

Guest Column

Book Author Finds Adventure And Understanding in the Horn of Africa

BY MAJKA BURHARDT

I didn't go to Ethiopia to climb; I went to search for coffee. In October 2006, I traveled deep into the cradle of humanity to hunt for a rare coffee bean that garners over \$150/lb—and found climbing instead. I understood that Ethiopia was a place of war and terror, but it never factored into my mind that it might also be a place of untapped outdoor adventure.

When I was a kid, what I wanted most was to be an explorer. I wanted to go to places that no human had even touched. As I grew older and began to explore, I held fast to an idea that adventure lay in a place of utter isolation, far from other people, government and development. I went outside to get away from it all. Until I went to Ethiopia, where I found myself going toward it all.

Ethiopia didn't fit into my childhood concept of exploration. Our oldest human ancestors come from here, it's one of Africa's most densely populated countries, and an average day at the cliff involved a group of at least 15 onlookers. Here, instead of traveling to a place untouched by humans, I was traveling to a place untouched by adventure.

Ethiopia's 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. It has hundreds of endemic species and holds the genetic keys to coffee, the second-most traded commodity in the world. I knew none of this before my first visit to Ethiopia.

My team had over \$10,000 worth of climbing gear in a country where more than 80 percent of its people make less than \$1 a day. But it was that very discrepancy that made us able to interact intimately with Ethiopia.

We were not caught behind the window of a Land Cruiser. Instead, we were sticking our hands and feet in sandstone cracks towering above acacia trees and camels. We got dirty. We got close.

I got even closer by producing "Vertical Ethiopia" with Shama Publishing,

an Ethiopian publishing company. That meant I had to follow their press rules (considered to be among the 20 worst in the world) and listen to an Ethiopian editorial panel tell me how they wanted their country represented.

One day I got an e-mail from my lead editor that said: "We've decided to replace the photo on page 57. The old one had too much dirt in it."

Later, we decided to increase the section of the book that profiles an eco-resort on a 25-kilometer-long lake south of Addis Ababa. "We want to show people there is water in Ethiopia," my editor said.

Two years later, I'm six months into a speaking tour about my book, "Vertical Ethiopia: Climbing Toward Possibility in the Horn of Africa." I've traveled from South Beach, Miami, to Seattle, Washington, talking with people about the connections between outdoors, adventure, culture and politics. And I've come to understand that people truly want these connections.

What if we can reconfigure our understanding of a place? What if we can reconfigure the world's?

I'm a writer. I communicate with story. I am also a climber, paddler, skier, hiker, biker and wannabe surfer who is still that kid who wanted nothing more than to explore. Now, I'm trying to put all of this together. I call it making adventure addictive.

As our world gets more contentious, as resources are depleted and tensions augmented, understanding is our most important international commodity. I believe that those of us who find adventure in the natural spaces of this world have a chance to understand sooner—and share it faster.

Majka Burhardt is a writer, climber and AMGA-certified guide. Learn more about "Vertical Ethiopia," view a list of upcoming speaking events and see more of Majka's work at www.verticalethiopia.com. She will be signing "Vertical Ethiopia" at 3 p.m. today at Scarpa Booth #50000.



Majka Burhardt

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