

Land of many faces

On an 18-month, 50 000 km road trip from France to South Africa, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** crossed the border into culturally and scenically diverse Ethiopia.

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Approaching the Ethiopian border post, we were excited to see green vegetation after four months of deserts in Jordan, Egypt and Sudan. We arrived at Gallabat, a sleepy border village with plenty of trucks, which we bypassed to get to the immigration office. The crossing was smooth, only taking two hours. We were in Ethiopia at last – one of our much-anticipated trip highlights.

From the border, we took a 350 km route towards Lake Tana. The road was sometimes tar, sometimes gravel, and it set the tone for the driving during the rest of our time in Ethiopia. In general, the roads were terrible. Because of this, we grossly underestimated our travel time and had to camp by the roadside when darkness caught up with us.

The next day, we drove to Bahir Dar at the southern end of Lake Tana. From there, we visited several Ethiopian Orthodox monasteries in the area, we visited the nearby Blue Nile Falls, and we took time out in restaurants to gorge ourselves on the tasty local cuisine.

We visited the Ura Kidane Mihret monastery and a lesser-known one nearby. Both have brightly painted interiors depicting scenes associated with the Orthodox religion.

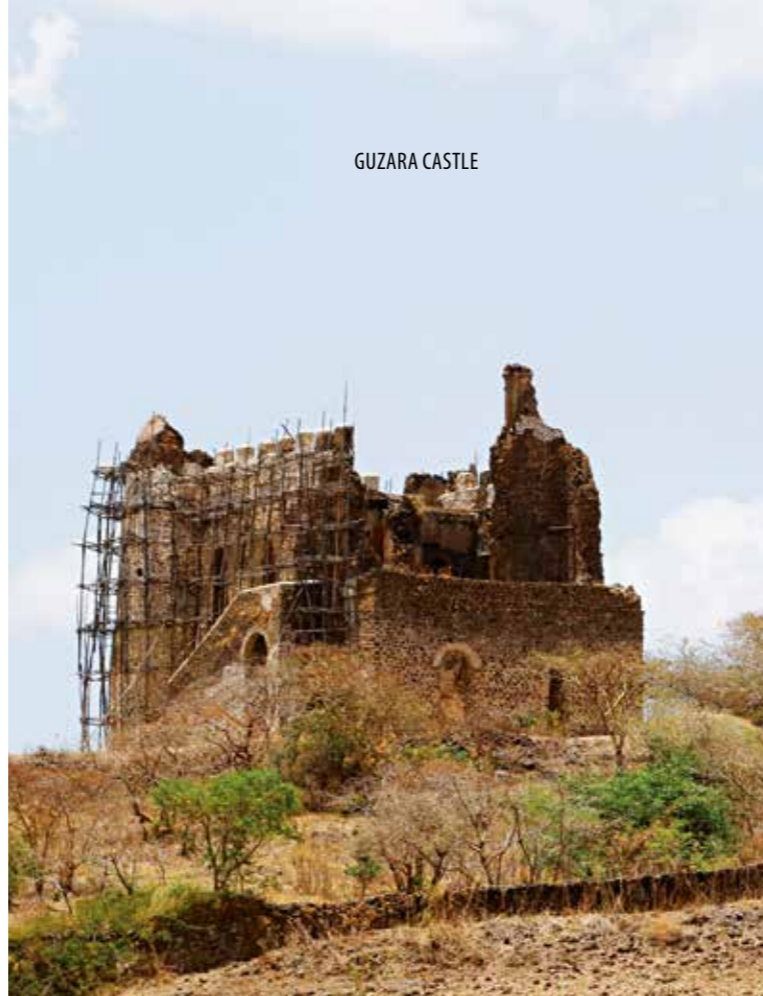
Near midnight, as we lay in our rooftop tent just outside the Ura Kidane Mihret monastery, we were woken by a group of monks singing. The sound was angelical to start with, but after four hours we felt a bit differently...

