

# MAN'S BEST FRIEND

Cultures collide in Harar, an ancient walled city flanked by dry savannah, coffee and khat crops and mountains. But the star attraction of this Ethiopian outpost are the 'hyena men', and their fearless interaction with the wild dogs

WORDS: Mark Stratton



IMAGE: GETTY





SPINE-CHILLING HUMAN  
HOWLS CURDLE THE AIR  
BEYOND THE ANCIENT CITY WALLS

The medina is dimly lit, wracked by power cuts. Daytime's withering heat is subsiding into a refreshing evening chill. "They're calling the hyenas, we should go," says Henok Tsegaye, the guide I've been travelling with for a week. Hurrying through Harar's ancient lanes, we reach Fallana Gate to find 32-year-old Mulugeta Wolde-Mariam kneeling in the dirt. Seven wild hyenas encircle him. Bad odds. The beam of a stationary 4WD picks out their spotted backs and searing, assassin eyes. They make rottweilers look like lapdogs. Mulugeta continues howling. He's calling them.

In eastern Ethiopia, 60 miles from Somalia, the hyena men of Harar are an enduring presence — Mulugeta is one of only two local men maintaining the city's historic tradition. He's a showman and asks for 100 birr (£3) to perform. Thickset and bald-headed, he reminds me of TV chef Ainsley Harriott.

A coach party of French tourists has arrived. Oohs, ahhs and a few ooh-la-las radiate once Mulugeta begins the feeding, with increasing flamboyance. First, he dangles rotten meat from a stick at arm's length. The hyenas are sheepish at first, but greed overcomes timidity. They sidle towards him, sniffing at the night sky before unleashing muscular lunges to snatch the rancid offal.

Soon they're snatching snacks held between Mulugeta's own teeth. It gets crazier. At times, the hyenas' paws rest upon his shoulders when taking the meat, so he reciprocates with arms around their necks, as if sharing a passionate clinch. A consummate entertainer, Mulugeta invites members of the audience to share his Doolittle magic. Several Ethiopian Muslim women take the plunge, eyes closed and hysterical as their friends snap smartphone shots for Facebook. One girl takes a selfie. 'Me and a hyena, just chewing out,' I imagine her caption will read.

My turn. I'm soon kneeling on the ground, as Mulugeta scatters pieces of meat around me. Three circle me. One chunk is way too close to my nether regions. I inhale as a big hyena carries out a potentially emasculating lunge, but its

powerful jowls simply brush my thighs as it surgically snaps up a meaty morsel. The hyena eyeballs me as it eats greedily.

For all the theatricality, there's substance to this show. My guidebook suggests the hyena men have only been around for 60 years, but local Harari guide, Hailu Gashaw, insists the feeding dates back as far as the 1550s, when the 42nd Emir of Harar, Nur ibn Mujahid, constructed Harar's city walls.

Hailu says the tradition was partly born out of a need for better sanitation. The hyenas were encouraged to eat Harar's organic waste (evidenced by small 'hyena gates' built into the city walls). Well-fed hyenas, he adds, are also less likely to eat both livestock and Harar's good citizens.

But there are stories that feeding by locals — with buttery porridge — also led to superstition. It was believed that dependent on how well the hyenas gorged, good or bad harvests could be predicted. This ritual is still recalled locally on the Muslim holy day of Ashura, marked on the 10th day of Muharram (the first month in the Islamic calendar).

FAR EAST

Islam's fourth-holiest city after Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, Harar is located around 310 miles east of Addis Ababa, near Djibouti and Somalia, south of the inhospitably barren Danakil Depression. Henok and I spend four days on a circuitous exploration of the eastern routes to Harar; first venturing into the territories of the Oromo and Afar, two of Ethiopia's 85 ethnic groupings.

