

Rachel Guthartz - Ethiopia, August 2013,

My trip started with a week of travelling, beginning in the exquisite Lalibela, famous for its eleven monolithic rock-hewn churches which were built between the 12th and 13th centuries. When standing at the base of the churches, especially the largest ones (Biete Medhane Alem and the famous Church of Saint George), the triumph of architecture they represent is evermore clear: they tower over you, their size magnificent and their carving exquisite. What was even more fantastic was that we visited on the eve of an important religious holiday which meant that the churches were filled with people. I was able to get a sense of the intensity of ordinary Ethiopian devotion to religious practice. Another distinctive feature of Lalibela was its setting—it is very high up and overlooks a huge valley, particularly green and plush as we visited in the rainy season.

Our next stop was Bahir Dar. We went on a couple of boat rides on the surprisingly brown Lake Tana. We saw the very faint trace of hippopotamus heads and the traditional reed boats that have been used for the past two thousand years. We also visited the Zege Peninsula and its sixteenth century circular church, the walls of which are covered with painted religious narratives, although these have been redone, dated between 100 and 250 years old. Nonetheless, they proved an interesting insight into the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which has its own sacred literature, including variations on traditional biblical stories—for instance, the walls pictured Mary on her journey to Jerusalem, via Ethiopia. We also visited the huge and exceedingly busy market which sells everything from textiles and livestock to chat (mildly narcotic leaf) and honey which is scooped out of huge plastic barrels, still buzzing with some stray bees. On our last day in Bahir Dar we drove an hour or so out of town to the Blue Nile Falls (though these are actually also brown and resemble something from Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory). After a hair-raising minibus ride during which we seemed to spend the entire journey narrowly missing people, goats and cows, the driver amicably racing his friend who was driving a neighbouring bus, we arrived (slightly worse for wear), in Gondar.

We spent the next three weeks in Gondar teaching at the Pembroke-Link Ethiopia Summer School. The first couple of days were exceedingly difficult what with the children being fairly shy and us having to majorly doctor and replan lessons which were considerably more complex than the English skills of the students. Since I was also very involved in teaching the more informal, creative side of the summer school, another challenge was developing the students' creative skills—a feature which seems to be sorely lacking from the Ethiopian school system. Over the first week, I taught a variety of classes focused on building imagination and developing confidence, and by the second week there was a notable difference in the children. We were even able to put together a presentation—“Around the World in 80 Days”—which we then presented to parents and senior Link Ethiopia staff. I also taught English Language, Grammar and Pronunciation, and even though I am sure that having to speak in English every day, express themselves and communicate effectively was hugely helpful, the students remained excellent at grammar theory and less proficient in speaking accurately.

Weekends off were spent seeing the sights of Gondar (Fasil Ghebbi or the Royal Enclosure, Fasil's Pool where the Epiphany Festival is held, and the Debre Birhan Selassie church) and visiting the Simien Mountains. After the hectic life of Gondar, it was lovely to escape to the remote Simiens. We camped for two nights and spent one day trekking at very high altitude—we climbed Mount Nati which is 4070m, higher than Mount Fuji! Though we were occasionally rewarded with bursts of sun and clear skies, we mostly walked in the rain and immense amounts of fog which meant that often, at a high point which theoretically affords a magnificent view, we could see nothing but grey and white cloud. At numerous points we found ourselves exceedingly close to precipitous edges which only became visible with the slight shifting of the clouds—sometimes the guide would point out the treacherous route we had been on the day before, of which we had been (happily) unaware

at the time. We were also exceedingly lucky to see four out of the purported forty Ethiopian Wolves in the entire national park; they are the rarest predator in Africa and the rarest canine in the world. We also saw huge amounts of Gelada Baboons, many of which resemble lions rather than monkeys.

All in all it proved a fantastic trip in which I learnt immeasurable amounts about life outside the Western world.