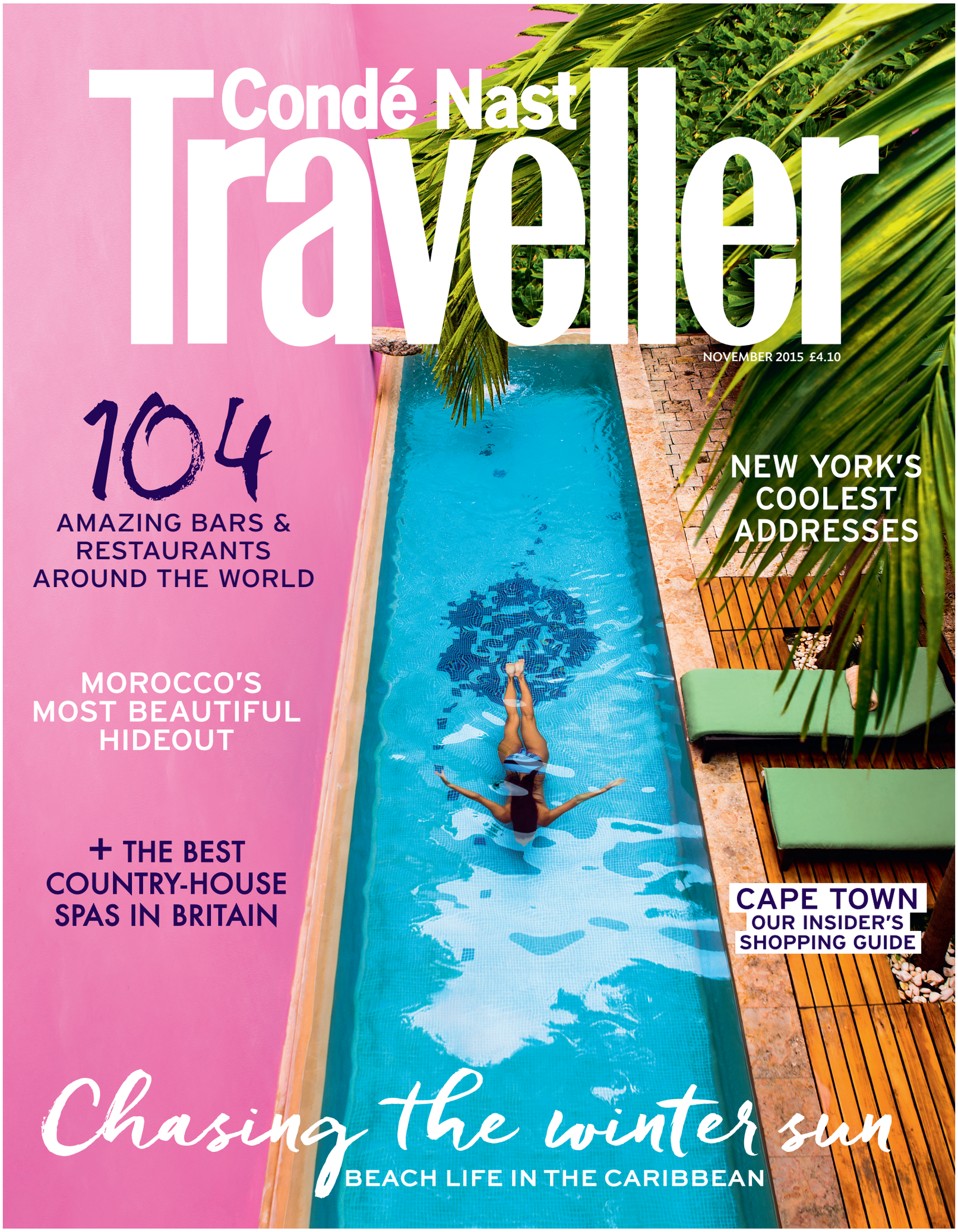


The edge of reason

Words by Stanley Stewart. Photographs by Alistair Taylor-Young

The salt merchant did his best to dissuade me. 'You don't want to go there,' he said. 'It's hotter than hell and they're quite likely to chop your testicles off.' In the market in Mekele, in the Ethiopian highlands, the merchant was seated among piles of rectangular salt blocks gift-wrapped in white acacia bark. 'They come from the Danakil,' he said. He must have noticed a glint in my eye. 'Eight days by camel caravan. Don't even think about going there.'

