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Selamta

THE IN-FLIGHT MAGAZINE OF ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES



VERTICAL ETHIOPIA

Exploring new angles of an ancient country.



A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER



Contributors



TYLER ANDERSON is a photojournalist based in Toronto, where he works as a staff photographer at the *National Post*. A two-time Canadian Photojournalist of the Year, he has covered such assignments as the 2012 London Olympic Games and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. He recently spent time in northern Uganda documenting the country's recovery from its long civil war. See "Hollywood of the North" on p. 34.

Rooted in: Toronto, Canada

Best meal while traveling abroad: White Rose dumplings, made from a secret family recipe found only in Hoi An, Vietnam.



MAJKA BURHARDT is an author, professional climber, filmmaker and entrepreneur. She has an uncanny knack for blending vertical exploration with multistage international ventures focused on current cultural and global issues. Read about her climbing adventures in "Vertical Ethiopia" on p. 24.

Rooted in: New Hampshire (USA)

Best meal while traveling abroad: A gemsbok (a type of antelope) steak in Windhoek, Namibia, after a month-long trip culminating in a new technical rock climbing route up the Brandberg, Namibia's highest peak.



LAURA CAMERON is a freelance magazine and newspaper writer who covers a range of topics, including business, crime and the arts. After spending a year divided between the wilderness of Northern Ontario and the Antipodes, she returned to the adventures of city life in her hometown of Toronto. She introduces us to the Canadian metropolis in "Hollywood of the North" on p. 34.

Rooted in: Toronto, Canada

Best meal while traveling abroad: Pastry-wrapped Cornish game hen in Auvers-sur-Oise, France.



GABE ROGEL is an adventure photographer who has been known to stand on the hoods of moving vehicles, rappel off 3,000-foot rock walls and ski from the summit of an 8,000-meter peak for the perfect image. Check out the images he captured of climbing the Gheralta Mountains in "Vertical Ethiopia" on p. 24.

Rooted in: Idaho (USA)

Best meal while traveling abroad: Dinner on a remote beach in Thailand with my new bride, Sara. Between the stars overhead, the gentle waves lapping the shore, the sand underfoot, my new wife across from me and, oh, the fresh-caught fish poached in coconut-milk curry, the meal was memorable, to say the least.



CARLA SAPSFORD NEWMAN is a freelance journalist who has covered stories floating up the Amazon, on the high seas off Africa, in the shadow of Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer statue and more. Her first career in nonprofit development sent her to Ethiopia, where she fell in love with the people and yirgacheffe. See "The Petronas Towers" on p. 48.

Rooted in: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Best meal while traveling abroad: Castelli's in Addis Ababa, where she experienced truffles, espresso and grappa for the first time.

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VERTICAL ETHIOPIA

Exploring new angles
of an ancient country.

BY MAJKA BURHARDT
PHOTOS BY GABE ROGEL

WEIGHT OF GEAR

25 lbs

HEIGHT OF CLIFFS

600 ft

TOTAL WOMEN

4

Four women rock climbing in Ethiopia — climbing anywhere, really — are hard to miss. Each of us was adorned with 25 pounds of metal and nylon, and we took turns contorting our hands and feet into orange sandstone as we tried to get higher. Our purpose? Charting a new course into the unknown.

Launching yourself up vertical inclines is not normal. I have learned that in my 17-year career as a climber. It is, however, glorious — when it works. And on that day in March 2007, it was glorious.

