

Dear Friends and Family,

Ancestral Traditions was the name of the tour on which eleven of us embarked for two weeks in January visiting traditional villages of southern Ethiopia. Among at least ten different ethnic groups we observed varied forms of dress, body decoration and ornamentation. We could also see that the materials and techniques from which they constructed their huts and granaries were different and that the languages were distinct.

Interestingly, there is not a lot actually known about their customs and traditions. The most definitive work is currently occurring at the South Omo Museum and Research Center in Jinka. They have a video library of various ethnic groups' cultural events (we watched a video of a diviner predicting the future from the contents of slaughtered goats' intestines), and interviews regarding customs. There are very good exhibits of tools, musical instruments, clothing, etc.

The natural environment was also stunning. It had not occurred to me before the trip that we would be at the northern beginning of the Great Rift Valley running south through many countries of

eastern Africa.



At Lake Chamo you are up close and personal with hippos and crocodiles while touring in local dugout canoes!





Generally speaking, this region practices subsistence agriculture and raising animals, especially goats and cows, with very little cash economy. Since there are not any tourist facilities in the actual tribal areas the only benefit they receive from the gradual introduction of tourism is payment for photography and entrance charges to their villages. One cannot begrudge paying 2 brrh (about 10 cents) per photo taken (per person). The frustration for me was that I prefer to capture people going about their normal activities rather than posed.

Fortunately, we visited three different market days and it was a bit easier to get candid photos and observe the shopping/social interaction. Usually more than one ethnic group were present at the market. Even in that situation, however, some people clearly did not want to be photographed, which I respected. So, the photos are a mixture of candid plus posed from this part of the trip. I then traveled solo in the north for an additional week.

The village structures in some cases are remarkable. For example, the Dorze – their “huts” are shaped like giant beehives. They start out life about 12 meters tall (~ 40 feet) and the interior is divided into rooms for animals, children, food storage, parents and a central common room where tea and coffee may be prepared. There is no central support pole. A separate building is used for communal cooking. Because termites gradually eat away at the base of the structures, after about 80 – 100 years it may be only about ten feet tall and no longer useful for habitation.



The “roof” of faux banana leaves is re-woven about every 20 years.

The Dorze make complete use of the false banana, not only for roofing materials. They scrape the leaves with the ribs being twisted into strong ropes, the flesh is buried in a pit for three months to ferment and then cooked like a pancake (enset) which was delicious





served with the local wild honey. They also make very strong spirits, araki, like ouzo but stronger. In this tribe the men weave beautiful fine cotton cloth and the women spin the thread. Our guide wore his hair in dread locks like a Rastafarian, although the Dorze



are Ethiopian Orthodox



Christians.

The children were playing and showing off for us.

Most of the other tribes had separate pens for the animals when they were not out grazing – some even had separate poultry houses, and pens for nursing mother goats and their babies. Goats are considered even more valuable than cows because they can withstand periods of drought.



The Konso, who live on top of very steep hills (almost impassable roads even with the Toyota Land Cruiser in dry season) are believed to be the first Africans to practice terraced agriculture, which they do intensively and successfully.

We visited the current (21st) Konso King (plus his ancestors' graves).



He is responsible for mediating the cultural/interpersonal squabbles of 75,000 tribe members out of the 300,000 residents of the Konso region. He was educated and working as an engineer, after serving in the army, when his father died and he had to return to the village and assume his duties. There are nine Konso groups each with its own sub-chief.

These villages have high stone walls separating family units and are easily



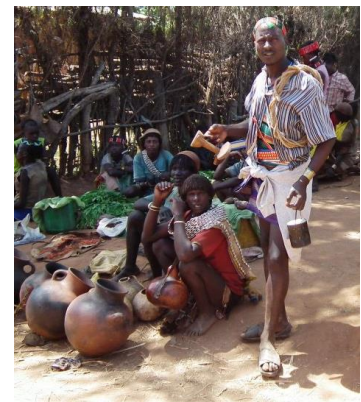
guarded since to gain access

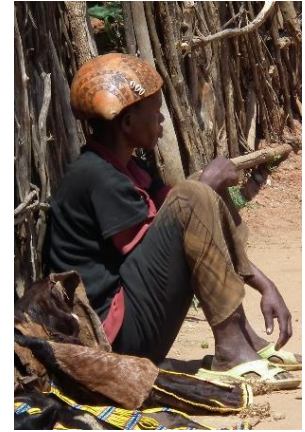
you have to crawl through a tunnel!

We walked to the graveyard where he explained the “totem” poles of the ancestors.

I was very excited to see Moringa Oleifera trees planted among the other crops (and served at dinner that night). In Benin, education regarding Moringa was a major pcv project as it has a high nutritional content and is especially valuable for children. We saw posters announcing Moringa education seminars posted in this part of Ethiopia!

