

Ethiopia

October 12-24, 2002

I don't take trips as much as they take me. Especially when it has to do with work. And Africa wasn't any different. I wasn't pulled to Ethiopia, I was pushed. I told everyone that I was looking forward to it, but Kirsti and the kids knew otherwise: I would have preferred a trip to the dentist. I know several who have been on African foreign aid projects, and they've all come back with the same dismal stories. One fellow who had been to Addis Ababa simply said, "Prepare yourself." That's all. So I did (or tried): vaccinations for yellow fever and typhoid, boosters for tetanus and polio; a first aid kit packed with bandages, sterilized gauze, syringes, antibiotic ointments, and a pharmacopoeia of tablets for every internal organ, including some preemptive strike materiel for diarrhea (to be swallowed before every meal). Finally I stuffed in weapons-grade insect repellent, zipped up the suitcase and snapped the lock. Locked and loaded, I was ready for Ethiopia.

Saturday

I woke up at 3:45 a.m. to catch the 4:30 bus; hopped on the 6:30 flight to Frankfurt, then the 10:20 to Cairo and landed at Addis Ababa at 9:30 that night. Axel Baudouin (the fellow who lined up the job) said he'd meet me at the airport, but the authorities only let ticketed passengers into the airport. Armed guards keep visitors behind the parking lot gate. So I walked into the crowd searching the blackness for a face I'd only seen once before (five years ago) and had forgotten (five years ago). What a relief when I heard a voice call out, "Bill!" Axel was easy to spot: his was the only white face. After shaking hands he sheepishly confessed, "I told the driver I couldn't remember what you looked like. I just remember you were about fifty – and white."

Sunday

I elbowed up around 5:30, my head swimming with noxious diesel fumes. Not faint exhaust but raw fuel, as if I were sleeping on the deck of a super tanker: "Where is that coming from?" I pulled the soft plugs from my ears (the ones I wear when *trying* to sleep on a plane). At last it was quiet. Yet I could still hear the call from the mosque, an eerie drone that has no beginning and no end. Actually, the call began around 5 (I think), and though it had stopped before I pulled the plugs, my inner ear still heard its resonance. It is the closest thing I know to eternity: I suspect Mohammed knew it as well.

I pulled back the curtain from my sixth floor hotel room and was stunned. I didn't expect to see trees – well, not so many. Neither did I expect to see so many people on the streets so early, nor so many cars and vans, so different yet all alike. Almost every vehicle was painted a two-tone blue and white.

I called room service and ordered a cup of coffee. A few minutes later a cheerful fellow with a charming smile tapped on the door and offered a tray with a tiny cup, small pot of coffee, and a large jug of hot milk. The coffee was thick and robust, its aroma intoxicating. I slid back the glass door leading to the balcony and pulled up a chair. I placed a notepad on jack-knifed legs, sipped coffee, then reached for my pen:

'So I sit here and listen to the cacophony of calls to the mosque (they've started again) and a loud speaker (from who knows where) blaring Blueberry Hill, Amazing Grace, some Country and Western tunes, and hits from the '80s. The bizarre sounds are beyond

imagination, yet... it's so beautiful I find tears in my eyes. Am I merely overly tired, or is it the uninhibited raw life of this place? A broken bone exposing the marrow.

'There are five buzzards soaring not far above the roof tops, perhaps eyeing breakfast below. A herd of goats just clattered across the intersection, dodging the crew of shoeshine boys. There are fourteen of them! Maybe they're shining each others shoes. This might be the heart of the local economy.

'I really wonder where that music is coming from. (I later discovered a music store directly across from the hotel, with a loudspeaker over the door.) The mixture of different sounds is surreal: Willy Nelson on steel guitar, Barry Manalow on piano, Louis Armstrong on horn... and Mohamed Bin Yellen on top of the mosque. The speakers are quite loud and apparently the only things that works well, other than car horns. I say that because my first experience with an Ethiopian bathroom proved few things work here. The faucet handle came off when I turned on the tap, the toilet backed-up to a precarious level before the water receded, and the shower... well, it looked like a tiled booby-trap. Next to the shower head was the hot water heater, a ten-gallon drum with a cord hanging freely. Apparently one is to plug it in the wall socket, which is also in the shower stall! I picked up the dangling cord and noticed the head of the plug wobbled from two exposed wires. Then I inspected the socket. An ominous brown smudge streaked from the outlet, the type of smudge one associates with faulty wiring, electric chairs, hotel fires... I thought the situation over carefully for three seconds, then took a cold shower.

