

# Tombouctou

**Michael and Edmundo Travel through 8 Countries of "Remote Africa"  
In November 2008**

## Introduction

# Tombouctou

## & 8 Countries of 'Remote Africa

With Michael and Edmundo

A small gathering over tea and biscuits at Harrods is quite the smart way to meet new acquaintances at the commencement of a holiday, don't you think? My old Amex friend Edmundo and I are doing just that, except we are not sitting sipping tea from fine bone china and making polite conversation at the Harrods store in Knightsbridge; we are actually standing in Harrods Air Terminal at London's Luton Airport balancing a mug of tea and nibbling shortbread from a packet while eyeing our fellow passengers milling around us.

Strewth! What have we let ourselves in for? We are about to embark on an 18-day tour to eight far-flung countries in "Remote Africa". It has been arranged by the "out-of-the-ordinary luxury tour operator", Captain's Choice of Melbourne.

Are we the youngest of all eighty two Aussies and Brits waiting expectantly to board the privately chartered jet of Monarch Airlines? It doesn't matter. How else could we combine Mali and Madagascar in such a short period of time? I'm excited, even though I don't have a clue what to expect in most of the destinations on the tour.

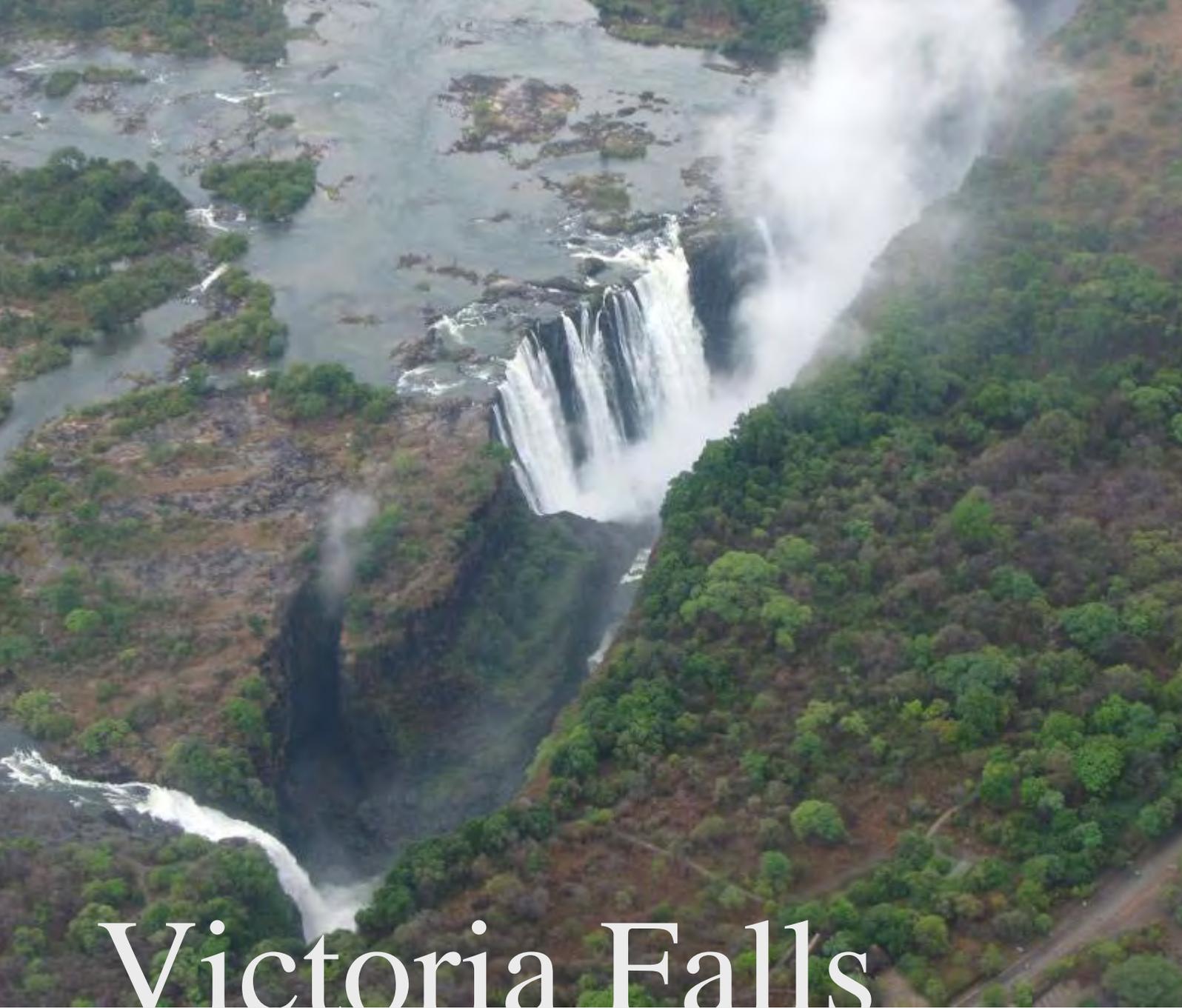
Read on! I tease you this time with ten pages of pictures of each destination, which I expect will then have you clamouring to read, in full, the nine pages of 'story' that follows. I've also included some links to other pictures that you can view with Picasa Slideshow. ENJOY!

*Front page photo: Our Tuareg tour guide in the sand hills on the edge of the Sahara outside Timbuktu wearing a modern wireless headset for all of us to easily hear his commentary.*



# Mali

Mysterious Timbuktu and Djenné with their Mud Mosques are synonymous with the ends of the earth. Mali is the largest country in West Africa and the Niger River is its most reliable traffic artery and life source. It is Africa's second longest and is as important to the people of Mali as the Nile is for Egypt.



# Victoria Falls

The Zambezi River thunders down into the gorge known as the 'boiling pot' through what appears to be just a fissure in the earth's surface. Spray rises high into the sky like a cloud of smoke.



