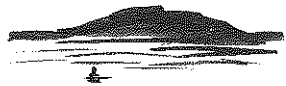
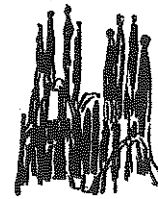
Patricia Storace
on Provence



Pico Iyer
on Iceland



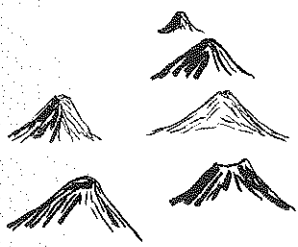
Robert Hughes
on Barcelona

The

Condé Nast Traveler

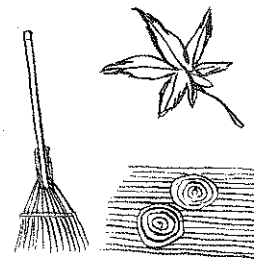
Book of Unforgettable Journeys

Great Writers on Great Places

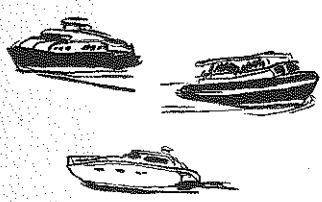


Simon Winchester
on the Philippines

Russell Banks
on the Everglades



Nicole Krauss
on Japan



Shirley Hazzard
on Capri

Edmund White
on Jordan

Edna O'Brien
on England

Dickens pokes fun at the whole experience, as poor Mr. Pickwick drinks endless pints of water, declaring himself "much improved," even though his friends "had not been previously aware that there was anything the matter with him."

***The Waters of Sul* (1997)**
By Moyra Caldecott
(Bladud Books)
Set in A.D. 72 in Aquae Sulis (the Roman Bath), this is a surprisingly convincing story of a Celtic rebellion against Roman rule, led by a fiery heroine, Megan. The action swirls around this conflict between the native Celts and their Roman oppressors, and also concerns a nearby settlement on Glastonia Island that has embraced the hot new religious cult of . . . Christianity.

ETHIOPIA

Heaven's Gate

by
PICO IYER

"This is the new Jerusalem," said our guide, a former deacon. "These churches were built with the help of angels. Once upon a time, an angel came to King Lalibela and asked him to build a city in the heart of Ethiopia, in rock. This is Heaven," he went on, pointing to the divide along which we were standing. "As soon as you step here, you have set foot in Heaven."

We walked in the silence above the plain, across the Jordan, through Bethlehem and Nazareth, through all the places reconstituted here by the king so thar the faithful would not have to journey to Jerusalem, and, sitting outside one of the eleven seven-hundred-year-old churches carved entirely out of red rock—the only such marvels in the world—we let the centuries fall away, on this, St. Mary's Day.

The next morning, at dawn, I went out to see the hillside beside the churches scattered with figures—hooded, robed figures all in white, with priests above, under rainbowed umbrellas, half-obscured by the mists of their frankincense, reciting prayers and sermons from the tops of rock faces. Farther inside the complex,

linked by a maze of tunnels, the chapels were alive with the gaunt ancestral faces of pilgrims called Bethlehem and Solomon and Abraham, who had walked two weeks—or two millennia—across the emptiness to be here; with withered nuns staring out from the darkness of their cells, small lightless spaces in round two-story huts, white crosses on the iron doors; with priests, burning-eyed and bearded, moving back and forth in purple robes to the ancient, hypnotic sound of drum and sistrum, golden crosses in their hands.

Motes of sunlight danced in the air, and boys flashed smiles, and gradually the silence descended, seeping out of the round huts, drifting through the network of underground passageways, floating into and out of the chapels. Something in the air—the children playing in the light of ragged corridors, the aged pilgrims clambering toward the doors, the priests in raiment—made me think of Tibet. For I had never before seen such fervor and devotion except in the Himalayas. Sometimes, in the dark, I could see nothing but priests and their crosses; sometimes only the outline of figures, archetypal almost, biblical, bowing toward the altar.

I had heard for years that Lalibela was one of the secret, undiscovered wonders of the world, and now I was being told that it was Paradise. But in truth, it seemed to me, it was something more than that: a living, singing replica of Paradise in our midst. And not just a collection of old buildings and stones for archaeologists, but a breathing, pounding, chanting place with a sense of worship so powerful that it made me shake.

Lalibela, like all the truly sacred places in the world, is distinguished, in fact, by all the things you cannot see: most of all, the silence, the sense of spun calm as luminous and clear as glass polished by forty generations and more of worship. You sit in the cool darkness of a church, light streaming through the cross-shaped windows, the sound of murmured prayers all around you,

and you leave the world you know. And enter one you had forgotten you inhabited.

I hadn't come to Ethiopia to be spiritually awakened. Quite the opposite, in fact. I'd set off (for reasons that should remain obscure) with a box of plain Cheerios, some chocolate-covered espresso beans, and an English investment banker with a mosquito net. The I.B. (as I shall call him, for reasons of diplomacy) was a disciple of Evelyn Waugh's, anxious to set back any Anglo-Ethiopian relations that might have healed since the great man's visit. The Ethiopian National Tourist Operation was, I had found, in the Ethiopian Airlines office in New York City, but when I went there, they had no knowledge of it (or, indeed, of tourists), and fobbed me off instead with a months-old copy of the *Ethiopian Herald.* A large headline said, AMATEUR BOXING LACKS KOCK-OUT APPEAL.

