

TATLER

TRAVELER

Edited by FRANCISCA KELLETT

GUY PELLY'S WILDEST MOMENT...

...was not on the King's Road – it was when he and his intrepid wife Elizabeth tracked the rare and mysterious Ethiopian wolf on horseback across the Bale Mountains

Lizzy and Guy
Pelly in Ethiopia's
Gheralta Mountains

Guy and Lizzy walking their horses across a bridge over the Web River



In my misspent youth, I loved to go climbing. I was pretty good at it too – though it was usually late at night, after a lot of alcohol, naked. But as anyone who is married will attest, such simple pleasures are often ruthlessly stripped from you post-wedding and placed in the ‘He Doesn’t Do That Any More’ box. I had been married for about a year when we went to Ethiopia, so I was very much out of practice.

However, I hadn’t really expected my climbing skills to be put to the test, which was a mistake, because this wasn’t really a holiday. This was a non-stop, adrenalin-fuelled adventure. We were here to track the elusive Ethiopian wolf – now numbering roughly 500, with about 250 existing in the southern Bale Mountains, one of the species’ last strongholds. They are the world’s rarest wild canid and only a lucky handful of visitors get to track and see them each year. I wanted to be one of them.

But first, there was the rest of the country. We flew in to Addis Ababa, where my wife Lizzy strolled confidently into arrivals looking marvellous in head-to-toe Ralph Lauren, with me following, letting the side

down, looking as if I had dressed with the lights off. The approach to Addis was wildly, unexpectedly green, but we didn’t linger, jumping on another flight, to Mekele in the north. There, Ethiopia looked the way I had thought it would look – dry, rocky, all burnt-oranges and muted yellows, with mountains rising suddenly from the plains, and the sun softened by glittering billows of dust. We drove past locals cutting wheat with scythes, past oxen ploughing the tiny fields, past line upon line of donkeys carrying cripplingly heavy loads. You don’t want to be reincarnated as an Ethiopian donkey. They work hard.

Our lovely guide, Bemnet, helped us settle into Gheralta Lodge, an Italian-run place (it’s functional, basic, perfectly comfortable) where we spent our first evening eating a typical Ethiopian supper under typical Ethiopian skies – vast, star-studded, amazing. A note on Ethiopian food: it can be delicious, but everything – *everything* – is served with injera, a sort of spongy, sour pancake, which Lizzy liked but in my view was like a wedge of chamois leather. I opted for the bread, which was also served everywhere, thank goodness. That night we had things like mashed spicy

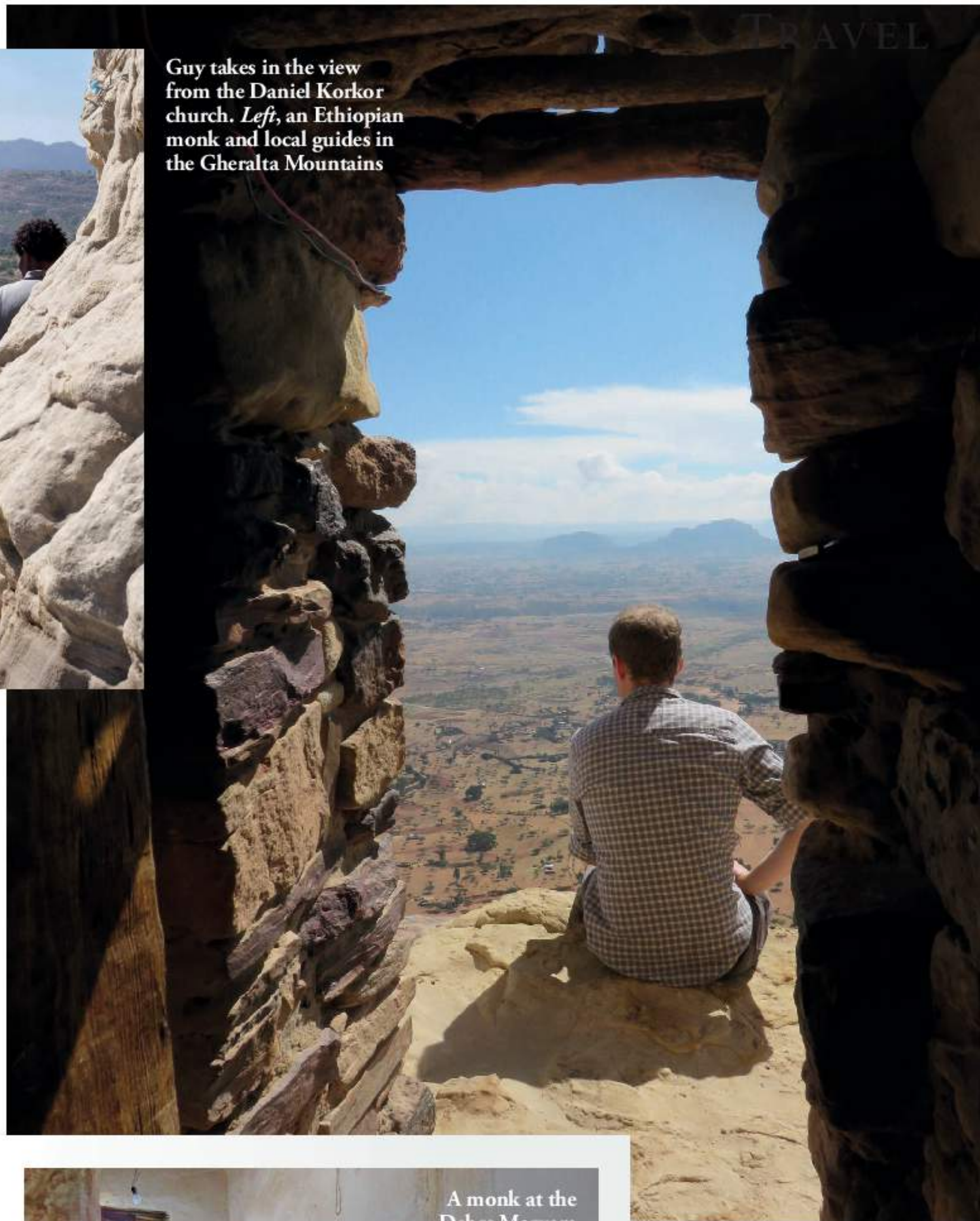
chickpeas – called shiro, according to Lizzy – and lentils, roast beef, a few bottles of St George beer and a very nice local syrah from the Rift Valley.

