

On a journey from Addis Ababa to the bucolic
Bale Mountains, **ALEXANDRA FULLER** falls for
Ethiopia's extraordinary cultural mix and the
powerful, primordial beauty of its landscape.

photographs by **TOM PARKER**

Uncommon



Ground



Dusk in the Haremma
Forest, part of
southern Ethiopia's
Bale Mountains
National Park.

W

e flew south from Istanbul through the first part of the night, my fiancé, Wen, and I. It was an uncertain time, this past winter—Turkey and Greece rattling sabers, Europe roiling, you know the rest. The waxing moon was a blood-red crescent, while in the uninhabited stretches of the Sahara below us, no sign of humanity could be detected, as if the end of days had paid an early visit.

And then, an hour after midnight, a stretch of soft orange lights appeared on the ground, reminding me of the village fires of my African childhood. The plane banked over hills, gray knolls resembling the backs of massive elephants, and the glow of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, raced to meet us.

For two decades I had transited through the city on my way to my parents' banana farm in Zambia, or en route to assignments in countries south of there. I had always imagined Ethiopia itself would wait. Famously safe, permeated with ancient culture, it felt like an eternal sort of place.

Then, a couple of years ago, Wen, an artist, made a tour of the country, painting and sketching windswept plains, Christian pilgrims dressed in white robes, Muslim women in vivid veils. When he came back to our home in Wyoming, he presented me with a watercolor he'd done of the 17th-century Debre Birhan Selassie church in Gonder, northern Ethiopia. "It's beautiful country, rugged, very spiritual," Wen told me. "You'd love it."

AT TWO IN THE MORNING—ADMITTEDLY, AN ODD TIME TO GET A FIRST impression of a place—the streets of Addis Ababa (the name means "new flower" in Amharic) were so quiet they seemed spell-struck. A few old Fiats pattered about, donkeys dozed on the dusty roadsides,

cats streaked along shadowy walls. Ethiopian jazz crooned from a mellow-looking pub. A lone cyclist rattled along the side of the street.

We pulled into the Sheraton hotel, an opulent building near the National Palace. The annual summit of the African Union had just taken place, and every plush room had been occupied by an African dignitary. "Do you think there's been a dictator in here?" I asked Wen, from between the sheets of our stately bed.

It keeps you up, the disparity in Africa. The dizzying wealth of the continent's new elite, the depressing corruption, the pledges to end the seemingly endless wars, the conflicts over power and resources, over rare-earth minerals. During our visit, droughts were threatening the Horn of Africa. Already there were calls from aid agencies for the West to pay attention. But the West had its own crises to think about.

I was up before dawn. My father told me once that dawn is the holiest time of day, the time of monks, soldiers, and poets. He always rose before anyone else on the farm to check the bananas, his pipe lit, bush hat over his eyes. He'd died not long before we set off on this trip to Ethiopia, and I'd been grieving for him, one dawn at a time. Now I sat on the balcony overlooking the hotel gardens. From mosques across the city there came the call to prayer. The sky clattered with birds. Butterflies fed at the blue blossoms of plumbago hedges. Dew sparkled on the lawn. The holiest time of day, it felt blameless and still.

WITH ONLY ONE DAY TO SEE ADDIS, WEN and I chose to skip the city's many museums and historic sites and go straight to the Merkato, an enormous open-air bazaar. We snaked up and down narrow alleys, perusing stalls of freshly woven grass baskets, leather saddles, turmeric, dried beans. The air

The Entoto Maryam church, in Addis Ababa. Right, from top: A camel herder and his flock on the road to the Bale Mountains; coffee in Addis Ababa.



was filled with tendrils of frankincense (the wise man who offered that gift to the infant Jesus is said to have been Ethiopian). Blacksmiths and metalworkers tinkered and hammered, an alfresco jazz improvisation. Tailors whipped up robes out of homespun cotton. Chickens complained from little wooden cages.

Everything seemed to me vibrantly fresh. But at the same time, even the most casual exchange was weighted in

ritual. For example, the ever-present coffee ceremony was taking place in scores, if not hundreds of stalls all over the market. Customers sat in intimate clusters on small stools as beans were roasted and ground. Frankincense was lit. Finally three cups of smooth, rich coffee were served to each patron, one for health, one for prosperity, and one for love.

