



ETHIOPIA

Its landscapes are biblical and its rituals haven't changed for centuries. But amid the cave

words STANLEY STEWART



churches and primitive tribes are new lodges – and helicopters (or donkeys) to reach them

Sunday service in the church of Abuna Yemata Guh requires nerves of steel. Yet they assured me the congregations were good. “Don’t worry,” the priest fussed. “Pregnant women are attending, old people are attending, tiny children are attending.”

I wasn’t sure I would be attending. I was standing on a narrow ledge. Below me was a 1,000ft drop to the valley floor. Somewhere above me, beyond a sheer polished cliff, was the church. My legs felt like water. I was sweating in places I had never sweated before. At that moment, the eye of a needle seemed easier to negotiate. “You must try,” the priest whispered. “God is watching.”

There are moments when Ethiopia seems to belong to an atlas of the imagination – part legend, part fairy-tale, part Old Testament book, part pulling your leg. In this land of wonders there are medieval castles of a black Camelot, monasteries among Middle Earth peaks accessible only by rope and chains, the ruined palace of the Queen of Sheba and the original Ten Commandments in a sealed box guarded by mute monks with killer instincts.

In the northern highlands priests with white robes and shepherds’ crooks appear to have stepped out of a Biblical painting. In the southern river valleys bare-breasted tribeswomen, who scar their torsos for erotic effect and insert plates the size of table mats in their lower lips, seemed to have emerged from a *National Geographic* magazine circa 1930. Ethiopia “resembles no other country in Africa”, wrote the great explorer Wilfred Thesiger, “or anywhere else.”

Its isolation is legendary. Not only was Ethiopia never colonised, but it also inflicted the greatest defeat on a European army in the history of the continent – at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. It was only the Italians, of course, but it still counts. Ethiopians were “forgetful of the world”, Edward Gibbon wrote, “by whom they were forgotten”. For long medieval centuries Europeans believed that Ethiopia was home to Prester John, legendary Christian ruler, descendant of one of the three Magi, keeper of the Fountain of Youth, protector of the Holy Grail, and all-round good guy who would one day rescue the Holy Land from the Muslims.

Crossing the threshold of the church of Medhane Alem in Lalibela, I seemed to step back a thousand years. Cut by shafts of dusty light from high windows, the interior gloom was scented with frankincense. I came round a pillar to find a dozen priests leaning on their croziers, chanting in Ge’ez, a language no one has spoken since the Middle Ages. The sound was a curious cross between Gregorian plainsong and a nasal Arabic call to prayer. These were among the earliest Christian rites, unchanged for well over 1,500 years. Worshippers sat on the ground against the bare stone walls, wearing clothes that wouldn’t have been out of place in the Book of Genesis. They gazed mournfully at a pair of threadbare theatrical curtains. Beyond the curtains lay the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, which held the Ark of the Covenant.

For a country with so much to offer, it is surprising to find tourism in Ethiopia still in its infancy. The war and



Ethiopia appears to belong to an atlas of the imagination, part legend, part fairy-tale, part Old Testament book



famine of the 1970s and 80s, though now almost ancient history, may be partly responsible. But a deeper issue may be a feature of the national character – a lack of entrepreneurial urgency. Ethiopia may not be big on stylish boutiques hotels, littered with objets d'art and architectural magazines, but it is a delightfully old-fashioned place, with ravishing landscapes, sleepy villages and friendly, unhurried people.

It is difficult to pick a single destination from Ethiopia's treasure chest, but first-time visitors shouldn't miss Lalibela and its remarkable churches, all below ground level, and all carved from the rock as entire buildings with surrounding courtyards, exterior walls and roofs. Historians are uncertain about much of their history but Ethiopians have a handle on it. A celestial team of angels came in at night to help out after the terrestrial workforce had clocked off.

There are always two histories in Ethiopia: the history of historians, sometimes a trifle vague, often tentative; and the history of Ethiopians, a people's history, confident, detailed, splendid, often fantastical. The two rarely coincide. Historians are still wringing their hands about the mysteries of Aksum in Tigray in the north, with its colossal stelae, its underground tombs, its ruined palaces and its possible connections to the Queen of Sheba. For a thousand years, until about AD 700, it was a dominant power in the region, "the last of the great civilisations of antiquity", according to Neville Chittick, the archaeologist, "to be revealed to modern knowledge".

Fortunately, the Ethiopians are on hand to fill in most of the historical blanks. The city was founded, they say, by the great-grandson of Noah. For 400 years it was ruled by a serpent who enjoyed a diet of milk and virgins. Historians may be divided about the Queen of Sheba but Ethiopians know she set off from here to Jerusalem with 797 camels and lot of rather racy lingerie to seduce King Solomon. Historians carelessly lost track of the Ten Commandments not long after Moses came down from Mount Sinai. Ethiopians have the originals under lock and key in a chapel in Aksum, guarded by those mute monks, assigned to kill all intruders.

