

Final Edition

Our Work

Last week for the first time I, got to do engineering and agricultural work. We flew one hour west by turboprop plane to Dire Dawa, then 4 hours down into the desert by 4WD Jeep. First you still see green trees, then dried dead thorn bushes and eventually only stones and dust. White bleached bones from dead camels appeared in the desert, there has been no proper rain for 4 years and temperatures can hit almost 50 deg C in summer. Our destination was the small town of Asha to work on a solar powered water pump.

In the lowland desert of eastern Ethiopia and the Somali region over a million nomadic farmers live from camels and goats which seem to live on nothing, all I could see was dying thorn bushes and stones. These farming people are as thin and tough as nails. They walk vast distances herding their animals and live under blankets thrown across a frame of sticks (below). They have nothing and somehow live from nothing.



We had bought a big bag of bread, tinned tuna & water. On the way to the well, we saw a solitary tree growing beside a leak in the water pipe. It's shade provided a perfect spot for our picnic (above right). HelpAge financed a solar powered water pump (below left) for the desert town of Asha and I was asked to train the local operators how to use the system. Never again will I complain about Irish rain, after seeing locals celebrate with exuberant joy, water flowing from a tap in the desert (right below).



Another project was the construction of a water irrigation canal for the farmers of three villages. All the women and children came to celebrate and pose for a photo (below left) in front of the new canal. These farmers had lost their livelihood in a freak flood and the new irrigation system and modern seeds from HelpAge provided a promising new start. Local farmers were stunned how modern seed imported from Europe, produced crops of onions with almost three times the yield of their traditional seed (below right).



Carolina did a full day of training about project management and fundraising to staff and volunteers from two local partners in Dire Dawa town while we were away. Also back at the office we are implementing a “Report Deadline Planner”. This is a system for checking that reports about how donor funds are used are submitted on time, often paper work gets confused and accountability for donated funds is not clear. However being an inspector and checking accountability is never popular and diplomatic skills are required.

Long Landcruiser Journeys

During our two months working here we had one week of holidays. So we rented a 4WD Jeep between Christmas & New Year and headed north. Most of the vast country is not very accessible. Toyota Landcruiser Jeeps, with 4 barrels of fuel and 2 spare tires on the roof are the standard cross country tractor. Some journeys are not measured in hours or even days but sometimes weeks. Only a few central roads have a tarred surface, most roads are dirt tracks winding for hundreds of kilometres through the mountain terrain.

Europeans have no idea what a blessing tarred surfaces are!!! Un-tarred mountain roads slow you down to an average speed of 30km, the jeep and especially the dash board shake so violently that you can hardly hear each other speak. Cracks in the metal bodywork grow longer, stones savage the tires and parts fall off the vehicle. All windows have to be closed tightly as a big plume of yellow dust rises behind the jeep. Our jeep doors were buckled from previous crashes and we stuck up the cracks with tape to battle the dust. However after 10 hours chasing across the mountain tracks the entire jeep was filled with yellow dust and our faces had turned black and muddy.

Ethiopian truck drivers are a special breed. They travel for weeks with 40 ton loads and chew chat (leaves from a bush) which is a drug stimulant to stay awake. The mountains tracks rise and descend 1000m at a time with hairpin bends and dangerous spots are always marked by rocks and rolled over trucks from failed brakes. The drivers call it rock & roll (below left). Rocks fall down the mountain on to the left side of the road and the right side of the road has slipped down into the valley, so often there is only width for one vehicle at a time. You always have to weave slalom through an endless obstacle race to avoid rocks, missing road, donkeys, cows, people, horse carts,etc. Our faithful Toyota Landcruiser tractor only had minor health problems; a light fell off, the front suspension broke and when we crossed inaccessible mountains in thick fog & rain the wipers died. I improvised, took the wiper blade in my left hand, opened the window and did a manual wipe (below right).



FOUR HOLIDAY DESTINATIONS (from Christmas to New Year)

We took holidays for a week, ventured north and explored 4 different regions.

1 - Lake Tana

Lake Tana is the 4th largest lake on the African continent. When you travel across it, the water meets the sky at the horizon and you lose sight of all land. It is the source of the famous blue Nile and home to Hippos and Crocodiles. Near the lake exit are the famous blue Nile water falls. Locals still paddle a full day on ancient Egyptian style papyrus boats, with a heap of firewood for the Bahir Dar town market (bottom left).



We were typical tourists and travelled by boat to visit some of the 30 old orthodox Christian monasteries (16th century). The circular African churches are made from timber with a grass roof (top right). Inside is a square sanctuary which is painted on all sides with bright biblical paintings used for teaching the faithful (below).



2 - Gondar The Old Capital

Gondar was built by King Fasiladas in 1636 as capital of Ethiopia. It is the most southerly reach of old Mediterranean architecture and for the local African culture King Fasilada's city was an architectural wonder. Many churches were built which are famous for their colourful interior murals. The 135 angels looking down from heaven (the ceiling) of Debre Berhan church are the most famous (bottom right).



On the 19th of January the entire town (4000 people) have a big splash when they celebrate Timkat (baptism of Christ) by jumping simultaneously into Fasilada's Bath, an Olympic size 400 year old pool (bottom left). Ethiopian Orthodox Church religious celebrations are a lot more dramatic than back at home.