It's thought that coffee was discovered in Ethiopia, in the 11th century. Back then, it was the leaves that were boiled to make a tea, but its properties as an accompaniment to convivial companionship have persisted all these long years. Which is the other thing about Ethiopia: it feels as if the people here have been living this kind of civilized, graceful, hospitable life forever, because they have.

OF ALL AFRICAN NATIONS, ONLY ETHIOPIA WAS NEVER COLONIZED. THE Italians twice invaded and temporarily imposed their rule, the second time under Mussolini, who ransacked ancient artifacts. Naturally, the British also tried to settle the place, but the Ethiopians always managed to resist. It says something. It means something, to have withstood the great European scramble for Africa.

For one thing, it means that Ethiopia's cultural and religious inheritance has remained more or less intact over the centuries. Oriental Orthodox Christianity is Ethiopia's majority religion, with Islam a close second. The first Orthodox church in Ethiopia was built in A.D. 333. Roughly 300 years later, Islamic disciples from Mecca arrived in Ethiopia. The two faiths have coexisted, more or less peacefully, ever since. Prayer, spiritual study, and ritual continue to be a part of daily life.

That's not to say the country has been spared war, famine, autocratic leaders—sometimes, in the latter half of the 20th century, all three at once. In 1974 a young army lieutenant, Mengistu Haile Mariam, was swept into power by a Marxist-Leninist uprising, toppling Haile Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia. Tens of thousands of Ethiopians died violently in the subsequent civil war between Mengistu's government and opposition groups, while another million died as a result of famine. In 1991, a coalition of rebel groups finally ousted Mengistu, the so-called Butcher of Addis.

Since then, Ethiopia has known relative political stability and rampant economic growth. But in this part of the world, *relative* is often a key word, and very few of those gains have trickled down to those most in need. With a population of over 99 million, Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa. It has restive neighbors, and long-standing ethnic tensions between the country's Tigray, Amhara, and Oromo groups. These tensions recently erupted into violence, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency last year.

AROUND THE PIAZZA AREA, IN CENTRAL ADDIS ABABA, THE BRIEF Italian occupation of the mid 1930s and early 40s remains skeletally evident. It's a congenial, lively spot overlooked by Baroque balconies attached to grand, crumbling buildings. After dark, couples sip coffee in small sidewalk cafés; shoppers hurry home with their day's supply of fresh produce.

Just downhill from the Itegue Taitu Hotel—Ethiopia's first hotel, built in 1898—we found a tiny pink pub. A half dozen customers,

mostly long-haul truckers, were relaxing inside; a radio played local jazz. Dimly lit by a single bulb, it was a cozy kind of place.

"You're from America? You want to know our tricks of survival?" asked a man who'd introduced himself as Robel. I was taking notes.

"In Ethiopia, we're nearly fifty percent Orthodox Christians, most of the rest are Muslim; and there are more than eighty ethnic groups. We're not all the same. We're different. We know this, but we don't allow ourselves to be divided and conquered." Robel sipped his beer. "A leader can only divide his people if they agree to be divided."

Robel pointed to my notebook. "Write it down," he instructed. "Look almost anywhere in Ethiopia, any little road, and on one side you see an Orthodox church, the other side a mosque. We are in each other's houses, we are in each other's lives, we solve our problems together with our neighbors. We learned this the very hard way: inner wholeness makes a strong community; inner weakness makes civil war." He waved to the doors of the pub. "The doors to this place have remained open without cease, day and night, for twenty years or more, anyone welcome. Anyone at all." I asked Robel the pub's name. A bemused discussion ensued between the proprietor and her clientele. The place had no name. "One Love," Robel finally suggested. "From now on, we'll call this place the One Love Inn."

THERE SEEMED NO GOOD WAY TO CHOOSE which part of Ethiopia to travel to after we left Addis Ababa. We found a guide—or, more precisely, a guide found us, the way the best guides seem to, the perfect person at the perfect time. Eyob Awraris has degrees in

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The dining room at Bale Mountain Lodge, with its dramatic views of the surrounding peaks and spires.