The following day we pitched camp close to the Blue Nile Falls. We spent a day hiking through villages and we crossed a Portuguese bridge built in 1626, and a more modern suspension bridge, to see the 45 m-high waterfall. Unfortunately, the waterfall's historical 400 m width has been diminished to less than 10 m due to a hydroelectric plant that was built upstream in 2003.

TRADITIONAL FARMING,
NEAR BAHIR DAR



GUZARA CASTLE



INSIDE A MONASTERY NEAR
URA KIDANE MIHRET



Chilled monkeys

From Bahir Dar, we turned north to Gonder, an area best known for its magnificent 17th-century castles and palaces. En route, we visited Guzara Castle (120 km from Bahir Dar), a partly ruined but still impressive building dating back to the 1570s. We asked the site manager if we could camp at the castle. “No problem,” he said. “But you need a guard because it’s not safe.” We ended up paying R200 for two guards who arrived with AK47s. They chatted all night and henceforth, we vowed to only ever hire one guard at a time. . .

We spent two days visiting all of Gonder’s sights, including the Fasil Ghebbi royal enclosure in the heart of the city (a castle with a moat around it), and the picturesque Bath of Emperor Fasilidas, 2 km away.

After a few days in the city, we were keen to get back into nature and meet the famous gelada baboons (apparently they’re actually Old World monkeys) found in the Simien Mountains National Park north-east of Gonder. The 165 km journey took us four hours and it was rather testing, but well worth it in the end.

The geladas were so remarkably chilled compared to our baboons in South Africa. We watched them forage in the short highland grass, and we regularly plonked ourselves in the middle of a 50-plus-member troop, coming within 2 m of the monkeys.

We hoped to find some proper wild camping opportunities in the Simien Mountains, but we were disappointed. Next to the main dirt road is a noisy community-run campsite with poor facilities, and again we had to pay for a guard. He sat 10 m from our tent all day long, brandishing his AK47 for happy snaps. Not ideal.

To get some time alone, we went for short hikes in the mountains. On one such hike, we even managed to spot a rare Ethiopian wolf.

From the Simien Mountains, we headed north to Axum. This town had its heyday from around 100 AD to 700 AD, when it was the centre of the most powerful state between the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia. It wasn’t incredible for us, however, perhaps due to our increasing frustration of not being able to camp wild. Camping in a hotel parking lot just isn’t the same.

We visited various historical sites: obelisks, tombs and other monuments like Queen Sheba’s swimming pool, and Dungur, which is rumoured to have been Sheba’s palace compound. All these sites seemed vulnerable due to a lack of conservation and unregulated tourism. The giant stelae (obelisks) were impressive. The tallest of them (33 m) was broken, and the pieces lay where they had fallen centuries ago.

From Axum, we travelled further north, almost to the border of Eritrea, to find the so-called “hanging” churches or monasteries, perched atop high mountains. Only men are allowed at Debre Damo, so Marie waited in the Hilux while I fretted about getting to the top. I had to scale a 15 m sheer cliff using only a thick cowhide rope – nerve-racking!

Of all the hanging churches, we liked Abuna Yemata the most (about 120 km south of Debre Damo). The climb is insane, but the reward is a tiny chapel that has been hollowed out from the rock about 200 m above the surrounding landscape. Constructed in the 5th century, it has been relatively unsullied by tourists; the frescoes are vivid and the views are amazing. We spent three nights in the region and even managed to camp wild for two nights, which boosted our morale.

One of the best things about wild camping in Ethiopia is that you almost always hear hyenas. It brings an edge and excitement to any evening. We were told that Ethiopians like hyenas because they play an important role in disposing of carcasses, which helps manage hygiene issues.

MOUNTAIN PASS NEAR AXUM





VIEW FROM ABUNA YEMATA

The realities

The moment we entered Ethiopia, it was clear that tourists – especially white tourists, referred to as *faranji* – were associated with money. Everyone asked us for money, all day long, every day. It was frustrating and prevented us from having an authentic cultural experience.

