

the high side of the
HORN OF AFRICA



text by MAJKA BURHARDT images by GABE ROGEL

I scissor my hand up and down in the crack, clearing loose grains of sand from the inside edge. The purchase gets better and I commit to the hold and begin cleaning the inside of the next. Midway through my next excavation, the edge of the crack outside my foot fractures. The horizontal runnel I'd been on one



move before was little better. I adjust my stance, willing myself to be lighter. This is climbing in Ethiopia, a minute-by-minute guessing game of what to trust in the environment, and how to trust yourself in that environment.

A seemingly unlikely climbing destination, Ethiopia is better known for drought, famine,

poverty, and war. It's also known as the birthplace and ruling grounds of Emperor Haile Selassie, the Queen of Sheba, and the ancient Kingdom of Axum. Its physical landscape stretches from the fourth highest peak in Africa, the 4,543-meter Ras Dashen, to one of the lowest points on Earth at the Danakil Depression—some 22 meters below sea level—to the headwaters of the Blue Nile. All of these elements make Ethiopia one of the largest wild areas in Africa. And with a vast expanse of 200-meter-tall sandstone towers in the north, Ethiopia holds intriguing climbing potential for a place not known for the sport.

I first came to Ethiopia in October 2006 to write about a rare coffee bean, Geisha, that was thought to be from the Horn of Africa but had never been found there. A relative of this coffee bean, grown in Panama, now garners more than \$100 a pound on the market. While the expedition I had joined to cover the story didn't find Geisha, I found Ethiopia.

In gathering further information on the country, I contacted British climber, Pat Littlejohn, who had been there before. Following our discussions, he sent me eight photos of striking sandstone towers in the northern province of Tigray. The coffee exploration took place in the southern part of Ethiopia, but even before I left the country for the first time I made plans to come back to the explore the north. I returned to Ethiopia the following spring, making my base in Addis Ababa. When I told Ethiopian friends of my plans to climb, I was met with blank stares. When I showed them photos of the north, of shocks of sanguine stone piercing an azure sky, they were further confused. This was not a landscape that most people in Addis had ever seen, let alone foreigners.

This is not the Himalaya, Patagonia, or the poles. Exploration has occurred in Ethiopia, but not at the level of its potential due to politics and safety—government sanctions, war, and persistent international restrictions, to name a few. The result is a country twice the size of France that is just now being understood for its full geographical diversity. At least this is how I put it to potential

partners when I was assembling my team. This lured people in, but eventually the following conversation would ensue.

A potential teammate: "Is it safe in Ethiopia?"

Me: "That depends on your interpretation of safety."

I would go on to explain recent kidnappings, religious violence, and then wrap up the conversation with my assuring them that despite all of this I felt safer in Ethiopia than I did in most places in the United States. I'd end with the following tidbit that sealed the deal: "Where else in the world are you going to find unclimbed sandstone spires anymore?"



By March 2007, I had a team assembled. Kristie Arend, Helen Dudley, Caroline George, and photographer Gabe Rogel. Guided by overly digitized versions of the images Littlejohn had sent me, we headed off to a handful of rock faces outside of Hawzien, a small town in Tigray Province. Our objective was Gheralta, the last in a series of sandstone upthrusts covering much of Tigray. The largest of these is three kilometers long and 450 meters tall. The rock folds over itself and turns sharp and smooth corners to form buttresses and isolated towers with pinnacles and faces repeating in every direction. Other formations extend beyond

this massif north and south. The pictures we had seen did not do this region justice, and once we saw Gheralta up close I knew it could take a lifetime to explore these faces. Eager to start climbing, we picked our way through terraces to the base from the road within an hour. Twenty meters of climbing later, we were duly humbled.

Sandstone is not known for its solidity. Sandstone in Ethiopia even less so. Perfect cracks became fissures on a suspended panel; gear bit into the rock and left an impression when removed. Not expecting things to be easy is one thing, realizing just how hard they might be is another. It quickly became clear that when rock climbing in Ethiopia, following is definitely the desired position. Freed of such worries as wondering if the anchor you are being belayed on is strong enough or how much rock you are knocking off below, the climbing is sublime. You can dance over edges and flirt with jamming and laybacking. You can be in Ethiopia. If you are leading, sometimes all you want is to be somewhere else.

Northern Ethiopia is resplendent with vertical terrain and vistas. Locals often climb third, fourth, and, in some cases, even easy fifth class terrain to simply get to church—attending services still held in ancient sanctuaries hewn from the rock 1,000 years ago. We went to visit one of the most famous of these, Abuna Yemata, and used sandstone foot and hand holds worn into the soft rock and polished from centuries of use. While no one in the region is climbing beyond this, the very fact that these churches exist created an understanding of our desires as climbers to explore these faces. Everywhere we went we had local support and interest, which meant that everywhere we went, we were with other people.