A girl riding alongside the road
to the Sanetti Plateau, part of Bale
Mountains National Park.



Spires of mountain peaks were covered in lichen-draped trees. It seemed seductively timeless, permanently restful.



history and English literature; elderly Rhodes scholars, culture enthusiasts, and professors seek him out.

Wen had traveled in the north and east on his previous trip, so we drove south, following the contours of the Rift Valley: an arid landscape strung with lakes, their names like incantations—Koka, Ziway, Langano, Shala, Awasa. Flat-top acacias, those clichéd silhouettes of East African sunsets, sheltered flocks of goats. Plantations of eucalyptus pulsed in the warm wind. Occasionally, a string of camels wandered into view.

It was impossible to absorb the vastness of the landscape all at once. The sky seemed to wrap itself around us, and the earth, like a great upturned clay plate topped with shimmering bands of heat and dust, showed no horizon. Most of the land was under intense cultivation: oxen and donkeys ripping dry clods of soil; horses and donkeys driving threshers; herders tending to cattle, sheep, and goats.

That evening, after the day's drive was over, Wen and I struck out on footpaths from our simple room at the Sabana Beach Resort on the shores of Lake Langano, he armed with his sketchbook, me with my notes. It was as Robel of the One Love Inn had promised—almost everywhere we turned, a little Orthodox church on

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Getting there,
plus hotels
and visas,
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one side of a path, a little mosque on the other. And always a villager or two accompanying us and making offers of assistance, speaking slowly and deliberately, as if to people who've been too long in the sun without a hat.

The next day, we drove and drove.

Vastness, particularly when coupled with heat and dust, has a tendency to lull. The miles whipped past, and still (Continued on page 104)



(Ethiopia, continued from page 95) it felt as if we must have been here before. "Are you sure we're not driving around in circles?" I asked Eyob, our guide, only half-joking. Then the Bale Mountains suddenly appeared, rising steeply verdant out of the cereal-scape of teff and wheat. Scoured by cold winds, swathed by thin clouds, they came both as an astonishment and a relief.

Or, how else can I put it? Two days of dusty driving were worth it, more than worth it. I would have walked the distance from Addis Ababa to Bale's great skirt of highlands, 530,000 acres of which comprise Bale Mountains National Park, on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List since 2009.

We settled in to the Bale Mountain Lodge, an eco-hotel tucked beside a clearing in the park's Hareenna Forest. Having opened in 2014, the property now provides a welcome option for travelers who prefer to take in the natural beauty from lodgings of hospitable comfort. Hot-water bottles in the beds and a crackling woodstove in the room kept the chill off at night. Meals were frequent and delicious. Patient and talented guides were at the ready to show guests around. The place was so soothing, it was like paying to relive the perfect childhood.

In front of the lodge, a wooden bridge spanning a small stream led to a meadow where the occasional bushbuck grazed. Beyond that, there were spires of mountain peaks covered in lichen-draped trees. It seemed seductively timeless, permanently restful, a palate of soothing purples and greens. "Like something Gauguin would have painted," Wen said.

So inspired, Wen set off with his easel and pencils for the nearby Rira village: two little mosques, a few coffeehouses, wheat fields, and domed huts made of clay with woven grass roofs. Turbaned men, veiled women,

cocky boys, and girls in hijabs hurtled about on tough little Arabian-looking horses at a tooth-rattling pace. Occasionally, an overladen bus clattered through.

AS EYOB AND I HIKE THE LICHEN-

draped forests surrounding the lodge, he told me there are more endemic mammals—including one of the most endangered canids in the world, the Ethiopian wolf—in Bale Mountains National Park than in any other area of comparable size in the world. Thrown together for days, we talked of everything. His faith, his ambitions, his family; my faith, my children, and my father.

One day, Eyob told me about his close friend, Biniam Admasu, an Ethiopian conservationist who had been determined to protect this rare environment and its wildlife, the wolves especially. In March 2015, a fire broke out on the mountainside under the Sanetti Plateau, the wolves' main habitat. "If the flames had reached the plateau, Biniam knew the wolves, and the pups in their dens, would be completely finished," Eyob said.