'The bird's-eye view of street life is ideal for the casual observer. There is such a blend of movement below. Most folk walk slowly, greeting each other with a handshake that's more of slap, followed by touching opposing shoulders like genteel NFL linemen.

'Blue and white buildings, topped by rusted corrugated roofs. Women clad in the whitest of white robes, while men wear the darkest of olive drab, brown, and gray. It's like a black and white photo tinted with dime store colors.

'I wonder where everyone is going this early Sunday morning? Yet half of the crowd is like me, sitting and watching the excitement. Despite the abject poverty, everyone seems cheerful. The men have a bounce in their steps; the women glide.

Later that day...

'They moved me to a new room, at the back of the hotel where I now overlook a cluttered shamble of tin roofs and painted stucco buildings (blue and white, of course). Oddly enough, the longer I examine them the cleaner they appear. Most of the cars look like combatants in a demolition derby, but they're all freshly washed. In fact, most things are. It's not surprising because it seems all the activity below is associated with washing: steps, cars, clothes, bodies... Even the plastic buckets – bright green, bright yellow, bright red – are free of stains. As I write this, a lady is washing her hair in the yard, apparently with an entire bottle of shampoo.

'Although children are scrambling everywhere, there is a noticeable absence of toys. I can't see one, not even a simple ball. One associates poor neighborhoods with abandonment and chaos: neglected bikes, broken glass, stray dogs, litter... but I see life and order: beds of blossoming flowers, a herd of goats nibbling a courtyard green, laundry waving in the breeze... slowly like the people who move without deliberation. They stroll everywhere, even to their destinations. Maybe they're weary, maybe not. Whatever, they seem so clean. Not what I expected. I thought everyone would be wearing soiled rags, but in fact their clothes are clean, like the people themselves. There is a public tap below, and it seems everyone is stopping by to wash their hands, and sometimes their faces. Then they're off, whisking water from their glistening brown arms.

Monday

It's 5:30 p.m. and I'm relieved today's lectures are over. Three hours is my limit. Combined with the thin dry air (Addis Ababa is around 7000 feet) my throat is parched. I slide back the balcony door, drag out a chair to enjoy the view... and suck on another cold Coke. I've downed three since noon. Extravagant? Not when they cost a dime.

I look down and see the "meat" has arrived. There are a lot of meat items on the hotel menu. It's fresh, but who knows from where. The slabs – a most appropriate word – vary in size, from chunks the size of a dish pan to beef hindquarters to an entire sheep carcass. Stacked in the back of the open pick-up, they look like a piles of body parts, which is what they are. Three buzzards are circling above the hotel, but not far above the roof! The hotel manager is there to inspect the unloading. The fellows hauling the slabs into the kitchen (two men to a slab) are wearing spotless white coats. From this bird's-eye view it looks like they're unloading corpses. I suspect the buzzards share the same perspective.

'The meat delivery might explain why there are so many dogs wandering about. But only at night. (I wonder where they are during the day.) If you listen during the day (like this very moment), you can always hear a dog barking; but at night the packs wail a continuous din. Last night a dog fight erupted below – right where they unloaded the meat – and chewed through the still night air. As much as I hate dog fights, I prefer them to cat fights for the simple reason they're brief, like street fights: a snarl, a growl, a few bites, then a yelp and it's over. The chronic cat fights here are eternal and more terrorizing. They rip a night to shreds. Although the dogs always bark through the night, one gets used to them (I hope). The nocturnal raucous – sometime near, sometimes far – stretches across the city like the car horns during the day. The duet of barks and blares ebb and flow like the tides. At dawn the barks fade to toots, then at dusk the taxi drivers head home and dogs go to work. The only silent time is right before dawn.

'Every morning begins the same way. As the sun breaks the horizon, the mellifluous call from the mosque scratches at the silence. This salutation to the day is remarkably beautiful. Odd as this may sound, the call to worship really is pleasant, a soothing way to be awakened. Then comes the church bells; not chimes, but a few brief solitary peals. Ethiopians are people full of faith, Coptic Christians, Moslem, Jews, Pentecostals.

'You need to be faithful to survive here. The call to prayer reminds me of soldiers taking communion before going to battle. And here, fighting traffic is somewhat like fighting war. I don't think there is a safe vehicle on the road, save the luxury 4-wheel drives. Our taxi – we hired one for the entire stay – is like all the others, of which there are thousands. A 30 year old Fiat, painted blue and white, fitted with bad tires, bad exhaust, bad brakes... and no window cranks. The back seat must be like a blast furnace during the hot season, which lasts nine months. The front passenger door tends to fly open when a left-hand turn converges with a bump. The instrument panel has an odd light that flashes sporadically. I was told, "It's the brake light, Sir." I discovered that it flashes when the driver steps on the brake. Unless my logic is as faulty as the wiring, the light tells the driver either, "You are now slowing down," or, "You are NOT slowing down." Nevertheless, the light always works, as well as two other things: the blaring radio and the feeble horn.