On the Ethiopian Airlines flight into Addis Ababa, one toilet was soon flooded to the point of being unusable, and the other needed to be reassembled by the time the feature movie—*Dennis the Menace*—began. Every five minutes, like clockwork, the armrest of the woman in front of me came down to concuss my knee. And, for some atavistic reason, wrenching country-western music accompanied us over the great plains of Africa, culminating in a stirring rendition of "America the Beautiful" as we touched down at Bole International Airport (which was dominated by a six-foot-high replica of a pack of Winstons and a sign: WELCOME TO ETHIOPIA. CENTRE OF RECREATION AND RELAXATION).

Within an hour of arrival in the country, I found myself (unknowingly) in a house of ill repute, where a plump, denim-jacketed houri called Franca was shaking her hips and calling *"Rico, Rico,"* while a bearded man walked in and out, bearing a copy of *Franny and Zooey.* Another woman sat at a brazier in her

shorts, cooking up coffee in some traditional fashion, while Kenny Rogers sang "We don't need money" out of a super-woofer twin-drive radio. We were there because we had been picked up by an Eritrean named Haile ("Haile Unlikely," said the I.B.), who had promised that this was the only place where we could get a visa to his newly independent homeland.

A top dog in the Eritrean embassy came here to "re-create himself," said Haile, red-eyed with drink and bad intentions. "If we do some trouble, maybe you can give us some favorable attentions."

"I got you," sang Kenny Rogers, "you got me, we got love."

A few hours later, still reeling from the twenty-four-hour flight from Los Angeles, I found myself standing under a huge full moon outside the room of the Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid. Aidid, the most wanted man in the world just a month before, was staying in the same hotel as we were, as it happened ("Oh, General Aidid—room 211, over near the swimming pool," the receptionist had said), and now, surrounded by khaki-covered men with guns, his private secretary was pulling up his pant leg to show us the shrapnel he had received from "U.S. helicopter gunships."

The very next day, though, we drove out of Addis, away from Franca and Aidid, away from Kenny Rogers and Haile Unfortunate, and within minutes we found ourselves in an utterly different world: a Stone Age world, almost, of antique figures and shawled old crones and donkeys who seemed to have walked in from the Book of Kings. Abyssinia has, of course, been veiled in mists and mysterious associations almost since the birth of Christ. It was a haunt of the Queen of Sheba and, by some accounts, the original site of the Garden of Eden. It is the oldest Christian country in the world, and the ouly one in Africa to have defeated a European power (the Italians, in 1896). I had only to look at the ancient Phoenician script on my visa, with its air of old parch-

ment and sacred Coptic texts, to realize that I was traveling into antiquity.

Compounding this remoteness in space—Ethiopia is not really Africa, and yet not quite Arabia, either—is a remoteness in time, hardened by the watchfulness with which it has guarded its traditions. In medieval times in Europe, Abyssinia was known primarily as the domain of Prester John, a Christian priest-king ruling a world of unicorns and pygmies; and for centuries, hidden away in the mountains, with the oldest written culture on the continent and its own distinctive community of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, the country had kept up its own unlikely ways (whenever a crime was committed, the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* informed me, a small boy was drugged, and whatever person he dreamed of was fixed on as the criminal). Its sense of apartness from the world is only confirmed by the fact that Ethiopia still observes a pre-Julian calendar (so there are thirteen months in a year there, noon is at six in the morning, and New Year's is celebrated in September, four months before Christmas). "Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion," as Edward Gibbon wrote, "the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten."

Even within my own memory, things were no less otherworldly. Just twenty years ago, Addis was still the center of a feudal medieval court, with pillow bearers and urine wipers and bodies suspended in front of St. George's Cathedral, ruled over by Haile Selassie (his heir apparent, Prince Zere Yacob, walking the same English high school corridors as the I.B. and myself). Then, in 1974, the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah was taken off his throne and driven away in a VW. There followed a more or less typical period of guerrilla warfare, Marxist misrule, and desperate food shortages, and when the country emerged again seventeen years later, in 1991, with a

new "transitional government," it had a per capita GDP of under one hundred dollars a year and more than four million people dependent on international food aid. Now, under the thirty-nine-year-old Meles Zenawi, the 53 million Ethiopians (up from just 42 million only ten years ago) are experimenting with a kind of democracy by trial and error—no easy task for a land that had held, not long before I arrived, its first free elections in sixteen hundred years.

So as we journeyed out of Addis, along the so-called Historic Route, which takes one through many of the great historical sites of Ethiopia—Lalibela, Gonder, Bahar Dar, and Axum—we felt as if we were going into prehistory or into some dark and echoing otherworld. Rastafarians famously consider Ethiopia to be the home of the Messiah; others believe that the Ark of the Covenant and part of the True Cross of Christ are buried here. The high plateau is made for guerezas, geladas, guenons, and dog-faced baboons, I read, as well as the greater and lesser kudu, duiker, klipspringer, and dik-dik. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is like nothing else in the world, observing a practice of singing and dancing, as in the time of King David, and a Monophysite creed. And even if (like me) one doesn't go to see the Surma women with clay plates in their lips, the tribes who reportedly still make fires with bows and sticks, or the "yellow people" of the south, one is going into a world charged with something spookily recessed.

