

# Ethiopia starting as it means to go on

The East African country attracts few tourists, so **Philip Marsden** was pleased to discover that it already boasts two excellent eco-lodges

"LOOK! LOOK!" Hirpo gripped my arm, and smiled his charming, enthusiast's smile. "Olive thrush! And white-rumped babbler! And wattled ibis! Endemic species!"

We had pushed out of thick scrub and stood suddenly on the edge of a vast area of marshy flats. To one side lay the shores of Lake Langano, fringed by the bone-like boughs of sycamore forest. The flats were green and lush. Lines of cattle grazed across them. Baboons squatted on the near edge and boys languidly hunted catfish with spears. Hirpo saw none of these things.

"Woolly-necked stork! Marabou stork! Look — look! Yellow-fronted parrot in the tree, seven yellow-fronted parrot! Endemic!"

Hirpo was Bishangari Lodge's bird expert. His English was thin, serviceable, but his ornithology was spot-on. He had made a check-list, in English, of the more than 300 birds he had seen around the lodge; in the past couple of months alone he had added several new ones to the list.

Until a couple of years ago when Bishangari Lodge opened, Hirpo had little interest in anything that flew. As an Oromo, native to this region, a teacher, his concerns had been pedagogic and agricultural. But he discovered that the foreigners who came to stay at the new lodge, who travelled thousands of miles from their own countries, had a curious passion for looking at birds. Seeing them spend so long at the lakeside, in the forest, with binoculars trained on some flitting, twittering creature, led him to develop a fascination of his own for the birds. "America-people like birds," he explained, "Germany-people like birds, but most of all England-people like birds."

In a nation still dominated by Soviet-style hotels and Soviet-style service, where a rim of concrete safely separates hotels from anything green or muddy or natural, Bishangari Lodge is like a spring of clear, bubbling water (which is what its name means in Oromo).

DOMINIC HARCOURT WEBSTER



Lake Langano, "fringed by the bone-like boughs of sycamore forest", is a popular haunt for bird-watchers staying at nearby Bishangari Lodge

To spend a few days in one of its eight comfortable wooden huts (called *godjos*), swimming in the lake, riding in the forest, watching the hippos at dusk, listening to the cackle of colobus monkeys, or simply contemplating the sky through a tangle of flora, is all the more rewarding because of its novelty.

Such places are hardly unusual in other parts of East Africa. But in Ethiopia, ever the exception to rules, there is nowhere quite like Bishangari. Go to Kenya, Tanzania, if you want to follow forest paths furrowed deep by the feet of previous visitors. But Ethiopia in every respect remains that rare thing, a territory of diverse and little-seen wonders.

Bishangari is the country's first eco-lodge. Its owner, Omar Bagersh, has ambitious plans to make Ethiopia nothing less than the world capital of eco-tourism. Bishangari is his first try, and to me at least it is a confirmed success.

Bishangari is built not in a piece of cleared forest, but into the lakeside foliage. Its bar is a tree-house, constructed around a large 500-year-old ficus. No cars are allowed inside the lodge's inner perimeter; you reach your *godjo* by horse and cart. The *godjos*, with their solar-heated water and their solar-powered lights, are built of local materials, likewise the restaurant, a thatched open-sided structure. Omar Bagersh

admitted that from a business point of view he probably went too far with his eco-efforts. But they are in keeping with the sense of the lodge's immersion in its own environment, the sense of it being simply a sophisticated camp site.

Nights in the *godjos* are full of little noises — hootings and rustlings and shufflings; the primates' chatter in the trees and shortly after dawn when you step outside and go down to the lake to swim, you can feel the dew-heavy grass brushing your legs.

Then there are the birds — such as the bishop bird and the cordon bleu, of such fantastic colours that they flash between the trees, airborne jewels with names to match —

the acacia paradise whydah or the African paradise monarch or the bare-faced go-away bird. The larger ones haunt Langano's marshy shoreline: the 5ft (1.5m) marabou stork (ponderous duke), the woolly-necked stork (tentative debutante), the silver-cheeked hornbill (fierce dowager), the pelican (Woosterish wag).

In terms of its tourism, Ethiopia retains the refreshing impression that it has hardly begun, that the country is an empty canvas yet to have the forms and colours of visitors splashed across it. So it was hardly a surprise when, back in Addis Ababa, I heard about a new eco-lodge at Bilen in the Afar region.

Bilen is a five-hour drive

east from the capital, from the green highlands to the desert fringe, from the densely populated heart of the Amhara empire to the hot lowlands, where the pastoral Afar people have never really taken very seriously the notion of central government.

About 70 years ago, Wilfred Thesiger stopped for a few days at Bilen's springs. He was the first to explore this region and would shoot at the birds and beasts and any of the Afar that threatened his caravan. He relished being able to report that the necklaces worn by Afar men for prestige were made up of the severed testicles of their enemies.

Times have changed. The thought of the Afar still brings

## NEED TO KNOW

**Getting there:** Philip Marsden travelled with Bishangari and Bilen lodges and Ethiopian Airlines (020-8987 7000, [www.flyethiopian.com](http://www.flyethiopian.com)).

Journeys by Design (01273 623790, [www.journeysbydesign.co.uk](http://www.journeysbydesign.co.uk)) offers tailor-made trips of four nights at Bishangari and three at Bilen, plus visits to the major cities of Lalibela, Gondar and Aksum. The price is from £2,400 per person for all ground arrangements, excluding international flights.

British Airways (0870 8509850, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies to Addis Ababa four times a week from £411 return.

Travelbag (0870 8146544,

[www.travelbag.co.uk](http://www.travelbag.co.uk)) offers return flights on Ethiopian Airlines from £412 valid for travel until December.

**Tips:** The best time to visit is from late September after the rainy season, to January, when the land is still green. The European winter is also the best time for birding. Temperatures vary with altitude rather than season. Bilen is low and hot; Bishangari is higher and more temperate.

**Red tape:** Visas from the Ethiopian Embassy (020-7589 7212, [www.ethiembassy.org.uk](http://www.ethiembassy.org.uk)) valid for one month, cost £43.

**Reading:** *Ethiopia* (Bradt, £12.95).



toise. Four warthog appeared from the west, honking, rolling in the mud and grazing.

They moved off with their big-headed, high-tailed gait. The sky turned an impossible orange and purple, the sun glowed briefly on the horizon and was gone.

Bilen Lodge is the initiative of Tony Hickey, a charismatic Irishman who lives in Addis Ababa and has a lifetime of African experience behind him. In the morning we walked along the banks of the Awash river. The idea for the lodge came to him five years ago. Now, like Omar Bagersh, he has plans for more.

The water at our feet was high. It flowed fast and pale brown, with sudden babbings and eddies on its surface. The Awash never reaches the sea but runs into the desert some way to the north.

The opposite bank was a tangle of thorn and creeper and podocarpus and Tony pointed beyond it to a pale ridge-line of hills which rose in the distance.

"My plan is to take camel tours over there. It will be tough — I went for the first time a couple of weeks back. Swam across the river. In the herders' camps the people just stared at me. The whole area is completely untouched."