



jewish  
**RENAISSANCE**

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON JEWISH CULTURE

JR Tours

# Ethiopia

4-17 November 2019

Group Diary





## Tuesday 5 November

Twenty of us (including David from JR, Michael standing in for Sybil and Abye our Ethiopian guide) wanted to visit Ethiopia, to learn more about the country of some 105 million people (mostly younger) and the remaining 8,000 or so Jews, whose earlier generation were forcibly converted to Christianity, but retained their Jewish religion. We made our way separately to London Airport and very sadly for me, Jackie my partner had to cancel because her daughter was having an emergency operation that day.

I found myself sat next to a man who was born in Ethiopia to an Armenian father and Lebanese mother, trained to become a chemical engineer but for political reasons had no passport and was stateless. In time he found himself in Holland where he became a citizen, but now lives in Hendon and has a son who went to the same school as me, and like me, went to the LSE. He is now in the wine business and he invited me to a wine tasting that night.

For no apparent reason he asked me if I am Jewish and I said yes and explained the tour. He guided me off the plane through a very crowded arrivals hall and knew exactly where to go and even took me through the diplomatic passport control!

Once I collected my case he asked me who I was meeting and where I was going and when I said that I didn't know he kindly stayed with me to ensure everything was okay. Fortunately I had attached the West End Travel tag to my bag and David spotted me and it was only when he knew I was alright that he said goodbye.

Slowly the 9 from the flight came together and we wondered towards Terminal 1 (no signage to help!) for the internal flight to Bahir Dar to the north of Addis Ababa. The other part of the group who had arrived in Ethiopia early, joined us in the terminal for the short flight.

It was only a short coach ride to the Blue Nile Resort Hotel beautifully located on Lake Tana, created by an earthquake millions of years ago and from which the Blue Nile runs. Few of us slept on the plane and having been introduced to Abye our friendly, gregarious tour guide we met up after lunch for a coach tour of Bahir Dar, home to 150,000 people, divided into the old and new parts.

The streets are mainly wide, tree-lined and full of *tuktuks*. The coach climbed a hill (passing some beautiful and unusually shaped trees) to a point where we could have a panoramic view of the large lake and the Blue Nile.

On the way back we were shown the market area with leather traders, wicker basket makers and dealers of animal stock (not today - or the streets would have been jammed). Throughout the journey Abye told us about the city, government, University and answered all our questions, it was very helpful and informative.

Although tired from a lack of sleep we were able to take in the atmosphere and feel; quite different to anything we see when travelling in Europe, although the large (vanity-driven) football stadium was not unfamiliar.

At the end of the day we had dinner together shared over two tables. A few hours ago most of us did not one another, but now we were a friendly group sharing the new experience of exploring Ethiopia. At the unusually early hour of 6:30pm (UK time) we went to bed to recover the lost night's sleep, refreshed the next day for more new experiences.

*Richard*



## Wednesday 6 November

At the old port of Bahir Dar we boarded a boat for a trip across a corner of Lake Tana - about an hour's journey to the Zege peninsula which is home to several Christian monasteries set amongst giant forest trees and lush green vegetation. We landed and ascended a narrow, winding path, lined on both sides by souvenir stalls, leading to the 14th-century church of the monastery of Azuwa Mariam: a round thatched building, 88m in circumference, in the traditional style of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The central holy chamber, which may only be entered by priests, contains a replica of the Ark of the Covenant. The walls of the middle chamber are decorated with beautiful richly-coloured paintings of many biblical scenes and characters- deftly identified and explained by our wonderful guide Abye. We walked around the middle and outer chambers, viewing the paintings and then enjoying a restful moment in the grounds amidst ancient cedar and oak trees.

On the return boat journey we took a detour into the outlet from the lake, a wide river surrounded by bulrushes and reeds that meanders southwards before eventually turning northwards towards Sudan. This is the Blue Nile. At Khartoum it meets the White Nile, and they become the Nile.

In the afternoon our coach took us on a short trip through the countryside to the village of Tis Abay for a visit to the Blue Nile Falls. The coach journey itself was fascinating, affording glimpses of local rural life: simple houses of wood and mud with corrugated metal roofs, women carrying water and firewood, fields of sorghum and sugar-cane, donkeys, goats and cattle. At the village our guide recruited four local helpers to assist us on our walk to see the Falls; the terrain was quite difficult and the helpers proved to be very helpful! The cascade was pretty impressive, albeit affected somewhat by hydroelectric plants upstream.

Our lakeside hotel in Bahir Dar was the best - and so we shared good food with government delegations, UN soldiers and other groups of western tourists before retiring for a good night's sleep.

