



A Journey to the New Testament

Ethiopia, September 2001

Touching down at Addis Ababa Bole airport I had a feeling of déjà vu - I had been here in the early seventies, selling aircraft to Emperor Haile Selassie's government. In spite of a new terminal that is nearing completion, the place on a dark overcast day at the end of the rains was as dowdy as ever. On arriving at the passport desk third world beurocracy hit - a mistake by the embassy in Washington meant my visa had just expired, by 4 days. A solution was not to be easily found - after all rules are rules! I will have to leave the passport there and go into town to the main office to apply for another one. I could see the entire day disappearing without trace, so I went off to negotiate a truce with the senior immigration officer and it was finally agreed I could buy another one for \$40. It was not quite over yet, as the customs needed every detail of my cameras, laptop and cash recorded in duplicate before I was allowed to head outside to see if my greeter was still waiting! Amazingly he was, held back in the car park by sultry looking police.

Pushing past the usual hawkers and beggars, we headed into town to the Ghion hotel in downtown Addis. The city seemed depressed and the people, physically Africa's most beautiful, strangely subdued. I perceived none of the feeling of resurgence I had felt in Kampala, Uganda, the previous week. I had stayed at the Ghion 30 years ago and it has since definitely long since lost its 4 star status. I asked for, and was given, a "best" room, but my heart sank as I opened my door to the red velvet chairs, soggy beds, varnished wooden panels and stark wall lights. Threadbare red carpets were spread everywhere, in memory of grander times gone by. The television however did offer BBC satellite to stay connected. I had a late lunch - being late it was also cold and well past its prime- and I headed over the road to meet my agent Senait at Travel Ethiopia where I was able to easily send an E Mail and phone Nairobi. After a heavy rainstorm, I was off to the crowded airline office to change my return flight, passing the new incredibly opulent new Sheraton hotel, built with Saudi money - with Islamic strings attached.



I was taken to meet the owner of my ground handlers, Thomas Mattanovich, originally Slavic, a well-known hunter and fluent Amharic speaker, who had been a personal friend to the Emperor in the old days. We went on together for an excellent buffet dinner at the Hilton, meeting the charming, suavely dressed but apparently ineffective minister of tourism.

It was stressed that I must be at the airport two hours early for a 7 am flight, so that meant a 0445 am wake up call. Staggering into the transport on a cold Addis morning and rushing through deserted streets, the driver dropped us off and left. I pushed my trolley from the remote car park only to find the officious police guard was having none of it - the airline staff would not be there for another half an hour, so I would have to wait right there - gazing longingly at the warm and inviting terminal only 100 yards away. He demanded to see my tickets, peering at them upside down in the gloom. Ahmed, my escort, explained that the years of civil war and Marxist government had left a breed of officiousness where everybody now has, and exercises, the right to make themselves important at any point. Finally I made progress, and our Fokker 50 left the ramp absolutely full, only 10 minutes late. My destination was Axum in the far North of the country, which meant 3 stops at intervening Bahir Dar, Gondar and Lalibela. The high wings and reasonably low altitudes offer

excellent views of this beautiful and lush country. On the first leg I sat next to a PHD student studying fish in Lake Tana. The fish are failing to grow to sufficient size due to the soil erosion flowing into the lake, thus reducing the light; and then Solomon, an exile now running his own Queen of Sheba Ethiopian restaurant near Times square in New York. In Lalibela I met the pilot and he invited me to spend the last sector in the cockpit; bringing back memories of my previous life. There was low cloud on approach to Axum, but he showed skill in finding a hole and soon we were on the ground - waiting an inordinate amount of time for our baggage. My guide Belete had driven for 2 1/2 days up from Addis to meet me, and we went directly to the museum and the famous Steles. To visit the National monuments one has to also take a government guide and Tessfaye was assigned to me. He had led a chequered life, having been imprisoned and tortured by Mengistu's Marxist regime because his brother had joined the resistance fighters. He had managed to escape to Sudan and lived in exile.