Lions were a symbol of royalty for Ethiopian kings, since time immemorial. All kings wore lion hair as a royal head decoration and kept lions as pets in cages and for eliminating the most reviled enemies. In Fasilada's castle lions were kept until 1991 but now the cages are only for mad tourists (above right).

3 - Simien Mountains National Park

From Gondar we bumped 3 hrs north to explore the Simien Mountain National Park. It was the first time we needed a guard, a local farmer with a gun, which is standard procedure for westerners especially near Somalia (bottom left). The mountains hit 4500m but most spectacular are the grand canyons with a sheer drop of over 1000m.



No place can compete with Africa when it comes to wild animals and Ethiopia is no exception. A herd of almost 50 baboon monkeys posed for the camera and wild goats (walia ibex), leopards and wolves roam the mountains.



4 - Lalibela Rock Churches

Lalibela, a UNESCO world heritage site, is home to a unique and very laborious form of architecture. The challenge was to carve a church with all interior and exterior details out of one single solid rock (bottom right). This feat has been done 11 times within Lalibela mountain and all of the 11 churches are joined by a maze of connecting tunnels (bottom left). They were built around 12th century AD, by king Lalibela. You need a local guide because you can get lost more easily than inside one of the pyramids.



Pilgrims walk up to a month for special festivals at Lalibela, wrapped in a blanket, a stick and a bag of grain slung over the shoulder for food. Thousands of them sleep outdoors on the neighbouring hillsides during festivals (bottom right) cooking food, chatting and praying. On the 1st of January we got up early, to experience sunrise at Bet Giyorgis rock church. At dawn a religious ceremony consisting of a long litany of prayers with a thousand pilgrims dressed in white cloaks and all bowing repeatedly towards the central cross church (bottom left) left a deep impression. The murmur of many voices and chants went on for 2 hours.



Ethiopian Christmas & Timkat

Ethiopians have a different calendar and their Christmas is celebrated on 7th of January (our calendar). Christmas dinner is not about turkey but all about sheep. Actually 600,000 sheep are slaughtered throughout Addis Ababa that evening. The men of every household are busy skinning and carving up the carcass. The women cook a large feast with several dishes made from the meat, with salads and as usual chilli is not omitted from anything (bottom right). For days before Christmas farmers cracked whips and shouted at herds of stubborn sheep passing our office, in the city centre. All men walked home with a live sheep wrapped over their shoulders on Christmas day. The next morning all street corners had heaps of sheepskins piled high for collection. Another must have speciality is sweet bread, which is part of the religious ceremony and distributed to all guests (bottom left). We were invited into the homes of two work colleagues and celebrated Christmas twice on that day.



However a much larger event and the biggest festival of the year is “Timkat” celebrating the “Baptism of Christ” on the 19th of January. Everybody dresses in white, and over 500,000 people march in various processions where the arc of the covenant (replica of the 10 commandments) is carried under coloured canopies by priests in bright vestments (bottom left). Green grass is scattered in honour on the streets and groups of men with sticks dance in circles banging on festival drums. Crowds push and shove and several police assaulted our group with sticks as we entered the field, trying to keep law and order?



The destination of the processions is a field with a festival & many games. I tried a challenging local game, where you have to hit a suspended jug while blind folded. The locals had a good laugh at my failed attempt (top right).

Markets

In Addis Ababa there are about 20 small supermarkets which supply foreigners with a limited choice of western food. Towns have kiosks along the street side specialising in local necessities. But most Ethiopians still buy directly from the farming population through the village market. I was given a tour of such a market by two school boys who had learnt good English. The site was divided into areas for- cattle (bottom left), sheep & goats, a chicken market, grain market (barley, beans, teff...), spices and salt market (very bottom right) and everything you can think of including a bee buzzing honey market (bottom centre). Everybody was busy haggling for a better price, produce was displayed on an open blanket and it was a lively sociable occasion.



Most of the country people predominantly wear traditional dress which consists of blankets wrapped around the body and over the shoulder. For men carrying a stick across the back of the shoulders (perhaps a derivative of former spears) is essential and hands are hung on either end. They walk straight and proud like this following herds of cattle. They rarely carry things, which is left to the women. Another smaller blanket is wrapped around the head as a hat. Younger people wear half western clothes (trousers) at the bottom and half traditional with a blanket around the top. Below left is a group of village elders inspecting modern trousers at the village market.



Harar an Ancient Walled City

When we were working for HelpAge in eastern Ethiopia we had the opportunity to visit the walled medieval city of Harar (bottom left). This is the 4th holiest city for Islam, with many mosques. Inside the walls is a maze of small pedestrian alleyways and everybody is busy coming & going.

During our overnight stay in Harar loud commotion and shouting started on the street outside. I looked out near midnight to investigate, and was shocked to see a large fire brighten up the night sky. It grew rapidly, flames engulfing the shanty town shacks across the street from us. The electricity died and we packed our bags with mobile phone light, headed up the dark corridor together with 4 other concerned tourists. We watched the fire move towards the petrol station across the road and when we could feel the heat from the fire, we decided to flee the flames and pushed through the crowd, got a taxi and found safety in another hotel. About 300 homes burnt to the ground that night (no water) and people with few possessions lost everything. However this is Ethiopia, these were poor people and nothing was mentioned on the news.



Next Wednesday the 26th of January we are going to arrive back at home. There is no place like home and I am looking forward to it!!!