'Now this is interesting: When you hire a taxi, you often pay more to go one way (to a given destination) than the same way back. Why? Because inevitably you're going up a hill one way and down the other. Uphill means more gas (read: money). Taxis don't have meters; you barter before the ignition is turned on. Some clever fellows actually turn off the engine when going downhill and simply ride the brake. Going uphill is another exercise in logic. Some drivers, like ours, shift into a higher gear because the engine runs slower (RPM), and therefore uses less gas. Or so they tell you. Most taxis have little if any compression in their engines, so it doesn't make much difference. They chug along in every gear.

‘Traffic moves by inertia. The roads are clogged like arteries of a fat old man. But it always moves. And that’s the strange thing. There’s very little stop-and-go driving. It’s all go; slow but go. One reason being the absence of traffic lights and stop signs. (In the ten days of touring the city of 2.7 million people, I only saw two traffic lights and one stop sign). In fact, there aren’t any signs to speak of, including speed limits, yields, detours, street names.... A ten-year old could learn to drive in eleven minutes. Steer and honk. It’s that simple.

‘Yesterday our driver was going down a hill and began to pass a truck. As we moved into the other lane and picked up speed I was shocked to see a mirror image directly ahead. A blue and white taxi was passing a truck – uphill. Four vehicles driving head on, on a road with no shoulders, and drivers with no heads on their shoulders. I gasped a deep breath, shut my eyes and clutched the seat in front of me. In a flash it was over. Common as rain.

‘Oh, I should note the steering wheel. It has a bit of play in it – the driver turns it about ten or twelve inches before anything happens. This is compensated (or corrected?) by a deftly handled “death knob”. I don’t know how he does it, but it’s comforting to see a picture of Jesus on the dashboard. (Fortunately He is praying, not hanging on the cross.)

Tuesday

‘There are so many blind folk walking in the road, tapping the curb with their sticks. (Most of folk here have cloudy eyes, i.e. the whites are gray, bloodshot or rheumy. Somebody told me it was due to lack of nutrition in childhood.) Occasionally a passer-by steps out and grabs the poor fellow, then ushers him from the path of an on-coming car. But most of the time the drivers just skirt by with a gentle toot. Though horns are used constantly, Ethiopians are not agitated drivers. Aggressive, yes; angry, no. Nevertheless, accidents do happen. A man (perhaps blind) was hit in front of our hotel the night before I arrived.

‘Cripples are more widespread, and more horrifying. They hop, scuttle crab-like, or simply sit, looking as if someone has tossed a burlap bag over a pile of rope. They’re distinct yet common, like joggers on any college campus.

‘Tonight’s dinner was unusual: the menu, the setting, the conversation. I had something wrapped in leaves. It tasted fine, but an hour later my stomach felt like a toxic waste dump. We ate at the Armenian Sports Club (I kid you not), which consists of two tennis courts and a nice restaurant: white linen, fresh cut roses, simple elegance and mostly Italian patrons. The door is guarded by two elderly Ethiopians sitting on folding chairs with nightsticks across their laps. The coffee was stronger than both of them combined. Anyway, it’s a private club and Axel is a member. Axel is French, Radnil (the other member of the team) is a Croatian Serb. With that in mind, picture the evening: a Frenchman, Serb and American are speaking Norwegian in an Armenian restaurant in Ethiopia. (Sounds like the intro to a bad joke.) After dinner we waited outside for our taxi. It was pitch black – street lights are as rare as toilet paper. Suddenly I see five or six fellows walking toward us, shouldering AK-47s. As they approach we nod. They nod back. I say “Hi,” and this guy gives me a suspicious look... sort of like a dog hearing an unfamiliar tone from a familiar face. After they passed Axel leaned and whispered a single word, “Police.”

Wednesday

‘I need cash. That’s all the hotel takes. So we go to a bank. As soon as I pull out my VISA the teller shakes her head. She informs me that nobody in Addis Ababa takes plastic, except the Hilton. You can pay for your room there. But she did exchange my Norwegian kroner for Ethiopian birr. We decided to eat lunch at the Hilton, not because of the food, but because Axel assured us they’d have toilet paper in the men’s room. The Hilton is all gloss and glitter, with two swimming pools and four tennis courts (all empty) and a restaurant that

charges three times the going price. It's amazing how quickly one adopts to standards of living – and exploitation. But he was right about the men's room.

