

ETHIOPIA

January 2005

Addis, Omo Valley, Jinka, Remote Tribes, Konso, Arba Minch, “Historic Route”: Lalibela, Axum, Gondar, Bahar Dar (Lake Tana)

Why go to Ethiopia? Some friends say “Better you than me!” But their image is one of draught, starvation, disease, AIDS, chaotic neighbors (Somalia, Sudan). With per capital income of \$700 a year, it ranks as one of the three poorest countries in the world. Unemployment – difficult to measure in an agricultural society – is said to be 50%. All this may be true, but it ignores a host of appealing reasons to spend time with these conservative and warm-mannered people in their gorgeous and historic country. Consider --

-- Ethiopia is the only sub-Saharan nation with recorded history that stretches back 3000 years. It is cited in the Bible and by Homer. It dealt with Greece in the Golden Age, and earlier with the Egyptian pharaohs. (Ethiopia is a Greek name, meaning “land of burnt faces”). Its empires once included southern Arabia, Yemen, the seaports of the Red Sea, Djibouti and Somalia, linking the trade routes to India and beyond. The stone palaces, monuments, and extraordinary rock-hewn churches are there to capture one’s imagination.

-- Ethiopia is a country of staggering beauty, a mountainous plateau 4000’-9000’ high.

-- Ethiopia (and Armenia) are the oldest Christian nations, already established when Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity in AD326. The great Christian festivals, especially Epiphany on January 18-19, are momentous, colorful events.

--Ethiopia is the only African country to have escaped European colonialism. Its identity has been nurtured for millennia and is the only sub-Saharan country with a cultural tradition at the national level. (Tiny Ivory Coast, for example, has no less than 67 languages).

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-- The last emperor, Haile Selassie (1930-1974), was the 225th emperor in a direct line from King Menelik, believed to be the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, in the Tenth Century BC. A hero in the U.S. for his appeal to the League of Nations to stop the Italian invasion of his country, he was forward looking, transformed the country into a modern bureaucratic state, promoted education, eradicated slavery – but stayed on too long. He is now a near deity to the Ethiopians.

-- Ethiopia is twice the size of Texas, five times the UK, about the same as South Africa, but smaller than Sudan, which matches the USA east of the Mississippi. Remember also that Africa is five times the size of the USA.

-- Ethiopia has the second largest population in Africa after Nigeria -- 70 million -- and projected to reach 115 million by 2025. (It also has 26 million cattle and about the same number of goats). Children under 15 constitute 45% of the population. It was only 20 million in 1950. Agricultural societies cannot stop having babies. Life span for men is 43, for women, 47. One in 14 women die in childbirth.

--Ethiopia boasts one of the finest climates in the world, matching northern California. Most of the inhabited region is at 6000' to 9000' elevation. Heavy rain showers deluge the country from June to September, but October to May feature cloudless blue skies with an average temperature of 67 degrees -- cool at night and temperate during the day. Heavenly! Same as home!

--But Ethiopia is famine prone. Too many people, too little cultivated land, and frequent droughts. Always has been. They have survived forty recorded famines since the Ninth Century, far greater than the disasters we've seen on television. For example, in 1888-92, two-thirds of the population died.

--It is also war prone. Ethiopia has not known a single decade of unbroken peace since records were started 700 years ago.

--But, as we shall see, Ethiopia is known for its spirit of endurance and its deep religious faith,. Let's find out why.

CLOCKS AND DATES. Ethiopians take tradition seriously. They don't like to be told by westerners what to do. Much of this we would find odd:

-- New Years is September 9. The calendar has 13 months, 12 with 30 days, and one with five days (except six on leap year).

-- Their sense of time is screwy. For example, the day starts not at midnight but at six in the morning. Seems logical, one might say. But perhaps you want to set a date at, say, 4:00. To them this would be 11:00. Or let's meet at 12, but then they would show up at 1800 hours. Our guides explained that they simply use the western system when dealing with us, but prefer their historic clocks.

---Christmas is January 9, and is not observed very seriously. The big events are Epiphany (e-pee-PHAN-Y) and Easter. Sundays of both events are the favorite times for marriage. (All these dates are based on the Gregorian calendar, we were told).

-- While New Years is September 9 and involves a good deal of eating and drinking, they are at it again two weeks later, celebrating Masqal, the discovery of the true Cross by Empress Helena. By this time the rainy season is ending, the air is spring-

like, the landscape is colored by acres of yellow wildflowers. The priests chant and each group circles the holy pool three times (for the Trinity) before everyone settles down to the main part: the bonfire is lit, the young men dance around it shouting their war chants and ultimately seizing burning sticks and throwing them at each other. Clearly there is plenty of drinking involved.

-- November brings St. Michael's Day: elaborate chanting and dancing by the clergy, and carrying-on by all throughout the entire day. A community picnic on a grand scale.

--December has a bunch of pre-Christmas blasts: St. Gabriel, St. Mary, St. George and another St. Michael in January (before Christmas – remember, that's January 9). There are special festivities for each of these days, each an all-day event. It's dry season, not much to do, so let's have fun – and pray also.

-- The other extreme is Lent, the great fast before Easter. For eight weeks there are serious fasting requirements, reaching a climax the final week: no work is allowed, the more devout go to church many times and intensify their daily schedule of prayers. Total abstinence is practiced for 48 hours preceding the final Mass, performed in the middle of the night before Easter. Gluttony follows.

DAY ONE - TWO: ADDIS Frank Wheeler and I have shared many trips together. (A sampling: Burma, Pakistan, India, Islands East of Bali and Sulawesi, Yunan Province and Vietnam, Istanbul-Syria-Jordan-Israel-Sinai-Cairo, the Galapagos). He is a saint to put up with me, and I am so fortunate to have as a traveling buddy a gentleman with such common sense and good judgment to keep me out of trouble.

To maximize time in Ethiopia, it is important to get there quickly. Flying from SF to London or Europe adds 8-10 hours – downtime between planes; the fastest route is by Ethiopian Airlines from Dulles, one-stop Rome (30 minutes – stay on the plane), about 15 hours.

We selected the old Ghion Hotel, avoiding the plush excesses of the Sheraton, recently built by the Ethiopian-Saudi Sheik AlaMundi, who also has a dozen other major businesses in Ethiopia, including the Pepsi franchise. We found that even school kids knew his name – and his wealth. The Ghion has the best hotels through the Historic Route; we advise using them. Further, they accept credit cards, which none of the others do. ghion@telecom.net.et.

Addis is rapidly sprawling. Only 500,000 when I visited in 1966, it has now exceeded five million and will soon pass six million. Main roads in the commercial center of the city are paved; the boulevards then suddenly switch to graded dirt. (We visited most of the cities – average population 120,000 – and while some downtown roads are now paved, most are only slightly better than the “inter-city” routes, where an average 20 mph is usually possible, but in some stretches it is more like 10 mph.

Good roads could dramatically unify the country commercially and open up many development opportunities).

We have one day for the highlights of Addis, the third largest city in Africa. It's a big city with a small town feel, pack-donkeys ignoring red lights, goats grazing beside high-rise buildings. Mud and straw huts nestle between hotels and office buildings. Priests in medieval robes stroll with businessmen and bureaucrats. Addis is new: established just 100 years ago. At 8000 feet, it is also the third highest capital in the world (the others, I'm guessing, are Lhasa and La Paz).

The National Museum is outstanding, probably the best sub-Saharan museum in Africa. And it features Lucy, at least an authentic-looking reproduction. Lucy is the 3,200,000-year-old fossilized hominid discovered by my Bohemian friend, Archeologist Don Johanson. The original is sealed in a vault.

Nearby is the new Sheraton Hotel, a sprawling five star eyesore in that everything is opulent and garish and out-of-place in this poverty-stricken country – right down to the in-the-pool bar – just swim up, sit down, order a drink and pretend you don't see anything around you.

Next, the Holy Trinity Cathedral (“No entry for woman”), largest in the country, with thrones for the emperor and empress, murals depicting the emperor making his famous speech to the League of Nations. It is almost as if Haile Selassie was a deity – but then, many Ethiopians view him as such. Parishioners kiss the doors and walls on entry, passing through the Door of Hope to daily Holy Communion. Many giant drums, the musical center of all churches, their sound deep and mournful.

On to the St. George Cathedral and Museum, built in 1896 by Emperor Menelik II to commemorate their victory at Adwa, a stunning victory by African troops over Europeans (Italian). Haile Selassie was crowned here, and all the royal garb of rich gold brocade is on display. St., George is the patron saint of the country. In every church he is killing that dragon representing Satan.

Then on to the Merkato, the largest market in East Africa, covering perhaps 20 square blocks, much of it shacks and stalls. Everything is here: want a Kalashikov or a camel or expensive incense? Here's a vast “recycle” market where workshops turn tires and old steel into new products. Lines of Toyota pick-ups, Toyota vans and Toyota trucks. Seems like they have 100% of the market. (Surprisingly, no motorbikes; you bus or drive a car – if you're lucky enough to have a good job!)

We also view the National Palace, now the residence of the President Zalawi, as well as the headquarters of UN's Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Organization of African States (OAS). Lots of bureaucrats in Addis; the climate is perfect. Only Capetown could give it a run, but it's at the tip of Africa, and Addis is in the middle.

Evening was a musical blast. With friends of friends (introduced by Tony Schulte) we headed across the city for about 10 miles, out on the dirt highway, lined with storefronts and repair shops, with minimal living quarters behind, arriving ultimately at the Crown Hotel, not far from the airport. Here we experience our first Ethiopian dinner, “injera” (all meals are injera), no forks, spoons or knives. Injera is the national staple, the base of every meal. Spread out like a large thin grey pancake on a communal tray, the meal – sort of a beef or lamb stew without the vegetables – is dumped in the middle. You simply tear off a piece of injera with your right hand (NEVER the left – I think you know why) – and wrap it around a bit of the food, and stuff it all in your mouth.

(*Injera* is made from a highlands grass called *teff*).

Our first try at injera was not encouraging: the meat was largely gristle and muscle, maybe some bone, which I kept extracting from my mouth subtly and discarding in a nearby plant. One guidebook warned us: “Short-term visitors loathe it; longer term visitors usually loathe it – and go on loathing it You need to be very hungry five times running....” However, the DANCING!

Yes, it was the dancing that we came for, the famous Iskista. About six couples performed various tribal Iskista dances for well over an hour. Very strenuous. One’s shoulders quiver up and down, backwards and forwards, at a furious pace, while the hips and legs are kept motionless. The girls, who are bra-less, like all Ethiopians, quiver their upper bodies delightfully. Occasionally some would sing and shout, while a six-man orchestra filled the room with exciting sounds. Very stimulating. But impossible to dance. Just watching the amazing upper body muscles vibrating as if unattached to the body was a remarkable sight. Back in the safety of the hotel I tried it, but was so unsuccessful I wouldn’t even let Frank see my complete failure.

