

HIGHER CALLING

*Ethiopia's biblical
landscapes are
a major draw
for adventurous
travellers*

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ANCIENTS

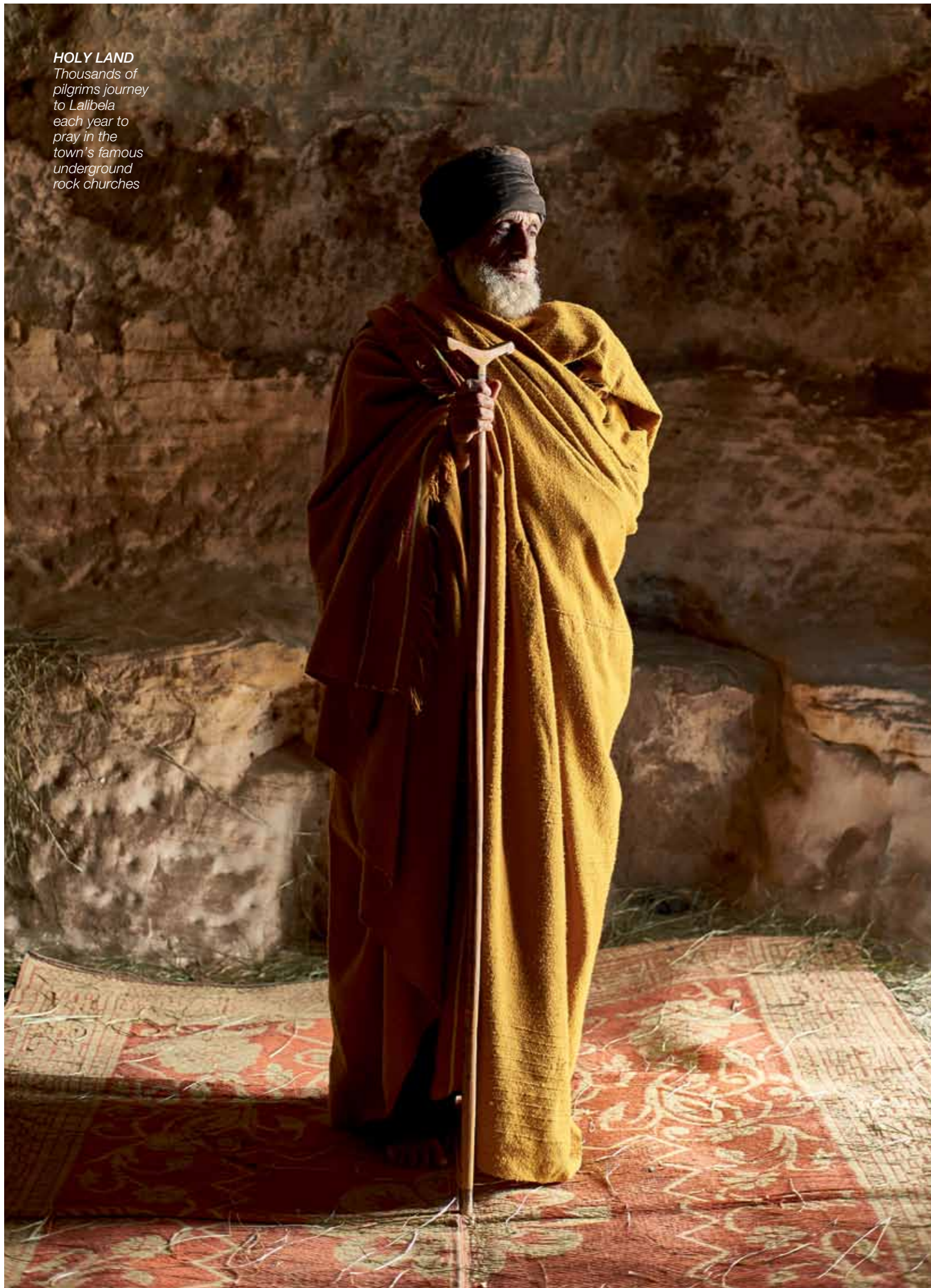
*It might not leap to mind when thoughts turn to travel, but Ethiopia is a riveting destination. **Jakki Phillips** discovers a rich mix of history, spirituality and tribal cultures in a spectacular landscape of contrasts*

