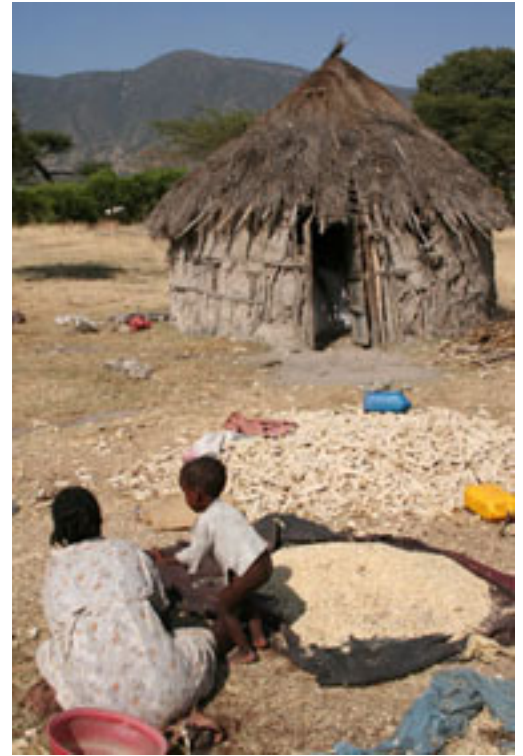


Lifestyle

Ethiopia has about 80 million people. 80% live in the countryside in traditional round mud homes with grass roof and survive on subsistence farming. The starting wage for a civil servant (minimum wage) is Ethiopian Birr 300 per month which is €15 per month or €0.07 cent per hour. However everything is very cheap and money goes a long way. Financially and with the cost of things here, it is a totally different planet to Europe. For Ethiopians all Europeans are walking banks. The minute they see you, it is a opportunity to ask for money. The UN survey estimates that it is the second poorest country in the world.

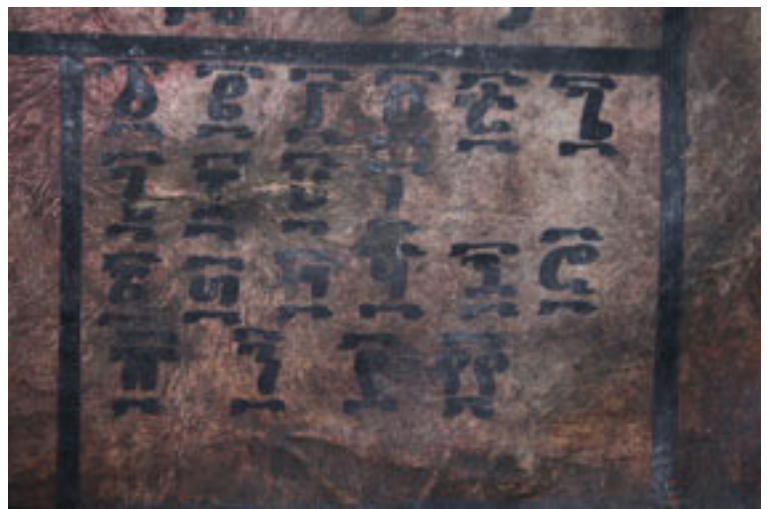


People are always smiling and it is claimed that the best smiles in the world are in Ethiopia.



Interesting Differences

There are many curious differences such as... In Ethiopia it is now 2003 their calendar is 7 years behind ours. Also 1 o'clock starts at sunrise or 6am in the morning. So mid-day for us, is only 6 o'clock for them. English is spoken by all who received an education and the main national language is Amharic which is a form of the ancient language Aramaic. They have their own alphabet with 231 characters and write from left to right. There are also different numbers, but our numbers are normally used. However the entire country has about 80 tribes with 80 very different local languages. I quickly learned that OW means yes in Amharic!



Food

On our first day we were introduced to the traditional restaurant beside the office. One massive plate for everybody and all eat with their right hand (no cutlery). It is very impolite not to wash your hand first and never lick your fingers. On the plate is the staple diet of Ethiopia called "Injera". This is a flat pastry or pan cake, almost one meter wide and on top are many colourful sauces. Most of them are laced with chilli. You tear off some injera with a twist of the wrist and scope up your favourite sauce. Raw beef meat is the supreme delicacy and chunks of it are served with a big knife. On this one, we politely declined.



Travel

The city moves with a vast fleet of Toyota Hiace minibuses, painted blue and white. They are made for 11 but I counted 24 at Friday rush hour last week. These buses are totally clapped out and have been carefully repaired for decades, grinding engines and vast clouds of blue smoke when they go up the hills in first gear. The locals call them “blue devils”. Every morning we hop on board going to and from work at a cost of €0.05 cent each way. They have no numbers or signs of where they are going to, so you have to get used to the shouter who is hanging on the side. “Piazza” is to work and “Aksum” is home again in the evening.

