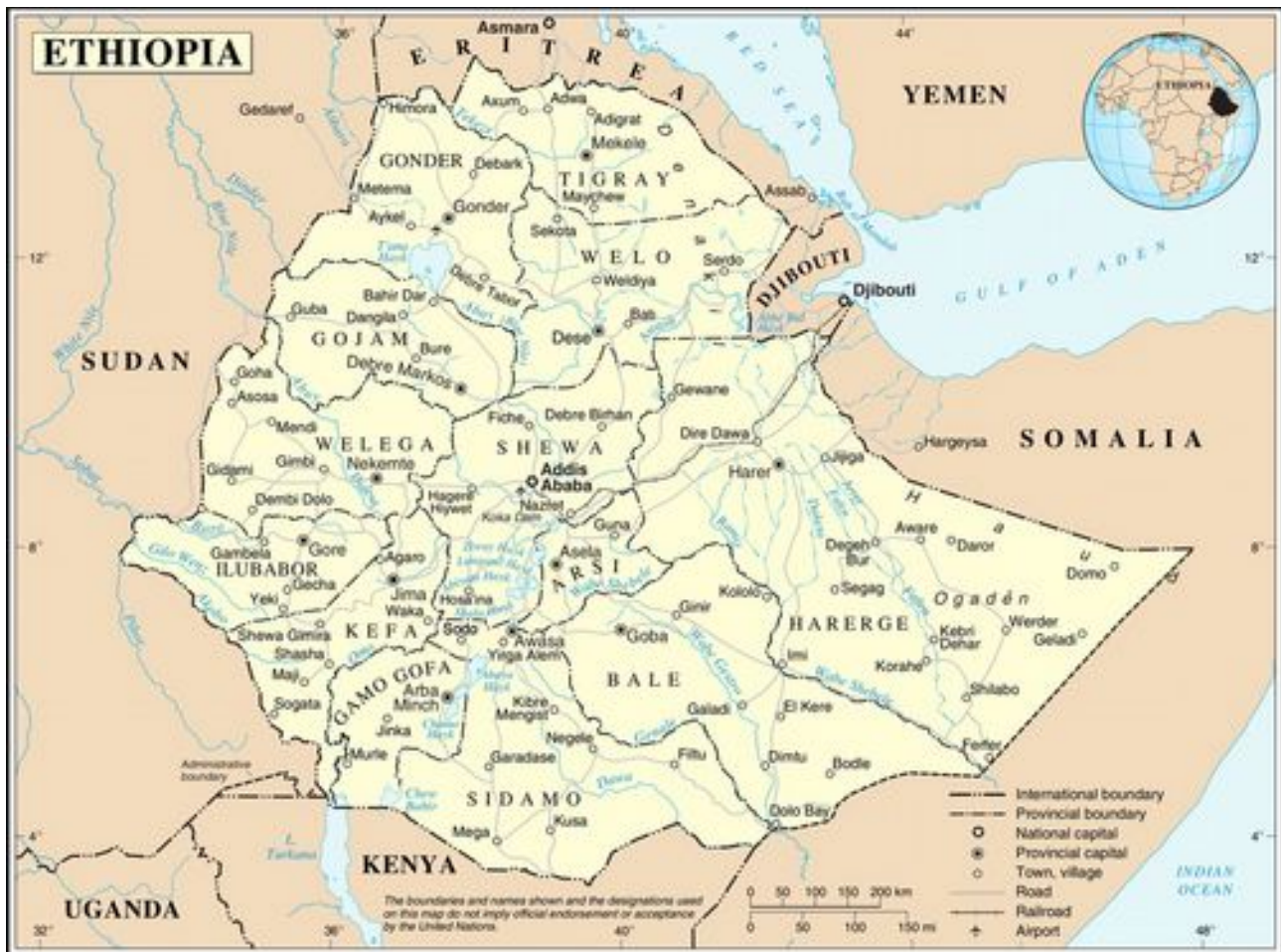


Ethiopia October 6th - 27th 2018

Map of Ethiopia



Ethiopia Day 1 Saturday 6th October 2018

I left UK on an overnight flight on 5th October, the flight is just under 8 hours. Beth flew in from Windhoek, and we met Binyam at the airport for our first day in Ethiopia.

Binyam took us to a coffee shop for breakfast, and we sat outside in the morning sun. He then drove us round Addis - wide avenues, and lots of high rise construction, but still green in the city, and lots of hills. Binyam is such an enthusiast about his country and its history it was very catching. He will not be accompanying us, but we will be met and guided by Yehenew from Bahirdar.