*Robert*





## Thursday 7 November

It was time to say 'goodbye' to our first town and head north around Lake Tana to reach Gondar, our base for the next three nights. Setting off from the Blue Nile Resort we were soon through Bahir Dar and onto the 'black carpet'. Around 10.30am we stopped for a comfort break and a chance to give the coach's tyres a check up, with the eye-opening experience of Ethiopian public toilets for some of the group, and some members enjoyed the tour's first Ethiopian coffee ritual. Somewhat impromptu, most definitely roadside and very much drawing a crowd of intrigued locals, the warm welcome of the hosts was equalled by the delicious coffee. Punctures repaired, we now started to peel away from lakeshore level where we saw fields growing all sorts of produce including paddy fields of rice, and climbed up through the hills stopping on the way to view an intriguing rock formation. Formed by volcanic activity, Abye proposed that it was better than the Grand Canyon because this part of Ethiopia is so green.

A little later than scheduled we arrived in Gondar and made our way out of the town to the Gondar Hills Resort located high above the town and with spectacular vistas of green hills and valleys. At lunch we experienced first-hand why Gondar was so green when the heavens opened launching a deluge of heavy rain and hail accompanied by thunder and lightning, it delayed our departure by about an hour and several people mentioned it was fitting for this week's Torah portion *No'ach*.

By 4.30pm we arrived at the after-school club funded by Meketa, where we were greeted by a loom in the grounds weaving *tallitot* in the traditional way, some group members buying one as a memento. With the after-school club about to finish for the day, we had a chance to quickly tour the three classrooms and meet some of the children and their teachers as well as Ambanesh, where we could leave various items of clothing, books, games, sports kit and computers brought over as gifts. Regrettably delays in the journey and the weather meant we did not have enough time to participate in Mitzvah Day tasks to help out the community, but the children loved their stickers and having their photos taken as the most remote outpost of Mitzvah Day.

We returned to Gondar Hills Resort for a buffet dinner, drinks and our first communal experience of the challenges of internet access in sub-Saharan Africa.

*Kevin*





## Friday 8 November

The day began with a visit to Wolleka, formerly a Falasha village, now the home of the Ploughshare Project. Women having specific medical problems and isolated from their families are supported in learning skills which will enable them to become self-sufficient. We watched demonstrations of weaving, spinning, basket making and pottery. We gave our immediate support in their shop, buying lots of gifts to take home with us. But one thing they really need is an engineer with spare parts to repair one of their kilns which was made in Stoke-on-Trent.

Next, a short break for some retail therapy before our next destination. Our bus and driver left us to get the tyres fixed, having picked up some nails from the road.

Kindu Trust and Link Ethiopia are British charities working together to improve the lives of children in the poorest communities in Ethiopia. We visited their centre and learnt about how they help through their projects of school building, teacher training and child sponsorship and about how we could help them. A delicious lunch had been prepared for us by the in-house team: homemade soup, bread, lentils, chickpeas and vegetables. The traditional coffee ceremony followed, immersing us with the evocative aromas of incense and roasting coffee beans. They make the best coffee in Ethiopia!

Our Erev Shabbat visit to the Synagogue began with quite a wait at the gate while our credentials were established. Eventually we were allowed into the synagogue, which is basically an enclosure with a tin roof and earth floor. On the women's side were about ten rows of low metal benches - I couldn't see behind the curtain into the men's section. The rows in front of us were packed with older women swathed in white shawls and intent on their prayers. There was no chatting, much standing, chanting, and chiming 'amen', building up to a crescendo of singing, clapping and ululation. As we left everyone around shook hands and we wished them 'Shabbat shalom'. It is a world apart from our synagogue in Manchester. I wonder what they thought of us.

Finally, dinner at the Lamergaier Hotel where a room had been set aside for us and our visitors including people from Meketa. We listened to a passionate address from Dan, an Israeli Ethiopian returning in the hope that he will be able to help his fellow Ethiopian Jews who have not managed to emigrate. Unexpectedly, Abye had managed to arrange for our bus to take us back to our hilltop hotel: the alternative of the *tuktuks* in mind, I imagine this was a relief to everyone.

*Carol*

## Saturday 9 November

We are now into the 5th day of our tour and once again we board the coach ready for the off.

The weather is overcast as we arrive at the church of Debre Birhan Silassie. Another amazing site which was built in the 17th century. The walls inside the church are covered with the faces of hundreds of angels. Unfortunately I cannot remember the history of the church but can certainly recall as to how different it is to any other church I have ever seen.

Back to the hotel for lunch. Having all eaten, off we go again. This time to have a tour of the Gondar Castles and the swimming pool of Fasilades. Not a pool full of water for a regular swim but one that is only full of water once a year for religious celebration! It covers a very large area of which we walked around.

Our next journey was to collect David and Kevin from the hotel they stayed overnight for Shabbat. Back to our hotel once again for a quick wash and tidy in preparation for dinner at Four Seasons restaurant. A place which is a big tourist attraction, hence it was extremely crowded. We were supposed to have had a display of traditional dancing, but no such luck! The event had to be cancelled due to some dispute in the country that prompted the church to call for a period of prayer and restraint. Nevertheless, we had a pleasant time. Back to our hotel at the end of another perfect informative and full day all exhausted and ready for bed to prepare ourselves for an early start the next day.