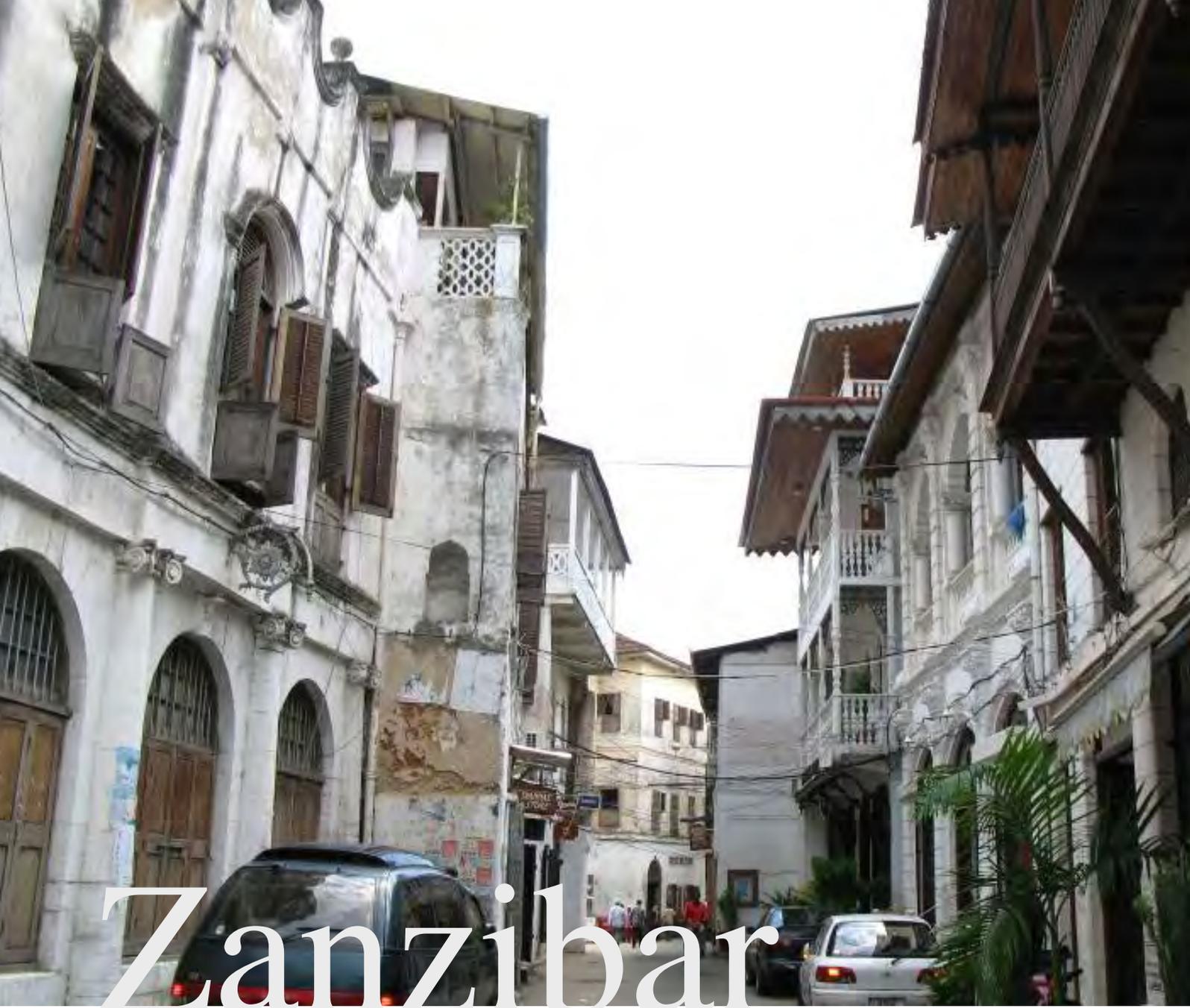
# Cape Town

A spectacular city located beneath the famous Table Mountain, surrounded by sea, mountain ranges, and beautifully planted vineyards with the traditional Cape Dutch architecture - all packed into a small area.



# Madagascar

So much of Madagascar is deforested; mustard coloured rivers run through a red landscape. The native lemur with a long bushy tail lives in the forested area of the Perinet National Park.



Stone Town is a striking product of centuries of social and cultural interaction between Africa and the lands across the Indian Ocean with identifiable Swahili, Arab, Indian as well as early colonial architectural elements blending together.



