

Rock OF AGES

The Orthodox Christian churches of Lalibela, northern Ethiopia, devotionally hewn straight out of the mountains, have drawn the pious since the fall of Jerusalem. Our writer, AIDAN HARTLEY, had a very personal reason for his own timely pilgrimage

WAY OF THE CROSS
Many Ethiopians believe Lalibela's 11 rock-hewn churches were carved by angels



he last time I was in northern Ethiopia, a civil war was being fought and I was a foreign correspondent travelling with a guerrilla army—the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front. My memories are a blur of battles, captured soldiers, flying bullets and explosions, a firing squad, sleeping rough and hungry on the rebel advance south. On May 28, 1991, I witnessed the final assault against Addis Ababa, the capital, ending my journey at the gates of the old imperial palace, which had been squatted by Marxists since the murder of Emperor Haile Selassie.

One day during the advance we had to take cover in a dry riverbed as missiles roared overhead, moaning and fizzing like fireworks and slamming into the fields around us in great plumes of debris. The Christian Ethiopian fighters had told me about the monolithic churches in Lalibela, among their most sacred pilgrimage sites, which they believed the angels had helped to carve out of solid rock. I’m usually a godless fellow, but cowering in that riverbed I prayed for my skin to be saved and made a promise that if I survived, I myself would go to see Lalibela. When the war ended, I naturally forgot about my pact and took off for fresh adventures.

Over the decades I returned to Addis Ababa, but never to those northern hills, whose isolation was famously captured by Edward Gibbon, who wrote in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that the Ethiopians had “slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten”.

Then came 2015. I turned 50, made costly mistakes, saw a friend dying of cancer. Bad luck supposedly hits you in threes, but I stopped counting after I was violently attacked and the surgeon considered amputating my hand. As I came round in the recovery room, I saw my all fingers were still attached—but I had the growing superstition that I was being punished. It was time to make amends. I recalled that promise in the dry riverbed all those years ago, decided to retrace my steps, and booked a flight to Addis.

My aim was to head north to the highlands, but in my mental state *en route*, it seemed appropriate to pass by the Danakil Depression. From the air, this resembled recent photographs of Mars. We camped at 116m below sea level, and this was, by night, a place of strange dreams, fuelled by my bedtime reading of Wilfred Thesiger’s 1930s *Danakil Diary*. This records the local Afar people’s habit of collecting human testicles as war trophies: “Met a young boy, at most fourteen, who had recently ‘cut’ [castrated] a man... the dream of every boy”.

In the heat of the day, the nightmares were replaced by surreal mirages. The desert was the rippled surface of a chocolate pudding. Or it was an ice floe, salt tinkling underfoot, where I might see polar bears. At the continent’s lowest point, we found the gates of Hades: sulphur springs, yellow and orange, with crystal fans formed into coral reefs or the entrails of Leviathan; brimstone pillars like Lot’s wife; mountains of salt, wind-eroded into the Gorgon’s victims, Mount Rushmore faces and the Twin Towers of Manhattan. In the extra-terrestrial silence, I listened to the sounds inside my skull, the pumping of blood like voices of reproach.

Out on the salt plains, we found Afar men cutting what resembled blocks with which to build igloos. This was pure salt. Rather than castrating us, the Afar smiled, while loading the slabs on to their camels. One dromedary peered at me through Marilyn Monroe eyelashes and seemed to utter the words of James Elroy Flecker: “We are the pilgrims, master; we shall go/Always a little further...”

At a slow lope, the salt caravans headed for the hills of Tigray, which we passed the next morning on a brand new Chinese-built road.