The sheer immensity of Axum's history and the achievement soon removed any frustrations I had felt. The third biggest Stele - obelisk- 69 feet tall is still standing, though it leans at an angle of 15 degrees. Intricately carved to resemble doors and windows in the 4th century AD, the mind marvels at how they carved it from solid granite and hauled it 4 km and then erected it. The recent bloody war with Eritrea, whose border is just 30 miles north of here, in addition to shutting down tourism, has brought all excavations to a halt, and it will be many years before this treasure trove of this ancient Christian empire is fully revealed. However what one does see is spectacular and awe-inspiring: the amazing stela, the Queen of Sheba's swimming pool, and the rather dry

museum. We drove up on the hilltop overlooking Eritrea and the life of millennia gone by. There the dark clouds caught up with us, and a torrential downpour sent us scuttling underground into King Kaleb's ancient tomb, built in 542AD, to wait it out in the gloom with many cold and wet local people. Finally a candle was brought and we passed the time admiring the incredible masonry work in the tombs. Two inches of rain in 40 minutes started to pour down into the tomb, and turned our road into a river. In a flash flood just a little further down, a poor unfortunate donkey taxi was swept to his death; a reminder of the savagery of life in Africa.

In the continuing rain we went on to visit the three churches making up St Mary's church - the newest one built by Haile Selassie to allow women to enter. Here rumor has it, rests the legendary Ark of the Covenant, but no mortal has ever actually seen it! The aged monk, who is the appointed guardian of this famous relic, did generously agree to open up the yellow metal box containing five crowns of previous emperors. I was persuaded to take one more stop to see the Queens ruined palace just outside town - and while trying to dodge a very wet cowpat, my precious digital camera fell right into it - if I had not been so cross at myself and the potential disaster at the very beginning of a long and remote trip - I would have laughed!

Back at the simple government run Yeha hotel, any thought of a hot bath to warm up after the rain vanished when nothing at all issued forth out of the hot tap. The fried chicken dinner that evening was well illuminated by a lively group of Black American female tourists just completing a three country African trip to visit their roots.



Continuous overnight rain gave the early breakfast a soggy feel and we headed out to refuel - all fuel stations close at 430 pm everyday, imagining themselves to be government departments. Luckily there was diesel available today, so soon we were on our way. This is a nine-hour drive - or an 11-hour one, depending on



how many stops you make to photograph this piece of the New Testament, and I made many. Poor Belete - being asked to slow down at every potential photo opportunity - but I knew that I would not pass this way again anytime soon. It is unquestionably the most spectacular drive I have ever taken in my life.

As we headed South through Tigre province the poverty of the people really became apparent, certainly there were no cars, no bicycles, the only transport for the lucky ones was a donkey; almost everyone walked, most without shoes. They were carrying a myriad of items, from a miserable upturned chicken to a few sticks of wood to sell at Falasha girl their nearest market, this being a Saturday. The roadside was littered with old Russian tanks and rusting artillery, reminders of the ugly civil war in the early 90's that overthrew Mengistu. The army was still very much in

evidence as the bloody war with Eritrea only ended in 2000. The army pay has recently been raised from 150 bir per month (\$17) to 450 bir in an effort to stop them from terrorizing the local communities.

We saw only 40 vehicles all day, mostly trucks and buses and no other tourist cars, but speed was kept down by the constant flow of wandering peasants and their unruly goats and cattle. Belete enjoyed frequent use of his horn, but nonetheless it is amazing how insensitive to their own survival domestic stock can be. The fields were empty of their farmers as they crowded in to the market places to enjoy one of the few social occasions in their simple lives.

After 3 hours we wound our way down into the Tagaze gorge, spectacular in itself and a feat of engineering by Italian engineers and their poor Ethiopian labor force during the early years of World War 2. The river is crossed by a new steel bridge, the last one was lodged just downstream by the last floods.

Winding up the other side brought us the first glimpses of the incredible Simien Mountains. Evidence that Ethiopia is as old as time itself is shown by these granite slabs, hewn sharply on every edge, as though the gods themselves had designed each one. We stopped for lunch at the Ethiopia hotel - a one roomed eating area dominated by a condom advert for 25 cent items and a large wall painting of the Emperor Teodoros or Theodore. He is locally loved as he united the regions of Ethiopia - albeit by utterly brutal methods. He is known better to the Western world as having been mentally unstable, and kidnapped Queen Victoria's envoy, and sat on the poor fellow in chains until General Napier was sent all the way from England with an army to rescue him from an nearly impenetrable mountain fortress at Magdala. That campaign remains one of the most remarkable achievements in Western military history today.