Photography **FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE**



HOLY LAND

Thousands of pilgrims journey to Lalibela each year to pray in the town's famous underground rock churches



The honey wine arrives not in a glass but a large conical flask, the type I remember from school chemistry experiments. This is my first—and last—encounter with tej, a sickly sweet and incredibly strong mead that flows freely across Ethiopia. My drinking den is Torpedo, an unexpected find in the dusty backstreets of Lalibela, one of the African nation's holiest towns.

It's getting late and despite a looming 6am start to explore the region's famous underground churches, I'm watching a man in a military-style suit and flat cap playing what looks like a one-stringed lute. There are howls of laughter as he moves from table to table poking fun at the drinkers with improvised songs. He's singing in Amharic, the country's official language, so when he arrives at our table, my guide, Bereket, translates. "He says you have cheeks like oranges." I suggest he might mean peaches, but Bereket shakes his head. "Nope, the ones they make breakfast juice out of."

It could be worse, I think, but then the dancers appear—a squad of lithe young men and women who spy the battalion of empty flasks on our table and identify me as an easy target. The women whoop wildly as I'm lassoed around the waist with a beaded belt and herded onto the dancefloor. Bereket tells me it's customary to tip your favourite dance partner by sticking a 10-birr note (worth less than one US dollar) to their forehead. I press a crumpled bill to the moist brow of one particularly fierce shoulder-shaking, head-wagging woman before beating a retreat to get some sleep.

The dawn wake-up call comes all too soon, but this is Ethiopia—the birthplace of coffee—so we follow the aroma of roasting beans to the nearest jebena bet (a tin-roofed hut where coffee is served) and settle on the grass-strewn floor to watch the time-honoured ritual of grinding, brewing and pouring, then knock back a much-needed jolt of caffeine mixed with sugar—not the less palatable local favourites, salt or butter.