Initially, the Great Rift Valley's spectacular dangling escarpments are striped by terraces worn like ancient frowns in a landscape warmed by fields of red sorghum and golden wheat. These crops are grown to make the national staple, ►

**Above:** Hyena man, Mulugeta's assistant with a volunteer  
**Opposite, clockwise from top:** Semien Mountains, Amhara; Muslim girls in Harari; the facade of a local bakery

IMAGES: MARK STRATTON; GETTY







*injera*, a sourdough flatbread, resembling a deflated lung. The drive is challenging, slaloming between a continuous stream of overburdened donkeys, camels, and scrawny sheep being driven to myriad local markets.

At Bati, around 230 miles north east of Addis Ababa, one of Africa's greatest camel markets is held every Monday morning. Camels and long-horned cattle jostle for space in a tightly packed, dusty crater. We run the gauntlet of splashing deluges of camel urine (bad idea, open-toed sandals) and trailing gluey-white mucus swinging from their masticating jowls. Amid this mayhem, buyers and sellers exchange thick wads of worn-looking birr, sealing deals with masonic finger-squeezing handshakes concealed under keffiyeh scarfs. Good breeding camels fetch upwards of \$1,000 (£676).

The Somalis are here, some with AK47s slung over their shoulders. So are some lean, tall, young Afar men, with huge 1970s lollipop afros and curved gile daggers strapped to their waists. "It's to kill our enemies, the Issa people," snorts one young warrior who's walked two days to Bati to sell his cow.

We follow the 745-mile Awash River south through dry savannah, faking fecundity with a thin veneer of grass and flat-topped acacia trees. Eventually, the Awash tumbles into a series of cataracts, its waters, churned caramel, breathing life into the surrounding Awash National Park, home to around 450 bird and 80 mammal species.

We spend two nights here on safari at a rustic lodge overlooking the falls. First excitement of the day comes from pink-bottomed baboons raiding the breakfast table. Fruit is boring. They snatch the toast. Early-morning flurry over, the savannah smoulders into 35C listlessness, prompting wildlife to lie low until the cauldron cools. We emerge late afternoon, along with Soemmerring's gazelles, warthogs, dik-diks, and svelte, athletic oryx. Unseen Abyssinian lions and hyenas growl and howl throughout the night.

Harar is a four-hour drive east via lakes with pink flamingos and the voluptuously fertile Chercher Mountains, where we find coffee growing alongside the Horn of Africa's narcotic of choice, khat (a stimulant when chewed). From a distance, the low trees, arranged in neat rows, resemble those of a tea plantation. Much of this crop is transported to Ethiopia's leading khat market at Awaday, just shy of Harar.

Early morning brings auto-rickshaws stuffed with bundles of khat, while women in bright dresses sit among piles of discarded leaves plucking the tenderest shoots for chewing. We squeeze through the packed market, grasped at by glazed-over zombies with green-stained, toothy grins.

"By afternoon, nobody makes a lot of sense here," laughs my guide Henok.

He tells me Awaday market generates 10.5m birr (£345,000) a day, with Somali merchants buying much of the khat. Nicknamed 'tea of the Arabs', khat has recently been declared a Class C drug in the UK. It's a mild narcotic, and 20 birr (65p) buys an afternoon ticket to otherworldly abstraction. But ugh, those leaves taste bitter. I prefer the fragrant aroma of my newly acquired Ethiopian caffeine addiction.

### GATES OF HARAR

Blue, battered Peugeot 404 taxis churn around Feres Megala Square, narrowly avoiding death-wish goats and donkeys bearing bushels of khat. This vortex sucks us in through Harar Gate: one of five historic gates dotting the intact 16th-century walls of the Jugal, the centuries-older UNESCO World Heritage-listed medina.

