

diversions



first class ❖ EPIC ETHIOPIA

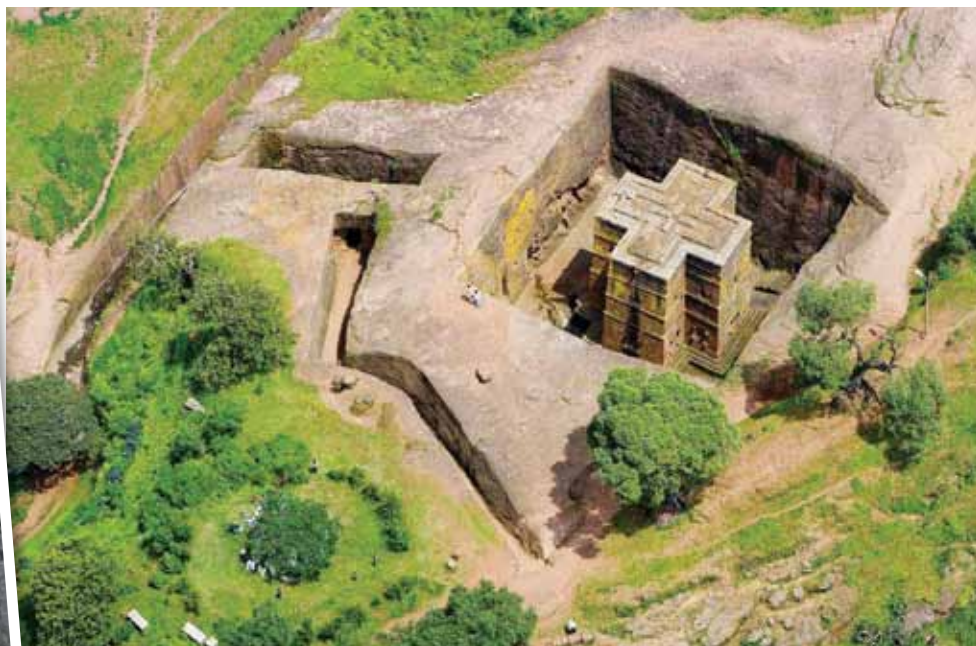
A helicopter safari over the East African nation's highlands exposes intrepid souls to majestic landscapes and cultural treasures.

BY DAPHNE NIKOLOPOULOS

There are many fine places in the world to have breakfast. On the plains of the Masai Mara after a predawn hot air balloon ride. On a balcony of the Plaza Athenée overlooking the Eiffel Tower. On a riverboat crossing the Chao Praya as the sun rises over gilded Thai temples.

A helicopter safari is a window to Ethiopia's remotest regions, such as the Simien Mountains.

Clockwise from right: Bete Giyorgis, the most famous of Lalibela's rock churches; Orthodox priests in front of Bete Maryam; flying through the Tekezé River Valley en route to the Simien Mountains; a worshipper at Bete Golgotha.

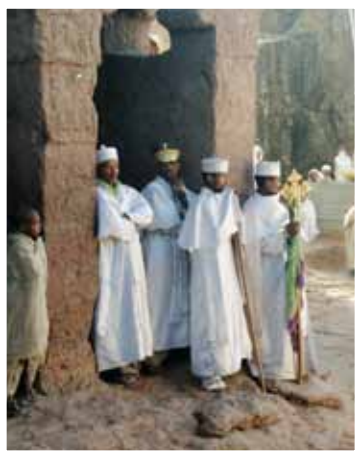


a strip about 10 feet wide with precipices dropping hundreds of feet on either side, landing dead center. The man is an artist.

“Right,” he says as the rest of us exhale. “Coffee?”