The landscapes of Tigray are appropriately Biblical. It is a world where everything comes and goes by foot or hoof, a world of timeless villages perched beneath vast mesas and plunging ravines, a world where it is possible to imagine startling young men turning water into wine. With my bag loaded onto a Palm Sunday donkey, I set off on a three-day walk down the Erar Valley. I strolled through the latticed shade of eucalyptus trees, past scented banks of sage and mint, past stands of prickly pear and neatly ploughed fields framed by irrigation channels. I rested under the shade of vast fig trees beneath colonies of hornbills, bee-eaters and firefinches. A man in a white robe was winnowing wheat, tossing yellow forkfuls into the air, allowing the wind to take the chaff. Children ghosted out of orchards with home-made toys: a ball of goatskin and twine, a doll of twigs and wool. In the late morning I passed people coming back from the weekly market, two hours' walk away. They were carrying some of life's essentials: bags of rice, new sickles, bolts of bright cloth, blocks of salt that had come up from the



BY THE BOOK

From top: an illuminated manuscript at Abba Pentalewon monastery, near Aksum; camels bearing salt; Ethiopian Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas at Lalibela; a worshipper at the entrance to the church of Medhane Alem, the largest of the stone churches of Lalibela



Danakil Desert by camel caravan. Everyone stopped to greet me with handshakes and smiles.

The trek was part of a new community project. The guides and the transport – my faithful donkey – were provided by local villagers who, with the help of NGOs, have also built *hedamos*, or guesthouses. There is something special about these Tigrayan guesthouses – their location. Tigray is a mountainous region, characterised by *ambas*: dramatic, sheer-sided, flat-topped mountains. Most of the treks are easygoing, following the valley floors through pastoral landscapes. But towards the end of each day I started to climb with the guide, following steep paths along narrow rising ledges, to the summits of these anvil-headed *ambas*.

On the top, we emerged into a whole new world of luminous light and distant views. Here we found our home for the night, the community *hedamo*, perched in splendid isolation on the lip of a colossal escarpment, perhaps 3,000ft above the landscapes below. The views were breathtaking. We looked straight down, past circling eagles, to the world we had just left – ploughed fields, stone *tukuls*, eddying sheep, tiny white-robed figures trailing along dust lanes. Farther away, rivers carved swathes of ancient earth, canyons yawned open and valleys tumbled into one another. Farther still, mountains

There was no electricity, just lanterns and candles. Yet these felt like the most luxurious places I have ever stayed



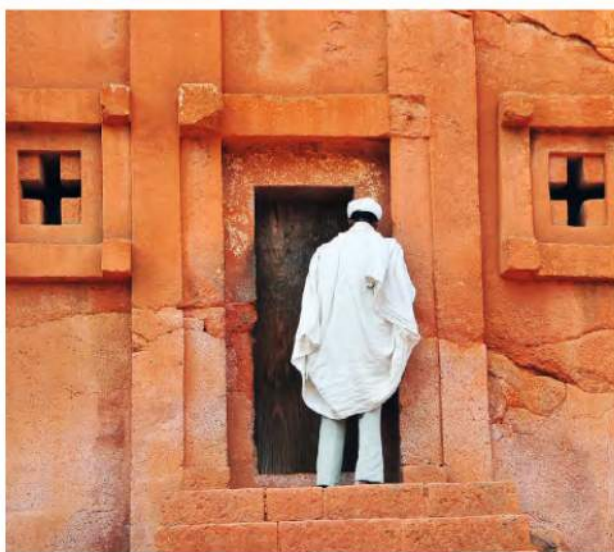
patrolled the horizons. With a slight turn of the head, I took in hundreds of miles.

At Erar and Shimbrey, the stone-built guesthouses, with their little courtyards and roof terraces, were comfortable but basic. Village women prepared delicious Ethiopian dinners that made little concession to Western tastes. The loos, Western-style, were in spartan huts. Washing facilities were wooden buckets of warm water. There was no electricity, just lanterns and candles. Yet these felt like the most luxurious places I had ever stayed. It was the luxury of unique experience, of meeting local villagers on their own ground, of engaging with an ancient way of life, of being far from tourism's well-trodden trails. And it was the luxury of spectacular location. I have never been anywhere with more stunning views.

At Erar, night came with equatorial suddenness. A troop of gelada baboons, 30 or so strong, made their way home across the summit of the *amba* after a day's feeding. They climbed down over the edge of the escarpment to precipitous ledges where they would be safe from leopards. The sun set over distant, mythical-looking mountains. When I turned round, a fat full moon was rising directly behind me. The world seemed to be in perfect balance.

