

# reader report.



## ethiopia's lush lands



WRITER PROFILE

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INFO Lawyer Catherine lives in Ottawa, Canada, with her husband and daughters. As well as Ethiopia, the family's favourite recent trips included Bhutan, Ladakh, Laos, Cambodia and trekking in Nepal.

ARRIVING IN ETHIOPIA WITH HER HUSBAND AND TWO DAUGHTERS, **CATHERINE COULTER** SPENDS TWO WEEKS GETTING TO KNOW A SURPRISINGLY BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPE AND PEOPLE

**I**n the words of Thomas Friedman, "the world is flat." This becomes particularly apparent when I find that I can book internal flights within Ethiopia by using Expedia, from the comfort of my home in Ottawa, Canada. The world has changed...

Our kids, now aged 13 and 10, have seen so much of the world that they have become rather blasé about it all. From tea with lamas in Ladakh to touring the Killing Fields of Cambodia, not much fazes Emma or Hannah. However, none of us had yet explored any of sub-Saharan Africa, so in March last year my husband George and I stuck the proverbial pin in a map and were off to explore the Horn of Africa with our kids.

We arrived in a country that is filled with contradictions. A largely rural and agricultural country, internet cafés and cell phones

are beginning to spring up in remote places. A place where tough people still plough the land by hand, some homes have satellite dishes and electricity. The land of famine from 20 years ago is filled with fields and trees, all brilliant green during the summer rainy season. Perhaps most surprising of all, it is a land of poverty where the people don't seem to begrudge foreigners their wealth. By the end of our trip, we came to the conclusion that the people of Ethiopia are among the friendliest on the face of the earth.

The capital of Addis Ababa is a funny place on a Sunday. The perpetual traffic jams disappear and one is left with the dichotomy of a shiny modern African city juxtaposed with tin-roofed huts, donkey carts and camels in the streets. You don't visit Addis for its tourist attractions, particularly on a Sunday. The recommended Ethnological Museum was closed,

along with the Mercato (Africa's largest market) and most of the shops and restaurants across the entire city. We finally found one attraction that was open – the National Museum. Although it is the home of the bones of 'Lucy', one of the oldest hominid's ever discovered, the museum's exhibits looked like they had been put together by Hannah's fourth grade class, with descriptions written on pieces of paper that were stuck to the items with scotch tape. But that was okay, because the real reason for our trip was to see the much-vaunted historical circuit in the northern part of the country.

We flew into the small town of Axum not far from the Eritrean border. Although our flight was uneventful, we found out that our bags were still sitting somewhere in Addis. The unhappiness that this generated led to one of the highlights of our entire trip. I come from a long line of women who



Worshippers circling St Mary of Zion church



Bet Giyorgis (St George's) church in Lalibela

think nothing of being a little adversarial when necessary. In the midst of my belligerence about our missing bags, I ended up meeting the son of the President of Ethiopia, Solomon Woldegiorgis. Solomon overheard my discontent and stepped in to try to resolve matters. It turns out that although Ethiopian-born, he is Canadian and has lived in London, Ontario, where George and I had attended university. The next thing we knew, we had an invitation for a personal tour of the Presidential Palace on our return to Addis. I've always known that this particular personality trait of mine would pay off someday...

### ARK OF THE COVENANT

Axum is primarily known for its collection of stelae and the St Mary of Zion church. St Mary actually has two Ethiopian Orthodox churches and a chapel within its compound. The most important, the one we had come to see, is where the Ark

of the Covenant is reputed to be held. We're talking *Raiders of the Lost Ark* stuff here. Whether or not it's the real thing is a matter that has kept several authors in business, as the Ark is under lock and key and protected round the clock by a guardian monk whose sole job in life is to safeguard it. The Ark was supposedly brought to Ethiopia by its king, Menelik I, the reputed son

**"THE ARK IS UNDER LOCK AND KEY AND PROTECTED ROUND THE CLOCK BY A GUARDIAN MONK WHOSE SOLE JOB IN LIFE IS TO SAFEGUARD IT"**

of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. The reality, however, is that nobody but the keeper is ever permitted inside to see the Ark, so we were left to speculate from afar.

As for the stelae, they sit in a field on the northern edge of town. Tall granite structures, some carved and



some plain, they look remarkably like Egyptian obelisks. The largest of the stelae was taken out of the country by the Italians under cover of night in WWII. Finally returned to Ethiopia in 2007, it was still waiting to be raised later in the year as part of Ethiopia's millennium celebrations. Millennium you ask? Yes, 2008 is the year 2000 in Ethiopia, which follows the Julian rather than the Gregorian calendar. The Ethiopian clock is different, too: a 12 hour clock which begins at sunrise. When making bookings in Ethiopia, it's always a good idea to make sure you know what time they are on.

