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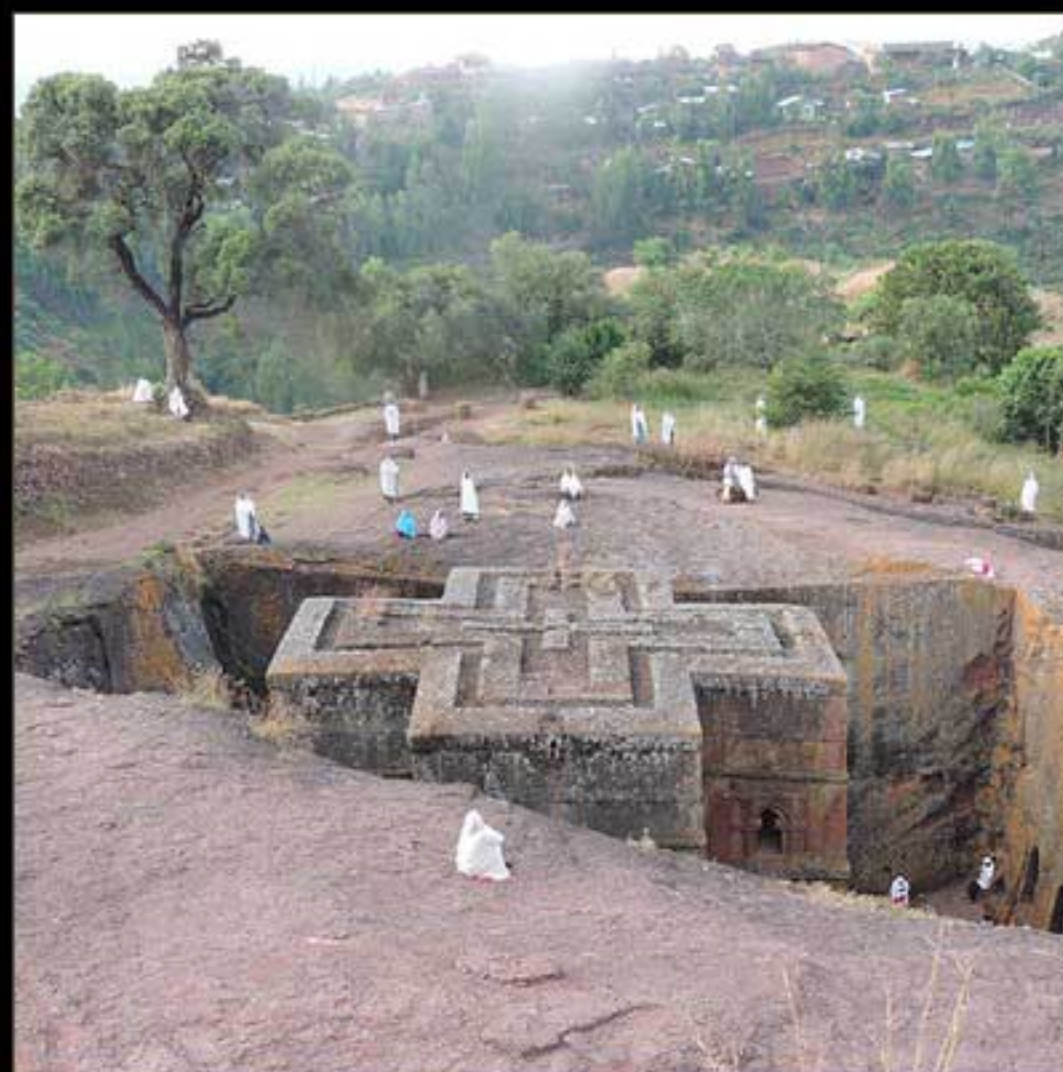
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ESCAPE TO ETHIOPIA

By Caroline Phillips



Ethiopia, it's said, is perhaps the most intriguing country in Africa. It's a place of scale, Biblical beauty, and oodles of historical treasures. It's a land boasting a colourful, gracious and welcoming people. And somewhere with awesome landscapes, the likes of which are rarely seen outside of good dreams. This is an impressionistic account of its wonders.