But there was no lie-in the next morning. We were up, fed and watered before 7am, set for a day of hardcore hiking in the Gheralta Mountains, our destination three of Ethiopia’s famous rock-hewn churches. Everyone has heard of Lalibela, but we were heading somewhere far more remote, a place visited – for good reason – by only a handful of tourists each year. Without Lalibela’s tour-bus-friendly tarmacked roads, you need dedication to get to these places. You need to climb.

We started at 8.30am, scrambling between rust-red rock faces, already hot despite the breeze, and it took just a few minutes for me to regret the previous night’s syrah (and the beers, and the two Laphroaig whiskies...). I had flashbacks to a disastrous grouse-season walk with the van Straubenzee brothers – having overindulged with a good bottle of port the night before, I’d found myself slung, like a dead stag, over a hill pony to get me to the top of a climb. There were no helpful ponies here, so on I climbed behind super-fit



Guy takes in the view from the Daniel Korkor church. *Left*, an Ethiopian monk and local guides in the Gheralta Mountains



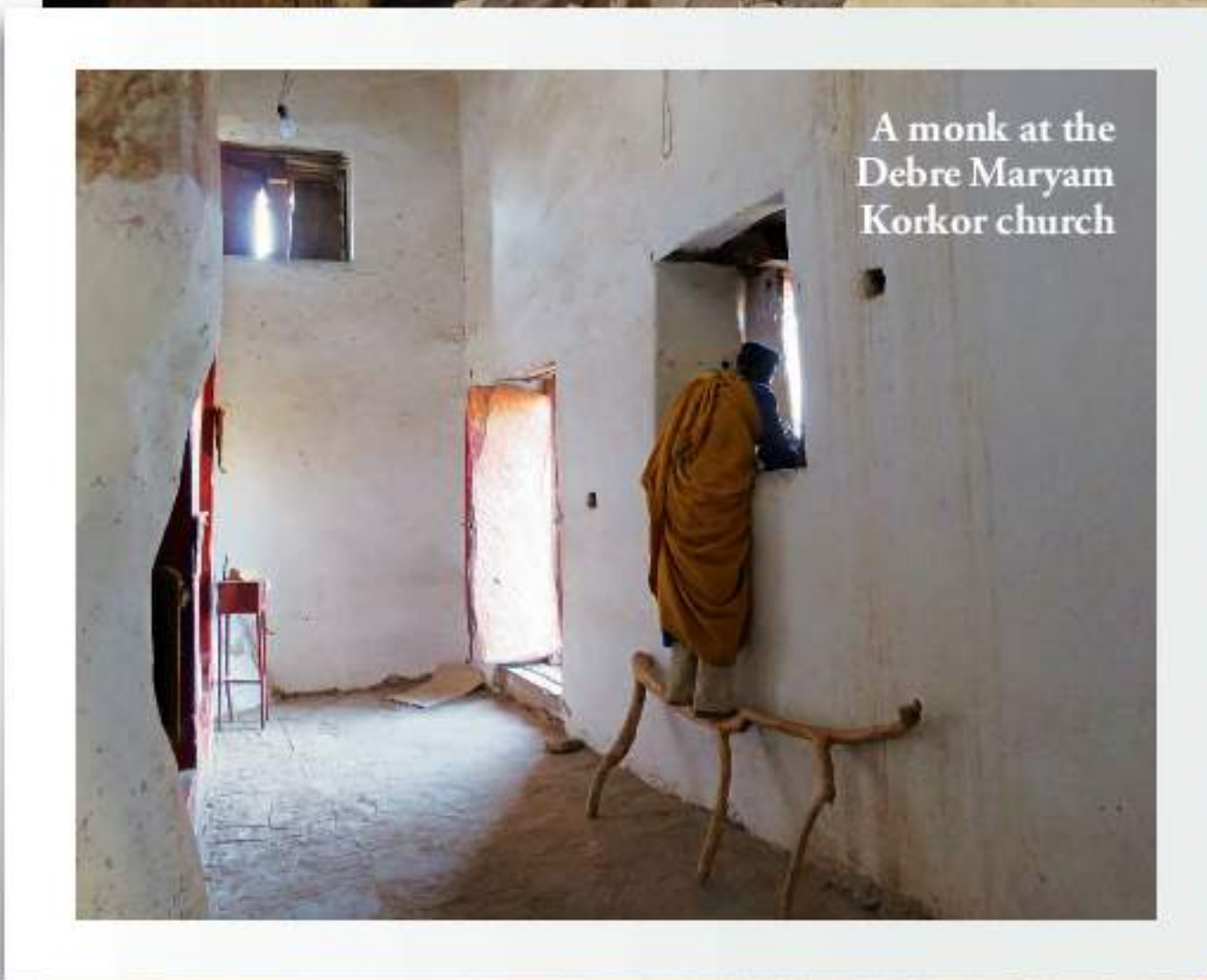
Lizzy, feeling pretty tough – until we were greeted by a farmer trotting the other way with a huge load of hay on his back and barely breaking a sweat.

