

TRAVEL COFFEE WINE

CREMA

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THE CAFÉ LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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Cafe cities: Wellington

Ethiopia: home of coffee

Melbourne best Cafes

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AUSTRALIA'S PRE-EMINENT COFFEE LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

A close-up photograph of a traditional Ethiopian coffee pot (jebena) with a coffee grinder (mullu) on top. The pot is dark and has intricate, hand-carved patterns. It is sitting on a charcoal stove. The background is blurred, showing a wooden structure and some greenery.

Ethiopia

home of coffee

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Paul Golding explores the intimate link between people and the land, in this most special of coffee destinations...

Ethiopia is a land of 80 million people, almost four times the population of Australia, deriving much of its income from the sale of coffee. It is also a startlingly beautiful land, despite common misconceptions of endless drought, flies and starvation.

These things certainly exist, but much of the northern highlands where the coffee is grown is a magical place with real tourism potential. Visitors could bring badly needed revenue into the country and the Ethiopians are optimistically gearing up for it, if the number of students studying tourism is anything to go by. I recently visited the highlands as a volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, building houses in the remote coffee community of Djimmah. Having travelled so far, of course, I was determined to also

make a pilgrimage into the mystical areas of Sidamo, Yirgacheffe and Harar, sources of some of the world's finest coffees.

I started my trip in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. At 8,000 feet above sea level, Addis is the highest city in Africa, and a good place to acclimatize for a few days. Leaving town, buses can be an excellent way to see more of the beautiful landscape; they are huge, tough-looking beasts with wild colours inside and extremely loud music to keep you company during the day. The trip to Djimmah, 250km to the south west, was cheap and scenic, taking about 12 hours over the rough roads. As we rolled into Djimmah, I looked at last into the dusty streets of the town, which produces some of our most-used Ethiopian beans. I was soon out on the streets looking for



my first cup of authentic Ethiopian coffee. There are plenty of cafes in town, funny as that may seem in a place with rudimentary water supplies and haphazard electricity, but the Italian occupation has left its legacy. Old, battered lever espresso machines are everywhere, serving up a version of Italian coffee culture. “Buna” is a simple espresso, “macchiato” is like a piccolo latte, and cappuccino is what you’d expect. The problem is – they always use pre-ground coffee, and the shots are pulled ahead of time, then re-heated to order in a jug before pouring into your cup. At one place I dropped into for a macchiato, then watched amazed as the girl washed my glass in a bucket with her fingers, then added milk and sugar, steamed the milk in the glass, steamed the coffee in the jug, then poured a beautiful float, leaving the coffee in a layer over the milk. It actually wasn’t too bad. My advice: forget the cafes and head to the street market, or wangle an invitation to someone’s home. In this way, you’ll get to see and experience the coffee ceremony – a unique and priceless part of Ethiopian culture, which should definitely not be missed.

The street café is informal; basically just a bunch of wooden pews spread around, with women brewing coffee and sweet spiced tea, along with fried and baked breads. You may or may not see the coffee roasting. It’s boisterous and fun – a great way to meet people in town and practice your *Amharic* while they try out their English. I had breakfast each day at the market next to the hotel, having several coffees and doughnut-type things for a very satisfying jump-start. The service was brilliant, the coffee terrific, the conversation lively, and the bill would be about 50 cents. Can’t argue with that!

It’s the home coffee ceremony, however, where you will really be impressed. Ethiopians are extremely friendly and will invite you to their homes readily for coffee. In the home of Asmaret Gebre, I was seated in their lounge while her shy 15 year old daughter Medina prepared the beans, first washing the raw coffee, then starting to roast it in a metal dish over a coal brazier. I watched in amazement as she used her delicate bare hands to lift the pan and then stirred the hot coals with her fingers before commencing the roast. The beans are moved with a metal spatula to roast them evenly, and they soon begin to pop and smoke, giving off a wonderful smell. The roast continues to roughly a medium-dark espresso roast. Medina made this look simple, but in reality, it takes plenty of practice to master the technique. Once roasted, the beans are passed around the family so everyone can inhale the delicious aroma. Medina then poured them into a wooden mortar and started pounding away with a long timber pestle, the end rounded and smooth from years of use. Once the beans were ground to powder, she funnelled it all into a clay

jibennau pot, the traditional round based coffee pot of Ethiopia. Water from a kettle boiling on the brazier was added, given a swirl or two, then the *jibennau* was bedded into the coals for a few minutes to brew. Medina laid out delicate demitasse cups with practiced, graceful movements, then uncapped the pot and began to pour out its dark, aromatic contents. I was captivated, as this beautiful young girl held the pot high, and with great ceremony and commendable accuracy, poured cups full of genuine Ethiopian *buna*. This is the way coffee has been consumed for centuries in its traditional home, and I was about to sample washed Limu Ethiopian style! I swirled and sipped. *Gobez!* (Fantastic!).