*Avril*



## Saturday 9 November

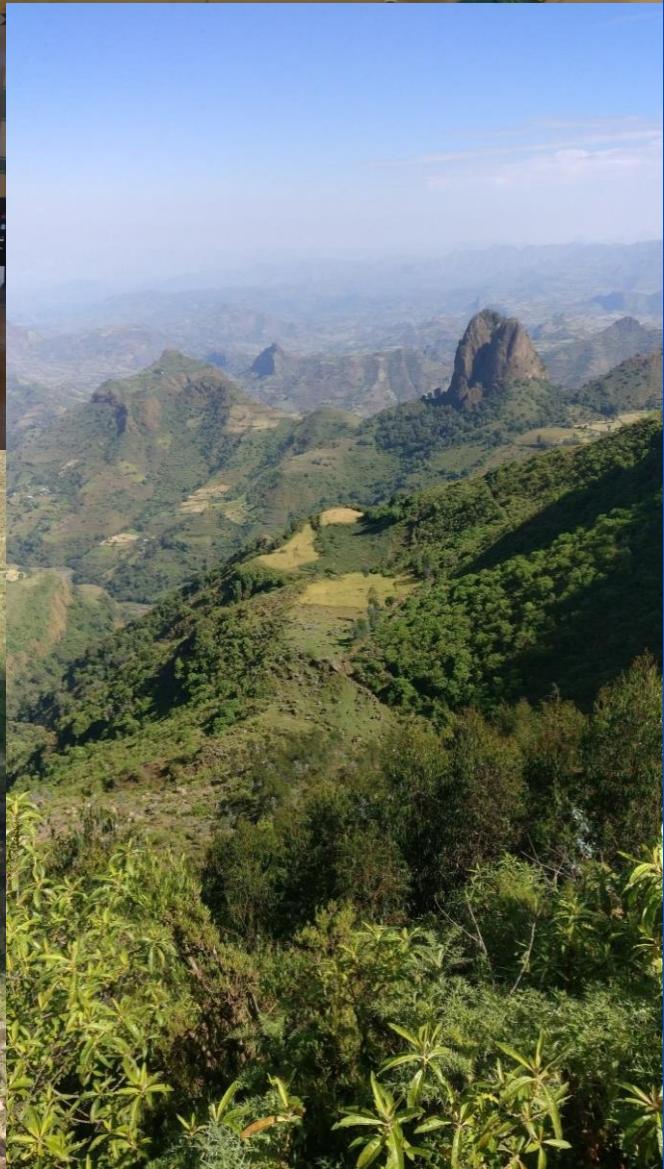
Following last night's *Kabbalat Shabbat* service at the synagogue, David and Kevin returned for *Shabbat shacharit* service. Thanks to some "insider knowledge" from the Israeli volunteers staying at the hotel we knew that service started at 7.30am and the Torah service would be around an hour later. So this is when we were arrived to be greeted by the synagogue as busy as yesterday, if not a little busier, and the sight of almost every man and boy in identical electric blue and silver *tallitot*. There was something rather striking about so many people looking so similar, a visual symbol of community belonging.

The Torah was already being read from the central bimah on the men's side and the process of *aliyot* was very familiar, although in Hebrew and, being an Orthodox service, only men would be called up here. Whilst the Torah scroll was open and housed in a case similar to those of Sephardic style, one reader read the Torah portion aloud from a large book in Amharic to the congregation whilst the other - we assume - read it out quietly in Hebrew from the scroll. The Torah service culminated less in a procession of the Torah but rather a mass gathering around it, reminiscent of a rugby scrum, as it made its way back to the ark in front of the women's side. Whilst much of the service was in Amharic, with the kaddish and a few blessings in Hebrew, the pattern of the service would be immediately recognisable to any western synagogue goer. The service itself ended with a chorus of *Hatikvah*, Israel's national anthem, again sung in unison and with great joy.

Once the main service was over, it was time for *kiddush*, this time the congregation was a little more ordered and quieter than yesterday. Once the blessing for *hamotzi* was done, a stream of bags of *challah* were distributed about the mass of seated men, women and children. By now everyone was chatting eagerly, some things are the same at kiddush world over it seems, and Dan was attracting quite a crowd of boys keen to hear his stories of Israel and why he had returned to his parent's former country. A touching moment was when a young girl came over to wish "Shabbat Shalom" having introduced herself as being in Getch's class during our after-school club visit. *Birkat Hamazon* was then recited from the front of the synagogue and by 10.30am the congregation was streaming out of the synagogue into the warm Ethiopian morning sun.

