

Visit to Lalibela

Lalibela consists of its churches and a straggle of buildings on a dusty unmade road, but there are five schools with a total of around 10,000 children. They attend in shifts for half a day only. We visited some of the schools, education being of major importance to young people. There are not enough places in higher education and the pass mark is very high so the majority of children end up disappointed. The only option for many young people is to return to the country and to try and scrape a living from the land. 'We have very educated farmers,' the school principal told us. Class sizes are large despite the shift system, eighty pupils crowded onto rough desks or logs. But the enthusiasm of the children and the dedication of the teachers shines through.



Lalibela is famous for its rock hewn churches which are described as the eighth wonder of the world. Carved in the 12th century in the reign of King Lalibela, it is estimated that it would have taken 40,000 people to carve them. Legend has it, and it is still believed by many, that at night the angels carried on with the work of carving. They are carved from ground level down into solid rock, surrounded by dug out trenches and connection tunnels, they are not crumbling monuments of a dead civilization but the spiritual centre of the town's religious life.

Woynshet took the week off school and accompanied us everywhere. It was not an easy trip with the dust and flies together with the heat and the inevitable upset stomachs; we were also covered in flea bites. But this faded to insignificance due to the warmth of the welcome we received. Everywhere we went we were treated to an elaborate coffee ceremony that starts with the roasting of the beans over an open fire and only concludes when you have managed to drink three cups and to share their *injera* and whatever meat or chilli paste they have to spice it up.



In October 2005, Woynshet started a 3yr Nursing Diploma in Addis Ababa. It had been her daily dream, since the death of her father to become a nurse. In August 2008 she will graduate and I will hope to be there, a very proud sponsor. Her time at the Africa Medical College has been set against a backdrop of the G8 conference; cancelling of third world debt, the 'Make Poverty History' concert in the park, and Tony Blair's statement that Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But it will take far greater political will than has so far been demonstrated to even start to make a difference. But to help one young African woman to achieve her dream has been within my gift to give.

Jo Lock