

THE EDGE OF ETHIOPIA

Friendly connections, scenery greet hikers in Ethiopia

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Our hearts pound and lungs gasp with each upward step as we hike through oxygen-starved air at altitudes of more than 4,000 metres. But our discomfort is quickly forgotten with each breathtaking view: soaring jagged peaks, gorges galore and cliff faces dropping a half kilometre almost straight down.

The Simien Mountains of northern Ethiopia are part of a vast mountain plateau known as the Roof of Africa. It was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site because of the combination of dramatic scenery and rare species. Indeed, this was among the first places in the world chosen when the United Nations started designating sites of outstanding cultural or natural significance.

Our trip here came together remarkably quickly and efficiently. We had hoped to visit the Simiens but had no concrete plans when we arrived in the nearby city of Gonder, about an hour's flight from Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. The owner of our hotel recommended someone who arranges excursions, and after a short meeting, we worked out a five-day hiking and camping trip, and were off the following morning.

We've never taken a hike quite like this. We not only had our guide, Getachew, but also a cook and his assistant, plus mules with handlers who hauled everything between campsites.

Then there was Jemale, the national park scout who was never without his Kalashnikov rifle. Park regulations require all hiking parties to have an armed scout "for protection." While there used to be bandits in the hills, these days it's more to provide employment in this impoverished region.

The park was created to protect several rare species. The most obvious of the plants is the giant lobelia, a short palm tree with a long flower stem that shoots up as high as 10 metres.

We were fortunate to find extremely rare walia ibex, large goat-like creatures with massive curved horns that males use to fight each other for dominance. This is the only place in the world where they live.

The wildlife highlight was seeing large troupes of gelada baboons, found only in the highlands of Ethiopia. Rarely venturing into trees, these grass-eaters prefer to walk and shuffle along the ground, where they pick blades of grass with their hands.

Sporting luxuriant lion-like manes, they're remarkably gentle and easy going, and they often pass right beside us.

Though this is a national park in remote terrain, small villages are scattered everywhere in this crowded country of more than 90 million.

Our approach to Geech village was almost surreal, as we saw round buildings of rock and mud, topped with substantial thatched roofs. From a distance, there was abso-



lutely nothing to remind us that we hadn't been transported a thousand years back in time. Men were hand winnowing barley, the easiest crop to grow in these harsh conditions.

Our last campground was next to Jemale's tiny village, so he invited us to his house for coffee. Coffee is a highlight of Ethiopia, both for the excellent quality and its social importance. After all, this is where the stuff originated.

According to legend, it all began when a goat herder noticed that his animals became more spirited when they ate particular berries.

Jemale's wife went through an elaborate ritual of roasting green beans in a frying pan over a charcoal fire. It's important to appreciate the aroma. She then ground the beans and added them to hot water to brew. It doesn't get any fresher than that. We sipped the delicious drink as neighbours wandered by for coffee and conversation.

The experience became unforgettable for a combination of jaw-dropping landscapes, curious critters, fascinating cultures and agreeable companions, all served up with the world's best coffee.

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ABOVE, CLOCKWISE: Arlene Karpan, centre, with guide Getachew, right, and scout Jemale on Ethiopia's Simien Mountains.

Gelada baboons preen in the sun.

Thatched roof huts dot Geech village.

A young girl sells crafts to hikers.

Jemale's wife pours fresh coffee for visitors.