Tigray, too, has its remarkable buildings. Scattered across these mountains are more than 120 ancient churches, most excavated in remote rock-faces like caves. Until the 1960s they were virtually unknown to the outside world. Older than the churches at Lalibela, they are little understood by historians. Which means we are left with the fabulous oral history of the Ethiopians.

Abuna Yemata Guh is one of the more challenging





The priest, a humble villager, referred to the apostles as if they were old friends. He talked of the saints as if they were men who had known his grandparents

churches to reach. A rock butte soared above us; I was getting a crick in my neck and a serious case of vertigo just looking at it. I imagined, as with the sheer-sided *ambas*, that there would be some circuitous path, some scrambling route to the top. It was only when we had trekked up from the valley floor and gained the narrow ledge that I began to realise I was going to have to climb a cliff-face, in fact several cliff-faces, to get to church.

A priest was waiting on the ledge, with the kind of morbid face usually reserved for the last rites. He advised me to remove my shoes and socks; bare feet would give me a better grip. It turned out that two men, who I had assumed to be casual passers-by, were in fact there to try to prevent me from plummeting to my death.

We started to climb. My two assistants, one above and one below, guided me to precarious foot- and hand-holds. This was rock climbing without the ropes, the safety harness or the Chris Bonington confidence. Spread-eagled on the cliff-face, clinging to the minor indentations that passed for handholds, I felt a trifle out of my comfort zone. Had I know what was in for, I would probably not have chosen Abuna Yemata Guh for a casual visit. But once I reached it, I was thrilled I had. The climb might be hair-raising but the church is unmissable.

At the top of the cliff, not daring to look down, I gazed ahead, just in time to see a side-chamber full of bones – the priest insisted they were deceased clerics, not fallen visitors. Then I shuffled along a narrow ledge and came to a cave-like opening. The priest wrestled with a key the size of a cricket bat. A door opened and I stepped into the gloom of the tiny church, hardly larger than a modest drawing room. As my eyes adjusted, I became aware of faces round the walls. Then the priest lit a torch and held it aloft. Suddenly the dark walls were alive with figures: apostles and saints, prophets and the archangels, Mary and the infant Christ. The famous Nine Saints from the

Levant, who had brought Christianity to Ethiopia in the fifth century, were here, as was Saint Yared, who wrote so many of the early Ethiopian chants. The builder of this cliff church was here, Abu Yemata, mounted on a horse and accompanied by his nephew Benjamin, who had painted the murals.

The priest, a humble villager, told me the stories that swarmed across these walls. He told the stories as they had been told to him, as they had been handed down from one priest to the next from the earliest days of the Christian era. He referred to the apostles as if they were old friends. He talked of the saints as if they were men who had known his grandparents. He told me about the groom who had neglected Yemata's horse. Yemata had turned him into a weasel. There, he said, bringing his torch near to the wall, illuminating a small weasel-headed man beneath the horse.

I asked why the church was here, so difficult to access, so high in these cliffs. The priest said it was for reasons of safety – it may well have been built when Christianity was still vulnerable. Then he added: "We are closer to God here, away from our world, and closer to His." He lifted an ancient text enclosed in an ox-hide satchel from a nail on the wall. He asked if he should say prayers. I said I thought a few words might be a good idea. After all, I still had to get down that cliff-face.

Journeys by Design (01273 623790; journeysbydesign.com) can organise a two-week private journey to Ethiopia, including Lalibela, a three-night trek through northern Tigray staying in Gheralta Lodge, and three nights at Bale Mountain Lodge, from £6,200 per person, excluding international flights. A seven-night helicopter safari to include all of the above, plus a flight to 300ft below sea level in the Danakil Depression, costs from £19,810 per person, based on four sharing a Eurocopter B4.



THE ULTRA GUIDE TO ETHIOPIA

High-end luxury has yet to make a significant impact in Ethiopia. Don't let this put you off. This is the most fascinating country in Africa. And you needn't go without Wi-Fi, room service or a skinny latte. Here are some of the best new options in Africa's most intriguing destination. Get a tour operator to join up the dots.

ADDIS ABABA

The Sheraton Addis

Ethiopia's only five-star luxury hotel. This would be an impressive hotel in Paris, let alone in Africa, and is a spoiling retreat after a few days upcountry. The spa will sort out sore muscles, and the French and Indian restaurants make a change if you want a break from Ethiopian fare (00251 11 517 1717; sheratonaddis.com; doubles from £210, b&b).