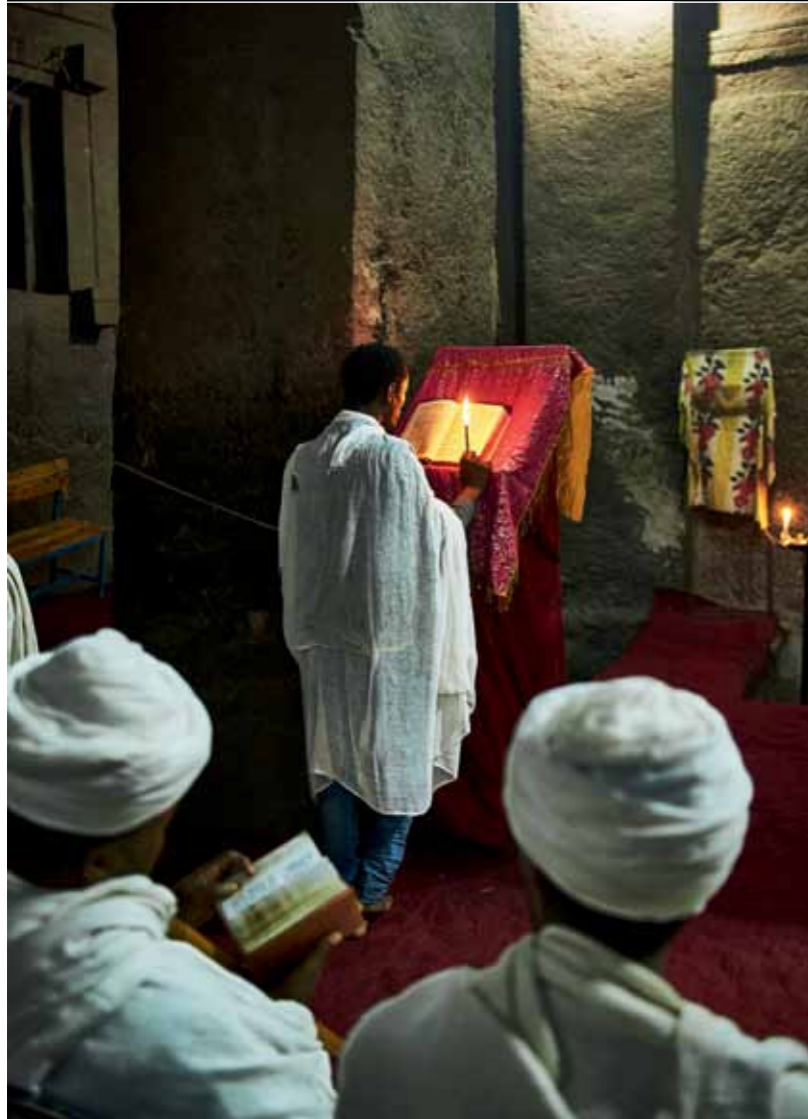
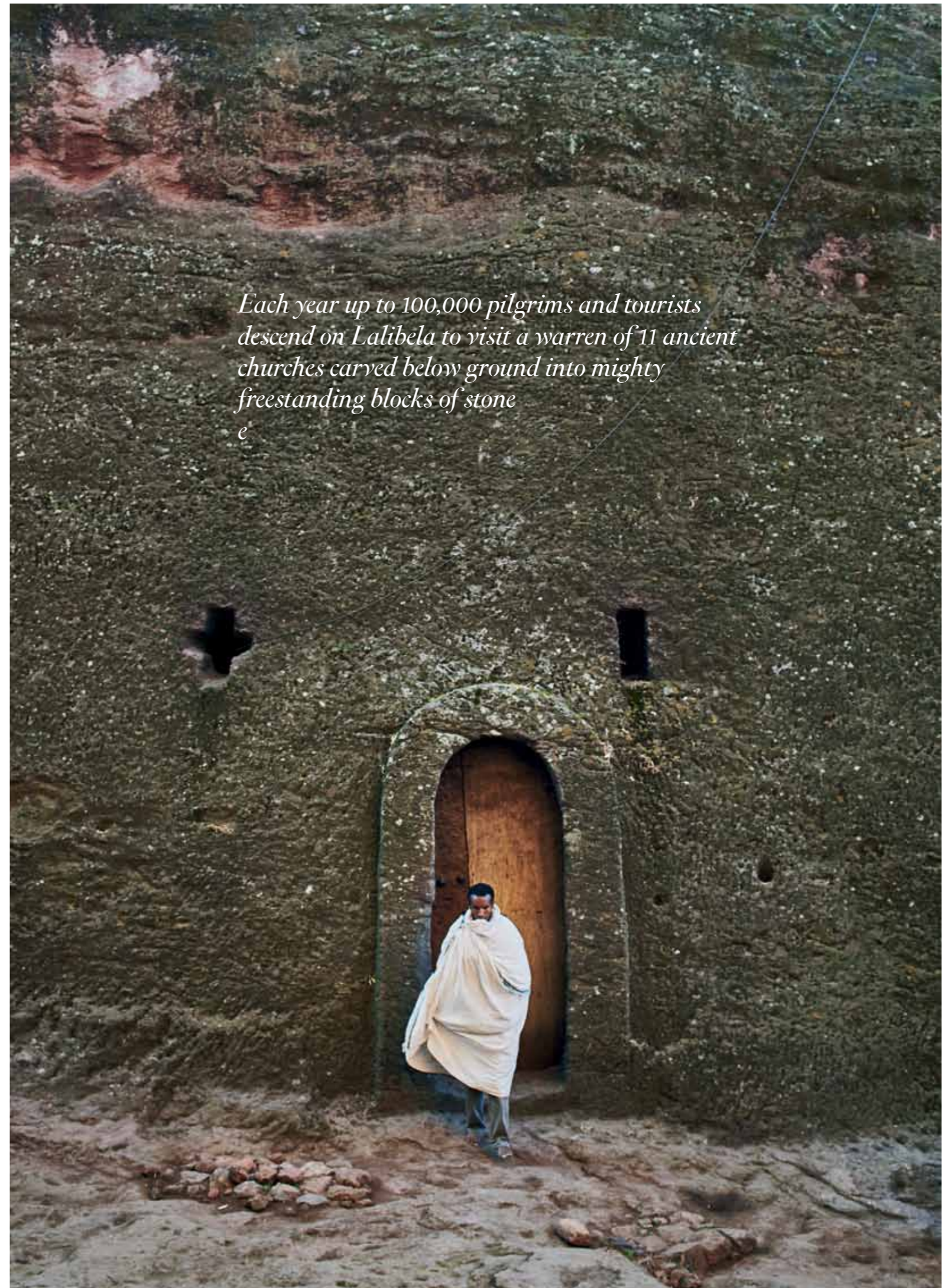
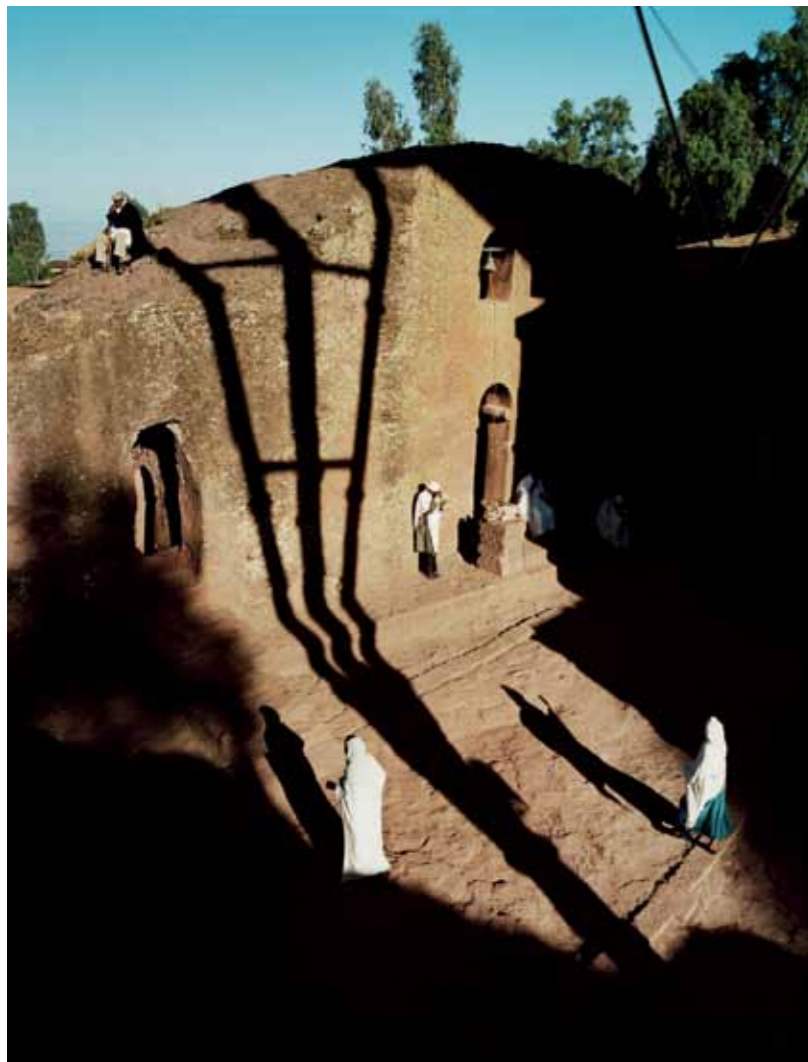
Located in the north of Ethiopia—a landlocked country the size of Spain with a population of 95 million—this small mountain town overlooks a vast ochre plain, a patchwork of dusty farmland cultivated with oxen and wooden ploughs. Each year up to 100,000 pilgrims and tourists scale these heights to visit a warren of 11 ancient churches carved below ground into mighty freestanding blocks of stone.

