

Colorado climber reveals Ethiopian culture

Who: Majka Burhardt, author

What: *Vertical Ethiopia: Climbing Toward Possibility in the Horn of Africa* book signing, slide show

When: 7:30 p.m. on Thursday

Where: Teton Room at Snow King Resort

How much: \$8 in advance from Teton Mountaineering, \$10 at the door

By Angus M. Thuermer Jr.

Last year Boulder, Colo., climber and author Majka Burhardt led four friends on a climbing adventure to Ethiopia, enduring press censorship to produce a book about a place and culture rarely seen.

In collaboration with an Ethiopian publishing company, Burhardt produced *Vertical Ethiopia: Climbing Toward Possibility in the Horn of Africa*, featuring the photographs of Driggs, Idaho, shooter Gabe Rogel. The journey to the remote cliffs and towers on the border of Eritria exposed team members to more than vertical cliffs; their brush with a different civilization and exposure to the realities of warring Africa built bridges even as it raised questions about censorship and human rights.

Burhardt will present a slide show and sign copies of *Vertical Ethiopia* at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday in the Teton Room at Snow King Resort. The handsome, oversized book features Rogel's strong eye, the dynamism of Burhardt, Kristie Arend, Helen Dudley and Caroline George, and the physical and cultural landscape of northern Ethiopia.

Half of the print run will sell in Ethiopia, part of the collaboration that was important to Burhardt's project. The Access Fund sponsored



Photographs by Driggs, Idaho, shooter Gabe Rogel reveal the harshness of life in Ethiopia. Four women climbers visited the country in an effort to pioneer new climbing routes and establish cultural connections.

her visit.

Climbing in the African desert seems an extreme cousin of the booming sport practiced on the desert cliffs of southern Utah, North America's latest climbing mecca. In Ethiopia, the rock is questionable, the temperature high, the water scarce and too many plants have points on them. The climbers make a pilgrimage to a hidden cliff temple, accessible up worn footholds in a slanting wall – like an Ansazi ruin but here complete with a priest and mysterious ceiling frescoes.

On their journey the climbers buy spices in the market, wait in line for water at a desert pump and ask questions of the locals. They eat the area

food, drink the local beer and get their hands scraped in the cracks of several cliffs and towers.

Rogel's photographs of the climbing prove the undertakings to be anything but a breeze. Gritty rock, steep faces and fragile features combine to make the ascents challenging.

While the climbers accomplished several notable routes, Burhardt can't recommend the challenges to most.

Rogel's pictures of the landscape and people of Ethiopia add a revealing dimension to the book. They suggest some of the things that Burhardt can't say about cruel times or an uncertain, fragile future. The eyes

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– Majka Burhardt
CLIMBER, AUTHOR

of children gazing up at climbers on a cliff remind that curiosity is a universal trait, that young minds yearn for more.

Yet Burhardt can't write more. In a letter, she admits she is telling only part of her story.

"I could not talk about recent kidnappings, religious violence, or the mobilization of Ethiopian troops in the north," she writes. "But I saw all of these things while I was there."

She is ready to say more. "Through my book tour, I am now able to address all of the other forces that were at work in the background of writing this," she said.

Having constraints on her exploration provided insight.

"To appreciate art, we are told to first become neutral," she said. "What if adventure is art? What else could it really be?"

"I did my best to see Ethiopia wholly as the experience I had."

Vertical Ethiopia opens our eyes to a different world. It suggests hope and could spread that message to the Horn of Africa.

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"Plenty of wild hay..."

In 1889 a Mormon caravan of six covered wagons led by Sylvester Wilson, who had sold his property in Utah, invested in stock and headed north to settle in Idaho. He discovered there was no winter feed for his stock near St. Anthony, where he had started to build a cabin. At this point his brother Nick returned to his home in Teton Basin (the Pierre's Hole of trapper days) from Jackson Hole, where he had been helping a local rancher make hay. On Nick's insistence that there was plenty of wild hay in Jackson Hole, the men of the party, with two teen-age Wilson girls as cooks, went over Teton Pass to put up hay, leaving the women and children in a camp on the west side of the Tetons. In late fall the haymakers returned for the others, and the whole party moved into Jackson Hole and settled where present-day Wilson now stands. It took two weeks to get over the pass.

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SOURCE: From *Trapper to Tourist in Jackson Hole* by Elizabeth Wied Hayden