

# Ethiopia: A tale of two countries

## Direct flights from Dublin

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### 7 Churches at Lalibela Ethiopia

Ethiopia provides that wonderful feeling of strangeness. It reminds one that travel can still broaden the mind.

The famine-torn Ethiopia of 1984-5 is a distant memory, although this is still a very poor country and very much two countries in one. There is the massive building boom in the capital, Addis Ababa, where modern glass buildings are going up side by side with tiny street lock up shops. Many of the women dress like in any European capital. People talk on their mobiles. There are good restaurants and hotels.

Out in the country, one steps back in time to wooden ploughs drawn by oxen, women in traditional dress, children offering to shine your shoes for pennies, poverty but with enough to eat. I never saw a child with a bicycle. I saw kids kick around, but never with a real football. Half-used ballpoints were accepted with enormous gratitude. And no one wore glasses. There were very few dogs or cars. Pets eat food.

The new Dreamliner Boeing 787 service from Addis Ababa to Dublin and on to Los Angeles and back beginning in June will open up Africa to Irish travelers. From Addis you can fly on to forty nine African destinations. I had a great night's sleep on the Dreamliner. It is noticeably quiet and the flatbed in business class is a treat.



### *Ethiopian's Dreamliner 787 arrives in Dublin*

We arrived in Addis for morning rush hour. Chaos, bustle, and life are the order of the day. Amazingly it is all done with no horns beeping. There are queues for minibus taxis that are hundreds of yards long. They hold about fifteen people and everyone piles in. A rapid transit system is being built which will ease things. Somewhat.

Smack bang in the office district we see a man arrive at his street stand which is the pedal part of a Singer sewing machine. Out of his rucksack comes the machine proper. He fits it and settles down to work. Nearby a pub advertising the Newcastle v Arsenal match. We checked into the Radisson Hotel and went for a shower happy in the knowledge that the Six Nations crucial final day would be on in the bar.

Ethiopia was Christianised in the fourth Century and the Coptic Christian church is still dominant. First we visited the Trinity Cathedral Church where Haile Selassie is buried. He was a giant in Ethiopian history. He died in 1975, probably murdered in prison by the communists who stayed in power until 1991.

Today there is a democracy with 547 deputies, 546 held by the ruling party! Suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst is also buried here.

As at all churches shoes are off and women cover their hair. Men stand to the right and women on the left.

The following morning with the Six Nations Cup safely in the right hands, we took the two hour flight to Lalibela and began to appreciate the enormous differences in this ancient land. In Addis there is building everywhere, often with wooden scaffolding. The country's small towns are, by

contrast, frozen in history and subsistence living. The average annual income in the whole country is about five thousand dollars. It is a lot less here.



*Traditional harari architecture and African dress in Ethiopia*

Arriving in Lalibela, our minibus took us along dirt roads where subsistence farming was the norm. Ploughing is still done with a wooden plough pulled by two oxen. Children and women were carrying firewood. Mules carried sacks of food on their backs. Women used umbrellas to shield from the sun. New roads, being built with Chinese money, provide some work.

Farmhands walked with long sticks held across their shoulders and behind their head. Some carried guns. The fields were terraced with stones carried by hand to minimise the effects of flooding. People live in flimsy thatched dwellings, tukuls, with the more affluent having corrugated iron for protection. Jacarandas and bougainvillea bloomed. Eagles and kites flew above and hummingbirds played in the shrubs.

It was a Sunday and there was no school so the villages were teeming with children all of whom wanted to recite the capitals of the world in exchange for a few Birr. Some played table tennis on the street.

I began my first coffee experience. I walked the village while our hostess, Tsige, was roasting the coffee beans and was swarmed with children showing off their English and telling me they would study hard.

Lalibela is famous for its eleven churches hewn out of rock and they are an extraordinary sight. Built in the 12th Century they are a testament to hard labour and religious devotion and, at 50 dollars for a guide, form much of the local industry. We were treated to a priest holding up a gold 7 kilo, 12th Century cross and I could not help remembering in Dervla Murphy's book, *In Ethiopia with a Mule*, (1966) that the first time she was robbed in the mountains was by a gang led by a priest.

We retired to our Tukul Village Hotel with beautiful artisan-designed rooms and mountain views. There followed a wonderful lunch. One would not think that Fasting Food would be the meal of choice, but on a bed of Injera, which is like a citrus pancake made from teff flour, were a variety of vegetables and spices that hit the spot. You eat this with your fingers.

