

## Ethiopian Travel Adventure

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February 2025

Travel through much of Ethiopia in the late 1960's and early 70's challenged those who ventured forth from major cities like Asmara where I completed my U.S. Army service at Kagnew Station. I also taught part-time for Maryland and enjoyed meeting the traveling faculty teaching there for a term or two. One of these, Dr. Julian Jones, a political science teacher, used the term "adventure travel" to describe serious off-base journeys. As I got to know him over the course of Term I, September/October 1970, I learned that we shared a common interest in unusual travel experiences. He hoped to use his Maryland travel to write stories in this genre for newspapers and magazines; I wished to explore more of the country that I had adopted as almost a second home. We soon began to plan visits during the term break to several parts of Ethiopia, by way of the DC-3 flights operated by Ethiopian Airlines, to some destinations seldom seen by foreign visitors. Together, we aimed to be travelers rather than just tourists.

Our first DC-3 destination was the ancient city of Axum, the capital of Tigre Province. We packed a couple of small bags, changed some money into Ethiopian currency, Julian checked in at the Kagnew MAC office and found that there was a flight up to Turkey on the following week Saturday, and so we left on a Friday morning, the first day that our Term I was concluded. We used a local taxi to get from the Axum Airport into the city proper, a distance of about 3.5 miles. We soon noticed that there was a language barrier here that was far less of a problem back in Asmara. However, every place seems to speak the international language of money. Wave a few Ethi bills around and service would come running. That was our means of finding accommodations for the evening and a decent place to eat. We dropped our bags at a small hotel and went out to explore the town on foot. It was not long before we drew the notice of a number of small boys vying to guide us, for a small fee, of course. We chose one who was dressed a little neater and the rest melted back into the crowds, disappointed at not finding their day's wages. The first place that we wished to visit was the field of stele, famous on all of the posters for Axum. Stelae Park had about a half dozen of these standing stone giants to admire, one of them rising about 80 feet, and with a couple even larger ones that had fallen which we could then examine up close. These striking carved obelisks are said to mark grave sites of ancient Axumite rulers. We took a few quick photographs and then were lead away to what had to be the most well-known edifice in the city: the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion. What makes this holy building so famous is that it is reputed to contain the long-lost Ark of the Covenant, in spite of what that first Indiana Jones' movie proposed. Of course, no one is allowed to enter the small Chapel of the Tablet, not even Emperor Haile Selassie I himself. One monk becomes the lifetime guardian of that precious hidden object, and the mystery of whether it is actually there has been zealously guarded for centuries. We did notice a number of Coptic priests sitting around the walls of the structure, engrossed in prayer by reading small books printed in Ge'ez, the local religious language. Our walks made us both hungry and thirsty, so we took our leave and went back to our hotel for the night, paying our very happy young guide likely a bit more than most tourists would. Our evening meal of doro wat, the red-pepper-spicy Ethiopian dish with chicken scooped up with the sour pancake-like injera, (thankfully not served at industrial

strength to two obvious tourists, for which Julian was certainly grateful), was washed down with cold bottles of Melotti beer. We slept reasonably comfortably and satisfied.

I should mention that flying by way of a DC-3 can sometimes be downright frightening. On another occasion, I was making a trip to Axum and was seated on the aisle next to a small Ethiopian boy who had the window seat adjacent to the exit door. All of a sudden, that door flew open in mid-flight. Luckily, we were both belted into our seats. My first instinct was to grab onto this boy's small arm and hold on. As the door banged on the side of the aircraft, we could both feel the wind whipping into our faces and see the brown and barren mountainous landscape moving steadily below us. Two male in-flight personnel instructed us to move carefully into the empty seats behind us. They then proceeded to try to catch the door with a long wooden pole equipped with a hook on the end. It took about ten minutes before they achieved success and made the door "secure" once again. The boy and I elected to remain in our new seats. That incident in itself was scary enough. What bothered me even more was that this plane even had that long pole onboard, as if this kind of incident was not exactly uncommon! The memory of that flight still scares me to this day. In that sense, I am so glad that DC-3 flights are now in my distant past.

