

# THE ROAD TO Mother Coffee

*In Ethiopia, coffee trails open up Kafa Biosphere Reserve to tourists*

BY CHUCK ADAMS



CROSSING A 60-FOOT DEEP  
GORGE ON FALLEN LOGS

Minutes after walking away from the oldest coffee tree in the world, Silje Heyland, a German college student studying fair-trade coffee practices in Ethiopia, had a sudden urge to go back. “Perhaps we can eat lunch under the tree,” she suggested. The rest of our expedition party — wet, tired, muddy, hungry — looked at her with unsympathetic eyes and decided it would be better to eat lunch at a nearby village, where there were primitive huts to duck into for shelter against the afternoon thunderstorm.

But as we hiked away from our goal for the day, known locally as Mother Coffee, located in the Makira wild coffee forest, I could sense Heyland’s disappointment. After about five more minutes of hiking, we stopped at a junction, and she blurted out an apology.

“I get irritated when I’m hungry and dehydrated,” she said. And then she wolfed down a package of crackers brought from home.

It’s not easy to see the oldest known coffee tree in the world. It takes more time than you expect so it’s easy not to bring adequate food and water. The trail is steep and sloppy, and guaranteed to give you blisters. So once you eventually reach the tree itself you may be tempted to linger, but not for long.

Coffee trees, you see, rarely grow much larger than a bush; their trunks no wider than an adult’s forearm. Mother Coffee stands approximately 20 feet tall and 8 inches thick. It’s noticeably larger than the surrounding coffee trees, but much smaller than, say, an average-size apple tree.

So why hike nine hours through some of the last remaining Afro-montane rain forest in Ethiopia, through ankle-deep mud and over rough, mountainous terrain in order to visit a tree that isn’t even big enough to protect you from a light downpour?

It’s a good question, and one that the Kafa Zonal Office of Culture and Tourism was hoping we could answer when it invited our party of researchers and volunteers to visit Mother Coffee last year at the tail end of the rainy season. Andualem Alemayahu, a wiry young man working with the zonal office, would be our guide.

The Kafa region, in the southwest corner of Ethiopia, is commonly regarded as the birthplace of coffee. The flimsiest proof of this is given as vernacular: the English words *coffee*, *café* and *caffeine* all seemingly derive from “Kafa.” The best proof of this is the Mother Coffee tree, visual proof *coffea Arabica* has been growing in this region for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Yet, of all the spectacular places to visit in Ethiopia — much less Africa — why visit the birthplace of coffee? Why visit a tree in the middle of the jungle?

To give some perspective, approximately 90 percent of foreign visitors to Ethiopia stick to just two natural sights: the Blue Nile Falls and Simien National Park; three ancient sights: Gondar, Axum and Lalibela; and one cultural sight: Omo Valley National Park (home of the women with lip plates). An additional 9 percent visit tertiary sites like the Rift Valley lakeside resorts, the walled city of Harar and bird-paradise Bale Mountains National Park. The remaining 1 percent gives Western Ethiopia a glance.

What those intrepid travelers find is an off-the-beaten-track adventure, characterized by large tracts of temperate cloud forest, treacherous road conditions, abundant bird life and an utter lack of

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