Unfortunately, we were too tired to go to a pub. Yes, they call them pubs. Mainly music and dancing, and foreigners are urged to dance. In fact, it is an insult to refuse to dance. Very friendly people, comfortable in their culture and traditions.

DAY THREE: JINKA Selishi Sherferaw, the best driver in Addis (Cheryl’s friend, cell 09242975) picks us up at five (a.m., that is). Selishi has lost his job, his wife, his parents – and will accept any driving assignment, even five a.m. We speed to the airport through “Confusion Square” where five boulevards come together without any stoplights. We are catching the early twice-a-week flight to Jinka in a 16-passenger Fokker. Beautiful farmlands, dry river beds, occasionally blessed with water, shades of green, blue, brown and tan, forests up the hillsides, some lakes (even though we’re now three months into the dry season), and rugged mountain craggy peaks. But no roads, perhaps some donkey trails. Breakfast on the plane: pound cake and a Sprite, standard plane food, which we were soon to supplement with the Power Bars we had brought.

We land in a meadow that is, essentially, the grassy mall of Jinka (pop: 15,000, elevation 5000). Twice a week the locals pour out to the meadow to watch the plane land and take off. Nothing else is so exciting in Jinka. The meadow is then taken over by grazing sheep, and a portion used as a soccer field. Andualem is there to greet us – and negotiate several days together, involving 4WD and driver and himself. A young, enterprising fellow, he goes by Andrew, and his email is andualemgebre@yahoo.com.

We arrive just in time for the Saturday market where a variety of local tribes are represented by their uniform dress (or undress). The Ari, Afer, Banno, Karo and Bodi, all of this Omo Valley region. Very basic, very poor. This is a weekly social occasion. Tribesmen who are scattered during the week can count on discussing community matters here on Saturday. There's more standing around conversing than negotiating and selling.

Smiles all around, especially women and children and young men. I routinely bow my head to the elderly (like myself) to establish mutuality, and the gesture is inevitably returned with a bow and kindly smile. All products are displayed in the dirt – no tables – mainly vegetables and firewood for cooking. Plenty of donkeys that carry in the wood. A week's worth: six cents.

The two hotels are on either side of the "airport". We're at the Orit and end up paying an outrageous \$10 a night for two. Private john and cold shower – at least when the water is on, usually an hour in the morning and evening. Electricity is problematical. But who cares? We're all in the same boat. And it's simple to go to the patio and have a beer or fanta – fanta orange drink everywhere – we probably drank a hundred.

The "hotel" was a row of about 10 rooms with a long veranda. Here we met Del Russell, a retired mortgage banker from Seattle, once with Bank of America, who discovered his retirement role in the Omo Valley. On his first trip there he noticed many harelip cases in the region. He decided to cure those children, arranged for two Norwegian surgeons from Cairo to come for a couple weeks to operate on these kids – and to train six local "surgeons". He raises about \$30,000 from friends every year, has hired a scout to find the kids and convince the parents, and comes here to administer (and witness) the results of his efforts. Such minor surgery, but so meaningful: now these girls can have a chance at marriage; now the boys will not be scorned and ostracized.

All the Orit's rooms were filled with these children and various parents, half with great white bandages under their noses, others awaiting surgery. In the evening on the patio the Orit would turn on the DVD: mostly American rap and pop, the kids in the front and adults from Jinka town standing in the back. Given all their weird dances, they probably relate well to ours. Meanwhile, we had finished our evening domino battle and I had taken a 2-0 lead.

We had also discovered that we didn't have to eat injera – actually we had no intention of trying to adjust – because readily available were good soups and pasta, plenty of spaghetti Bolognese. And a banana or orange. This became basic to our diet for the next three weeks. And oatmeal or omelet for breakfast. (Note: bring good reading lights and a “torch” (flashlight); there are no lights in a bedroom in any hotel adequate for reading.

DAY FOUR: TRIBES We wake to the sounds of birds and roosters and suffer through a cold but refreshing shower, rather necessary after yesterday's sweaty trip. Andualem and his assistant Miralu and our driver are ready to take us to the tribal villages of the Ari, Afer, the Borani and the Bana. We are about to enter a virtual Stone Age. Some say primal and savage, but somehow I think they'll be good folk. Famous last words!

We had decided not to visit the Mursi, one of the popular sights for tourists. These are the girls we called Ubangi when I was young – girls with their lower lips sliced open so that, through a year-long method of stretching the lip after puberty, large wooden plates can be inserted. All girls face this mutilation. The size of the lip plate determines the price of the bride. A large lip plate will bring 50 head of cattle. A heavy iron puberty apron also ups her price.

Speculation centers on the origins of the disfigurement custom but most agree: to make our women unattractive to slave traders so they won't be stolen. Today, lip plates advertise the cost of the bride. Actually, we didn't like the thought of the girls putting on their lip plates so that tourists could take photos of them – and, of course, pay them for the privilege. It was all too sad.

So we headed another direction in our 4WD, essential for all travel anywhere in Ethiopia except Addis itself. Toyota, of course – a pickup. We sit in the back on small bed mattresses placed on spare tires. The metal frame bars for a canvas cover in case of rain gives us something to hold on so we don't flip out of the vehicle when lurching along the so-called rural highway.

We bump along for a couple hours through arid, parched landscape, responding to the customary wave from every man, woman, child along the way – though there were not many of them. In six hours of driving this day, we saw two vehicles and one bus. For the tribal populace, a vehicle is a big event in their day, a chance to interact, if only with a wave and shout and smile, with *ferengi* (foreigners), for they often scream out *ferengi* or “you” or “one” (meaning one birr or 8 cents). (The Chinese for foreigner is *farang* – amazingly similar),

Little hovels of sticks and straw – “wattle” is the word. Soon we are in an Ari village. No central anything; just an extended family of huts with small corrals attached for their animals. And big cornfields where kids take turns sitting in a raised platform to terrify the birds who are eager to steal corn. The community pours out to greet us, young children totally naked, women bare-breasted with a dozen or more multi-

colored beaded necklaces, with a cowhide wraparound. While pitch black is the norm, some have decidedly lighter skins, indicating some mixing with the northerners over the centuries.

The small community has no store, no meetinghouse. The tribal leader's small compound has a circular home encompassed by circular fence of rough sticks six feet high, so that goats and cattle can squeeze in so they won't be stolen in the night). We ingratiate ourselves in the usual manner, bowing to the elders, playing with the kids -- and admiring the women. Next comes a walk through their corn fields with stalks barely five feet high, baking in the sun. A well produces subsistence water -- everything here is subsistence, living each day to get adequate food to survive. Yet all are wreathed in smiles -- we are the entertainment brought in from an outside world, which they have never seen, namely Jinka, a three-hours drive away.

Circling back by a different route we view the vast Omo Valley from a vantage point ... flat and desolate, with a high mountain ridge rising over the Omo River in the distance. The intrepid come to camp on the Omo, see tribes and animals, eat fish. Or go in luxury -- well, slightly more civilized -- stay at the German's tented retreat on the river. Next door is the Mago Park, filled with game. (The Kenya and Sudan borders are just 100 miles away).

Lunch at a small roadside café by the roadside where a Fanta and spaghetti were available, and some of the men wore pants. Then on to a Borani village, a cluster of sticks, straw and wattle with the usual enclosure for the animals, sort of a guest room in your house. With difficulty Frank and I backed and squeezed through a four-foot door into the blackness of "home".

The matriarch was squatting there on a goatskin, legs askew, tucking a rag over her crotch. Skins covered the floor where the entire family slept -- except the newlyweds who slept on a platform right on top of mom and dad for the first three months of married life. Mom is preparing coffee for us, or coffee hulls, I should say. The fire is lit, adding more soot to the blackened ceiling of home. She puts hulls on a large calabash, pours in water, and warms the concoction. Frank gets the first one, I the second. We politely pretend to do more than sip -- it's really quite bland -- but every coffee ceremony is important in this coffee-crazed nation. After all, it's been the major crop for millennia.

Mom is a character, so the episode is delightful. And dad comes in from the fields also, slurps down some coffee hull drink. Behind mom is the new daughter in law, a virtual slave. We know it's a "first wife" because she is entitled to have affixed around her neck a wooden and metal ring (almost an inch thick) with a three-inch handle sticking out her Adams apple. This proves that she is a "first wife". Men are entitled to as many wives as they can afford, but the first remain the most respected.

Back in Jinka in the late afternoon we visit the archeological museum on the hilltop over the town. Here an attractive young German woman is devoting her life to study

of the tribes, learning the languages and collecting pieces for her museum. One has to admire her dedication – sitting in a research museum in Germany would simply be too frustrating. One has to be out there where the action is. We all understand that.

New harelip surgery cases on the doorsteps. New candidates for surgery in from the Omo. Del Russell in his Somerset Maugham hat and white beard sits with me outside our tiny room. There is no water anyway. Perhaps after dinner or in the morning. There is no electricity, but the Orit – wonders of wonders – actually has a generator, probably so they can show their DVDs until 9:00. Then all shuts down. Frank gets lucky at dominos. It's now 2-2. Natives are always fascinated by dominos. It's such an easy game to understand. They politely stand around us, nodding admiringly when one of us wins a good multiple of five.

Andualem and Miralu are a wealth of information on the country. Both are young entrepreneurs who don't see themselves as guides for long. The tourist potential in the Omo area is vast. Miralu earned a business degree from Bahar Dar University on Lake Tana; Andualem (or "Andrew") is the promoter. They are close to the manager of the Orit Hotel, and are miles ahead of anyone else in Jinka because of their ability to use the local Internet café. It was my email to the Orit (most hotels don't have an email address) that produced Andualem. These emails can be picked up at the local Internet café. Of course there is only one. What the young men dream of is their own computer which they see as the tool to lift them to a new level of success.

DAY FIVE: TRIBES Off early for a four-hour ordeal to get to the famous Hamar people and the Turmi village Tuesday market. We are plunging into the Lower Omo, to what is described in a guidebook as Africa's "true wilderness ... the country of the Hamar is a lost world enclosed by Abyssinian mountains 13,000 feet high, by the Sudan's impenetrable Nile swamps, and by the desolate barrens of the Ethio-Kenya borderlands. Forgotten by history, the Lower Omo Valley forms the approximate center of this remote zone. Here, side by side with the Hamar, a number of small bands of pastoralists and subsistence farmers coexist with groups of hunter-gatherers in a state of wild, almost primordial innocence...."

All efforts to fit the various tribes of this region into neat ethnic and linguistic categories seem doomed to failure ... Stated simply, one cannot assume that relatives are also friends. The Mursi, for example, are often at war with their kin and neighbors, the Bodi, and permanently at war with the Hamar ... Sometimes the Mursi and the Bodi make peace in order to fight the Hamar together, and are frequently at war with their cousins the Karo. Meanwhile the Bumi fight the Hamar *and* the Karo and also hit the Surma whenever they can.

With trepidation, we agreed to spend the night there also. Generally barren land, occasional streams of living water, stuck once in loose sand of a riverbed – even the 4WD couldn't handle it, but happily a band of warriors was resting under the one big

tree for miles around. They weren't anxious to help; I suspect they were delighted that we were stuck. But when Frank and I (and Anduaem and Miralu) got out to push – and teach the driver how to handle such situations – the warriors were impressed and became eager to help.

