

Ethiopia, the Vibrant country of Africa

“You are going to Africa?” my cousin asked me in astonishment as I was getting ready to make first ever trip to the Dark Continent. I replied to him, “Ethiopia, not whole Africa, the continent has around 53 more countries.” I had my apprehensions of making this business trip as I had heard many ignorant and half-baked advices from uncles and aunts who cannot point any other country apart from UK and the US on the globe about Africa such as, “Beta, don’t go out of your house after dark, those people will rob you” and “Beta, what will you eat there? They eat raw meat”.

My apprehensions turned to dust as I got out of the airplane at Bole International Airport, the airport of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. I was greeted with pleasant weather and friendly people who were ready to help me for my smallest trouble. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, a country based in the Horn of Africa is one of Africa’s most populous countries. Addis Ababa the capital was my primary destination which reminded me of Mumbai city 20 -25 years ago. The city based on a hilly terrain has a cool pleasant weather most of the year with low levels of pollution due to fewer cars plying on the road.

As a foodie, my first agenda on the recreation list for the trip was to taste the local cuisine available in Addis Ababa and I was not disappointed with the fare I got. The national dish of Ethiopia is ‘Injera’, a flat round pancake made of fermented flour of ‘*teff*’ a local variety of grain which has a similar look of a Turkish towel when rolled up and reminded me of our very own ‘*Dosa*’ but only a bit more sour on taste. The Injera is accompanied with servings of different meat and vegetable thick gravies called ‘*Waat*’ as toppings on it. When eating Injera, with friends or family, it is a common custom to feed others in the group with one's hand by putting the rolled Injera into another's mouth. This is called a ‘*Gursha*’, and the larger the Gursha, the stronger the friendship or bond. Injera is more of a community dish where 2-3 people share it together to spread the ‘*Gursha*’ an act of friendship and love.

When we talk about the history of coffee, the story of the goat herder whose goat ate the coffee plant and discovered the stimulating effects of coffee cannot be missed. Well, the legend telling the discovery of coffee originated in Ethiopia making it the birthplace of the brew we enjoy every day. The making and drinking of coffee in Addis is a huge and long affair and celebrated like a festival where all the family members come together in a relaxing atmosphere where the ladies manually roast then grind the coffee beans and make the brew for more than two hours filling the surrounding with the rich coffee aroma. There are typically three varieties of coffee available in Ethiopia namely Harar, Sidamo and Yigacheffe which can be bought at *Addis Mercato*, a large open air marketplace having over 120 stores and one massive shopping center with 75 stores.

Just like a French meal cannot be complete without wine, an Ethiopian meal cannot be complete without ‘*Tej*’ the local honey wine. ‘*Tej*’ is a locally brewed and consumed wine made of honey, flavored with the powdered leaves and twigs of *gesho*, a hops like bittering agent and is available in bars called ‘*tej betoch*’ literally meaning Tej houses. Tej is generally had in a laboratory flask kind vessel called ‘*berele*’ and its sweetness masks the high

alcohol content which varies greatly according to the length of fermentation. For the non-alcoholics, there is '*Spris*' which is a thick multilayered juice made of avocado and mango with strawberry or pineapple.

Ethiopia is also known as the cradle of mankind as the remains of the supposedly first ever human female have been discovered here. The remains named 'Lucy' are showcased in the National Museum of Ethiopia and a sight which should not be missed by any amateur archeologist.

The party culture of Addis Ababa is quite happening with the availability of pubs such as Jolly, Illusion and H2O which open late night and continues its patron's party mood till the early hours of the morning.

Though Ethiopia is identified as an underdeveloped country, in my experience it is one of the most vibrant and tourist friendly countries in Africa with its relaxed people and multiple offerings as a tourist destination.