It took us just under an hour to climb from 3,300ft to 8,000ft – a record, our guide told us, which made me feel a little bit better. And there, at the very top, was a cheery monk in bright-yellow robes holding a large cross. He told us that he'd walked that same path when he was 15 and had never gone back down. That was 63 years ago. He had a sense of humour too – when I joked that if I'd known he was up there I would have brought him some lunch, he said that he would wait if I wanted to pop down and fetch it.

The Debre Maryam Korkor church itself was remarkable: tiny, whitewashed, over 1,000 years old, set in terrain that looked like the surface of Mars – coppery, dusty, stretching as far as we could see, the odd lonely bellow of a cow or the bleat of a goat floating up on the hot air. I could have spent all day staring at that view, but we pushed on to our second church, Daniel Korkor. Following a hairy shuffle around a tapering ledge, we came to a Hobbit-sized door guarding a chapel knocked into the side of the mountain. Inside, the white walls were covered in beautiful paintings depicting scenes from the Bible.

But it was the third church, Abuna Yemata Guh, that really tested my climbing skills. After a night in a second lodge – Korkor, also Italian-run – we were driven to another mountain, where we saw a flustered-looking foreign couple clambering down as we arrived. As they stormed off, we were told that they'd climbed up halfway before giving up and coming back down. This did not bode well.

The first half hour was misleadingly easy. Then we arrived at a steep cliff face. It was ▷



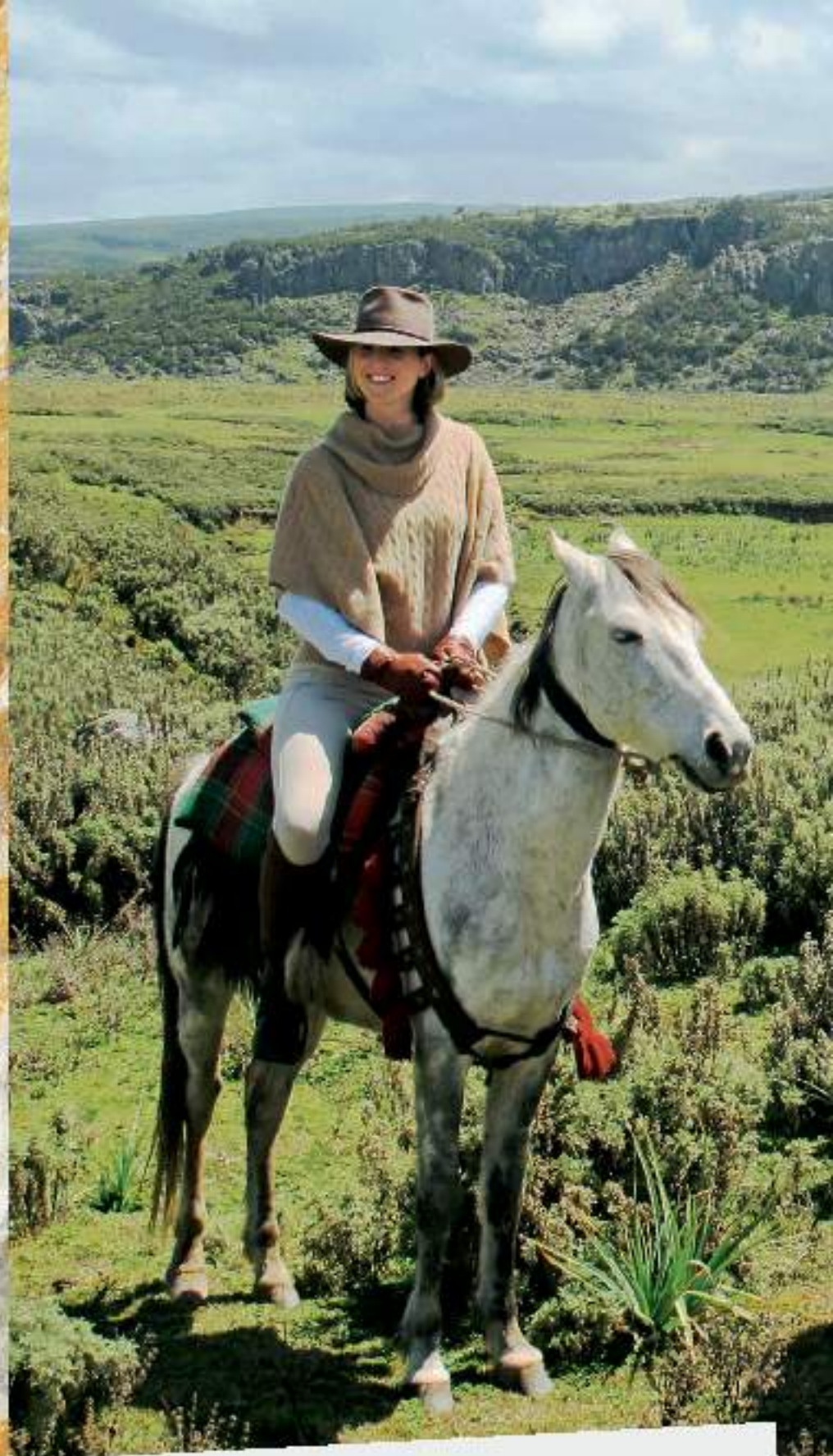
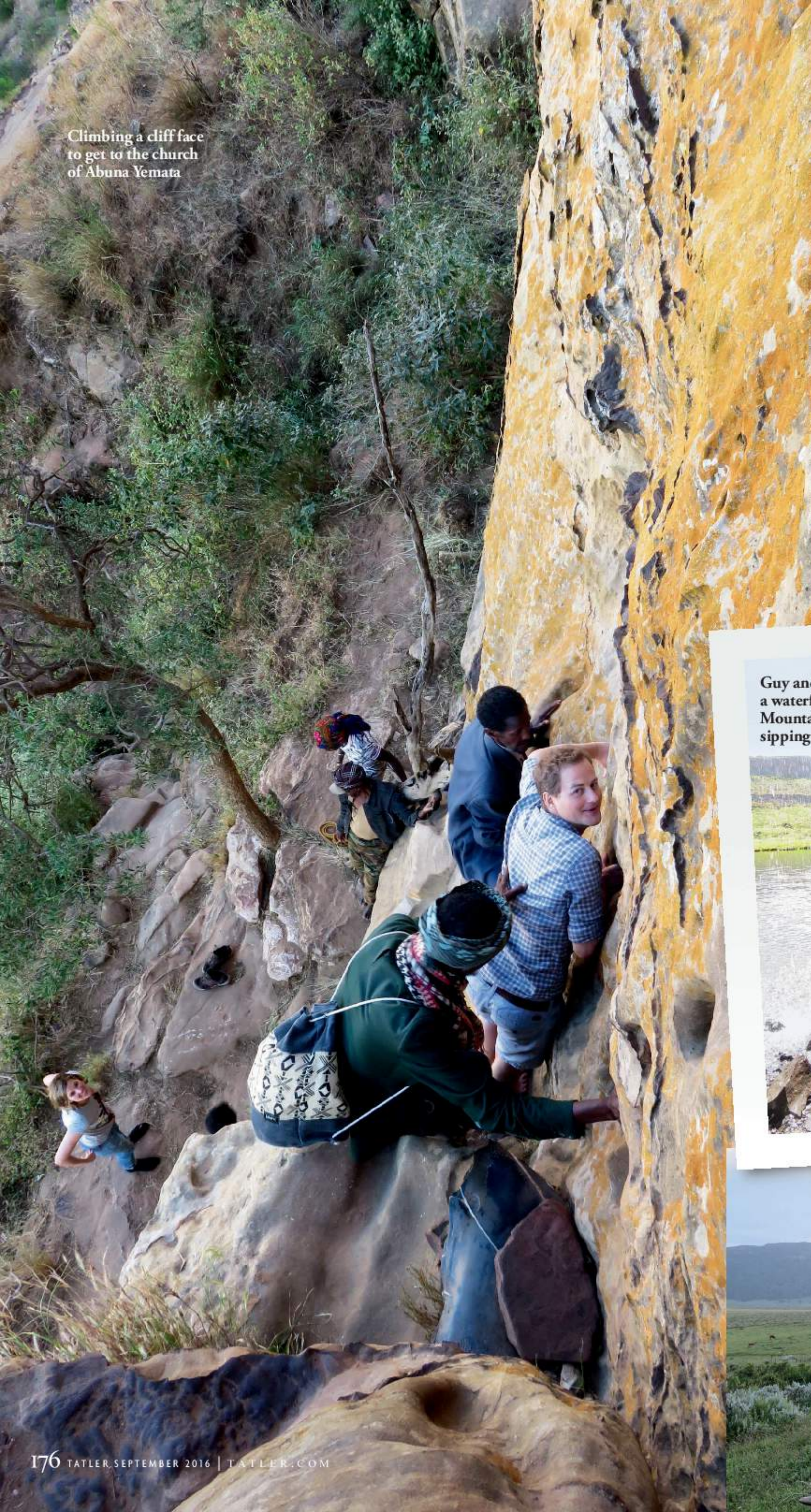
A monk at the Debre Maryam Korkor church