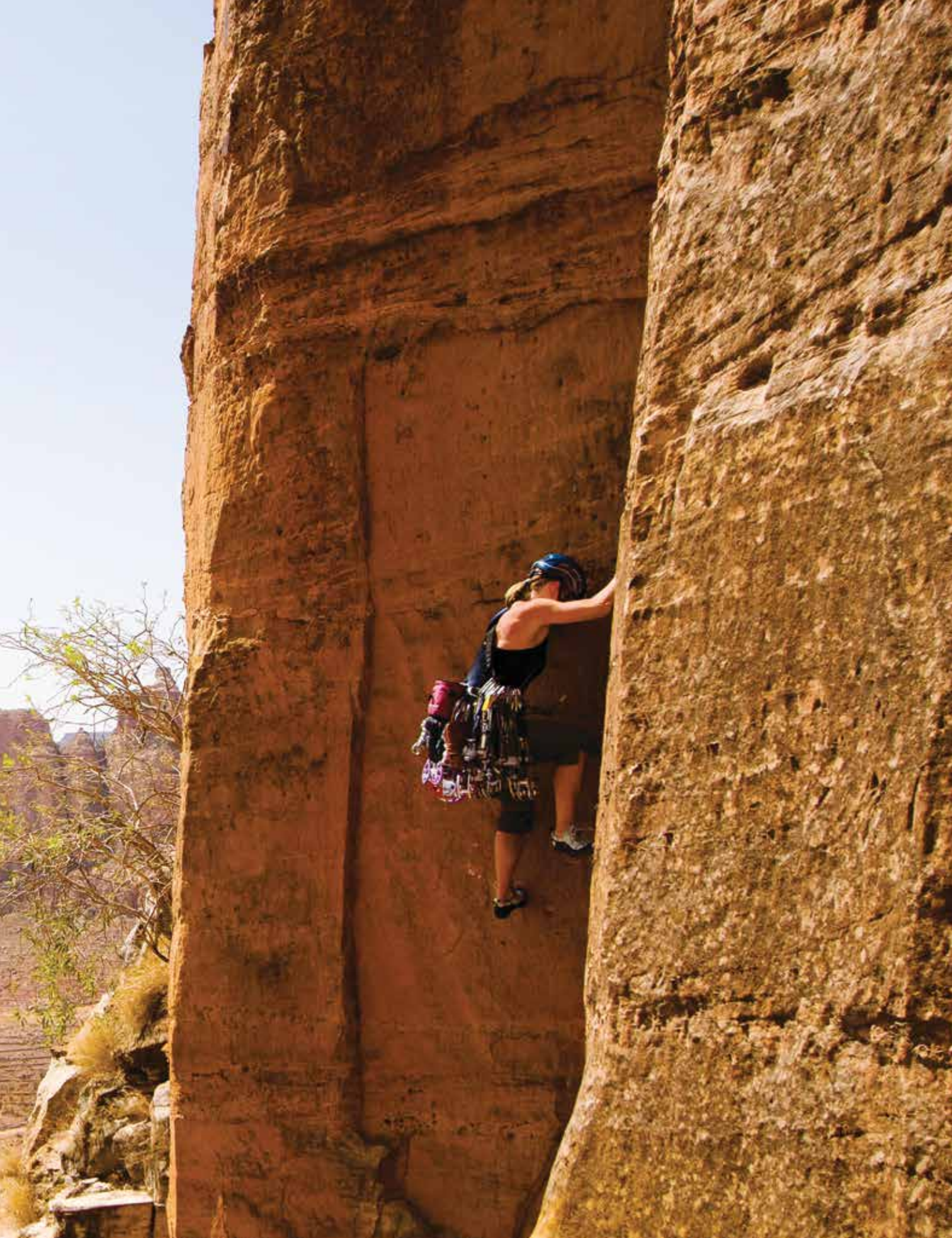
Five months before, in October 2006, the idea of rock climbing in Ethiopia was no more than a hunch. I'd spent a week traveling through the country's rich, green coffee lands doing research, during which I caught occasional glimpses of another landscape that would appear and then vanish. The basalt and limestone escarpments tucked into verdant valleys were playing tricks with my mind.

I seized my first opportunity to learn more once I arrived in Jimma, the largest city in southwest Ethiopia. It took me five minutes to locate the singular Internet connection in the three-block radius of the downtown.

Ten minutes later I watched a photo appear over the dial-up connection, horizontal line by horizontal line. The screen flickered. I waited, holding my breath. And then I saw confirmation: sanguine and orange bolts of sandstone stretching 600 feet into the sky. *(continued on page 26)*

CAPTION | Kristie Arend climbs "Jewel in the Sand" — a first ascent up a sandy buttress outside Gheralta, Ethiopia.





