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FERENGE ETHIOPIA

ProjectsAbroad

The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Ethiopia

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on**



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Editor's Letter

Welcome to the June 2013 Projects Abroad Ethiopia newsletter. This newsletter aims to inform all our volunteers with news and information about the latest happenings in Projects Abroad Ethiopia.

Projects Abroad Ethiopia team would like to welcome our July volunteers. Thank you all the people who have volunteered with us – we really appreciate all for your valuable time and great help you gave at the different placements. And who decided to choose Ethiopia for volunteering through Projects Abroad.

Enjoy reading this issue and I hope that you will find something that you like. **Thanks to our volunteers who have shared their stories and photos with us.** We encourage everyone to join us in making the newsletter interesting and exciting by sending in your own written articles and pictures of your experiences here with us. Your stories and pictures will help others to understand and learn about Ethiopia. If you have anything you'd like to contribute, suggest, or comment on, please contact: bikeseegnhaileul@projects-abroad.org

Enjoy!!!!

Historical Wonder

By Mike Dickson – Journalism volunteer from Canada

(The following article published at the reporter weekly Newspaper)



The rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are often called ‘the Eighth Wonder of the World’ for good reason.

The network of eleven houses of worship chiselled directly out of basalt rock cut spectacular figures as the sun strikes their sandy-coloured exteriors, with the chipped stairs and cracked walls attesting to their 800-plus years of existence. Varied in

size, with the largest (Bete Medhanielem) standing over 10 meters tall and 30 meters long, the insides of the churches are just as impressive as the outsides. Elaborate murals and etchings line many of the walls and ceilings, from plastered portraits of the Virgin Mary to intricate stone etchings depicting St. George. UNESCO named the Lalibela churches as a World Heritage Site in 1978.

Historians debate the exact period the churches were constructed, but it is speculated they were forged sometime in the 13th century at the command of King Lalibela, who according to legend had returned from exile in Jerusalem and sought to recreate the spirituality of the holy city he called home for 25 years. During this time, Jerusalem was fraught with conflict and repeated invasions by numerous forces, making pilgrimages difficult, and upon his return to Ethiopia, King Lalibela called for the churches to be carved as a symbol of a ‘New Jerusalem,’ a place where the devout could safely come to worship. However, there are many interpretations of his motives for building the church, including a legend wherein the king was poisoned by his brother and fell into a

coma for three days, in which time he saw visions of cities carved out of rock and received instructions from God to build them.

The history of Lalibela remains very important to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, as many consider the churches to be the holiest site of the faith in Ethiopia. The churches also remain historically important in their own right as their age, though disputed, and durability remain incredible. In addition, Indian swastikas and crosses of St. Andrew found in the design of several buildings suggest that Christians from all over the world gathered to aid in their construction, though there is little in the way of written historical records to substantiate this claim. Whatever King Lalibela's impetus for building the churches was, they have continued to be a site of pilgrimage to the present day, with over 100 000 pilgrims arriving each year to take in the spiritual essence of these unique churches. It is also one of the most heavily visited places for tourists in Ethiopia. Even in low season, dozens of foreigners can be seen pacing the streets of cobblestone on their way to one of the town's many restaurants, hotels and souvenir shops.

The tourism industry is the economic lifeline of Lalibela. It provides the majority of financial input that the largely rural community needs to support development projects and to simply maintain the status quo. There are many who consider Lalibela to be the Eighth Wonder of the World, in the same breath as the Taj Mahal in India and Angkor Wat in Cambodia. But unlike these other attractions the price of admission for foreigners has been increased dramatically. Effective January 9th 2013, the entrance fee rose from 350 birr to USD 50, or 930 birr, tripling the entry fee and some would say cutting the odds of visitation by tourists in thirds. There is also no option of visiting individual churches in the site for a lesser price. In comparison, the Taj Mahal costs under USD 14 for foreigners, while Angkor Wat offers one, three and seven day passes, costs USD 60 for a weeklong pass and is the largest religious monument in the world.