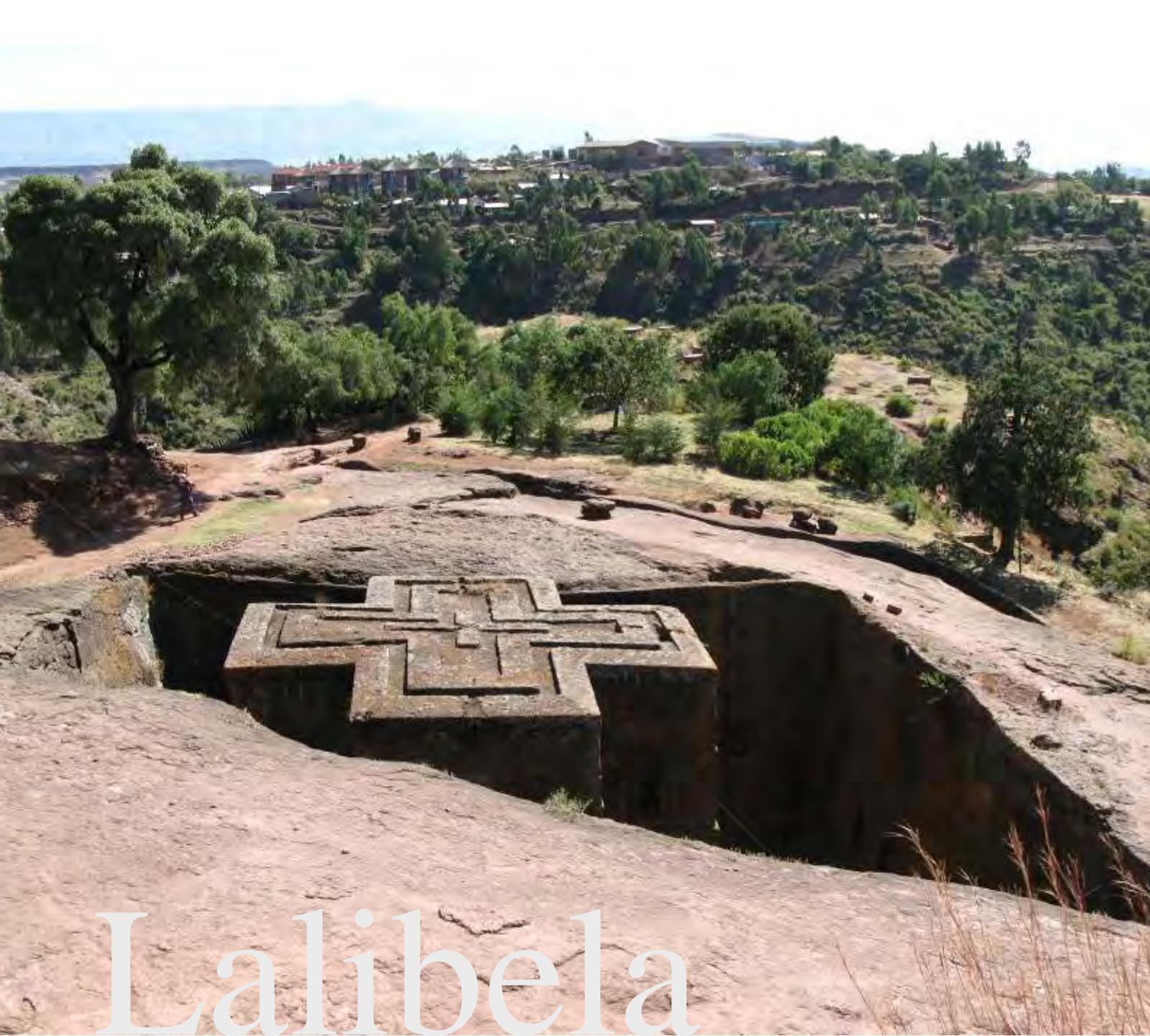
# Ngorongoro

The Ngorongoro crater game reserve is reputed to be one of the most beautiful wild-life havens on earth. It is home to 30,000 animals including zebras, lions, cheetahs, hippos and elephants.



# Lake Manyara

Baboons, blue monkeys and gazelle abound. Hippos resting at the edge of the water stir and we get to see their huge mouths as they yawn to take in air. Vivid coloured giraffes in large numbers stand gracefully in dappled shade among the trees.



# Lalibela

The show-stopper of all the famous rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in northern Ethiopia is the monolithic Church of St George in the shape of a cross; it is the last of the churches built by King Lalibela in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.



# Leptis Magna

One of the best preserved and most exciting of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman cities in the Mediterranean, Leptis Magna is located 130kms east of Tripoli. The setting by the sea with the sound of waves breaking on the shore creates a most colourful and surreal backdrop for Edmundo, Andrea, Lamin and me. This is not the best photo of the ruins, but not a bad one of the authors!



You may like to print out the next ten black and white pages for easier reading

### **Approaching Mali in West Africa**

A golden Sahara is below us but there's also an iridescent shimmering of white, tinged with teal, colouring the far horizon. Is this a mirage in the desert that I've heard so much about? Mysteriously, as we approach Mopti in central Mali, our first stop, the terracotta countryside turns into a bright green flooded landscape as far as the eye can see. How can this be out here in the desert? It turns out to be rice and a single crop is planted once every year when the river floods. Mali is the largest country in West Africa, bordered by Algeria to the north; Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea to the west; Niger to the East; Burkina Faso to the south. In the coming days we are visiting Timbuktu and Djenné, towns that are synonymous with the ends of the earth.

The light is fading as we disembark and cross the tarmac to a single unlit shed that is the Mopti airport terminal. I see in chalk on an old departure blackboard that there will be a flight from Paris after midnight but ours is the only aircraft on the ground now. We shuffle around in the half light not knowing any of our fellow adventurers. At this early stage, we are quite happy to be shunted onto a stifling hot unlit coach for the drive to the town, travelling along roads dimly lit by an occasional street lamp of very low wattage. The experience is even more mysterious as we sit obediently and silently not receiving a word of welcome or information on where we are going. The Dark Continent is living up to its name.

We stop for a moment outside the main Komoguel Mud Mosque and peer out the window to catch a glimpse from the light of small cooking fires and a few dangling bulbs that throw no more light than a kerosene lamp. People scatter and music blares from little stalls, so there has to be some electricity. Do I also recall seeing goats and bikes and donkeys pulling carts too?

We finally arrive at the better-lit Kanaga Hotel of similar architecture to the mud mosque. It is situated on the banks of the Niger River, lined with huge old trees planted up to a century ago in French colonial times. Mali emerged from French colonial rule in 1960 – a shoddy legacy of terrible roads and no national railway. The Niger is Mali's most reliable traffic artery and life source. It is Africa's second longest and is as important to the people of Mali as the Nile is for Egypt.

Our hotel is the best in town and not too bad considering. The air conditioning unit cuts in and out making a racket like a stick in the spokes of a wheel, but at least it is cooling the room. Now we need to cope with the fear of malaria-bearing mosquitoes and of cleaning our teeth with bottled water only before proceeding to dinner and heeding the tour doctor's warning to avoid salads and uncooked vegetables. A little plain pasta with some unknown sauce and a sprinkle of parmesan suffices on this first night of our deluxe tour.

### **Fellow travellers**

None of our fellow travellers are decked out in khaki and white as you might expect, but some of the eccentric Brits look as though they could very well be carrying a pith helmet in their luggage. Struggling to get a beer at the bar, I offer to get one also for two older ladies – both named Shirley and both from Brisbane. Would you believe that one Shirley had lived in Redcliffe for fifty years, the town where I was born during the war? Of course she knew my father, 'old Dr Musgrave', and all the local families whom I remember from early childhood. (Dad was all of 38 when we moved to Brisbane.) Six degrees! The other Shirley from Wynnum has a grand bearing and has come away and left her husband at home. Edmundo elevates her to 'Baroness' to avoid any confusion. As she curtsies in acknowledgement, she nearly falls over her walking stick.