The coffee shop was named for the goatherd in Ethiopia who noticed his goat eating these curious beans and decided to experiment with them and produced the coffee which Ethiopia is now so famous for all over the world. It certainly makes a wonderful strong cup of coffee.

Addis Ababa – Bahirdar

Beth and I took the morning flight, and Ethiopian Airlines is such a well

renowned airline in Africa it is very efficient. The small Bombardier plane was packed to the gill as were both Beth and my flights here. It is a special family time in Ethiopia following their two main festivals and the end of the rainy season, so many overseas Ethiopians return home now. They do come in all shapes and sizes from the different regions and bordering the surrounding countries.

We landed over Lake Tana, the third largest lake in the whole of Africa, at the town of Bahar Dar, a fabulous small airport, where we were met by Yehenew and Abraham in our mini bus. Again our initial impressions were very positive with such enthusiasts. Yehenew is from here originally, but is a German and English speaker and guide who works with Binyam. They drove us round the tree lined streets along the lake to our hotel, where we had ten minutes to turn around before heading out on a small boat onto the lake. This was the description of our four and a half hour trip!

"You will have a boat trip on Lake Tana, where 37 islands and 32 of them have churches and monasteries of considerable historical and cultural interest. You visit the monastery church of Ura Kidane Mihret is more decorative with a huge, conical thatched roof is painted with scenes from Biblical lore; Betre Mariam is renowned for a magnificent manuscript to the Four Gospels which is believed to date back to at least the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century."

Well the trip itself was perfect for two jet-lagged travellers as we had time to relax and take in the scenery, see our first ever African Big Lizard (looked like a log floating on the lake], lots of pelicans, cormorants, a sea eagle and of course the shoreline and some of the islands. There were fisherman out on the water in small boats made of papyrus which they paddled along. The first two we passed had a monastery and a nunnery on - the former no females are allowed, but the monks are allowed to go to the nunnery as they still perform the services!

Ethiopia is a deeply religious country with the main religions being Christianity and Islam. Around 44% belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church while another 19% are Catholic or Protestant and 34% are Islamic. In the north the religion is mainly orthodox Christianity, hence Ethiopia is very famous for its churches and monasteries.

The two we visited stemmed from the the 14th century and were circular with thatched roofs and the most amazing murals painted inside depicting stories from the New Testament painted on cotton cloth. Most monasteries do not allow women, so we were lucky to be able to go there. They are accessible from the little jetties walking through forests with wild coffee growing beneath the tree cover. The trails were lined with stalls where the local villagers were selling and making their weavings, paintings, jewellery and siting doing it as well. It was somewhat reminiscent of the Bali artistic traditions in Ubud in the early days of development.

The monasteries were very interesting, and Yehenew knowledgable in giving us details and answering our questions. We returned across the lake arriving back in the dark. Of course we were absolutely exhausted having been up for more than 24 hours, but we managed a little supper and then collapsed





Ethiopia Day 2 Sunday 7th October 2018

Bahirdar-Gondar

After a 6 am breakfast we set off to drive for one hour to the start of a walk to the Blue Nile Falls. Being Sunday it was a wonderful opportunity to see village and Christian life.

We had woken to chanting at the church around 5:30, and as we drove through the streets of Gondar many people were heading to or from their churches. The women particularly have a large white shawl draped over their head and body, whereas the men still wearing shawls don't necessarily wear it over their heads, but they often carry a long stick, which is useful for leaning on in the long services.

We learned much about the religious life today, and about the fasting - there are over 200 fasting days in the Orthodox calendar, which mostly means not eating animal meat - this includes every Wednesday and Friday. For certain periods there is daytime fasting altogether, but not including children, the elderly, sick or pregnant women. If people cannot stay for the whole 3 and a half hour ceremony they have to stay outside the churches, so we saw lots of women outside the churches

Village life showed more how undeveloped much of the country is with water coming from a well for drinking, but from the river for bathing and washing. The countryside was green lush and well farmed, with lots of cattle, sweet corn and grain in evidence. The houses are constructed of a wooden frame, which is then filled with wattle and mud, and they are built on a cooperative level. The cattle often are kept in the house at night with the family living above. The families are large, but most children do attend school.

The walk to see the blue Nile Falls was very muddy as there had been rain the night before so we had lots of 'helpers' and shoe cleaners. We had to cross the river on a small ferry and walk for about 20 minutes on the other side. We

were rewarded with a spectacular waterfall at the end of the rainy season. It drops 45m, and we could see the rising spray from a distance away. We were lucky to arrive at a quiet time as small groups of tourists were approaching as we left, but we had just a few cows and goats and children playing football.