Or we could have had spiced lamb or Nile Perch which I enjoyed at a later meal. And what a meal we had in "Mad Susan's" (her description) accompanied by Rift Valley Syrah. This retired Scottish teacher has built Ben Abeba, an architect-designed restaurant in the mountains with 14 balconies with views. She tells me she was talked into it one night after 'a glass of wine or two'.



### *Ethiopia's Simien Mountains*

Next morning, up early and a flight to Axum which has been a centre of trade since the fourth Century BC. Today it is famous for the majestic Stelae Field, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with enormous carved 1st Century giant granite pillars each weighing over 500 tons.

Next we went to the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion which was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1955. We watched as a precession of women in simple garb followed ornately-clothed Priests around the church as part of morning service. Nearby is the Ark of the Covenant. Maybe.

Women were not allowed in so I refused to go in. The current Patriarch announced on 25 June 2009 that he would allow the Ark to be inspected the next day. The next day he changed his mind. The Ark is claimed all over the world, including at our own Hill of Tara.

We called to the palace of the Queen of Sheba, the foundations of which have been carefully restored. The story goes that King Solomon wanted to sleep with Sheba so he put a lot of salt and pepper on her dinner. She retired to his bed and fell asleep. When she awoke dying of thirst he had replaced the water in her jug with wine. She gulped it down and he had his way, which one of our group remarked was an early instance of date rape. Mind you she was already in his bed.

Our final church where King Ezana was buried was up a steep hill and was memorable for the 14-year-old girl who ran like a gazelle all the way to the top keeping pace with our mini bus. She had the smile of an angel and wasn't even out of breath when I bought some of her trinket crosses. This Olympic contender carried her school books as she ran, told me her name was Birzaf, and she wanted an education. Later, as we re-boarded the bus, she pushed a piece of paper in my hand with her email and asked me to send her photos. My heart melted



*John Masterson in Ethiopia*

On our way back to the hotel we were invited up a side street to what I can only call a shebeen where we drank tela, a muddy barley based alcoholic drink and chatted with the locals as best we could.

Our final hours back in Addis were spent buying souvenirs in the Postal District and drinking St George Beer for less than a euro in a street bar. Before retiring to the Yod Abyssinia Restaurant for a culture night drinking tef, a honeyish wine that you drink straight from a small carafe while watching traditional musicians and an Ethiopian boy band. We were in good form heading for our midnight flight home.

Incidentally the Ethiopians use a different calendar. They are in the year 2007. I certainly came back refreshed, fascinated, educated and enriched and most definitely felt eight years younger and perhaps just a little wiser.

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## **Getting there**

Ethiopian Airlines begin their Dreamliner services form Addis Ababa to Dublin to Los Angeles with an introductory fare of €499 return to Addis or LA on June 20. See [www.ethiopianairlines.com](http://www.ethiopianairlines.com).

Our internal flights cost between US\$75 and US\$150. On arrival in Addis your tourist visa for a month costs US\$49. Addis hotels are around US\$200 for B&B and our Lalibelia and Axum hotels were approx US\$60. Round trip transfer to hotel is US\$60 to US\$75. A local guide will cost you about US\$30 a day.

Restaurants are good value with main courses sometimes as little as \$3 and very drinkable wine less than \$10 a bottle. The local currency is Birr and is about 20 to the Euro and can be changed at a fixed rate in all hotels. Small tourist gifts plentiful at 200 Birr, a tenner. Museum and Church entry fees were typically US\$10



*Ethiopia: direct flights from June 20*

## Take Three

### Little Lucy

The National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis displays the skeleton of 'Lucy' who is over three point two million years old. Early modern humans go back a mere 200 thousand years. Lucy, found in 1974, is *Australopithecus Afarensis*. She walked upright and was three foot seven. She was called Lucy because Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds was a favourite track in camp. In Amharic she is called 'Dinkesh' which means 'you are marvellous'.

### Coffee heaven



I have never heard people so often remark: 'that was wonderful coffee', as I did in Ethiopia. The coffee ceremony is a big deal. I stopped in a one-roomed café where a charming woman gave a speeded-up demonstration of roasting beans on a little charcoal fire. She then ground them and served me as perfect a cup

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