



# GREEN DREAM

## A MILLION SHADES OF GREEN IN SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIA

by — Chuck Adams  
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*Is this a dream?*  
You wake up early in the morning to a chorus of black-and-white Colobus monkeys barking out territorial grunts.

*Am I dreaming?*  
You sit at breakfast, watching the steam from your cup of *jebena buna* imitate the steam rising from the dense forest canopy surrounding your hotel.

*Could this be real?*  
You ride a horse to a hot springs, duck under a natural bridge, track a pride of lions deep in the jungle, and ultimately discover that Ethiopia has a million shades of green you never knew existed.

*Where am I?*  
This dreamland is known as the Kafa zone. Located in the oft-overlooked southwest corner of Ethiopia, Kafa may lack the historical rock-hewn churches of the North, the bubbling lava of the East, or the guaranteed sunshine of the South, but it has a distinct quality that any curious traveler can appreciate. All just a day's drive from Addis.

Okay, so I might sound like some paid promoter of the Kafa Culture and Tourism

Office, but this is far from the truth. I'm a volunteer English teacher who has been serving the past two years at the Bonga College of Teachers Education. To be fair, the roads out here can be atrocious, the bus service uncomfortable and the water nonexistent at hotels. Compared to the posh Hawassa resorts or glitzy digs overlooking the Gondar castles, Bonga's hotels only offer six rooms *capable* of a hot shower. Let me be clear: there is a reason Kafa is 'off the map', but that also may be a part of its charm and allure. And, in any case, the tourist infrastructure is improving, *qes be qes*, and visiting is not only an economic necessity for Kafa's tourism, it is an ecological necessity for all of Ethiopia.

According to the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU), currently only about two percent of Ethiopia's original forest cover remains and fifty percent of that is located in southwest Ethiopia. NABU has been promoting the region for years, and, in 2010, it was instrumental in successfully lobbying UNESCO for recognition of Kafa as a Wild Coffee Biosphere

Reserve, noting that the area is a blend of unique cultural heritage as the center of origin and genetic diversity of *coffea arabica* amidst rare afro-montane cloud forest.

However, UNESCO only offers international recognition, not protection from deforestation, which continues at a regular pace. In order to protect these precious forests from the charcoal, logging and Jimma stool industries, money must be made from their non-timber forest products (honey, spices, coffee) and their eco-tourism potential. Furthermore, unless locals see the benefits of conserving the biosphere reserve, it will look like the rest of Ethiopia in the years to come.

NABU understands this very well, and it is working hard with the Kafa Culture and Tourism Office, local Participatory Forest Management teams and regional businesses to prepare Kafa for its debut on the world travel circuit. Road signs have been posted at strategic locations throughout the region to direct private vehicles to attractions, wildlife viewing platforms have been erected at wetlands, a National Coffee

Museum is set for completion in 2014, a visitor's center will be completed within the year, and the road from Addis to Bonga will also be completely asphalted. But the largest draw to the region may prove to be a page ripped from the Harar playbook.

"The growing popularity will be to see the local population of African lions", says Mesfin Tekle, project coordinator at NABU. Known by locals for several years but only recently 'discovered' by scientists, the African lions are unique in inhabiting the dense, jungle environment of Kafa. Mesfin says that a local man has been feeding the lions for years, so NABU is looking into whether this human and lion interaction can be witnessed by tourists, like the Hyena Men of Harar, only (hopefully) using less invasive means.

The hub for all this is Bonga, located 100 km southwest of Jimma. In Bonga, the main attraction will be the impressive National Coffee Museum, where visitors will be able to examine the story of coffee from its origins as a humble bean to its worldwide appeal. The coffee museum can be combined with a trip to the Kafa cultural museum and the local coffee-processing center to get the full Ethiopian coffee experience. In addition, several day trips lie within reach of Bonga that I can recommend:

### Dediben Hot Spring

This is the most developed and accessible hot spring in the area. The trailhead starts about 24 km north of Bonga on the road to Gesha, and drops down through thick forest for about 5 km on the way to this boiling stream. Horses can be arranged locally to make the excursion that much more unique and easy on the feet. Locals with health problems have set up a semi-permanent camp next to the springs, so you'll likely be sharing the healing waters with others. Nevertheless, it makes for a pleasant and refreshing way to see the biosphere reserve.

