, glowing scarlet, like a big lazy grin.

Trekking to the Daniel Korkor church in Tigray, Ethiopia

Alamy

Details

Mike Carter was a guest of Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.com), which offers a 10-night Tigray trip, combining four nights’ trekking, staying in guesthouses, three nights at Gheralta Lodge and three nights at the rock churches of Lalibela, from \$6,450 per person including internal flights



The main Resort Hotel

so? Better get another 40 balls, or maybe 400... In the cubicle next to me, a man and his young son were steadily thwacking their stockpile out of sight; I told him it was my first time but that I could start to see the appeal. “You can have the worst, coldest, blowiest round ever,” he said, “and at the end you’ll be thinking, ‘Now when can I do that again?’” My 13-year-old, beseeching me for another session on the range, was clearly of a like mind.

Not that there was any shortage of other activities: archery, a laser war game,

one of those treetop rope trails. There are gyms, spa treatments and swimming, with pools at the main hotel and a big satellite clubhouse called the Lodge. And steam rooms: you could spend a weekend steeping yourself in different varieties of leisure water.

After two nights, I felt clean, loose-limbed, glowing, a sleeker analogue of the jumpy stress-puppet who’d fetched up on Friday night. The children, too, having resisted the exile from our metropolitan WiFi comfort zone on Friday, were begging by Sunday to stay longer. School and work did not permit but, as the train pulled away from Newport, I wasn’t the only one thinking, “Now when can I do that again?”

Details

Neville Hawcock was a guest of Celtic Manor (celtic-manor.com). The Hunter Lodges sleep eight and cost from £1,750 for a three-night weekend break

Short cuts

London A luxurious 91-room hotel has opened on a former bomb site in what was Soho’s seediest corner. The Ham Yard Hotel is the latest property from Firmedale, the company run by designer Kit Kemp and her husband Tim, who have seven other London hotels as well as one in New York. In an area once renowned for drugs and prostitution, Ham Yard was the last undeveloped second world war bomb site in Soho before Firmedale acquired the land in 2009 for a reported £30m. It has now been transformed into an “urban village” with 13 specialist shops in a tree-lined pedestrian street. The hotel has a rooftop garden, library, spa, 188-seat theatre and a 1950s bowling alley imported from Texas; bedrooms have floor-to-ceiling windows. Meanwhile, Nobu Hospitality, the restaurant and hotel company whose owners include chef Nobu Matsuhisa and actor Robert De Niro, has announced plans to open a London hotel in what would until recently have been considered a similarly insalubrious location. The 156-room property is due to open in 2016 in Willow Street,

a Shoreditch backstreet behind the budget Hoxton Hotel. [firmedalehotels.com](#); [nobuhotels.com](#)

Kathmandu The Nepalese government is opening 104 new peaks to climbers, offering even those with little experience the prospect of making a first ascent. KE Adventure, a British tour operator, has already responded to the move by launching a trip to make the first ascent of Mukot Peak when it opens next year. The 6,087m peak lies to the north of Dhaulagiri, the world’s seventh-highest mountain. The 21-day trip, departing October 3 2015, costs £2,895; participants need only to be fit and to have used crampons before. The proviso is that this will be the

first “recorded ascent” – others may have already reached the summit without official permission. Space is limited to 12 people but other operators are likely to announce more expeditions to the newly opened peaks in the coming months. The Nepalese government hopes the move will increase tourism revenue while also easing congestion on the most popular peaks. [keadventure.com](#)

Virginia Hilton Worldwide, the Virginia-based hospitality group with more than 4,000 properties worldwide, is to launch a new chain of hotels for travellers “who seek local discovery and authentic experiences”. Rather than being managed by the group, members of what will be called “Curio – A Collection by Hilton” will remain independently owned and managed. The move is designed to give guests more individuality while still offering the group’s loyalty programme and guaranteed standards. For the hotels, it offers a chance to gain access to Hilton’s global marketing and distribution channels. [hilton.com](#)

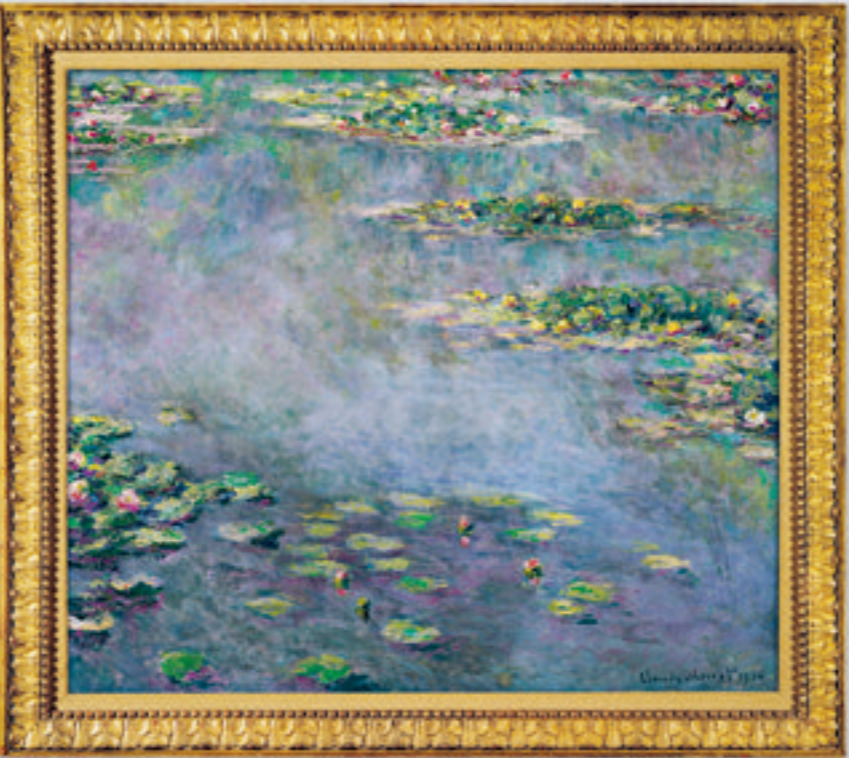


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