Turmi is a real town, meaning its dusty center main strip is indeed there to accommodate a small plane should it be necessary, though there was no evidence that a plane had been there in years. About six blocks long (though there are no “blocks”), straw huts and wooden houses, some with corrugated roofs (the sign of affluence), and *High Noon* streets.

Everyone who is anybody is in the market, a sea of pitch-black bodies, all ages. The market is here because there are three small shade trees, the only shade trees in Turmi. There are no tables or stands or anything. Women spread out their produce on cloth or skins on the ground, small (but tasty looking) new potatoes, various beans, peppers and a few green veggies. Plus re-worked metal products (locks, etc) and calabashes – and probably much more.

The people were fascinating: men in brightly colored robes, fashioned to the ankle on the right, but slit up to the thigh. Or dressed only in a loin wrap. Young girls and women show it all off: proudly-displayed sagging breasts on the elderly, to early pubescence on the girls. Hair bowl-shaped but not long, half with black corn curls, half with well-oiled, red-orange corn curls, dripping with jewelry: heavy ankle bands (several layers), forearms totally covered with one or two dozen bracelets, upper arms banded, a dozen or so beaded necklaces, and with a goatskin wraparound. Colorful headbands are also common, and bandoleers made of white shells, and colorful cloth waist belts holding the goatskins in place....

These tribes seem to lack any form of material culture, but they do inhabit a rich symbolic universe. Symbolism is everything: the scars, hair feathers, topknots, jewelry, paintings on face, arms or legs, even certain items of clothing – all convey significant and unambiguous messages. Alas, we don't get the message, but are intrigued.

Many men have rifles and/or knives. Supposedly to hunt game. But given the degree of warfare – the few police posts seem ineffective – one suspects war. Just look at the scars on the men, displayed with pride, since such injuries bear witness to the dastardly attacks that they have survived and the courageous raids in which they have participated. Others have patterned scarification ... Horseshoe-shaped incisions on the upper arm represent successful murders ... on the right arm for a male victim and the left arm for a female. Anduaem says that homicide used to be so frequent that the more successful warriors run out of room on their arms.

While a rule of law has brought cultural changes in most of Ethiopia, the honor of the warriors of certain tribes, like the Borani, continues to be bound up with the killing of other men. While not pleasant to contemplate, if a homicide takes place and there is

no witness to testify to the death, then the killer must hack off the penis and testicles of the victim and carry them back to the village ... proof positive. If you don't participate in a raid – the objective is to kill – or at the very least to murder a hapless passerby – then you are unlikely to be welcomed as a husband by any potential bride or to be seen as a suitable son-in-law. On the other hand, a killer is given gifts of cattle, lavished with sexual favors, and allowed to wear special earrings, necklaces and ivory armbands ... badges of honor, of rank ... and the right to grow a male hair tuft which will instantly turn him into the darling of every eligible girl. Ah, tradition. It's all so simple there!

Andualem says that inside the tribes there is peace and harmony. But the young warriors still stage single-combat sports to test strength and masculinity, earn the honor of their peers and win the hands of girls in marriage. I picture these young men dueling ... surrounded by cheering spectators, each covered in protective padded clothing (like 1890s football players) ... armed with a pole, carved into a phallus at the tip. Often as many as 50 males will compete, with the winner of each bout going on the face another winner. Eventually only two are left, and that champ is carried on a platform of poles to a group of girls ... Needless to say, he gets the best ... but only one!

The prevalence of rifles is surprising. Even old ones are expensive. (The Addis market had Kalashnikovs). We were told that men need them to hunt game for food. But they are so poor. But here in the Lower Omo they may need them for protection. Spears, although we saw them frequently, seem almost passé.

Superstitions? Among the more horrifying is the belief that twins, and a child born out of wedlock, are considered to possess evil, and therefore are thrown into the forest to die. Hamar parents would rather lose a child (or two) rather than risk a crop failure or drought, or ill health in the family. Where are the shamans when we need them?

One distasteful custom in Ethiopia is the open palm for money (perhaps an eight-cent note) for a photograph, or a two-cent or four cent coin. I prefer to snap photos so the subject never knows – and when caught, it usually produces laughter from the subject's friends that she has been snapped. Often it is children who get a kick out of my deception.

Our "hotel" is interesting. A row of about six rooms on the right, and the all-purpose meeting room – bar – dining room, and on the left, an open air but roofed area lined with broad wooden benches and low tables (like a bar), with thatched roof. This is where the townsmen meet, women also, to update each other, to have a few laughs (and beers). It's odd to see these naked women and warriors mixing with us in such an environment. So nonchalant.

Our little room has beds and mosquito nets. I don't know what our guide paid, but such hotels are listed at the \$1 a night level. No electricity. No water. Pee outside in the night. A barrel on stilts for a trickle shower, and a communal squat john which

you wouldn't want to visit in the night with a flashlight – or anytime. To wash your hands, there was an old “drinking water dispenser” (remember?) which was controlled to provide just enough to dampen your hands and then to wash off a bit of soap. Take your hand off the dispenser, the water stops. But as I always say, Frank and I stay at the best hotels everywhere, and this was the best. Fanta, beer and spaghetti also, and the usual omelet in the morning.

DAY SIX: KONSO Off to Konso and Arba Minch, a long day's drive on the usual dirt and rocks and bumps. Konso is a kind of frontier town, the gateway to the Omo Valley, with a distinct appearance and culture. Nearing Konso the earth turns red, the mountains rise up, likewise the terraces, stone terraces, built and rebuilt over the centuries, mainly for wheat, barley, oats and corn. The villages or family clusters, usually on hilltops (for security), are surrounded by stonewalls. The houses can be entered only on hands and knees via a wooden tunnel, a perfect defense against foes.

There's plenty of stone all over Ethiopia, so much that is impossible to clear the farmland completely when building the stone terraces. Homes are built of stone in this area, with thatched or corrugated roofs. Electricity arrived in Konso last year, and also a bank and small “supermarket,” so the populace is being dragged rapidly into the 21st century – well, the 19th anyway.

Konso culture claims one distinction: when “warriors” die, they are honored with the erection of a series of carved wooden sculptures, the Konso *waga*. Arriving on the outskirts we stop at a farmhouse to view the line of *waga*, weathered grey. Placed on either side of these four-foot figures are several of the man's wives, so that he is not without all variety of service in the next life. The wives are identifiable by necklaces and breasts, while there is no dearth of phallic symbols on the man.

The sculptures are placed in a line, virtually joined at the hip. We saw many more during our afternoon in Konso's surrounding villages, but *waga* erection is dying out, a victim of theft. Diplomats and tourists in Addis will pay \$200-\$300 for a *waga*. Thieves will not ignore *waga* lined up in front of someone's home. Further, the church frowns on ancestor worship.

Eight miles outside of Konso, on a high ridgeline, we visit the residential school Machekie. Tree-covered and cool, with a “teachers' compound”, open-air meeting rooms, ancestor-worship (called “generation square”), all thatched huts surrounded by six-foot stonewalls, narrow stone walkways. And the Church. We were impressed with our student guides, 10-12 and fluent in English – and very proud of their school. “We're all Christians”. Very knowledgeable on world affairs. Truly a distinctive institution.

Here they also play soccer. But one rarely sees any sports in Ethiopia. Energy goes into agriculture or the communal markets. With one exception: running. They will continue to produce Olympic winners, training from childhood in such a high altitude.

It is January 18, the eve of Epiphany, the most important days of the year (along with Easter). As in every Ethiopian town, the Ark (every church has an ark, a “replica” of the original ark that was brought to Ethiopia by Menelik, son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, when Jerusalem was about to be sacked. (More on this later).

On the afternoon of the 18th a large procession forms, many thousands – or in Addis, hundreds of thousands – to accompany the carrying of the ark to a hilltop where it will remain overnight as the throng dances and shouts and chants well into the night. At dawn, many are re-baptized and by mid-morning the ark is taken back to the church amid more very noisy celebrating. All men and women are dressed in white robes and scarves or turbans, with the elite in bold embroidered robes of red, blue, yellow or green, carrying very large umbrellas, also multi-colored.

Our vehicle is not allowed to pass the procession, so for 90 minutes we join the throng and walk about a mile. This was our first exposure to the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (not “Coptic,” who are predominantly in Egypt and elsewhere) and which has such a prime presence in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (where Frank and I were on Easter Sunday weekend in 2001).

Another two hours and we’re in Arba Minch, and on a paved road for the last mile to the Bekele Mola Hotel overlooking the two great lakes of the region and the tiers of mountain ranges. A beautiful location. And a far better room – all the amenities – for about \$30, including three meals for both of us. We say warm farewells and God-speed to Andualem and Miralu and the driver. These drivers really earn their pay on the horrible roads ... they have to be mechanics also.

Tonight we have soup, fresh fish and fruit – and a bottle of Ethiopia’s best wine for export, Gouder Red, which I had sampled on the plane coming over. Not bad. And the price in Arba Minch is right: \$4 a bottle. Frank is on a roll. He leads in dominos 5-3.

DAY SEVEN: EPIPHANY (January 19). With our new guide, Gish, we taxi to the central stadium and playing fields where thousands have gathered to prepare for the procession up main street to the St. Gabriella Cathedral. All are in white robes with turbans or scarves. The Ark has been secure in a tent overnight. By noon it will be returned to the cathedral, a half mile away.

The bishops in rich robes and sheltered by large multi-colored umbrellas are speaking on bullhorns to the crowd. Occasionally the women burst forth with the “Arab trill”. Dancing in sequence are groups of a dozen men and of women, each in uniform robes of green, yellow, red or blue, with contrasting color crosses displayed on their chests. These “uniforms” represent each of the eight Orthodox churches in Arba Minch. Large colorful ceremonial drums are booming a heavy beat, clusters of men are dancing and chanting, almost as if in a trance, swaying gracefully. Many in the crowd have umbrellas to shield themselves from the sun. It is a photographer’s heaven – so colorful.

Soon the procession starts up main street, about 15 abreast, chanting, singing, dancing in clusters of about 20 men or 20 women. In the middle are the bishops with the ark covered in layers of gold cloth. Only the holy men with the ark are allowed inside the cathedral -- thousands outside, chanting and dancing. Under a shade tree is a large poster of Mary, or Maryam as they call her, and of Jesus. Carpets cover the ground. Women passing by kneel, kiss the carpet, and leave a donation, usually about \$1 – a very big donation in this country with a per capita annual income of less than \$200. Several high priest types are sitting on chairs and offer one for me – respect for the elderly, or sympathy for the infirm. I gratefully accept. It's a marvelous show.