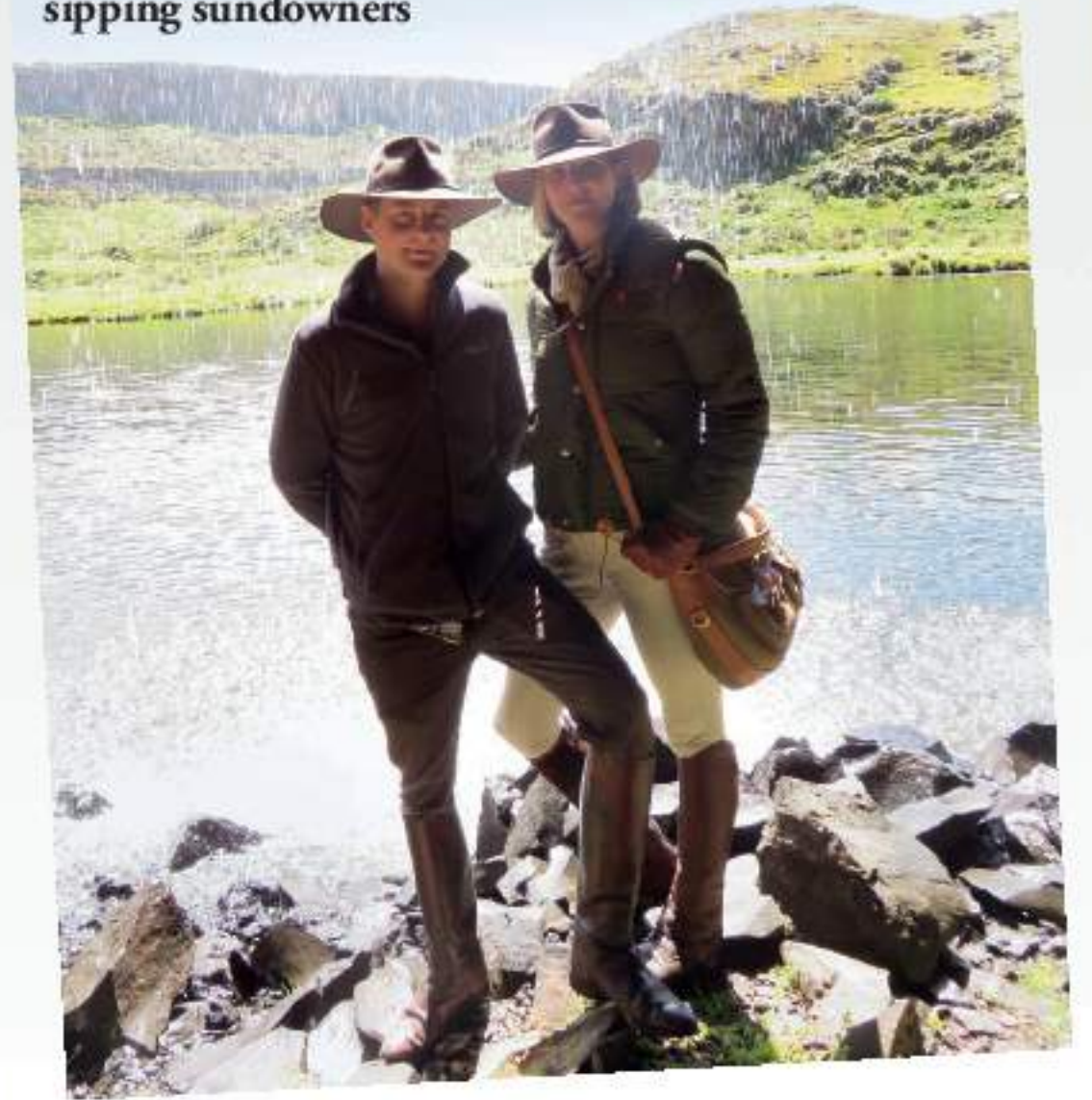
LEFT, A BEDROOM AT GHERALTA LODGE. RIGHT, GUY & LIZZY IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE GHERALTA MOUNTAINS



