



PHOTO BY CHUCK ADAMS

tourist-class services and amenities. The tourists who do pass through the region are as lively as blow-up dolls, staring out the windows of their rented Land Cruisers as they watch Ethiopia go by outside. I often feel I'm not the first white man Kafa villagers have ever seen, but certainly the first one to say hello and ask them if their families are at peace.

The glut of package tourists has more to do with infrastructure and development than a preference for luxury. Arriving in the regional capital of Bonga, the site of a national coffee museum under construction, independent travelers simply wouldn't know where, or how, to start exploring. In the area there are spectacular waterfalls, natural bridges, hot springs, famous coffee and tea plantations, cultural villages and so-called coffee trails ... but no organized way to visit these places without prior arrangement with tour operators in Addis Ababa.

But all new destinations begin without tourist infrastructure and a population who rarely sees a foreigner. These challenges, however, can be met and overcome. (Or, in the parlance of Eden-seeking backpackers the world over, what was once unique and charming about a place will be anthologized, mythologized, marketed and then bulldozed.) This is allegedly what the Kafa region of Ethiopia is hoping to do, taking steps toward development without sacrificing that off-the-beaten-path allure.

And so this is why I crossed a 60-foot deep gorge walking on nothing more than four mud-slick logs: To see what Mother Coffee had to offer.

At dawn, Laura Harrington, another Peace Corps volunteer, and I gulped down tea at a café in Bonga, bought some bread for a snack and hopped inside the Kafa Zone's SUV. We picked up Heyland and Ohsoon Yun, a South Korean coffee tourism Ph.D. student, at the K.D.P. Guest House, a scenic lodge on the outskirts of Bonga catering to package tourists and researchers.

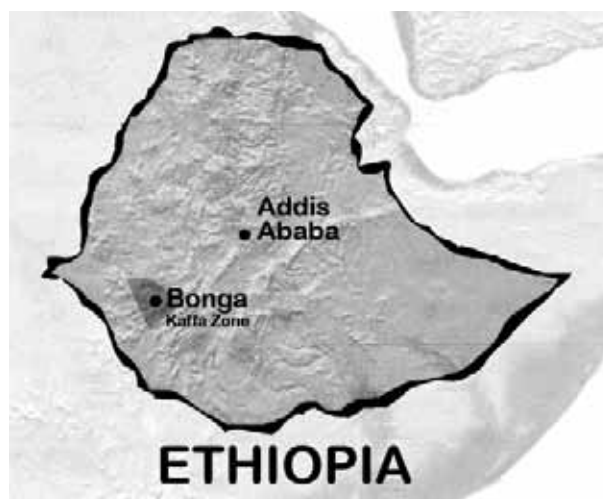
The morning started off fog-shrouded and dewy, the thermometer reading a solid 62 degrees F and climbing. The first leg of the trail to Mother Coffee is, thankfully, all downhill for 30 minutes to a remarkable natural bridge where a jungle river tunnels underground for about 50 meters. The mist rising out of the forest looked like clouds being woken up and rolled out of bed.

We decamped under the natural bridge for photos. Alarmed bats swooped from niche to niche. The rocks were slick and made for treacherous climbing next to the rain-swollen whitewater. This, I mused, could easily pass for the unexplored wilds of the Congo. Thought Ethiopia was all barren deserts? Think again.

In June 2010, huge tracts of the remaining wild forests of Kafa were designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in honor of its intact biodiversity and unique cultural heritage

as the origin of *coffea Arabica*. (See, even UNESCO says it's true!) However, international protection does not automatically mean the forest will be preserved. Yun, the coffee tourism doctoral student, had sharp words to discuss with our guide about illegal wood harvesting she witnessed in the region. She admonished him to get his government to set up more roadside inspections.

The next segment of trail took us out of the "core" zone of the Biosphere Reserve and into the "transitional" zone of mixed farmland, forest-in-repair and wild coffee cultivation. We met a local farmer, and our guide translated a question Yun had about a type of bush that yields a fruit very similar to coffee. Dubbed "yayo" in the local Kafinoono language, Yun believes this plant to be a predecessor to *coffea Arabica*. In her words, it's the "missing link" of coffee evolution. The farmer disappeared into his hut and returned with a handful of yayo beans. Yun snapped photos of the beans and bagged them up for later research.



Our guide, Alemayahu, wore nothing but a white T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. He carried a journal that he never once cracked open. Traveling light and fast, he didn't even bring water. This is maybe the reason he was far ahead of us, beckoning for us to hurry up. I kept worrying we'd reach a fork in the trail, Alemayahu would go to the left and the rest of us would go right, ending up in South Sudan.

Thankfully he stopped at every major trail hazard, such as the tree-bridge, the mud-slick scramble up a ridge and the small village in a clearing, where farmers, children and goats stopped what little tasks they were occupied with to stare at us. Luckily, I'd picked up enough Kafinoono greetings to assure them our presence was friendly.

The extended family occupying this clearing are the sole caretakers of Mother Coffee, assuring its location goes unmarked, unharmed and unknown to all except those with

the best intentions. Being with a government official helped, and before long we were pointed in the right direction, taking an abrupt left-turn off the main trail and into a dense thicket of wild coffee trees.

After a few minutes walk down a game trail our guide exclaimed and pointed out the Mother Coffee tree, but it took awhile for us to see it. It took, literally, until we were an arm's length away from the tree to recognize its relative girth, its moss-covered branches, its strange split halfway up the tree, appearing like two arms reaching for the sky, before reality sunk in: This is one Mother-Effing Coffee Tree! Brewed coffee, a commodity that practically made the modern world what it is today, may have started with this tree. I kept looking around to see if any goats were wandering around in a caffeinated buzz ...

Like Heyland, the German student, I was also hesitant to leave the birthplace of coffee, but for different reasons. Instead of slogging back to the Land Cruiser, dehydrated and drained, I wanted to rest in the shade of the afternoon sun and stay the night in the local village. To wake up the next morning to villagers making the thud-thud-thud sound of pounding fire-roasted coffee, to drink the traditional three cups of espresso-like *buna* and to make the return journey wide awake and refreshed: These are things travelers dream of.

Instead we made the four-hour return trip shortly after a lunch break, tired and delirious with dehydration. Our feet ached, our brows dripped with sweat as the sun beat down on us. This was no leisure hike; this was a vision quest. Black-and-white colobus monkeys tried to urinate on us from high, twisting *welka* trees. Shrieking birds with red bodies and blue wings swooped overhead. An elusive De Brazza's monkey, solitary and barking like a dog, gave us a final send-off.

We made it back to the Land Cruiser just as a rainbow grew over the biosphere reserve. I've heard that some Ethiopians believe it is bad luck to look at rainbows. I just hope Ethiopians see the beauty in what they have, preserve it, manage it and find a way to share it with the world without compromising it.

There is talk of improving the coffee trails to make them safer and less steep, of training local forest rangers to act as guides-for-hire, of setting up villages for trekker accommodation, all of which is fine and good. But the ultimate reason any traveler goes anywhere is to be in an environment unlike any other place on Earth. For now, the Kafa region of Ethiopia has that unique sense of place. By the time mass tourism arrives, it'll hopefully have figured out the rest.

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