In the atlas of remote destinations, of splendidly end-of-the-world places, the Danakil is a star entry. It has been described as 'the lowest, the driest, the hottest and the most inhospitable place on earth'. Split between the north-eastern fringes of Ethiopia, southern Eritrea and northern Djibouti, it is stark, elemental and spectacular. Much of it is 100 metres below sea level; temperatures regularly exceed 50°C. Like the polar regions, like mountain summits, like coral seas, the deserts of the Danakil are only tenuously connected to the earth we know. The salt merchant's anxieties illustrated its status; the Danakil is the kind of place to which myths attach. I have been thinking about going there for more than 30 years.

Historic accounts of travel in the Danakil tend towards the hair-raising. A man called Nesbitt explored the region in 1928. Three of his servants were murdered but Nesbitt managed to get back, more or less intact, in time to deliver a lecture at the Royal Geographical Society. Wilfred Thesiger was here in 1930, after attending Haile Selassie's coronation. The great desert explorer loved the Danakil; it came with the kind of aloof and sadistic tribesmen – the Afar – that reminded him of his prep-school days.

To say the Afar had a reputation for hostility may be understating things. According to their code, a man was not a man who had not killed other men. A chap without a few notches in his belt might be able to marry but he had no hope of taking mistresses. Mealtimes were stressful for the pacifists. They got the worst cuts of meat and the others, Thesiger reports, would use them as human napkins, wiping 'the grease and food off their hands on their clothes'. As for outsiders, if the Afar didn't kill them, they usually castrated them. Apparently they hung the dried scrotums from the rafters of their houses. One traveller reports seeing one used as a snuff pouch.

But tradition everywhere is in retreat, and the Afar have long since given up their anti-social habits of killing, castration and carving the roast according to a man's police record. They say the murder rate in the Danakil is now lower than in Milwaukee, which may not be entirely reassuring. But the Afar retain their reputation for aloofness. I blame the landscape. The Danakil is a harsh and demanding place. The Afar are its reflection.