Climbing a cliff face to get to the church of Abuna Yemata



Guy and Lizzy at a waterfall in the Bale Mountains. *Below, sipping sundowners*





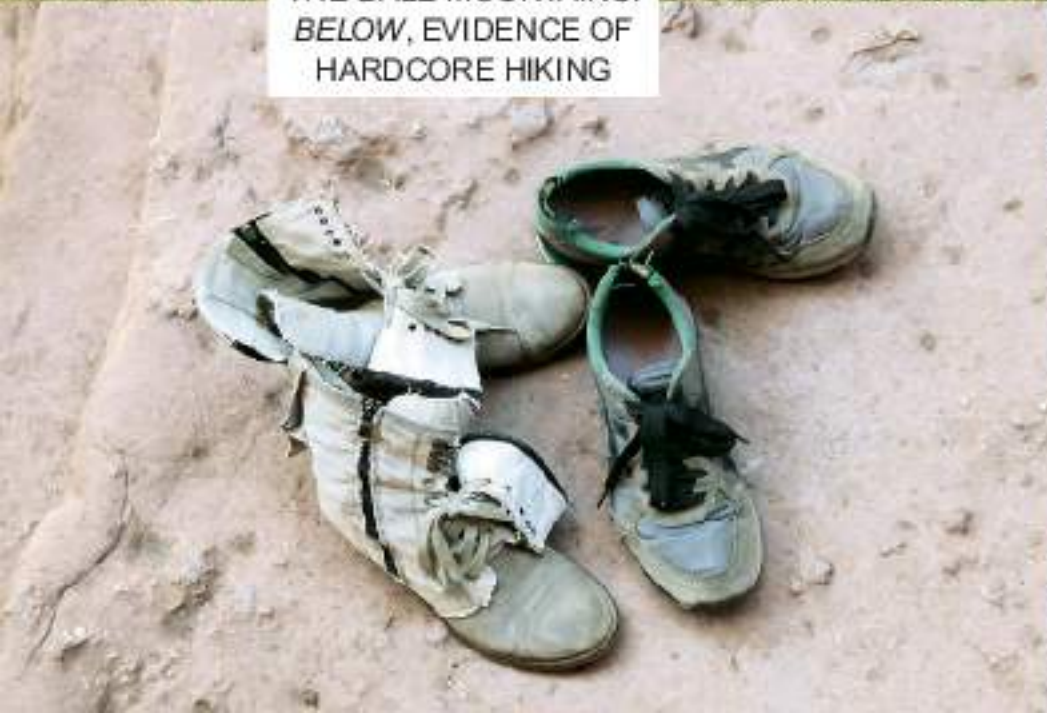
ABOVE, LIZZY & GUY SEARCHING FOR WOLVES IN THE BALE MOUNTAINS. BELOW, EN ROUTE FROM ADDIS ABABA



From top, flying over Ethiopia; Lizzy and Guy in an Ethiopian bar; riding back to camp in the Web Valley