DAY EIGHT: CHENCHA, DORZE Five thousand feet above Arba Minch lies Chenchu and the villages of the Dorze people. It's a miserable road, but, in addition to the gibbons, there is entertainment. Boys and girls dance solo in the road, hoping that we will toss a birr note (8 cents). Some boys are break-dancing, twirling on the hands, the girls hula-hooping without the hoops. The air cools rapidly. The view looking down on Arba Minch, the lakes and mountain ranges, is panoramic.

Gish is not himself. Returning home he discovered that his younger brother, 14, had been hit by a car and had his leg broken. The hospital wouldn't set the leg unless the family came up with about \$200. Home they went. Mother tries to set the leg herself, with son screaming. Unsuccessful. Says Gish: "If you're poor in this country there is no hope." Unforgettable words. Upon returning from the trip I am about to describe, we suggest to Gish that he take us to his brother and mother in order to see if there was anything we could do. Our thought was: why not pay the \$200. But of course we wanted proof that the whole story wasn't a fabrication, although Gish seemed like a genuine Christian soul.

After two hours of driving up the mountain we enter Chenchu. The area produces Ethiopia's best-woven cotton. Traditionally the men weave and the women spin. Beautiful shawls and scarves are displayed on the roadside. Brilliant colors. And hats also. The Dorze wear small derby-type hats, usually bright red or orange.

Soon we are in a Dorze village, a cluster of large beehive homes. Most are 40 feet high with a central tree trunk holding it all up, and can last up to 60 years. Inasmuch as all the cooking is done inside, you can imagine how much soot coats the upper reaches. Inside some family members are permitted a semi-private area in which to sleep. And the indoor corral for the cattle and goats is separated from the living/dining room by a bamboo sheathing divider. There is an amazing amount of living space in these homes, not to mention the vaulted ceiling of the beehive.

This is January 20, a day after Epiphany, but the Dorze and Chenchans have stretched out the religious celebrations for a third day. All the townspeople gather on the slopes of a grassy knoll. Yesterday the ark was taken from the hilltop church and carried to a white tent 200 yards away. This afternoon it will be returned to the church with due pomp. Warming up the crowd are horse races up and down the

greensward, the horses dolled up in multi-colored blankets and headgear. Very small horses.

DAY NINE: NECHISAR PARK, CROCODILES, HIPPOS It's debatable whether Nechisar is worth the agony of a 90-minute bone-shaking ride up the mountain to the savannah plain. Having spent a sweats-and-chills night from my malaria pill, I was granted a seat with the driver. Frank and the others were standing in the back, holding on to the canvas frame as we rocked and rolled over a rock-and-boulder rutted trail. And what was there when we reached the savannah plateau: a bunch of zebras and kudu and a few other creatures. But not much. On the other hand, the views were extraordinarily beautiful – stretching beyond the savannah to the blue-green tiers of mountain ranges, and to the right, down to the lake 1000 feet below, where giant crocs lounged on the beaches. In retrospect, I'm glad we did it; Frank would dissent on this. Unfair, perhaps: I was comfy in the front seat with a hotel pillow.

On the way back we stop at an Army Camp and share some canned fish and bread with them. Sixty soldiers are guarding the game park. Judging from the scarcity of animals it's evident that they are not taking their job seriously.

In the afternoon, after another five-mile-an-hour ride, we boarded a small put-put boat to cruise the crocodile beaches. Acclaimed to be the largest in Africa, we had no doubt. Giants, many with their mouths open. On one peninsula beach a flock of 60 pelicans claimed territory all-too-close to the monsters. And further on were clusters of hippos. Again, the scenery behind the creatures was spectacularly beautiful. The only downer was the regulation which prevented us from getting as close as we would have wanted to the featured attractions.

Again, the sunset hour on the deck of the Bekele Mola was sheer delight. A monster vehicle – just picture a Hummer magnified tenfold – dominated the parking lot. It had enormous tires, which raised the base of the monster five feet off the ground. Truly an all-terrain vehicle and perhaps able to withstand suicide bombers to boot. Before dinner things don't go well at the domino table: Frank is now ahead 6-3.

DAY 10: ADDIS After a two-hour flight back to Addis, Selishi was there to take us to the Ghion Hotel. We didn't have to go far for afternoon entertainment: it was wedding season. Seems that the Saturday after Epiphany, and Easter as well, are the most popular times to get married. And the park below the Ghion had 12 weddings scheduled.

Tall shade trees, rows of palms, fountains, gardens, 10' hedges – it all made for an appealing setting, especially when the wedding parties arrived, bridesmaids in shades of lavender, pink, saffron, etc. There were generally six to ten bridesmaids, matched by “ushers” in black tie. Brides were in white western dresses, as in virtually every country of the world. Drums booming. Pounding music. Bridesmaids dancing ritualistically. Then the men. Women trilling. Priests chanting. Little flower girls

in fancy white dresses with puffed shoulders. The ushers form a circle, shouting ritual chants – and hopping counter clockwise on their left foot in unison. Good fun. Probably an adaptation from tribal campfires.

Wedding photos are taken at the central fountain. Soon it is time to leave. The get away limos or cars, all tan or white are lined up in the parking lot, lavishly decorated with fake flowers. Another wedding party is forming across the park. And, look, even the subsequent bride has already arrived. One bride is twice the size of her groom; he looks depressed. Probably a reverse arranged marriage. Good show. Kindly, courteous people, happy, or at least gracious, about having an intruder in their midst.

Our evening is spent with CNN and BBC, the first news we'd had in a week, apart from some VOA and BBC on my shortwave radio.

DAY 11-12: LALIBELA Up at 4:30 so that Selishi can get us to the airport for the early flight to historic Lalibela and the “rock-hewn churches.” The landscape is pitiless: desolate mountain valleys, eaten out of the flat plateau, occasionally a little water and green. A major tourist attraction, Lalibela has a paved road into town, although it passes by small straw-and-bamboo huts without the usual wealth of livestock that increases the chances of survival in this harsh country.

With us in the airport van are three Ethiopian girls who escaped to the U.S. and are all in California colleges. Their dad gave them a trip home. “It’s so beautiful, I really miss it” she says, looking at the straw huts, barren dirt, baked clay. I thought: “Be it ever so humble.....”

Lalibela (pop. 9000, 8200-feet) is only 120 miles from Addis, but it is a two-day journey by road. In fact it simply wasn't available to tourists until 1960. And don't even think about going in the rainy season: the road is frequently closed. That gives you some idea of Ethiopia's transportation nightmare. One guidebook: “The journey overland is long and arduous ... the sense of arrival at the little town is rather like that after making a great pilgrimage....which is fitting, because Lalibela *is* the center of pilgrimage....among the dimly lit passageways and tunnels of the medieval churches, robed priests and monks still float, from hidden crypts and grottoes comes the sound of chanting, and in the deep cool recesses of the interiors, the smell of incense and beeswax candles still pervades.... Lalibela undoubtedly ranks among the greatest religious sites, not only on the African continent, but in the Christian world....”

It was once the thriving capital of a medieval dynasty founded in the 12th century by King Lalibela who had a vision that he should create churches the like of which the world had never seen. One legend says that the master plan came to him from the Almighty himself. Another legend that he visited Jerusalem and vowed that upon his return he would build a new holy city when he returned to his kingdom.

The plan: carve these churches out of the solid rock. The result: the famous rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. Carved into the rock, but freed entirely from it. Freestanding rock-hewn churches with walls, passageways, tunnels, rooms – all carved in the 12th and 13th centuries.

During construction, first a large area was selected. Trenches were then cut on all four sides until a solid rock remained in the center. Out of this center block the rooms and hallways were carved. Fortunately, the relatively soft red volcanic rock was quite conducive to hewing. Scholars estimate the workforce at 40,000. Long a victim of “it can’t be African” chauvinism, Lalibela actually represents the pinnacle of a very longstanding Ethiopian building tradition, going back to the Axum Empire.

It is so difficult to describe these remarkable complexes. The Northern Group, comprised of seven churches, named “Jerusalem,” They lie almost completely underground concealed within deep trenches. The Eastern Group, with four churches, was named “Bethlehem.” Why? The great Muslim leader, Saladin, had just defeated the Crusaders and destroyed Jerusalem. Where would Christian pilgrims go? Well, why not to the new Jerusalem and Bethlehem in Ethiopia. History tells us that an enormous number of pilgrims did come – to Axum, to Lalibela. Usually they came to die, like Hindus in Varanasi.

In the Northern Group the churches are connected by a complicated network of tunnels and narrow passageways with offset crypts, grottos, galleries – all in a cool, shaded, subterranean world. In the interiors are holy rooms and holy men, priests and monks who are pleased to pose for photos, knowing that donations will follow. Frescoes grace some walls. At Bet Maryam there is a “fertility pool” and a baptism pool.

Twenty-five miles out of town, and at 9400 feet, is Kristos, the most interesting church outside of Lalibela. The trip provided a lesson in road building. First, boulders have to be broken down by sledgehammer. They are then loaded by hand on a truck, which deposits them in piles along the roadside. Now the road crew can start placing them, stone by stone, on the highway-to-be. Eventually sand and black top will be provided. Lalibela will then have another paved road to supplement the airport run. Most of the town is a mass of dirt alleys and a non-descript mess of round thatched huts and stone homes. Eye-catching was the “Unique” restaurant sign on a falling-down hovel across from the Asheton Hotel.

Actually the road to Kristos was beautiful – ALL of mountainous, high-plateau Ethiopia is beautiful, with vast sweeps of terraces climbing the hills, remote hillside villages (clusters of rondavals). To reach Kristos we walk up a rocky trail to find the enormous cave that holds one of Lalibela’s freestanding churches, tucked under the overhang. The tomb of King Lalibela is here also, covered in rich red and gold embroidery. The rear of the cave is all human bones, bones of pilgrims who chose to be buried here. An ancient wooden casket is visible, carved out of a tree trunk, with a

full skeleton inside. Through history, countless holy men made the journey to Lalibela's "Jerusalem," just as Muslims go to Mecca.

Before entering we engage in diplomatic ritual with the Archbishop who wears white robes with gold and purple shawls. With warmth he praises the USA, and I comment respectfully on how new a nation we are compared to Ethiopia's 3000 years. He adds a plea for a substantial contribution to improve the last few miles of the little dirt road access to Kristos. Most tourists (80% plus) never get here, but would if the approach were not so horrendous. He names an amount, which translates into \$120,000.

Kristos is a modern version of Axum architecture. King Kristos built it in the 11th century. Decorated with whitewashed marble panels, the whole church sits on a foundation of carefully laid olivewood beams that float it perfectly above the ground. Only priests and bishops can enter the church, and women may not enter the cave at all. The archbishop lives in a loose stone circular home outside the cave, with a support group of monks. Tips from tourists keep them going.

On these rocky mountain trails – and on the precarious steps of the rock-hewn churches – I have used my foldout cane. This is easily spotted by those who would like to help my every step, up or down, meaning "Ah, a tip opportunity." Any gesture of assistance requires a tip. Providing information requires a tip. Frank and I carry plenty of one and ten birr notes for these occasions (10 cents and \$1 dollar), the latter for guides that have taken us through historic buildings and such.