The coffee was deep, rich, smooth and sweet, with an indescribable character imparted by the hand preparation, which is impossible to duplicate by other methods. It was in Djimmah I had my first sight of Ethiopian coffee trees. The coffee is grown chiefly in small private gardens, as the law generally forbids one person owning large areas of land. The Djimmah area produces two kinds of arabica coffee. Dry processed or sundried coffee – which is labelled Djimmah grade 4 or 5 – is heavy bodied with creamy texture and earthy, dark berry flavours. The other, Limu grade 2 washed coffee, is produced from a different strain of Arabica, giving a cleaner, lighter cup with sweet flavours of citrus and lovely floral notes.

After touring some of the farms, my next stop was Sidamo, some 300km to the south. Sidamo is around 2000m above sea level, and the coffee here develops very slowly in the thin, cool, misty mountain air. The coffee trees in the small gardens are old heirloom varieties, often a variety unique to the area. It is nearly



all grown under shade trees, sometimes on very steep slopes. I visited several washing stations, and was impressed by the degree of care put into the process. Farmers sort the cherries at the scales when selling, removing any green or black fruit. After washing, the coffee is sorted again by hand to pick out crushed or mangled beans. It is then laid out on raised beds to dry in the sun, being turned by hand and further sorted to remove defects as they appear for the next 3-5 days. At the end of this process, only lovely clean parchment remains. The terroir at Sidamo produces a coffee with light body and crisp citrus flavours, especially orange.

From Sidamo, we travelled high up into the town of Yirgacheffe and on to the Gedeo area, home to one of the finest coffees in the world. Top Yirgacheffe is amazing, with lemony citrus, jasmine and honey flavours floating on a brew of tea-like clarity. At one specialty mill, I walked into a store room dedicated to Yirgacheffe Grade 1 Sundried and was stunned by the heady aromas of strawberry and honeysuckle arising from the piled up sacks, each of which can fetch over US\$3000 to the right buyer. These were all destined for Japan. My memory of Yirgacheffe is the peaceful Zen-like atmosphere which seems to hang over the whole place, as if the outside world is far away, and time moves at a different, slower pace.

Shaking off the desire to never leave, I caught a plane to Dire Dawa in the northeast, from where I travelled by 4WD to Harar. The difference in landscape was incredible; from lush forest to harsh, stony hillsides. It was where I first noticed how people's homes reflect the local materials; while most of the highlanders build from timber, mud and thatch, in Harar the houses are built from the abundant stone. The old city of Harar dates back several thousand years, with the passage of time evident in the cobble streets worn smooth, and the crumbling houses leaning this way and that. The architecture is very different also, this being one of the mainly Muslim towns of Ethiopia. The alleyways are fascinating, and can be wandered for days, passing through spice markets, tables full of colourful vegetables and yawning dark doorways. Delicately beautiful women in bright clothes move like butterflies, kids play inventive and endless games, and men lay like speedbumps for the unwary, chewing qat, a herbal narcotic grown everywhere around the region. Qat is quite valuable and unfortunately many of the coffee fields are being uprooted in favour of this crop.

The coffee of Harar is not grown on the stony slopes but in small, oasis like areas where water comes close to the surface. I walked over the farm of a man known simply as Abdellah, while he showed me his flourishing trees and pointed out the unique golden colour of the new leaves. Small springs of crystal water emerged from the ground here and there, channelled into small canals, which wind through the coffee garden feeding the tall arabicas. It may well have been in this area that coffee was first discovered by humans, and I doubt the coffee of Harar has changed much since then. Dried under the fierce African sun inside the cherry, Harar coffee is smooth, rich and intense, with dark berry and chocolate flavours, sometimes lightly smoky, and well reflects the land that produces it.

Later that night I walked the gates of the city to watch the ritual of hyena feeding. It's done mainly for fun rather than any symbolic reason, but has become a fixture of Harar and a popular tourist attraction. Tourists appeared a bit thin on the ground this night, and I was alone apart from a few local kids who'd come along for something to do. The hyena man that night was Mulgeta, by far the biggest Ethiopian I'd seen, at least 100 kilos of muscle. Plenty of the big predators appeared out of the darkness, coming to within touching distance to wrestle strips of meat from my grinning guide. The close encounter with these huge and quite beautiful animals was a great end to the journey across this amazing country. Somehow the spirit of Ethiopia really stays with you... I can't wait to get back to that street café in Djimma!