As soon as we drove out of the capital, in fact, we were in a landscape of ancient spareness: shepherds on horseback, driving their flocks along roads white with dust; horses galloping across the openness; huge processions of petitioners, all in white, marching in long lines along the road to celebrate St. Gabriel's Day. The sky above the eucalyptus groves a burning blue, the ridges of the mountains forbidding before us, and everywhere a landscape untouched by anything we knew. Sometimes we stopped and joined

little boys along the road at their games of foosball; sometimes we sipped sweet clove-and-cinnamon tea while introducing our hosts to the Neville Brothers.

And as we drove, I realized that I had never, ever, seen a place so bare: There were no road signs here—no roads almost—and no amenities or shops or frills. Nothing, in fact. And nothing to take one away from the ageless, changeless rhythm of men with crooks and staffs, and women with blue crosses painted on their chins, and patriarchs staring out from unlit doorways. In late afternoon, as we passed through villages lit up by the sharp last light, and six-year-old shepherds drove their animals home, and the sun declined behind the purple mountains, surrounded by silence and vast emptiness, I could think only of the lilting cadences of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard." For this really did seem a world pre-fallen; an intimation of some pastorale that sang inside us like a long-lost melody.

"What would it take for news to reach here?" asked the I.B., hungry for a copy of the latest *Financial Times.* It never could, I realized. An atomic bomb in Hiroshima; a coup in Moscow; the whole of China swinging on its hinges: None of it, surely, could ever touch this world or make sense even if it did get here. It belonged to a different age.

Driving in Ethiopia is not an easy experience—infrequent buses appearing on the wrong side of the road, children and donkeys swerving crazily in front of you, potholes sending you ricocheting from one side of the car to the other until you cannot move or talk or eat. And, in our case, conditions were not enhanced by a LandCruiser equipped with a tape deck that wouldn't work, seat belts that didn't engage, a front door that couldn't lock, and a driver who, when pressed, admitted that he'd been along this road only once before, twenty-eight years earlier, on a bus.

Still, there was redemption in the air itself, and in the unend-

ing vistas: camels, sometimes, running under a full moon; horses being ridden so fast in impromptu races that they raised up Mongol clouds of dust; village homes a blaze of apricot and sea blue and blinding green.

We drove past rolling hills and round straw huts, past monumental skies and conifers and hooded pietàs. "It's so cultivated," said the I.B., who had just come from Kenya, and though he was talking about the land, he could as easily have been talking about the sensibility. For there is nothing of the bush or the untended jungle here among these high mountain plateaus. And nothing without pride, and some degree of self-possession. The night of our first day on the road, helpful voices calling out directions in the dark, we stopped at a tiny rest house, and a man came out, cried *"Buona sera!"* and served up, with a Milanese flourish, steak Bismarck and Axumite red wine, a napkin decorously wrapped around the bottle (whose label announced, "The peculiarity of this wine makes it appreciated by everybody").

At daybreak, it was like seeing the face of the world before it was born, like shapes and figures from one's deepest subconscious. In the early light the mist still swaddled the mountains, and when I walked up the main street, little girls were skipping rope, women were sweeping the space before their huts, boys were carrying fuel home for their mothers. Cocks crowed. The mist began to lift. Horse-drawn carriages clattered over bumpy roads. It was not that there was so much poverty here; it was more that there was so little excess. No fat on the land, so to speak.

On a blazing blue day in Dese—the name means "my joy"—we stopped to get our roof fixed. Across from us, men bathed naked in a stream, their wives sitting on the grass under parasols. Above them, on a hill, villagers were selling sheep and goats and donkeys on this market day, while below, in the central market, boys sold empty bottles of Johnnie Walker and presided over cans of European Economic Community rapeseed oil. The I.B. lost

himself in Richard Price, and I walked into a local video store, which carried seven copies of *Return to Eden* (and one of *Romeo and Juliet*), under a huge mural of Bob Marley.

"The Sudan is primitive," the I.B. pronounced. "This is basic. There's a difference." And there was some truth to what he was saying, in this land where eight people out of every ten live a half day's walk from the nearest road and ninety-five percent are still agricultural peasants. There was no sugar in the Ethiopian diet until recently, and there has always been a fierce wariness of the modern: Even when Haile Selassie brought the first airplane from Europe, in the twenties, many of his people took him to be a necromancer, importing instruments of Satan.

We drove on, through enchanted light, over mountain passes where men were carrying whole beds of leaves, and when we got to the town of Weldiya, we stopped to ask directions. If we went on, we were told, we would be attacked by bandits. "If they see us," the driver said, turning around, eyes wild, "they will take money, bags, everything. Even they will kill us. They do not care. They will kill us like the animals." Deciding not to put this prognosis to the test, we procured three rooms in a waterless shack and beguiled the last of the light with games of Ping-Pong along the main street, fifty or so boys cheering and laughing all around us and calling out "Bravo!" whenever one of my slams nicked the table.