Another case of 'six degrees' is the familiar face I saw in the gloom in the front seat of the bus on the way to town. It turns out to be Peter who tells me we met at friend Andrew Stuart's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday dinner ten years ago in Sydney. Apparently, I had impressed him with my then 'expansive knowledge of the internet'. I think I had just learned to turn on a computer at that stage.

An eager Marie from Brisbane approaches and tells us she's travelling alone and if we don't mind, she'd love to come 'clubbing' with us during the tour. And suggests we find somewhere tonight? After all, Mali is the music capital of Africa. African music and the blues fed into each other centuries ago from times of slave trade.

At the dinner table we have a Cathy from New Zealand who is a counsellor for people whose pets have died, but I approach the youngest fellow-traveller by far and introduce myself. Amira from Melbourne is a psychotherapist specialising in addictions and I know we'll click - maybe she'll also advise on my obsessive traits and recommend behaviour modification as we go along? The Shirleys, Marie, and Amira are to become our good buddies.

The end of my socialising for tonight comes as a pompous Englishwoman pipes up "My, my! The more Australians I meet these days, the more impressed I am - you've all come a long way!" Edmundo has already retired to prepare for Timbuktu tomorrow. This mysterious destination is probably the most compelling reason for me to be travelling on this tour.

### **Timbuktu - the "caravan terminus" at the end of the universe**

Come morning on our way to breakfast, the geckos are sunning themselves on the external walls of the hotel. Close up they look quite pre-historic. Prior to 1880, only fifty European travellers set off in search of Timbuktu, the legendary remote city situated on the north bank of the Niger at the southern fringe of the Sahara. Of the five who made it there only three returned home alive. And today it's our turn but we're going in on a locally chartered flight.

Reaching Timbuktu feels like the "caravan terminus" at the end of the universe. We are met by our Tuareg guide in full blue regalia and introduced to Abu, our 4WD driver and his smiling assistant, Oumar. Though it's an impoverished city today, it was once a thriving desert metropolis and the busiest Saharan trading centre west of Cairo. It was also the major regional centre of Islamic scholarship in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Mud brick architecture is everywhere harkening back to earlier times. We soak up the atmosphere walking around the well maintained old mud mosques, which were former universities. There's a touch of 'Disney' here with donkey carts and a few colourfully-dressed women and rag-tag kids to add some zest. We also visit the UNESCO supported museum and archives with about 15,000 locally acquired religious and secular manuscripts dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> century or earlier.

A camel ride in the sand dunes is as close as I get to experience life in the desert as a Tuareg and I ask Edmundo to catch a photo of me in the saddle. He's proud of his new little camera that he boasts is so foolproof. Alas, no photos; he can't make it work; and I discover later that he's left the chip at home! A walk through the market reinforces just how impoverished these people are. We dodge the sheep that look like goats coming down a main street and duck into a local hotel for lunch in the garden. Delicious cinnamon-sweet gravy flavours a mound of rice on my plate but I can't eat the tough old meat in the stew. I wonder what animal it was.

A frightening parallel between the once thriving caravan trade and the current global financial melt-down strikes me on the way back to the airport. We like to believe that our stock market works in cycles. However bad and prolonged a slump there is, the market always rises again. Correct? Looking back, I wonder how long it took the Timbuktu caravan traders to realise that when core changes occur,

such as the advent of maritime shipping, that cities such as theirs on the trade routes were doomed to demise, never to rise again. Are we at that point of demise? Perish the thought!

### **Djenné and the great Mud Mosque**

Djenné is the oldest known city in sub-Saharan Africa and is situated on an island in the flood lands of the Niger and Bani rivers, 354 kms southwest of Timbuktu. We travel from Mopti by minibus and ferry to reach it. On the ferry, local girls sell their trinkets and one outspoken child, quizzing me about my family, cries in disbelief, "You have no mummy and no baby. That's no good mister!" The local people are poor, but smiling. The dress is colourful but how the women appear so attractively from inside their mud brick houses amazes me.

Djenné was founded by merchants around 800 AD (near the site of an older city dating from 250BC), It flourished as a meeting place for traders from the deserts of Sudan and the tropical forests of Guinea and developed into Mali's most important trading centre during the 16th century. The city thrived because of its direct connection by river with Timbuktu and from its situation at the head of trade routes leading to gold and salt mines.

My main interest is the centrepiece of the town today - the great Djenné Mud Mosque. It was built in 1913 but it remains faithful to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century original destroyed 100 years ago. Women gather sticks outside to sell as firewood while donkeys and sheep graze in the shade of a few trees around the walls. Over lunch today we make the acquaintance of Gillian, a well preserved English rose, who lives in Geneva with her ailing husband, the toothbrush baron, Michel. Gillian was a five foot ballerina with the Royal Ballet as a girl and then went off to work in the Congo to get away from home. She carries herself like a Contessa and appears always with gloves, Dior sunglasses and her favourite 20 year-old Gucci flowered umbrella, even in the desert. Henceforth, she is addressed as 'the Contessa', but it is a few more days before she is made aware of her elevation.

### **The Monarch crew**

Another set of players are poised to take 'centre stage' in this African adventure. The flight attendants of the Monarch Airlines plane that stays with us for the duration are sunning themselves by the pool when we return so I send a tray of nice cold beers over. We're set for extra special service on board from now on. Here in Mopti, even Captain Dennis, who tells me that he took a sabbatical in the Eighties to fly airships in Australia for Alan Bond, was running a vacuum cleaner up and down the aisle of the plane as all hands on deck prepared the aircraft for the next long haul to Zambia.

The loadmaster, 22 year-old Felipe, with three stripes on his epaulettes, has more than his hands full managing all operational details of the charter flight in such remote circumstances. The fuel tanks at the airport in Mopti are insufficient to re-fuel a Boeing 757 so he has to have fuel shipped in by tanker from the capital, Bamako, several hundred miles away.

