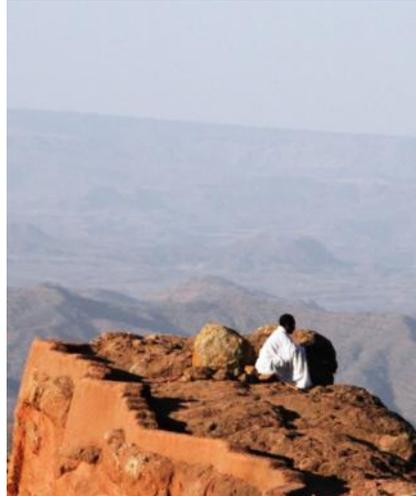
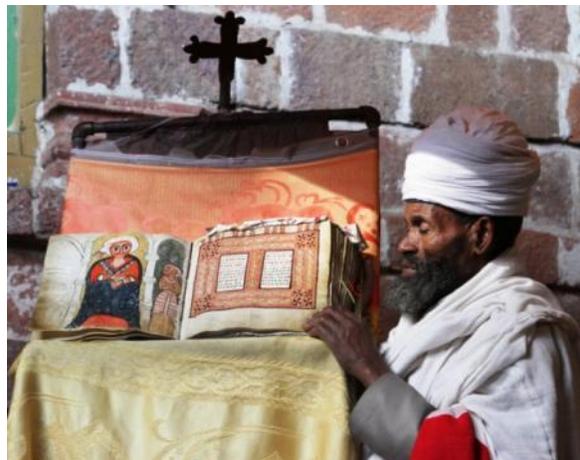


## The Other Holy Land

Keen Harrison



I travelled to Ethiopia to see churches that had been carved into mountains many hundreds of years ago--long before construction of Europe's great cathedrals. What I got was a transformative encounter in the holiest place I've ever experienced. In the northern town of Lalibela you fully expect to see Moses striding down a mountainside, or at least a burning bush; it's both exotic and profoundly biblical. Christianity came to this part of the world before it reached most of Europe. Very early on, when Syrians came here to the city of Aksum, they found Judaism already firmly established. How it happened is anyone's guess. When escaping Egypt, could it be that some of God's Chosen were geographically challenged and turned right instead of left, ending up in Abyssinia (ancient Ethiopia) instead of Israel? In any event, people responded warmly to stories from the Syrians about Jesus Christ. The Christian faith was officially deemed Ethiopia's religion early in the 4th century A.D. and it has remained untouched by the centuries.



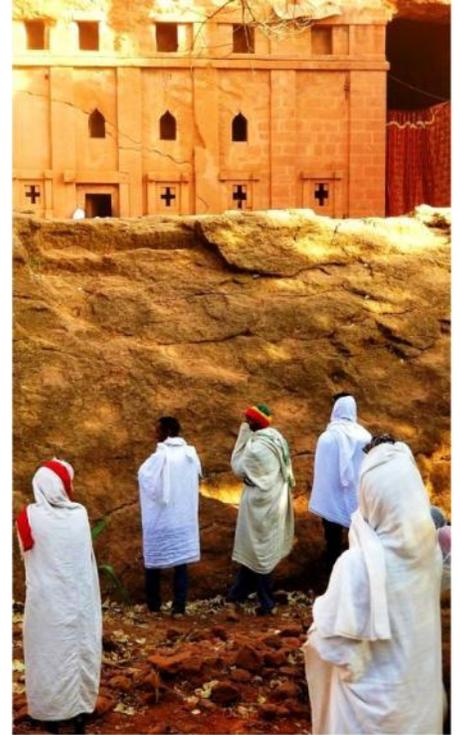
Early Christian/Judaic practices are maintained: Pork is forbidden and boys are circumcised on the eighth day after birth. Men and women enter churches via separate entrances and all are

draped in robes and carry walking staffs, a necessity on the tortuous mountain paths and stairs carved steeply into the stone. Reverent public prayer is ubiquitous, yet quite personal and private. Every Mass is solemnly celebrated by two priests and three deacons, all dressed in rich brocade vestments and carrying an ornate Orthodox. Illuminated icons and murals are everywhere, even at the airport. We witnessed a solemn procession of the (purported) Ark of The Covenant and heard the night's stillness pierced by the call to prayer, similar to that of the Muslims, on the Feast of St. Giyorgis (George) at 1:30 in the morning. We observed our friends--including those who identified themselves as secular--pause at each church to pray, and eat vegan meals to honor religious fasting days (seemingly half of their non-Gregorian calendar year!). Duplicates of holy sites of Jerusalem are seen throughout the town, their construction prompted by the Muslim takeover of Jerusalem in 1187 A.D. We saw the Jordan River, the tomb of Adam, and the Mount of Olives.



Most stunningly, we viewed the gargantuan monolithic stone churches carved from mountains. Ceilings and windows hold impossibly intricate carvings and paintings. You don't see a nail or a piece of wood. At each of the eleven churches we asked "Who did this?!" and received the same hushed answer: "A single man and the angels." It's easy to believe that the intervention of angels was needed for these creations. Each is unique, each is a mystery now protected and preserved by UNESCO and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Seeking spiritual refreshment? Need inspiration, respite from cynicism? This is your place. An added perk...they have the best coffee you'll ever taste, served in a ceremony that includes roasting beans amidst the dizzying fragrance of frankincense. (Coffee, after all, originated in the Ethiopian province of Kaffe.) Bring a walking staff, an open heart, and be prepared to be knocked right off your horse. You'll have a happy landing.





The photos below are more representative of Lalibela present and future--particularly the little children, visited at a community center, to whom we brought brown dolls. ("She looks like me!")