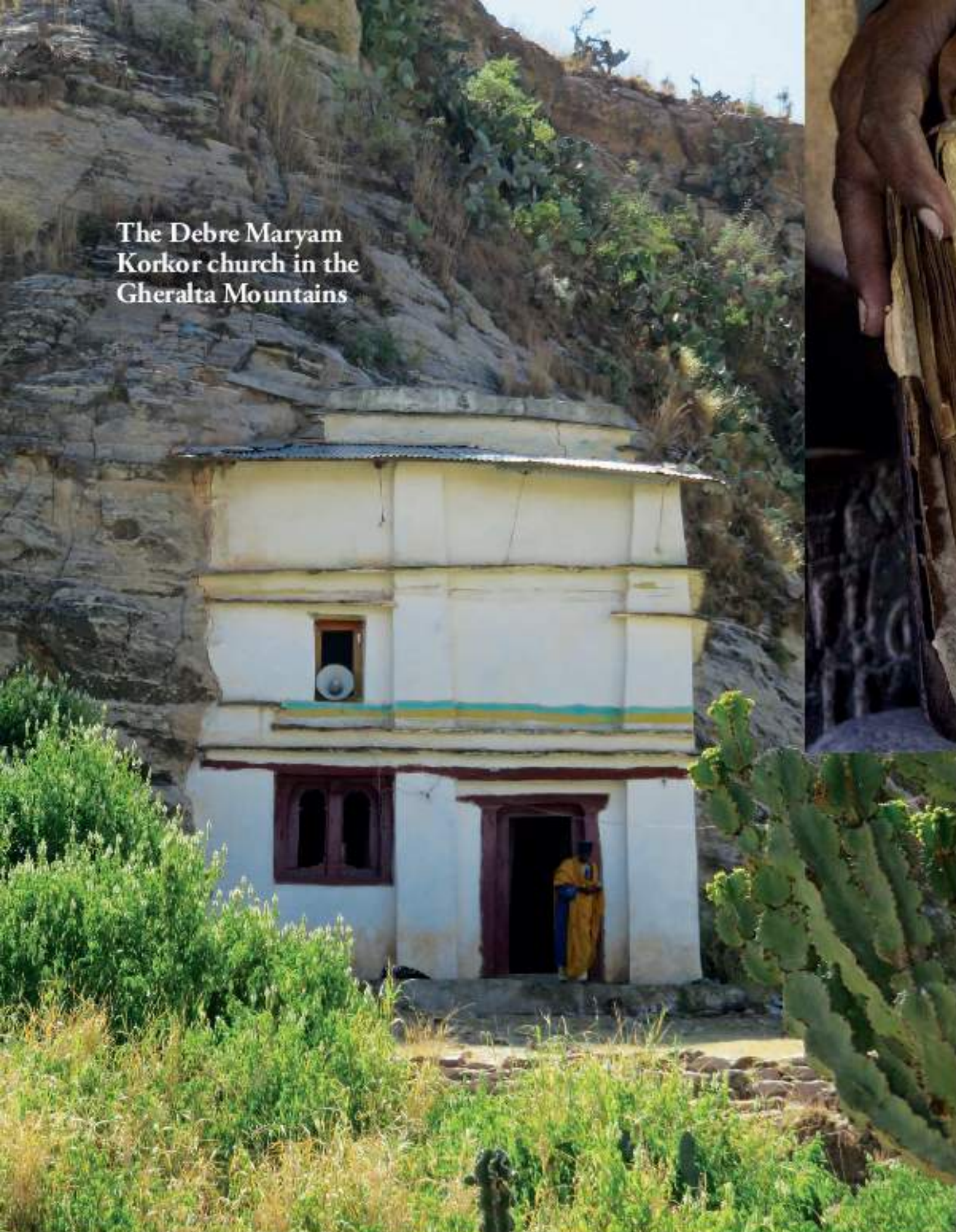
ABOVE, BASE CAMP IN THE BALE MOUNTAINS. BELOW, EVIDENCE OF hardcore HIKING