During the first three days travelling through rural areas, we got the feeling that something wasn't right. After a year on the road, you develop ways to "feel" a country and determine its "vibe". It has to do with the way a stranger responds when you greet him or her, how you're treated at a security check, or how a simple transaction like buying bread is executed.

People in Ethiopia were not friendly, especially compared to Sudan where we'd just come from. The security checks at each village were aggressive; there was no "Welcome" or "Can we help you?" Hardly anyone waved back at us, and smiles were in short supply. In Bahir Dar, we started asking questions to try and understand what we were missing. It turns out that Ethiopia has huge tribal conflict, and the scale of human displacement is greater than Syria. I'd read news reports about Ethiopia supposedly being Africa's fastest growing economy, but nothing we saw substantiated this. People lived in terrible conditions. Subsistence farmers still worked the land with traditional implements and out-of-date techniques, which seemed unsustainable. The impact of unregulated farming and charcoal harvesting on the environment was scary to witness. We saw massive deforestation, erosion and silted-up rivers.

Hot and salty

The Danakil Depression is one of the most inhospitable places on earth. To get there wasn't easy – it's an expedition rather than a tour. From the town of Mek'ele, we joined a tour company convoy for US\$200 due to security issues. We visited in winter, but the night-time temperature was still 45°C, making sleep almost impossible.

Having chosen the self-drive option, we had to take our precious Hilux through salt flats that were filled to a generous depth of 10–20 cm with highly corrosive salt water, thanks to recent rain. I wasn't happy, and neither were the two other self-driving overlanders on the tour. The following day, Marie and I managed to score a ride in one of the tour vehicles instead, leaving the Hilux behind in place called Maglalla.

Danakil is probably the oldest continually worked salt mine in the world. The Afar miners expertly hack into a solid, 10 cm-thick layer of salt to carve out tablets. This must be one of the most harrowing jobs anywhere, considering how hot it gets. Hundreds of camels lie in the sun awaiting their load of 20+ salt tablets, which you find in almost all of Ethiopia's informal markets.



DANAKIL DEPRESSION



DEBRE DAMO



CAMPING NEAR ABUNA YEMATA



PATRICK AND MARIE GURNEY IN THE DANAKIL DEPRESSION



HOUSE OF ABBOT LIBANOS, LALIBELA

Lalibela and Lucy

We drove dirt roads from Mek'ele towards Lalibela via Sekota, taking a few mountain passes. It took us 11 hours to travel 280 km. It seemed as if all of Ethiopia was one continuous mountain pass! Nowhere else on our journey had we driven so many wiggly roads.

Arriving in Lalibela was a shock: Sanitation seemed to be problematic; food scraps and animal faeces were everywhere; the roads were a muddy mess after recent rains; and accommodation options were slim but expensive for what you got.

We hired a guide for a day, who took us to some of Lalibela's more popular churches, like Bet Medhane Alem, Bet Mercurios and Bet Giyorgis, a 15 m-high church cut in the perfectly proportioned shape of a cross.

Despite the mess and the disorder, there was a real spiritual feeling at some churches: You could feel the reverence, the age and the strength of the stone. We purchased the customary candle offerings and handed these over to the priests. We were lucky to visit during the celebrated day of Saint George. The pilgrimage was on top form, with pilgrims singing outside the churches at 7 am. It was humbling.

Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, was all over the place. Mud-brick, tin-roofed houses sat alongside huge, western-style hotels and communist-era administrative buildings.

We had a few Ethiopian contacts who took us around. We visited some of the city museums, including Haile Selassie's house, and we said hello to Lucy, the famous fossil skeleton of an *Australopithecus afarensis*, which was discovered in Ethiopia in 1974.

We ate out often: The highlight was a buffet lunch at the newly opened Hyatt Hotel, which included complementary wine. Our batteries were recharged and we were ready for the next leg. It's amazing what a glass of good chenin blanc can do!