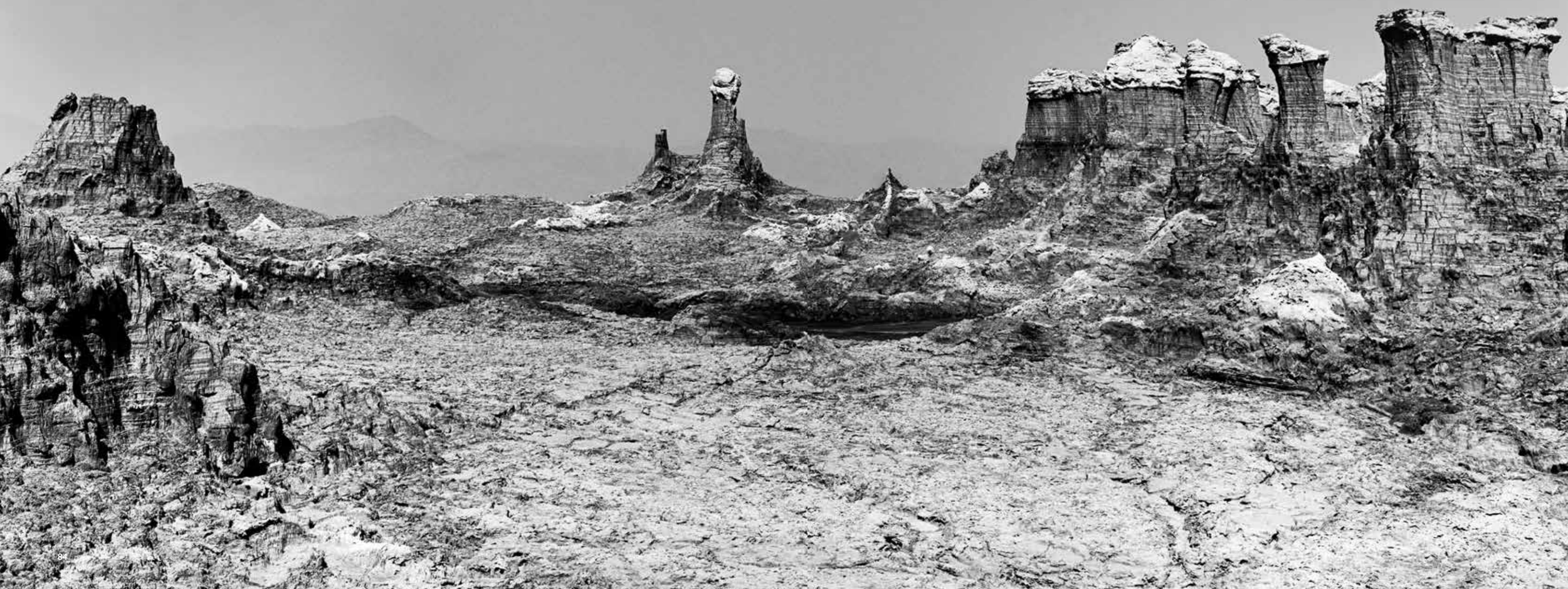
Keen to see this dramatic region, and the historic salt trade that lies at its heart, I ignored the advice of the Mekele merchant and set off with guides and porters in a couple of four-wheel-drives. As we twisted downward from the Ethiopian highlands, canyons opened beneath us. The landscape became desiccated and the vegetation thinned. Far below, the world was unravelling into vast horizontals.

We began to spot Afar encampments – round domed tents like upturned coracles, covered in brightly coloured cloths and surrounded by corrals of thorn bush containing camels and goats. Two young girls appeared near the road. They wore complicated silver jewellery at their necks and their hair was plaited and shiny with camel butter. Around another bend a man with a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder was silhouetted against a white sky. Beyond him

This remote place has been described as the lowest, the driest, the hottest

and the most inhospitable on earth. It is stark, elemental and spectacular

Dramatic rock formations in the Ethiopian desert. *Previous pages*, a camel herder leads his caravan into the salt flats of the Danakil depression



camel caravans were descending the pass towards the desert. At Berhale we found a scrum of belching trucks and bellowing beasts. The town is a key staging post of the salt trade. Some camel caravans still go all the way to the highlands with their cargo but most, having come three days across the Danakil, offload the salt onto trucks here. Labourers stacked blocks and middlemen circulated like vultures while the camels eyed us with a calculating gaze.

We drove on. Night fell. Along the road camels loomed out of the darkness. Swathed in dust, highlighted fleetingly in our headlamps, their leering heads looked ghoulish and unreal.

An hour or so later, we skirted the ramshackle settlement of Hamed Ela. Beyond it was our mobile camp, a surreal oasis of safari luxuries. Paraffin lanterns lit the way to tents with comfortable beds and flushing loos. Warm showers sluiced away the desert dust. Cold beer emerged from an icebox. A candlelit dinner appeared, fillets of fish and sautéed vegetables followed by chocolate mousse. The Danakil was proving more hospitable than anticipated. Later we carried our beds outside the tents and slept under the moonlight.

No one comes to the Danakil unattended. The Afar insist on accompanying their guests, and charging them for the service. The local police chief had assigned us two armed guards, while the tribal chief, Hajji Hussein, had embedded a few young men in key camp positions: tent-peg attendants, paraffin-lantern advisers, camp-chair inspectors.