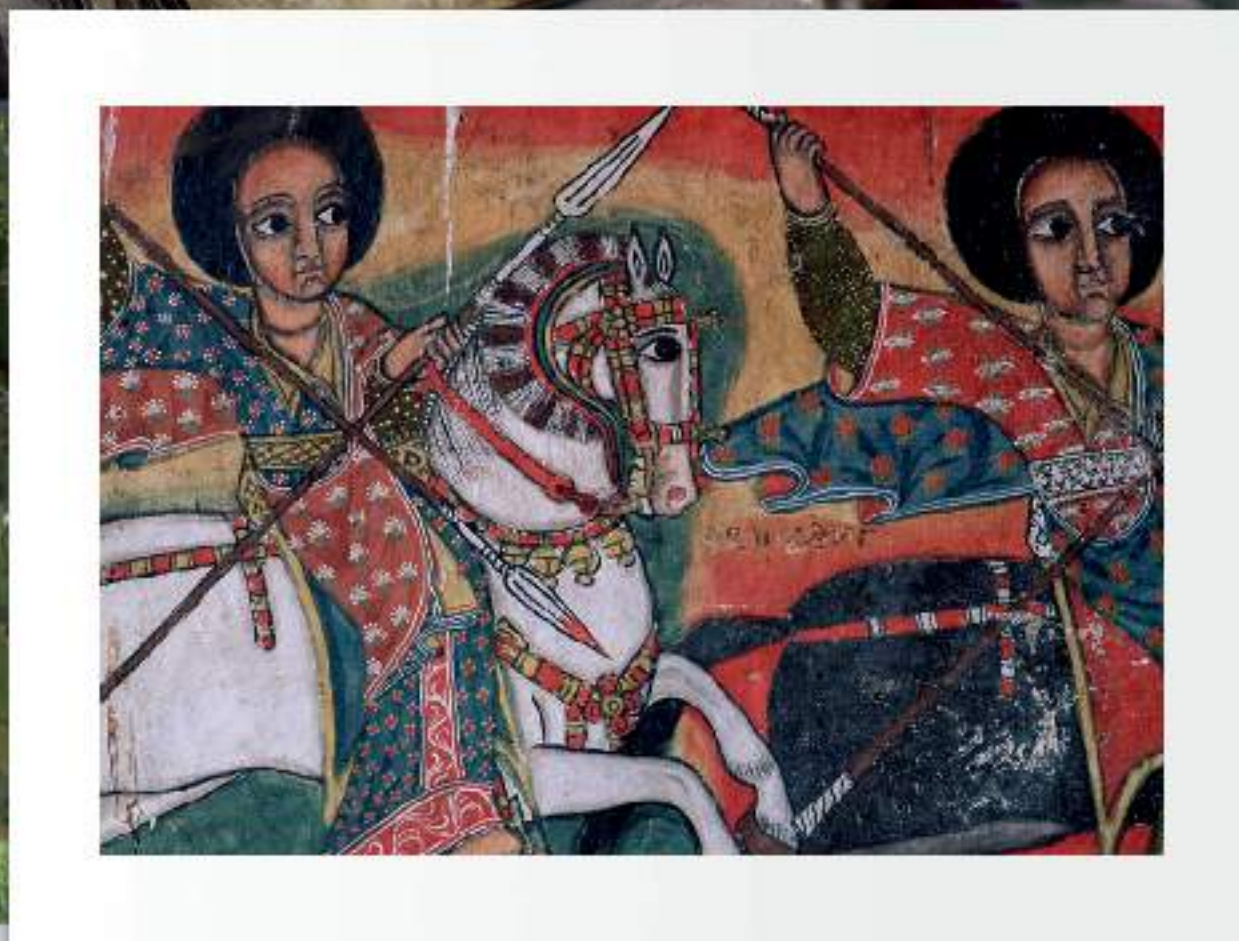
Lizzy in the Gheralta Mountains



The Debre Maryam Korkor church in the Gheralta Mountains



A manuscript and, below, a fresco at the Church of Ura Kidane Mehret, near Lake Tana



< the sort of thing that normal people would do with ropes and harnesses. But there were no ropes and harnesses. Instead, we saw four smiling chaps in mismatched suits: our 'climbing assistants'. Up we went, our helpers showing us where to put each shaky foot, where to place each sweaty hand, the valley dropping off below us. The little nooks and rocky ledges were so narrow that we ended up climbing barefoot.

After the adrenalin rush of the climb, the serenity of the ninth-century Abuna Yemata, knocked into the rock with vertical drops all around, was astonishing. Inside, as our eyes adjusted to the gloom, biblical scenes dating from the 13th century loomed in the darkness, vivid on the ancient stone walls. Outside, the land rolled away like a scene from the Old Testament.

The rest of our time in the north was spent exploring famous Lalibela. So much has been written about the 11 rock-hewn churches that I won't go on about them here, but it is worth noting that St George's – the cross-shaped one that you see in all the photographs – is the best (and the most popular; you'll be sharing the views with busloads of Italians). Less famous are the villages you pass through to get there. We stopped in one and were shown the flour mill, the boisterous cattle market and a woman making injera while children

ran around us shouting 'China, China!' – so many Chinese workers are building roads here that the children assume all outsiders are from there. Best of all, we found the 'bar' – a house with a cup on a stick outside (which in Ethiopia means you've a good chance of getting a drink). I wanted to try the home-brewed beer, but our guide dissuaded me – even after I'd explained that I happen to own a bar myself.

Also worth mentioning is the Maribela Hotel, the smartest place (by Ethiopian standards) we stayed during our trip, with wi-fi and hot showers and even a hairdryer. And I mustn't forget the Ben Abeba restaurant, owned by Susan Aitchison, a Scot who has lived here for many years. How agreeable it was to have a supper of Scotch eggs and shepherd's pie. To celebrate, I felt it important to sample the local nightlife, so we headed to the Torpedo Tejbet 'nightclub', a colourful spot decorated with fairy lights and packed with local people dancing to live music. We were two of just three foreigners there and very soon we were up on our feet with the band. I tried my hand at the local instrument – the krar, a bit like a lyre – which was 'hilarious', according to Lizzy.

The next day proved challenging. Not because of any mountain-climbing – which was behind us now – but because of our brutal hangovers, which made the bumpy flight

on a tiny charter plane all the more testing. We were heading south to wolf territory, zipping between mountains, skirting peaks and buffeted by strong winds. But the views were mercifully distracting, the vista below shifting from cracked and coffee-coloured to lush, jade-green and mountainous. After touching down, we felt as if we had arrived in an entirely different country. The southern part of the country gets far more rain than the north, and as we bumped our way into the mountains in a 4x4, it looked like the Scottish Highlands – except for the mud huts, flocks of goats and waving children.

Base camp, deep in the Bale Mountains, was on a plateau, with safari tents and incredible views across the plain – the first camp of its kind in the country and the entry point to the territory of the last Ethiopian wolves. The camp also has the country's first safari vehicle, and we bounced about in the cloud-shrouded hills. You won't see the Big Five here, but you will have the legendary landscapes to yourself. We spotted everything from jackals and colobus monkeys to reedbeek and mountain nyalas – the biggest and fattest antelopes I've seen. That night, after sipping sundowners to the sound of cackling hyenas and enjoying an alfresco dinner beneath extraordinarily clear skies, we slept in thermals, hats and jumpers, pushing our beds together for warmth. The Bale Mountains are extremely cold at night.