We headed back to Bahir Dar on the rough rutted road through the villages, and then onto the tarred roads of the town which has come alive with street markets and tuktuks taking people everywhere. We headed out on the road to Gondar nearly 200 kms away. The road was paved all the way, and we had spectacular scenery, firstly flat plateaus with rice and grain, and then through the mountains. Everywhere people were out grazing their cattle and goats, and we saw occasional interesting birds.

We learned all about the grain tea which is a grain unique to Ethiopia and used to make their staple carbohydrate injera. Growing it looked like a short wheat, and when it is ground and mixed with water it is left to ferment for up to three days before it is cooked. The result is a bit like a crumpet textured pancake full of holes and slightly sour. We ate injera for lunch (and dinner) and it turns out it is very good for you, high in nutrients and gluten free, and containing its own symbiotic yeast.

We stopped for lunch at Werota, obviously a popular restaurant with the locals, and we ate Tibs Inner which was a tasty lamb dish cooked in lime and green chillies, which we dipped the injera in with our fingers.

Yehenew wanted us to experience Ethiopian coffee which came on a special tray with a black pot serving three small cups. It is drunk black and thick not unlike Turkish coffee and is very good. In family life they have two coffee ceremonies a day, one in the morning when plans for the day are made for each member, and one in the evening when these are evaluated and shared - sounds reminiscent of our own childhood meals ...

On up through the mountains which were terraced in parts, and many goats, donkeys and cows were being herded, and suddenly we were in the bustling city of Gondar situated on many hills to the north of Lake Tana.

The city seems more of European than African origin as it was the capital in the 17th and 18th centuries, when there was influence particularly from Portugal. We went first to visit Fasiladas's Palace, probably the most impressive of all the castles found in the area and the oldest one! It was a walled compound on a hilltop and contained six castles of different generations of kings. (Having just been in Northumberland and seen some castles there, the remains were reminiscent) it is great it is being preserved as a world heritage site. We learned much of the history before going on to the Church of Debre Berhan Selassie (Light of the Trinity). The interior is decorated with beautiful frescos, cherubs and paintings. Debre Berham Selassie is rumoured to once having been the proposed final resting-place of the Ark of the Covenant of the Ethiopian Empire, which began in 1632. This was small and intimate, stone built and rectangular.

Our last visit of the day was to visit Fasildas's Pool where he had his summer palace. And where now there is an amazing ceremony on 16th January each year when all the arks often covenant are brought here from all over Ethiopia and the high prices converts the water to holy water and people come to bathe

in it or drink it or just touch it. This was an interesting place, and we also saw the ruins of a tomb he had built for his precious horse Suviel.

Already after 6 we checked into the AG hotel which was in the heart of the city and very noisy ... night clubs all around! We ate a vegetarian injera which was made from ground chickpeas and vegetables, and came looking like a giant stuffed pancake.









Ethiopia Day 3 Monday 8th October 2018

A fabulous day of mountain scenery, wild flowers and hiking with the baboons in the Simien mountains. We left Gondar around 8:30 and headed up to Debarke

Drive to Simien Mountain National Parks

'After breakfast drive to Simien Mountain National Park. Debarke is a small market town at an altitude of 2700 meters close to the boundary of the Simien Mountains National Park. Corrugated-iron-roofed buildings surround the colourful and busy market area. Before entering the park, you have to register at the park headquarters just outside town. Here we were joined by an armed scout – one of the park regulations.

We stopped briefly at the hotel where we are staying tonight and had a traditional coffee ceremony while our picnic was being made.

We drove for an hour or so into the very high mountains. En route, we passed through pretty country, the foothills of the Siemen Mountains, with carefully tended field, open pasture with grazing horses, stands of trees and distant rocky peaks. At the high point of the road, there were superb views across the weirdly eroded foothills of the range. We were dropped off by a troop of Gelada Baboons which are an endemic baboon to Ethiopia. There would have been around 50 members of the troop, the males were especially handsome with a golden main.

From here we hiked for about two and a half hours along the edge of the

mountain with spectacular views below, but also underfoot as there were many wild flowers blooming at the end of the rainy season. I did recognise quite a few, and there was the unmistakable smell of thyme underfoot. There were centaurea, edelweiss, salvia, Praia, red hot pokers, scabious to name a few. There were tree heathers covered in lichen, and birds of prey overhead, cicadas in the trees and lots of birdsong. This was a real treat, and an eye opener for my trek starting a week today.