All around us the simplest of life in this ancient kingdom continues, a peasant if lucky enough to find a job, will earn 5 bir - 65 cents a day. I hungrily wolfed down my packed egg sandwich - the Ethiopian eggs are the yellowest I have ever seen, while Belete enjoyed his local meal of Injera, curried chicken and local beer. I tried it all, but frankly the egg sandwich gained in appeal. While there, a man in his early 60's came in who spoke excellent English, and it turned out that he had been a member of Parliament in the last Emperor's reign. Then Mengistu had him imprisoned and bankrupted; he now cheerfully accepts his lot in life, looking after his parents and their simple hotel while listening to the BBC news twice a day. He walked with us to the market and hoped I could help him get a

small job guiding. It seems all of Africa has suffered upheavals, but few have had to endure so much hardship as the Ethiopians. The market was a bustling hive of activity, but the most of the active trade seemed to be in local beer.

Belete was anxious to drive on in order to make Gondar before dark and shortly we started down into one of the many tiny winding gorges of the Simien Mountains, each tight turn heralding a more breathtaking sight than the last. Words cannot describe the dramatic scenery, too vast to even photograph, interspersed with the simple beauty of Ethiopian peasant life. His skilful driving far exceeded the value of his monthly salary of 1,000 bir per month, on which he runs his family of eight children. School here up to standard 11 is free, except for uniforms and books, but the load of 800 bir a year when they get to university is crippling. His eldest child, a daughter of 25, is reading science, in the hope of finding a teaching job. I resolved to help him with a year of tuition for his daughter. This is the end of the rainy season, and everything is green and this is a time of relative plenty; there is little dust which is fortunate as the narrow twisting hairpin bend road offered few opportunities to pass. We drove by hundreds of waterfalls before finally rounding Malima Mountain to arrive at the town of Debrak at an altitude of 11,500 feet. The horse seemed to be the preferred transport here, offering imposing sights of proud householders hurrying to and fro from their business. The poverty is everywhere, yet it seems no one is hungry in this area.

We pulled into Gondar just after dark, and our hotel, the government run Goha, similar in design to its cousin the Yeha in Axum, is optimistically described as three star. Slightly better decorated, the hot water did flow, and I enjoyed a solitary tomato soup and fish dinner, washed down with a rum and coke, and made notes later by the meager fire.



"Amassa Ganallo" and "Ishii" are two Amharic words that will get you a long way in Ethiopia - "thank you", and "I see - OK - really" etc, and my frequent use of them brought radiant smiles from the very attentive hotel staff.

Heavy overnight rain gave way to a cheerful dawn and we went early to the church of Debre Birhan Selassie for the Sunday service. After watching the incongruous sight of a lecture given by a man with an AK-47 rifle slung over his shoulder while the priests looked on, the wedding of 25-year-old Mulagheta to his lovely 23 year old bride China took place, adding joy and a festive air to the place. I was honored to be able to take pictures of a people rejoicing, and spent a long time listening to the rhythmic chanting and dancing. Gradually the crowd began to filter away, and we gave three of the bridesmaids, who run a local hair dressing shop, a lift down the hill. We had to stop to let them out early before the ever-watchful police stuck us for running an illegal taxi!



This city though is not as ancient as others, built by Emperor Fasiladas in the 1640's, was the capital for 150 years and is altogether more cheerful and hopeful than Axum. We visited the imposing palace compound consisting of his own, and his sons castles. According to reliable reports of travelers at the time, these were once decorated with jewels, gold and ivory, and witness to sumptuous ceremonies until they were sacked by the Sudanese dervishes in the 1880's. It seemed more like a piece of Mediaeval Europe than Africa. We went on to his baths, which even today are used for the religious ceremony of Timkat in January. On the opposite side of town we visited the palace of his redoubtable estranged Queen, within which the Scottish traveler James Bruce later built a clinic, and had a child by her daughter in 1760.

Lunch was yet again soup and fried fish; thankfully Lake Tana yields endless supplies of albeit small tilapia. We drove to a nearby Falasha Jewish village: these once highly persecuted people now exist in poverty awaiting visits from benevolent Jews, and possible emigration to Israel. Back at the hotel, another wedding party swept in, so I worked on my notes out on the patio overlooking the town below, surrounded by shrilling Amharic music and the happy sounds of young love, with much clapping and chanting: very Arabic in style. This is a different Ethiopia, perhaps a middle class, but I doubt that many have jobs in this shattered economy.

Dinner, the third tomato soup and fish meal in as many meals, was spent with Niva, the only other hotel guest. Her lonely job as a Red Cross inspector was to visit the prisons and camps around Ethiopia.



A thirty minute drive to the new air terminal - Ethiopia is spending a lot of money on new internal airports - got me to the 20 minute flight to Lalibela on time, and quite a crowd gathered around us as I showed Belete all the pictures I had taken on my laptop.