'I got a shoeshine. The last time someone shined my shoes was in Cleveland's Union Commerce Bank Building, and it cost fifty cents. Three decades later and the price hasn't changed. Remarkable! I went across the street from the hotel to buy a bottle of water and was "begged" by one of the shoeshine boys. So I sat down. I paid three times the normal rate but it was worth it, for two reasons. First, I knew I was getting overcharged, but it made me feel good to know that the lad had a decent start for a long tedious day. Fifty cents will buy a hot meal. As I walked away I could just imagine him smirking to other lads, "He didn't even bargain!" Secondly, it was the best shine one could hope for. To begin with, he took off my laces and draped them over his shoulder. Then he thoroughly washed my shoes, followed by rubbing in an excessive amount of cream with his fingers (read: massage). Next he took a toothbrush and worked black polish into the sole edges and heels, then worked the cream in with a rag, then buffed the shoes with a brush, sprinkled on water and polished again. He laced them up like a Fifth Avenue shoe salesman, stood up and gave a slight bow. A real professional, the guy took pride in his humble work.

'Here's the kicker. While this is going on an African businessman in a nice suit stood by and patiently waited for his turn. There were a dozen other shoeshine boys hawking for his business, but the businessman ignored them. Clearly, he was waiting for the white man's polisher, or so it appeared to the white man.

Thursday

'It's 7 a.m. and warm. Usually it's cold enough for a jacket – not today. The horizon was blushed with feathered clouds, tangerine at first but now white. An apparent inversion layer hovers above Addis. If it were not for the pungent odor of wood smoke (much like punk) one would assume it to be fog. Like any sunrise, the sky changes before your eyes. But this morning the air itself seems to breathe. A yawn of morning breath.

'Last night we ate dinner at a traditional Ethiopian restaurant. We invited our driver to join us (as our guest, of course). What a name: Engdawork Kibret. If there were a comma between the two words you'd think it was the capital of some unknown country. Engdawork is in his mid-twenties. Axel "adopted" him about ten years ago when he was a shoeshine boy. He lost his father during the revolution and migrated to Addis with his mother and kid sister. That's a story in itself! During the day he works at the German Cultural Center (i.e. school); at night he drives a taxi. A devout Coptic Christian, he goes to church every morning before work; and if he has time, he goes again at night. He's a delightful fellow with sparkling eyes and the most infectious smile. Teeth like ivory. A beam of warmth, commonly found in Ethiopia, much unlike the camera smiles back home.

'The restaurant was once the home of a tribal chief. A large round room with wall benches and stools. And tables covered with cloth. As soon as we sat down the waiter briskly whisked the table cloth away. Different perspective, eh? They keep cloths on to keep dirt off. If you've ever been in a thatched roof building you'll know why.

'Engdawork ordered our dinner, which was brought out on 30-inch circular metal tray, covered with a single piece of soft sponge-like bread, more akin to fabric than food. Not in taste but texture. On this were a dozen different exotic pastes and clots of who knows what. There were spiced meats, mashed beans, pureed greens, creamy yogurt ... plus a cup of industrial strength chile powder, one hardboiled egg smothered in an ominous red sauce, one beef bone (without beef) that nobody knew what to do with, and one green pepper that I was advised not to look at lest I go blind. Engdawork warned us of the potency of each. On a scale of 1 to 10, I'd rate most of it above 17.

‘Then came a bottle of the traditional drink made from fermented honey, served in (and drunk from) what looked like a narrow-necked bud vase with a bulbous bottom. Quite earthy, but good when sipped in judicial amounts. It immediately soothed the inflamed palate.

‘In the time taken to write this, the wood smoke “fog” has lifted, or I should say, has vaporized... just as quickly and mysteriously as it emerged. But the pungent air lingers. It’s the smell of Addis. Not a stench as one might assume; more of an awakening aroma like eucalyptus, which (by the way) grows everywhere and used for everything.

Later that day

‘It’s now evening, but don’t ask me what time. I’m thoroughly confused. It’s 1997 here, but that’s not simply because the clock has been turned back in Ethiopia. (If it had, it would be more like 1897.) Ethiopia not only has a different calendar, with thirteen months, it has a different clock as well. The day begins at 6 a.m., so if you’re invited to a meal at 6 (Ethiopian time) it doesn’t mean dinner but lunch (noon). When you think about it, it kind of makes sense for the day to begin when the sun comes up.