As I descend into the labyrinth of shady courtyards and tunnels connecting the sanctuaries, I feel like I'm stepping into a scene from a biblical painting. Barefoot worshippers wrapped in white cotton shawls kneel, heads bowed, whispering their prayers. Elderly priests swathed in ceremonial robes and clutching tall wooden staffs move meditatively through the quietly chanting crowds.

Like most of Ethiopia's ancient treasures, this Unesco World Heritage site is shrouded in mystery. The churches were built in the 12th century, apparently after King Lalibela had a vision in which God ordered him to build the "New Jerusalem." It's said that an army of 60,000 workers toiled for 23 years to chisel the awe-inspiring structures out of stone, though legend has it that angels helped on the night shift.

Set aside a full day to explore the holy sites. The most famous, due to its distinctive flat, cross-shaped roof, is the Church of Saint George, a place of hushed reverence illuminated within by shards of light that cast a celestial glow on the religious frescoes adorning the walls. Nearby, rising from the dry, red earth like a Greek temple and surrounded by 34 stone columns, the House of the Saviour of the World is the largest monolithic church on the planet. The neighbouring House of Golgotha Mikael is said to harbour the tomb of King Lalibela, and the House of Emmanuel was a royal chapel.

Ethiopia is the cradle of an ancient form of Christianity dating back to the 1st century AD that claims to be the custodian of the Ark of the Covenant, the golden chest declared in the Old Testament to contain the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. The ark—said to have been brought





to the region from Jerusalem by Menelik, the son of Israel's King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, some 1,000 years before the birth of Christ—is supposedly housed in a chapel in Aksum, 390 kilometres north of Lalibela. The only person allowed to see the sacred artefact is a virgin monk who guards it with his life. Every church in Ethiopia houses a replica of the ark in a holy alcove hidden behind theatrical red curtains. Stray too close and cassock-clad priests will emerge from the shadows to shoo you away.

The day after exploring the Lalibela churches, Bereket promises us an “Ethiopian massage.” It turns out to be one of his little jokes—a bone-shaking, buttock-pounding three-hour drive on dirt tracks to Yemrehanna Kristos, an 11th-century church inside a mountaintop cave. The sound of chanting carries on the breeze as we trek up a steep, juniper-lined path, exchanging smiles with young shepherds, elderly pilgrims and dishevelled-looking hermits. Inside the

sanctuary, once our eyes adjust to the gloom and sting of burning frankincense, we witness a religious ceremony conducted in the ancient language of Ge'ez, an almost extinct tongue today spoken only in Ethiopia's churches. This cave is the final resting place of thousands of pilgrims who over the centuries have made their way here to die. Their bones are piled high towards the back of the cavern.

The long drives necessary to explore Ethiopia's far-flung treasures are windows into the daily lives of the country's tribes, which number more than 80. Each group has its own dialect and, most intriguingly, its own unique sense of style. The people of Lalibela distinguish themselves from neighbouring tribes by sewing cross-shaped patterns of white buttons onto their clothes. Women from the Daasanach tribe wear wigs crafted from bottle tops. Men from the Bana group decorate themselves with colourful hair slides and plastic flowers. Members of other tribes have jacket lapels adorned with rows of



plastic digital watches and headgear fashioned from stacks of sunglasses. With their varying notions of beauty and intriguing mash-up of tradition and modernity, the tribal cultures are an enthralling draw for visitors. While it is still possible to meet peoples almost unchanged by modern times, such as the Mursi, who wear little more than body paint, animal skins and clay discs in their lips, they are destined to disappear as urbanisation and tourism grow.