The final five miles to Lalibela, over unpaved road, the car's wheels spinning in dry creek beds, the cans of fuel in the back all but suffocating us, took almost three hours. It was, we noted sorrowfully, December 31. "The end of the year in the end of the world!" cried the I.B., with a gaiety brought on by hysteria.

And then suddenly we were there, in silence and in mystery. Inside the rock churches the white figures were everywhere in the dim light, leaning against pillars, standing in front of windows, reading old leathery, hand-size Bibles or letting out unearthly,

mumbled chants that reverberated around the ancient spaces. Sometimes I could see only their eyes in the dark, and hear only their song.

Lean, bearded priests with piercing eyes made strange movements with their crosses, and pilgrims slept in empty spaces, and somewhere in the rafters pigeons whirred. Incense rose up from the shrine, and deacons sang, and figure after figure came into the darkness, kissing the cool stone before they entered. "I weary of writing more about these buildings," the first foreign visitor to describe them, a Portuguese priest in the early sixteenth century, wrote, "because it seems to me I shall not be believed."

Often, in Lalibela, I took just to sitting on a hill and listening to the sounds of the village: the chatter of old men with crooks, gathered in the shade, a mother shouting to her child; the sound of other children playing in the distance. Birds with gorgeous iridescent turquoise wings—Abyssinian rollers, I later learned—lit up the branches. Often there was nothing but the calling of the birds and the wind, whistling in my ears.

Occasionally there were vultures in the trees and bells to summon priests to church. And everywhere a sense of piety and fervor, a world inscribed by nothing but devotion.

"It isn't Africa," a Swiss medieval historian said over dinner that night, on New Year's Eve. "It's more like a cross between medieval Europe and Arabia. In this village, for example, there are seven thousand people. And one thousand of them are priests. That too is medieval: In Europe, in the Middle Ages, one tenth of the population were priests."

The next day, the I.B. and I got on mules and rode through the dust-colored mountains, over a landscape as majestic and humbling as Monument Valley, the I.B. listening to Dead bootlegs on his Walkman as we passed donkeys and cedar trees and olive trees and juniper and peasants with long black beards, seated

under trees sharing food. As so often happens in Ethiopia, it felt as if we were traveling through an illuminared Bible from the thirteenth century, except that all the figures moved.

When we arrived in Nakutola'ab, a tiny settlement two hours away where twenty-five anchorites live in rock caves, we came upon a group of pilgrims—mud-grimed grandfathers and sunken-cheeked women and young girls in pockmarked gowns—all of them clapping and singing their joy, ululating wildly and pounding on drums, in a circle, to vent their pent-up pleasure after arriving at the place that they'd been dreaming of all their lives.

I asked one of the men (through a translator) how old he was—a strapping man, tall and lean, his eyes alight with glee. He was seventy, he said, and he had walked twelve days and nights to mark Christmas (celebrated in Ethiopia on January 7) in this sacred site.

"And why do you come here?"

"Because this is heaven. We believe if we are here, we go to heaven."

"Then I'll see you in heaven," said the I.B., clapping him on the shoulder, and there were wild shouts of approval and laughs all around.

Lalibela was not just an extraordinary medieval mystery play in stone, I thought, not just a place where the emperor had come to pray when the first of Mussolini's Blackshirts arrived; not merely a marvel that had taken twenty-three years to construct, with the help of angels, and masons from Syria, from Greece—even from India. It was one of those rare sites where the spirit vibrated not only through the buildings but through all the spaces in between.

And then we took to the road again and drove for hour after hour, past deep canyons and bleak wasteland and lunar spaces, with

nothing to remind us of where we were, or when. It felt more than ever as if we were driving through some ur-terrain, archaic, ancestral, through some lost part of ourselves, almost.

And everywhere, the sheer grandeur of the mountains and an immensity of sky. A landscape before whose gravity and purity one feels very small, and young. A bareness that takes you back to something very essential, and elemental, almost to life before it was lived. In the Ethiopian language of Gallinya, I had read, the word for sky is the same as the word for God.

I had seen empty spaces before I came to Ethiopia—in the Australian Outback, say, or in Patagonia. But what made these so much more rending and exalting was that there were people living amid this nothingness, walking across it, trying to eke out a living from it—nomads pale with grime, men wielding axes, women bearing staffs. And in the midst of the desolation, long lines of people, most of them rail-thin, bedraggled, barefoot; long lines of people walking, walking, walking, from nowhere to nowhere. The sadness of Ethiopia is that even in the areas that are relatively prosperous, all the lean figures look as if they are walking out of the photographs of famine that shocked the world a decade ago; next year, we were told, a million people would be without food, and there was nothing that could be done.

And the fervor and the desperation, the piety and the suffering, threw light on one another. Amidst this extreme deprivation, one could see how extreme devotion could arise; amidst this barrenness, the burning brightness of the religious rites and buildings made better sense. Prayers in the wilderness, I thought; water in the desert. It was easy, in Ethiopia, to understand how religions caught fire (easy, too, to see why people became monks in a world that was already naked, unaccommodated, and bare); and it was possible in Ethiopia to see how people who have nothing will give everything to faith.