In order to savour the sweet life of mattresses and pepper steak, Hajji had decided to come along himself. He presided over the camp followers like a minor potentate, sipping tea, dispensing orders, accepting bribes. We greeted one another each morning with elaborate salutations and were soon firm friends. He had four wives, 12 children and rather more than 50 grandchildren – he wasn't sure of the latest count. He kept in touch with the family tree by mobile phone. When it rang, I teased him it was one of the wives calling to check up on him. He waggled his finger. 'Never,' he advised, 'give a wife your telephone number.'

Ali, the chief guide, was less congenial and more typical of Afar tribesmen. A tall, willowy young man, he wore a long robe with a curved dagger tucked into a wide leather belt. At his hip was a holstered revolver. His front teeth were sharpened to crocodile-like points: a rather unsettling beauty modification popular among the Afar. Efforts to engage him in casual conversation were met with stony monosyllables.

Hajji assigned Ali to guide us to Dallol. Beyond the desert mirages – camels knee-deep in silver lakes, clumps of illusory trees floating like islands – we came to a troubled place where the world was splitting apart. A cauldron of tectonic and volcanic activity, the Danakil is the northernmost point of the Great Rift Valley, and the rift here is still separating. The Danakil is a depression and one day soon, in another hundred million years or so, ocean water will flood this unstable desert, creating a new sea.

We clambered through a kind of Monument Valley where desolate mesas have been scoured by desert winds. We picked our way across a saltpan, the crust cracking like ice beneath our feet, to a sluggish lake of poisonous effluence. We climbed into an old caldera, fractured with fissures, faults, hot springs and geysers, and stained with a kaleidoscope of mineral colour. Stony fistulas had swollen and burst like boils, oozing caustic pus, small cones

Beyond the desert mirages – camels knee-deep in silver lakes, clumps of illusory trees floating like islands – we came to a place where the world was splitting apart

Sulphur springs in the Danakil depression. *Following pages,* red-hot lava oozes through the earth's crust at Erta Ale volcano

spat hot sulphur like open sores, bright green and yellow ponds bubbled ominously.

A few miles on we came to the salt flats that were the centre of one of Africa's most ancient trades. Up to a hundred men were cutting salt blocks in 40°C heat and loading them onto camels. Once used as currency throughout the Horn of Africa and beyond, these bricks are called *amolé*. Writing in the sixth century, the Egyptian Kosmos described how they were bartered for gold.

Far too wily to do any of the heavy lifting themselves, the Afar allow the Tigreans from the highlands to mine and transport the salt. The highlanders spend up to 10 months a year in the Danakil, living in the dishevelled town of Hamed Ela, close to our camp. I had hoped for a raucous place full of brawling men, prostitutes, card-sharps, opium dens and low-life dives. But in the evening, when I prevailed upon Ali to accompany me into town, I found a somnolent place where Coca-Cola seemed to be the tipple of choice and television the only entertainment. Ten hours working in blistering sun obviously didn't leave a great deal of energy for running amok.

Down in the dry riverbed in the middle of Hamed Ela we found several dozen Tigrean men waiting for the nightly lottery to begin. Eventually an Afar arrived armed with an exercise book and a torch. The complexities of the Afar fees and taxes on the salt trade of the Danakil would make the derivatives markets look like a model of clarity, and I won't pretend to understand it. But I was pleased to be given a starring role in establishing the priority bookings among the Tigreans for the next day's camel caravans.

The lottery operates with camel sticks. The cameleers put their sticks in a pile and an august figure – in this case your correspondent, the celebrity guest – picks them out one by one. When his stick is chosen, each cameleer takes his place in the queue to pay the fees that ensure him a place in the next day's work. Ali was much taken with my role in the proceedings. He stood off to one side with a group of his friends, guffawing.

Later I stood him a warm Coke in one of Hamed Ela's neon-lit bars. '*Faranji*,' Ali said. It was what he called all outsiders – *faranji*, foreigner. 'We will need you every night now for the lottery. You are very good with the camel sticks.'

'I am available,' I said. 'For a fee.'