Another peculiarity to us was the typical Ethiopian greeting. Shared between men, it looks a bit like a hug, with men almost resting their

necks on each other's shoulders. George first encountered it in Axum. Having no idea what was going on, he instinctively reached for the money pouch hidden down the front of his trousers. Our guide, who had initiated the greeting, misunderstood George's gesture,

and both men ended up in a wary stance, genitals protected. The panic on their faces was a wonder to behold.

From Axum it was on to Lalibela, the small town which contains the greatest number of archaeological and religious treasures in the country. Lalibela sits on volcanic rock and that's what has made it famous. The town is filled with churches that were carved out of the rock many hundreds of years ago. Rather than being sculpted into the rock like a cave, they are carved down into the hills and then hollowed out, so all you can see is the roofs of the churches when you stand at ground level.

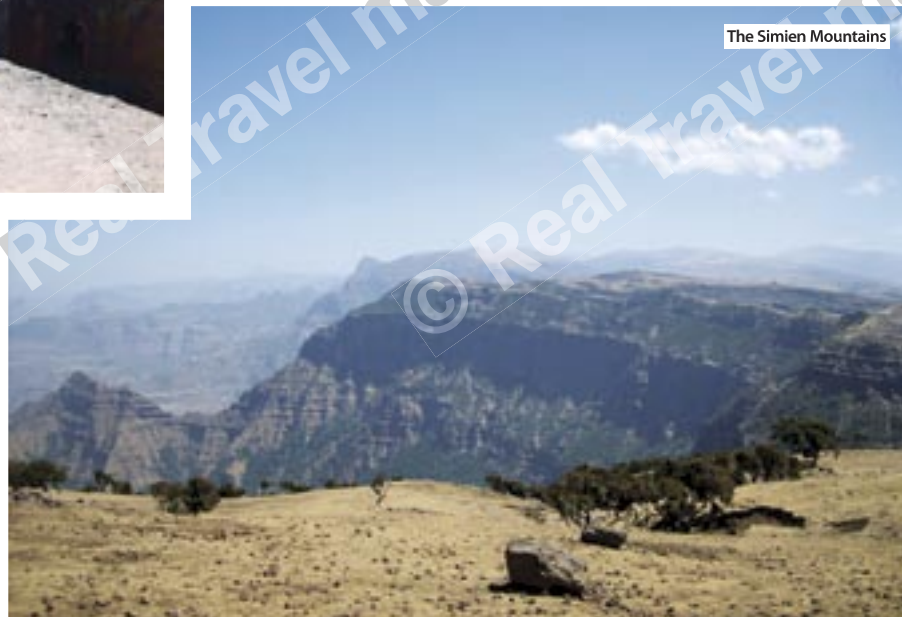
We spent two full days exploring the churches. Some of them are currently having protective suspended roofs installed by UNESCO, but even with all this construction around, none of us will ever forget the feeling of awe as we entered our first church, Bet Medhane Alem. Walking down through the depths into the cool darkness of that first and largest of churches was like stepping into a site from the Middle Ages. Carpets are laid end over end covering most of the hand-hewn rock floor, and paintings going back hundreds of years are applied directly onto the church walls. Priests in their white robes with white turbans on their



“THERE ARE MORE THAN TEN ROCK-HEWEN CHURCHES IN LALIBELA, THE MOST FAMOUS BEING BET GIYORGIS, IN THE SHAPE OF A PERFECT CROSS”



The ceiling of Debre Berhan Selassie



The Simien Mountains

» heads stood singing together in a corner, all leaning on their staffs. In another part of the church, incense burned while the chief priest blessed the locals with a 12<sup>th</sup> century seven kilogram cross made of pure gold. Stolen several years ago and sold to a traveller for \$25,000, it was subsequently found and returned, and is now kept locked up for most of the year.

There are more than ten rock-hewn churches in Lalibela, the most famous of them being Bet Giyorgis,

which is cut down into the rock in the shape of a perfect cross. Most of the churches are connected by a rabbit warren of tunnels through the rock – one of them 72m long. Candles flicker throughout the darkness and priests willingly pose for photographs with sunglasses on to protect their eyes from camera flashes. A feeling of ancient Judeo-Christianity abounds.

Our time in Lalibela also included a trip to Yemrehanna Kristos, the most well-known and oldest of the cave churches that litter the surrounding countryside. A 90 minute drive and 30 minute uphill walk from Lalibela, this 1,000 year old timber, marble and plaster church is located in an enormous cave. The skeletons of monks from days gone by are stacked up in the back of the cave and if you don't watch your step, it's possible to trip over skulls and bones peeking out of the dirt and straw which covers the rock floor.