### **Zambia and Victoria Falls**

For six hours today the longest leg of our journey takes us south over Central Africa to Zambia. We had to leave Mopti early as the Captain doesn't want to risk a night landing in Livingstone without proper runway lights should there be a power blackout at the airport. Once again, the crew is beautifully groomed in a symphony of smiles and accents - Mancurian, Yorkshire, Scots, Italian and French, all too willing to serve us. Landing in Livingstone, the contrast between this former British colony and what the French left behind in Mali is palpable. Gerry and Mary from Dublin enter the country without a visa as an acknowledgement by the President of the first democratic government

for the contribution of the Irish nuns in establishing the educational system in the country. On the way to the Royal Livingstone hotel, a beautifully spoken young black woman speaks intelligently and passionately. I wonder if she was educated by the nuns. Brightly painted weatherboard shops and houses along the tidy tree-lined streets remind me a lot of rural Queensland from fifty years ago. I identify the names of all the flowering trees for the botanically-minded Ruth from Devon sitting up the front taking it all in from under the wide brim of her practical straw hat with a ribbon dangling down the back. I see giraffes eating the tops off the acacia trees in the bush as we drive up to the hotel. Not particularly impressed, Edmundo shrugs off my obvious excitement saying "Years ago in the Amazon, we used to paint the Indians and put them in the rainforest in time for the tourists' arrival".

Scottish explorer David Livingstone discovered the cataract of the "smoke that thunders" in 1855. Patriotically, he named the falls after Queen Victoria. Unfortunately we are here in the driest month of the year and there's very little smoke and thunder, let alone water. Sitting under the trees on the lawns of the hotel overlooking the sprawling river, we can see the spray from the falls even at sunset. Edmundo fails to heed the waiter's warning to keep a watchful eye out for marauding baboons and twice our canapés are snatched away from under his nose by animals smarter than he. Pulling the curtains in my room back later in the evening I see two zebras grazing, just asking to be photographed. There is plenty of smoke and thunder at the dinner table however. Edmundo, as the only American on the tour was quite in demand for his opinions on the recently elected Barack Obama. He is an avowed Republican, for which he was verbally attacked by an uncompromising, 'George Bush-hating' Australian female sitting next to him; the vitriol was so inappropriate and unladylike that Edmundo had no choice but to excuse himself from the table. 'Madam Poison' became the first of the 82 to be ignored for the remainder of the journey.

Next morning, as a torrential downpour clears, we circle the falls in a helicopter. The minimal water in the vast flood plain of the Zambezi River thunders down into the gorge known as the 'boiling pot' through what appears to be just a fissure in the earth's surface. Spray rises high into the sky like a cloud of smoke. Coming back to the hotel, I take a walk through the bush to get a closer look at the rim of the falls from the side view. Unfortunately, it's not possible to cross the bridge into Zimbabwe to see the falls front on.

### **Cape Town, South Africa**

My pre-existing image of Cape Town comes from travel posters of funnel steamships of the Union Castle Line with Table Mountain as a backdrop. But on this first visit, I am blown away (not only by the legendary south easterly wind that let up only on the morning we leave) but by the surrounding sea, mountain ranges, and tiny vineyards all packed into a small area. A Brazilian friend, Valerio, comes to collect us at the old Mount Nelson Orient Express Hotel and drives us along the coast through the smart residential enclaves by the sea to the national park at the tip of the continent as far south as the Cape of Good Hope. Yellow protea are almost the only bushes dotting the rocky wind-swept landscape, and families of baboons are having a merry time sitting in the branches eating of the juiciest blooms.

We also visit a beautifully planted vineyard with the traditional Cape Dutch architecture and taste of the local Sauvignon Blanc before stopping at a restaurant perched on the rocks next to the pounding seas at Seaforth for a prawn salad. The bleakest of weather doesn't deter us one bit. I enjoy this better than the organised bus tour to Stellenbosch next day with time allocated to walk through the tourist shops and an 'educational' tour of another winery. We venture out for dinner alone on both nights down to the Waterfront. It's buzzing. Cape Town looks to be a young, fun place but you'd really need an established network of friends to enjoy it to the full. Sidney and Nanette, where are you? Flying over the Mozambique Channel towards Madagascar off the east coast of Africa, the captain informs us that the recent weather-front in Cape Town was the worst low pressure system to settle off the coast since 1979.

## **Madagascar – more Asian than African**

So much of Madagascar is deforested; looking down, I see fingers of mustard coloured rivers looking like roads running through a red landscape. Fifty percent of the 17 million inhabitants are under the age of twenty! The island was populated more than fifteen centuries ago by Indonesian settlers, followed by others from East Africa. The Malagasy bear a much closer resemblance to the Bataks of Sumatra or the Dayaks of Borneo than the Kikuyu of neighbouring Kenya. All of these similarities to other ethnic groups and cultures are only vaguely similar to those of the nearby African continent. The terraced paddy fields have the same serenity of those of Java. The buildings at first mystify me and remind me of the chop houses in South East Asia – but I soon realise they really have French Colonial origins.

People don't seem to be working – they seem very slow and unmotivated. Edmundo has the impression that the oceans washed people from all lands and they overtook the natives – then the Arabs and Africans arrived and did little for the country; they exiled the queen, and the people lost their identity. This is truly 'Babel' according to the movie – confusion and chaos. We drive for a couple of hours into the countryside to visit the UNESCO sponsored Palace of the King known as the Blue Hill at Ambohimanga. Asian and African cultures mingle here, with close ties between the worship of ancestors and royalty, and it is the most important symbol of Madagascan cultural identity. The original Malagasy people were very small, the first king being only 1.45 meters. Some say they were descendants of East African pygmies. Unpicking history and myth could be quite a challenge, but our short-cropped, social anthropologist Dudley was having a field day with all her questions of the diminutive, knowledgeable local guide.

Half of the tour group has opted for five hours on a mini-bus on winding mountain roads to reach the Perinet National Park. From their minimal lodge quarters in the forest, they are to spend the night with a torch looking for the long-tailed lemur. Ken Turner would reach for his torch and be there in a flash, but not for me.

We stay at the old Hilton Hotel surrounded by abject poverty of Antananarivo, the capital city and get to see but not play with lemurs at the local zoo. We are advised not to venture out of the hotel alone but Edmundo and I do visit the colourful markets on Sunday morning. With our bags firmly tucked under our arms, we have a wonderful time soaking up the old French colonial architecture as much as the bunches of plump red lychees and mountains of yellow mangoes next to hanging tripe and fly-strewn plucked chickens. Eighty percent of the world's vanilla beans come from here but I don't get to see even one of the vanilla orchids. The closest I get is in a vanilla crab dish at a quaint old French restaurant that serves very decent food. The garlic and parsley of Edmundo's escargots was more tempting. Otherwise, with the whole town looking so dirty we always had the uneasy feeling of don't touch, don't eat, and don't drink.