In any case, the next morning meant a quick breakfast before our taxi ran us back to the airport for our next DC-3 flight southwest to Gondar in the Northern Amhara region of Ethiopia. Here, the airport was almost a dozen miles outside of Gondar proper, so we caught a local bus that ran us into town instead of using a taxi. What makes Gondar famous is that it is known as "the Camelot of Africa" due to its many Portuguese castles that dot its landscape. This stop was one that Julian especially wanted to make, and on that Saturday afternoon, it finally became a reality. Not to say that I was averse to going there, but some choices had to be made due to time constraints, a point which I shall return to later. After the fact, however, I was glad that I experienced this historic European-influenced city in the heart of the Horn of Africa along with Julian. As we had only one day to spend in this fascinating city, we had to be choosy on what we went to visit. Out of the almost twenty castles to be admired, Julian and I chose the Emperor Fasilides' Palace, by far the most complete and imposing of these structures. It was almost like being treated to something out of a medieval European fairy tale. Its high walls with turrets and towers had once been the home of Ethiopian royalty. The style was a mix of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Portuguese and Arabic. The impressive interior stone walls with arched doorways and the wood-beamed ceiling kept the fairy-tale image intact for the next hour. Then we walked around the castle and took a few photographs, before going to look for a late lunch prior to any more sight-seeing. On this occasion, I chose one of my favorite staples of Ethiopian fare, which was alicha, a vegetarian dish consisting of potatoes, carrots, cabbage and onions covered with a light curry flavoring and eaten with the pancake-like injera. Julian accepted my selection as well for himself. We washed it down with a hearty glass of tej, a honey wine sort of like mead but with a definite kick to it. By using my knowledge of Ethiopian cuisine, I felt that I was making positive steps in forging a friendship with a new-found and fun UMUC colleague. We also found a reasonable lodging for the night before heading back out into Gondar to visit one of its famous churches. Our choice was the Debre Birhan Selassie, which I had read about before our trip. Luckily, it was open in the late afternoon. We paid the small fee and secured a priest as our guide, and removed our shoes. The exterior had twelve rounded stone towers, which our guide told us represented the twelve apostles that guarded the church. But that somewhat plain exterior

did not prepare us for what was to be viewed within: what a stunning interior, consisting of a ceiling of over a hundred beatific cherub faces in the Byzantine style staring lovingly down on anyone who worships there. Another startling painting is the one depicting a landscape of hell, with huge and nasty-looking demons surrounded by flames, and with the broken and bloodied bodies of tortured sinners strewn about everywhere. If I were a believer, that wall may well have put me back on the straight-and-narrow all by itself. We gave the priest a generous tip and went back to the hotel to relax before the next major stop on our trip.

It was a flight of just over one hundred miles south and east that brought us on Sunday to the fabled city of Lalibela. The flight only took a little over an hour before we landed late that morning in what looked more like a corn field than an airport. From a small hut, a man wheeled out a rickety set of metal steps with thin railings down the side and we descended into a sun-baked landscape at an elevation of over eight thousand feet. We used a cheap van service to make the twelve-mile journey into Lalibela proper. As it was Sunday, this important religious town was bustling with lots of people milling about in preparation for the church services. So we took the opportunity first to locate a hotel as we felt that two days here might be necessary for us to take in this place at a more leisurely pace. We found lodging at a small hotel for about \$10 per night in US equivalency. However, it did not have a restaurant on the premises, so that was one sacrifice to be made for that great price. We found a small restaurant and I checked what the menu had and found that shiro was available. This vegetarian dish consisting of ground-up chick peas with spices, looking like a brown pudding, and served on a bed of injera, was quite filling. A local soft drink helped in completing the meal. We then joined the crowds walking towards the main edifice, the Biete Giorgis, or St. George Church. This volcanic red church in the shape of a Greek cross is hewn out of the living rock and was a wonder to behold. The crowds gathered along the edge of the deep gorge into which the church was set and the women began their ululations to celebrate the occasion. With so many pilgrims gathered there, it was not possible to go down into the gorge for a look at the interior. Fortunately, tomorrow would bring that opportunity into reality. On our walk back to the hotel, we passed a small stone hut with a wooden stake driven prominently into the ground in front. Suspended on that stake was an inverted white metal cup. I suggested to Julian that we stop there for a drink. Again, he had to place his trust in me. I knew that this display was the sign that suwa was available. This home-brewed beer made from barley bread and fermented for a couple days is a staple to be found throughout the country. It was a bit bitter and had a smoky flavor, and had bits of the barley bread floating in it. But once purchased for a few small coins, it would be an insult to the old woman who had made it not to finish the full cup. My palate had sampled this sour beverage many times before, but I was not quite sure if Julian was ready for it. He did manage to get it all down, but when the old woman offered a refill, we both politely begged off and made our way back to the hotel by weaving through the bustling crowds that made the going slower than it might otherwise have been. We slept quite soundly that evening in order to be ready for a more hectic day on Monday.

We checked out of the hotel and made our way to a small restaurant for a breakfast of fit-fit, a combination of broken up bits of injera mixed with clarified butter and berbere, which really woke up our taste buds. It was to be good fuel for the long walks on our Monday schedule. We immediately headed for the St. George Church in order to get a look inside. It was a steep walk down into the gorge along a precipice that threatened death to anyone not careful