The fire had seemed unstoppable. The villagers joined Biniam in fighting it, but as the flames gained ground, everyone ran or jumped to safety—some breaking limbs in the process. Everyone, that is, except Biniam, who, against all prudence, raced desperately upward and upward toward his beloved wolves, a lone figure in the inferno, thrashing at the flames.

"Biniam used to tell us that if he had to die to save the wolves, then he'd willingly go," Eyob said. And the 33-year-old did die up there on the mountainside, when a sudden change of wind blew the flames over him. On the very same day, as if satisfied by his sacrifice, the fire, having raged for more than a week, burned itself out. The Ethiopian wolf, that rare, keystone species, had been spared, for the moment.

OUR LAST DAYS IN THE MOUNTAINS WERE marked by two dreams. The night Eyob told me the story of Biniam's

death, I had a vivid dream that the three of us—Eyob, Wen, and I—hiked from the plateau, down the flanks of the mountain, to the place where Biniam had died. After breakfast, I told Eyob about the dream. It had been so clear, I told Eyob, so insistent.

So we decided to hike down off the top of the plateau, just as we had in my dream. It was a steep drop-off from the road, but not inaccessible. After about 20 minutes of walking, we found the place, more or less, where Biniam is believed to have lost his life. We settled in the heather. Eyob closed his eyes and prayed. I tried to still my mind. Wen sat below us on a rock, silently.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, an augur buzzard cruised swiftly toward us, just feet from our head. Then, catching a powerful updraft, it shot skyward. Wen and I watched as it circled higher and higher at what seemed a terrifying rate. It became a fragment, then a dot, then it vanished completely.

Two nights later, Eyob had a dream. In it, he and I were exchanging gifts. His gift to me, he said, was a postcard, written in a childish hand, as if by his little brother. It said something like, "Thank you for understanding Ethiopia." But as he was about to open my gift for him, Eyob was awoken by a bird smashing into his window.

Not long after we'd left Ethiopia, in an exchange of e-mails, Eyob said he knew now what my gift had been. "Thank you," he wrote, "for giving me the courage to go to where Biniam lost his life, and for your prayers for him." That was all. It was all that was needed. What I could not find the words to tell Eyob in return is that the gratitude was as much mine as his. Somehow on that mountain, with the disappearing wings of that augur buzzard, the grief for my father had lifted.

Perhaps this is the enduring, unexpected gift of travel to places where the sacred is still daily bread; where graceful hospitality is still practiced. Perhaps this is why we leave the security of our homes and risk the disorientation of travel. None of us can really know what is an end and what is a beginning. Most of us are too busy being in the middle of it all to even try. ■

The Details

LIVING HISTORY

Longhouses, once used to shelter multiple families, are common at Northwest First Nations sites, where they've been preserved as artifacts.



COSTA RICA

(Charting a Different Course, p. 41)

GETTING THERE

Many U.S. airlines offer nonstop flights to San José. From there, to go kayaking in the Golfo Dulce, rent a car and drive about five hours southeast. To go rafting on the Pacuare River, drive about two hours east to Tres Equis.

TOUR OPERATOR

Ríos Tropicales Organizes eight-day sea-kayaking and rafting tours throughout Costa Rica. riostropicales.com; from \$2,500 per person.

HOTELS

Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge Unwind in the middle of the rain forest after a full day exploring on the water. nicuesalodge.com; doubles from \$205 per person. **Ríos Tropicales Eco-Lodge** Surrounded by 2,400 acres of private reserve, this lodge offers dozens of hiking trails, a pool, and open-air dining. riostropicales.com; doubles from \$310.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Song of the Forest, p. 80)

GETTING THERE

Masset and Sandspit are the two main airports on the islands of Haida Gwaii, off the coast of

British Columbia. The Port Hardy Airport offers access to Port Hardy and Port McNeill. All are accessible via a connection in Vancouver.