Our first market day was at Key Afer where we saw Hamer women (wearing animal skin skirts and cowrie shell bandoliers plus distinctive iron necklaces describing their marital status, i.e. first wife, # of children, etc, and ochre plaited hair), Bana wearing a helmet-like hat made from a gourd,





and Tsemai men with beaded head bands. We saw locally grown tobacco and coffee bean shells which are widely brewed and drunk as coffee. We stayed at a beautiful lodge with individual huts and in the morning overlooking the valley at sunrise I heard hundreds of roosters crowing to greet the day. It made me think I was hearing calls to prayer!



Near Konso on another mountain, we visited a miniature “grand canyon” known as New York!

Women of the Ari tribe are historically the potters of the southern tribes, although they do not use a potter’s wheel.

The vegetation in their area is so lush it reminded me of Micronesia with taro, tapioca/cassava and avocados.



Throughout the trip the basic national dish was the same – injera is a large crepe (pizza pan size) made from tef, a local grain grown in Ethiopia’s highlands. On it are placed a wide variety of seasoned/cooked vegetables and meats – a bit like an Indonesian Rijsttafel. You break off bits of the injera and use it to gather your bites. Lots of great lentils, peas, beets, moringa/spinach, and cabbage, but also grilled and stewed meats.



Delicious! And they weave beautiful special large baskets with lids like tajines to carry the injera to communal events, such as the eve of Epiphany, a major Christian religious holiday which we observed in Jinka.



This is the Christian rite of baptism and the nearby river was busy with travelers’ cleanliness as well as preparations for the Epiphany baptism ceremonies the next day.



A magnificent sunset ushered in Epiphany.



The Ethiopian Orthodox fast two days of every week, plus a month several times during the year. Fasting for them means no meat, one reason for the very delicious variety of vegetable dishes.

There are also many occasions when chanting in the church continues throughout the night which was often our background music. Drumming is an important part of the service, and there are crutches for under the shoulder to lean on to get through the long service!



In the south there is a large Muslim population as well as Evangelical Christians.



In some small towns we saw only one religion but most had all three represented.

One of the tribes we visited, the Mursi, are known for the clay or wooden disks inserted in their lower lips by the high caste women. They live in about 20 villages in the Mago National Park and are nomadic – periodically moving their villages.



The one we visited overlooked a major bend in the Omo River where we could see fishermen in dugout canoes.



This was our first glimpse of the shepherds carrying Kalishnikov rifles! Although there is little large game remaining in the preserve, poaching is still practiced, plus the shepherds are protecting their herds.

The lower Omo Valley is unique in that it is home to so many peoples in such a small area, a true cultural crossroads of Cushitic, Nilotic, Omotic and Semitic people as they migrated historically. Traditional rivalries remain active between some tribes, while others inter-marry. Animism is the main religion.



Many ethnic groups in the Omo region practice body painting and scarification. The body painting is most often with white chalk and often looks like the plumage of the guinea fowl.



But we also saw other colors, especially “leggings” on the men at the Hamers’ jumping of the bulls ceremony. This is a periodic gathering of several villages when men are ready to complete the rite permitting them to be married, by running naked across the backs of 20-30 bulls. Much dancing (bells and horns) by the women and dancing/jumping/clapping by the men’s friends, and drinking of coffee preceded the event. There were a couple hundred of celebrants

who had brought their bulls from multiple villages and we were very lucky to be camped nearby

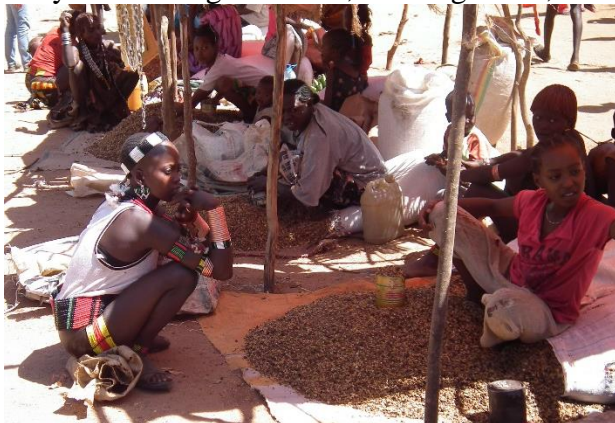


when the celebration was scheduled! I don't know what their access is during the rainy season since we traveled on dry sand river beds in order to get there. This is also, shockingly, when many women choose to be whipped to create scars on their backs to show their strength as future wives.



Interestingly there were no drums, but still plenty of ENERGY and NOISE!

Because we camped three nights near Turmi, made day trips to other villages, and visited two market days we began to feel as if the Hamar were our “family” as we saw them pursuing their daily life – along the roads, drawing water, etc.





