



**summit** 

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**KNOW YOUR MOUNTAINS:** *Ras Dashan, 15,158 feet, is the highest point in Ethiopia. Though not a technically difficult ascent, it requires about four days from the nearest road to cross the steep gorges and high passes encountered on the way. Photo by Arlene Blum. See article on next page.*



*Looking down from the escarpment.*

**By Arlene Blum**

Addis, Ethiopia  
January 1, 1972

Dear M.

We have just returned from ten days' walk through the high Semyen mountains of Ethiopia. Much of this region is over 12,000 feet in elevation; consequently it is known as the "Roof of Africa." It is quite a rugged area with a precipitous escarpment falling abruptly away for three to four thousand feet from the peaks. Nearly vertical rock, covered with baboon defecation and moss, connects the high plateau to the lowlands.

There are no roads in the Semyen yet, and all commerce and communication is conducted on the rough caravan trucks that we followed to the peaks. The straight-line distance from Debarek to Ras Dashan, the highest point in Ethiopia, is only about 35 miles, but it takes around four days

to cross the steep gorges and high passes encountered on the way. Even more rugged than the terrain are the hardy Semyeni people who live and work there much as they have for thousands of years.

The Ethiopian Tourist Office (ETO) in Gondar helped us find a young student, Awell Hagos, who served most ably as our interpreter. We bought all our food in Gondar although the selection was somewhat limited. It would probably have been better to buy it in Asmara or Addis. Prices for canned food were high, but we were able to buy some of our food very cheaply at the local market.

The origins of our packaged food were diverse. A typical lunch was Bulgarian jam and Danish cheese on English crackers with Malasian pineapple and Israeli chocolate. Peanut butter was our sole purchase imported from the U.S.

After several pleasant days spent buying and eating food in Gondar, the three members of our

# STROLLING THROUGH THE SEMYEN

*Photos by the Author*

party, and our interpreter took a local bus to Debarek, about sixty miles north. The 3½ hour ride cost 80 cents for each of us and for our nine gunnysacks full of food and camping equipment. The small bus was totally full, and then twenty more people got on, everyone gesticulating and talking excitedly. Entertainment tax for the ride would have been appropriate.

After much haggling in Debarek, we agreed to pay \$4.40 a day for three horses to carry some of our things and two horse drivers who knew the way to Ras Dashan. With difficulty, we managed to persuade the owner of the horses that we would rather walk than ride horses, which may be rented for \$1.00 a day. A couple of years ago, armed guards accompanied most caravans, but now all the "shiftas" have been moved from the area, and it is quite safe to travel unarmed.

We checked in at the best hotel in town — forty cents a night, with very clean mud walls. Although we put the mattresses on the floor, we

acquired an assortment of the local fauna there. For dinner we had the staple food in Ethiopia — enjera and watt. Enjera, a spongy sour bread fermented from teff, a cultivated grain, and watt, a highly spiced stew, are eaten three times a day by those Ethiopians who can afford it.

The next morning, our horse drivers loaded our supplies on the three horses. We departed at 9:00 a.m. (3:00 Ethiopian time) for Sankaber, about seven hours away in the Semyen National Park. The dusty steep trail was always crossing over passes or descending to dry river beds, gaining about 1,500 feet in elevation this day.

Near Sankaber, we crossed through a herd of many hundreds of Gelada baboons and began getting views of the fantastic Ethiopian escarpment. A number of European zoologists live at Sankaber, studying the Gelada baboon, the Walia Ibex, and the Semyen fox, animals unique to this region.

There was plenty of water and wood at Sanka-

ber as at most of our other campsites. The horse drivers dined on a handful of roasted grain and then uncomplainingly spent the night crouched around the fire wrapped in a few shreds of blankets. The temperature was below freezing. We wished that we'd bought them blankets and socks at the market in Gondar. Instead, we let them use our extra socks which developed a most impressive odor.

With the morning sun came an almost instant change from cold to hot. For breakfast we had a dozen fresh miniature eggs costing twelve cents or four empty tin cans. Four hours' walk later, we reached Geech, the headquarters of Semyen National Park. For \$4 we bought a sheep which provided us with dinner for the next five days. The game scouts butchered the sheep and were most pleased when we gave them the skin and head. Great vultures, buzzards, and other large birds of prey soared down and greedily gobbled up the few entrails that our horse drivers did not want.

The third day, three game scouts took us to look for the Walia Ibex, a rare animal found only on the great escarpment of the Semyen. Unlike U.S. parks, the Semyen has very few visitors — the twenty or so who go there each month receive VIP treatment. We saw the Walia only as specks in a telescope as they were so far away. Joel and Toby scrambled around the escarpment for a while amidst families of quarreling Gelada baboons.

