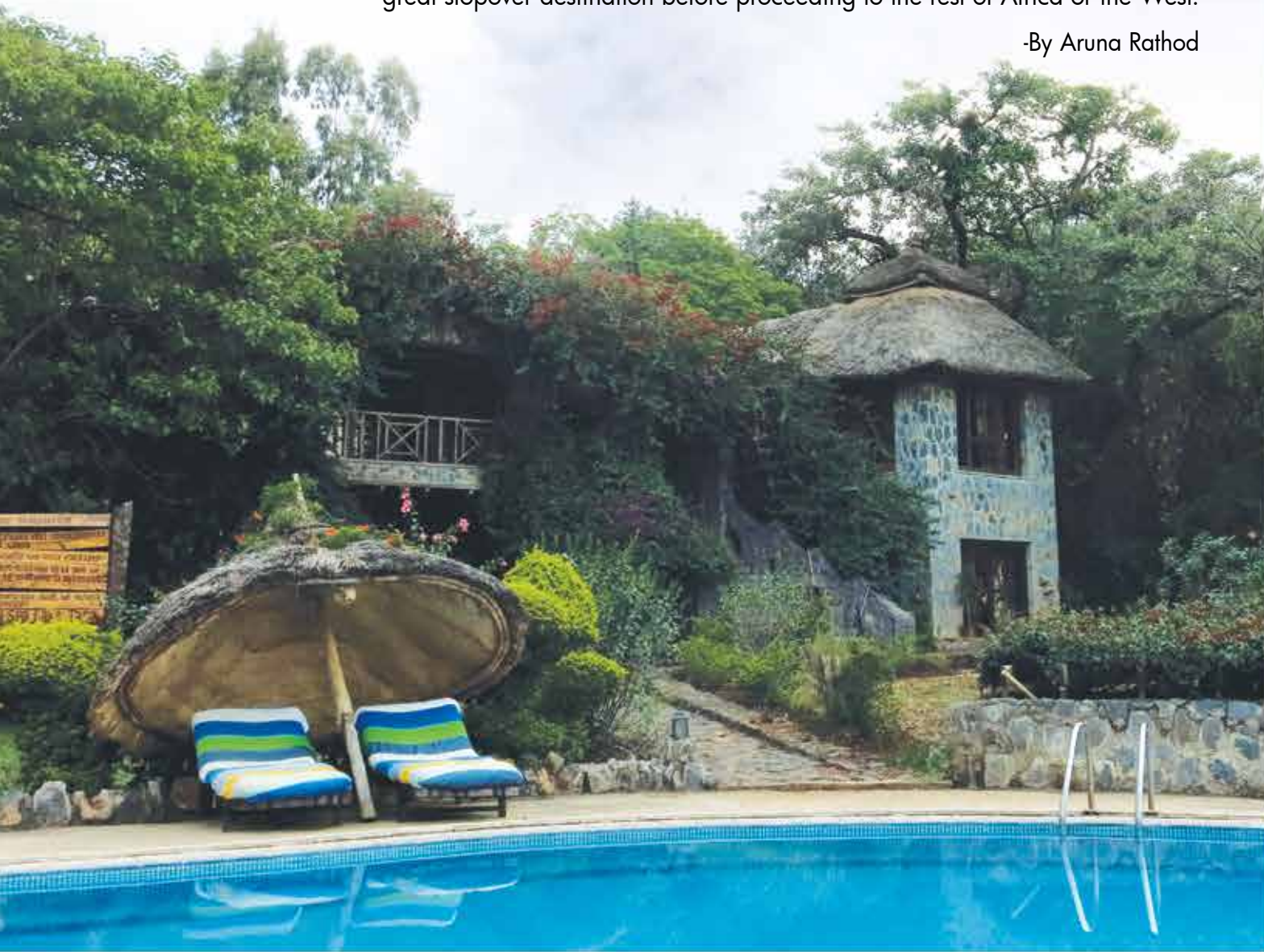


# Ethiopian Utopia

Ethiopia, the ancient landlocked country in the Horn of Africa, offers a range of rich cultural experiences in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar and Lalibela. The capital is also a great stopover destination before proceeding to the rest of Africa or the West.

-By Aruna Rathod



A quiet, peace-loving country, Ethiopia is referred to as the land of origins because the earliest fossils of modern humans were found here, as well as those of a hominid species that preceded us. The most famous fossil of the latter is that of a female Australopithecus Erectus, discovered in 1974, which was named 'Lucy'. Ethiopia houses the National Museum at Addis Ababa, where a cast of Lucy is displayed along with the history of mankind. One of the displays recreates how she must have stood some 3.2 million years ago, and at 3 feet 7 inches she was tiny! The real bones are preserved in the archives of the museum.