The next day we walked the Eastern Group of Churches, four of them. Bet Amanuel was especially beautiful, the Royal Family's private chapel. Another, Bet Merkorios, is believed to have actually been a prison and then converted to a church. On its walls are frescoes of the three wise men and of the Twelve Apostles. Bet Libanos has beautiful friezes, and a tunnel to the tiny chapel of Bet Lehem (Bethlehem). And finally Bet Gabriel, believed to be the residence of the royal family, with its three halls and two courtyards. Another tunnel leads to the so-called Arogi Bethlehem, a bakery for making the holy bread. Remember, ALL these structures are carved out of solid rock hills. That's what makes them so special.

Back in Konso and in Arba Minch we participated in Epiphany celebrations. Here in the northern historic Christian towns the churches testify to the power and spirit of the archaic Christian faith, which, here, 1600 years later retains its hold on hearts and minds with undiminished vigor. The perfect time to visit – if you make reservations at least six months in advance – is Epiphany (Jan. 18-19), and choose Lalibela or Gondar. (For beauty, the best time to visit is October, after the rainy season, when the country is green, the terraces that grace the mountains are luxuriant and wildflowers are luxuriant.

In all these Christian towns worshippers attend services that occur at dawn, before working in the fields. I think of our evangelicals and especially the Black churches: the rhythmical music with drums and tambourines, the inspiring chant of the deacons,

members of the congregation giving thanks or calling out for the mercy of God. Here in Lalibela it's easy to add the cold dark walls, the stone floor, the silhouettes of people standing, leaning on prayer sticks or bowing down in obeisance – all these sights, sounds and sensations seem to constitute an unbroken link with the past – like 17 centuries! It helps us understand how powerful the original Christianity must have been, how it inspired the imagination of millions.

For Christmas (January 9) and Epiphany (January 19) the church's role as a place of active worship becomes vivid. Even in the hardest of times, tens of thousands pilgrims gather here in Lalibela. They walk for days, months even, from far-off hamlets in inaccessible valleys. They just have to be here. Or in Gondar, or the other centers of Christian life.

Epiphany rituals commemorate St. John's baptism of Christ in the waters of the Jordan – Lalibela, too, has a river named Jordan. First, on January 18, the ark, the holy *tabots* of the rock-hewn churches are brought out and carried in procession to the banks of the Jordan. These engraved slabs of stone or wood represent the tablets given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and are contained in an Ark, as in Ark of the Covenant. No other Christian Church worldwide gives such importance to what is a pre-Christian – indeed a Judaic – tradition.

Christianity did not itself reach Ethiopia until the fourth century, some 1300 years after Solomon's rule in Israel. Therefore, there must have been a period when there were very close cultural and religious ties between Ethiopia (Abyssinia) and the Holy Land. Could it be true that the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba – that they hooked up – and that Menelik, the son that resulted, did indeed become the first King of Ethiopia in the 9th century BC. Certainly the people there believe it.

Completing our Eastern Group (Bethlehem) tour, we join humanity, savor a fanta, mix with children in rags, engage in conversation for 10-13 year olds (amazing English competence). In high school everyone gets a foundation in English, and University level medicine and engineering are taught in English. Tagging along with us was a 14-year old gal, Tesita, alone in the world, the kind you just want to hug. The boys her age obviously have grouped together to protect her. But what a hard life., and very uncertain future. Returning to the Roha Hotel we see a large sign at a primary intersection: "Save Our Holy Land". Really grabs you. Such gentle people ... they deserve better.

Very rarely did we see anyone smoking. Never saw a pack. But we did see cigarettes being rolled. Far cheaper to buy some tobacco and roll you own. But even so, it appears to be an almost smoke-free country!

DAY 13-14-15: AXUM & DEBRA DAMO One hour to Axum (ak-ZOOM), once the capital of the greatest Ethiopian Empire, now a sprawling, dusty town of 30,000 at 7000 feet. On first sight it's difficult to imagine Axum as the site of a great

civilization, with the splendor of its palaces, underground tombs, and stelae. Today it is estimated that only 5% of the archeological digs have been uncovered.

The first written records of Ethiopia (Persian and Egyptian) date back 4500 years.... The Pharaohs started obtaining frankincense and myrrh from Ethiopia in 2700 BC.... also vast quantities of ivory ... Shortly after David's reign in Israel in the Ninth Century BC the kingdom was founded in Axum, and for the next 1300 years Axum dominated the trade routes between Africa and Asia. Axum was one of the greatest states of the ancient world.

Axum's is also the supposed capital of the Queen of Sheba ... from here she set out on her legendary visit to the court of Solomon in Jerusalem. Yemen is certain that Sheba's capital city was Marib, 100 miles east of Sanaa near the Saudi border. I visited there in 1995 and thoroughly accepted the Yemeni story: Sheba and 4000 camels carrying all her wealth headed up the Arabian peninsula to Solomon, where maybe she had an affair with the top guy. .

The legend of Solomon and Sheba has great appeal. The earliest known version is preserved in the Old Testament. Here we are told that the Queen, lured by Solomon's fame, journeyed to Jerusalem with a great caravan of costly presents and there "communed with him of all that was in her heart." King Solomon "gave to the Queen of Sheba all her desire" ... The New Testament refers to her as "the Queen of the South", which also hints at Ethiopia. The Koran has a fairly detailed account. So do Arabic and Persian folk tales. The most convincing tale is the Ethiopian claim.

Regardless, one thing is sure: Ethiopian veneration of Sheba. As an historical figure, she is thought to have lived between 1000 and 950 BC. The evidence is extremely strong that her capital was indeed in Abyssinia (Ethiopia). When "their" son Menelik grew up, he went to visit his father, King Solomon, who received him with great honor and splendor. Menelik's departure a year later was hardly polite: he and his young gang stole the Ark of the Covenant and took it with them to Ethiopia, which, now became known as "the second Zion."

The notion that the Ark was removed from Jerusalem to Axum is central to the reverence accorded to the *tabots*, the Tablets of the Law, in Ethiopia's Christian ceremonies. Since Christianity didn't reach Ethiopia until 1300 years later, it seems certain that there existed very close cultural and religious links between Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and the Holy Land.

Now, a little history lesson: the best story of Ethiopia's conversion to Christianity was written by a fourth century Byzantine theologian – how a respected merchant brought two Syrian lads to Axum, one of whom (Frumentius) grew up to be a potent missionary. Frumentius, who recruited Christian traders and evangelists, traveled to Alexandria to obtain the blessings of the Patriarch who in turn gave Frumentius the title of Bishop. Returning to Axum, Frumentius was able to convert the Emperor. During the following four centuries Christianity flourished.

This was the golden age, before Mohammed. Actually Mohammed's 7th century injunction to his followers was "Leave the Abyssinians in peace." But the Muslims did take over the seaports, and in doing so rolled back the frontiers of what had been the most important secular power between Rome and Persia. So they retreated into the mountain regions, were able to protect themselves, though cut off from the evolving mainstream of Christian thought. Axum never fully recovered from the isolation caused by the Muslims.

Our home in Axum for the first day was the Remhai Hotel, which gave us access to a community swimming pool next door (good 70 degree water, the only pool we ever saw) and a community gathering spot that showed movies. The point is: we never saw a movie theater in the entire country. TV and DVD's will change this, but slowly.

The next day we switched to the local Ghion hotel, the Yeha, because it had a good view over the historic areas. In all four cities and in Addis we stayed in a Ghion – always the best hotel in town, \$40 to \$50. We also wanted to use credit cards, and the Ghion chain just started accepting them. No other hotel or restaurant or airline will accept credit cards. Yes, they have a long way to go. Further, you can't change dollars into birr anywhere. You have to find a local branch of the Bank of Ethiopia and start filling our forms. One fills up on birr in Addis. Guides and 4WD can be paid in dollars. An average day for hotel and food, local guides and incidentals costs under \$100. However, vehicles, drivers and requisite guides are costly; they can add \$100 or more to the basic cost of hotel and food.

One needs a strong imagination to picture the glories of Axum. The "ruins" are indeed ruins -- temples, fortresses, palaces – and even the stele are mostly destroyed. More than 2000 years old, these stele reach as high as 100 feet, but most are lying on the ground. The Christians did the dirty deed – this form of ancestor worship didn't fit the Bible. The stelae are clustered on a meadow in the center of town, perhaps 200 by 50 yards. One was meant to lie on its side: a 30-foot stone ship carrying the Ark to Ethiopia.

A little research reveals that stelae, or monoliths, were used in northeast Africa for 5000 years, a kind of tombstone-and-monument for local rulers. It is said that Axum's stelae are like great billboards, announcing to the world the authority and power of the ruling families. Axum's are noted for their huge size and pristine condition. Sculpted from a single piece of granite to look like skyscrapers rather than obelisks. The biggest imitate multi-story buildings, with little windows, doors and even door handles or locks.

The biggest, the Great Stele, is over 100 feet, though now lying on its side and broken, just as it fell 1600 years ago, "a permanent reminder of the defeat of paganism by Christianity." Yes, when the Christians took over they viewed these monuments as pagan worship and proceeded to try to destroy them. The Great Stele

is believed to be the largest single block of stone that humans have ever attempted to erect, and (according to a guide book) “overshadows even the Egyptian obelisks in its conception and ambition.”

First we stop at the modest Archeological Museum (most everything is still underground) where a congenial curator shows us a few breathtaking items being displayed under a 10 watt bulb, including a small clay figures of two oxen tethered to a yoke that is 3000 years old. Read it again, 3000 years! Outside on a hillside the wealthy farmer today may have oxen tethered to a yoke. Next, we visit King Kaleb’s tomb a mile outside of town, and also King Gebre Meskel. A rather important chap, Kaleb was able to bring all Southern Arabia under Aksumite rule in the Sixth Century. It is estimated that hundreds of elephants were used to move the blocks of stone. A steep stairway leads us into the interior, constructed with massive (15 foot) ceiling stones, with all slabs fitted perfectly against one another, staggered for protection from earthquakes.

The Queen of Sheba’s Bath is not a bath at all. It is the local reservoir. And what a show. Almost all day and with intensity in the late afternoon, the women of Axum come to fill up five gallon plastic cans and carry them back home. Before gaining entrée to the reservoir, the women kiss the wall or gate of the church next door, presumably a daily gesture of thanks for the water. This is not drinking water. The reservoir is covered with green scum. Ladies of all ages are trudging home, long distances, with what must weigh 50 pounds. The fortunate ones bring a donkey; they can carry about four cans. It’s a colorful scene, and is just down the driveway from our Yeha Hotel on the hilltop.

Good hotel. But no water. Actually I walked up the hill behind our hotel to the water tank that provides the entire town. Seems the pump broke down. The air is wonderful: blue skies, cool evenings and pleasant days (60-70).