Northern Ethiopia’s landscapes are the fantasies of a Turner painting: blurred peaks, hanging valleys, white-robed pilgrims like distant angels gathered around churches in wooded groves. It has always been a place of fantasy, or even the unbelievable. Scottish explorer James Bruce visited the source of the Blue Nile in 1770, but after his return to London his stories of Ethiopia (known as Abyssinia at the time)—“more wonderful than those of Sinbad the sailor and perhaps as true”—were greeted with disbelief and derision. For centuries, Abyssinia was the home of Prester John, a Christian king of legend who might, it was believed, emerge to help Europe against the Saracens. To Ethiopians, it was also the sanctuary of the Ark of the Covenant, brought home to the holy city of Axum from Jerusalem by Menelik, the son of Solomon and Sheba. In his sublime book *The Chains of Heaven*, Philip Marsden says Ethiopia “represents an idea as much as a place”—and that it has always been an engine of myths for the outside world, while its isolated people also created their own world of countless stories. You see this in Tigray, where there are more churches per square mile than anywhere on earth, in a landscape where God is everywhere, with legends of miracles wafting about every hilltop, sycamore fig, cave or stream. A man points at an impression in volcanic rock—“The footprint of Maryam [the Virgin Mary]!”—and builds a shrine.

We left the car outside Adigrat, loaded up two donkeys with kit and began our walk into the hills. Our guide, Bemnet Gizachew, estimated the number of hours we would spend walking, but my travelling mate, the photographer Frédéric Lagrange, was so entranced with what he saw that he could not go for more than five minutes without stopping to take pictures. Peasants were harvesting wheat by hand with sickles. Chanting men drove threshing teams of oxen in tight circles, round and round, on the golden straw in the highland sunshine next to stooked stacks shaped like beehives. They broke from their work to offer us unleavened bread.

Stopping always for Frédéric, which I did not mind because I saw his delight, we trekked along the spines of mile-high cliffs with clouds below us, descending passes into valleys dotted with beautifully made peasant dwellings of red sandstone with

slate and murrum roofs sprouting barley. On well-trodden paths, we met villagers on their way to church: all in white robes edged with colour, the women’s foreheads tattooed with the cross, their hair braided into biblical styles; a monk who offered the corner of his cloak for the pilgrims to kiss, and crocodiles of school children carrying their textbooks. We crossed green meadows watered by springs, with furrows of water trickling through orchards of fruit, hops and vegetable gardens. We heard the tinkle of cowbells, bray of donkeys,

plains outside Korem, it lights up a biblical famine, now, in the 20th century...” Today, the people we saw looked much healthier and better off than I recalled. In the fields they were growing hops and harvesting millet. “For beer”, said Bem. Most Ethiopians are poor, yes, but village markets brimmed with grain. The country roads were among the best I’ve seen anywhere in Africa. I saw no plastic rubbish. Most of all, northern Ethiopia was peaceful—not the conditions for a crisis, despite the media hype. Unlike in many African

THE PRIEST CLAIMED WORK TO CARVE HIS CHURCH HAD BEGUN IN THE TIME OF NOAH, AFTER THE FLOOD

children playing, birdsong, the swoon scents of acacia blossom.

Returning to Tigray, where I had first covered the Ethiopian conflict, I perceived that Narnian distortion of time that occurs when you revisit places where you had formative experiences. I felt as if no time had passed at all, yet it might have been so long ago that it was just a dream. I imagined encountering myself, aged 25, advancing along the rocky paths with a column of guerrilla infantry, small men and women with wild Afro hair, guns and bandoliers, half-starved in sandals and looking skywards for MiG jets hunting for targets to cluster-bomb.

Between flashbacks I interrogated Bemnet—known as Bem—on all that we saw. “What’s that?” “Gelada baboon” “What’s that?” “Rock hyrax”. I was better than him on Tigray’s amazing birds. White-winged cliff chat. Abyssinian scimitarbill. Blue-breasted bee-eater. People had told me that Bem is probably the best guide in Ethiopia, having spent time everywhere from the Simien Mountains in the north to the southern Bale highlands. He travelled with photographer Sebastião Salgado for a month in the Omo River Valley.

According to Bem, most visitors he met were “intelligent” travellers, people seeking more adventurous travel in a unique African country. I’d add that visitors to Ethiopia tend to be at least reasonably literate. From Marsden to Thomas Pakenham, Dervla Murphy and Miles Bredin, there are so many good books that have been written about Ethiopia. As we settled down at evening in Tigrayan guesthouses, perched on the edge of windy cliffs, the incense, green rush-covered floors and elaborate Ethiopian protocols surrounding coffee-making were all charming—but I sensed that the conditions were quite basic for the dotcom tycoon or the oligarch’s family. (Having said that, though, Bem takes plenty of tourists on very posh, expensive helicopter safaris.) Some might balk at *injera*, Ethiopia’s traditional staple spongy flatbread which, to the uninitiated, resembles a kitchen mop—and they might find the “traditional” Tigrayan loo they must visit later a bit hard to handle, too.