Bahir dar, an old town that offers a variety of attractions including the picturesque Lake Tana and the Blue Nile, and Lalibela, the UNESCO World Heritage Site, are two must see places in Ethiopia.

## Laid back in Bahir dar

Bahir dar is best reached by the 45-minute flight from Addis Ababa and is known for the beauty of Lake Tana which lies 1800 metres above sea level. It is a quiet sleepy town, ideal for relaxation.

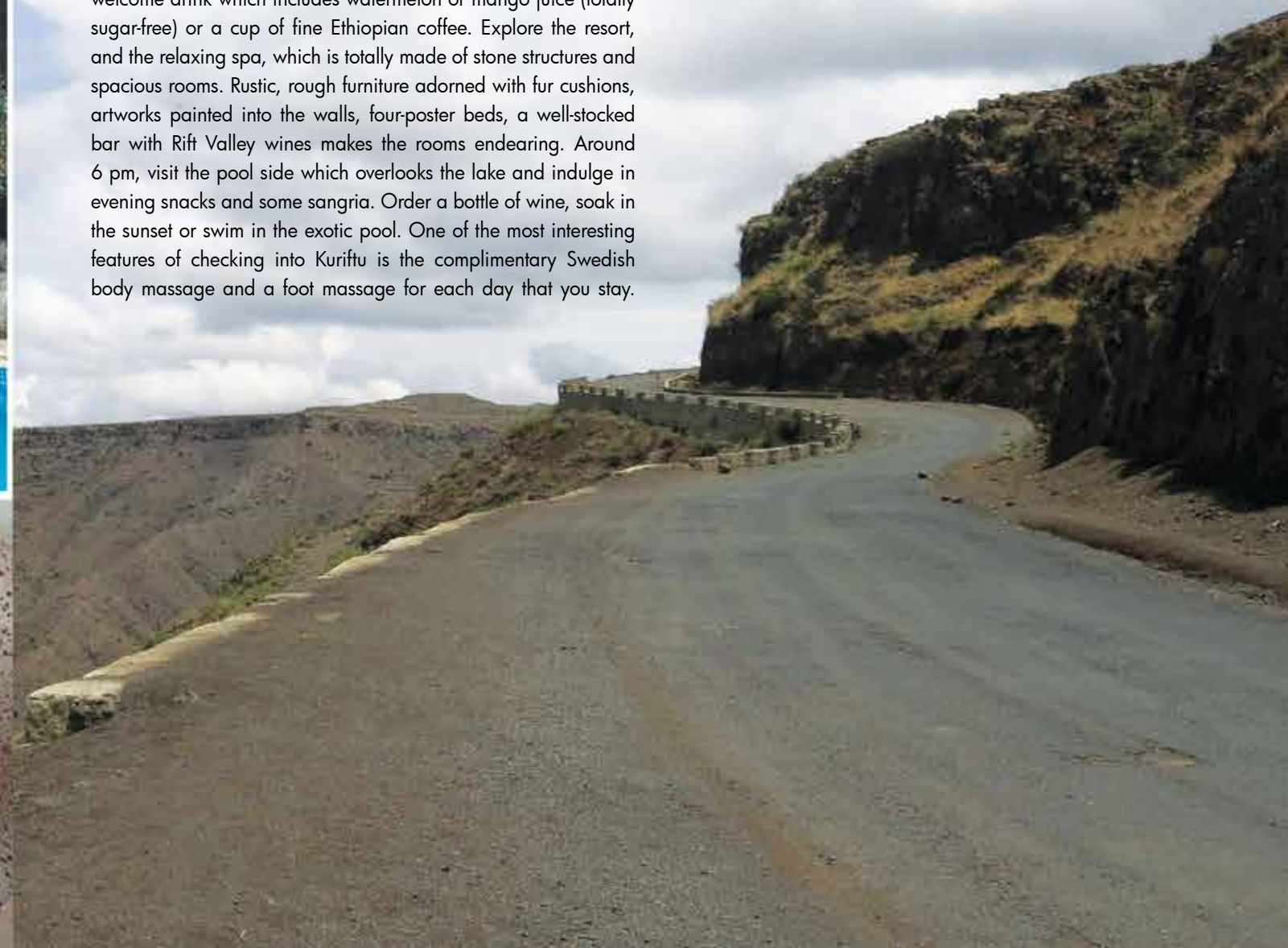
When in Bahir dar, the best place to stay are the Kuriftu Lodges, a chain of resorts near Addis Ababa and in Bahir Dar.