A 30-minute flight northwest from Lalibela takes us to Gondar, known as the Camelot of Africa. Founded by Emperor Fasilides, who reigned from 1632 to 1667, it served as the imperial capital until 1855. Today you can explore seven tumbledown castles and palaces within the walled royal enclosure, each of which has a history of treachery, murder and revenge (four emperors were assassinated in one particularly bloody 15-year stretch). Watch out for the lion cages that housed the big cats belonging to the 225th emperor, Haile Selassie, whose overthrow in 1974 brought

TIME TRAVEL

You'll feel seven years younger in Ethiopia

We're all used to resetting our watches when we land in a different time zone, but when you touch down in Ethiopia you'll need to adjust your calendar too because it's actually 2010. Unlike nations that follow the Gregorian calendar (the majority), Ethiopia uses an ancient system influenced by its branch of Orthodox Christianity. Its calendar has 13 months, with New Year's Day celebrated on September 11 and Christmas Day on January 7. The issue of time is even more perplexing because

Ethiopians consider the start of the day to be sunrise, so the time at daybreak is 12 o'clock. The time at noon is not 12 o'clock but 6 o'clock. So set your watch to local time and mentally subtract 6 hours to understand where you are in the day. And there's no “am” or “pm”. Ethiopians say “8 in the day” for what would be our 2pm, and “8 at night” (2am). When arranging to meet, always confirm whether you're talking Ethiopian or ordinary time, or someone will have a very long wait.

PAST TIMES

Ethiopia has more than 80 tribes, some almost unchanged by modern times



an end to 3,000 years of imperial rule by the House of Solomon.

Today, the bathing house of Fasilides lies deserted, a large stone basin empty except for a few skulking vultures. But it's a different story on January 19 each year, when thousands of Orthodox Christians flock here for Timkat, a mass baptism. Water for the ceremony is brought from a local river and blessed overnight by priests. As dawn breaks, men and women immerse themselves in the pool of holy water and renew their baptismal vows. The ceremony is followed by feasting, dancing and a rather fruity mating ritual. To signal their romantic intentions, single men throw lemons at their love interest. If the lemon is thrown back, then it's a match and dating can begin.

An unexpected downpour sends us running into a maze of back alleys, sprinting past tin-roofed shacks, wading through mud and hurdling the occasional stray goat in search of lunch. Ethiopian food is one of the world's most underrated cuisines, with few if any specialist restaurants in Asian capitals, so each mealtime is a welcome chance to indulge. It's a communal experience with tapas-like dishes such as marinated meats, bean stews, spicy vegetables, dips and salad served in individual mounds on injera, a large circular flatbread made from teff, an indigenous gluten-free

grain. Etiquette dictates that you break off a piece of the injera's rolled edges with your right hand and use it to scoop up the delights within. The bread's rubbery texture and slight sourness don't appeal to me, so I cheat and use cutlery instead.

Unlike many African countries, Ethiopia is a dream for vegans and vegetarians because Orthodox Christians, the bulk of the population, are obliged to refrain from consuming animal and dairy products for 180 days of the year—every Wednesday and Friday, Lent and other specific periods. As a result, restaurant menus have a generous selection of “fasting dishes.” Also of interest to those with less adventurous palates is the plethora of Italian food, thanks to Italy's long relationship with the country, which included occupation during the second world war.

A five-hour drive northeast from Gondor takes us into the surprisingly lush Simien Mountains, known as “the roof of Africa.” This vast Unesco-protected wilderness is home to Ethiopia's highest peak, the majestic 4,550-metre Ras Dashen. Unfortunately our arrival coincides with a fierce electrical storm and impenetrable fog—and the dizzying heights leave me bedridden with altitude sickness. Our plans to hike vertiginous ridges, hang out with inquisitive gelada monkeys and track rock-climbing walia ibex are scuppered.