There is one principal truck for transporting everything made by Isuzu. These have caused many fatal accidents and have been nick named Al-Qaida.



Religion

Ethiopians are extremely religious. 50% are Ethiopian Christian Orthodox, about 35% Muslim and only 0.5% Catholic. There is no conflict and a strong sense of neighbourliness between the different faiths. They express their faith very freely. Fasting food on Fridays and Wednesday is normal and at the many orthodox churches people pray outside the church with their forehead against the wall. There are many religious festivals (but no Christmas) where the whole city packs full of people celebrating all night with; ceremonies, drums, dances and food. The very strong religious beliefs, have a strong influence on society and there is almost no crime or violence. The many poor people who are in desperate need never turn to violence which for me is an extraordinary witness.



Housing

There is a huge population of homeless, I would guess at least 10% of the population sleep on the pavements and parks. This shocked me at first however the climate is warm, but the rainy season does turn everything into mud for four months during the summer. Many people sleep in agricultural sacks which they pull over their head and close the top for privacy when they sleep on the pavements. I have noticed that they are always on the side of the street which is still in the shade in the mornings. So on the shady side they are still sleeping and on the sunny side the shoe shiners and stalls are already open. Many sleep in a metal boxes made from sheet metal. Most of the people live in self constructed shacks made of corrugated iron. Everywhere there are many children and lots of activity and work. Addis is undergoing a big building boom of NY style sky scrapers. Buildings 30 stories high (bigger than anything in Dublin) are built completely with manual labour, wheelbarrows and shovels. If workers are only paid 15 euro a month then this the cheapest. It is really striking how these huge buildings and wealth and the poverty of families living destitute are side by side.



Our Work

We are working for HelpAge International (which is called Age Action in Ireland, same thing). They look after and lobby for the needs of the elderly internationally. Management and organisation skills are badly needed in Ethiopia, so HelpAge Ethiopia have asked Caroline and myself to organise a 2 day training conference for 30 people on 14th & 15th of December. We have prepared most of the talks and workshops, booked a conference room, food etc. The participants are the groups which receive financial assistance from HelpAge. So all of our work is on the computer and phone and we were so busy that I have only got time to write this feedback to you after 3 weeks. I am hoping to get out to do some engineering or construction work after this is over.

HelpAge Partners

HelpAge International always only works through local groups with local knowledge and gives them funding and management skills for their projects. These local groups are called partners and we have gone on several trips to visit them. There are a small minority of wealthier people in Ethiopia but the partners are working with the most difficult situations where the need is the greatest.

We drove south to Awasa 6 hrs and up dusty tracks and then walking on foot across dried up land to Arsi Negelle. They village elders are waiting seated in a large circle in the shade of an acacia tree. Here the population has been devastated by HIV-AIDS. Only the grand parents and children are there, most of the young adults have died. Education about AIDS is important as they do not understand what is happening and HelpAge gives goats to the older women to earn an income. 3 goats is enough for an older woman to live on all year round.



In Addis we called into KAMSD which was set up by the wife of a politician. She has rented 2 houses, and cared for 40 destitute homeless old people off the streets. They sit in clean clothes in circles in the garden and have a bed & food. They see us as the financial sponsors and never stop thanking us and shaking our hands and singing for hours, it is very humbling.



Those who can work are always given income earning jobs. At the Enredada project, big groups of older women spin cotton all day and the men do the weaving. They make “Gabies”, which is a large traditional shawl, which many people wear. Hundreds of hours of work (growing, cleaning, spinning, weaving etc..) produce a shawl which is then sold for €5.



There are 20 local partners of HelpAge and the 3 above, is only a sample. There is much more to talk about, but I will write more later, because I have to prepare for a meeting later today.

I hear there is lots of winter wonderland at home. Ireland with pictures of Brian Cowan has appeared on the Ethiopian television last week, so the Irish news has followed me all the way to Addis Ababa, for all the wrong reasons?

Best wishes,

Clemens

PS

If you were going to give me a Christmas present ;-) Then please don't, because we are hoping to collect money for some of the partners of HelpAge here. The simple reality is that most of the problems here are directly due to poverty or money. So if you wish, please send me an email with details if you can help. All of the funds raised will go directly to the partners which you can choose such as;

- Direct food distribution for children or elderly.
- Housing of the destitute elderly.
- Income generating small business programs.
- Health, HIV AIDS programs.