Something I'll never forget is the merkato — Africa's largest open-air market — in Addis Ababa. There the air was heady with the smell of kocho (fermented banana stem). Women sat cleaning their teeth with twigs, men walked by with six mattresses on their heads and people sold recycled everything — including sandals and horse tack made from used car tyres. (Best hotel in Addis Ababa? The Sheraton hit the spot with its international cuisine, acres of marble, and swaying palms. It also offered tip-top service, all mod cons, displays of contemporary Ethiopian art, and a big swimming pool.)



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It was just a short plane hop from Addis Ababa to another of my favourite places: the ancient monolithic and semi-monolithic churches of Tigray — which are less well-known than the (famous) 12th century ones of Lalibela. The Tigray churches are set among the Gheralta cluster of mountains that rise majestically above the fluorescent green fields, cacti and acres of maize.

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We clambered up sheer rock, picking our way like goats, to see these religious wonders. At the top we found priests, peace and ancient murals lit by the flickering light of handmade beeswax candles. Nearby a local hermit lived in a cave. 'He survives only on honey and vinegar,' explained our guide. (And the top local hotel? The Gheralta Lodge. It has views to eternity and beyond, and stylish rustic bungalow rooms that are circular and boast timber ceilings and stone walls. Owned by an Italian couple, it also offers delicious home-cooked Italian food — a relief after so much 'injera,' the sour-tasting and ubiquitous Ethiopian pancake).



Afterwards we drove for hour upon hour through rural areas without seeing any cars, just wide views of fields of maize, millet and acacia trees. And the bluest of open skies, kids shepherding their sheep, and locals meeting in the shade of sycamore trees. At one stop, we wandered by a funeral ceremony that was taking place in a tent, the participants segregated by gender and wearing white shawls. Beside them a woman crouched on the ground with 'rue' herb stuffed up her nose: a traditional cure for colds. Nearby, children with elaborately plaited hair played games with sticks and plastic bottles.



Another memorable sight (just three hours by car from Gheralta) was the teeny museum in Axum, which seems to have no name. (It's next to the chapel that allegedly holds the Ark of the Covenant and Moses' Ten Commandments.) Its contents wouldn't look out of place in the glossiest-of-glossy Christie's catalogues with zillion-dollar reserve prices. Think gold crowns and antique chalices and ceremonial crosses studded with precious stones. Amazingly, the security in the museum is almost zilch: the treasures are in cabinets that are fastened with the sort of lock you'd put on a filing cabinet. This adds to its charm.



Finally, we had a 40-minute flight to Lalibela, the jewel in Ethiopia's crown. After seeing the appropriately-dubbed 'eighth wonder of the world,' the rock-hewn churches – written about so often that I shall not cover them here; suffice to say it must be true that they were built, in part, by angels at night – one of my other indelible memories is of the town's Saturday market: a Biblical scene that stretched as far as the eye could see.



Locals walked past with hessian sacks of grain on their heads. There were traders carrying live chickens hanging from wooden poles. Size zero donkeys. Tethered goats. And bleating sheep ready for slaughter – but not for feasting on on Wednesdays, known as Fasting Day, when Orthodox Christians cannot eat animals. Market traders crouched under umbrellas – to protect themselves from the sun – or stood to greet one another with four kisses or by tapping their shoulders against their friend's shoulders.



There were farmers and villagers wearing shawls and sitting cross-legged; traders flogging mounds of lentils and piles of 'fer' — the super grain used for making 'injera;' women selling sacks of 'gesho' — bitter hop-like leaves for making local beer; and everyone dealing in bank notes so worn it was hard to decipher their denomination.



I'd never seen a market like this — we could have been transported back to past centuries or have walked onto the film set of *The Ten Commandments*. And we were the only westerners there. That's one of the benefits of the recent political unrest. So go there soon. It's definitely the most intriguing place in Africa.



NEED TO KNOW

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