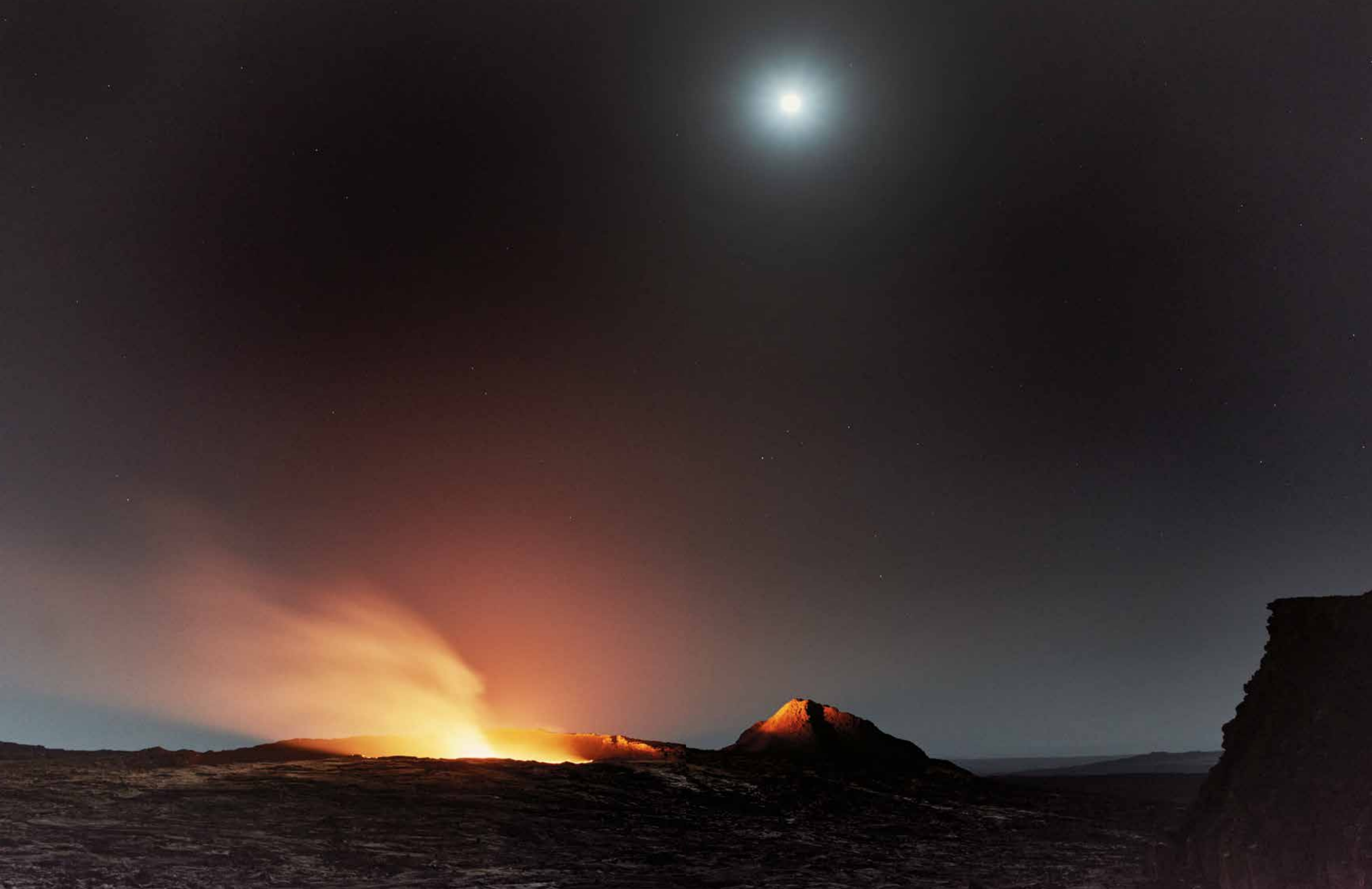
'You are thinking like an Afar,' he said, offering a rare smile of chiselled teeth.