A recent alert from the United Nations claimed Ethiopia was suffering the “worst drought in decades” and that millions were yet again going hungry. We are three decades on from Michael Buerk’s famous BBC broadcast: “Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the

countries, there is security, law and order. Policemen do not pester one for bribes, though officials are steadfastly bureaucratic. Best of all, in northern Ethiopia people are excessively polite and friendly.

Peasants were reaping barley on the wide meadows of Samre. A young boy shared a handful of green beans with me by the roadside. We said goodbye to the donkeys and got back in a car for our journey south. Along hairpin tracks, we dropped into northern Wollo, with its jagged valleys and flying buttresses of rock. After the spun gold and red of Tigray, Wollo was all terraced fields of browns, greens and the dark yellow of *sorghum*.

Here the trail led us to a string of churches, most of them carved into the solid volcanic rock of hillsides. At one grotto we met a priest whose name was *Glass-at-the-bottom-of-the-Ocean*—conjuring the humble idea of our invisibility within the immensity of God’s universe. He claimed work to carve his church had begun in the time of Noah, after the Flood, but had only been completed during the reign of the Axumite king Ezana, who embraced Coptic Christianity in the 4th century. “While you were still pagans”, Bem leaned in to remind me.

These priests and their flocks were very poor, existing on a handful of bread each day, wearing clothes and shoes often made at home. What was incredible to Frédéric and me was how such people could believe their route to grace must be won by abandoning the desire for material gain, embracing asceticism and mortification of the flesh.

At the 12th-century church of Yemrehanna Kristos, we found great piles of pilgrims’ skeletons at the rear of the church’s huge cave. To die here was a guaranteed path to salvation—the foot of Jacob’s ladder ascending to heaven. I asked the priest, Habte Maryam—the “wealth of Mary”—for his blessing. He looked surprised. “Are you Christian?” I shrugged. He produced a large metal cross, which he offered for me to kiss. Outside, blind beggars crawled up the rain-soaked steps to the cave. Back at the car was a group of children. “Give me pen. Give me munny. Give me candy. Give me orange. Give me biscoot.”

“This is the Holy Land,” Wodajene Asefa, the priest



HEART OF STONE

Clockwise from above: the vast expanse of Tigray, northern Ethiopia; the Axumite church of Yemrehanna Kristos; a man emerging from a church in Lalibela. *Facing page:* the interior of a rock-hewn Tigray church; in the desert in the Afar district; salt mining in Afar near the Danakil Depression; the interior of a Lalibela church





PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

A priest, or *abba*, at a Tigray church

at the monolithic church of St George in Lalibela, announced. "You have arrived not in the earthly world, but in heavenly Jerusalem. Anybody who visits here will be redeemed, and so will the 14 generations after you. Lalibela! Lalibela! Lalibela!"

Eleven incredible rock-hewn churches were carved here, probably during the 12th-century reign of the king after whom the site is named. Lalibela wished to provide his Christian subjects with a pilgrimage site to replace Jerusalem after the holy city was captured by Saladin in 1187. It is a medieval religious theme park. Some of the churches have partially collapsed. Others are intact. St George's, shaped like an Ethiopian cross in elevated 3D, is perhaps the most perfect example of monolithic architecture anywhere. All the edifices are very close to each other, linked by paths and rock trenches. At the mouth of one tunnel I was told, "This is hell." I had to feel my way blindly down the rock passage, which was pitch-black. Then I heard a deep, despairing groan. The Ethiopians with me exclaimed, "The Devil!" Then we all heard it again. And when we emerged into the light, nobody had any explanation for it.

