

Selamta

THE IN-FLIGHT MAGAZINE OF ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES

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Roots & Ritual

COFFEE AND CULTURE IN ETHIOPIA.

Contributors



NANA EKUA BREW-HAMMOND has appeared on MSNBC and TheSartorialist, and in *The Village Voice* and *The New York Times*. *Publishers Weekly* called her novel, *Powder Necklace*, “winning.” Keep up with her on Twitter at @nanaekua, and check out her itinerary for 24 hours in Frankfurt on page 60.

Rooted in: New York City

Most fascinating local ritual from her travels: “On a trip to Zambia, I learned that it’s customary for house help to kneel down when addressing the boss. I never got used to it.”



MAJKA BURHARDT is an author, filmmaker and professional climber, as well as the creator of “Additive Adventure” — when adventure goes beyond exploration to cultural and environmental connections. Her newest project, *The Lost Mountain*, combines cliffside ecology, conservation and adventure in Mozambique. Read about her exploration of coffee culture across Ethiopia on page 34.

Rooted in: New Hampshire (USA)

Most fascinating local ritual from her travels: “I love learning how to make a local dish and sharing this daily ritual with the people I meet.”



GLENNA GORDON is a documentary photographer who splits her time between West Africa and New York. In addition to her own photo projects, she also covers news and features, does work for NGOs and trains photographers in Africa. Read about her luxury island experience on Lake Malawi on page 42.

Rooted in: New York City and Ghana

Most fascinating local ritual from her travels: “‘Spraying’ at Nigerian weddings — throwing money at the bride and the groom as everyone dances around. Though it’s technically illegal in Nigeria (it’s considered an abuse of currency), the practice remains a typical part of most weddings.”



PER-ANDERS PETERSSON is a Swedish-born, award-winning photographer whose work has been exhibited at festivals and galleries the world over. His last major exhibition, titled “Amazon,” was a two-person show with photographer Sebastião Salgado. See his images of Ethiopia’s coffee culture on page 34.

Rooted in: Cape Town, South Africa

Most fascinating local ritual from his travels: “The Reed Dance in Swaziland, where tens of thousands of unmarried girls and women gather reeds in the forest and then dance and sing for the royal family. Historically, one of the main objectives of the ceremony is for the Swazi King to choose another wife.”



CANDACE ROSE RARDON is a travel writer and sketch artist from Virginia (USA), although she has also called the U.K., New Zealand and India home. She recently released her first book, *Beneath the Lantern’s Glow: Sketches and stories from Southeast Asia and Japan*. Read her story about sketching her way through Saigon on page 24.

Rooted in: Currently sketching her way through the Middle East

Most fascinating local ritual from her travels: “Taking part in a local gamelan orchestra’s practice session on the Indonesian island of Nusa Penida.”

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VOLUME 30 | NUMBER 6

Selamta — meaning “Greetings” in Amharic — is published bimonthly on behalf of Ethiopian Airlines by JourneyGroup+C62, LLC.

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Roots & Ritual

COFFEE AND CULTURE IN ETHIOPIA.

Wild coffee berries are the main source of income in the Kaffa region, said to be the birthplace of coffee. Children and cattle also drink the brew here.

Entrenched in the forested flanks of Ethiopia's Amaro Mountains, I sat down for a cup of coffee with a seventh-generation leader of the Messa tribe, Marsha Aday. We convened outside his regal earthen home, with a dizzying vista of wild coffee trees toppling over each other as they stretched to the summit of Mount Yero Wallo.

§ I was visiting Marsha Aday to hear his coffee story and the coffee stories of his ancestors. He wove a tale for me of cursed and burning red beans, of Muslim traders on camelback, and of the best coffee in Ethiopia. He told me there was more to tell, but in order for him to share his coffee story — and for me to truly understand — I would have to drink his coffee.





We ducked inside the carved wooden doorframe of his home, where his wife, Gete, roasted, ground and began to brew two handfuls of beans from trees that you could almost reach from their doorstep. A sweet and spicy scent filled their home as the sky outside filled with clouds.

My stomach rumbled in anticipation. But then, thunder and lightning crashed across Yero Wallo, and a flash flood turned me out of their house before I could ever sip a drop of the brew.

Ethiopia is the birthplace of *Coffea arabica* — the species that represents 70 percent of the planet's current coffee consumption.¹ Indeed, coffee appears in Ethiopian legend as far back as the 10th century B.C. Stories of its uses, symbolism and power overlap across this 1.1-million-square-kilometer (426,000-square-mile) country, providing a fabric of commonality and diversity.

Across 90 languages, 200 dialects and 10,000 different coffee types, these coffee stories form a tantalizing roadmap for a lifetime of exploration. Step inside the journey.