Other than the jerry cans/bidons (yellow 20-gallon plastic cans used for hauling water) almost all materials here are natural. Water is obviously key, and throughout the south we tended to see wells every few kilometers, always with lines of people waiting to fill their jerry cans. Anywhere that a river actually had water it was full of people bathing, doing laundry as well as washing vehicles and animals.

Other sights that were typical were the various forms of transport of goods, the local schools, roadside sellers, and herds of animals.





skins. Women were grinding from goat skins.

In order to visit the Dessanech we technically had to “emigrate” from Ethiopia (to Kenya) and present our passports before crossing the river in dugout canoes. The Omo river is the source for Lake Tanganyika in Kenya. Here the married women braid their hair differently, both men and women pierce below the lower lip and women remove the two middle lower teeth. They also use a wide variety of objects (i.e. bottle caps, bottle opener) to decorate their headdresses. About 450 people live here and there is an elementary school. The huts are made from a combination of bark, corrugated metal and goat sorghum and scraping hair





The smallest remaining ethnic group, the Karo, have only about 2500 members in five villages and are not nomads. The girls use butter and ochre to arrange their hair in tiny balls and many still pierce the lower lip and ears to insert wooden or clay disks. They often intermarry with Hamar.

In this area there were an extraordinary number of termite houses – all shaped like phalluses, not like the castles in Kenya. At night the stars were so bright they felt close enough to be touched!

After breaking camp in Turmi we drove through savannah and visited a village of the Erboire tribe. Here we saw grain storage buildings made of clay for sorghum which can be stored for several years in case of drought.

Someone spotted a snake and a group of villagers, including one of our driver/guides went chasing after it and caught it!



The women here were wearing elaborate beaded necklaces and liked my red lipstick!



We headed back north through Konso where the women wear colorful distinctive two-layered skirts.



Everywhere, the men are always carrying a wooden head rest and stick when walking.



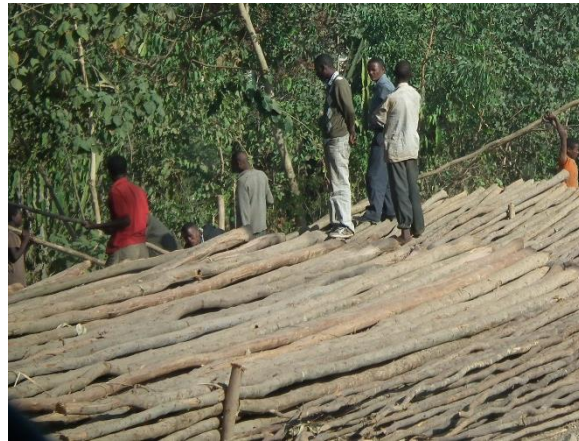
This is perhaps the time to mention the over-riding impression of people constantly in motion. I was taking photos from the car – most days we covered at least 200 km – mostly piste – and I was almost never out of sight of people, animals, and/or carts. And, of course, approaching any town on market day the roads were crowded with people of all ages on foot and always carrying – something!



Between Yabello and Yaorgaalem we were in a very fertile region of bananas, tobacco, grains and coffee plantations. We visited a coffee plantation and saw the beans spread to dry and being processed. That evening we participated in the traditional coffee ceremony practiced throughout Ethiopia.

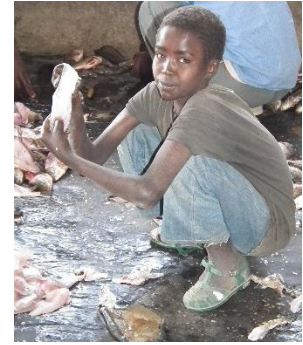


As we traveled north horses briefly replaced donkeys and planted eucalyptus forests were prevalent: their tall straight trunks are used for all manner of construction.



There was also cotton production in several areas.

At Awasa (the capital of the southern region) we visited the fish market where tilapia and golden lake fish were being brought by the fishermen and watched the huge stork



population collecting their share.

After returning to Addis Abeba it was time to visit the other “face” of Ethiopia – the so-called historical circuit – which I accomplished in five days by flying Ethiopian Airlines to each city and spending a day as a solo traveler with a driver/guide. Ethiopian Airlines takes security seriously, beginning with a search of each vehicle and its passengers before entering the airport property, the second at the terminal entrance (only passengers permitted inside) and the third just before boarding the plane.

I started at Axum, considered the birthplace of Ethiopian civilization, which was a major trading center with Egypt, Rome, Nubia, Greece, Syria and India by the first century A.D. Axum is known for pre-Christian stele (giant solid granite grave markers) as well as the Tsion Mariam Church next to the Axum Cathedral where Ethiopians believe the original Ark of the Covenant was brought by Emperor Menelik (son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba) in the 1st C B.C. Ruins of a palace of the Queen of Sheba can be seen as well.