*Kevin*





## Sunday 10 November

We left our 'luxury hotel' in Gondar at 9.00am on a bright and sunny morning to continue our adventure north into the Simien Mountains. The Simien Mountain National Park now comprises an area of 412 sq Kms and ranges from the height of 1,900 metres to 4,533m. A smaller park was first established in 1966 at the behest of UNESCO. It is now a World Heritage Site.

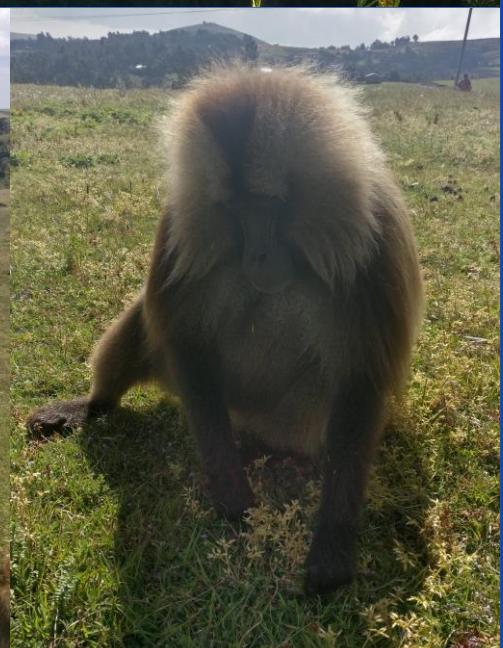
Along the road were many villages, some with the familiar simple thatched huts which were typical of the houses throughout this part of Ethiopia. There were other larger villages where the huts were built in rows with corrugated iron roofs, which are provided by the government to resettle people whom they are removing from the park. Grazing cattle and horses is now considered to be incompatible with the preservation of the mountain habitat and the needs of the wildlife population, so some of those living within the park are being moved outside to preserve the land and habitat for the indigenous animals.

We experienced one of the real highlights of the whole trip on this journey in the shape of the Kossoye crater. It was simply the most dramatic awe inspiring view that I have seen. It was formed by intense volcanic activity and stretched as far as the eye could see. Within it were mountainous areas, craters and volcanic chimney plugs which were scattered throughout this natural wonder. Beyond the edge was a huge range of rocky mountains. It was spectacular. Apparently when Queen Elizabeth visited Ethiopia in 1965, she flew from Axum to Gondar and stopped at Kossoye to admire this magnificent feature. It was, and remains for me, one of the outstanding natural highlights of this trip.

We arrived at a busy town at the start of the park called Debark. We all signed in at the park office and then were on our way to the Simian Lodge where we were staying for the night. On arrival having given our lunch orders we went to our cabins up the hill to settle in. We then went for lunch after which we went for a walk to see the indigenous Gelada Baboons. In fact the Gelada is an Old World Monkey, not a baboon, but the name sticks. These creatures have long silky beautiful coats which offer protection from the bitter wind. They have a distinctive bright red heart shaped patch on their chests and are mostly vegetarian. In fact their diet is 95% grass, so feeding is constant to ensure that enough calories are ingested. The social system is governed by related females, together with a few breeding males. They travel in large groups, some herds can be up to a thousand strong. There are approximately 4,500 of these creatures, some living in the park and 2000 or so living on the Simien massif. The troop we saw largely ignored us but were content for us to wander amongst them with no fear of attack. We spent an entertaining time observing their behaviour and the antics of the babies.

The evening turned chilly but a wood fire burned at the lodge. We watched a film about the Gelada, made by a research student who had been studying one troop for 7 years. After dinner, we retired for the night, having enjoyed a great day in the Simien mountains.

*Sybil*



## Monday 11 November

This morning, we woke very early, to a pristine, washed-blue sky as the sun shone brightly on all the myriad shades of green of plants and trees, the rusty red colour of the cliffs, and the beautiful lines of the mountains that surrounded us at Simien Eco Lodge. It was sad to leave all the beauty, but, at 7:30 AM we left the Simien Mountains for Axum and the wonderful new adventures that would surely follow us there! Because we spent the day on the bus, the notes I have, and all that I learned that day, came mostly from Abye directly.

Abye played some music for us and we learned about Ethiopian musicians and instruments. We learned about Tedy Afro, a very popular Ethiopian singer whose music broke the record for Africa, and who is a dedicated, patriotic, supportive Ethiopian. We all fell in love with his music and, later in the trip, searched for it in the shops. I was especially fortunate to find not one but two CD's of his music to take home! We also listened Mulatu Astatke, a jazz musician, and to Ethiopian music played on a masenko, an ancient form of the violin. Masenko music was especially relaxing and sounded very classical.