We had brought a picnic from the hotel in Debark, and sat with a spectacular view below eating a cheese sandwich on delicious bread. After lunch we drove higher up the rough track for more views, but a storm came in, and instead we saw baboon troops rushing to shelter together in the rocks, a fabulous site, and then a rainbow which lasted a long time as we descended the mountains back to Debark to the simple Simien Park Hotel. There was hot water for a shower, and time to catch up with the diary

Great day







Ethiopia Day 4 Tuesday 9th October 2018

Today we had a spectacular 9 hour drive through the mountains all the way from Debark to Axum. There were superb views, and time to reflect on so many things we have seen and learned in our brief time here.

Reflections on Ethiopia

Great balance of history, religion and life in the town and country

Having Yehenew as a guide to ask questions really makes such a difference. He is enthusiastic and very knowledgeable, and can answer most of our questions, though is not so good on flowers and birds as history and religion. Having a car and driver eliminates a lot of hassle and saves so much time. Both Abraham and Yehenew are very attentive.

The depth of orthodox Christianity I was not expecting, and it seems to pervade life here which is fascinating. There is much symbolism in artefacts associated with the church.

The life for women is still hard of course as they work in the field and fetch the water and cook. The children do have free education and even university education is free at the point of starting. There are now 42 universities in Ethiopia. Although most people have shoes, we have still seen some barefoot. Villagers are given land to build their houses. Most villages have no electricity or water, but there are wells for drinking water and in the high mountains they have Springs.

The Ethiopian calendar is totally different from ours. Their new year is in September and they are now in 2011! They have thirteen months, each with a special name. Twelve of them have 30 days and the thirteenth 5 or 6 depending on whether or not it is a leap year. This makes it quite complicated when dealing with the rest of the world and international dates.

Everywhere there are goats, cattle and donkeys - the latter are used for work carrying and pulling.

Today we drove from Simien – Axum, and moved from the province of Amhara which has Bahir Dar as the capital to the province of Tigray which has Mekelle as it's capital. The people wear their hair differently, the houses are built of stone, and the land is very dry, but most fun was seeing camels being used!

We stopped in the city of Shire India Selassie at Africa hotel for coffee and a late lunch. This time we chose Shiro Tegabino which was another injera with a chickpea sauce, I think Yehenew is impressed by our enjoyment of his food.

We arrived at the Sabeen Hotel in time for a shower and catch up before dinner.





Ethiopia Day 5 Wednesday October 10th 2018

We tried a different injera last night which had less sauce and was a form of lamb tibs, it was tasty as all of them are with the sour dough of injera. On the way yesterday we saw fields of brown injera which apparently has the same taste but a different concentration of minerals!

We are now in the most northernmost province of Tigray, just 30 kms from the Eritrean border here in Axum. There have been really significant moves to end the Ethiopian/Eritrean twenty year war, and people here are so happy that they can now visit relatives there and have them visit here freely. Actually we saw crowds around trucks in the street here, and apparently already entrepreneurs are bringing in cheaper clothes to sell here in Axum. Historically and culturally Tigray and the whole of Ethiopia share strong links, and now they are hoping to build a big new port for ease of imports and exports.

The landscape here is so different from the green slopes of Amhara, here there are stark sandstone rockscapes and stone houses blending into the landscape lending more permanence than the wooden houses of Amhara.

Today we spent the entire day exploring the history of Axum. Firstly I found it one of the nicest towns we have visited as it is smaller and quieter with trees everywhere and views into the countryside from all sides. It is not too noisy or busy, and very manageable.

Axum is a contender for the oldest continuously inhabited cities in sub-Saharan Africa, it is also Ethiopia's most historically and archaeologically important town, as well as being the site of its earliest church and the spiritual home of its unique brand of Christianity. It is 2130m high and 1000km from Addis Ababa. In 1980 it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is full of fascinating, sometimes unexplained history. There has been some archaeology since the early 1900's, but it would be a paradise unexplored for those with the

money and knowledge to dig beneath this town. As we were shown around I had the feeling that LIDAR might reveal the full extent of what is here.

We started our tour with the local guide at the Stelae Park where giant obelisks were still standing, having been erected in the 4th and 5th centuries for Axumite kings over their tombs. The granite had been brought from quarries 4 km away, and of course there is much speculation as to how these huge things got here. You could go down underneath to see where the sarcophagus and artefacts were found. One of the stellae had been taken back to Italy by Mussolini in three pieces, and was only returned in the last few years by Russian plane!