From the very first day of the tour, white haired, ever so straight-backed sisters Prudence and Elizabeth, in sensible English florals, are destined to play starring roles in this African adventure. Where is Agatha Christie? I was fascinated watching them choose their trinket purchases from a very young mother with baby on her back on the ferry across to Djenné. Now I wait ten minutes for them to negotiate with an exasperated hotel receptionist on what to do about the only available postage stamps that are too big to put on the cards already written with only a thumbnail of space left for a stamp. Then they protest over the payment for a bottle of expensive Evian mineral water from the minibar in the room claiming that the hotel had failed to provide bottled water as promised in the tour brochure, and they needed to quench a thirst.

## **Zanzibar – an exotic mix of African, Arab and Indian**

Shortly after achieving independence from Britain in the early 1960s, Tanganyika and Zanzibar merged to form the nation of Tanzania in 1964. Zanzibar has perhaps the most exotic name of a

destination in the whole itinerary. But because of the size of the group and having to stay in a thatched resort hotel on a beach an hour out of town, it doesn't live up to its name. We are left to fantasize what could have been. We would arrive with a suntan; dress in flowing white; walk the old streets photographing the decorative Indian, Portuguese and Arab doors; siesta after a light seafood lunch on the lawns of our hotel overlooking the sea; massage, and then dress for dinner in an exotic restaurant. How does that sound? Actually, we did enjoy a BBQ and musical entertainment on the beach at our Ocean Shores Resort, where the young Monarch crew, once again, were the catalyst for getting people up and having fun.

Zanzibar Stone Town is a striking product of centuries of social and cultural interaction between Africa and the lands across the Indian Ocean with identifiable Swahili, Arab, Indian as well as early colonial architectural elements that have blended together in a unique way. In 2000 it was recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Our sightseeing tour reveals the shameful past of the slave traders and the dreadful conditions these poor wretches were held in equatorial heat without water or food for seventy two hours, bent over in cells of only half a man's height with no facilities - before being sold. It was a test to see how strong they were. Many suffocated. Those who simply collapsed or could not withstand the lashes were sold for a lower price.

Today, the Anglican Cathedral sits on this site. David Livingstone is credited with being instrumental in bringing the slave trade to an end in the nineteenth century. A beautiful retablo of figures from the Old Testament, moulded in copper brought from Zambia, surrounds the main altar in his memory. We visit the markets and our tour ends at the House of Wonders, a most imposing structure on the sea-front built in the 1880s as a ceremonial palace. Designed by the North Koreans in their typical 'Great Leader' tradition with massively high ceilings and surrounded by wide verandas, it was converted into a school and a museum for the ruling party after the Revolution.

### **Tanzania and the Ngorongoro Crater Game Reserve - the most beautiful game reserve in the world**

From what we see of mainland Tanzania, it seems to be an African nation that has its act together. The terminal of Kilimanjaro airport simply shines. The landscaping is meticulous. On our five hour trip to Ngorongoro Crater, we see people going about their daily lives in the towns and the countryside industriously. There are plenty of schools both public and private and it is compulsory for all children to attend. We are left with the question as to why one African nation can be so self-sufficient and others like Mali and Madagascar are mired in mediocrity. Could it be the French versus the British colonial legacies?

Africa may lack many modern conveniences, but penetration of mobile phones has an insidious side. Not only is there saturation coverage, but we see whole shop-fronts painted in garish colours of a particular provider. Shop after shop with cerise and aqua frontages are an eyesore and pollute the local landscape. Edmundo vows again that his first act on assuming dictatorial powers in one of these beautiful African countries will be to order removal of all signage. In Zanzibar, which is 99% Moslem, where muezzins ring out calling the faithful to prayer five times a day, he was writing to the Pope to have the ringing of the Angelus bells at Catholic churches reintroduced.

It's a long, 5½ hour drive in a wheezing 1996 Toyota Land Cruiser 4WD in the heat to the Sopa Lodge. There's a chill wind up here at 2,500 metres on the rim of the Ngorongoro crater on the eastern arm of the Rift Valley. I have a warm sweater and am sitting in a rocking chair in my glass-fronted hut taking five minutes for myself, waiting for the sun to set on this, the largest intact caldera in the world. What a peaceful scene! Due to the permanent water supply on the crater floor, a permanent population of 30,000 animals inhabit the mere 260 km<sup>2</sup> in the 600 m deep crater below in what is reputed to be one of the most beautiful wild-life havens on earth. Tomorrow we are promised an excellent chance of seeing the entire 'Big 5' from an open-top 4WD in the course of our game drive. This is a first for me. We can stand up to photograph and watch safely. Poor Edmundo doesn't make it. It's his turn to suffer the

African 'curse'. I had a day of it already, and contrary to my cautious practice to let it run its course, I followed the tour doctor's advice and hit it with an antibiotic immediately - to good effect.

I feel more at ease today than on any during the whole tour thus far. The secret is that we are a little unit of just five friends - the two Shirleys and Marie from Brisbane and Amira from Melbourne. We all like Richard our 4WD driver (particularly Amira), and I line him up to be ready to get away from the hotel before the rest of the convoy so we can get down to the animals on the floor of the caldera before any crowds. His eyes are forever darting seeing animals where I see only bushes. Zebras quickly became so yesterday but then we see our first lioness scanning the horizon. She wanders down to a waterhole to drink before climbing back to the road to sniff the tyres of the vehicles before sauntering off. We stick to graded roads and see the wildebeest and Cape buffalo while sneaky little jackals roam and lapid-faced vultures spread their wings on the lookout for their next meal. The first viewing of the cheetah is so exciting - he is sitting on his haunches with body motionless, but his head scans left to right wondering whether he is in the mood for the warthog or the gazelle grazing in the distance. At 170 kms an hour neither would have a chance if he were hungry (or is it a she who does the hunting?).