‘We had lunch at the French school complex., which is on the other side of town. While driving through Addis I wondered which was worse, the pollution or the poverty? Rattling down the streets in the taxi one sees every imaginable description of misery. From a hilltop the distant neighborhoods look like crumpled paper. But as you approach them the creased edges become alleys and the folds reveal homes. Tiny shelters no larger than the average bedroom back home house entire families. We bumped down a side street and stopped at a walled compound guarded by three doe-eyed men sitting on box, etching the ground with their nightsticks. Amazingly, amongst all the mean-looking filth, here were gentle-looking men in clean khaki uniforms. I wish my khakis could be pressed so crisply.

‘We hopped out and passed through a steel door into the walled compound. I felt like Alice: a mere step and I was in Wonderland: beautiful buildings shaded by majestic trees, topiary hedges, and spotless Parisian cafe. The food, of course, was French, and the TV carried a French program via satellite. But once we stepped out of Wonderland, Alice was back in the thick of things.

‘I dropped by the Lufthansa office to confirm my flight back: a necessity one does not overlook. As I walked back to the taxi I passed a one-legged beggar sitting on the sidewalk – a leg lost to a landmine perhaps. I gave him some change and was spotted by another one-legged man. He hopped over to the taxi and opened the door for me. My tip, for which he was extremely grateful, seemed totally vacuous.

‘I suspect they hang out near the Lufthansa office because they know foreigners will pass by. Sure enough, we stopped at the corner and three more hobble up to the taxi: an old man, an old woman and a leper with no fingers (mere stubs the size of thimbles). I was ashamed of my diverting eyes. Then – don’t ask me why – I thought of my parents. “Forget the coins, Bill!” I reached in my pocket, pulled out some bills, then passed them out the windows. I didn’t feel any better; but at least I didn’t feel worse. Later another beggar tapped at the window. He had eight fingers – on one hand!

‘The next stop was at a store to pick up supplies for our field work, which begins tomorrow. As we left the shop a gaggle of paupers flocked us. Country folk who’d migrated to the city out of desperation. Two women and half dozen kids, maybe more. I passed out more coins, which brought another flock. A guard in front of the shop began to scream and bully them away with his four-foot stick. We crossed a busy four-lane street to get to our waiting taxi. To my shock the little urchins trailed us, snaking their way through zipping traffic. I tried to ignore them and walk faster, but their hands kept padding my pockets, then pawing my hands. My pace quickened when I heard the mothers coming in tow, pleading. I hopped in back seat and carefully (but quickly) shut the door, fearing I might slam the

tentacles of poverty. All I could think of was, “Get the hell out of here!” I was ashamed. Still am. Not just for my escape, but the way I held my hand in the car. As if it were oozing an infection from an unclean wound. I could feel the moisture from one of those dirty little hands when it grabbed mine. It was slime.

‘They’re everywhere, the beggars. The saddest are the little ones. Pitiful creatures of filth pleading for a penny. A lousy penny. They tap at the window and say “I love you, Father. I love you, Father.” I was told they assume all white men are missionary priests. I don’t think I’ll ever forget those voices.

Friday

‘We piled into the Land Cruisers around 8 a.m. Sixteen folk packed in two vehicles. There was no question where I would sit. Being the guest, I had the privileged honor of sitting up front. Actually I hopped in the back seat as soon as we were loading up. My motive was self preservation not courtesy. I’d seen too much reckless driving and didn’t want to end up seeing the grill of an old Russian truck the moment before death.

‘The road was paved but still bad, with pot holes large enough to deserve exit ramps. In many places the washboard road was like driving over a plowed field. But there’s a blessing in driving over a corrugated road: it enables one to take in the scenery and local color, like the hamlets that sprout up along the road and the folk who herd goats, donkeys, and cattle down the middle of it.

‘We arrived at our destination, a small town about fifty miles west of Addis, and broke up into three groups. Our mission was to identify control points on aerial photos, hike to the targets and survey their locations with GPS (global position system). We spread out the maps, identified the drop-off sites and points where we’d meet up at 5 p.m., then loaded into Land Cruisers.

‘I was to lead Professor S-A-S’ crew. (He doesn’t spell his name that way; that’s just how it sounded phonetically, like the three letters. Same for Professor B-N-A.) Before field work began we drove to S-A-S’ birthplace. We were in the neighborhood, so to speak, and he wanted to see his mother. We just dropped by without notice, which is the only way considering they don’t have a phone. An old man greeted us at the hut, shaking our hands with both of his; then we were introduced to S-A-S’ mother, a ninety year old woman resting on cushion in the kitchen. (She can’t walk.) Like most elderly people, she was so pleased to have visitors. The kitchen was covered with fresh straw, and a small stove the size of a paint bucket smoldered wood by the kitchen door. The kitchen door led directly to a clay yard that corralled two cows, a tethered bull, a few chickens and a cheerful dog... and a few billion flies. The curling smoke was an effective fly repellent – not a single fly in the hut. It wasn’t acrid, rather, sweet and aromatic, perhaps eucalyptus.