The fourth days' walk was short and pleasant. Word that I'd brought a huge bag of hard candies to give to the children we met spread faster than we walked. Everywhere I'd be followed by cries of "caramello" from the children, and with offers of a horse to ride from the adults. No one could understand why the rich "ferangi" insisted on walking and carrying their own rucksacks. Our camp was near Chenik, an idyllic site a few hundred feet from the edge of the escarpment, between two clear streams flanked by giant lobelias and trees dripping moss.

Next day, we crossed Buahit Pass at 14,000

feet on the main caravan trail. Six hundred feet higher, we were on the summit of Buahit, the second highest peak in Ethiopia. From the top, we looked down the steep escarpment side of the peak where the volcanic rock is reasonably sound and should provide some good routes.

After the pass, we dropped 4,000 feet in a mile or so to a campsite next to the church at Chin Walaba. Apparently not many "ferangi" visit this region for half the village crouched on a small bluff above our camp staring at us all evening. We found the Ethiopian mountain people to be exceedingly strong, honest, and friendly. Most are devout Christians, but there are several Moslem settlements in the Semyen. Life goes on here just as it has for thousands of years. Wheat and teff grow in the steep field from which the rocks have never been cleared. The grain is pulled out by hand, and thrown into the air to separate out the lighter chaff. Nothing has changed.

Sitting around the campfire, we told our horse drivers that men had walked on the moon. They did not believe us.

The sixth day was the longest. We descended to the river at 9,500 feet and then went back up to the summit of Ras Dashan at 15,158 feet. A group of men carrying an ill man back to Debarek went by. They had just crossed the 14,300-foot pass by Ras Dashan, would descend to the river at 9,500 feet, up over Buahit Pass, and up and down for about fifty miles. It later took us almost four days to reach Debarek from there. They planned to carry the sick man out in 1½ days. Incredibly tough people!

The track we were following passed through hot and dry desert, then farmland, and then giant heather and lobelias. The horses, horse drivers and our interpreter stayed at a good campsite at 13,200 feet, while we followed the caravan track to the pass at 14,300 feet.

After crossing a boulder-strewn plateau, we found several campsites on soft dirt shielded from the wind by a natural boulder wall about fifty feet below the summit. Leaving our sleeping bags



*One of our horsemen guides.*

*A herd of baboons.*





*Some local people watch as we prepare to camp.*

there, we scrambled up solid rock to the top. The sun set — glowing pink and orange.

Next morning my sleeping bag was coated with frost and a water bottle that had been left out was frozen solid. On the summit a second time, we were probably the first people in Ethiopia to see the sun that day. Then we went down, down and back up again to our old campsite by the church. Again the villagers sat and stared, still mesmerized by the strange “ferangi.”

Next day we crossed Buahit Pass and spent another pleasant night at Chenik. For dinner we had Semyen chicken. Forty cents for a remarkably tough bird! Our final night in the Semyen was back at Sankaber eating another amazing Semyen chicken and popcorn to the strains of the Brandenburg and the Beattles from the phonograph of one of the English zoologists.

We reached Debarek in about four hours the next morning encouraged by the thought of not

having to spend another night in the Debarek Hilton. The bus for Gondar left at two and we were on it, full of tea, enjera and watt. Unfortunately, some of the other passengers were full of “Tella,” the local brew, and even more unfortunately, they did not stay full of it. Back at the Imperial Hotel in Gondar, one of the waiters told me that I looked as dirty as “the ignorant peasants who live in the Semyen.” If only I were as strong!

Sincerely,  
Arlene Blum

If you would like to visit the Semyen National Park of Ethiopia, you can obtain information from Miss Meta Belachew, Planning and Research Department, ETO, Box 2183, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, or Mr. Kifle Seyoum, ETO, Box 22, Gondar Ethiopia. Also Mr. Awell Hagos at the above address is an interpreter that we recommend. Ask ETO in

*A part of  
the escarpment.*



Addis for a free copy of "The High Semyen, Roof of Africa." Mountain Travel, Oakland, California, sometimes organizes trips to the Semyen.

We saw some very interesting looking rock towers and pinnacles to the north of the Ras Dashan area. Apparently it would take an additional week or so to make a loop to the north giving the opportunity to climb these peaks, which probably have many good unclimbed routes. The escarpment itself has great potential for the se-

rious rock climber. The rock is reasonably sound although moss-covered and has many interesting looking lines as long as 2,000 feet.

The cost of horses, horse drivers, translator, food, and bus fare for the ten-day trip was \$40 each. The dry months are between September and February and in May. Probably September and October are the best times to visit the Semyen as the country is then green and fresh from the long rains.