about the footing and then had a sort of tunnel for the last fifty yards or so. But standing at the base of this impressive edifice left both of us in awe. The half dozen steps up into the church brought us to a large interior where a few priests were praying. Some colorful rugs were on the floor inside and some more brightly colored paintings in the Byzantine style covered the walls, but at least we had the place relatively to ourselves on this Monday morning. We both now understood why this lone, free-standing church in the shape of a crucifix had been labeled by many as the “8<sup>th</sup> Wonder of the World”. The climb out was steep but it afforded us one more look at this marvelous cruciform edifice. We then made our way towards the northern group of churches. The walk itself took almost half an hour and we needed to be choosy about how many of these five rock-hewn churches here we would visit as our intention was to catch the late afternoon DC-3 flight over to Bahir Dar. We first went to the Biete Medhane Alem, the House of the Redeemer of the World, because it held the famous Lalibela Cross within its confines. The church was fronted by a dozen pillars looking like a series of giant rectangles. We did see the Lalibela Cross, a giant form of a processional cross considered to be one of Ethiopia’s most precious religious and historical heirlooms. We then moved on to the Biete Maryam, the square brown-stone church with a small portico as its entrance. This one seemed to be better preserved and its interior also had rugs and brightly decorated walls with a few priests in attendance praying for world peace perhaps. After that visit, we only had time to look down at the other churches in the complex, some in a very rough state of preservation like the Biete Meskel. After a quick bite to eat, we found that we had to wait until Tuesday morning to fly to our next destination. Luckily, our hotel rooms were still available for the night.

The DC-3 flight south and west to Bahir Dar left much later than scheduled and then took a bit over two hours. Again, the airport landing strip was more like a corn field than anything else. We used a local taxi to get into Bahir Dar, the third largest city in Ethiopia. Flying in, we caught a glimpse of the immense Lake Tana, one of our principal destinations on this stop. Our first move involved finding a hotel. I do not recall the name, but it did have an overlook into a steep valley and the cost was well under \$20 in US money equivalent. It did have a small restaurant on the premises, so that was an additional benefit. A stroll about town took us past many open-air markets with staples and spices galore on display. Also, a number of young beggars were quite persistent in asking for money, and a few even offered their services as guides. But our sight-seeing would now have to wait until Wednesday morning as we were too late and the ticket office for going out to the Blue Nile Falls was already closed. Ah, the vagaries of African travel. Dinner on this evening was the more hearty doro wat, the stew made with chicken and eggs and flavored with the red spicy and biting berbere sauce. It took a couple of local beers and some strong coffee to wash it down and then cleanse the palate. We did sleep soundly and comfortably that evening, however.

We were at the ticket office just as it opened and were soon on the small bus for a very bumpy ride out to the village of Tis Issat. A long trek out to the famed Blue Nile Falls lead to some disappointment as our timing in getting there after the rainy season meant that the falls were but a mere trickle of water over their steep cliffs. It was getting to be exhausting making our way back to the village for the bus ride back to Bahir Dar. We had one more desired excursion to make that afternoon on a boat ride out to one of the island monasteries on Lake Tana. The ride itself was relaxing, for which we were grateful. It did take almost three hours before landfall where only a few of us males on the boat made the walk to the monastery. We

reached the Dabra Sina Maryam monastery after a hike through a grove of olive and eucalyptus trees to find a small round building made of mud and wood with a thatched roof. However, inside was a spectacular set of wall paintings which became the true highlight of our day together. By the time we got back to Bahir Dar, it was approaching evening, so we just went to the hotel, had a light meal, and put in an early wake-up call for our flight on Thursday morning to Addis Ababa.

Our over ninety-minute flight south to Addis Ababa Bole International Airport at least landed us in a more modern facility than those of the previous several days. The convenient bus took us to a hotel within walking distance of the royal palace in the heart of this bustling capital city. The cost was considerably more at over \$40 in US currency, but the amenities were worth it, with a nice shower and a welcoming bed. After a light lunch, we headed out for a walk and made our way to Emperor Haile Selassie's palace grounds. The exterior was really not that much to see. We did manage to discover the emperor's small zoo on the premises. Of course, the feature attractions here were the lions as symbols for the Lion of Judah himself. The traffic in the city was a bit daunting as we had to dart our way among the many autos, trucks, vans and buses that seemed intent on ending our stay there in an instant. (Having chosen Addis Ababa as our final stop, along with those few unexpected delays, also meant foregoing a trip over to Dire Dawa with another jaunt over to Harar to sample its world-famous coffee, a look inside the Arthur Rimbaud Museum, and the infamous night-time hyena feeding. I might have used a stick had I gone there, but no way was I going to allow the strong jaws of a hyena anywhere near my mouth holding a strip of questionable camel meat. But that was never to be, as it turned out, for neither Julian nor I ever made it to Harar.) For our evening meal in Addis, we found a restaurant that had a combination platter on the menu, so we got to sample a wide variety of a half dozen small portions of delicious Ethiopian cuisine served on a bed of injera and washed down with wine and then coffee. It was a perfect capper to our long DC-3 trip across the country together.

On Friday morning, we made our way back out to the Addis airport for our return flight to Johannes IV Airport in Asmara so that Julian could catch his previously arranged Saturday MAC flight up to Adana, Turkey, on his way to his next UMUC teaching assignment at Karamursel. I had a more leisurely schedule which allowed me to wait until into the following week before my hectic and circuitous set of MAC flights described elsewhere that took me to my Greek island retreat villa on Hydra. However, our week-long "adventure travel" journey together certainly helped to forge a friendship which has now lasted a lifetime. So when, just a few short weeks later while I was on Hydra and received a cryptic telegram: "Hotel. Perapalas. Weekend. Julian," I knew just what I was getting into on that new momentous occasion.