Tales of the Arabian Nights could have been written about this place. Squeezed and claustrophobic, the Jugal's mazy, cobbled lanes are inaccessible to vehicles. The thick limestone



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walls ooze tales of the past. By the 17th century, Harar was a trading city on the Red Sea route between Arabia and Africa. It was long established as the bastion of Islam in East Africa, where entry was forbidden to non-believers. Frequent wars were fought, repelling invasions by Ethiopia's Christian emperors. Yet in 1887, autonomy from Ethiopia as an Islamic city-state, spanning nine centuries and 72 emirs, ended with defeat by Emperor Menelik II at the Battle of Chelenqo.

Local literature claims 99 mosques are crammed inside the Jugal. "It's actually around 86," corrects Hailu. "But 99 is associated with the known names of Allah."

A handful of old Harari homes offer accommodation and I'm lucky to spend three nights in the cool calm of Anisa Abdella's centuries-old townhouse, within a blue-walled compound her family has occupied for generations. Harar's heat is mollified inside the shady, stone-walled rooms, enclosed by wooden-beamed ceilings set in baked earth. A breakfast of fried honey pancakes and freshly roasted coffee is served a few hours after a booming 5am courtesy alarm call to the central Jama Masjid mosque. There's no need to hit the snooze button because an hour later the 19th-century bells of Medhane Alem Church clang noisily.

By afternoon, inside compounds, propped against walls, or under shady trees, the glazed folk of Harar are sprawled out, chewing khat. It's impossible to imagine how the city functions, given that most of its residents chew khat. Hailu's assessment of the situation is something of an understatement: "We prefer a relaxed life here. We leave the rushing around for people in Addis."

But this prevailing torpor adds to an easygoingness I hadn't hitherto associated with such a pious Islamic city. There ➤

**Left:** Awaday Khat market **Above:** Beisa oryx, Awash National Park



are many bars, and Harar Beer is good. Also a rich, cosmopolitan blend of Egyptian, Greek, French, Indian, and Turkish influences infuse the architecture and decor of the churches, mosques, shrines, cinemas, and palaces on Harar's crowded, hotchpotch of streets.

Sir Richard Burton, the Victorian explorer, orientalist, linguist and Kama Sutra obsessive, spearheaded the European influx, first arriving here back in 1855, disguised as a Muslim. Harar wasn't to his liking. Always the charmer, Burton described Harari people as 'coarse and debased'.

French poet Arthur Rimbaud followed shortly afterwards, living here from 1880 until his death in 1891. According to certain guide books, the precocious poet, who'd swapped stanzas for coffee trading and arms dealing, resided in what's now the Rimbaud Museum: a sublimely, ornate wooden

palace with a veranda embellished in Indian motifs, and creaky floorboards. The museum's contents are threadbare, although there's a framed letter from Rimbaud complaining that Emperor Menelik II hadn't paid him for 900 guns.

"Rimbaud never lived here," confesses Hailu. "The house was built in 1908 after his death, but it's an example of the wealthy architecture of his era."

Mostly, I absorb Harar's mojo by wandering insouciantly throughout the lanes, slinking into Harar's pedestrian pace, wowed at every junction by architectural integrity spanning centuries and centuries. The smell of roasting coffee beans percolates down lanes brightly painted sky-blue, indigo, and pea-green; street markets are heaped with sacks of frankincense and fenugreek; the whirring sounds on Makina Girgir Street emanate from sidewalk tailors, cross-stitching with antique Singer machines.

Before my encounter with the hyena men, I visit the Kite Man of Harar, who hosts rival performances in an old market square. For a few birr, he holds out chunks of meat for swooping black kites to snatch mid-flight.

*FOR A FEW BIRR, THE KITE MAN OF HARAR HOLDS OUT CHUNKS OF MEAT FOR SWOOPING BLACK KITES TO SNATCH MID-FLIGHT*

### THE SECOND HYENA MAN

Human howling restarts after sundown. This time, though, we're off to find the more senior hyena man, Yusuf Mume Saleh, who waits by an Islamic shrine outside Erer Gate, where Burton first entered the city. This lean, bearded, 65-year-old Muslim farmer wears a kufi prayer cap and has been feeding hyenas publically for 25 years.