Thanks to the unbranded anti-nausea pills “prescribed” by the village doctor, I feel like I'm on a warm, fluffy cloud for the 12-hour journey south from the mountains to Lake Langano, which entails a flight to Addis Ababa followed by a 200-kilometre drive. The fuzzy tranquillity is maintained by a large glass of surprisingly good Rift Valley merlot that greets me on arrival at our lakeside lodge in the heart of the East Langano Nature Reserve. Like the local hippos (which, thankfully, I don't encounter), I spend the day wallowing in the vast freshwater lake, which is tinted gold by its mineral and sulphur content, watching exotic birds dance in the breeze, and camels, wart hogs and baboons parade along the shoreline.

Ethiopia is home to one of the hottest places on earth, the Danakil Depression, where the mercury regularly climbs above 50 degrees Celsius, but it also boasts the continent's largest sweep of wild alpine terrain, the Bale Mountains 250 kilometres south of Lake Langano, where temperatures plummet to well below zero and snow regularly dusts the lunar-like landscape. On the mystical Sanetti Plateau, in the heart of this alpine national park, spikey giant lobelias and the flame-coloured blossoms of red hot poker look alien against the otherwise barren highland. It is here that we catch a glimpse of the critically endangered Ethiopian wolf, a leggy, fox-like creature stalking giant mole rats popping up from burrows as golden eagles soar expectantly overhead.

Dusk falls as we descend through a fairy-tale forest shrouded with mist, tree trunks

coated in glistening moss and branches draped in silvery lichen. Remote, dank and eerily silent, it feels like Tolkien's Middle Earth. Suddenly, out of the ghostly fog steps a black horse. On its bare back is a boy of no more than seven or eight wrapped in a heavy blanket. We exchange smiles as he glides by. We've seen no form of shelter or anyone else for hours. As with the many locals we've passed during our journey—from bare-foot children herding donkeys along truck-infested roads to elderly farmers laden with sticks treading dirt tracks stretching to the horizon—I can't help wondering where the boy is going and how long it will take him to get there?

This is the luxury of an Ethiopian odyssey—chance encounters with nomadic tribes, glimpses of an ancient way of life and journeys into mystical landscapes—and with tourism still in its infancy, you're likely to be the only one there. 📍

Journeys by Design's private bespoke tours are escorted by knowledgeable local guides and include accommodation in luxury lodges, meals in the best restaurants and all internal transport, including chauffeured 4WDs. The UK-based luxury travel specialists arrange expeditions in 15 African countries, including Ethiopia, North Sudan, South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo and the Seychelles. journeysbydesign.com Jakki flew courtesy of Ethiopian Airlines. ethiopianairlines.com

WHERE TO STAY

From panoramic mountain lodges and jungle treehouses to five-star urban retreats, Ethiopia's luxury offerings are on the rise

The Sheraton Addis

Most tours of Ethiopia start and finish in Addis Ababa. You'll need at least one full day to explore the city—check out Makush Art Gallery, dine at modern restaurant Antica, reenergise at coffee shop chain Tomoca, then head to this five-star urban retreat to party the night away at its nightclub, Gaslight, or soothe road-weary muscles at the spa. sheratonaddis.com

Bale Mountain Lodge

Nestled in the Bale Mountain National Park, surrounded by the Harena Forest and overlooked by majestic mountains, this cosy lodge is run by a charming British couple who can arrange guided hikes and wildlife excursions—we spotted Ethiopian wolves and wild lions during our stay. Feeling adventurous? Book the romantic treehouse with the scenic outdoor shower. balemountainlodge.com

Limalimo Lodge

Perched on the edge of an escarpment overlooking the Simien Mountains National Park, this cool and contemporary hilltop hideaway offers spectacular panoramic views from its wraparound terrace, which is perfect for early morning yoga, sunbathing and hot chocolate under the stars. Popular activities include birdwatching and hikes to observe gelada monkeys. limalimolodge.com

Maribela Hotel

Options are limited in the dusty mountaintop town of Lalibela but this clean, comfortable and conveniently located hotel will not disappoint. Rooms are spacious and have balconies overlooking vast rocky plains and craggy ridges. Wake up early to watch vultures known locally as bone-crunchers hunting their prey. Try the pizza—it's surprisingly tasty. hotelmaribela.com