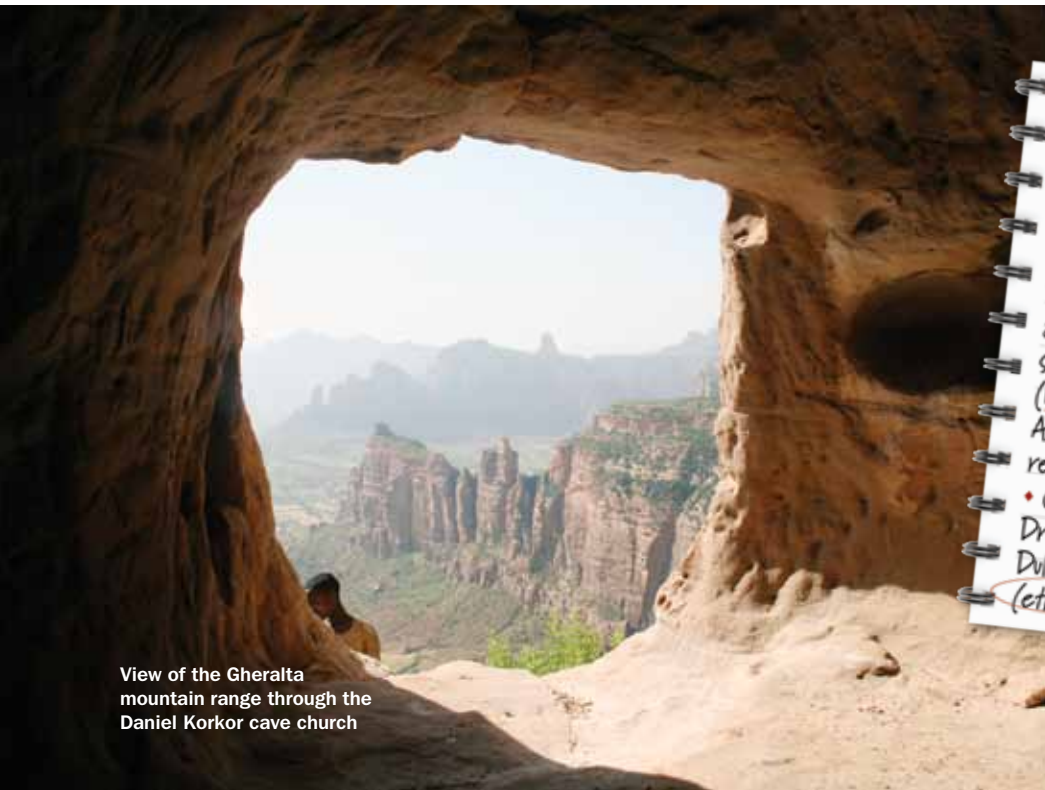
It’s a hell of a way to start the morning. We eat homemade donuts with Tigrayan smoked honey and sip strong coffee on the rooftop of Ethiopia, surrounded by basalt cliffs sculpted by the eternal winds. The air is vaguely perfumed with thyme, which grows wild in these mountains. A gentle breeze gives lift to the birds hovering above the canyon. We search for the rare Lammergeier vulture that sometimes circles this rock formation, but it is feeling shy today. We are far too awestruck to miss it.

This improbable breakfast sums up the experience of a helicopter safari: It takes you to the uninhabited ends of the earth in an adrenaline-fueled flash journey that, paradoxically, seems to unfold in slow motion. A trip such as this one, organized and made seamless by U.K. bespoke travel company Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.com), is a must in a place like Ethiopia, where the distances are long and there is a vast amount of detail to take in. Traveling the highlands by road is flat

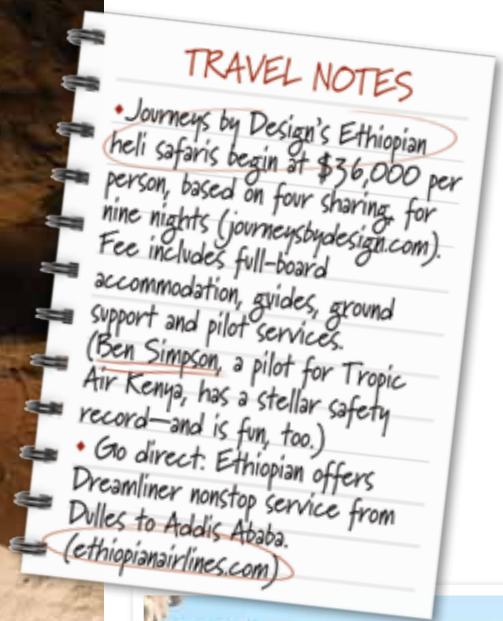


But nothing—I mean *nothing*—comes close to this. We are flying in a Eurocopter AStar through the Simien Mountains in remotest Ethiopia, in and out of wind-swept gorges that make the Grand Canyon look like a gully. The pilot, Ben Simpson, a Briton living in Kenya who bears an uncanny resemblance to Robert Redford in *Out of Africa*, points to an insanely narrow outcropping and says, “How’s everybody feeling?”