There was a small museum on site with some artefacts, and a lovely place to sit in the shade while the coffee ceremony was performed for us, including frankincense being wafted over us. One of the three kings is believed to have been Ethiopian. From here we visited the remains of the Queen of Sheba's Palace, which had a wonderful view over the countryside. Although our guides are very keen to keep this association, apparently archaeologists dispute this! Onwards and upwards we visited her swimming pool (May Shum), which was a rock hewn reservoir, still being used by boys today for swimming. Again it is unlikely to have had anything to do with her, but may have given the town its name.

We also visited a tablet with writing in Sabeen, Greek and Geez found by local farmers, Kaleb and Gebre Meskel's tombs, which were amazing for the size of the stone slabs, and the perfect condition inside. All in all, every place we visited was amazing and full of speculation as to who, what and when, making me think the site must be enormous, and in the future we will understand it much more.

Our last visit of the day was to the Cathedral of Maryam Tsion, which was a whole compound, including a monastery of 720 monks, priests and deacons. It was here that we saw remains of the earliest church from the 4th century, and later buildings which house Axum's most famous religious artefact the Tabot or supposed Ark of the Covenant. This is in a completely closed building. There are other areas only accessible to men, but we were allowed to go into the 1960's huge building commissioned by Haile Selassie, and not unlike the look of Aya Sofia from the outside. There is also a huge bell tower in the form of a giant stelae. We did go in here, and of course there were many paintings, and it reminded me of a mosque! We did get to see and photograph a five hundred year old book which a priest read a short passage to us.

All the info and speculation was a little overwhelming, but in-between we managed to see some local life and had some good bird sightings. We had a great lunch of a different kind of injera with everything piled in the middle. Today is a fasting day, so there was no meat.

At the end of the afternoon we said goodbye to Abrohim our driver who was

returning over two days to Bahir Dar on his own. We have been very happy and confident with his driving and attention. We ate out with Yehenew at a local restaurant and retired for a well deserved rest before heading off by flight to Lalibela tomorrow.





Ethiopia Day 6 Thursday October 11th

This was a travelling day, so we had a last coffee ceremony with Yehenew before taking the shuttle to the airport. Although it is very close to the city, we saw lots of development along the way, so change will come to the peaceful town of Axum.

The airport was tiny, with only three flights a day, not sure if it is yet geared for more. The flight was only half an hour with great views all the way, and we landed on a high plateau which seemed much drier than where we had left. We were met by a new driver at the airport, and driven the half hour on dirt roads mainly up the mountain to the town of Lalibela, possibly the most well known religious place in Ethiopia.

Immediately there were great views all around and hotels that seemed to discretely blend into the countryside. We were dropped at the Tukul Village Hotel, which is the best in town. It was a joint Ethiopian-Dutch venture, combining stone and thatch traditional tukul style two storey round houses. Our room is on the top floor and quite delightful. We have a balcony, and were soon welcomed by four monkeys wanting to get in not so nice, we quickly shut the doors! Later on we saw the traditional tukul houses in the village.

Beth and I took lunch in the garden and had a change from injera with rice and vegetables, which were also served with the most delicious bread. Yehenew and the driver picked us up around 3pm to begin our tour of the famous rock hewn churches of Lalibela. We bumped into Binyam who was Susan's guide on her recent trip, and we will have dinner with him this evening.

Lalibela is named for the King and Saint of the same name accredited with excavating them in the 12th century. It is a UNESCO world heritage site since 1978, and there are 13 churches carved below ground level, ringed by trenches and courtyards, with stone graves and hermits caves, and

interconnecting passages. The wonderful thing is that they are living monuments with active churches even today after 800 years. As tourists we needed a pass to visit, and we began today with the northern group of churches.

King Lalibela allegedly designed this as the New Jerusalem, and accordingly gave names such as the River Jordan for the main river. Again there is much myth and speculation around how the whole site came into being, we were able to wander above and below the two most important churches, Bet Medhane Alex and Bet Maryam. These are free standing monoliths carved out of the rock with corridors around. What nobody had told me, or shown me in their photographs is that they are both covered by huge translucent white shelters erected with the Italians. There is currently some controversy over this as they appear to be damaging the very structure, so there is a move to get them removed the structures themselves have withstood the 800 years so far

We had a good look around from below, above and inside, and the whole complex was utterly amazing. We were able to take photographs inside - only Bet Maryam had any carvings or paintings, but they were all very atmospheric and had wonderful doorways and windows.