KAFFA: THE COFFEE NAME, THE COFFEE LEGEND

Coffee's biological home is understood to lie in Kaffa,

deep in the south-central highlands of Ethiopia, near the border with Sudan. Around the world, the story of coffee's discovery is tied to a young man named Khaldi (also known as Kaldi, or even Khaled).

Depending on the teller, Khaldi was a goat-herder or a shepherd, a Muslim or a Christian, a scholar or a prankster, a delinquent or a monk. But he is always from Kaffa. And in every tale, Khaldi sees goats/sheep frolicking near a mysterious red fruit and is consumed by a desire to have as much fun as the animals. He investigates the fruit himself and, voilà, coffee is discovered.

While it's an easy semantic leap from *Kaffa* to *coffee*, the academically accepted root of coffee is actually an adaptation of the Arabic word *qahwa*, a wine made from the brew in the 17th century in Yemen. *Coffea arabica* was the name given in 1753, based on this association.

But Khaldi is far from Ethiopia's only coffee legend. In another, a particularly sweet-smelling ox was spotted eating similarly sweet-smelling, ripe coffee beans, or cherry, which inspired people to consume the same.

And in yet another tale, dating to the 7th century, Prophet Muhammad's grandsons were being bathed by their mother; once they were clean, coffee beans

Everyone in a coffee-farming family plays a role in the annual harvest, lasting from September through December.

¹ Coffea robusta (or Coffea canephora) accounts for the majority of the other 30 percent of coffee consumed worldwide. It's generally grown at lower altitudes than Coffea arabica and is considered more bitter and a lower grade of coffee. Historically, robusta has been typically used as filler coffee, though the specialty coffee world has started to experiment with how to better use and cultivate robusta at a finer level.



Farmers harvest ripe coffee beans — called cherry — and dry them under the sun before de-hulling and sorting.

sprouted from their bathwater. Those beans were used for prayers and began the Muslim tradition of using coffee beans in religious ceremonies.

Individual children have even told me that their great-great-grandmothers discovered coffee.

In Kaffa, the heartland of Ethiopian coffee diversity, all of these stories might well be true. Coffee trees and forests consume the landscape, and the scientists at Ethiopia's primary Coffee Research Station in Kaffa's capital, Jimma, will tell you that only half of Ethiopia's 10,000 types have thus far been discovered.

Each coffee type is morphologically different based on leaf color, productivity and other genetic signifiers. And each type — called an accession — has its own taste profile. Up to 5,000 accessions have been catalogued thus far.

Ethiopians take coffee seriously — not surprising, considering that it accounts for more than 50 percent of the country's gross domestic product.² But coffee is more than a commodity. It is a life currency.

In Kaffa, people brew coffee in the traditional Ethiopian three-cup ceremony (see "The Coffee Ceremony" on page 38), serve the coffee cherry roasted whole and soaked in melted butter with honey, and use coffee grounds mixed with honey to

relieve an upset stomach.

Here, and throughout Ethiopia, coffee trees can make or break a marital agreement, and they can soothe asthma, problem children or a distressed heart. In Kaffa, a stranger becomes a friend when you pause and ask her to tell you more about coffee.

HARAR: COFFEE TO THE WORLD

Kaffa might have coffee's lineage and suppositional linguistic connection, but coffee moved into the rest of the world through Ethiopia's eastern province of Hararge. There, the ancient city of Harar served as the trade hub between the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and the extensive Ethiopian heartland. This Muslim city propelled coffee along its historic course and into the greater world at the end of the 15th century.

In Harar, as in Kaffa, coffee is called *buna*. In fact, throughout Ethiopia and the majority of Ethiopian languages, *buna*, *bunn* and *bun* are all used for coffee. This consistency has become the strongest piece of evidence for coffee's origin in Ethiopia. When you travel today in Ethiopia, you are offered buna from every home and storefront, whether you be foreigner or friend.

In Harar, you will easily find buna at restaurants and cafés, but in homes, buna is most often saved for

² After coffee, Ethiopia's primary exports are oil seeds, chat and floriculture.

religious occasions, births and marriages. For daily consumption, it's the leaves that are used. They are picked green, sun-dried and then flash-roasted before being stored. Later, they are brewed slowly with milk to make a tea called *kuti kela* (also known simply as *kuti*). This practice supports a ceremonial importance of the coffee bean as well as the economic practicality of devoting the majority of coffee to export.

Historically, Harari homes devoted entire rooms to the storing of leaves for *kuti kela*. If you are lucky, you will find someone who still reserves space for this purpose, and you will definitely find *kuti kela* to drink. While trying the tea, go ahead and sample a traditional coffee with salt as well. The chocolaty flavors of coffees typical to Harar work surprisingly well with a salty tang.