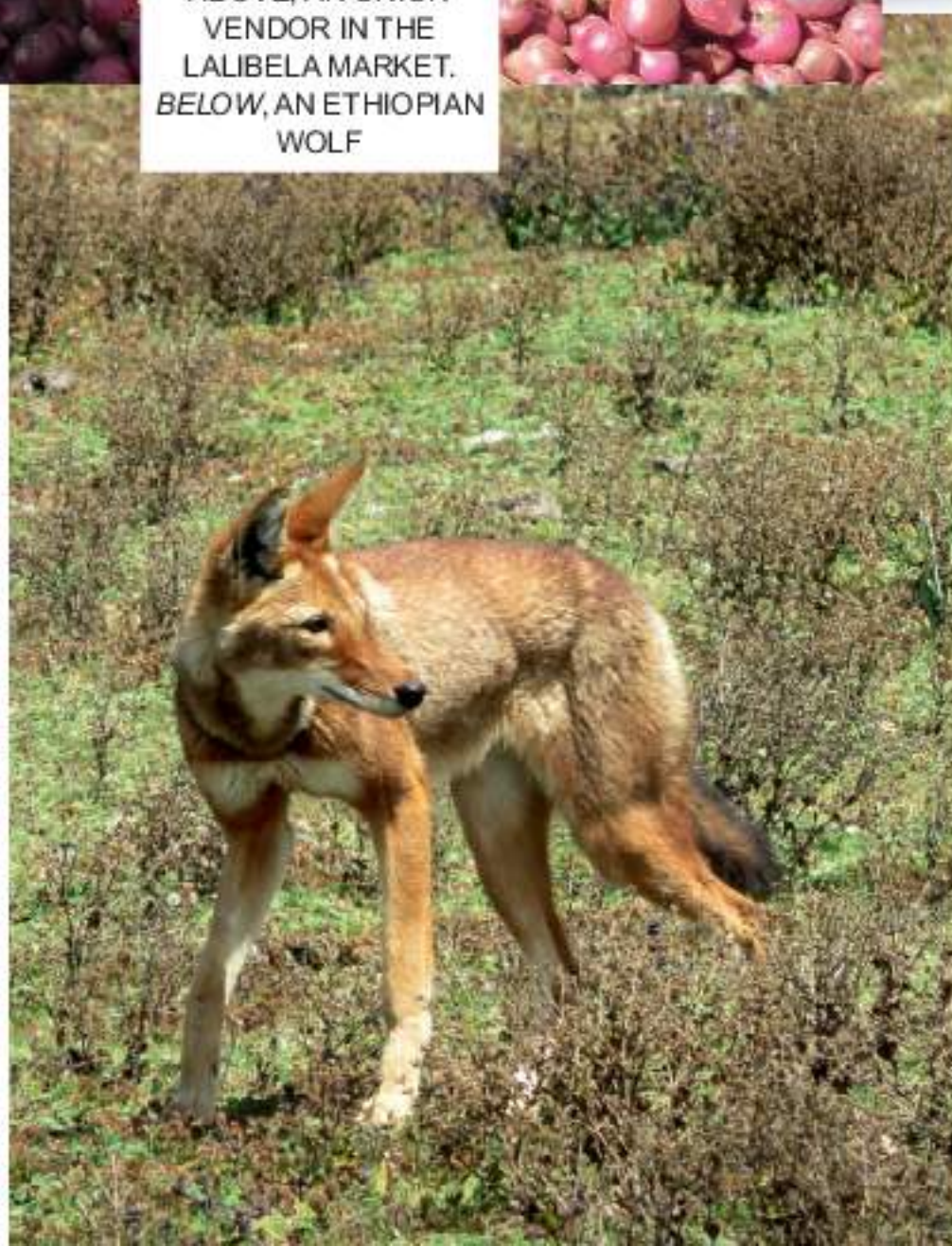
Man meets wolf



ABOVE, AN ONION VENDOR IN THE LALIBELA MARKET. BELOW, AN ETHIOPIAN WOLF



Lizzy with an Ethiopian goat



WATER IN THE WILDERNESS

While in Ethiopia, my husband and I bumped into a man who is trying to achieve something remarkable: to supply clean water to communities that don't have it. The figures speak for themselves: 663m people – nearly one in 10 – live without clean water worldwide. Scott Harrison, founder of Charity: Water, is changing that, building relationships with local stakeholders to develop sustainable, safe drinking water for those communities that need it most. And what's so brilliant is that public overheads are covered by private funding, meaning that 100 per cent of all donations go straight to the projects. We have now joined Scott's committee to launch the charity in the UK. To find out more, or to donate, visit charitywater.org. **Elizabeth Pelly**

Next morning, it was time to find wolves – and this time we headed out on horseback. The local horses are small and skinny, with simple saddles and colourful blankets thrown over them, and ropes in their mouths. Who needs anything more? Mine was grey and had one mad, rolling blue eye – we christened him Crazy Eye. He did his best to buck me off as soon as I got on. But I like a challenge.

We cantered a bit, which made Lizzy and me happy, but mostly we picked our way across the Web Valley, avoiding the abundant mole-rat holes (mole rats are the wolves' favourite snack), and after about 40 minutes of walking, crossing streams and spotting antelopes and swooping raptors, there came a short shout, and our guide's hand shot up. We stopped and peered towards where he was pointing. And there was our first wolf: slight, long-legged, with a rust-red coat. I watched him through my binoculars as he scampered off over the rocks and out of sight. Soon after, another cry went up and our guide took off at a canter. I had to bite my tongue not to let out a hunting holler as we quickly followed.

This chap was slinking towards a herd of sheep and its young shepherd. As it got closer, the boy spotted him and ran towards it shouting, waving his stick, scaring the wolf off – and driving him straight towards us. The animal slowed to a trot and continued in our direction, now hunting again, listening and looking out for mole rats. He didn't seem bothered by us – the horses perhaps meant he didn't see us as a threat, and we sat in awestruck silence as he loped this way and that.

We saw four wolves that morning – which is incredible when you remember there are only about 500 left in the wild – and soon it was time for our lunch, by a waterfall surrounded by epic, Scottish-looking peaks. We spent the afternoon fly-fishing on the Web River, though the water was so fast and muddy we didn't catch a thing.

But this trip wasn't about trophies. The prize was seeing things very few others have seen – churches in the clouds, vanishing predators, Ethiopian nightclubs. It was exhausting and inspiring and exhilarating. But be warned: off-the-beaten-track Ethiopia is not for everyone. But it was, most definitely, for us. □

As told to Francisca Kellett

BOOK IT *Journeys by Design* (journeysbydesign.com; 01273 623 790) offers a two-week, full-board Ethiopia trip, with visits to the churches of Lalibela and Gheralta and a three-night excursion on horseback to track wolves in the Bale Mountains, from £5,800 per person, excluding international flights but including all internal flights, transfers and entrance fees.