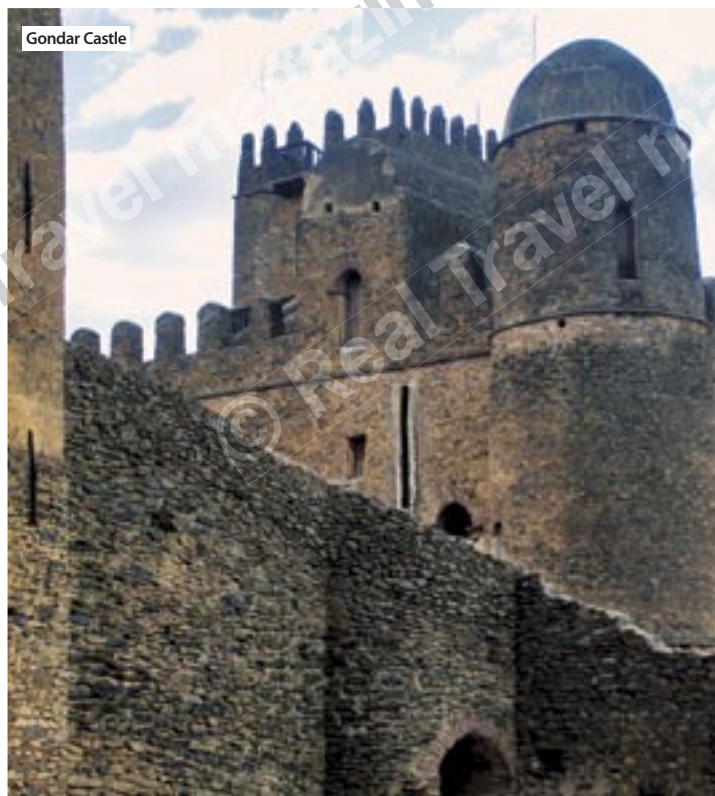
#### THE CITY OF CASTLES

Our next stop took us to the city of Gondar, which lies just north of Lake Tana in the northwest of the country. Gondar sounds like something from *Lord of the Rings* and, luckily for us, it's known for a number of castles which also could have come from Tolkien's imagination. There are nine castles in the city, all contained within one royal complex, although each was built by a different emperor.

The architecture is a strange cross between English/Scottish architecture with Islamic/Moorish influences. Each castle is more grand than the one before, and it's clear to see that there was a royal game of 'top this' that went on for generations. Gondar is also the home of Debre Berhan Selassie, one of the oldest and most important Orthodox churches in the entire country. Every inch of the walls and ceiling are covered in vibrant paintings of scenes from both the Old and New Testament.

From Saint George and the dragon to people falling into the flames of hell, there was enough here to give us all nightmares for a week.

From Gondar we detoured into the Simien Mountains for a short trek with the gelada baboons through Grand Canyon-like scenery, before heading south around Lake Tana to the town of Bahir Dar. Among the delights here are the flower gardens of the lakeside Hotel Tana and the town's large pelican population. Another is the nearby Blue Nile Falls and the



Gondar Castle

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### SECURITY ISSUES

Border regions of Ethiopia should be avoided, but the balance of the country is generally quite safe. Although there have been bombings in Addis from time to time, foreigners do not seem to be targeted. Petty crime exists but isn't a significant issue. Foreigners should check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website before visiting any country, including Ethiopia. [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)

### WHEN TO GO

Ethiopia's motto is '13 months of sunshine'. Other than avoiding the rainy season in the summer months, you'll do well travelling there at almost any time of the year. The countryside is a particularly lush green in the autumn months.

### WHAT TO PACK

Lots of cash! Most hotels, restaurants, shops and even banks in Ethiopia are not set up for credit cards or travellers' cheques. Pack lots of cash and change it into Ethiopian birr whenever you get the chance.



Inside the well preserved Presidential Palace



» corresponding Blue Nile River, which becomes the Nile in Khartoum, where it merges with the White Nile. Despite the fact that the country draws some of the water flow away from the falls to generate hydro-electric power, it's still awe-inspiring.

The other big draw in Bahir Dar is the lake itself, home to dozens of monasteries which circle the shore. Ranging in age from hundreds of years old to brand new, many of them can only be visited by men, so with three females in the family our options were limited. We opted for a lovely day out on the lake viewing those monasteries closest to town and open to women.