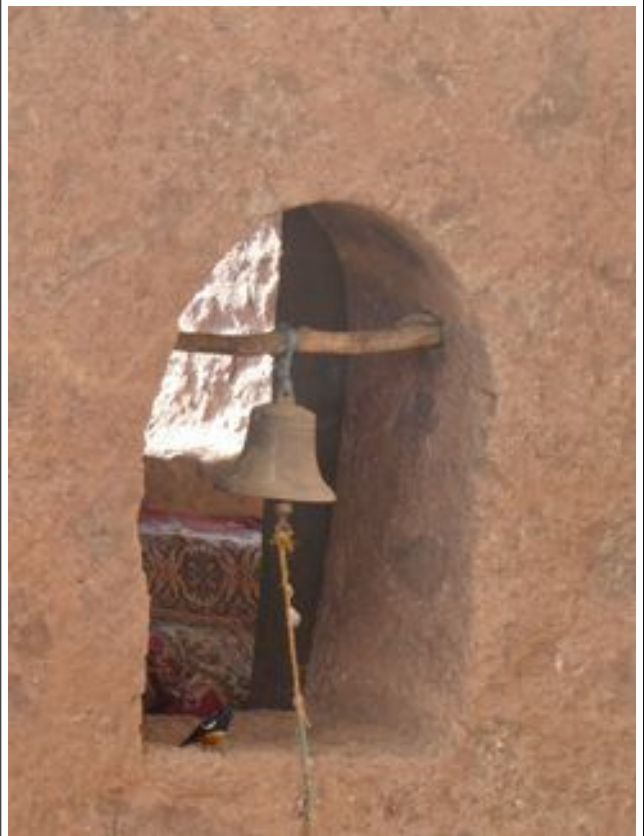
We had time to shower and catch up before meeting Yehenew and Binyam for dinner. Biny was in town with a French tour group, so we just coincided amazingly. We went to eat at one of his favourite places, and ate on the terrace of the owner, who put out a table specially for us, so that we felt we were eating at someone's house. This was super and we ate a large plate of injera shared between us all with lots of different vegetables - all just very convivial.

On the way home the sky was full of stars and I saw a shooting star which was very auspicious!













Ethiopia Day 7 Friday October 12th

Our second day in Lalibela and it began in a very relaxed way with a lovely breakfast which included the local bread and honey. We put our clothes in for washing, and I should start the second part of the trip completely clean.

Yehenew telephoned to say to meet him at Ethiopian Airlines with a slight panic that the next days flight was cancelled, but after a few panics, it looks as though we will be heading to the airport as planned tomorrow around 8 am.

We were dropped at the entrance to the complex and first visited the museum with artefacts and books from the churches. I did not mention that the museum in Axum was a bit of a disaster area, but indeed they both are. It would appear that they have absolutely wonderful items, but they are displayed so poorly I fear they will disintegrate before they are saved. There were so many precious items that could be restored and kept at temperatures to preserve them, I hope that something can be done before it is too late.

We revisited part of the northern complex before moving on to what is called the southern cluster, including Bet Gabriel-Rafael, Bet ABBA Lebanon's, and then a very special journey through a completely dark 50 m tunnel to Bet Lehman. Going through the tunnel was so eerie as you had no sense of distance or space, and could only feel your way along the right hand side and ceiling. Yehenew said we are going through hell to get to heaven - it was a real adventure and I do not think many people ever do this.

In visiting all these amazing rock hewn churches there are hazardous steps and passages, and magical entrances to negotiate. Often there would be a priest or monk falling asleep in the church itself, having spent the day in the dark insides.