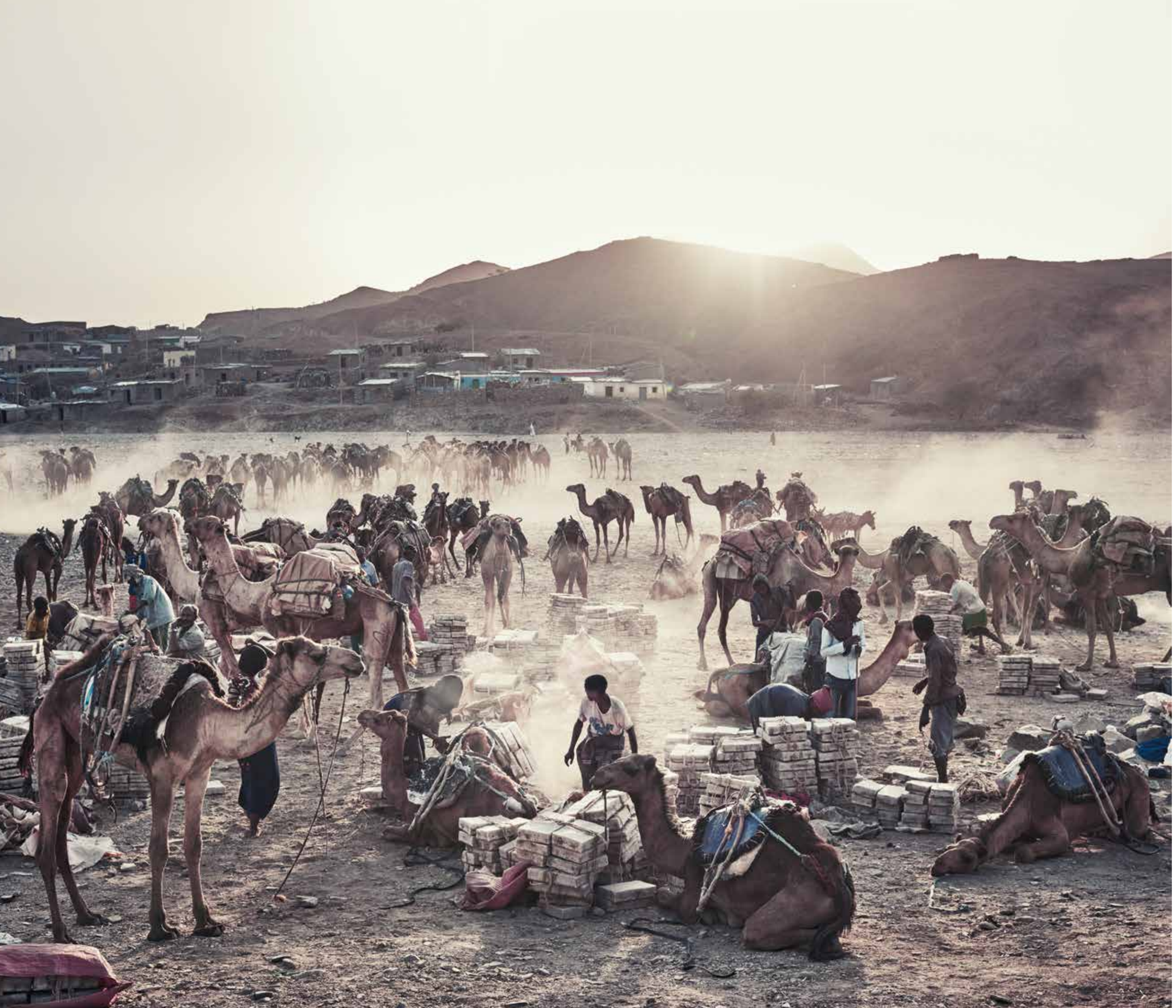
The following day we broke camp and set off to one of the Danakil's greatest spectacles. Erta Ale – the name means smoking mountain – is a volcano whose caldera contains a permanent lava lake, a sea of liquid fire. We followed tracks southward through different desert stages: soft sand dunes, dry caked mud, gravel expanses with a thin covering of scrub, black lava fields where the vehicles stumbled and strained at a walking pace. Isolated rocky outcrops loomed. Goats stood on their hind legs to reach the leaves of thorn trees. Camels gathered at a well in a dry riverbed where two men were hoisting water in skin buckets. At first we could see the fortress highlands of Tigray behind veils of haze away to our right. Then they were gone and we were alone with the arid expanses, the mirages, the distant Afar tents hunkered down in the midday heat. Ahead, three volcanic cones appeared.