Yusuf says he's following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps by maintaining this tradition, yet he sounds unsure what that tradition really is. "They say centuries ago people used to feed them porridge to predict the future," he says. Then shrugs. "I don't know, I think they just got closer and closer to people and the feeding started by accident."

Already, a young hyena is mooching around, although it's not very brave. Yusuf tosses it some meat but two stray kittens pounce on the morsel and ignore the beast. Crestfallen, the nervy hyena just stands there watching them devour the lot.

We head 10 minutes away from the gate because, Yusuf says, Harar Municipality is dumping rubbish just outside the walls, which the hyenas scavenge instead of his tidbits. Yet, once in the countryside's darkness, I sense something more than just a show and altogether more spiritual than Mulugeta's razzamatazz.

Sitting down with a bucket of meat, Yusuf addresses the hyenas by name, like they're family. He calls 'Kute' first, a big dominant female. Her keen, wary eyes glisten in the velvety blackness. Then 'Dubbi', a bold young male, who follows in tow, while 'Alkemer', 'Chaltu', and 'Devas' are more circumspect.

Yusuf rolls up his sleeves and says, "You must never have fear of them and they won't hurt. See? No bites or scars."

Eventually, nearly a dozen hyenas are crowded around him, taking turns when called to snatch the morsels from his mouth or outstretched arms. The trust on both sides is touching. Then a group of women walk past in the shadows and ask Yusuf if he's seen their missing cow? He says no.

One of the women responds: "Ask the hyenas not to eat our cow if they see it." The depth of the almost mystical, symbiosis the Harari share with their hyenas suddenly becomes clearer.

"They believe he has the power to speak with the hyenas," says Hailu.

In this fanciful city of ancient walls and howls, anything seems possible. ➤



IMAGES: MARK STRATTON

From top: The kite man of Harar; ubiquitous Peugeot 404 taxis



## ESSENTIALS

# Ethiopia

### GETTING THERE

Ethiopian Airlines flies a direct Dreamliner service daily from Heathrow to Addis Ababa airport.

[flyethiopian.com](http://flyethiopian.com)

**Average flight time:** 8h.

### GETTING AROUND

Traffic accidents are frequent in Ethiopia, so stick with reputable bus operators for the 310-mile drive from Addis Ababa to Harar. Selam Bus has a 6am daily departure from Addis, taking around 10 hours and costing 310 birr (£9.80).

### WHEN TO GO

Late October to March/April is a popular time because it's dry and warm — average temperatures are around 20C — and

coincides with major festivals, such as Timkat, in January.

### NEED TO KNOW

**Visas:** A visa can be bought on arrival for £13. However, immigration can be shambolic, so buying a visa at London's Ethiopian Embassy before your trip may be preferable.

**Currency:** Birr (ETB). £1 = 31.4ETB.

**Health:** Consult your GP for vaccinations, particularly anti-malarial medication around Awash National Park.

**International dial code:** 00 251.

(in Harar, dial 25).

**Time:** GMT +3.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Awash Falls Lodge:** Rustic lodge with

restaurant overlooking Awash Waterfalls in the national park, with B&B rooms from £45. [awashfallsecolodge.com](http://awashfallsecolodge.com)

**Anisa Abdella Guest House:** Atmospheric family townhouse with basic rooms from £13, including breakfast.

**T:** 00 251 25 0 9153 30011.

### MORE INFO

*Bradt Guide to Ethiopia*. RRP: £17.99

### HOW TO DO IT

**Rainbow Tours** offer a 12-day Ethiopian wildlife tour, stopping in Harar, including visiting the hyena men, from £2,720 per person, based on two sharing. Includes international flights, a guide, private 4WD vehicle, and mostly full-board accommodation. [rainbowtours.co.uk](http://rainbowtours.co.uk)