



A girl works in a field
near Addis Ababa,
capital of Ethiopia.

My Uncle's Ethiopia

BY DANIELLE PERGAMENT

I was always interested in Ethiopia. I knew it as the place where the oldest human was found, where the Ark of the Covenant was purportedly hidden, and where an uncle I vaguely remember from childhood had been working as a surgeon for 34 years. Then one day, I picked up Ryszard Kapuscinski's *The Emperor*, a book about the last days of Haile Selassie's rule, and wide-eyed fascination replaced interest. Kapuscinski's world was

mystical and fascinating and terrible and cruel and utterly foreign, like a fable from the *Arabian Nights*. Moments after finishing the book, I was on the phone with the airlines. I didn't have anything in the next

few weeks that couldn't be rescheduled. And I realized this uncle of mine, who is 81 years old and knows the city and its history as well as anyone, won't be around forever. If I didn't go now, I knew I'd never go.

I bought a one-way ticket to Ethiopia. A few days later, I had a visa. By the end of the week, I was on my way to the eastern edge of Africa.

Addis Ababa sprawls out at 8,000 feet, making it the third-highest capital city in the world. When I woke up on my first of 30 mornings in Ethiopia, it wasn't the thinness of the air or the sting of the pollution in my eyes that startled me. It was the green. From horizon to horizon, the city was embedded in a lush, verdant blanket.

Breaking Away

It was the first surprise of many.

Addis has many faces. There's the vibrant Mercato district that sells food, jewelry, donkeys, shawls, T-shirts, and trinkets to locals and curious backpackers. There's the poolside bar at the Hilton that sits empty all day until happy hour, when it fills up with every expat, diplomat, and UN worker in the city come to drink cold beer in the blazing sun. There are the fancy restaurants where beautiful young men and women dressed in tribal wraps perform traditional Ethiopian dances for the patrons. And there are the unfancy roadside stands, the ones with neatly swept dirt floors where businessmen cram inside for platters of *kitfo*—raw beef and spicy sauce. There's the crowded Bole Road, where cafés and bars spill onto the streets, pumping Ethiopian jazz and the smell of weed into the evening air. Then there's the Addis that doesn't show itself until well past dark—the hustlers, the petty thieves, the 60,000 children who live on the street. There's the Black Lion Hospital where my uncle is the head of surgery, the country's best medical facility where the power dodges in and out and pools of muddy water collect in the hallways.

There's nothing refined about Addis. Everything here is raw and untamed, as if the city spontaneously sprung from the land underneath it. It's a place where many of the roads remain unpaved, where eating utensils are frowned on, and where flocks of sheep cross four-lane highways with ten-year-old shepherds cracking a whip behind them. Everything about this place brings you closer to the earth.

On my last night in Addis Ababa, I had dinner with my uncle—the uncle I hadn't seen for 20 years until I showed up in his city a few weeks earlier. I asked him what he thought of his adopted home country. "It's a mess; there are problems we can't even begin to solve," he said and paused. "But I'd never live anywhere else."

Danielle Pergament is a contributing editor at Allure and writes for the New York Times, New York, Departures, Travel and Leisure, and Outside. She divides her time between New York and Rome.