ETHIOPIA IMAGINED

At the time, Ethiopia was not known as a climbing destination. The world had been primed to pay attention to this country because of the stories of Axum, Haile Selassie I and the famine of 1984; stories of the Derg, the Queen of Sheba, coffee and more — but not climbing.

Prior to 2006, even *my* concept of Ethiopia had been that of a dry, flat and barren land. That's when I was exposed to the country's coffee lands — and surprised by the mountains, jungles, bucolic abundance and bougainvillea. I learned that more than 60 percent of Ethiopia lies above 2,000 feet, the highest point being 14,928-foot Ras Dashen.

None of this was the Ethiopia of my previous imagination.

The moment I saw the sandstone towers in the photograph, Ethiopia became my next climbing destination. A plan came together quickly: assemble a team of top female climbers and a photographer, and commit to a book deal. Our goal was to expand the dialogue about Ethiopia and to do so via adventure.

The sandstone towers were from the Gheralta Mountains in Tigray, 800 miles north of Jimma. My team flew to Mekelle, Tigray's capital, and we set off driving north in the evening so that we arrived at the mountains in the darkness. Sunrise revealed overlapping massifs of towering rock formations tumbling together in a high desert landscape. We were climbing just a few hours later.

The moment I saw the sandstone towers in the photograph, Ethiopia became my next climbing destination.

HIGHEST POINT

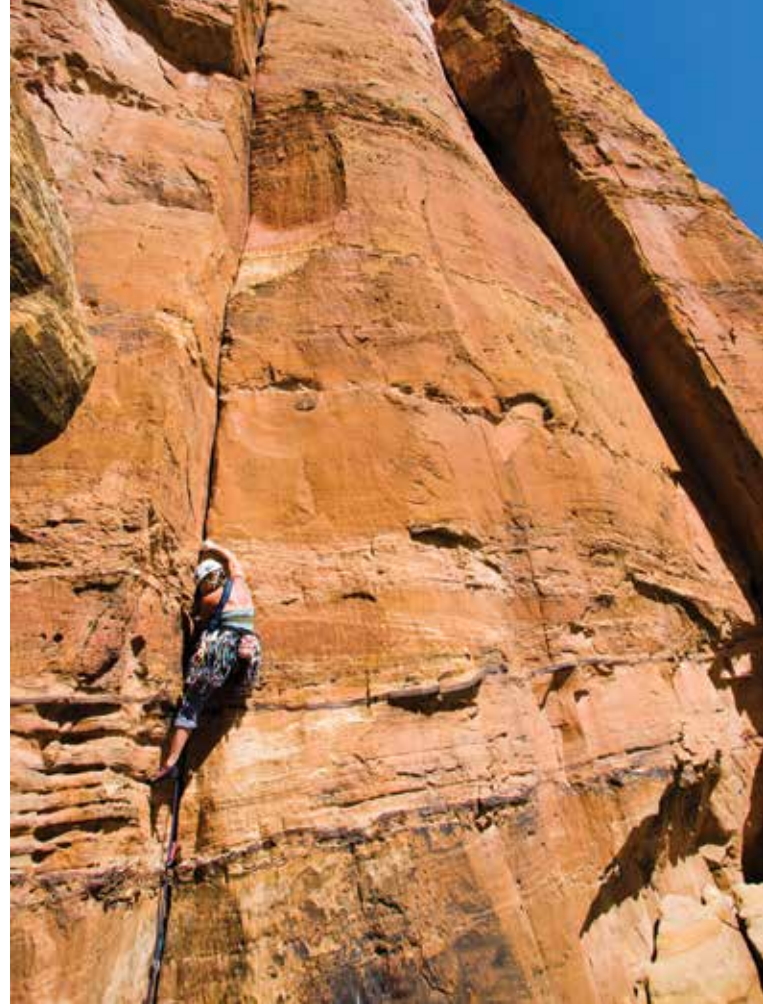
14,928 ft



CAPTIONS | (Above) A local man climbs up the worn cliffside to Abuna Yemata, a rock-hewn church near Hawzein. (Opposite page) Author Majka Burhardt (far right) and three other climbers discuss potential routes up the Gheralta massif, outside the town of Megab.

