

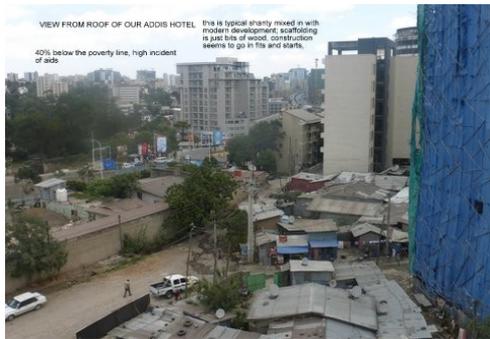
Ethiopia: the land of coffee and honey

After our first day, we flew to Mekele. Even on an internal flight you cannot get into the airport without going through security, then another security. We then drove over, at first, a tarmac road, through many developing towns, to our first encounter with a rock church and the unique Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religion. None of us realised that in the twilight we would be scrambling up rocks to get to the church. It was our first encounter with the local boys, who started to help us over the rocks, but then demanded money on our return. Some of the prices demanded were as much as a day's wages, so yours truly, after trying to find out how much we should give, and having it refused, disappeared quickly into the vehicle. Luckily our Ethiopian guide found the priest, and the church was opened with a ceremony of the keys. There are rock sculptures on the ceiling and walls and often paintings, which are just unique. The churches are built on springs so that the Ark of the Covenant can be housed there. Women enter most churches from a side door on the right, the men from the left. There are three parts to the church and no one except for the priest is allowed to enter the Holy of Holies.

A funeral that we saw on one occasion was only attended by men. This was all part of a mass gathering in the open air, where the people were celebrating St Michael's Day. All churches have a saint and these are celebrated once a month, but on a special day once a year, the Christians gather, with their colourful umbrellas and decorated donkeys. It is, then, a public holiday for the Christians. The Muslims will be working. There have always been Muslims in Ethiopia.

Our visit from 14 to 28 November brought us to a country full of contradictions, blessed with wonderful scenery and not forgetting the excellent wine of the Rift Valley, but the food we did not hold in such high esteem. The meat dishes were a little spicy for me and the injera (flat bread made from teff) looked more like a rolled napkin and possibly had a similar taste. The idea was that food was placed on it and you used your fingers. On our journeys, the Ethiopian chef provided excellent cold buffet meals, sited under the shade often of a solitary tree, and the traditional coffee. This was coffee roasted over an open fire over leaves. We all had to smell and waft

the scent. Beforehand popcorn was served.



Why did we go? Curiosity. And as it is landlocked, then probably you cruise enthusiasts will not have been. We kept to a popular tourist route to the northern section of Ethiopia. Although we booked with an English firm, the Ethiopian company, Image, ran the trip for 18 of us. They were excellent and their guides were full of information and the love of their country, and they spoke excellent English.

Landing in Addis at just over 5,000ft, the hotel was situated amongst the shanty dwellings, off a dirt road. This is very typical, with much being under construction, held up by wooden scaffolding and often looking as if the project was on hold. Traffic-wise, the main and here tarmac roads were extremely busy. We were here on our first and last days, visiting the 3.5-million-year-old Lucy skeleton and on the last day Menelik II's palace. The original Menelik was the Queen of Sheba's son. A huge tale surrounds all that. In the 1850s, Menelik II decided Addis would be the capital. Ethiopia has had many capitals, including in ancient times when the lands extended to Yemen and more or less the whole of Sudan, with extensive trade routes of salt to the Red Sea. His first palace was basically thatched huts built high on a hill; the second one, now in the centre of Addis, has recently been renovated with huge amounts of UNESCO investment. It is very European, slightly colonial in style. To enter required passports and much security, but the minority of us preferred to do this, rather than go shopping. Our local guide was excellent. One of our group had heard about all of this from *The Economist*.



Staying overnight in Wukro, we realised in the morning that the lodges were on a steep hillside with good views, and also why we had a lack of water. The water system in our lodge was leaking into the bedroom, so a room change was in order, and much improved it was. Having been woken at 3 in the morning by chanting, some of the party had decided to set off at 6 to a local church. Having seen the steep rock face of the church that day, less than half of the party decided to scale the rocks. The English leader, who had not been here before, decided to accompany them.

Our Ethiopian guide took us to another easily accessible rock church where he introduced us to the different cereals, a deconsecrated church built on an older one, and the new church. Children had been bussed in to receive instruction under a large tree. More easily accessible rock churches in the afternoon. They have a separate building called Bethlehem to prepare the bread and wine, where people are fed the wine via a spoon.

Part 1. Courtesy of Yorkshire RMA.