Directly down the hill from the hotel is a church complex. First, the new St. Mary of Zion, built by Haile Selassie, is dreadful. It somewhat resembles public swimming baths. However, the priest-in-charge removed six layers of cloth protecting a 600-year-old Bible. It wasn’t the text that was important – most of the people couldn’t read – but the paintings were. The entire Bible is portrayed in paintings on goatskin, the lower right corner brown from the thousands of fingers that have turned the pages. Like all Ethiopian paintings, the colors flash from the pages, bright, strong contrast. It is truly absorbing to leisurely go through these precious works of religious art.

Next door is a small off-limits chapel, securely guarded, that is said to contain the famous Ark of the Covenant. Needless to say, no one is permitted inside. Here also is a little museum. While officially closed, the attendant brings out a collection of crowns worn by various emperors, and various other historic paraphernalia. It should be noted that women are not permitted in the chapel or museum. Too great a risk of contamination.

On the east side of the stelae field is the St. Gabriel church, a new structure which a local cripple showed me. At age 10 he had fallen on his hip and somehow paralyzed his leg. A few years ago, when 18, a western surgeon attempted to revive the leg, but no success. So he continues on crutches, dragging along his shriveled leg and half-foot. His English is fluent, but how can he beat out the more nimble guides to capture a customer? Only by targeting a solo target who likes to explore: me. He becomes my expert on the stelae, and the church next door, where he and the priest uncovered all the wall paintings. It is important to understand the role of painting. All churches are circular. The outside wall has paintings all around. The interior usually has paintings. The ceilings also. It makes for a colorful setting. Ethiopians like bright colors in their clothing and in their art.

The cripple makes a tasteful attempt to sell me something, which I totally resist. But he sizes me up and pulls out a very small bronze of the ark with paintings on four sides and a cross on the top. It is difficult to describe, but at only three inches high, easy to stick in my pocket. And he promised me it was more than 100 years old. No doubt I overpaid him, but on purpose. He was so wonderful. And so informative.

Debra Damo Today is an adventure. We head east about 20 miles on the usual dirt roads to Adwa. This is a famous spot. In 1896 in the hills around Adwa the Ethiopian army, led by Emperor Menelik II, inflicted the first defeat ever on a colonial army in Africa. Of course it was the Italian army. But the country was saved from colonization when all the rest of Africa wasn't. The consequences were enormous. Europe was stunned. Italy pulled back. And Ethiopia could retain its culture, its independence, its traditions. (The Italians under Benito Mussolini would return in 1930 and control most of the country by 1936, but five years later would be totally defeated early in WWII by the British. Saved again).

From Adwa we proceed to Adigrat and almost to Wukro, a vast area that contains a cluster of churches, at least 120. These churches are generally carved into a cliff, rather than out of the ground. But no less impressive. One could spend days in this region, but our schedule did not permit. We did, however, focus Debra Damo.

As we head north from the main "highway" the scenery becomes dramatic and the road less passable. From a distance we could see the entire plateau of Debra Damo with its overhanging cliffs on all sides. One massive rock. Formidable. Impenetrable. Awesome.

Up there on the flat top is a monastery, open to men – in fact men can spend the night there with the monks, and women can stay with the nuns at the foot of Debra Damo. A trail leads to the base of the cliff. We now see that access up the 80-foot rock face is by rope. In fact, two ropes. A teenager goes scampering up the cliff using the braided leather rope, about an inch and a half in diameter. The other "rope" is an old canvas fire hose that an attendant can wrap around your waist and under your shoulders. There's a monk or two at the top, ready to help pull you up.

Frank wisely defers. They wrap the fire hose around me several times. And off I go, trying to “walk” up the cliff. I wasn’t confident at all – just “let’s give it a try”. Got about two-thirds of the way up to where the overhang afforded no place to put my feet. My sudden decision: “Stop!! Down! screams of hope that the guide way below would relay this decision to the monks and anyone who might help. Well, it was a valiant try. And a clumsy rappel down. Frank and I both agreed that if our lives depended upon it we would have made it..... at least by the second try ... if indeed we were to have a second chance!

OK, what’s Debra Damo. First, it’s one of the most important religious sites, dating back to Aksumite times when Emperor Gebre Meskel (about 500 AD) built what is now the oldest standing church in the country, and the best surviving example of the ancient Aksumite building style. How the solid stones of the monastery were carted up is unknown ... there is no easy explanation. (Axum and Aksum are interchangeable; Aksumite is the adjective).

Some say that in Aksumite times Debra Damo was used to coop up excess male members of the royal family who might have posed a threat to the emperor. Now about 80 monks live there, in an area of around 200 acres, and are totally self-sufficient: cattle, goats, a reservoir of water. Driving away, the view back to that flat-topped mountain with the impenetrable cliffs is spectacular, and worth the trip. If we were only 30 years younger we could have scampered up that cliff.

Yeha Returning from Debra Damo we detour to Yeha, the oldest religious spot in the country, considered to be the birthplace of Ethiopia’s earliest civilization, who were probably colonists from Southern Arabia. They weren’t dumb; the climate here is unsurpassed..... imagine coming from the desert and finding yourself at 8000 feet, never hot and never cold.

One historic stone building remains. The immense, windowless stone walls look like something out of Yemen (or Beau Geste). Dating from sometime in the 8th to 6th century BC, Yeha is known for its amazing construction. Many of the sandstone building blocks measure over 10 feet in length and are so perfectly fitted together, without any mortar, that it’s impossible to insert so much as a coin between them. The entire temple is a grid of perfect lines and geometry. And there it sits in the wilderness. Some digging is going on around it.

Next door is a small church and a small museum. This church replaced one from the Sixth Century AD, but many of the museum pieces are ancient. The priest shows us the best: Sabaean manuscripts and goatskin paintings of a bible and large gold and silver crosses. The new church contains stones from the original temple, and also a famous relief of ibexes, stylized with lowered horns. The ibex was the sacred animal of Southern Arabia. It all ties together.

Nearby are other ruins, including a monument known as Grat Beal Gebri, distinguished for its unusual square pillars, features also found in the Temple of the Moon in Marib, Yemen. Marib was either the home or one of the homes of the Queen of Sheba.

Again we are driving through sweeps of terraces rising up the hillsides. But this is the dry season. No food being grown. It is a reminder that trouble looms. Drought is once again choking Ethiopia, leaving more than 12 million people desperate for food aid from abroad. But this food shortage began well before the rains stopped last September.

Eritrea is next door to us. The road from Adigrat goes straight up to the port of Massawa, which was Ethiopia's key port until the Muslims took it over. Eritrea was, historically, part of Ethiopia. In the 1990s the independence movement there won, and then this tiny nation of three million launched war upon Ethiopia – simply wanting more land. One would have thought that oil was the reason, or minerals. No, nothing but greed for land. The President of Eritrea is a friend from university days of Ethiopia's President. Still, this low-keyed war continued until 2001. A UN force of Africans and Europeans patrols the border – and spends time in Adigrat, a trading center on this side of the border. This area is commonly called by its historical name, Tigre and the Tigre people. Their peak of glory was during first seven centuries AD when Axum ruled the region.

Famine. In the 1990s Ethiopia went through a decade of global initiatives that sought to boost agricultural production but at the same time withdrew state support for the farming sector. The government, under pressure from international lenders and aid donors, was pulling out of the grain markets in favor of an under funded and inexperienced private sector. Little provision was made to support this fledgling free market with storage facilities, transport and financing. When a bumper harvest came in 2001, the markets were overwhelmed. Prices collapsed, sapping the incentive for farmers to produce as much as they could.

After barely covering costs two years ago, farmers sowed cheaper, lower-quality corn seed and didn't bother with fertilizer. Some simply grew enough to feed their own families. The result is that Ethiopia's unfolding tragedy is compounded by this absurdity: while the country begs for food, great stretches of fertile land in the more drought-resistant wheat and corn belts are lying fallow. Farmers know they are contributing to the food shortage, but at least they are not losing money. The extra land turns into meadow and feeds grazing cows rather than hungry people.

Meanwhile, more than 1.5 million tons of food aid have been rushed into the country.

There was no early warning system that worked. With a big surplus, prices fell, and there were inadequate storage facilities, and no export markets. Suddenly a 10-pound bag of corn that had sold for \$10 was now available for \$2. The big farmers lost money – and stopped investing in the future.

Despite constant warnings in 2001 and 2002 there was little effort to stabilize prices or intervene in the country's underdeveloped storage and trading system. The World Bank, which pushes privatization of agricultural and the end of subsidies, acknowledges its failure. The government is re-writing its policies.

Then there is the erosion problem: about 100,000 acres are lost to cultivation annually, representing about 60,000 tons of corn. Meanwhile, famine seems unstoppable. Last year the USA provided \$200 million in food, and presumably will continue this role. Some point out that we only provided \$4 million in agricultural development aid. That old line: "Don't give him a fish; give him a pole and teach him how to fish." Debate rages among international donors and government policy makers. Some say local reservoirs could be created, providing irrigation and therefore at least a second crop each year. Others tout fertilizers and pesticides. Some even say that Ethiopia could become the breadbasket of East Africa. It has a long way to go.

One is impressed with the number of foreign do-gooders. Hardly any tourists, but the good hotels have plenty of NGO reps. One government program funded by the World Bank has gone amiss: a massive resettlement effort to move people west toward the Sudan. From one newspaper: "Thousands are dying ... the food distributed cannot be eaten by children, and we've put them in malarial areas. The government won't ask for food aid, because then they would be admitting the failure of the resettlement program.... We bury three or four people in one grave.... There's plenty of space, but no one is strong enough to dig...The only water for 2100 families is a bright brown stream smelling like burned plastic and free-flowing expired milk...there is no well and only one flour mill for thousands of people..." And so on, and so on... Talk about harsh existence...

Occasionally, in our hotel or airport, we meet an Ethiopian who has succeeded in America and who is ready to invest in his home country. "There are so many wonderful opportunities." More such men are needed from the Little Ethiopias of Los Angeles and Washington.

DAY 16-17: GONDAR Our flight from Axum takes us over the Semien mountains and Ethiopia's highest peak at 14,600. A dozen other peaks over 13,000 dot the view on the left side of the plane. Luck at the airport provides us with a good guide for our two-day stay. Gliding into town on a paved road, we pass the new University of Gondar on a mountaintop, a series of very large pink sandstone buildings, with a cluster of dormitories below. Really first class. We check into the Roha Hotel (another Ghion) and find that this is the fourth hotel with exactly the same layout for every room.

It is said that Gondar is the only city in Ethiopia with charm and character expressive of the Amhara culture, the Amhara people, the Amharic language, which is the national language. From our heights we can look down on the remnants of its castles, walls, bridges and sanctuaries – they transmit a stately calm, reminding one of past nobility, of African grandeur. Yes, there is such a thing as African grandeur.

The city sprawls over several hills. A lake/reservoir provides ample water – well, at least two hours at dawn and in the evening. Gondar was founded as a new capital by Emperor Fasilidas in 1635. It is flanked by two rivers and commands a view over layers of descending farmlands all the way down to Lake Tana, 40 miles away. It sits at the intersection of three major caravan routes. In one direction lay rich sources of gold, ivory and slaves, and in the other lay access to the Red Sea and to the northwest Sudan and Egypt. Nice place for a capital, the first permanent capital in the country since Lalibela in the Fourth Century. By the time of the Emperor's death in 1667 Gondar had 65,000 people and its wealth and splendor had caught the attention of Europe. All in one generation.