RIFT VALLEY: ETHIOPIA'S COFFEE HEARTBEAT

The Rift Valley has been a mainstay for high-value Ethiopian coffee since the 1970s. The lemony essence of a Sidama and the sweet earth of a Yirgacheffe are found in coffee shops around the world, and the Rift has even more to offer in today's new symphony of celebrated flavors: from jasmine to rose, lingonberry to strawberry, cashew to walnut, black pepper to ginger, and countless other cup attributes that awaken the senses.

Abo Awajo, a distinguished elder in Kele, explains to me how the people of Kele believe that timing with a coffee ceremony can dictate fate: If an unexpected visitor arrives during the first cup, called *awol*, it is good luck; but second-cup arrivals are treated with suspicion. A third-cup arrival signifies peace.

North of Kele, in the province of Sidama, children are gradually eased into drinking coffee, starting with the third cup. They do not progress to the first

cup until they are 22 years old, of marrying age. In the Marsha region, infants get squirts of *awol* in between suckling on their mother's breasts.

My personal rule is to never pass up a coffee ceremony in the Rift — let alone anywhere else in Ethiopia — and to in turn ask my host to indulge me with stories of what each cup means and creates in their family and community.

COFFEE'S LANDSCAPE

The majority of Ethiopia is mountainous terrain above 600 meters (2,000 feet). And 50 percent of the country is moist evergreen forest situated between 1,000 and 2,300 meters in altitude, with dark, rich volcanic soil — making it the perfect place for coffee. Even where you don't see coffee trees, the beverage is highly prized.

In the Gheralta region of the northern province of Tigray, coffee is no longer grown, but it is ever consumed and treasured. If people are low on coffee beans, they will add barley pearls to make a brew. It's coffee, I've been told again and again in Tigray, even if there is only one bean in the batch.

In the Lower Omo Valley, the Dassanech people import trucks filled with coffee husks for a tea they brew. This beverage has been a Dassanech staple for generations, though by most accounts, coffee as an endemic crop has not been present in the Lower Omo Valley for centuries.

You can travel throughout the entire country by way of coffee. Be prepared for everyone you meet to offer you "the best coffee in Ethiopia." No matter if you are a visitor or a local, it's an honor to try so many superlative brews and a further honor to hear the story behind each one. I'm going back to Marsha Aday. There is coffee still to drink and stories yet to hear. [▶](#)

A boy picks wild coffee on his family's farm outside Bonga, Ethiopia.

THE COFFEE CEREMONY: SLOWING DOWN TO ENJOY RELATIONSHIPS.

In Ethiopia, people often drink their coffee in three stages, bringing the same portion of coffee grounds to a boil for each stage. They first enjoy a strong cup, known as *abol* or *awol*, followed by progressively weaker brews called *tona* (or *tala* or *thani*) and a final round, *baraka*.

Enjoying coffee in this manner takes time (one to two hours) and creates a space for community and conviviality. The term *coffee ceremony* arose in the 19th century and is now used to distinguish the practice from just a fast cup at a café or restaurant. Coffee ceremonies can be performed on a packed dirt floor or in a formal dining room.

Guests gather around for the whole process of hand roasting and grinding the beans and then setting them to boil in a thick-bellied/thin-necked clay pot called a *jebena*. The coffee is poured through the *jebena*'s thin spout high above handleless ceramic cups arranged on a squat tray and doled out to those in attendance.

Spices, butter, milk and/or *tennadum* (a sprig of rue) are added, depending on regional, tribal and personal preference. No matter where you are in Ethiopia, each successive cup creates a deepening of conversation and sharing.



Haile Michael Gaano shares a coffee ceremony with guests in his home.



BEYOND ETHIOPIA: THE WORLD'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH COFFEE.

Coffee is the world's most shared connection with Ethiopia, with more than 1.2 billion cups of coffee consumed daily. Ironically, though all arabica coffee originally came from Ethiopia, the country's annual coffee production in 2012 was only 6.5 million 60-kilogram bags – representing 4 percent of the world's coffee production. The global leader, Brazil, produces 50.1 million bags a year, 70 percent of which is arabica coffee.

Ethiopia will likely never compete with Brazil in volume, yet she holds realms of untapped quality within her borders. This is because, like wine and grapes, coffee has a flavor profile that can differ dramatically between bean varieties. And Ethiopia has more than 10,000 different types of coffee sprouting from her soil. (Brazil, by contrast, has just under two dozen primary arabica varieties.)

Appreciation for the nuanced tastes of coffee is growing worldwide, and Ethiopia stands to gain from that appreciation. Furthermore, it's estimated that only 50 percent of Ethiopian coffee leaves the country; thus, Ethiopia has potential to dramatically increase its export quantity and revenue.

It's unlikely, however, that Ethiopia would ever export 100 percent of its coffee, as chances are low that the 85 million people living within Ethiopia's borders would ever give up their 35-century-old relationship with the bean.



Portions of this text are taken from Majka Burhardt's book *Coffee Story Ethiopia*.