Every now and then we stopped in cafés for the national staple of *injera,* or foam rubber bread, the I.B. crying out, "This could be *injerious* to your health. Did you take out multiple-*injera* insurance?" Sometimes as we left, we heard the haunting, biblical cry of children in the distance, *"Abba! Abba!"* Every now and then we saw figures in the distance, silhouetted against rocks or proceeding across the emptiness in search of shelter. The only signs of the world we knew were the occasional huts of relief agencies or four-wheel-drive jeeps with LOVE FROM BAND AID on their sides. Mostly, though, it was just emptiness stretching on and on toward the mountains.

After what seemed like days, or aeons, of travel, we arrived in Gonder and were reminded again of how sadness and fervor fuel each other here. There is a faintly threatening air to the old capital now, as its Amhara people chafe against the dictates of a non-Amhara government. Gonder was at its prime 350 years ago, and now, with people from the province of Tigray in power (Zenawi is Tigrayan) and the memories of civil war everywhere apparent, the city has a decidedly guarded feel. A Martyrs' Memorial stands in the heart of town, with messages scrawled in blood red across it, and nearby is a large painting of a skeleton, with a fierce old woman holding the former governor of the province by the hair and crying, "You killed my child! Wherever you go, I will find vengeance!" Men in hoods watch you from dark corners in cafés, sipping their orange-colored mead, and boys in denim jackets tell you the difference between Kalashnikovs and M-14s, and how their fathers were killed by Communists and their sisters, fleeing the fighting, raped in Sudanese refugee camps. Strung between the pretty Italian buildings at the center of town, a banner proclaims NOV. 20 IS THE BIRTH OF THE OPPRESSED PEOPLES!

"All this the Italians built in five years," a local boy told us,

motioning around the two main streets of rown and referring to the Italian occupation of 1936–1941. "Some people are saying, if they stay ten years, Gonder becomes like Paris."

In Gonder there was not a great deal to do. I bought some Yemenite sandwich biscuits and visited the Falasha village where the last few remnants of Ethiopia's Jewish community, yet ro be airlifted to Israel, stand by the side of the road and sell stone figurines of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba making whoopee. I parted with thirty-five cents to attend a wedding in Revolution Square, and saw groups of men in their best Bon Jovi T-shirts gathered around a video camera. And, dutifully, I went to the ruins of the castle of Emperor Fasilades, the seventeenth-century ruler who built the capital here, with its Enigma Gate, Gate of the Flute Players, and Castle of Songs. For all the lyrical names, however, they are much like ruins anywhere: dead clumps of stone and broken towers and piles of forgotten rubble.

But as I sat one Sunday morning in the corner of a tower, looking over the pieces of rock, suddenly I heard wild chanting and the steady, insistent pounding of drums, and a trilling, thrilling ululation of women down below, and when I looked down, I saw them moving all as one, swaying back and forth, with the jacarandas behind them. And when I went down, I found myself in a whole avenue of churches, crowded with worshipers, the streets all but palpitant with prayer, and, along the ancient mud walls, long lines of mendicants.

On every side, around the center, people were gathered under trees, and children were scampering around broken gravestones, and petitioners with white crosses chalked upon their foreheads were giving alms. There were golden robes and rows of multicolored umbrellas, and bells tolling constantly, and, lined up outside the round churches, a terrible, haggard row of people in rags—the leprous, the lame, the palsied, and the blind. The notion of a savior had never made more sense to me; I half expected to see Jesus and the apostles walking down these muddy lanes.

The other site in Gonder that we inspected closely was the Ethiopian Airlines office (which pins POSITIVE ATTITUDE posters from Fairfield, New Jersey, on its walls). E.T., as the experts call it, has a sterling reputation but is not without its extraterrestrial elements. Its schedules seem to follow the solar calendar, it insists on security checks at every stage of check-in, and in many places the only terminals in sight are trees. "Ethiopia is a land where the great unknown yonder still exists in plenty," says the legend on every ticker.

Undeterred, we took our lives in our hands (and out of the hands of our driver, who had taken now to plaintive moans of "I am very suffering") and flew low over the high plateaus toward Bahar Dar. The town itself is a pleasant palm-fringed settlement along the banks of Lake Tana. Tissisat Falls is nearby, a rainbow punctually arcing across its rush of water every morning and marking the place where James Bruce, the Scottish explorer, excitedly hailed the waters of the Blue Nile. Boys cross the river on papyrus boats and hoist stalks of sugarcane taller than themselves. On the quiet lake there are tens of little islands, most of them given over to monasteries, some so strict that no female is allowed to set foot on them (not even a hen). The round, dried-mud churches at their center, three hundred years old, swarm with naive, brightly colored murals bursting with angels and stories from the Bible and even—a typical Ethiopian anachronism—Jesus surrounded by gun-toting men.

That strain, in fact, was beginning to hit me more and more forcibly. As soon as I went to change my money at a local bank, a security guard came up to frisk me and to ask me to deposit my camera next to the rifles laid neatly against the wall outside; an

hour later, walking through quiet villages to see the falls, I was accompanied by a sharp-talking teenager and a barefoot peasant with a rifle (whether to ward off bandits or to perform banditry himself, I never knew). Pride is only a hairbreadth from machismo here, and when it does not take the form of guarding Jesus—or General Aidid—with guns, it involves overtaking around blind turns and driving the other man off the road.