‘Then a young girl (who knows how old, maybe 17, maybe 27) ladled water over our hands and ushered us into another room. (There were three in the hut.) Not a window in the place, so it was rather dark save the indirect light coming from the doors. There were no light switches because there was no electricity. (And, of course, no plumbing.) Cow hides were placed gracefully on the three benches. Other than a low table and one stool, that was the extent of furniture. Nothing hung on the walls, which were made from mud and straw and remarkable smooth. I was amazed at how cool and fragrantly sweet the room was, apparently the mud walls are excellent insulation, and fresh straw has always been one of my favorite scents.

‘After a few minutes the girl brought in a tray with tin mugs filled with what they called “yogurt”. It looked like clotted milk, which is what it might have been. I respectfully passed the offer. Carrots were pulled from the garden, washed in a drum of water and passed around. I passed again. Fortunately I did not insult our host. Everyone understood

“foreigners” odd habits. Then we washed our hands again. Thanks were given for the up-teenth time and we took off.

‘We loaded into the Land Cruiser and crawled along a path into the hills. Easy going considering the terrain. Elevation was approaching 8,000 feet.

‘We stopped at our first point, a 130 year old Coptic church isolated on a knoll, surrounded by towering trees. They must have been close to one hundred feet tall. The church was round and topped by a cupola fringed with dangling tin ornaments. The slightest breeze would tinkle a heavenly sound. SAS’ father was the priest of the church. We walked around the church and SAS showed me the what remained of his birthplace: several abandoned shed-like huts that were once the homes of his extended family, abandoned years ago and now overgrown with brush.

‘Two elderly men approached us. SAS and another stayed and talked with them while four students and I took off on foot. I felt like Lewis (or Clark) heading west. We met an old barefoot peasant, clad in rags, and asked him for directions to the confluence of two creeks. A map and a GPS will easily tell you where you are, but it won’t tell you the best way to get to another location. In the high rolling foothills, it’s easy to waste a lot on time going the right direction the wrong way.

‘We soon discovered the map was wrong, which is not unusual. And the air photos were thirty years old. Even with a magnifying glass, finding the confluence of two particular creeks on a 1:40,000 scale photo of hilly terrain is not easy. It’s like finding a needle in a stack of needles.

‘The rainy season ended last month and landscape is wild with color: tints of russet and golden grain, blushes of green shrubs and trees with red and yellow blossoms, and bright speckling wildflowers one associates with spring meadows back home. Here the seasons are reversed. In some ways it reminds me of the American West, remote and open and roadless. But here you’ll find people everywhere. Follow a trail, any trail, and you’ll eventually see a peasant working in a field, shepherding a herd, or washing clothes in a creek. And they’ll always greet you like a long lost friend, raising their hat, shaking you hand, blessing that God be with you. And always that warm Ethiopian smile.

‘We picked up several control points. It works like this: Circle the location on the map and give it an ID number, pin-prick the point on the air photo, then turn the photo over and give the prick hole an ID number. Trigger the GPS and wait five minutes for the satellites to determine the location (longitude, latitude, altitude). The satellites, orbiting hundreds of miles above, triangulate a position within a few meters.

‘By 5:30 we’d trekked several kilometers. We met up with the two other survey teams at the home of SAS’ mother, and were invited for a “fasting dinner.” Coptic Christians fast every Wednesday and Friday, symbolic of Christ being handed over and crucified on those two days, respectively. They fast by abstaining from protein foods (essentially meat and dairy products). But it was Friday evening and the fast was over. So all sixteen of us packed into that tiny windowless hut and took turns sitting or kneeling around the circular tray laid on that little rickety table. Although dark I could see the tray looked much like the food we ate at the Ethiopian restaurant. I was hungry, but not THAT hungry. With stealth I pulled from my pocket a little bottle of antibiotic hand gel. A handy waterless sterilizer I keep for emergency situations. I rubbed it on my finger tips, slipped the bottle away, then tore off a piece of bread and faked a dip into the spicy sauce. I also faked, “Wow, that was *hot!*” which tickled a laugh from the crowd.

‘The sunset that evening was spectacular, with the classical red sun of Africa glowing bright. A fiery orb hugging the horizon; the clouds above like a blast furnace.