The vegetation we saw, of course, varied by altitude, as it does all over Ethiopia, and, indeed, everywhere in the world. We passed through several zones over the course of the day, but there was one thing that seemed to flourish in every zone – the Eucalyptus tree (which I happen to favour!). We passed green fields filled with cattle and goats and sheep and boys in colourful clothes that stood out sharply against all the greens watching the animals and waving and smiling to us. We passed little waterfalls and pools and springs and learned that all the waters here are holy, because they come from the mountains, and the mountains are holy. We saw Wanga trees, and learned that they were used to make furniture. We passed beehives in the trees but the beehives didn't look like the pictures of beehives with which I had grown up. They looked long and flat and lay along the branches of the trees. We saw lots of hay fields and wheat fields and the big round haystacks locals made.

There was a bit of haze in the air after a while, and Abye told us that this was sand dust from the Sahara, that starts there in the wind, blows through the Sahel, and to the Simien Mountains. So, we were really seeing sand from the Sahara! Abye also told us that the hurricanes in the Caribbean and on the East coast of the US come from the Simien Mountains, and blow right across the North Africa and the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean – a fascinating bit of information!

At a rest stop, we saw solanum plants, which had beautiful, curvy leaves – dark green with light, greyish-greenish borders. But – when we got up close, we saw that they had spikes – yes, real spikes (yikes!) on both the top and the bottom of each leaf. Of course, I had to try to touch one – and they were really sharp! There were spikes on all the branches, too. Lovely to look at – but impossible to touch!! Abye told us that the plants grew tomatoes, but that they were inedible, and that locals used the plants for detergent and for leather tanning, and that it was an ingredient in Head and Shoulders Shampoo. Wow – they must have found some way to get near it without getting spiked!! And then Abye told us that it used to be used to discipline children, too – and that he had been disciplined with it as a child. Having been stung by a spike myself, I felt really, really sorry for him!!

There were Sodom's Apple trees all along the roadside, their round, pale green leaves rustling in the breeze. "Apples" hung from the branches. They looked inviting and beautiful but – watch out – Abye warned us – Sodom's Apples are toxic!! There were also Euphorbia which looked like cactus but the branches were very tightly and closely packed together.

*Continued...*

Some had pinkish flowers on the top, which others had green tops. They looked so top-heavy, yet somehow delicate, and beautiful! There were even baobab trees, although many of them had been cut down to make scented fuel – which, however, wasn’t selling, and was just laying around in large white plastic bags!

A very clear and noticeable difference as we moved from Afar into Tigray province. Where the homes had been made of wooden poles, and the fencing from tree branches, in Tigray the homes were made of stone, as were the fences around them. This was a really noticeable and marked difference between the two provinces.

Abye told us that, with the population’s explosion, farmers like the ones we were driving past, had problems. They no longer wanted livestock wandering and grazing freely anywhere they wished to go, which has been the pattern until now. They didn’t want them in “their” fields, where they were planting and tending and wanted to reap their harvests. But in Ethiopia all the land is owned by the government, so the government would have to determine policy and address this issue – a very serious one for all concerned!

While we were on the subject of politics – we learned that Ethiopian elections are held every five years. The current President is from Tigray, the province which we were entering. We also passed many empty “homes” along the way – homes that were built right up to the roadway. Their owners weren’t living in them, mostly, but were holding them so that the government would provide a fee for them when they needed to be torn down for road construction. We also learned that Ethiopian women do not use any form of birth control – they believe using them causes sterility, and also do not want the marks under their eyes that the birth control causes.

Although Christians and Moslems get along in Ethiopia, the government is always aware of potential dangers and confrontations. The cities of Axum and Lalibela do not permit mosques in their cities, and have very tight security. Villages on the way to these cities have “security” checkpoints, and our van went through many of these over the course of the day. They were generally metal lines strung across the roadway to stop all traffic. A local villager hired for this special task monitors the checkpoint and can demand inspections before permitting the lines to be crossed. There is also official government security and police are armed. It is generally known that these two cities “are on the list of every terrorist organization” because of their anti-mosque policy, and that they can be the victims of terrorist attack at any time.

We passed May Sebri Village on our way. This is a village for Sunni Muslim Eritrean refugees, who receive free medical care, education, toilets, and electricity – all benefits that the local farmers around them do not receive. There was quite a difference in the appearance of the villages – the refugee village, with all of its special funding, very obviously had better housing and facilities than the local villages. The number of refugee villagers has increased after Ethiopia and Eritrea made peace. Instead of going home, as was expected, the refugees brought family members and others to live in the village as well, and receive all the benefits! UNHCR provide funding for the village. The refugees don’t want to remain in Ethiopia, Abye tells us – they want to go to the US, Canada, or Australia! There are 9 refugee villages in Tigray province and 4 more in Afar province. Refugees are  $\frac{1}{2}$  Eritrean,  $\frac{1}{4}$  Somali, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  Sudanese, Syrian, Djibouti, and others.

After this long, interesting ride, we arrive in Axum, the “Chief of the Waters” – the “waters” being the Red Sea.