The most obvious reason for this is that the country is only just emerging from decades of civil war. Ever since their region was annexed, in 1962, the Eritreans had been fighting against central authority in Addis, and then their guerrillas had joined the rebel fighters to overthrow the Communists. Meanwhile, more than a hundred other ethnic groups were pursuing their rivalries and interests in the north and south and east. The result is that everywhere you go in Ethiopia, you see the scars and remnants of thirty years of war: Airports are blasted, and the tarmac is littered with helicopters and junked Aeroflot planes. Rusted tanks line every road, and faded replicas of the hammer and sickle. Once, in Bahar Dar, coming upon a car crash (there are more crashes than cars in Ethiopia, it often seems), I ended up spending a long day in a local hospital, a place of terrible cries and whimpers, where boys with bandaged heads and sunken faces writhed under rough blankets. The doctors were courtly and efficient, but it was not a place where I would like to fall ill.

"Are there many car accidents here?" I asked a pretty young nurse.

"No," she said, nonchalant. "Usually it is bullet wounds. But that, too, not so often. Usually the people here shoot to kill, not wound. So we let them just go ahead with it." And, smiling, she went off to another victim.

We explored Bahar Dar in an old car decorated with pictures of Rambo and Jesus on the windshield, driven by Solomon, with Mikael at his side, both of them breaking into smiles of good-

natured perplexity as the I.B. recited a poem about a duck-billed platypus enrering the diplomatic service. We visited the U.N. Shoe Shine store and the Marine Bingo Club, and in the evening, we got the manager of the local cinema to screen *The Border* just for us, though the print was so washed-out and mutilated that the picture was over in a matter of minutes, and somehow the classic last scene of Freddy Fender singing Ry Cooder's "Across the Borderline" was lost. Nonetheless, it was a cheerful experience, sitting on long wooden benches, like pews, in what looked like a school assembly hall, the boys in the balcony eating egg sandwiches and sipping *shai,* and scarcely missing Freddy Fender.

For the few foreigners who visit it, Ethiopia is a very small country, and when I arrived, I had no hesitation in calling up Richard Pankhurst, perhaps the West's leading authority on the country and a resident of Addis, on and off, since 1951. He was rather ill, he said, the first time I called, and the next time I tried, he was out of town. But one day, as I walked toward a monastery on an island in Lake Tana, suddenly I heard his inimitable Oxbridge tones, and when I looked around, there he was, in a green suit, explaining the iconography of the church to a group of birders from America: the usual Ethiopian gallimaufry of St. George slaying the dragon, the "crucification" (as they always call it), the local Saint Abbo, Moses, and the Virgin.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is unusual, Professor Pankhurst explained, in that it still gives great honor to the Old Testament, believing not that the New supersedes the Old but, rather, that the Old prophesies the New. The Ethiopian Bible contains all the books of the so-called Apocrypha, and, in fact, the Book of Enoch comes down to us only in the ancient Ethiopian liturgical language of Ge'ez. Ethiopians also observe all the Old Testament rites of circumcision, fasting, and the like, to the point where many Ethiopians fast, one way or another, for roughly half the days of the year.

Ever since it was brought here in the fourth century by Syrian missionaries, Christianity has taken a distinctive form in Ethiopia, not quite Coptic and certainly not Western. Nestled in the isolation of the highlands, unsettled by the constant threat of Muslim invasions, it has gone its own individual way—to the point where it is now almost a talisman of the nation (thus Muslims participate in Christian rites).

It is wise to remember this when one flies out into the hot plains and scrubland of the east, for there one seems to have left the ancient land behind and entered Africa. Women in brilliantly colored robes, swirled like saris around their bodies, green and violet and pink, walk with a stately grace across the desolation of the desert. The air feels sultry, strutting, spiced with heat and menace.

Dire Dawa, my first stop in the east, had Stars of David on its doors and signs for the Ethiopia-Somalia Democratic Movement among stores that were nearly always called "Moderen." Not far from the old *chemin de fer* statiou (there is a stroug French influence here in this hot, dusty, squat, rectangular town redolent of the Foreign Legion), I came upou a swirl of calèches and minivans and Peugeot taxis, and tall boys with insolent stares selling nuts and oranges. A man guffawed at my copy of *Le Rouge et le noir,* a boy with kohl-lined eyes ushered me iuto a van, women pulled up their saffron scarves, giving off a cloud of fragrances. A fight broke out nearby, and the combatants sprawled in the dust.

A couple of denim dudes collected our cash, and then we set off for Harar, passing proud dreadlocked girls and small, muddy African villages, tall cactus by the side of the road. Flirty teenagers jangled their bracelets and stared back defiantly at passersby. The girl next to me had a ring on every finger.

Harar, at its heart, is all North Africa, all whitewashed passageways and Moorish curves, the cry of "baksheesh" from the

boys, and, in the house where Haile Selassie once lived, a man called Sheikh Mohammed, offering traditional healing ("The treatment is given by the help of God," his sign explains. "Although the Medicine is given without payment, the patient and all other peoples including organization help us if you can").