Also unlike these other wonders of the world, the profits from Lalibela do not fall under the jurisdiction of the government, so it is at the discretion of the church where and how those profits are directed. On the entrance receipt it states that part of the money is going towards

Reconstruction of the churches. Recently, the church has begun to construct a road from the town to the Asheton Mariam Monastery. The monastery also charges a 150 birr entrance fee just as every church outside the main grouping of eleven charges, such as Yemrehana Kristos which also requires the rental of a Land Rover to get to. These price increases coupled with a lack of checks

and balances on how the church chooses to use the profits has many who work in the tourism industry fearing for what might happen in future.

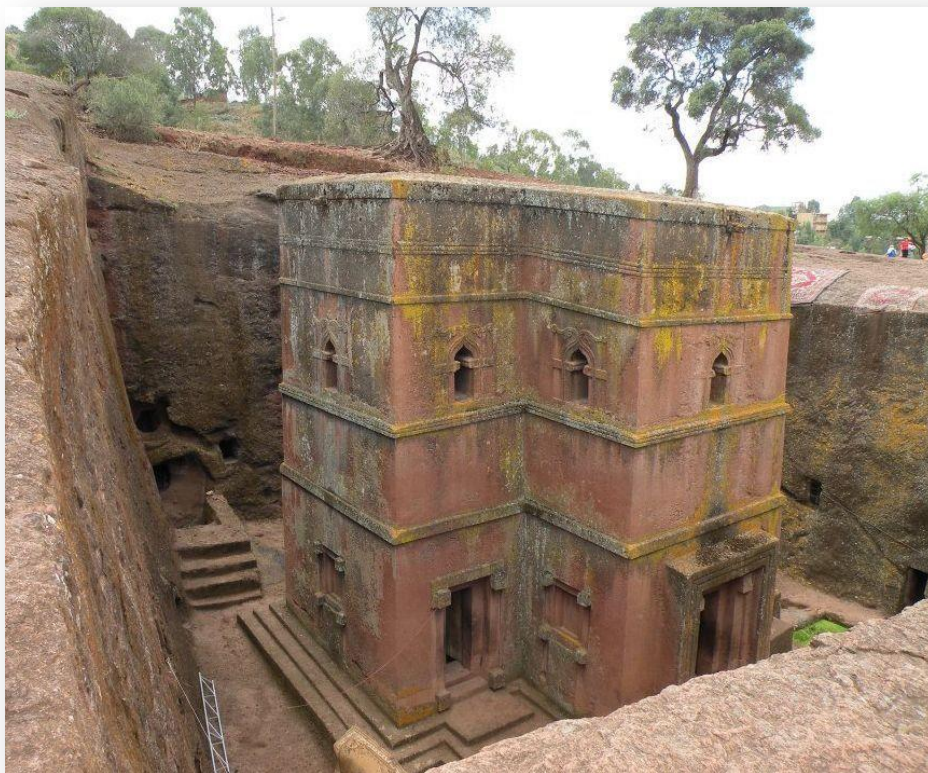
they have less of a budget to go to restaurants or buy souvenirs. This is solely in the interest of the church people.”

“It’s ridiculous,” a restaurant owner quipped. “I understand they need to repair and maintain the churches, but they also receive funding from UNESCO for that. They’re not thinking about the consequences their actions could have on the rest of the people in Lalibela.”

The church has defended its choice by referring to past price increases, from 50 to 100 birr, then 100 to 350, and the worry that foreigners would stop coming that was never realized. But this price hike is by far the largest the church has implemented. With more money than ever flowing through the Lalibela churches, people will want to know more about where that money is going.

“If they said part of the money was going towards improving education or community development I could definitely get behind the price increase,” Leo Nolte, a volunteer in Addis Ababa, visiting Lalibela, said. “But they only say part of the money is going to reconstruction.”

Having only been in effect for four months, it is still too early to tell what effects the price hike will have on tourism in Lalibela and consequently the town itself. But if the town’s fears are realized, this Eighth Wonder of the World may find itself slipping down the list.