*Juliet*





**Tuesday 12 November**

We spent today exploring the ancient city of Axum (also spelled Aksum).

After breakfast at the hotel, we set out by coach for the Northern Stelae where we visited the Tomb of the False Door, the Mausoleum, the Tomb of the Brick Arches and the Archaeological Museum. During the tour of the Archaeological Museum, Abye introduced his main theme the day: "What is fact? What is legend?"

After visiting the Museum, we had a coffee break outside before continuing on to our next stop, the St Mary of Zion Church and Museum. This complex of churches is where the Ark of the Covenant is housed (fact or legend?) We were all able to visit the Museum, which contained an extensive collection of regalia, but only men were able to go into the St Mary of Zion church. The women waited outside while the men visited and afterwards we all went to the Sabean Hotel for lunch.

In the afternoon, we drove to the outskirts of the modern city of Axum. First we took a quick look at the Queen of Sheba's Bath - but was it really the bathing site of the ancient Queen? or just an important reservoir? Fact or legend, you decide!

We then went on to the Tombs of King Kaleb and King Gebre Meskel (is there really a tunnel underneath the tomb leading all the way to the Red Sea?) followed by a quick stop to see the Ethiopian Rosetta Stone.

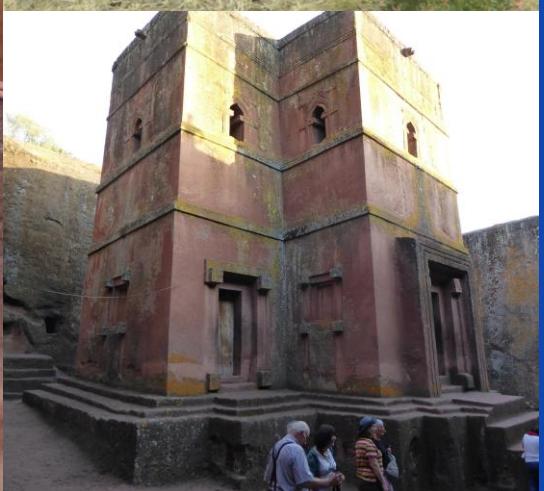
Our last stop of the day was The Palace of the Queen of Sheba, also known as Dungur Palace. We climbed up an observation tower and looked out over the ruins, and Abye asked us to consider if this was the palace where the Queen of Sheba lived or was it the stately residence of an important general? Or as recent archaeological evidence suggests, is the Queen's Palace somewhere underneath the General's Residence?

On the drive back to the hotel, Abye pointed out Abba Pantalewon, perched high on peak overlooking Aksum, which was the home King Kaleb as well as to a man who prayed nonstop for forty years.

We ended the day with dinner at the hotel.

*Maggie*





## Wednesday 13 November

Wake up at the Yared Zehma Hotel in Axum (3/5 on Trip Advisor – seems fair). Luggage at 9:00, bus at 9:30 – the extra sleep much appreciated. On the way to the airport we visited the Market in Axum that reminded us of Chinatown in New York but more extensive and open air. There was a section for almost everything – mattresses, cooking stoves, tires, etc. The food seemed very fresh and in contrast to Boston, it was OK to bring your dog (or donkey or goat) to the market.

Next came an uneventful flight to Lalibela and following a long drive through the mountainous country side (houses of eucalyptus branches and corrugated iron roofs), check-in/lunch at the Roha Hotel (3.5/5 - not on the itinerary but OK – except for the lack of running water and construction noise). The dining room was pleasant with hanging tapestries and occasional internet access. Fortunately, the water arrived at 6:00 PM. Notably, the Obama gift shop was across the street although there were no Michelle sightings.

The main event – the first of two visits to the monolithic, 12<sup>th</sup> century rock-hewn churches named after King Lalibela who commissioned the massive building project of 11 churches to recreate the holy city of Jerusalem in his own kingdom. The site remains in use by the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church to this day, and is an important place of pilgrimage for Ethiopian Orthodox worshipers. A world heritage site, each church is unique with carvings and paintings – a wonder of the world and, for us, the highlight of the trip so far. Fortunately, the walking on stone paths was assisted by our guides who also cared for our shoes when we went inside.

Back to the hotel for R & R – nothing like a drink at the bar to occupy one's time waiting for the water to come on. A typical buffet dinner led to a well-deserved early bedtime.

*Shari & Robert*





**Thursday 14 November**

We left the hotel at 8:30am for an hour and half's drive to the Yemrehanna Kristos Monastery. En route we were treated to spectacular vistas, views of farms, some large homes and traditional compounds, and many villages. To reach the church we climbed a beautiful mountain path lined with juniper trees. Yemerehana Kristos is built in a cave, and differs from the other churches of Lalibela in that it is not excavated from the ground down, but built up in layers of wood and stone. The church is spectacular in design and conveys intense spirituality.