SECTION TWO »





SECTION TWO

of VERTICAL ETHIOPIA

WAYS AND MEANS

At its purest, rock climbing involves finding a weakness in an expanse of rock and exploiting that weakness to get to the top. There are many variations on this primary objective. If the rock face or cliff is long, then you need to puzzle it out in rope lengths, or pitches. When the climber puts several such sections together, the result is a multi-pitch climb.

To keep yourself safe while climbing, you use a complex array of gear (see fig. 1 on page 30) called protection, and a nylon rope tested and rated to withstand forces far greater than what a long plummet might generate.

In Ethiopia, the weaknesses we sought were cracks — pinky-finger size to head size. Cracks

provide both a place to cram hands and feet to make upward progress and a place to put the protective gear that will keep you safe should you fall. These cracks were also a better and safer bet than the crumbling face surrounding them.

On our first attempt at an ascent, I was roped-in with Helen Dudley. She and I had four days of climbing as a pair before the other women would arrive. I went first and reached my hands inside a yawning fissure and felt normalized by the stone biting against my flesh. This was what we had come for.

The glory lasted approximately 25 feet. At that point, the crack, which had previously seemed like such a good idea, became a splayed and unstable pillar. It was time to find plan B: another crack on



SECTION TWO CONTINUED

Rock climbing involves exploiting a rock's weakness.

another rock formation that might yield to the human body.

Helen and I retreated and hiked the hour back down to our truck to meet Teddy Berhanu, our driver, translator and liaison, who would soon become my closest friend and advisor in Ethiopia.

"Are we finished climbing then?" Teddy asked when we arrived. It wasn't clear if he meant for the day or forever.

"We're just getting started," I said.

SECTION THREE »



CAPTIONS | (Opposite page) Climbers work in tandem, taking turns leading the way and finding the right cracks. (Top) Majka Burhardt chooses cams for the climb she is preparing to lead. (Above) Ethiopian life continues on around them.

A COMMITMENT TO VERTICAL

The reality of establishing first ascents is that you are often only actually climbing for five percent of your time. The other 95 percent of the time you spend hiking, discussing, trying, failing, hiking, discussing, doubting and then, if you are lucky, succeeding.

Climbing in Ethiopia was no different in this regard, save for the fact that it was Ethiopia. Many places in the world offer vertical exploration in a cultural vacuum. In Ethiopia, that seclusion was impossible. We wound our way through farmers' fields dodging last season's dried-out barley shoots, around immaculately crafted stone houses and threaded terraces built to save soil, water and crops.

The sun in the blue sky seared unforgivingly as we searched for our next line of possible ascent. Young children tucked their hands in ours, older children told us stories and taught us Tigrayan words, and soon parents and elders met us outside their homes and welcomed us inside.

We drank barley beer; heard stories of a 1988 massacre that had happened right where we were spending our nights; listened to inspiring stories of new wells and schools; learned of boom harvests and lean harvests; held babies and shook everyone's hand.

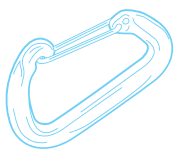
I am a physical explorer. I am drawn to the tactile — feeling the arch of my foot roll over the unexpected pebble, running my thumb across boulders to know what the rock will feel like 400 feet above, tunneling my shoulders through a chute of branches and having the scratches to show for it.

This is how I have gained complexity and understanding in other places. It is addictive. Yet Ethiopia's complexity had become for me both human *and* physical.

Ethiopia's complexity had become for me both human *and* physical.



FIG. 1 / SPORT-CLIMBING GEAR LIST



- CLIMBING ROPES
- CLIMBING HARNESS
- ROCK CLIMBING SHOES
- CLIMBING HELMET
- BELAYS AND CARABINERS
- QUICKDRAWS

CAPTIONS | (Above) Children in the mountain village of Megab smile for the camera, before scampering up a rock face in tandem with the American climbers. (Opposite page) Helen Dudley places a cam into the crack — a spring-loaded device that will catch the rope and climber in the event of a fall.