LALIBELA

Full of chanting priests and ancient churches carved out of the rock, Lalibela oozes atmosphere. The best of its hotels is the Maribela, modest but charming. Rooms are comfortable, the staff helpful, and the restaurant is excellent – be sure to ask for the local honey at breakfast. But the great draw is the view. The hotel is on an escarpment and every room comes with a balcony overlooking a vast swath of Biblical landscape (00251 33 336 0345; hotelmaribela.com; doubles from £46, b&b).

TIGRAY REGION

Tigray is walking territory and the spectacular locations of the Tesfa Tours community lodges can be a highlight of an Ethiopian odyssey. While clean and comfortable, these guesthouses are pretty basic; you may want to bookend a Tigray trek with two excellent lodges in the area – Gheralta and Agoro.

Both are stylish stone properties with rooms in individual circular *tukuls*. Owned and run by an Italian, Gheralta has some of the best food in Ethiopia. The Agoro is a social enterprise which invests in the local community.

If trekking is not your thing, either lodge could act as a base for visits to the cliff churches, or to the ruins of Aksum. Tesfa Tigray treks cost £48 a day, including food, guides, pack donkey and accommodation (00251 11 124 5178; tesfatours.com). At Gheralta Lodge, doubles with breakfast cost from about £38 (00251 11 663 2893; gheralta lodgetigray.com). At Agoro Lodge, doubles cost from £36, b&b (00251 34 845 0202; agorolodge.com).

THE OMO VALLEY

Home to some of the continent's most traditional tribes, the Omo Valley is colourful "primitive" Africa, a place still wonderfully unaffected by the modern world. Have cameras at the ready for the Karo people, with their spectacular body painting, the Hamar, with their bull-jumping ceremonies, and the Mursi, with their astonishing lip plates.



GOURD COUNTRY

Clockwise, from left: a Mursi woman from the Omo Valley carrying water; view from Bale Mountain Lodge; helicopters in the Highlands; Christian women in Lalibela; Ethiopian wolves

THE BALE MOUNTAINS

In a gorgeous region of forest and rolling uplands, of alpine lakes and fortress-like escarpments, Bale Mountains National Park is teeming with rare wildlife, including the endemic Ethiopian wolf.

Opened in 2014, Bale Mountain Lodge – a beautiful high-spec creation in thatch, wood and stone – is the only lodge inside the park. There are wood-burning stoves in the rooms, and wall-to-wall windows allow game viewing over breakfast. Guided walks, game drives, fly fishing, bird watching, horse riding and cultural excursions will keep you busy (00251 912 790802; balemountainlodge.com; £150 per person per night, full board, with one daily activity).

LAKE TANA AND GONDAR

As the source of the Blue Nile, Lake Tana has always had a mythical aura, so it is unsurprising to find it ringed by monasteries and castles. And Gondar, a former capital full of old palaces, is just up the road. But at Kuriftu Resort and Spa it could be time to forget about the sightseeing – four-poster beds, sun decks, a swimming pool, lake views and a first-rate spa encourage you to ditch the hiking boots and slip on the flipflops (00251 11 662 3605; kurifturesortspa.com; doubles from £210, half board).

THE SOUTHWEST

The south and west of Ethiopia have some of the least-explored terrain and most spectacular national parks in Africa. Much of the region offers a unique opportunity for the kind of safaris that visitors enjoyed before the age of mass tourism. There are healthy populations of lion, leopard, elephant, giraffe, buffalo, hippo, as well as a host of remarkable birds. Ethiopia is also top of the naturalist's list for endemic species, with many animals and birds you will see nowhere else in Africa.

Journeys by Design (01273 623 790; journeysbydesign.com) can arrange safaris with a private mobile tented camp with all facilities. The tented safaris cost from £300 per person per day, including full-board accommodation, a private guide, game drives and activities.



Also brace yourself for a good deal of nudity. The accommodation of choice here is Lumale Camp, where eight comfortable tents on the riverbank act as the base for fascinating excursions to the tribal villages (00251 11 895 1390; lumaletoursandcamp.com; doubles from £945 per night, full board, with excursions).

SIMIEN MOUNTAINS

With the most dramatic landscapes in Ethiopia, the Simien Mountains National Park – a World Heritage Site – is like a landscape from *The Lord of the Rings*, riven with astonishing canyons and dominated by many extraordinary peaks and ridges. The trekking here is rather more challenging than in Tigray and the

altitude can make it all a bit breathless. At Simien Lodge – at 9,840ft, the highest lodge in Africa – the rooms are functional rather than stylish, but log fires in the bar channel the right mountain vibe. Go for the standard rather than the VIP rooms – cosier, with better views (00251 11 552 4758; simiens.com; doubles from £68, b&b).