After checking into the picturesque Kuriftu Lodge, indulge in the welcome drink which includes watermelon or mango juice (totally sugar-free) or a cup of fine Ethiopian coffee. Explore the resort, and the relaxing spa, which is totally made of stone structures and spacious rooms. Rustic, rough furniture adorned with fur cushions, artworks painted into the walls, four-poster beds, a well-stocked bar with Rift Valley wines makes the rooms endearing. Around 6 pm, visit the pool side which overlooks the lake and indulge in evening snacks and some sangria. Order a bottle of wine, soak in the sunset or swim in the exotic pool. One of the most interesting features of checking into Kuriftu is the complimentary Swedish body massage and a foot massage for each day that you stay.

Book an appointment and leave the rest to the expert masseuse!

For day two, after a sumptuous breakfast, leave for the monasteries situated on one of the islands. Since Christianity came to Ethiopia in the first century, monasteries were built in the 7th century when missionaries arrived. There are 37 islands, though not all are accessible for tourists. After about an hour on a smooth boat ride, disembark at a quiet jetty to visit the House of Mary (bête Maryam Monastery); about 500 metres from the jetty. The 'church' is a wooden structure, with a thatched roof, bamboo screens and its highlight is the paintings from the 16th century – very colourful and depicting scenes from the Bible. On the way back pick up a souvenir from the authentic stalls, that sell a variety of Ethiopian handicrafts. Our guide tells us it's better to buy here than in Lalibela, as the pieces are priced reasonably here. Heavy metal crosses in intricate designs, small crosses that can be worn as pendants, hand-painted placards, wooden hand-carved animals, jewellery – there is a fascinating array of goods sold by smiling women. Ethiopian currency is the Bir and one Bir is equal to three Indian rupees.

We head back to the hotel, over the placid lake waters enjoying the sunset. It's time for dinner at the restaurant and injera is a must



on every Ethiopian menu. Made from a local grain called tef, it is made into flour, mixed with water and kept aside for a few days to ferment. It is then poured onto a griddle and scooped out into a large plate. On the injera, one can place the spicy chicken or any meat stew, alongwith vegetables, dal and salads. It is a dish that can be shared by more than two people.

### Lalibela – a reflection of glorious times

While in Ethiopia, a visit to Lalibela is a must. A UNESCO world heritage site, it houses massive churches built from stone below ground level to protect them from destruction by invaders over the centuries. Situated at a height of 2500 metres above sea level, in rocky terrain, Lalibela has a small airport. An hour's drive took us to the Mountain View hotel, through the simple city square with minimal facilities, yet a few souvenir stores. Our hotel was situated on a cliff where every room overlooked the valleys, allowing for a fantastic view at all times.

After a meal at the restaurant called Seven Olives, we started for the churches. Our guide informed us that King Lalibela ruled Lalibela in the last bit of the 11th century and beginning of the 12th century. He belonged to the Zagwe Dynasty and built the Lalibela churches, totally 11 in all. Each church was carved out from a single mass of red volcanic stone. As we reach, we see a huge metal canopy protecting

the UNESCO world heritage site. After buying the entrance ticket, we walk a few steps and suddenly a deep gorge appears with a massive church inside!

Visitors have to make their way over a few rough steps and stand in a moat like area as the walls of the mountain rise above you. Carved out from Lasta Mountain, the magnificent rock-hewn church complex leaves us awe-struck. We enter the first church after removing our footwear, and it's dark, silent and musty. A priest sits in prayer and on request blesses visitors with the famous Lalibela cross. Till date Sunday services are held inside the churches. As we walk out, we walk through trenches, moats, courtyards, all connected to each other by a maze of tunnels, making it seem like a walk back into centuries. The complex is vast and there are a couple of smaller churches and a good 500 metre walk takes visitors to the most famous and most photographed church of St. George. It has a cross-shaped roof that is visible at the road level and one needs to walk down at least 20 feet to access the church.

Totally amazed, I am dazed at the beauty of the churches and how they have stood the test of time over centuries. We walk back to our vehicle, visiting a tiny stall that sells rough clay reproductions of the St. George's church and some cute peahens that are handmade.

As we leave Lalibela the next morning, I feel totally blessed at having visited this sacred site.

