



Timkat

KEEPING THE FAITH

One of the holiest days in the Eastern Orthodox Christian calendar is Timkat (or Timket). Also known as Epiphany, this celebration draws thousands of worshippers to Ethiopia in late-January. It is an impressive event, which speaks of the rich cultural heritage that permeates society wherever you go in this fascinating country.

BY LYNN HOUGHTON

BOOM, THUD, BOOM, BOOM.

A woman emphatically beats an enormous traditional **NEGARIT DRUM**. She wears a bright headdress that wraps around her head like a python, shrieking purple, orange and yellow. The sweat trickling down her brow attests to the effort required to carry and simultaneously play the instrument. Insistent percussion accompanies throaty, loud singing from local parish churches participating in the procession.

This *erstwhile parade* has no neon lights, no motorised floats nor flashy characters. The 'characters', as such, are

the *Virgin Mary* and other saints, garishly and colourfully portrayed on three-metre-high posters being pushed along the route. Blood red elongated rugs are rolled out in front of the cardboard displays while frowning women with brooms scurry ahead, furiously sweeping away any semblance of dust or debris that might have settled on the carpeted path.

The din from the chanting, shouting, and banging creates a sensory overload but serves to draw in bystanders and ne'er do well pilgrims. As I chirp along with the singing, I spot *gorgeously attired men in golden brocade garments with ostentatious umbrellas joining the melee*. They form a group carrying the **TABOT**, a facsimile of the Ark of the Covenant; the original is said to be in the ancient city of Axum. The atmosphere now changes perceptibly. Police create a makeshift line along the route and are soon pushing spectators back to ensure no one gets near the holiest of holies.

Festivities finish at an enormous roundabout topped with a monolithic monument dedicated to those who perished in a horrific war crime during the Italian occupation. This is only a preliminary side show, a warm-up for **TIMKAT** tomorrow. →





Timkat unveiled

Dawn peers through my window. The call to prayer has already permeated my sleep so I arise quickly. Two days ago, I arrived in Addis Ababa in anticipation of this major event. It will be a clear, bright day for the main Timkat services that honour the three kings from the east.

On route, I notice bunting fluttering in the breeze, the tiny red, green and yellow flags looking like runaway Christmas decorations. We pass tented compounds with dozens of goats milling around that give the impression of Bedouin camps. A moment later and we are driving under the new ultramodern light rail that has recently opened. This clash of rural Ethiopia with the modern burgeoning city of five million inhabitants is startling to my unaccustomed eyes.

I have been joined by my tour guide, Assefa. "Security will be

intense," he explains with a serious face. "There are thousands of worshippers expected to attend." He chortles as I coo over donkeys and animals, clearly an everyday spectacle for him.

White robed worshippers are already descending onto the sprawling compound when we arrive, readying themselves for the ceremony to come. The tension is palpable as everyone crowds around, pushing into a more advantageous position.

Creeping forward, I move toward the large outdoor baptismal pool. Luckily young security guards, clearly enjoying their position of authority, allow my passage. Elders of the church, attired in heavily brocaded and gilded cloth, move into designated places, each one holding an ancient filigree cross representing an historic centre: Lalibela, Gondar or Axum. The men chant in low sonorous tones alternately singing then reading from holy texts.



This goes on for about half an hour.

Suddenly, there is shrieking and laughter. One soberly attired churchman has taken a hose and is dousing the congregants in a messy communal baptismal ceremony. Children and elderly alike jostle to get their share of the shower being bestowed.

The mood lightens. Now football pitches are swiftly erected, and the odour of coffee begins to waft the air. Farmers' horses have become makeshift fairground rides for the children. Worshippers are letting their hair down, taking selfies and are starting to enjoy the holiday.

Injera, coffee, culture

As the religious service is finishing, feasting starts, and a plethora of unique food is readied. *Tibs* (grilled meat) are being whipped up

on tiny BBQs and a wickedly spicy chicken stew *Doro Wat* is on the menu as well as *Kifto*, minced raw beef marinated in *mitmita*.

Ethiopians, ingeniously, use a sour tasting flat bread known as *injera* both as a utensil and a plate. Food is eaten with the right hand and a section of spongy injera is ripped from a larger piece and used to scoop up meats and stews.

People here practice long periods of religious fasting, particularly before Lent. But many foods are still allowed, even though meat, fish, chicken, oil and wine are forbidden. A fasting plate can be ordered at any time and consists of a large circular injera with fist sized amounts of lentils, salads and sauces arranged on it.

As ubiquitous as injera for Ethiopians is coffee and the ceremony surrounding it. Coffee is a social affair, a chance to share in a bit of gossip while at home or at a local coffee house. Fresh beans →





Previous pages: Priests carry the Tabot, a replica of the Ark of the Covenant

Above: Choir girls singing during Timkat **Below:** Hannah presents me with my first cup of Ethiopian coffee

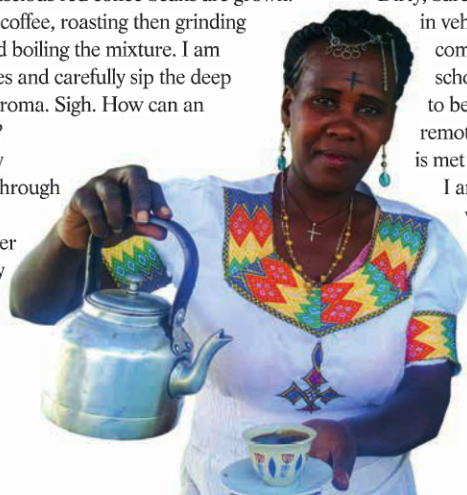
are roasted on an open fire to create a divine luxurious drink. The smell of roasting beans has an incredible smell that, mixed with that of burning incense and popcorn being prepared (also part of the ceremony) is intoxicating.

