

Ethiopia (2001)i

The propellers stilled. The steps were lowered. All the other passengers remained in the small plane, but we climbed down and walked across the runway. The plane taxied and took off, leaving us alone. The closing scene from the film Casablanca, in reverse.

We had arrived in Lalibela, the centre of Ethiopian Christianity. It is an isolated town, set amid a panorama of hills and ridges. The townspeople live in mud or stone huts with roofs of thatch or corrugated zinc, but it is a centre of pilgrimage, with twelfth century churches excavated, vertically, downwards, out of solid rock. Naves and aisles, columns and arches, steps and windows, crosses and side chapels are all hewn out of solid rock. They are decorated with murals, some old and flaky, blackened by incense, others modern and brash. One portrays God as an old man with a long white beard standing among lions and leopards. Others depict St George slaying the dragon. Priests in rich vestments sit reading old Bibles or walk around, holding silver crosses and heavy wooden staffs.

From Lalibela, we hitched a ride with two Dutch journalists to the cave church of Yemrehanna Kristos, some twenty kilometres away. We drove past fields of chick peas, tef (a grass like grain) and barley. Cattle and goats grazed. The hills were green and fertile, but a tented warehouse, funded by the EU, was a reminder of the famine which has struck this area.

As we made our way along the dirt roads leading to Yemrehanna Kristos, we passed scores of men and women walking, some barefoot, towards the cave church. Some had trekked for days. We saw only one other vehicle, an aged lorry which was carrying the bishop from Lalibela. We climbed a valley of juniper and olive and, behind a fence of wooden staves, found a large basalt cave. Hundreds of men and women, almost all wearing cream gabis (shawls)

and tintims (turbans) were sitting or milling around. Inside the cave, there was a large basilica church, built with geometric designs of white marble and dark brown wood. Behind the church, in the darker recesses of the cave, were tombs draped with red cloth. Men were walking round each tomb three times. A priest told us that in times gone by their wishes were granted, but there was now too much evil in the world. To the right of the tombs, lying bare on the floor of the cave, were the mummified skeletons of thousands of "Israelis" who had walked overland from Jerusalem to pay pilgrimage, and, presumably not having the strength to walk back, stayed until they lay down and died.

Boys were rhythmically beating caberos, large drums topped with animal skins. Men were chanting in Geez, an ancient Semitic language, and waving sistrums, brass musical instruments which looked like large potato peelers with wheels. Women were dancing. Then the bishop with full beard, dressed in dark vestments and a black kob (pill box hat), began a procession round the cave. He was preceded by a man with a brass horn and followed by four men with red, purple and gold umbrellas carrying a replica of the Ark of the Covenant. The original is reputed to be in Axum, far to the north. The procession was followed by a long sermon in which another bishop exhorted the flock not to kill their neighbours, warned about the perils of AIDs, preached about the need for abstinence and urged the congregation to look after orphans.

Ethiopia has many memorable sites and experiences. The remains of Lucy, over three million years old. The Mercato in Addis Adaba, the largest market in Africa. Axum, birth place of the Queen of Sheba, with its ancient stelae which rival Cleopatra's Needle. The beautiful Simien Mountains, with red hot pokers growing wild and giant heather more than two metres tall. Lake Tana

with its island monasteries and the nearby Blue Nile Falls. A beautiful, mountainous country.

But one of the strongest, most lasting memories is not of the ancient sites and buildings, but of the people, especially the children, especially in Lalibela. Some were poorly dressed. Some had long tufts of hair so that they could be pulled up to Heaven if they died. Almost all though were enthused by their education. Many schools have two or three shifts a day, with some children attending only in the mornings, others only in the afternoons. Many were desperate to practice their English, chatting to us and asking questions as we walked from church to church. Their English was surprisingly good, a tribute both to their keenness to learn, and the dedication of their teachers. Typical was Neway, aged thirteen, who spent his afternoons with us. He was sure that he was going to be a doctor.

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