We soon saw why: the complexes of old palaces, banquet halls, formal gardens. It's easy to picture life in this sort of Camelot. Each Emperor had to build his own palace – there was some superstition over moving into Dad's or Grandpa's. To build these palaces, artisans and architects were brought from India, from Greece and Portugal, although the Portuguese may have simply stayed on after the Jesuits were thrown out of the country early in the 1600s. The Roman Catholic mission was challenging the nation's Christian community beyond what the Emperor would permit. Among the artisans were resident Jews who inscribed the symbols the Star of David on the interior walls of the palaces. So did the Greeks and Indians. Nice touch. Royalty could look up from their banquets and see these three-foot symbols prominently displayed on the wall.

These are not huge palaces. Rather, boxy three-story creations of basalt stone with round corner towers. Although the massive first floor dining and living areas are now empty, one can almost feel the old opulence. All the palaces are in one large compound on the top of a rising hill, with views all the way down to Lake Tana.

We entered the lion cages (over the centuries emperors kept pet lions, right up to Haile Selassie, "the Lion of Judah," who let them roam in large cages in the front yard of his palace in Addis). Also, the stalls for 20 horses. These are sturdy stone buildings, architecturally matching the quality of the palaces. Unfortunately, in 1941, the British, in order to eliminate the Italian army in Ethiopia, bombed the palaces. There remain quite harsh feelings toward the British. My efforts to educate our guides on the German/Italian push to take Cairo, and therefore the need to remove any threat from the south, didn't seem to make a deep impression.

Next came Emperor Fasiladas' Bath, a two-story stone box sitting in the middle of a 150 X 400 foot pool, fed by an underground system from the reservoir. It still works. For Epiphany they turned it on, raised the level half way, and waited for the priest to

bless the water. Then the pool became a riot of spraying water, shouts and screams as the crowd jumped in. Presumably this is a religious experience, some may think they are being re-baptized, or maybe just some raucous guys are having fun with the blessing of the church. Women do not participate. The baths were lined with trees hundreds of years old, giving a green canopy. There was a huge vulture's nest in one.

Nearby is Ras Mikael Sehul's Palace, now closed. It was used as a prison during the "Derg," the military/communist government of Col. Mengistu who ruled from 1975 to 1991. Let's recall how Haile Selassie, after 37 years as emperor and nearing 80, was forced to resign. A year later he was assassinated. The culprit: no less than Mengistu, who led a coup and installed a communist regime, supported from Moscow. Mengistu didn't have Haile Selassie killed. He personally smothered him with a pillow.

From 1975 to 1991 life was horrendous for Ethiopians – not only because of the Colonel, but also the Great Drought of 1984-85, which killed over 1,000,000. Gondar suffered especially. Land was confiscated from the church and landlords. Industry was nationalized. The entire traditional ruling class vanished from the seats of power, to execution, prison or exile. Like China's cultural revolution, students were sent out to "educate" the rural population. Peasants' association and coops were formed, and a new socialist order was proclaimed.

A half-oval stadium was constructed in downtown Gondar where the people were ordered to sit for pep rallies. Billboards of Marx and Lenin reminded them what this was all about. Today billboards show patriotic scenes: the two-child family, AIDS prevention, "Education of Women Helps All".

The good news of 1991 was the overthrow of the Derg. The bad news was the low point in per capita income: \$120. Today it is about \$187. One of the poorest. Progress is slow and uncertain.

It didn't take long after the fall of the Soviet Union for the people to revolt and establish a democracy, now in its 13th year, with new elections scheduled for this May. Badman Mengistu went into exile in Zimbabwe – he and Badman Mugabe make quite a pair. True, the President's political party holds 90% of the seats in the House of the People, and a strong opposition is not encouraged, but there is a degree of free speech. Urban Addis does not have seats commensurate with its population – and of course the opposition is concentrated in Addis.

On the other hand, all ethnic and tribal groups are represented in the House – the constitution provided for a radical change to a federation based on ethnic lines, permitting each constituent to have its own say in the federal government. No one is marginalized. The frustration is that there is so little that can be done in a country so poor, and it seems that the people understand and respect that.

Haile Selassie remains, for many, a heroic figure and a beloved Emperor. In 2000 his family was permitted to provide a final funeral in Selassie cathedral, where he had prepared his own tomb and one for his empress.

About a mile from the Royal Enclosure is perhaps the country's most famous church, the Debre Berhan Selassie, or "Trinity on the Mount of Light." It's a rectangular box, a small Sistine Chapel. And the paintings are almost as familiar – I bet everyone has seen the ceiling, the winged heads of 80 Ethiopian cherubs entirely covering the ceiling, each with a slightly different expression – each with large, black penetrating eyes as in all Ethiopian paintings.

Outside it is an architectural gem. Sitting in the middle of an octagonal walled compound, with eight stone towers where monks now live in the upper reaches, the church is rounded at both ends, with overhanging roof that gives an especially pleasant feel to the entire structure.

Even more impressive are the wall paintings, every square foot of wall, all created by one artist, Haile Meskel. The life story of Jesus, the Holy Trinity, all the saints, martyrs, and "miracle stories." Frequently we comment: "There's nothing about that in the Bible." Not to worry. It's a "miracle story." Great stories make great saints. People look at pictures, not text.

Supplementing the Christian theme are a portrait of the church's founder, Emperor Iyassi, a depiction of Prophet Mohammed on a camel being led by a devil, and a frightening depiction of hell. All churches have horror paintings of hell, Satan black, and all sufferers black, naked, huddled together, covering their genitals, anguish on their faces. No chance of mistaking the point of it all.

It is claimed that the Emperor planned to bring the Ark of the Covenant here from its reputed resting place in Axum, and that the church was designed specifically to house the country's most famous relic.

All of Gondar is a UNESCO Heritage Site. So is all of Lalibela. And parts of Axum.

In the course of the day we stroll through the downtown, get a shoeshine (8 cents for locals, 80 cents for *ferengi*), and thought about getting a haircut (16 cents). This is a poor country. And lunch in an old Italian villa. Whatever the required repairs, the result has been disastrous, beauty destroyed, unifying themes be damned, garden unrecognizable. It is also a hotel, sort of a bed and breakfast. I refrained from checking out the plumbing. The usual for lunch: beer, soup, spaghetti and a banana – about \$3 for two. Still, it was interesting to see where and how the rich Italians lived during their brief colonial stay here.

Our Ghion Hotel, here called the Goh, is again identical to the others inside. We are on the top of the highest hill overlooking the town. A large terrace provides sweeping views. The swimming pool is, of course, empty. All pools are empty. No excess

water for such frivolity, when the people are trudging to reservoirs to get a few gallons to wash their children. Thank goodness! This is a fine spot for weddings also. One took place around the empty pool ... great white throne chairs on the bandstand. Frank is now ahead 9-3. I just can't understand why!

The next morning we leave at 7:30 to drive to the foothills of the Simien mountains, the ones we looked down upon on the Axum to Gondar flight. Incidentally, air viewing is great: we are in raised wing Fokkers, flying at 18,000 feet over land in the 8000 to 14,000 range. Really lucky.

On the way is the last Jewish village, Wolleka, once the home of a thriving community of Jews, or Falasha. Before Christianity arrived, Judaism was for centuries the dominant religion of most of northern Ethiopia. The Christians weren't perfect. If the Jews refused to convert, their land was (sometimes) confiscated. It is also said that the Falashas provided the labor for the construction and decoration of the castles – and hence the Star of David inscribed on the walls.

From 1985 to 1991 more than 60,000 Falashas were airlifted to Israel, leaving only a handful. And Israel doesn't want the rest; most are half-caste, having married Christians. Further, their skill at making pottery has degenerated – and is mainly depictions of Solomon and Sheba in bed – something tourists like to buy. The village is along the roadside, but we don't want to enter such a tourist trap. It's enough to see the welcoming signs in English. On we go to the mountains.

The Simiens are the result of massive seismic activity about 40 million years ago. Molten lava poured out of the Earth's surface, reaching a thickness of 10,000 feet! Subsequent erosion has left behind a jagged landscape, spectacular gorges and precipices.

This turns out to be some serious hiking, but the views of mountains, the volcanic cones, now all green, the tiers of mountain ranges looking over to Eritrea, the valleys and canyons thousands of feet down, all green and blue – it's all very beautiful. The trail is something else, but then my legs aren't what they used to be. Ethiopia offers with great trekking trips. Perhaps the Simiens are the best ... filled with wildlife, especially birds.

Through my binoculars I see peasants walking on distant mountain trails, and think of the men and women who train at 8000' and more for the Olympics. No wonder the Ethiopians win everything. Everyone's hero is Haile Gebrselassie, a two-time Olympic champion who has set 17 world records and is considered the most versatile runner in history. At the Olympics his team won eight medals, including four golds, and an estimated one million people greeted them in Addis for a jubilant parade from the airport – and that's 10 miles

On the way back we stop to load up the roof of the van with firewood. It's cheaper out here. Our guide John says that a week's worth of wood "for my mother" is 20

cents. He buys six weeks worth. You think of all those other markets, where women walk miles with some wood on their backs, which they hope to sell for pennies.

DAY 18-19: BAHAR DAR & LAKE TANA The 120-mile drive from Gondar to BD takes only three hours (or will when the paved road is completed), while the flight door to door takes more than four – although flying time is 20 minutes. So we drove through steadily improving agricultural land and considerable road construction. Gondar and Bahar Dar may soon be the first two cities connected by a paved highway. It was an interesting drive, especially the first real farmlands we had seen that were rock free. Flourishing green in a parched country.

Entering BD was another surprise: a real city, with 2-4 story buildings, though goats and cattle grazed around them; paved roads downtown. However, the side streets are infested with the usual wattle huts. Nevertheless, it is a city of 100,000 in transition... a regional capital that holds promise.

BD also has Lake Tana, a circular 30 x 37 miles, larger than Lake Tahoe, surrounded on three sides by mountains. It is best known as the source of the Blue Nile, which, about 10 miles out of town, plunges over the famous Blue Nile Gorge. We didn't go; to the gorge; it's the dry season – not much water. Flying to Addis two days later we have a marvelous late afternoon view of the Nile, the sun glistening off the water as it snaked west and north to meet the White Nile at Khartoum. I've seen the convergence there; it's truly a blue line converging with a brown one. What we learned here is the Blue Nile provides 90% of the Nile's water. No wonder that Egypt threatens to go to war if Ethiopia attempts to damn up its rivers and reduce the flow northward.

We check into the Tana Hotel, the Ghion's BD name. Same room configuration as the other four Ghions. It sits on a small promontory into the Lake with a lovely greensward and gardens for sunset viewing of the lake and surroundings. A room here goes up to \$60, by far the most expensive of the trip. The local hotel guide helps us plan the next day, which will require boat transportation.