Lake Tana and Dr Nuru

The first person to serve me a fresh cup of coffee in Ethiopia is Hannah. I have left Addis Ababa behind and joined a boat trip on Lake Tana, nearly 500km away. This vivacious lady is our hostess and will be preparing the dark delightful coffee. The boat crosses the water to the Zege Peninsula, where we view ancient iconography at the Ura Kidane Mehret monastery. The stunning artwork is worth seeing for the saints and archangels sporting close-cut afros and with large dark eyes.

This peninsula is also where luscious red coffee beans are grown. On our return, Hannah prepares coffee, roasting then grinding the beans before adding water and boiling the mixture. I am passed a small cup with no handles and carefully sip the deep dark beverage savouring its rich aroma. Sigh. How can an unadulterated drink be this good?

What happens next is certainly unexpected. Hannah rummages through a pile of clothes hidden in a back corner, finds a traditional sunflower coloured cotton dress and roughly pulls it over my head; she adorns my forehead with a heavy piece of bronze jewellery before



cinching my waist with a sash. I am transformed into an Ethiopian princess! All so we can have a picture together. Equally bonkers and bewitching.

A fair distance from Lake Tana is where I begin to notice the country's rural inhabitants. Farmers diligently till the land in a subsistence practice that has changed little over the centuries. And more than 85 per cent of Ethiopians are farmers.

Transfixed by the farms that, one after another, are scattered along the rough road, I notice each plot uses different building materials for their structures, creating a higgledy piggledy appearance. Some are wood, some straw and some corrugated tin. However, all have a collection of chickens, goats and, usually, a donkey in the yard.

The winter barley crop has just been harvested and those lucky enough to have horses are out in the fields threshing the grain.

Dirty, barefoot, happy children run out to see foreigners, like me, in vehicles driving by. Elementary education in Ethiopia is compulsory so children in smart uniforms carrying books and school implements are a common sight, but there does appear to be truancy as well. Does the government come out to remote places to see if this policy is adhered to? That question is met with vigorous denial by the locals.

I am now on my way to a unique village named Awra Amba where a quiet community of weavers work and live. I meet a serious young woman named Worksew and am ushered into a presentation with a roomful of rapt listeners. Worksew tells the story of Dr Zumra Nuru, a guru who developed a unique philosophy based on his experience of inequality at a very early age.



ETHIOPIA



Above: Clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church holds a wax candle during the prayer ceremony of Timkat
Below: Traditional weaving at Dr Nuru's commune at Awra Amba



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The story begins with Zumra seeing that his mother had many more duties than his father, particularly in the home. If she could not complete the endless list of tasks required, her husband would insult and even beat her. Though she helped him with the farm work, his father never contributed to childcare, food preparation or cleaning. The youngster found this unequal division of tasks intolerable. Disenchanted, at the age of 13 he left home to travel the world in the hope of meeting like-minded individuals, and soon started his own commune.

I am allowed to meet and speak to the great man; a gentle soul that has sacrificed much for his beliefs. Could this be a Utopian existence? Perhaps so, as disciples come here from around the world to be taught by the guru, while learning to weave.

Remote and rocky

Many of this country's ancient churches are located at astonishingly high altitudes and tucked into caves, rocky enclaves or carved directly from the rock. These are located in the remote Ethiopian Highlands where the orthodox religion and its centres, the cities of Axum and Lalibela, flourished many hundreds of years ago.

One such vertiginously placed church is an 11th century Axumite structure called the Yemrehana Krestos Church, which is tucked into a large natural crevice in the side of Mount Abuna Josef. Remarkably, it is a relatively easy 25-minute climb to the entrance as there is a wide wooden staircase.

I enter the semi-darkness of the church to find a baptism taking place under wraps. The mother and grandmother have literally cocooned themselves and the baby in cloth as if hoping to be invisible. When visitors finally see their faces, they are beaming with pride. I had thought, incorrectly, that they had been hiding away from the intrusion of strangers. Seldom the case with these friendly people.

In the dark recess of the cavern there is a low fence and beyond it ancient remains of pilgrims piled one on top of the other. The juxtaposition and significance of a celebration of birth being so close to derelict dusty bones is not lost on me. It seems to represent the lives of Ethiopians— religion, life and death all intertwined. 🐾

LYNN HOUGHTON VISITED ETHIOPIA WITH FAR & WILD TRAVEL, WHICH OFFERS A TIMKAT FESTIVAL TOUR IN 2020 PRICED FROM £3,685PP. SHE FLEW WITH ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES, WHICH OPERATES DAILY OUT OF LONDON HEATHROW AND FOUR TIMES A WEEK FROM MANCHESTER.