After the walk back down the hill, we stopped for a coffee ceremony which involved a frenzy of shawl buying. We left the coffee shop at about noon for the drive back to Lalibela. En route we stopped for a lunch at the Ben Abeba Restaurant, where we had a delicious buffet of traditional Ethiopian and Scottish dishes. The futuristic design of the building was the brainchild of two young Ethiopian architects, and afforded unobstructed mountain views from its many different levels. We met the owner of the restaurant, a Glaswegian woman named Susan. She was recently featured in Ben Fogle's tv series New Lives in the Wild (Series 10, Episode 2).

When we returned to Lalibela after lunch, some of the group chose to relax at the hotel or go shopping, while others explored more of Lalibela's excavated churches. Those visited were in the south-eastern group which included Bet Gabriel-Rufael, Bet Merkorios, Bet Amanuel, and Bet Abba Libanos.

Dinner was back at the Roha Hotel in Lalibela.

*Penny & Richard*



## Friday 15 November

Clearly for me the experience of the day was visiting the synagogue located near the Israeli embassy in Addis. We were met on the main street and taken to the synagogue at Kotebe. Abye had been told it was a different place from last time, but apparently it was the same.

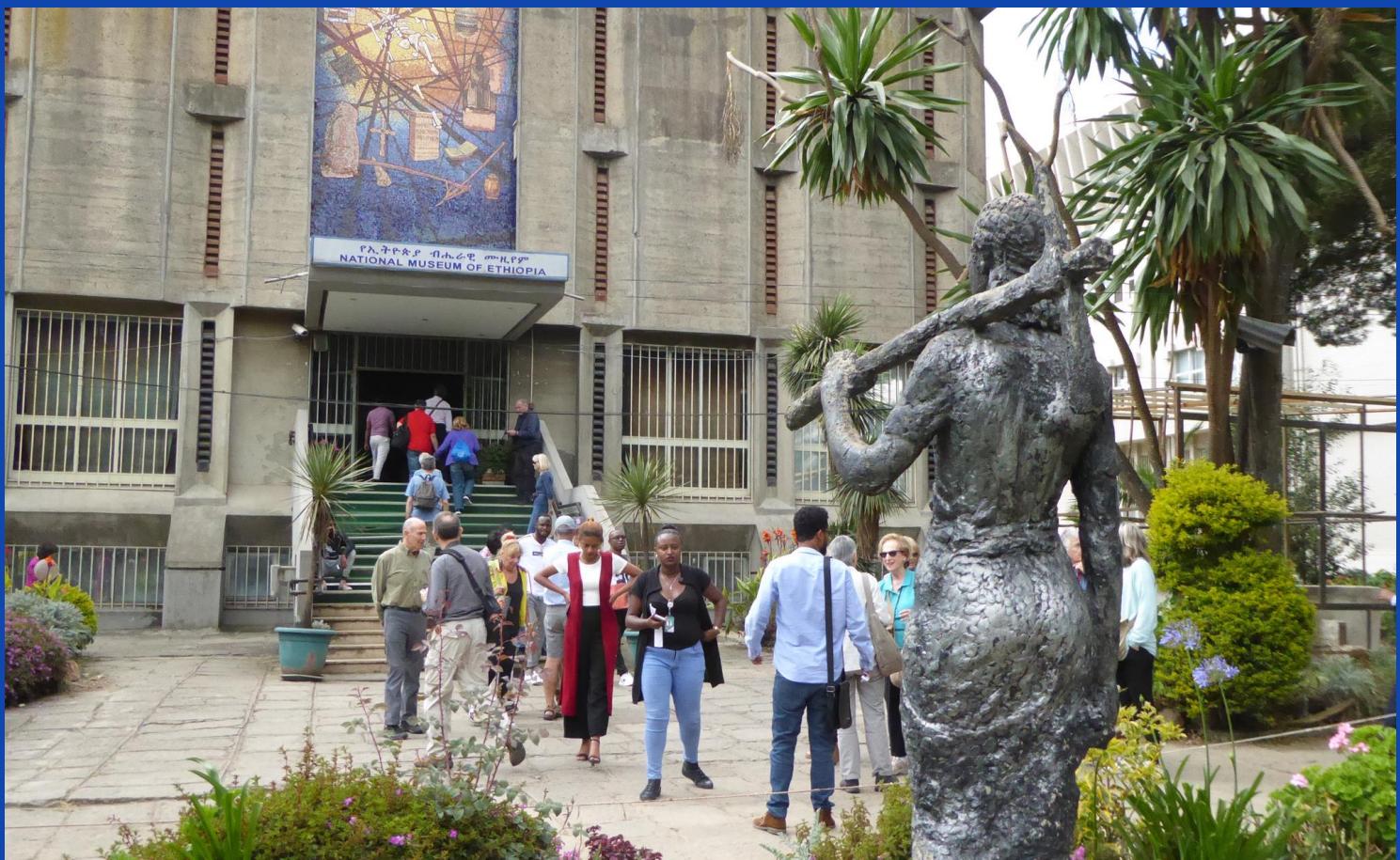
We arrived just as it was getting dark. I gave a donation which the man who met us put immediately in the box as Sabbath was approaching. We are then shown around the compound which was noticeably smaller than the synagogue in Gondar. He tells us that most of the community were now in Israel.