I put myself in the tender care of a bleary-eyed gent called Astaw Warhu, and he gave me a highly colorful tour of a Muslim enclave that was like a rich and heady concoction: of tribal girls with yellow-chalked faces, and others with rolling white eyes; of Oromo women with red dots around their eyes, and men with lips of foaming green. As soon as I turned dowu the traditional healing, he whisked me down a tiny alleyway aud then up some dusty stairs, to a place with panes of dirty stained glass and a lightless room where two men were sprawled on cushious, phlegmatically chewing khat (the coca leaves of North Africa, of which Harar is the world's leading producer).

"You know Rimbaud?" asked Mr. Warhu, pointing to the two dazed men who were splayed out like opium addicts. "This is where he lived. Sometimes he sells arms to Menelik II. Sometimes he is a postman." I thought, gloomily, of the exiled author of *Une Saison en enfer.*

Then Mr. Warhu led me up some more stairs, to where there was some wallpaper covering the ceiling. "Rimbaud!" he declared. "All this he paints!"

We went down into the dust and confusion and red and yellow loudness of the market, surrounded by five gates and ninety-nine mosques, so they say, with *Les Jeunes Bonzes du temple de Shaolin* playing in the local cinema, and the children, without exception, crying out to me, *"Ferengi, ferengi!"* ("Foreigner, foreigner!") or, more often, "Cuba, Cuba, Cuba!"

"They think you are Cubau," said Mr. Warhu. "The Cubans are no good. They think every day, every night, about war. They are walking in town with guns, with pistols." This seemed an odd

objection in a country where more people carry guns than handbags, but Mr. Warhu concluded, "Every people is come back to the gods."

Then, disconcertingly, he added, "You know Heinemann?"

Was he referring to the English publisher of V. S. Naipaul?

"Heinemann?"

"Yes. Heinie-man. Every night he feeds heinies. You can make photograph."

I decided to pass on the hyena man, while thinking that Harar has come a long way from its traditional status as a closed, walled city with its own chieftain, language, and coinage, a hidden metropolis that had never seen a European face until Sir Richard Burton stole into it in 1854. For centuries, ever since the Muslims had taken it over, it had flowered in secrecy behind its walls, closing its doors each night at dusk and keeping all Christians out.

Harar today seemed to me stench, flies, dust; flashing-eyed girls in golden scarves; the cry of the muezzin above green-domed mosques; women with nose rings and dangling bangles, walking so straight they were able to carry bundles of twigs on their heads. Along the main street was the Ogaden National Liberation Front and next door to it, the Commission for the Rehabilitation of Members of the Former Disabled War Veterans East Haraghe Office (the C.R.M.F.D.W.V.E.H.O.?). I checked into the best—actually, the only—hotel in town, which promised BOTH TRADITIONAL COMFORT AND MODERN HOSPITALITY. Did either of these include water, I asked the friendly receptionist? "No," she said. "There is no water in the town. For two months there has been no water."

Addis Ababa, through which almost every visitor must pass while coming and going, is a sleepy, eerie, rather bedraggled town—less tranquil than torpid, and less a town, indeed, than a collection of

grand monuments set against shacks and vacant lots and open ditches: a sad, rather abandoned place of relief agencies, and faded, sun-bleached ads for the United Colors of Benetton, and small, hand-painted signs along the road to the airport directing you to embassies. It is, in fact, the most rural city I have ever seen, encircled by dun-colored hills and haunted by the recent discovery that the last emperor was buried in a secret vault beneath the central palace. "Goats and cows grazed on the lawns along the main street, Churchill Road," wrote Ryszard Kapuściński, "and cars had to stop when nomads drove their herds of frightened camels across the street." And that was duriug the golden age, when Haile Selassie ruled!

Indeed, what gives the city its forlorn, halfhearted air is that the half-finished relics of an imperial past are placed amid the tin-roofed shanties. Addis—like much of Ethiopia—has the air of an exiled prince, long accustomed to grandeur and full of pride but fallen now on very hard times. There are broad streets lined with jacaranda, and the emperor's palace dominates the center of town ("At night the visitor can hear the lions roar from the grounds of the nearby palace," my 1969 guidebook said of the hotel where I was staying). There are boulevards named after Queen Elizabeth and King George VI, and ceremonial gates. There is even a Hilton Hotel. But incense clouds the lobby there, and the only papers on offer are ten days old.

Much of the capital feels remaindered now, and dispossessed (even the envelopes in my hotel proclaimed, not very ringingly, THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT OF ETHIOPIA). Along the streets where Haile Selassie used to cruise in his green Rolls-Royce, the signs say HOPE ENTERPRISES FEEDING CENTER and LIFE SAVER CAFETERIA. Across from the National Museum, there are stalls with names like NEIL A. ARMSTRONG TYPING TRAINING SCHOOL (typing in Amharic, with more than two hundred characters in its alphabet, must be almost as difficult as walking on the moon) and

hooded people clutching inflight magazines as if they were glossy treasures. And the city of palimpsests still has a spooky, nerve-wracked air, the air of a city with a bad case of the shakes, in the midst of a bad sleep troubled by dark dreams.

Yet ou the day before Christmas—as flawless and blue as every other day I spent in Ethiopia—the streets were bright with cross-shaped wreaths of purple and gold, and as night began to fall, the bars put on their single tube of neon lighting and I could see bright candles in shacks and twinkling trees in cafés. Children let off fireworks in small parks, and women iu gorgeous silks, with painted feet, trooped into my hotel.