For a split second, I think he’s kidding. But then he brings the chopper down on



View of the Gheralta mountain range through the Daniel Korkor cave church



compared to the 3D panorama of being inside the mountain ranges, next to the elemental layers of rock, seeing every fissure and shadow.

Before landing for breakfast, we'd spent a day in Gheralta, a high mountain plateau where monks built churches and monasteries into the sandstone caves as early as the fourth century, when Christianity first took hold in Ethiopia. The helicopter can land near eight of these, including Maryam Korkor and Daniel Korkor, nestled so deep within a high cliff they are barely discernible from the air, let alone the ground.

Access is not for the faint of heart—think two-hour hike through rocky, vertical terrain—but it has its rewards: The churches have magnificent murals, tombs and architecture, all testaments to the spirit of the men who have tended them for centuries.

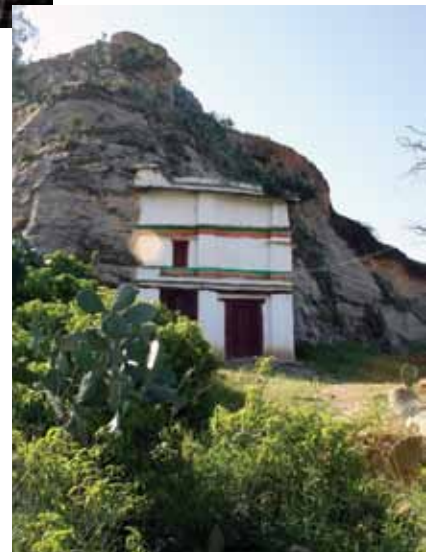
After a night at the remote Gheralta Lodge (gheraltalodgetigrat.com), built by an Italian couple to mimic a Tigrayan village (but with all the mod cons), the journey takes us to the Simiens and on to Lalibela with its legendary twelfth-century rock churches. Simpson circles above the town to give us an aerial glimpse of Bete Giyorgis, the church of St. George, chiseled of



a single piece of rock in a perfect cruciform shape about 100 feet into the ground. From above, it looks like a jewel dangling in a dark void: a remarkable feat of engineering and masonry.

These 11 medieval churches, collectively a UNESCO World Heritage site, are carved with columns, arches and keyhole windows, and decorated with frescoes that remain brilliant to this day. They are connected by a network of trenches and subterranean tunnels, adding to the mystique.

No amount of time seems enough in Lalibela, but the next morning we move on. Flying south to Addis Ababa, we make a detour through the Blue Nile Gorge, following the river as it cuts through an arid canyon. As we land on a pebbled shoreline



Clockwise from center: The view from the cockpit; a priest and keeper of the keys on a cliff in Gheralta; Maryam Korkor church.



Left to right: Landing on the banks of the Blue Nile; approaching the world's narrowest "helipad" in the Simiens.

near a farming village, women and children spill down a hillside to see what the commotion is.

At first they look at us as if we've descended from outer space: five wind-burned creatures stepping out of a noisy craft that raises a frenzy of dust and rock as it touches down. We try to speak to them but they back off, suspicious of our intentions.

In the end, it's technology that binds us. I snap a few photos with my iPhone and show them. Emboldened by

their giggles, I share photos of my children; in a tender gesture, one woman kisses my son's photo on the phone. Our lives may be worlds apart, but we are both mothers and that connects us on a fundamental level.

On one hand, four days on the helicopter pass too quickly; on the other, the experience has been so rich, it feels like weeks have gone by. As a return visitor to Ethiopia, I can honestly say viewing the country from above and entering its untrammled realms is like the difference between a gem in the rough and a polished one: a priceless treasure brought to life. ♦



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