### Alem Gono Wetlands

Halfway between Bonga and Gimbo, the Alem Gono wetlands attract a bounty of wildlife to its expansive plains at all times of day, but early morning or late afternoon are the best times for a chance to see several varieties of monkeys (including the rare De Brazza's monkey), various antelopes such as reedbuck and duiker, olive baboons, and four types of mongoose. The viewing platform gives good views, however, binoculars are essential for avid birders.

### Barta Waterfall

Bonga's closest natural attraction is the Barta waterfall, a three to four hour trek (round-trip) from the center of town past leafy neighborhoods, towering eucalyptus forests and into a vast bowl of basalt columns lined with tree ferns and dense vegetation. The waterfall is a sheer 80m drop and is breathtaking when at full force in the rainy season. I would recommend taking advantage of the newly-built shelter at the waterfall to pack a picnic lunch, and be on the lookout for African harrier hawks and white-cheeked turacos; common visitors to the area. On your way back to town, stop in the home of Mirutse Habtemariam, 'The Honey Guy', who makes only the purest, highest quality honey from his hives, and will gladly show you his process if you call ahead (0917 010 366).

### National Coffee Museum

The National Coffee Museum has been a long time in the works, but its hulking behemoth (built to resemble a traditional *gojo bet*) justifies its slow construction. When complete, it will be a world-class attraction. Visitors can learn about the history of Kafa, view artifacts related to coffee history and preparation, compare several different coffee plant varieties from all over Ethiopia, and conduct research in a well-stocked library.

### Open Air Museum

Still under construction in the forests above Bonga, the Open Air Museum will exhibit endemic plants, a reconstruction of the King of Kafa's Palace, and may even someday accommodate tourists for a full-immersion Kafa experience. ▶



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99

### **Makira Wild Coffee Forest**

Birthplace of coffee? Yeah, you can find it here in Kafa: the Makira woreda, about 12 km south of Bonga. If you are short on time and not in good enough fitness to trek 8 km through undulating biosphere, plan your visit in the dry season (October through March), when a vehicle can drive to within a five-minute walk of the Mother Coffee Tree, believed to be the oldest coffee tree in the world. Nearby attractions include: the Anderacha Saint Medhanialem church, built in 1897, and God's Bridge, a natural bridge carved out by the powerful Dicha River, reachable by a 45-minute walk through the forest.

### **Wush Wush Tea Plantation**

This 1250-hectare plantation cultivates high-quality tea. While samples of its divine brew can easily be had all over Ethiopia, to visit the plantation is to see rows upon rows of the vibrant green plants demarcating the contours of the rolling hills where it's situated; a dizzying sight to behold. A guided tour and visit inside the tea processing plant still requires an official letter from Addis Ababa but hopefully this process will be smoothed out in the future. For now, anyone can freely walk the grounds and watch the harvest.

### **How To Get To Kafa**

Bonga is 446 km from Addis on a road that is ninety-five percent asphalt. The drive typically takes from eight to ten hours in a private vehicle. Due to the rough roads found in the area, a 4x4 vehicle is recommended, though any private vehicle can make it to Bonga, where local transport options can be found. You can break up the trip by spending a night in Jimma, either by taking the Selam or Sky private bus services, or by flying with Ethiopian Airlines (Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays). For true purists, there is a daily direct bus service between Addis and Bonga departing from Autobus Terra.

### **Accommodation**

**Kafa Coffeeland Hotel:** The best lodging option in Bonga town offers clean rooms with private bathrooms for 120-180 birr, depending on the room. Has a relaxing restaurant area with delicious lunch and dinner options, but it is recommended to eat breakfast outside, as it is overpriced. 0473 310 010

**KDA Guesthouse:** Rooms at this newly renovated, tastefully designed and lushly landscaped property 1 km east of Bonga town range from 100 birr for a standard double/twin to 200 birr for deluxe suites with private terraces. At the moment, only breakfast is available, but a restaurant is planned. 0920 732 146. [bonga.guesthouse@gmail.com](mailto:bonga.guesthouse@gmail.com) ●

### **TOUR GUIDES, CAR HIRE & OTHER INFO**

Kafa Culture & Tourism Office: 0473 310 485/0473 310 788/0473 310 150

Rainbow Tours: 0113 717 944. <http://rainbow.midroc-ceo.com>

Paradise Tours: 0115 513 494. <http://www.paradiseethiopia.com>

Kibran Tours: 0116 626 214. <http://www.kibrantours.com>

Kafa Biosphere Tourist Website: <http://www.kafa-biosphere.com>