The service was conducted two thirds in Amharic and one third in Hebrew. Two young lads helped me with the place in the service and I relayed that information to the members of our group sitting behind me. The women behind the curtain say they cannot see or hear anything. There are some familiar tunes in the service, with *lecha dodi* being particularly like the one from home. The service lasts an hour after which we shake hands and thank the young men.

After the service it was back on the bus in time for dinner at the Hilton, where we are joined by Avi Bram and his wife Shahnaz. After the meal we take to a private room which Abye had pre-booked for us. Avi and Shahnaz talk to us for an hour about the political and economic situation in Ethiopia, with particular reference to the new Prime Minister. Avi works for the British Government in Addis as an economist on aid programmes. Shahnaz is about to have her first book published and is currently writing her second.

After the formal talk some of the group retire to the bar with Avi and Shahnaz to continue the conversation. An end to a lively day.

*Michael*



## Saturday 16 November

Our final day of the trip, so we started early for a full day of sightseeing in Addis Ababa. We set off in the minibus for a trip up to the top of Entoto hill, better described as a mountain at 2,900 metres. The road seemed to be under construction, it was very rocky and uneven with huge construction vehicles at intervals on either side. It was barely a two lane track and progress was slow with vehicles travelling in both directions.

This was not the only difficulty. The week previously the Prime Minister had asked that the population to spend time in the many churches praying for a peaceful and calm resolution of the violence in the South between the different religious factions and the 3 million displaced people there. We had noticed many prayer gatherings during the week, but this was their Sabbath, our Shabbat, and the people were out in their tens of thousands walking along the road, sharing it with the vehicles.

The women were all wearing white clothes with the ubiquitous white headscarf over the head and shoulders. Small shops lined the road on both sides and the pedestrians shared the road with the vehicles. Progress was very slow. Along the road, on both sides there were churches. People peeled off into their own church but their place was taken by those returning from churches higher up the mountain. Estimates of numbers varied, but 80-100 thousand souls was estimated. It was an unbelievable sight. When the final church had been passed, we sped up the wooded area nearing the top of the mountain on a tarmac road. This is an area in which there is a large military presence although we saw few soldiers. However, presumably because of this, we were unable to stop and admire the spectacular view of Addis from the top. We had a good view of the city as we slowly drove down and then made our way carefully back to Addis with the throngs of church goers all around us.

In Addis we went immediately to the National Museum to see its most famous exhibit, Lucy. The partial skeleton of Lucy was discovered in Ethiopia and she is approximately 3.7 million years old. The oldest human ever unearthed. Having looked at the artist's impression of what she might have looked like, there were other exhibits about early man through all stages of evolution. We then went for lunch in the charming outdoor restaurant in the museum grounds.

Next stop was the National Ethnographic Museum which is housed in an old Palace. The Palace was once the residence of Emperor Haile Selassie and was an impressive home in a large park which now houses the campus of the University of Addis Ababa. This museum told the story of the Ethiopian people and their culture. There were some very interesting cartoon like paintings which told stories and legends of the people, they were very bright, humorous and charming. Also there were items which described the history of the people, and costumes including the uniforms and clothes worn by Haile Selassie all beautifully embroidered with gold thread. However, the displays seemed very random and often unlabelled, they were very dusty and unloved. We returned to our hotel to prepare to leave for our evening entertainment en route to the airport.

After leaving the hotel we went to spend a few hours in an Ethiopian restaurant and entertainment centre where there were many other tourists and indeed local people. We partook in a large buffet and watched the offerings. Ethiopian songs were sung and dances were performed. Often audience members were persuaded to join the dancers and even tourists joined in with great enthusiasm. We finally saw the famous head dancing form of the Northern part of the country. The heads of the dancers spun from side to side, forwards and backwards and finally round in a complete circle. It was very vigorous and possibly also caused neck injuries! The show was much enjoyed and all too soon we had to leave for the airport.

As with all the days, the final one was action packed. We were all tired by this time and bade a fond farewell to our superb guide Abye who had taught us so much over the two weeks about the history, politics, religions and customs of the Ethiopian people. His knowledge knew no bounds and I think we all left so much better informed about the country than when we arrived. We were all weary and exhausted, but the trip had been fantastic. I'm sure we'll all remember it for the rest of our lives.

Sybil







[www.jewishrenaissance.org.uk/tours](http://www.jewishrenaissance.org.uk/tours)