Met at the airport by Hapte Gabriel we wound our way up, climbing 1,200 feet for 45 mins in an old Land Rover on the new road to Roha, the town built by King Lalibela in the 12th century. A quick stop to check in at the government Roha hotel, and we were on our way to see the nearby churches.



Nothing had prepared me for the spectacle that lay ahead. Acknowledged by Unesco as the 8th wonder of the world, 11 amazing churches are hewn into the solid tuff volcanic rock, each having a unique quality. A vast labyrinth of underground tunnels connects them all. The dedication and solid belief of the priests, in their simplicity and poverty within this dramatic place is palpable, and totally humbling. Hapte is the son of the late head priest of the Church of Gabriel, Kes Yitabarak, whom Angela Fisher had known and photographed in her spectacular book "African Ark" in 1986. As a result, we are never lost, and most importantly, are welcomed everywhere. Legend has it that angels helped these to be built in just 23 years, and one is forced to agree that there must have been some divine intervention to achieve this feat at all.

A service was in progress at our first stop, Beit Madani Alam. The monotonous pounding of the ceremonial drum and the somewhat discordant chanting of the priests and deacons created an unforgettable scene in the dim light.

A 93-year-old priest peered at this bible in the corner lit by two beams of the sun, and Hapte persuaded the chief priest to bring out the ceremonial Coptic crosses from the inner sanctum, and wait patiently as I tried to photograph him in the gloom. The meager few bir I left for him on the plate brought a huge smile to his face, as though I had left him the world. The exteriors of some of the churches have been ravaged by time and water, and have scaffolding around them as they plan restoration, but nothing takes away from their grandeur. We came across a christening ceremony and stopped to soak up the incense and the moving chanting.

The names of all the churches will not mean much to the reader, but every corner provides a fascinating scene, spectacular view and insight into this piece of the bible. We worked our way through Beit Madani Alam, Beit Maskal - Cross, Beit Mariam - decorated, Beit Debrsina / Golgotha - Tomb of King Lalibella, Tomb of Adam, Emmanuelle, Markorios. Underground to the now unused Bethlehem, Beit Abalibanos which was built by Lals' wife in 24 hours, Beit Gabriel which had been Hapte's fathers church, and finally St George.



Sitting at lunch with Bert, a Jamaican professor who is working on a vaccine for malaria, and the only other guest at the hotel, we both felt humbled by all we had seen. In the afternoon we beheld more amazing sights in beautiful light, culminating in the most famous Church of Saint George. Hapte took me home to meet his mother, now a nun after the death of her husband, who gently invited me in to give us coffee in her simple abode. Hapte, one of nine children, is 32 and not yet married. He still dreams of having four kids, though not until he can get his tour guide business going. I wonder how I can help him move ahead in this stagnant economy. He then took me to his house and proudly showed me his well thumbed signed copy of the "African Ark", which sadly his father never saw, but was used during the 40 days of ceremony after his death for the visitors to offer their prayers to.

The government hotels are all similar, close your eyes and you could be in any of them; adequate, though needing investment in money and ideas. The simple set menus are surprisingly tasty. People in the North are very friendly and allow you to photograph them if you take a little time with them and ask. It does help that I am able to show them the result on my digital camera screen, much to their delight. A few will ask for a bir or two - such a small contribution to their simple lives. Fortunately the "gimme pen" syndrome is still rare. One needs to carry a lot of small notes, as there are few places to change larger ones - the one bir notes have spent a lot of time in loincloths and smell quite awful, so there is a further incentive to give them away as soon as possible!



Hapte took me, after another scrambled egg breakfast, to the St Emanuelle church for the morning celebration there, and completely moved, I sat for over an hour on a bench next to several priests, while 20 others stood and chanted to the rhythmic pound of the drums, clanking their antique sistrum brasses. I watched a line of people coming to the priest with their ailments. These he would address by rubbing them all over with his beautiful and ancient brass cross. The history of Ethiopia is packed with cruelty and bloodshed, yet theft is virtually unknown, and I am welcomed everywhere into the most private sanctums of their lives. I had time to contemplate my relatively extraordinary life, and give thanks for all that I have, and wonder why I should be so privileged in the midst

of all this - but yet, perhaps they are the privileged ones - who knows.

The flight to Addis whips me back to reality and on the plane I meet up with my first client to this area, Bob Linton from Park City. He is sitting squashed in next to deacon, and has also been awestruck by the beauty of it all.

We are heading on to South now to witness a totally different Ethiopia...