With potential death lurking at any moment, it's remarkably peaceful down here in the caldera surrounded by the high rim and colours across the floor in blues, greens, browns, and white depending on the position of the sun. We finally reach the home of the elephants in the Eleri forested area of tall yellow-backed acacias and white thorn acacia in this otherwise flat, tree-less basin. Big mounds of fresh elephant dung by the roadside alert us to the presence nearby; and up on the road ahead there he is crossing to reach a water-hole. Watching quietly for the elephant to come closer, I'm conscious of the 'quiet'. The fresh water is bubbling from a little spring in a shaded area under the trees and I comment to the girls on how restful it would be if we could just stop here and soak it all up with no other sounds to disturb the reverie.

The convoy gathers at a rather large waterhole for a picnic lunch but we are warned stay in the 4WD while eating and not to feed any little birds from left-overs in the lunch box. We're told that the circling black kites will swoop and eat the bird. Replays of the disobeying Adam and Eve and a remake of the Alfred Hitchcock movie, 'The Birds', are only narrowly avoided. The most beautiful canary yellow bird comes and perches on the open door. Shirley, Baroness Hawkins, stealthily puts some cake crumbs on a ledge under the open roof to beckon it back. Not long, as forewarned, the kites come swooping and circling in frenzy and we fear that they'll end up under our roof. I'm still here to tell the story, but the little yellow bird isn't.

Having seen three of the 'Big 5', elephant, lion, and buffalo, and more, I am content for the tiger and rhino to wait. Additional close-up sightings of two cheetahs further along the track, and a huge elephant with tusks shining in the sunshine like two white laser beams are an added bonus. Returning towards the road up the side of the crater, we see how regal is the ostrich standing tall in dry grass with the changing colours of the undulating hills now in purple and brown and walls of the caldera behind turning to blue. And we stop at the freshwater pool where so many hippopotamus lie with their heads under the water, with sacred ibis standing on their backs shining in the sun like large wet river stones. It's so much hotter in the afternoon so I decide not to pay twenty dollars to go see Masai herdsmen dance in their village, and return to the hotel to arrange for a sandwich and pot of tea for Edmundo in his room, and to tell all.

Edmundo gets his share of wildlife viewing in the nearby Lake Manyara National Park on a drive through on the way back to the airport next morning. Baboons, blue monkeys and gazelle abound. Today the hippos resting at the edge of the water are at least stirring and we get to see their huge mouths as they yawn to take in some air. Giraffes with more pronounced markings than those we saw in Zambia stand in large number in dappled shade. This makes for challenging viewing in their natural habitat, but it's so wonderful! Flying to Addis Ababa, the captain makes a couple of low circles around Mt Kilimanjaro where the normally elusive peak is clearly visible coming through the clouds today.

## **Lalibela and the 12<sup>th</sup> Century rock-hewn churches in the north of Ethiopia**

The smell of burning wood permeates the night air as we arrive at the new airport in Addis Ababa. Eighty percent of the population of this city still uses wood for cooking. Tomorrow, we have our second locally arranged charter flight of the tour. We fly an hour north to see the famous 12<sup>th</sup> Century rock hewn churches of Lalibela. It's a perfect, sunny autumn day and we climb more than 1,000 metres higher than the airport driving through agricultural lands with haystacks dotting the countryside and people gleaning the grain to get their staple food item, *ingere*. The surrounding scenery of extraordinary escarpments and flat top mountains more than makes up for missing one Table Mountain in Cape Town last week.

I was here in Lalibela earlier this year with Pam and Ken but so were the crowds of locals attending Christmas celebrations. I'm free on this trip to listen more carefully to the most interesting explanation from our local guide. I hadn't realised that King Lalibela had visited Jerusalem and returned home and built the first group of three churches to represent 'earthly' Jerusalem. The largest of these is the monolithic Church of the Holy Redeemer and is carved from a single piece of rock. The two window styles are representations of the top of the *stellae* in Axum and the cross of Christ. The show-stopper is of course is the monolithic Church of St George in the shape of a cross, the last of his churches. We do not have time to visit the 'heavenly' Jerusalem churches.

At Christmas time I stepped over wall-to-wall, sleeping, white-clad pilgrims. Today, rugs cover the uneven rock-hewn chiselled floor but they do little to protect the soles of my feet without shoes. I can't keep bending down to take off and put on my shoes at every stop, so I use my smarts and slip a dollar into the hand of a local student, Sisay, and he remains with me lifting my foot and tying the laces. It is the feast of St Michael and the sounds of chanting nearby haunts us as we continue through the other churches. Our fears of missing the service are quite unfounded as we arrive in the church and learn that the chanting robed priests have been at it non-stop since two in the morning without food or drink. The experience mesmerises Jewish Amira and she asks to be left behind while the rest of us go to lunch. "I felt I was in the temple in Jerusalem before it was destroyed", she later tells me.

## **Addis Ababa - both the Diplomatic Capital of Africa and a noisy City of Grime**

Phew!! - Back in Addis Ababa, the luxury of a day off posing simply as two independent travellers is nearly more than I can take. The comforts in the Sheraton Great Addis Hotel are so welcome. I sleep nine hours like a baby knowing that we are free today. We are not being *prima donnas*, but you can take only so much of Mary saying "How is your tummy this morning, Michael?", or softly spoken Mrs Turtle with the sing-song voice and wearing the same blouse for a week asking to turn the air higher.

Our driver/guide is a 27 year-old marketing student Petros with big round eyes like those hundreds of angels painted on the ceiling of the old Trinity and Mountain of Light Church I saw in Gondar earlier in the year. Edmundo is anxious to see the replica of Lucy at the National Museum but he is also taken by the paraphernalia surrounding the late Emperor Haile Selassie. Edmundo's father received a coveted invitation from the Cardinal Archbishop of Havana to be one of a small group of people to meet him when he visited Cuba in 1954. In the Fifties, Cuba was the most prosperous of the Latin American nations.