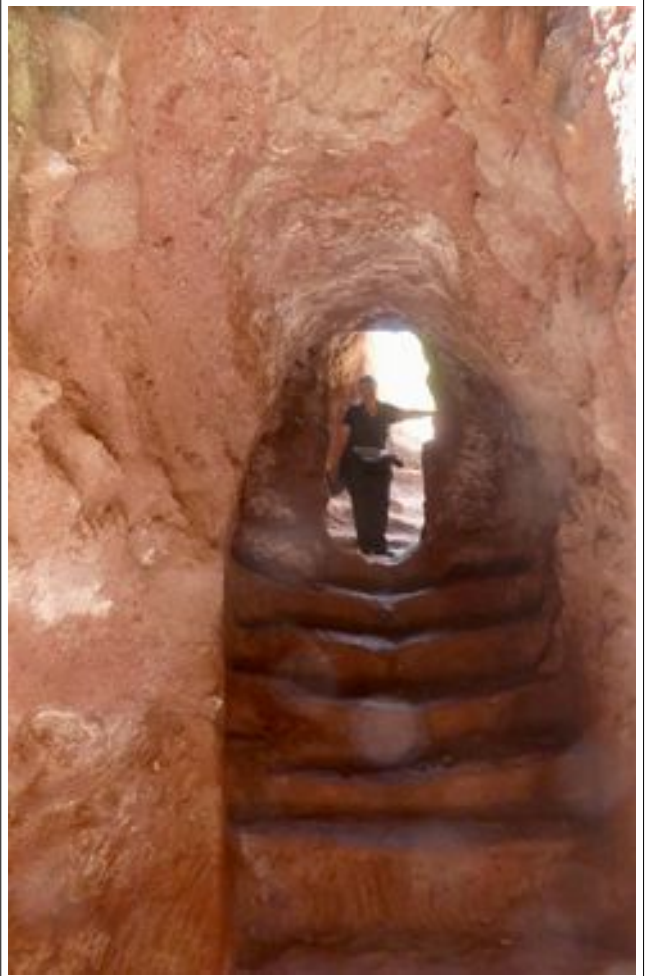
We escaped for lunch at Seven Olives where we saw several of the people we had encountered yesterday, and had a table in the lush woodland, with some wonderful birds, including a gorgeous blue one. We ate a marvellous injera with vegetables- today is a fasting day, and had a guava juice as well. We then went to a local coffee place for coffee ceremony before heading down to the last and most famous rock hewn church in Lalibela.

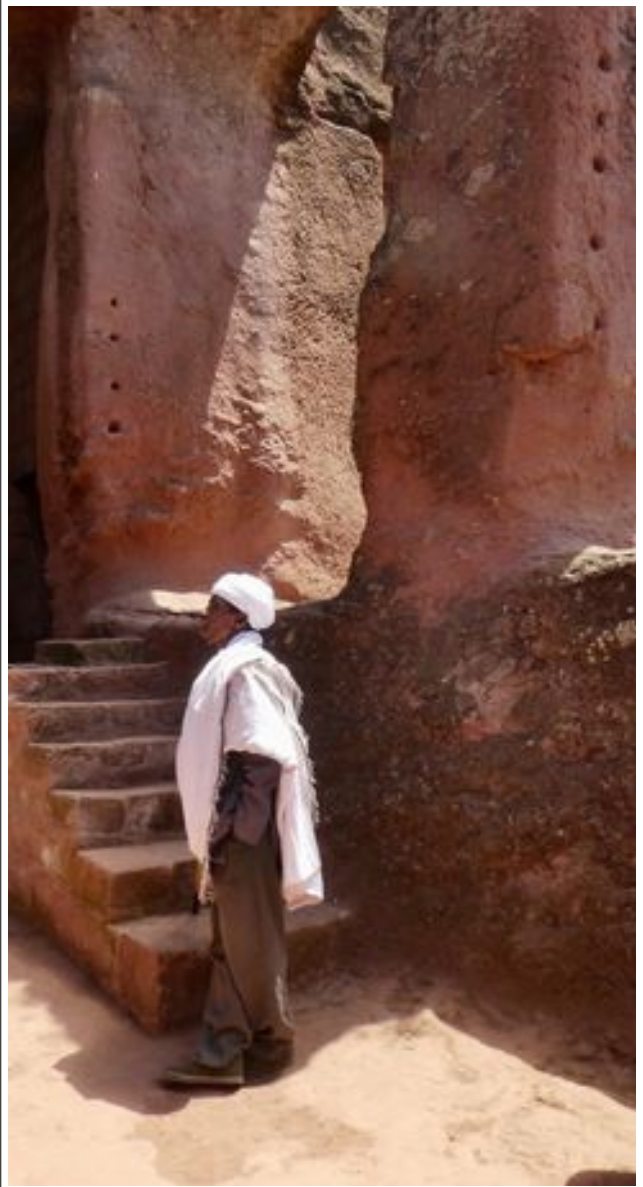
Bet Gyorgis, the church dedicated to Saint George is isolated from the others, and is left uncovered from protected shelter, probably because the view from above is the most iconic picture of Lalibela. The whole site did not disappoint, and it is 15m down to the bottom. There was a lovely yellow lichen hue to part of it, and when we got down inside, there were hermits caves, and human bodies which are left there for years- could not resist taking a photograph.