Long before dawn, I joined white-robed pilgrims gathered in Biete Medhani Alem—the House of the Saviour of the World—the largest of all Lalibela's churches. Around me, worshippers kissed rock pillars worn smooth and dark by centuries of lips, caresses and tears. The interior thrummed with the murmur of prayer: white robes, prayer sticks, young monks in alcoves reading handwritten scriptures, an older monk chanting the scriptures by the light of a tallow candle, a man shaking his head in ecstasy as the words flowed over us. A peasant woman knelt, kissed the ground and rose to her feet again with her hands in supplication and repeated this over and over again. Here there were old and young, mothers with babies, wealthy and poor. They were a people unbothered by self-doubt or loss of conviction. I sensed we could all learn something here.

Plaintive exclamations rose in a crescendo. I could not understand the service, spoken in the ancient ecclesiastical language of Ge'ez; and yet despite being divided by nearly 2,000 years of culture, still I recognized the progress of the mass.

The birds' liquid song entered with the dawn light, growing in the narrow, arched windows of the stone space. I was overcome with emotion. Being in the presence of such devotion, I longed for the consolation of their belief and the hope of grace. I was up here in the highlands of Ethiopia, so far from the outside world, yet I felt we had arrived in a safe haven, among friendly people who were from the same root as I. Lalibela recharged me and set me back on the path. I was glad I had seen it at last.

In *Chains of Heaven*, Marsden's book which describes a trek along similar paths as ours between Lalibela and the holy city of Axum, the author meets a hermit who has not left his mountaintop for decades. The monk tells Marsden, "If I was allowed another life, I would go to all the places on God's earth. What better way to worship God than to look on all his works?"

I can think of no better encouragement than this to travel to Ethiopia. □

ETHIOPIA

WAY TO GO

Go with Africa specialist Journeys By Design (journeysbydesign.com), who will tailor-make your trip to Ethiopia via Abaca-Africa, run by Graeme Lemon, who is a Zimbabwean safari expert of many years' experience. A two-week Ethiopian adventure, including three days' walking in the Gheralta Mountains and your own private tented camp in the Danakil Depression, starts from £7,450 per person, including seamless ground arrangements, full-board accommodation and private vehicles, guides and internal flights. International flights extra. The best time to visit is from October to May. Wild Philanthropy Travel (wildphilanthropy.com) pledges to return 20 percent of the costs of an itinerary back into Ethiopian ecosystem conservation through sustainable trade. Ask for Bemnet Gizachew as your guide, because he's a lovely chap and extraordinarily helpful. If you can afford it, charter a helicopter safari with Tropic Air, run by Jamie Roberts (tropicairkenya.com).

NEED TO KNOW

Before you fly to Addis Ababa, go to an Ethiopian restaurant and sample the national cuisine, which will prepare you for what you like, can tolerate or wish to avoid. Ethiopia wins top prize in Africa for its culinary sophistication and diversity but it can be an acquired taste. I absolutely love it.

The staple is *injera*, a pancake or flatbread usually made from the biblical grain *teff*, fermented. On to this is placed a variety of other dishes with varying quantities of *berbere*—chilli. *Tibs* is grilled meat—you might wish to avoid the *kitfo* (raw meat)—and *wat* is a stew. Look out for the excellent honey, and prickly pears when in season. Eat, of course, with your right hand. Ethiopian beer is jolly good and so is fizzy Ambo mineral water. Three quarters of Africa's highlands are in Ethiopia, so wear a hat in the sun and take warm clothes for chilly nights.

READ ON

The Chains of Heaven: An Ethiopian Romance by Philip Marsden—a record of the author's trek from Lalibela to Axum. *The Pale Abyssinian: The Life of James Bruce, African Explorer and Adventurer* by Miles Bredin, on the 18th-century explorer. *Notes from the Hyena's Belly: An Ethiopian Boyhood* by Nega Mezlekia. *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* by Samuel Johnson and *The Mountains of Rasselas* by Thomas Pakenham

PS

Ethiopia is still unspoiled by tourism and most people are friendly, curious and polite; they want to try out their English. If you fall in love with the place, consider supporting the Ethiopian Heritage Fund (ethiopianheritagefund.org).

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