Lake Tana was well known to the Greeks and Egyptians. Now it is known for the monasteries that are situated on 20 of its 37 islands. Most of the monasteries were built during the Gondar period in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Most believe that they were the sites of far earlier Christian shrines. One could easily spend a week here. The reason: boat transportation is so slow and the distances so great. And if you get tired of monasteries, there are the birds.... Exotic bird by the score. In our hotel the long white tails of Birds of Paradise are right in the dining room and lounge – somehow they find their way inside from the check-in desk. They are beautiful. And never have I heard so many new birdsongs. All the time. Outside our room, at meals, on the terrace, is the parking lot. And such colorful plumage

Because of two touring groups the dining room was full: French and Polish. The latter were the most interesting because they sang patriotic songs during and after the

meal, made louder and louder by ample amounts of vodka. Frank wins again, now 11-3. Not fair.

Monasteries. We're in our boat by 7:30 for a 30-minute trip to the Zege Peninsula and the St. Georgio monastery. The boat, brightly colored in red-yellow-green (the national colors), could seat a dozen on hard plank seats. In the distance are flocks of pelicans, large white pelicans with far bigger beaks than our American grey version. Gliding by us is a fisherman in a small kayak made of paper -- papyrus, that is. The fisherman sets a net the day before and now pulls it up. Amazing that he doesn't tip over. (Later that day we found the place where papyrus boats are made -- piles of papyrus strips (it grows along the shore). This gave me a particularly warm feeling: the same papyrus boats of the ancient Egyptians --- or 'there goes Moses'.

Landing at a loose rock pier we walk the trail besieged by begging children and trying not to step on displays of quasi-religious creations. Rather unpleasant. (It's not that we don't want to give some money to the community; it's just that a hundred begging hands and hawkers don't put one in the mood to contribute much).

Soon we come to an opening in the forest where a large version of the usual round wattle hut sits. This is St. Georgio a monastery and church, with 12 massive wooden doors representing each of the apostles. This 16th century house of worship is still used. The monks live elsewhere and didn't deign to grace us with their presence. This did not put us in a good mood. The church was designed like all the others: circular exterior wall encompassing a circular interior wall which in turn protected the heart of the matter: the center room where the ark is held. Only the priests are allowed in there.

Interior walls are covered with 450-year-old cotton cloths upon which religious tales have been painted. These were impressive, considering where we were in the middle of Lake Tana. And the drums. Drums are always available to play on any religious excuse. The drums are all the same, same size, same shape, same sound. I love the sound!

The priest also took us to a pathetic museum where we oo'd and ah'd appropriately over a small collection of old crosses and royal crowns squeezed on to tiny shelves. Nevertheless, St. Georgio set us up perfectly for the next monastery, Kebran Gabriel. Twenty minutes later we land at the new dock on Gabriel Island, which boasts a new rock wall encompassing the entire island -- an estimated quarter mile of rock. This is clearly an affluent monastery.

On the flatland near the dock is a small farm -- the monks try to grow their own food. The island is high, the trail rocky. Nearing the top a group of monks are sitting around processing wheat and barley outside their mud and straw homes.

Hermanos, our guide, is especially interesting. His father is a priest. Yes, the priests can marry, but not the Bishop and not the monks Bishops always come out of the

ranks of the monks. Make your decision and set your ambition early! Hermanos: “Every village has a church ... if you sin, you want to be able to pray quickly...” The chief monk has one of those magical faces that can draw you into his soul, even though you don’t understand a word he’s saying.

Hermanos kisses the walls before entering. The monastery paintings are remarkable, even though much of the scenes are not in the Bible – again, “miracle stories”. However, St. Mary (Maryam) gets the most attention everywhere. In one church she is being crowned – yes, the “coronation of Mary”, and there she is with bejeweled crown on her head. And then there is the painting of Mary holding a cutout of the Horn of Africa – all five countries of the onetime Ethiopian empire. No separation of church and state here. In fact, it seems that the daily conversation of Ethiopians is laced with all manner of “God bless you’s.”

Here in St. Gabriel is, of course, the painting of Gabriel cooling the flames of the fiery furnace or a boiling cauldron containing Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego. The beams and pillars of the monastery are all juniper, hundreds of years old, but not a sign of age. The chief priest takes us to the museum. This is a very special museum, sitting on the top of a small island in the middle of Lake Tana. Crosses from 500 – 1300, a 1555 goat skin Bible – gold plated -- the most beautiful full-page paintings yet, and such stunning writing. And a library of ancient books. As he says: “The full page paintings tell the story ... no need to read ... one can read the gospel in pictures.” It amazed us that these treasures, so vulnerable to a commando raid by the bad guys, are considered secure in an undefended monastery.

Outside there is a small (5’) circular hut, about 6 high. Here one lucky monk can spend all forty days of Lent. A little food is handed in through an 8” window. He can crap at night, and has a urinal inside the rest of the time. No light. No books. No TV. No conversation. Piety? Yes.

Hermanos explains the set up further. There are 60 monks on the island. It is a sin to think about girls ... and it is a sin to have booze, because if you booze, you will think about girls. What makes this more interesting is that on the next island (you can swim there in 10 minutes) are 20 nuns. Not only that, there are five men living there also (“in a restricted area”) “to take care of the nuns” and “guard their ark”. Now, wait a minute. But there is more. One day a year the women swim/boat over to the men’s island and they have a festive time together (but no booze!), but have to be back on their island before dark. Now, if you believe the purity of all this, I’ve got something here I want to sell youCome on, now. Sixty monks on one island, twenty-four girls with five more monks on the other island. No monitors..... Use your imagination. Hermanos laughed along with us, but as a priest’s son, we sensed he believed in the purity.

From Hermanos we learn more about Ethiopian Christian faith. First and foremost is their belief in the power of prayer, that the main way to achieve anything on earth is to pray to the Almighty. Also, if one prays properly, God’s power can punish one’s

foes, cause illness, or even kill them. Vengeance has long been part of the deal. They still believe that praying and fasting were a major factor in ridding the country of the Italian invaders.

These thoughts are all a part of the Old Testament, that a powerful Lord punishes, rewards and avenges. Judaic thought was here 1200 years before Christianity. That early Judaic thought was blended with some pagan and animist thoughts, including deities who can affect one's life for better or worse. In the Christian era this took the form of the Saints, especially the Saints who combated Satan and Evil. And the loving Saint Mary.

Every child at birth is given two guardian angels of his own sex, one for daytime and one for night. They protect him from all evil, and if some misfortune befalls them, it is because God has ordered his guardian angels to neglect their duties.

As pointed out, each church has an Ark, a hollow oblong box containing some sacred script. The ark is regarded as human: give it some incense and it will be happy ... if this church is given a new roof the ark will be very happy. As for the Saints, they must also be appealed to. That leaves Satan, the Devil. He is portrayed in the church paintings as a dark Negroid type, the least favored sort of racial stock in Ethiopia. All accidents are caused by the Devil. So the people pray to him, also.

The next morning we go out of town to the Palace that Haile Selassie built for himself. What a contrast between downtown Bahar Dar and the dirt boulevard that begins before the city ever ends: the most pathetic hovels – not even goatskins to sleep on. But still the smiles, the cheer that shines through all the misery. Welcoming waves and shouts from children and adults.

There is a half-mile, tree-lined paved road along the riverbank of the Nile, and on a gentle hill sits an attractive sprawling two-story modern home, with well-tended bushes and trees. We are not allowed past the gate, but can see the home 100 yards away. The area is sealed by a high fence and 80-armed guards with serious-looking rifles. Later we were told that perhaps this “palace” is the hiding place of the original Ark.

We enjoy a pleasant sunset in the gardens overlooking the Lake and chat with various nationalities. For some reason there were more tourists here than anywhere. In other towns you could count them on one hand. Usually we are the only tourists at historic sights. What we do find is NGO reps and AID-type officials. Most white people in the hotels are not businessmen, like most countries, but do-gooders, committed to helping these poor people.

Everyone we spoke with expressed frustration with the Ethiopian government bureaucracies. And corruption. Nothing can be accomplished without some money changing hands. We saw it in the requirement/request that we pay for simple things: where to buy a battery, directions to a building, anything ... the hand is out, and it is

expected. You carry that custom up the line to getting anything done in government, in education, in business – obviously the entire society is “corrupt”. But they see it as getting by. It’s not a tourist thing; it’s an Ethiopian way of living.

We have hours for reflection. The mind focuses on the poverty, the seeming hopelessness, yet the resilience, the seeming joy in life that these gentle, suffering people maintain. Some survey asked the peasants what was their chief goal in life? Answer: “Having worked, to eat,” reflecting their constant preoccupation with the need to eat.

We reflect also on the schools. Even in small villages new schools offer a strong contrast to the conical thatched huts. In every city and town the UNESCO sign is prominent: “Educating Girls Is Good for Everyone.” Education, especially for girls, is indeed one of the key answers for this poor country. Educating women, plus economic opportunity, stops population growth. A way must be found that’s better than famines and AIDS.

Focusing on work and food also creates independence and self-reliance. In raising children parents consciously try to prepare them for making a living on their own. It is shameful to be dependent on others. It is worse yet to steal. Stealing is felt to be somewhat worse than murder. Asked to name the six worst actions, 85% mentioned stealing, and only 60% said killing, often qualified by “unjustified killing.” Interesting, when you’re starving. I notice that this survey was conducted ten years ago. Now that the country has a rule of modern law, these attitudes may be changing.

DAY 20: ADDIS AND HOME. If we could have managed another two days we would have driven to Addis, stopping not only at the Nile Gorge, but also at Debra who arrived from Addis. Waiting with us in the airport were a half dozen bishops, looking very important in their rich embroidered robes of various bright colors, black top hats and holding big crosses – hidden until they went through security and had to show why the buzzers went off.

From Addis came the top gun of the church. While he was walking from the plane with his small entourage, airport workers took advantage of the opportunity and rushed up to kneel down and kiss his feet. All had big umbrellas to protect him and themselves from the sun. It was final example of the depth of religion in the country. Still, every day you could hear the mosque recordings waking up the Muslims, now 35% of the country. But far less than 35% in the Christian north.

We sit around Addis airport for a few hours before boarding the midnight flight to Dulles via Rome. Only a 30 minute stop for fueling in Rome; no one permitted off the plane. We connected to United within an hour and arrived in San Francisco at 0200 the same day.

In the Addis airport were at least five American women carrying home their Ethiopian adoptees. Such excitement. Such love. The NYTimes had an article

recently saying that the government had eased the regulations and procedures, dropping the price from \$40,000 to \$20,000. All the cost is procedural: the health exams and easing the paperwork through both governments. In Addis everyone gets a cut. Still, these gals seem to think \$20,000 was reasonable – and you couldn't deny the thrill they felt over their new very black babies. One gal from western Minnesota had five children of her own and has now adopted five more from various countries. Whew!

PS: Frank won the domino battle, 13-5. Doesn't seem fair.