‘We spent the night at a roadside hotel in a smoky town. Set back on a dirt road, within a walled compound, it was like an oasis. For \$3 I got a room with private bath. Had it

been in the US it would have been labeled a “flop house”. Here it was considered the Ritz.. But no matter where you are, for \$3 a night you get what you pay for.

‘After a luxurious dribbling shower I strolled into the bar for a cold beer. I was the only white face amongst dozens of natives. I got a few curious looks, but nothing hostile. I elbowed up to the bar and was greeted by a warm smile from the whitest set of teeth I’ve ever seen: “Yes, Sir.” “May I have a beer, please.” The bartender, never losing that smile, asked, “What kind?” “Surprise me.” He did: it cost fifty cents.

Saturday

‘A cup of tea and a roll, then off for more field work. Today I joined Professor BNA’s crew. Easier walking but more difficulty to find control points. We strung out single-file, six blacks and Bawana Bill, following a dried creek bed across the flat landscape. A landscape that was home to early man, or I should say, early *woman*. “Lucy”, who I saw later in a museum, was discovered not far from here. She was smaller than I imagined, around three and half feet tall, and older – three million years.

‘Anyway, it was a lovely day. But hot! We passed thatched roof huts and I was pleasantly surprised to find no traces of modern man: neither plastic (bags, water bottles, buckets or basins), nor metal (scrap or otherwise), nor litter. Waste is not part of the landscape; nor is mechanization. Just friendly farmers in traditional hand-woven straw hats, bent over grain with hand sickles, and herders standing motionless save the occasional brush with their horse-tailed fly whisks. Many of the herders were mere children of six or eight, or younger.

‘We picnicked under shade trees, on a grassy bend near the creek bed. Ripe bananas (soft and deliciously sweet), barley bread (fresh and flavorful), water (bottled and warm). And no flies! They only seem to be around the animals... and herders.

‘Two old herders came over to us (along with their flies) and I was surprised that only two in the crew could talk with them. I was told there are 84 different languages in Ethiopia – not dialects, but distinct languages. One language, however, is understood universally, the offer of food. We gave them some bananas and bread, and they were exceedingly grateful. Unlike the city beggars, the country folk are too proud to ask for anything – and generous enough to offer everything.

‘While walking back one of crew – a fellow who looked much like Mohammed Ali – stopped by a little girl herding some cattle. She was around five. He handed her a half loaf of bread then kissed her on both cheeks. I stopped in awe, amazed at the causal acceptance of a stranger’s affection. He smiled and said, “I understand that if I were to do this is your land I would be charged with immoral behavior.” Before I could respond he just laughed. I stood there thinking: These people aren’t poor; they’re rich... but without money.

‘We finally loaded into the Land Cruiser and headed home. When we stopped to re-fuel and I bought a round for the crew. The experience was as bizarre then as it seems now. Picture a roadside cafe in middle of nowhere. Everything is clean except the dusty customers who just walked in; and everything is white except the patrons and the warm bottles of Coke. A ceiling fan whirls slowly above the Formica table tops. Nobody is talking. All eyes are fixed on a TV suspended over the bar. Even the bartender has his neck craned. The room is filled with canned laughter from the blaring TV, but nobody smiling. Bill Cosby and a fat black man are joking about their wives, their work, their dinner... their lives. The atmosphere of the room is stale, like the faces watching TV. I look at Cosby and his all-black cast, loudly gesticulating, then cast a glance at Fikre, Girmay, Yayeh... The only things African Americans and African Ethiopians have in common are skin and hair. Genes. Merely pigment and follicular tendency. Shiferaw downs the last of his Coke, looks at me and says, “Should we go, Dr. Bill.” I nodded. Then he smiles.

Sunday

‘This morning Engdawork invited us to his home for coffee. We stopped en route and bought some food for his mother and sister: bread, coffee, concentrated juice drink, fruit, cookies... We parked and snaked our way through the slum, stepping carefully over open ditches carrying evil-looking ooze. Down narrow alleys, past open doors that moaned filth, ducking our heads under rusted eaves of corrugated tin, hanging laundry and finally the low entranceway to their humble home. One naturally stoops in a slum. I quickly realized that the place behind our hotel was not a slum, but a middleclass neighborhood.

‘Two rooms for three people. Their entire home was smaller than the average American living room. Mud walls white-washed, fresh straw on the clay floor. Both walls and floor were clean and fairly smooth, but there wasn’t a right angle in the place. A single naked light bulb hung from the low ceiling like a dead man in a noose. There’s one table and four chairs – and everything wobbles. The walls are decorated with a 1994 calendar from Norway, a water-stained poster of an old soccer team, and two pictures from magazines (both protected from the leaky roof by plastic): a classic European image of Jesus in prayer, the other, Madonna and child. His rent is seventy-five cents a month, which he hasn’t paid since July.

