

TRAVELLERS CLUB MEETING – 28th JUNE 2009

ETHIOPIA

Speaker – Stephen Codrington

A new record was set at our meeting on 28th June 2009 - our youngest ever member (the speaker's granddaughter, a pre-schooler) sat quietly with the other 34 members during the talk & behaved impeccably throughout the afternoon. Stephen's recent journey through Ethiopia with his son provided us with an absorbing overview which is summarised here:-

During the 1980s and 1990s, Ethiopia was constantly in the headlines for all the wrong reasons – famine, civil war, ethnic conflicts and poverty. On 28th June, Stephen Codrington provided us with a much more up-to-date and balanced picture of Ethiopia, a nation with a rich culture and wonderfully diverse geography.

The address, which was illustrated by over 200 of Stephen's photographs, revealed a stunningly beautiful country with vast differences between the north and south. The north is a comparatively arid and elevated plateau area, with a long history and settlement and trade and an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian majority population. Indeed, northern Ethiopia is probably the cradle of humanity. By contrast, southern Ethiopia is comparatively wetter and lower in altitude, much less developed economically, and supports diverse populations of many tribes and faiths, including tribal animism, Islam and evangelical Christianity.

The address began with a statistical overview of Ethiopia and an introduction to the country's unique Amharic language and alphabet. The talk then focussed on the country's capital city, Addis Ababa. Although not a booming urban metropolis by the standards of other parts of the world, Addis Ababa is by far the most developed part of Ethiopia, offering its residents goods and services that are unobtainable elsewhere. Nonetheless, the capital does suffer from the same energy shortages as the rest of the country, although this shows as blackouts in Addis Ababa rather than the rationed "two days on, one day off" system of electricity used elsewhere in Ethiopia. Interestingly, the city still has many remnants of the nation's difficult communist era from 1973 to 1993, including wide boulevards, stark buildings and revolutionary monuments. Addis Ababa is perhaps the place where the wide gaps between rich and poor in Ethiopia are most evident.

Stephen's talk then took us step by step north from Addis Ababa towards the border with Eritrea. The first place examined was Bahir Dar, a city famous for its urban planning and stepping off point for Lake Tana. With an area of 3,500 square kilometres, Lake Tana is Ethiopia's largest lake, and home to a number of monasteries. These monasteries reflect a very early branch of Ethiopian Orthodox belief, and are marked by round buildings with a square central structure housing the holy-of-holies that is accessible only to the priest. Although very plain on the outside, the temples displayed spectacular ancient frescoes on the interior walls. Lake Tana is also the source of the

Blue Nile River, which is marked by spectacular falls as the river begins its flow downstream. Spectacular as they are, the Falls are a pale reflection of their former glory before a nearby large hydro-electric power dam was constructed.

Moving northwards, the next area discussed was Gonder. Known as 'Ethiopia's Camelot' because of the spectacular 15th century Royal Enclosure in the centre of the town, Gonder also boasts an interesting ensemble of yellow and turquoise art-deco buildings in the town centre, a legacy of Italian control in the 1930s. A small late 18th century chapel known as the Debre Berhan Selassie church displayed a wondrous wooden ceiling decorated with the enigmatic smiling faces of 104 Mona Lisa-like guardian angels looking downwards; the ceiling has become something of a symbol of Gonder, eclipsing even the Royal Enclosure. Gonder also housed what Stephen described as the least impressive but perhaps most comical ancient monument in Ethiopia – the dilapidated miniscule 17th century remains known as Zobel's mausoleum, which marks the spot where the king's horse (Zobel) is buried.

Continuing northwards, Stephen then showed us the small town of Lalibela. Although much of the town was traditional and unspectacular, Lalibela housed a collection of unique and finely carved rock hewn churches. Built mainly in the 12th century, perhaps with the assistance of the Templars who were in Ethiopia at the time searching for the lost Ark of the Covenant, the rock hewn churches are in some ways reminiscent of the temples at Petra, except that those at Lalibela are free-standing, surrounded by excavated rock. Although the appearance of some of the churches has been spoilt by large white protective awnings erected by UNESCO, one church (St George's) still remains on display showing the grandeur typical of these unique constructions.

The final area discussed in the northern part of the country was Axum, once the centre of a huge empire spread across north-eastern Africa and the Arabian peninsula. Axum's history is tied up with legends involving the Queen of Sheba and her relationship with King Solomon, and many of the town's landmarks are said to relate to this history. Axum is an ancient centre, as shown by the many stellae that litter the area, some of which are said to be about 5,000 years old. However, Axum's main claim to fame is that it is said to be the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, housed in a small building to the side of the St Mary of Zion Cathedral and guarded by a monk whose life vocation is protecting the Ark. The disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant is one of the great mysteries of the Old Testament narrative, and Stephen referred anyone interested in unravelling this mystery to read 'The Sign and the Seal' by Graham Hancock.

Having reached Ethiopia's northern boundary with Eritrea, Stephen then showed us the very different southern half of Ethiopia, starting with a trek along the lakes of the Great Rift Valley where traditional fishing is practised. One particularly interesting town is Shashemene, which accommodates a community of Rastafarians. Many of the Rastafarians migrated to Ethiopia from Jamaica during the rule of Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie. Another distinctive town was Dorze, where the residents erect tall houses shaped like elephants' heads, built to become lower as termites progressively consume the wooden foundations in the ground.

Southern Ethiopia is home to several national parks with distinctive wildlife. Two national parks were examined, the Nech Sar National park near the town of Arba Minch and the Mago National park, home to the Mursi tribe. The Mursi are nomadic graziers who still live a traditional lifestyle, and the women are particularly noticeable because of their tradition of wearing large baked clay lip plates. Other tribal groups were also examined, including the Erebora, the Hammer and the Banna.

Stephen has posted a small sample of the images used in his presentation on his website, www.stephencodrington.com.

Sincere thanks Stephen!

‘Ela Taranto