At the base of Erta Ale, the central of the three, we rested, had some dinner, and then loaded the camels. As darkness fell and the day's heat ebbed slightly, we started the climb. Above

As we climbed the volcano it began to feel like a pilgrimage, as if the hardship, the heat, the thirst might be a prelude to some revelation on the mountaintop

The eerie landscape of Dallol, which holds the record as the hottest inhabited place on earth. *Following pages,* Erta Ale volcano at night





Left, salt blocks are loaded onto camels in the town of Berhale

the summit the sky was illuminated with a red glow. Occasionally shooting sparks flew upwards like fireworks.

Ali led the way, ranging over the lava rock like an ibex. I lengthened my stride to keep up. Our security men puffed along at the rear. Behind them the camels plodded after us carrying mattresses and food. As the night deepened we became a single line of torches on the dark mountain. The climb began to feel like a pilgrimage, as if the hardship, the heat, the thirst might be a prelude to some revelation on the mountaintop.

We stopped every 20 minutes or so to rest. Ali had not brought a water bottle – a curious oversight for an Afar. I shared mine. For a moment he was reluctant to accept, too proud to allow any sense of indebtedness. But eventually he relented. We sat side by side on the warm lava rock, drinking sparingly, conscious that what we had was for two. We both panted in the night heat. 'We say to share water is to be brothers,' he said after a time. We smiled at one another. 'Come on,' he said, standing. 'We will never make it if we sit here like women.'

When we finally emerged on the rim, the porters unloaded the camels; we would spend the night on the mountain. Shortly after midnight we descended into the caldera and picked our way across the solidified lava flow to a smaller caldera set inside the first. Climbing its rim, we looked down into a seething lake of lava. Its fiery surface was in continual motion, roiling like an agitated sea, the red and black veins sliding restlessly across one another. The heat was astonishing, as if we were barely a few feet from hot coals. Every few minutes a great boiling bubble of lava would swell and burst, sending more into the night air. They rained down as black sticky buds, already cooling to rock.

We both stared open-mouthed at this burning lake. Standing there beneath the indifferent stars, I felt humbled, perhaps even a little afraid, that our planet should show herself suddenly to be so disturbed, so terrifying. It seemed impossible to reconcile this hellfire with the earth I knew, a naïve world of gentle breezes, spring rain, dappled sunlight. But this is what lay at its deepest heart – this fearsome burning.

Ali and I looked at one another. Our faces glowed red in the light of the lava fire. 'We will remember this place,' Ali said. And then he shook my hand, and we bumped shoulders in the Ethiopian fashion, as if signalling some pact between us.

The following day we took the road back to the highlands of Tigray, to trees and grass and cooling evenings. At a crossroads in the lower reaches of the pass our Afar companions waited to catch a bus back to Hamed Ela. There were goodbyes and handshakes and the distribution of *baksheesh*. Hajji was waving from the roadside, sad to be leaving the foreigners with their ready access to ice-cold Cokes.

Suddenly Ali leaned in at the window. '*Faranji*.' He took my hand. 'You are a good traveller. You must come back.' It was high praise from the aloof, indifferent man I had met on arrival. 'You never know,' he said, laughing, 'when we might you need for the camel stick lottery.'

Journeys By Design (+44 1273 623790; www.journeysbydesign.com) offers 12 nights in Ethiopia, including a four-night stay in the Danakil in a private tented camp and a trek to Erta Ale, from £6,490 per person. The price also includes charter flights, an English-speaking guide and full-board accommodation. The best time to visit is from October to March