I was fortunate to be there on a market day to see the huge market of baskets made in this region. The women's clothing is distinctive and I also saw a wedding party having their photos taken.



Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity became the state religion in about 330 A.D. with St. George as their patron saint.



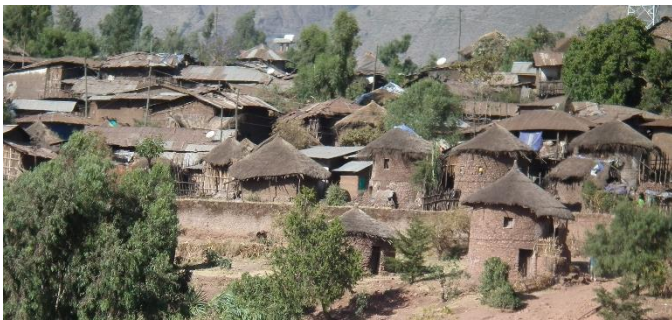
The next period of significant building activity after the Aksumites lost their hold on the Red Sea trade was the period from around 1137 to 1270 when the Zagwe dynasty built the rock hewn churches of Lalibela. Of the 11 churches, some are completely freestanding while others still have the rock forming part of the structure. Frescoes of various eras abound inside the churches which are protected by giant roofs provided by UNESCO. These churches are an active center for



Ethiopian Christians' spiritual life.



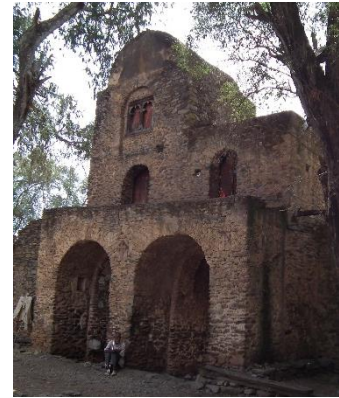
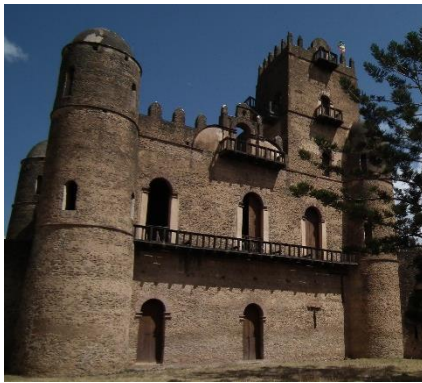
Lalibela also uses grain storage outbuildings and I got to see a little bit of town life, including a wedding group.



The landscape in this part of Ethiopia is most reminiscent of Utah and New Mexico. I was happy I had decided to fly from one historic town to another rather than drive.



Next up was Gonder with a compound of six different castles built from the 17th C by different kings at different times. This was another example of the outstanding knowledge of stone masonry I saw all over Ethiopia, up to and including bridges and drainage conduits currently under construction which look as if they will last for hundreds of years!



In addition to the castles, which included Turkish baths, lions' cages and stables, (plus local monkeys), King Fasiladas' pool lies nearby.



And of course Gondor is a town with its market days, local restaurants and life other than history!



The Debre Berhan Selassie Church with its stunning frescoes depicting good and evil overseen by the faces of winged cherubs was one of my favorites.



From here I was driven through pine-forested hills to Bahir Dar on Lake Tana, second largest lake in Africa, source of the Blue Nile and home to dozens of monasteries on its 37 islands.



route the observations were not that different from in the south. There were some interesting rock formations and there are mosques in the north.



Traveling on Lake Tana itself was fun. These monasteries house many religious relics, including gold and silver crowns of former monarchs (as did the museums at Aksum and Lalibela). Most of the monasteries are not open to the public and some can only be visited by men, but I visited Ura Kidane Meret with lovely 16th C paintings on skins that were then attached to the walls. The



natural pigments used are still fresh and vibrant today. UNESCO has added a metal roof to protect this structure and built a new museum to house many of the monasteries' treasures which will shortly be open. Unfortunately I generally found it difficult to capture these monuments on film, especially the interiors. So I apologize for the lack of photos of this part of the trip.

Back in Bahirdar I saw some other Ethiopian crafts.



In closing, I can't recommend a trip to Ethiopia highly enough! I haven't even talked about the two excellent museums in Addis Abeba, one housing the famous 3 million year old skeleton of Lucy, plus the beautiful Orthodox cathedrals and stimulating markets. To go to the south you have to definitely avoid the rainy season as many of the sites we visited would simply not have been accessible. A 4x4 vehicle with competent driver is essential, and a decent variety of levels of accommodations are available.



Marilee