On our visit to the National Cathedral, Petros arranges for a most knowledgeable history student to be our guide. He turns a visit to a church into a veritable history lesson and uses a big stained glass window to re-tell the story of the Queen of Sheba - without any of the popular myth to colour the facts. She took her whole Court to visit King Solomon 900 years before Christ. The son who followed nine months later became King Menelik I and he was the first person of the Solomonic Dynasty. Other mosaics in the cathedral also provided a convenient back-drop to illustrate recent history of

Mussolini's occupation of the Ethiopian Empire, and Haile Selassie's ultimate demise at the hands of Marxists.

The *Mercato* or market here in Addis is said to be the largest in Africa – teeming with very poor people in thread-bare dirty clothing. It's not the tomatoes, bananas and chickens in a basket sort of place. It is an area of many blocks of dilapidated shops and stalls lining unpaved and dirty rocky streets strewn with litter and trash; hawkers wheel their wares; music blasts from under umbrellas and awnings of little stalls; haphazard traffic with honking cars, ramshackle old buses and trucks, trotting donkeys, and people running with goods on their backs or on top of their heads. It's noisy, but I can't call it colourful. We choose not to venture in, even to the famous ancient spice market, so instead Petros takes us to a traditional coffee house 'Tomoca' for a macchiato of the most delicious Arabica coffee grown in the Ethiopian Highlands. It's like a pharmacy inside with the different coffees on shelves around the walls and staff serving you in clean white coats.

Pam would have given her eye teeth to be taken to the back-lane store of Shumeta Leda, a specialist in beads, baskets, jewellery and silver. Of course, the original mission there to buy a few little straw pots that we'd seen at the coffee shop as place-gifts for a Christmas table setting ends up with silver Lalibela crosses and beautifully worked antique silver bracelets for coffee table display. I don't leave empty handed either. Back at the Great Addis, Edmundo and I take advantage of the garden terrace of the hotel and have a table set in the shade amongst the lavender and plumbago overlooking the pool and fountains. Instead of our now customary buffet lunch on tour, we eat sparingly only of what takes our fancy from the table inside. A cold St George beer doesn't go astray either. Now, what to wear to the farewell dinner tonight? It's been brought forward from the final night of the tour in Tripoli to tonight, so that alcoholic drinks can be served.

### **Libya - Tripoli and a visit to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Roman ruins on the Mediterranean at Leptis Magna**

Our last port of call is Tripoli in Libya. Instead of the caravanserai-style hotel we stayed in last year, we check-in to the modern, Maltese-owned Corinthia Bab Africa Hotel overlooking the Mediterranean. My tour operator friend Nasser, who looked after the Turners and me so well on our last visit, comes to the hotel with another Libyan friend, Lamin to meet us. Tomorrow, Nasser has arranged for his partner, Jamal, to take four of us privately to Leptis Magna, one of the best preserved and most exciting of the Roman cities in the Mediterranean located 130kms east of Tripoli. Andrea from the Monarch crew and Lamin join us.

As you can imagine, there's much photographing amongst the ruins. After the guests at my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday party in Rajasthan devoted so much time and energy photographing themselves on stairs, in front of columns and in door ways, the props are too inviting not to strike a few creative poses here also.

The Arch of Septimus Severus (203 AD) is a grand introduction to the architectural opulence of Leptis. East-west and north-south roads paved in stone still exist today and cross under this arch. Then along at the Hadrianic Baths, it is quite easy to visualise the lavish decoration of the white marble walls from Italy and the green cipolin columns from Greece in what is still standing or restored. The open air Severan Forum is 100 metres long with a marble covered floor. There's nothing left of the colonnaded porticoes, but well-preserved gorgon heads of Medusa on the facades between the arches still remain.

We are here alone with ample opportunity and time to sit and let the scale and grandeur of the place sink in. Our specially selected local guide, Nader, brings it all to life with his excellent commentary (and he's very patient, acting as personal photographer as well), The Severan Basilica is 92 metres long and was built to honour Bacchus and Hercules. The detail carvings in some of the stone columns are

so perfect; they could have been installed only yesterday. The Basilica served as the city's House of Justice until Emperor Justinian brought Christianity in 600 AD.

Now for the pièce de résistance; we finally reach the imposing Roman Theatre by the sea. Climbing up the steps, I don't look back. I'm waiting to get to the top to turn around and take in the sight of the semi-circular seating and columns behind the stage. The sky is ink-pot blue. Waves are breaking on the shore providing sound effects and creating the most surreal backdrop for this spectacular performance.

With the party all but over, Nasser takes us to the local fish market on the sea for dinner. The selection of gleaming fresh seafood displayed on tables outside each shop without even a whiff or a smell in mind boggling. We choose some prawns and calamari and a whole fish which the fishmonger cooks on the grill and delivers to the restaurant of our choice. This is as close as you get to fresh - from the trawler to the table, in a matter of minutes.

Since buying those few beers for the Monarch crew at the beginning of the tour in Mali, we haven't had a suitable opportunity to invite them for drinks to thank them for looking after us so well. So Nasser came to the rescue and arranged a minivan to take them to other Roman ruins at Sabratha on their free day in Tripoli. Flying home to London the next day, it was touching when they all came one by one to thank us. During this flight, Greg, the Scot of the crew, choreographed a performance of 'Mama Mia' with all the flight attendants dancing down the aisle as the music blared from the public address system. As you might expect, half the plane got up and joined in!

### **Back in London - simply exhausted**

Back in London, we are both somewhat exhausted. Edmundo has the feeling that we fell in and out of love with people and places faster than we packed and unpacked. He's calculated that comes to a total of 18 times! He's still mumbling something about the advantages of travelling on a cruise ship where you can unpack once and forget about it for the remainder of the voyage; or better still, your cabin steward will unpack for you and whisk the suitcase away. We still feel sleep deprived because of the number of times our suitcases had to be outside the door at 5 a.m., which necessitated being up an hour earlier to make sure we'd turn out properly attired for the particular schedule of the day. Also, it will be fine if we never see another buffet breakfast; lunch or dinner; but we can't ignore that we have enjoyed visits to 8 countries in remote Africa in just 18 days.

"If it's Tuesday, it has to be somewhere in Africa!"

Photos from the tour can be found on my web page:

<http://www.michaelmus.com/%27remoteafrica%27> Link to Remote Africa Web Page