Back at the hotel I tried to assimilate the whole Lalibela experience, and it is a very special place to end our historic and religious tour, although tomorrow we hope to meet 'Lucy' in Addis Ababa.

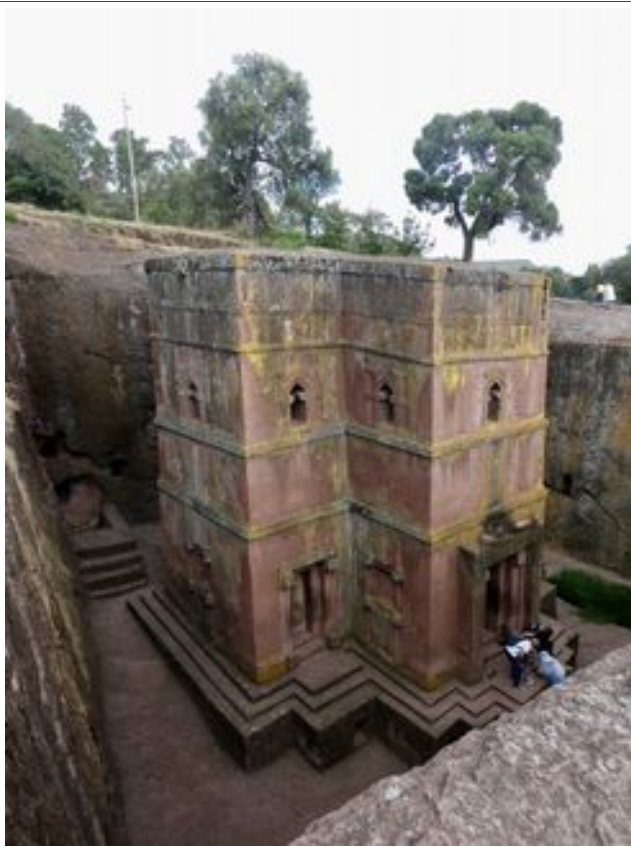
Tonight the last supper with Yehenew- we will be sad to leave him behind in Lalibela, we have become friends.













Ethiopia Day 8 Saturday 13th October 2018

Last night we ate for the second time at the Kana Restaurant where we had been with Biny the night before. This time we reflected with Yehenew on all the things we had done, and mutually we had truly enjoyed one another's company.

This morning we had another lovely breakfast in the peaceful surroundings of the Tukul hotel, and were picked up for the airport at 7:50. All went well for our flight to Addis, and we enjoyed a last look at Lalibela as people were coming from the surrounding villages for market. Unfortunately we missed the market itself! Despite all anxieties, the flight was on time and we were already in the bustling city of Addis before midday. We were met by Teddy, Binyam's partner, who is very friendly and is in charge of us for today.

Although the traffic was chaotic on a Saturday we arrived at the Blue Birds hotel not long after 12, and Sheilagh was there with her friend Tanya - brilliant that the plans all worked. Sheilagh flew in from Rwanda yesterday, so had time to catch up with Tanya.

Teddy took Sheilagh Beth and I out for the afternoon. First we went to a local restaurant in the University area for Shiro injera - we were amazed to see the girls on the next table order enormous burgers and fries with a beer which they were drinking through a straw! The next stop was the action all Museum of Ethiopia where we had come specifically to see Lucy, the 3.5 million year old *Australopithecus afarensis* skull discovered in the Rift Valley here in 1974. In terms of age, this has been superseded by Ardi in 1995 which is 4.4 million years old. Both these remains were in an excellent educational display in the basement. The funny thing was that just as got to these two key exhibits there was a blackout. Mobile phones with torches came into their own for the rest of the walk around. Upstairs there were artefacts from Axum, and memorabilia from Haile Selassie, including his throne.

Teddy next drove us through the largest market in Africa - utter chaos, but good to experience from the car - he was patience personified with all the people and cars. We stopped at the coffee place for Beth to buy coffee and then at the supermarket for her to get some tef flour before dropping Sheilagh at the Hilton to meet her friends, and then dropping us at our hotel to get changed for the last supper. I think this will absolutely be enough time to spend in Addis-Abeba.

We had a fabulous evening with Teddy at a Dessaleck Kittfo Cultural and Music Hall, which was full of local families all out eating together. Teddy ordered a Kittfo injera platter, and it was all so delicious. The music and dancing was interesting too, all folk stories being enacted- it was a great last night. The traffic was horrendous, I do not want to live in Addis Abeba.

So ended the first part of my Ethiopian experience





Important contacts I would recommend

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