And on a misty Christmas Eve, the streets were filled again with white-robed worshipers. The bells of the Selassie (Trinity) Cathedral tolled and tolled and tolled, and soon all corners of the glowing church were crowded with gaunt white figures in hoods, and deacons in white with red crosses on their backs, and priests in black robes with small white hats, and women with gold sandals underneath their white: a whole swirl of half-mythic figures, ragged, barefoot, but upright, filling all the pews in the church's ornate interior, the green and red and yellow flag of Ethiopia fluttering above them.

Upstairs, in a gallery, a group of robed deacons were standing in a circle, chanting slowly and solemnly, as if to some age-old rhythm. One, on the ground, banged a slow, slow drum, and all the men around him, clutching their T-shaped prayer sticks, slowly waving their sistrums, let out a slow, solemn, wailing chant that carried into the night and down into the nave below.

Outside, in the pitch-blackness, worshipers were making deep prostrations, extending their whole bodies along the ground and mumbling prayers, or standing in nooks and corners with their Psalters. Candles had been placed in the hands of every saint, in all the twelve alcoves along the church, above the stained glass;

believers circumambulated the darkened building bearing tapers, their figures making ghostly shadows on the walls.

Around them, in the dark, from the trees, I heard a banging drum. Cries and chants and ululations from somewhere among the gravestones. A haunting, unworldly, ancient chant that went through me to the core.

I followed the sound through the trees and the abject darkness and came upon a wondrous sight: a whole avenue of people, lit up by candles before them, outside the entrance to another church, old and small and round. Arouud it on every side, barefoot, bedraggled, hooded bodies, all in white, more bodies than I could count, hardly visible by the light of the candles they were holding, and gathering in small groups under straw roofs, or standing against headstones, or assembled in a circle under a tree, just praying, or listening in silence to a sermon, or singing hallelujahs in the night.

Everywhere I turned there were figures, some of them asleep. They had not eaten all day, and many of them had been fasting for two months—no meat, no eggs. Others stood on either side of distant tombs, a candle on each side of them. Others were lined up in what looked to be a manger, their sweet high voices rising up into the dark.

Within the church there were so many people that one could hardly move. Boys were playing ox-skin drums, and lines of men in multicolored raiment and gold and violet hats were singing from their holy books, the altars in front of them shaking with their piety. Outside, one of the groups struck up a hymn aud started clapping, and others picked up the rhythm, and then there was a wild ululation that signaled, thrillingly, glad tidings to the world, and the arrival of something bright.

All across the candlelit city it was like that on Christmas Eve: white-robed people from another age, with laughing eyes and

beads and crosses, chanting by the light of tapers. And sometimes, as I looked around me at the round church and the rough ground and the ragged, hopeful figures sitting or standing and singing through the night, I felt that this must have been how it was in Bethlehem two thousand years before. There was no sign of the modern world, no electricity or hype. Only ragged figures, with candles, singing their devotion.

"You really feel it," said the I.B., moved. "You really feel the joy that must have arisen when God was born." And he was right.

Before I went to Ethiopia, I had said, half-facetiously, that I was going there to "get around Christmas," leaving on December 25 to avoid the commercialism and loneliness and impossible expectations that constitute the holiday for us. I never knew, though, that Ethiopia really was the way to get to the heart of Christmas, and of almost everything else. I am no Christian, but Christianity made sense to me in Ethiopia—and many things as basic as hope and dignity, necessity and faith—and as I looked at the stars through the branches and the flicker of candles, I really could imagine three wise men coming to a manger, following the skies. Everything revved up and complicated fell away, and I was left in Ethiopia with the small, forgotten soul of the whole thing: thanksgiving amid hardship and songs of glorious praise.

1994

Seeing Ethiopia

How to navigate a timeless land

It sounds like a daunting place to visit, but in reality, Ethiopia has never been more accessible. There are new terminals and a new runway at Addis Ababa's Bole International Airport, and the government has improved access roads to the four main towns—Lalibela, Bahir Dar, Gonder, and Axum—that make up the Historic Route.

Aside from the improved infrastructure—which the government hopes will encourage tourism—the country can claim other points of pride as well. In 2005, Ethiopia recovered from Rome the seventeen-hundred-year-old Obelisk of Axum, which had been stolen by Mussolini in 1937. After a decades-long campaign, the seventy-eight-foot-tall granite tower lies for now in the Axum stelae field; plans are under way to re-erect it. And in late 2006, in one of the most publicized paleontological finds in years, scientists announced the discovery of the remains of a 3.3-million-year-old baby in the Rift Valley.

Here, some of the best and most reliable ways to see the new (and old) Ethiopia.

The "Northern Historical Tour" is an eleven-day trip organized by **Custom Safaris.** The Bahir Dar stop includes a side trip to the Blue Nile Falls in addition to the famous monasteries on Lake Tana. The Gonder leg adds a day tour into the volcanic Simien Mountains (301-530-1982; customsafaris.com).

Throughout the fall and winter, **Abercrombie & Kent** offers half a dozen different departure dates for its twelve-day tour