## “THE PALACE HAS BEEN LEFT EXACTLY AS IT WAS WHEN HAILE SELASSIE LOST HIS POWER: A PERFECTLY PRESERVED TIME CAPSULE FROM THE MID-70S”

Although we much enjoyed the sites of Bahir Dar, the real highlight was a visit to the town's Atse Serte Dingel Elementary School. We had arranged the visit in advance through Link Ethiopia, a British-run organisation which supports education in Ethiopia and looks to increase cultural awareness between young people in the UK and the east African country.

During our visit we discovered that the school educates over 2,000 students, half in the morning and the other half in the afternoon, with about 60 kids crammed into each classroom. AIDS and HIV have claimed about half of the country's adults, so a large number of children in all Ethiopian schools are orphans, and many students, unable to leave family farms when they're younger, are in their late teens. Along with maths, science and history, virtually all of Ethiopia's students study English on a daily basis, so we enjoyed a delightful time speaking with seventh and eighth grade students who were eager to practise their English.

Particularly charming was an older student who asked us about the small size of our family and then commended us, in front of our embarrassed daughters, on our family planning achievements. Despite the continuous presence of AIDS and poverty in Ethiopia, our uplifting visit made it clear that the youngest generation is working hard to become educated

and make something better both for themselves and for their country.

### TREASURE OF AGES

This high note continued on our final day in Addis, when we decided to take Solomon Woldegiorgis up on his offer of a tour of the Presidential Palace. While the President's family currently uses a small portion of the palace, the rest is effectively a museum although not open to the public. Solomon took us into the heavily secured basement, which looked for all the world like that scene at the end of *National Treasure* where everyone stands open-mouthed at the spectacle of the treasure of ages laid out before them.

The warehouse-sized basement contains virtually all of former emperor Haile Selassie's personal items, from solid gold crowns and jewelled robes, to gifts from world leaders and stuffed lions and tigers. From there we were escorted upstairs to see the rest of the palace. Haile Selassie was forcibly removed from power in 1974 and it has long been rumoured that he was killed by his political enemies while under house arrest. Whatever the story, the palace has been left exactly as it was when he lost his power: a perfectly preserved time capsule from the mid-seventies, complete with original furnishings, linens and even toiletries left just as they were when Selassie still resided there.

The best mark of a trip is the impression that remains with you once you return home. The girls and I don't appreciate *injera* (the Ethiopian national dish which features a sour spongy pancake made with teff flour and topped with various stews) and we've concluded that the international food on the trip (usually chicken

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British Midlands, KLM and Ethiopian Airlines all fly to Addis from Europe and many other parts of the world. Most flights are routed through elsewhere in Africa or the Middle East. Ethiopian Airlines has a good safety record and operates daily flights to many destinations within the country. [www.ethiopianairlines.com](http://www.ethiopianairlines.com)

### GETTING AROUND

Tour companies have regular guided trips to Ethiopia but it is also relatively easy to travel independently.

### VISITING LOCAL SCHOOLS

The family arranged to visit a local Ethiopian school through Link Ethiopia. [www.linkethiopia.org](http://www.linkethiopia.org)

### ACCOMMODATION

Addis Ababa has a Sheraton and a Hilton, but the prices are high and they are often full. There are lots of cheap hotels in most centres but these are not recommended. The government-run Ghion chain has hotels in each centre on the historical route and, these are probably the best mid-range option. Although overpriced at about £25 per night, the rooms are generally clean and have running water (although subject to some rationing due to water shortages) and restaurants with both Ethiopian and continental food. [www.ghionhotel.com.et](http://www.ghionhotel.com.et)

### VISA

UK passport holders require a tourist visa purchased before travel (30 day, single-entry is £12; three month, multi-entry is £18) or on arrival at Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa airports (US\$20 for one month).

### HEALTH

Vaccinations against cholera, diphtheria, hepatitis A+B, meningococcal meningitis, polio, rabies, tetanus, TB and typhoid are recommended. Yellow fever is present in the country, and there is a high risk of malaria in areas below 2,000m, except Addis Ababa.

and pasta always cooked the exact same way) wasn't really our cup of tea. There is also very little tourist infrastructure in the country which lends itself to a number of hassles, including finding decent hotels and exchanging money. We struggled mightily on our Simien Mountain trek, due to extreme heat and cold, the high altitude and late night journeys to outdoor squat toilets, and we all battled our own personal demons when comparing our comfortable lives in Canada with the poverty and general stress of life in Ethiopia.

But when we are asked what our trip was like, one need look no further than Emma and Hannah – both of whom want to know whether we can visit Ethiopia all over again next year. It will remain ingrained in all of us forever. ■



Emma and Hannah at the Blue Nile Falls, Bahir Dar