GREEN DREAM

A MILLION SHADES OF GREEN
IN SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIA

By: Chuck Adams

Photography: Chuck Adams

Is this a dream? You wake up early to the morning call of a chorus of black-and-white Colobus monkeys waking up territorial instincts.

Am I dreaming? You sit at breakfast, watching the steam from your cup of coffee seep into the aroma-filled forest canopies surrounding your hotel.

Could this be real? You ride a horse to a hot spring, tucked 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 over-exploited southwestern corner of Ethiopia, Kafa may lack the historical rock-hewn churches of the North, the bustling lives 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 pool 300-meteru away or glitzy digs overlooking the Gondar castles, Bonga’s hotels only offer six rooms capable of a hot shower. But 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 cultural infrastructure is improving, quite a bit, and visiting is not only on 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 World Coffee Biosphere Reserve, noting that the area is a blend of unique cultural heritage as the center of origin and genetic diversity of coffee and its associated ecosystems. Kafa forest.

However, UNESCO only offers international recognition, not protection from deforestation, which continues at a regular pace. In order to protect this precious forest, from the charcoal, logging and Jimmai stood industries, money must be made from their non-timber forest products (tea, 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 open within the year, and the road from Addis to Bonga will also be completely finished. But the largest show to the region may prove to be a page ripped from the Harer 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 Harer, 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 the world-wide 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 would recommend:

Dallol Hot Spring

This is the most developed and accessible hot springs in the area. The trailhead starts about 24 km north of Bonga on the road to Gedeo, and drops down through thick forest for about 3 km on the way to this hot-spring stream. Horseride tours are 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. Nonetheless, 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 the day, but early morning or late afternoon are the best times for a chance to see several varieties of monkeys (including the rare Du Beaucand’s monkey), various antelopes such as rooibok and eland, olive baboons, and four types of porcupine. The viewing platform gives good views, however, binoculars are essential for avid birders.

Banta Waterfall

Bonga’s closest natural attraction is the Banta waterfall, a three to four hour trek (round trip) from the center of town past lovely neighborhoods, towering eucalyptus forests and into a vast bowl of basalt columns lined with ferns and dense vegetation. The waterfall is a sheer 80’s drop and is breathtaking when at full force in the rainy season. I would recommend thinking out the vantage point of the newly built shelter at the waterfall to picnic a picnic lunch, and be on the lookout for African skimmer and white-breasted turacos, common visitors to the area. On your way back to town, stop in the home of Minusb Hambarem, ‘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 (0617100368).

National Coffee Museum

The National Coffee Museum has been a lifetime in the works, but its building behemoth (built to resemble a traditional coffee mill) justified its showmanship. 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 NABU funds, the museum will lie within 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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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 5 km through undulating biosphere, plus your visit in the dry season (October through March), when a vehicle can drive within a five-minute walk of the Mother Coffee Tree, believed to be the oldest coffee tree in the world. Nearby attractions include the Andicha Saint Medhanealem church, built in 1897, and God’s Bridge, a natural bridge carved out by the powerful Dicha River, reachable by a 65-minute walk through the forest.

Wash Wash 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 dappled with 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 streamlined in the future. For now, anyone can freely walk the grounds and watch the harvest.

How To Get To Kafa
Bonga is 146 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 4WD vehicle is recommended, though any private vehicle can make it to Bonga, where local transport options can be found. You can book up the trip by spending a night in Jimma, either by taking the Seli or Sky private bus service, 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 Addis Terminal.

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. For 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
EDA Guesthouse: Rooms in this newly renovated, tastefully designed and beautifully landscaped property 3 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. 0925 731 115. bongas/guesthouse@gmail.com

TOUR GUIDES, CAR HIRE & OTHER INFO
Kafa Cultural & Tourism Office: 0473 310 485/0473 310 705/0473 310 156
Kafa Biosphere Tourist Website: http://www.kafabiosphere.com