Beers in the bush

There are 80 ethnic tribes living in Ethiopia, eight of which live in the Omo Valley. It took us four days to drive the 600 km from Addis to Jinka, in the southern part of the valley. Due to tribes now charging for visits (R200 to enter a village; R400 to take photos), we needed to be selective. We decided on the Mursi (top right), Bana and Hamar tribes.

The landscape changed dramatically. The green mountain slopes disappeared, revealing open, scrubby bush with lots of sand and some of the biggest wild fig trees we'd ever seen.

People from various tribes congregate in Jinka on market day to sell and trade goods, from plastic sandals to vegetables, raw honey and cattle. We sat at a local coffee house and watched people arriving for the market.

All the tribes are protective and proud of their heritage and dress, and they celebrate their identity and cultural traditions. Considering how pervasive western influence is, even in smaller commercial towns, this is quite an impressive feat.

We camped for two days in the Mago National Park to visit the Mursi tribe, then we went further south to a town called Tumi, where the Bana and Hamar tribes are dominant. We found a guide who took us to a monthly drinking session out in the bush. About 60 people gather for three to four days, staying in makeshift shelters and enjoying the local brew while gossiping – the guide called it the local "Facebook group". The Hamar women decorate themselves with cowrie shells, glass and metal beads, and wear beaded goat skin shawls and skirts (bottom right). The beer (*tella*) had a slightly sour, tangy flavour and you drink it out of big calabash gourds. They also churn and store butter in them (middle right). I was more taken with the local version of ouzo – an aniseed-flavoured white spirit – which was super tasty. But beware the heartburn later!

Ethiopia is a unique country with huge tourism potential. Despite spending two months in the country and driving nearly 5 000 km (our average in other countries was 2 000 km), there was still at least a third of the country we never got to see. What a place!



PRIEST, LALIBELA



BET GIYORGIS



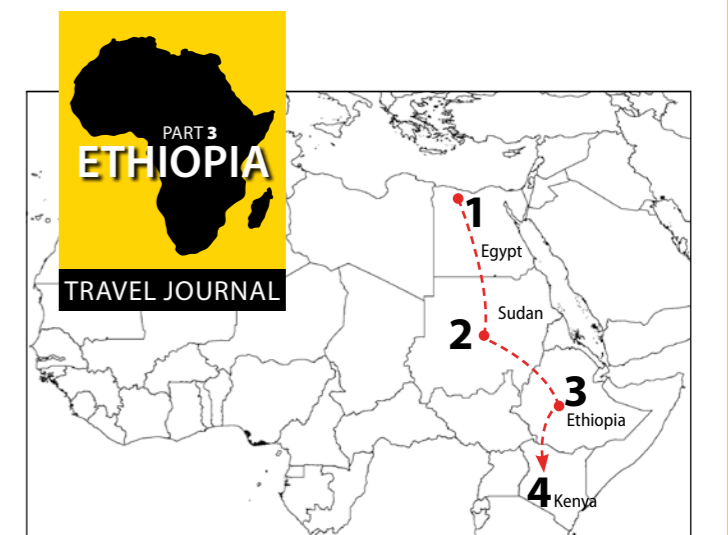
PILGRIM, LALIBELA

PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

Marie comes from Valence in France. They departed from there on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving back to their home in Johannesburg over the course of 18 months. By the time they reached Ethiopia, they had already been on the road for a year, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Sudan.

The aim of their journey is to re-think their definition of culture, and to find inspiration from humanity to guide their future work and personal choices. Marie is a sustainability consultant and Patrick works in marketing.

MORE INFO: You can e-mail them at info@skultcha.com if you have questions about their trip, or visit skultcha.com. Facebook "skultcha"; Instagram @skulcha



Next month: Patrick and Marie explore Kenya (Part 4).
Read about Egypt (Part 1) in go! #158 and Sudan (Part 2) in #159.