‘Introduction were made. With their hands glistening wet, they offered their wrists for handshakes. Our meager gifts were praised with excessive (if not embarrassing) gratitude. Then we sat down at the table.

‘His 18-year old sister built a charcoal fire in a small portable stove on the floor, then set a metal plate on it. When the plate was hot she spread out a handful of raw coffee beans. As they roasted the room filled with richly fragrant smoke. Then she took them outside and pounded them with slow deliberate beats. While the water was coming to a boil, she brought out a metal ashtray, and placed it on the floor, then scooped a few hot coals into it. From a box she took out a crumpled wad of paper, unfolded it, selected a few clumps of incense and placed them on the coals, which issued a swirl of white smoke. The room slowly filled with a thick exotic fog of sweet punk.

‘Water in the narrow-necked decanter finally came to a boil. She spooned in the grounds and set it aside. Then she put a spoonful of sugar into each small cup. The ceremony – and that is what the Ethiopians consider it – concluded with her pouring the thick black coffee and serving the demitasse on a tray. It was heavenly: rich, aromatic, robust, and (remarkably) neither sweet nor bitter. It’s flavor only matched the memory.

‘While we sipped, his sister sat on a tiny stool and tended the incense. His mother stayed in the other room. Then Engdawork rose and said he wanted to show me something. He brought from the other room a wooden bowl filled with papers, photos and post cards collected over his tedious but intense twenty-four years. He showed me his high school report card and his diploma from mechanic’s night school. (A few years back Axel had bought a “dead” car, which Engdawork resurrected and now uses as the taxi.) He showed me his employee ID card for the German Cultural Center, proudly noting that it was laminated and had a clasp to wear on his shirt. But then came his prized possession: his collection of post cards from people he’d met while shining shoes and driving the taxi. The bowl was full of postcards from all over the world. I felt honored when he said, “Please, you can read them.” I was amazed at the sheer number – there were dozens. As I fingered through them I saw one card with an American Indian and knew it was from home. I turned it over and started to read it. I can’t remember what it said, all I can remember is Engdawork saying, “Yes, that is from a wonderful man, a very wonderful man. God has been good to me to meet so many wonderful people, but he was a very wonderful man. Most wonderful...” I almost lost it.

So ends the journal. The remaining three days were spent touring the city: museums, a cathedral, a market said to be the largest in Africa (there were 17,500 shops!), Haile Selassie's palace... I even saw his luxurious bathroom (but as expected, there was no toilet paper next to the Emperor's porcelain throne).

And then came my departure. When I said goodbye to Engdawork he smiled and handed me a small package. I unwrapped it before slipping it in my suitcase. It was a dog-eared book about Ethiopia, dated 1969. Inside was a handwritten note: "Dear Bill, Rings and jewels are not gifts but apologies for gifts. The only true gift is a portion of yourself."

I arrived when it was dark, and I left the same way. I never did get a good look at Addis Ababa or any other part of Ethiopia from the sky, other than those old black and white aerial photos, which made the beautiful landscape looked more like porridge than land. As the landing gear tucked in with a satisfying thud, I turned and looked out the window. All I saw was blackness. And my reflection in the glass. The more I reflected, the fuzzier the image became. Ethiopia brings tears to your eyes when you arrive, and when you leave. But for different reasons.

When you arrive your senses are assaulted by the poverty: the site of filthy cripples, the stench of rotting garbage, the sound of pleading beggars Despite ubiquitous suffering, misery sprawls more in the city than the countryside. But no matter where you are, Ethiopians are proud to be Ethiopians. One fellow told me: "When God created man He made the first one black and said, 'No, he's too black.' Then He created the next one white and said, 'No he's too fair.' Then He created an Ethiopian and said, 'Ah, just right!'" Ethiopians are African, but they'll tell you they are *special* Africans.

In fact, they are special people. They're soft-spoken, polite, generous, and treat you with respect. And they are openly affectionate. Couples often walk arm in arm – but rarely between opposite sexes. I can only recall three or four occasions when I witnessed a man and woman displaying affection. In many parts of the world it's quite common to see young women strolling with linked arms. But in Ethiopia, boys walking with hooked fingers, or standing with an arm wrapped around another's shoulder, or resting on the ground with a head on the lap of another... well, it's part of the landscape.

They say that tears of joy come from the outer edge of the eye. If you ever visit Ethiopia, I assure you that when you tell others about it, that's where yours will be.