TOUR OPERATORS

Haida Style Expeditions Explore the waters of Haida Gwaii on a 28-foot Zodiac. Summertime cultural tours include visits to the villages of Skedans, Windy Bay, and more. haidastyle.com; from \$275 per person.

Sea Wolf Adventures Learn about Kwakwaka'wakw culture throughout the Broughton Archipelago. You may spot a few grizzlies along the way. seawolfadventures.ca; from \$179 per person.

LODGING

Cluxewe Resort Twelve cabins near Port McNeill with full kitchens and views of the Broughton Strait. cluxeweresort.com; cabins from \$125.

Jags Beanstalk A collection of comfortable rooms upstairs from a café. Take advantage of the bike and kayak rentals. skidegate.com; doubles from \$125.

Skwachàys Lodge This boutique hotel in downtown Vancouver has 18 uniquely designed suites filled with aboriginal art. skwachays.com; doubles from \$189.

RESTAURANTS

Cowboy Café Pasta, pizza, and locally sourced seafood, accompanied by B.C. wines and beautiful waterfront views. [Prince Rupert](http://prince Rupert); cowboycafe.com; entrées \$9–\$22.

Salmon n' Bannock Inspired by First Nations cuisine, the menu at this Vancouver favorite features hearty fare like boar meatballs and variations on bannock, the traditional First Nations unleavened bread. salmonandbannock.net; entrées \$17–\$35.

ETHIOPIA

(Uncommon Ground, p. 88)

GETTING THERE

Flights to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, typically connect via a Middle Eastern city like Tel Aviv, Dubai, or Doha, Qatar.

VISAS & SECURITY

A tourist visa is required for entry into Ethiopia and can be obtained at the Bole International Airport upon arrival. At press time, an active travel warning was in effect for Ethiopia from the U.S. State Department. Be sure to monitor the local political climate before booking a trip.

TOUR OPERATORS

Explore Travel on a seven-day trip with stops at the Bale Mountains and Lake Awassa. exploretel.com; from \$4,250 per person.

Passage to Africa Highlights on a 10-day trip can include harvesting honey in Bale, an excursion

with wolf researchers, and more. passagetoafrica.com; from \$12,000 per person.

HOTELS

Bale Mountain Lodge The only high-end property in Bale Mountains National Park, this eco-lodge offers hikes, horseback riding, and bird-watching expeditions. balemountainlodge.com; from \$190 per person per night. **Sabana Beach Resort** A no-frills resort on the shores of Lake Langano. It's the perfect place to spend a night en route to the Bale Mountains. sabanalangano.com; doubles from \$97.

Sheraton Addis Located in the capital, this property has a wide variety of dining options, plus a pool and spa. luxurycollection.com; doubles from \$300.

BUYER'S GUIDE

(URBANE OUTFITTERS, P. 32) **Louis Vuitton** in collaboration with Supreme (select Louis Vuitton stores, 866-884-8866); (P. 34)

1. **Givenchy** ([Bergdorf Goodman](http://bergdorfgoodman.com)); **Omega** (omegawatches.com); **N°21** (numeroventuno.com); **J.Crew** (jcrew.com); **NikeLab** (nike.com); **Best Made Co.** (best made co.); **L.L.Bean** (llbean.com). 2. **Fendi** (fendi.com); **Sacai** (mrporter.com); **Etro** (etroboutiques.com); **Hermès** (Hermès stores nationwide, 800-441-4488); **Mizu** (mizulife.com). 3. **Salvatore Ferragamo** (Salvatore Ferragamo boutiques nationwide, 866-337-7242); **Rollex** (rolex.com for store locations); **Greg Lauren & Moncler** (Moncler flagship store, New York City, 646-768-7022); **Charvet** (Charvet, 28 Place Vendôme, Paris); **Orlebar Brown** (orlebarbrown.com); **Nanamica** (nanamica.com). 4. **Dior Homme** (Dior Homme stores, 800-929-3467); **Visvim** (visvim.tv); **Hermès** (see above).

RARE SIGHTING



Visit Bale Mountains National Park for a chance to view an Ethiopian wolf. There are fewer than 500 adults in existence, more than half of which are thought to live in the park.

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