SECTION FOUR »



LEARNING THE HARD WAY

Helen and I hiked up to the towers I'd seen on that photo in Jimma and to a weakness we'd spied the day before. The climbing kept going this time, and once we were 200 feet up, I knew we'd be able to make it to the top of the spire. The feeling was brilliant. The feeling was emboldening.

And then I saw a young boy poke his head out of a nearby bush. I'd just climbed 200 feet up a technical, vertical face — one that had taken Helen and me more than 90 minutes to conquer. That one boy was joined by another, and another. I was tethered in via a climbing rope; they moved freely to the edge of the face and back into what I'd learn was a deep, brush-choked gulley leading to our place of ascent.

This pattern continued the rest of the way up the 500-foot climb. We took the technical, challenging way, and the children found an alternative. In the

end it was only the final summit mushroom that was ours alone. We opted for their non-technical route down and named our initial route "Learning the Hard Way."

When we arrived back at the base, Teddy was waiting, wondering what we were up to in that scalding sun. The children swarmed him, and we were curious to know if they had climbed that route before. With Teddy's help translating, we learned that they had not. They'd simply followed our lead and started exploring in tandem.

"Do they think we are crazy?" I asked Teddy to ask them.

The children shook their heads no and laughed in response.

"Do *you*?" we asked Teddy.

"Yes."



ETHIOPIA'S POSSIBILITIES

Helen and I, along with two other women*, went on to climb a half-dozen more routes in the Gheralta. And our story, *Vertical Ethiopia: Climbing toward possibility in the Horn of Africa*, was released in February 2008.

Over the next year I went on a 50-event speaking tour and started a dialogue about Ethiopia in the midst of the current global landscape, where religion, politics and setting continually interact and react. The conversation has yet to end.

Today, I still get monthly emails from curious climbers. Several have since gone to Ethiopia, some have established routes, and all have been touched

greatly by the country and its people. But I also hear from nonclimbers who have simply fallen in love with this ancient land.

I always write back and say what I still know is true: There is adventure to be had in Ethiopia. How much, how scary, how true, how certain is up to you. Climb, walk, mountain bike, run, hike. You will find a willing partner in Ethiopia. In exchange, I wager you'll help give Ethiopia a more complex place at the table during the next global conversation. ■

[CONCLUSION]



AFTERWORD

In the years since her first climbing trip in Ethiopia, Majka Burhardt has explored the country multiple times. In February 2013 she'll return again for Accelerate Ethiopia — the first-ever trail race in this country, supporting imagine1day and the Himalayan Cataract Project. You can purchase her book Vertical Ethiopia at her website (majkaburhardt.com), on Amazon.com, or — in Ethiopia — at Book World.

**Majka Burhardt's climbing partners, Helen Dudley, Caroline George and Kristie Arend, were each instrumental in establishing routes for that initial Ethiopia trip.*

CAPTIONS | (Opposite page) The topography of the Gheralta Mountains shows itself at sunset. (Above) The author purchases food in a local market during a break from climbing.

FIND YOUR ADVENTURE PORTAL

Climbing is not the only way to be tactile and to explore the beautiful complexities of Ethiopia. Given the nature of the soft rock, it might be better to forgo the climbing (unless you're an expert with a penchant for the extreme) and try any of the following instead:

- » Hike virtually anywhere or everywhere, especially in the mountains around Addis Ababa. Other options include the Bale and Simien Mountains.
- » Join hundreds of other runners in Addis or in the countryside, taking to the streets and trails before dawn. Ethiopia's running culture is thriving and inclusive of all.
- » Combine a visit to the churches of Lalibela with walking, hiking or mountain biking in the surrounding valleys and mountains.
- » Windsurf, paddle and swim northwest of Addis Ababa on Lake Langano in the Rift Valley.