

## Ethiopia/Djibouti/South Africa Summary - November 2004

This was my first time to sub-saharan Africa and the experiences ranged from camping in Ethiopia's Omo Valley to 5-star accommodations in South Africa and Botswana.

The trip had four phases:

The Omo Valley 10 days (custom trip)

Ethiopia's Northern/Historic route -- 2 weeks (with Explore Worldwide)

Djibouti - 10 days (Explore Worldwide)

South Africa - 2 weeks (Passport Travel)

I did the Omo valley on my own - but not completely -- had a driver, guide, cook and cooks helper! Having an entourage was a fabulous experience and visiting the tribes of the Omo Valley was the most exotic experience of the lot. I booked directly with Travel Ethiopia in Addis Ababa ([www.travelethiopia.com](http://www.travelethiopia.com)) which had come recommended. I sent inquiries to about 15 companies and Travel Ethiopia provided the best itinerary at the best cost. Other quotes ranged from \$1100 (all camping and we do our own cooking) to \$5000 (included 5 - star accommodations in Addis).

Aseffa Ayale, my guide, spoke the Omotic languages as well as English, Italian, French and German! He is well known by the local headmen which gave me easy entree into their communities. Mothers took me around their huts or tents and let me hold their babies. They showed me their jewelry and other belongings. I got some amazing photos as they also enjoyed posing for me! In the Mursi village (where women wear clay plates in their lower lip), they delighted in pinching me like sizing up a chicken at the market!

Two weeks on Ethiopia's Historic Route (what 100% of tourists who come to Ethiopia do, while only 10% get to the Omo Valley) was a great cultural experience. I booked with Explore Worldwide and we had a full group of 16 with a well-experienced guide. This was one of the first countries to accept Christianity and its emperors trace their lineage to Solomon and Sheba. Haile Salassie (died in 1972) was the last emperor. Explore travels "close to the ground" and except in Addis Ababa we stayed in locally run places. One "hotel" in Debark staging area for a trek in the Simian Mountains, was one of the most basic hotels I've ever stayed in. In contrast, Ethiopia has several grand cities - now tattered and faded: Lalibela, Gondor, Axum (where the Ark of the Covenant is reputed to be). This was a bit of a hard trip so the next phase, Djibouti was a welcome few days.

Dolphin Excursions (Djibouti City) caters mostly to Germans, French and Italians and diving programs. And they have just put a eight cabin Turkish-style gulet into service. We had 9 -- 5 from the Ethiopia trip, and 4 who flew in from London for the 10 days of French food, French guide and a wonderful atmosphere. We cruised the Bay of Tadjoura, at the tip of the Red Sea, which is perfect for snorkeling and dives were arranged for those who wanted. Each day we snorkeled, explored little villages, hiked in the unique terrain -- this is where the last desolate scenes of the first "Planet of the

Apes” , where Charlton Heston finds the Statue of Liberty were filmed. There were two optional trips, one which was 8 hours (each way) in 4X4's and camping in the desert. Since I had done a lot of off-road in the Omo Valley, I told the guide I would stay on the boat. Turns out I was the only one who did and it was great -- the captain and I snorkeled, fished, went looking for shells, and caught sight of Whale Sharks -- we even tried swimming with them (they only eat plankton), but couldn't catch up with them in the motorboat.

Djibouti is a hard country to fly out of and in order to get to Capetown, South Africa, I had to fly back to Addis Ababa, wait two days then catch a series of 3 flights that was the only combination possible to meet my next group.

It was one of the hardest transitions I've ever made traveling -- going from a developing country where, in some areas people do not wear clothes, to Capetown and 5-star accommodations -- all in one day.

I now joined Passport Travel, ([www.passporttraveltours.com](http://www.passporttraveltours.com)) an American company - and a group of 16 people of which I was the second youngest! The owner and guide, Bill Ball, is a specialist in South Africa and has gone on to make series of documentaries on the area, which run in PBS. After four days exploring Capetown - which is so beautiful, it sparkles -- we went to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe and continued to Chobe National park in Botswana. The lodge was fabulous -- all the rooms overlooked the river filled with hippos, elephants and an occasional crocodile. Monkeys played in the trees and colorful birds were all over the place. I don't know how it happened but I was assigned a two-bedroom suite with one of the most beautiful bathrooms I've ever seen. I figured this was God's way of evening things out (i.e. Debarik in Ethiopia). We did two safari drives each day - some at night and some on a boat. One day, two others and I went into Namibia just to walk in some villages as the border post was just a 20 minute boat ride away.

We continued to Pretoria where lavender Jacaranda trees were in full bloom, then four nights at Kruger National Park. In all our game viewing we saw 148 species of animals and birds which Bill (the guide) said is a record for any of the groups he's taken to South Africa.

After six weeks of travel I needed to get home in time to vote. At various times while traveling I got into political discussions - mostly with Europeans -- always very interesting.

Since coming home, I've survived workmen putting new exterior doors on our house; a complete overhaul of our heating system; and Thanksgiving. Joe and I leave for Mexico Dec. 6th -- he is going kicking and screaming, but he's going.