In Ethiopia one cannot escape to the mountains, or not for very long. We climbed on escarpments in plain view of a town that was created by forced relocation of people into a centralized area in the name of safety. Below us, the tin-topped rock houses looked like an early effort at Ethiopian suburbia. And we looked like absurd caricatures of humans trying to remain tethered to the faces above. Off in the distance, down a dirt road another 15 kilometers lay Hawzien, the village where we stayed and the site of one of the bloodiest massacres of the Derg, a communistic regime that controlled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. Hawzien is the area's center and on a Wednesday, market day,

in 1988, when people from the surrounding towns and villages came to trade wares, a low-flying plane dropped a napalm bomb and killed 2,500 people. There is a monument to the dead in the middle of Hawzien, placed just so that traffic circles around it; perfectly located next to our hotel so that each morning and each evening, on the way to and from climbing, we rounded this memorial.

In Tigray, terraces extend in every direction as a result of a food-for-work program that targets preservation of the fragile landscape. We were climbing in the very region of Ethiopia that was flashed across every television screen and radio in the 1980s for the famine that killed more than one million people and affected six million more.

To scout out climbing lines we hiked over and through these endless terraces to get close to walls and peer inside cracks and chimneys for a way up. The rock undulates deep orange and red with ochre bands up high. It quickly became clear that we wanted nothing to do with the ochre bands and the horizontal striations they signified in the rock. Even from the ground, this porous upper band, more than a hundred meters above us, looked like a bad idea. But the rock underneath is ever mysterious with potential. We spent countless hours scurrying up and down terraces to get to these faces, taking binoculars to the sandstone cracks and estimating the size and safety of various objectives. We were not there to climb to one specific summit, but rather to see how much we could find to climb.

Our first tower was a five-pitch experience of short sections of perfection followed by long scary choices on questionable rock. Gheralta does not give itself easily to a climber, but then again, that was what we were there for. Deep in the middle of the Nebelet Towers, we climbed 150 meters to the rounded mushroom summit of orange sand and reveled, briefly, in our success before realizing that our only way down was to down-lead. We did this for one pitch and then found gulleys to take us the rest of the way. We drove back to Hawzien that night while the sunset silhouetted acacia trees against the deepening sky. We were in a car driving away from a first ascent and I wondered both if I was up for another Ethiopian climb and how that climb mattered in the face of other similar exploits in the world.

I'm 31. I did not grow up in the golden era of rock climbing and cut my teeth on first ascents waiting





to be plucked around the world, but I have always wanted to be that type of adventurer. Ethiopia represented that chance to me, and it did so in a way that I did not fully understand until now.

I grew up paddling the waters of Northern Minnesota, Canada, and the Arctic, believing adventure had to be removed from daily reality. Nothing would upset me more than an interruption in this perceived sanctuary—be it a plane, a cabin, a trace of anything human but me. That was then.

Now, what I want most is the integration of the extreme and the everyday. I would rather go toward the world than escape from it, which is good because in Ethiopia there is little option of anything else.

Half of the country's population earns less than a dollar a day and Ethiopia is one of the top ten recipients of foreign aid money in the world. Yet, there are signs of prosperity. In Mekele, the capital of the Tigray region where we were climbing, new glass buildings stand regal and complete with signs advertising office space and internet access. Next door, another building is mid-construction—the scaffolding is branches bound together with twine leaning against concrete walls with edges bubbling over wooden frames. The current Ethiopian prime minister is from Tigray and has infused major capital into the region for modernization.

Ethiopia is the only country in Africa that has maintained independence against the era of European colonialism. Italy occupied the country in the 1940s in retaliation for a vendetta Mussolini had as a result of an Ethiopian victory against his country in the late 1800s. The United Nations helped Ethiopia drive the Italians out but not before several roads were built and the country got hooked on pasta. As a result, spaghetti is readily available everywhere, even in the small villages

from which we set off to climb in the north.

Rated one of Frommers top 12 adventure destinations last year, Ethiopia has ten national parks with another dozen in the making. The country has emerged from a dark veil of war into a world of opportunity with its natural resources. Is the country safe? It depends on whom you ask. Caught in the middle of a global war on terror, Ethiopia is 60 percent Christian and 40 percent Muslim—the two faiths having largely lived in harmony until now, but that could change. Ethiopia has a contentious

border with Eritrea to the north and recently invaded Somalia to the east. Yet Ethiopia's stability is considered crucial for East Africa's stability. It houses American military and intelligence installations a mere 400 kilometers from Saudi Arabia.

And this is where we were climbing—in a world where sport, life, history, and culture all converged in an elusive search for summits. We established several beautiful lines, many that I would go back and climb again and others that I would never again attempt. What drove us was the knowledge that we were only seeing

part of what there was to see in the area. The sheer density of rock, the consistency of the formations layering out after each other far into the horizon, the sight of another massif just around the corner—all of this created both an urgency and a peace during our trip. There was no way we were going to fully explore the potential of these cliffs, but the mere taste provided inspiration for more.  



THE PRIEST OF ABUJAWA YEMAMA, FACING PAGE, ON THE FINAL ONE-METER GAMBPLANK WALKWAY AT RIGHT, THE ROAD TO CHERALTA.

BIOGRAPHY

Majka Burhardt is a Boulder, Colorado-based writer, climber, and certified guide. She is currently on a speaking tour with her book, *Vertical Ethiopia: Climbing Toward Possibility in the Horn of Africa*. www.verticalethiopia.com