Meeting with The Mursi people

By Aude Vogele – Journalism Volunteer from France

Living in the South Omo region, Mursi people are probably the most well-known tribe in Ethiopia.

Famous for their lip-plates, the Mursi are the last group in Africa, amongst them, their women still wear large pottery discs in their lower lips.

In 2007, Mursi people were numbered around 7,500 in Ethiopia and are now estimated at 10,000 people. According to the 1994 national census, a large majority could not speak any other language than Mursi. Almost 90 percent of the Mursi were only able to speak the Mursi language and only 3.5 percent were able to speak the Amharic language.

The religion of the Mursi is animist. They believe in strength greater than themselves, in the sky called Tumwi. Sometimes, Tumwi can appear as a bird or a rainbow. In the Mursi tradition, there are also various rites of passage.

is a ceremonial dueling that consists of a stick fight between two contestants. The fighters are painted in white chalk paste and pummel each other with heavy two-meter long poles. This is a highly valued and popular activity of Mursi men, which is considered a key marker of Mursi identity. This is a form of ritualized male violence. To wear the lip-plate, girls are pierced at the age of 15 or 16. Normally, these lip-plates are only worn to serve food or to milk the cow. Sometimes, unmarried women wear them to dances, and increasingly, they are worn to attract tourists in order to earn extra money.



Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009,) a famous French anthropologist and ethnologist, writes that a traveler can really perceive the other how he is, only with a “triple décentrement” which can be translated as “triple shift.” When a traveler meets another culture, he has to experience another place of course, but also another temporality.

The progress and technologies come at a different speed to a society and the idea of temporality is determined by how the progress is present in the society. The third is the change of the concept of social class due to the different value of money.

When we arrived at the Mursi village, the situation was surreal. A guard was there with a Kalashnikov weapon to protect us. Then, the guide told us that to be married; a Mursi man must provide 38 cows and two Kalashnikov weapons to the family of the bride. Although Mursi people were following us everywhere, it was really difficult to establish contact with them, probably due to our lack of proficiency in the Mursi language. Their conversations were reduced to a minimum; they didn't speak to us except to ask to take a picture with them, by touching or softly pinching our arms.

With his famous sentence, "I hate traveling and explorers," Claude Levi-Strauss warned us against the search of sensational and exoticism, which often brings stereotypes in the tourist's mind. In the meeting with the Mursi, we had the feeling that it was the paroxysm of this idea. For instance, children paint themselves to play and experiment, and young men paint in order to impress the ladies. Nevertheless, paintings, scarifications and even the lip plates are also done to impress tourists. When tourists come to the Mursi village, they don't really see the Mursi way of life, but a kind of show organized by the Mursi themselves in order to earn extra money from the tourists. Much of what tourists see is nothing like the type of body painting or decorating people do for their own aesthetic or ritual reasons.

Claude Levi-Strauss explains also that the western civilizations often bring war and desolation to primitive people and at the same time, in laying waste to the ecosystem. That's why the book is called "Tristes Tropiques" (meaning Sad Tropics.) In the case of the Mursi, we can easily see that their world has considerably been changed by the tourism and the civilization around.

Since the 1960s, the state has been establishing control over the lower Omo valley. Indeed, two national parks (Omo and Mago National Parks) have been established. This has contributed to settle a simplified and legible state, suited to the administrative needs. Secondly, this has allowed raising revenue from a growing tourist industry centered on the local cultures. In 2008, the Mursi declared their territory a community conservation area and begun a community tourism project.

In this region, the largest irrigation complex in Ethiopia will be built in 2014. The project will be able to at least double the total irrigated area in the country. Naturally, this will deeply modify the downstream environment and particularly the flood regime upon which thousands of people, such as the Mursi, depend on for their livelihoods.

The history of the Mursi tribe is for sure really interesting to discover. Not only as a tourist but by questioning ourselves about our impact on their way of life. Moreover, their way of living can make us learn a lot about our own system by putting our cultures into perspectives.

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bikesegnhaileleul@projects-abroad.org