

Of light and shade in Ethiopia

Stephen Scourfield, Travel Editor The West Australian March 28, 2014, 3:46 pm

It's Sunday and people are out with their umbrellas. Through the wide, golden landscape of northern Ethiopia, terraced from countless generations of touch by human hand, they walk to the nearest town and to the nearest church.

For some it might just be a big black umbrella or a silver one to keep off sun that is strong at this altitude of more than 2000m. One can see the practical side of the umbrella here, of course.

But some are more decorative. I watch two young women walk down a road on the outskirts of Axum - once the capital of the powerful Axumite kingdom, from the fourth century BC to the 10th century, before Ethiopia was so-called. One is wearing a traditional long, white cotton dress, with turquoise printed decoration and embroidery around the bottom, and carries a matching turquoise umbrella. Her companion is dressed similarly in purple, carrying a purple umbrella.

In the town itself, there's gold, blue with daisies, Burberry check.

Yesterday, in the dusty, buzzy Saturday markets, it was as colourful. I followed a woman with a spectacular orange umbrella and others with elaborate patterns.

And here you can buy big bunches of chickpeas, to eat from the pod like peas, pulses and big, maroon, dried chillies - so many piled on hessian on the ground in some places that the air makes you sneeze. There are tailors with street-side sewing machines, open shops with fabrics and sheaves of grasses for weaving baskets. Camels are loaded with timber or salt, donkeys cart all manner of goods and small Ethiopian horses pull carts. A group of men gathers to unload 50kg sacks and they carry them away on their heads - umbrellas of sorts.

And a couple of days ago, in Gondar there were, again, all manner of umbrellas, but I walked with local Tena Seraw, doing her shopping, with silver against the sun.

In tracing back through my days in Ethiopia, we also start tracing back through the history of the umbrella here.

For, some days before, I was in the capital, Addis Ababa, for Timket - the Christian festival of Epiphany.

Every Ethiopian Orthodox church has a representation of the Ark of the Covenant, and these are brought out during the Timket celebration and paraded together - all under umbrellas and canopies.

For the umbrella in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is said to signify the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Traditionally, an umbrella is opened during the liturgy and held by a deacon over the head of the priest reading the Gospel from the Bible - white for Easter, and colourful umbrellas the rest of the year.

The umbrella might be, for most, merely a useful tool to keep off the weather.

However, it is integral to a defining conviction of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that the original Ark of the Covenant, containing the stone tablets on to which God inscribed the Ten Commandments, was taken from Jerusalem and brought to Axum under the protective canopy of umbrellas held by 12,000 Ethiopian Jews, or falashas.

And umbrellas carried at Timket are brightly coloured, some covered in velvet and braided with gilt. Those carried by the devoted mimic the elaborate umbrellas carried by deacons and priests, with their tassels and fringes.

From its highly religious beginnings, umbrella use in Ethiopia was also intrinsic to the formalities of early Ethiopian emperors (and, indeed, the whole question of emperors in Ethiopia so often strays towards questions of the divine).

Rulers were accompanied by umbrellas, and their incumbent carriers, just about wherever they went. Emperors often received guests and subjects while seated under a big, red umbrella embroidered in gold and silver. Often it was embellished with jewels and usually it was made of silk or velvet.

An empress was entitled to a similar red umbrella with comparable decorations.

Princes and princesses were permitted to only use umbrellas with less embroidery, while historians say clergy and nobles could have umbrellas carried over them but not red ones, which were reserved for royalty and religious processions.

After the Italian occupation of 1936 to 1941, Emperor Haile Selassie was restored to power in Ethiopia and he and Empress Menen ended the daily use of imperial umbrellas being held over them.

From then on they appeared only for big State events, such as the celebration of their Silver Jubilee in 1955. But when Empress Menen died, the historic Empress' Imperial Umbrella was held open over her coffin during her State funeral.

And back in Axum, next to the site of the first church in Ethiopia, which was built in AD340, and next to the Ark of the Covenant, is a museum. There are crowns and gowns, ancient books and sistrums - a silver percussion handpiece used in services.

And there, too, in the bottom of the dusty cabinet, with their scant labels and information, are elaborate, embroidered umbrellas, once held up against the sky in celebrations of belief but now derelict, in disrepair and turning to dust themselves.

I walk the powdery streets of Lalibela, one of Ethiopia's holiest towns, with churches hewn into the mountains and there, on a street corner, is a man hunkered down, with his turquoise beanie and standard Ethiopian plastic sandals.

In front of him is a pile of umbrella parts - shafts, spokes, handles, and tiny joints and springs. The local umbrella repair man in a country with an average annual income of not much more than \$US1200 (\$1303), and where a broolly's a jolly precious thing.

FACT FILE

Days in Ethiopia is part of Travel Directors' African Dawn tour - a 28-day journey through Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia from January 4 to January 31, 2015. It's a mix of diverse experiences and sights, from Lake Victoria and the source of the Nile in Uganda, to the rare mountain gorillas of Rwanda and on to Ethiopia - the cradle of civilisation. It is \$18,880 per person twin share and single supplement is \$3250 per person. The cost includes economy international airfares, all internal flights in Africa, accommodation, meals, Travel Directors tour leader and local guides, entrance fees, visas and the \$US750 permit to visit mountain gorillas in Rwanda. 9242 4200 or traveldirectors.com.au.

For those wanting a shorter trip in Ethiopia alone, Across Abyssinia has packages and group tours but also caters for individuals, couples and small groups. They can follow Across Abyssinia's itineraries, or amend them. But in looking at the website, consider the Northern Historic Route (14 days on road or eight days flying). Visit adventureabyssinia.com, email info@adventureabyssinia.com or call +251 911440145.

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Stephen Scourfield was a guest of Travel Directors and Qatar Airways.

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