

Daily Life in Addis

Living in Addis Ababa, let alone Ethiopia, after so long a time away, has been interesting. Unlike my stay in rural Emdebir as Peace Corps volunteer secondary school history teacher during the latter 1960s, daily living this time around is considerably different, and yet, with elements of continuity.

In the 1960s, the total population of Ethiopia was 23 million, and Addis had a population of 450,000. Today, Ethiopia's population is around 80 million, and greater Addis has a population of over 5 million. The demographic change alone has placed enormous pressure on the landscape, and Ethiopia has struggled to keep an aging infrastructure at least somewhat in step.

A Skyline Transformed

In the 1960s, Addis was a sprawling town whose roads largely reflected old trading paths taken by merchants to and from the city. They meandered over hilly terrain rather than went in some radial or grid pattern that is found in many cities today. Commercial buildings lay largely on key roads or transit intersections of the city - the Piazza, the Mercato, Sidist Kilo, and Arat Kilo, being among them.



Bolé International Airport, Addis Ababa, 1965



Bolé International Airport, Addis Ababa, 2009

You can still see many structures today that date back to at least the 1960s if not well before - the Ministry of Education at Arat Kilo, the University at Sidist Kilo, Berhana Selam Printing Press off Arat Kilo, the Bank of Abyssinia in the Piazza, the State Theater at the base of Churchill Road, the Ethiopia Hotel, the Ras Hotel, and the former Itege Hotel. Some of these buildings have been maintained or renovated, while others have the fading glow of times gone by.



City Hall, Addis Ababa, 1968



City Hall, Addis Ababa, 2009

At the same time, Addis has a proliferation of new buildings, many still in an active construction phase, and they reflect an ambitious attempt to change the face of Addis as a modern city. The way this is unfolding, particularly since the fall of the Derg in 1991 and the Meles regime, has been a wholesale pattern of road construction, notably what is known as the Ring Road around Addis Ababa's central arteries (a replication of Beijing's Ring Road that is being done by Chinese engineers as part of China's interest in Ethiopia's commercial trade, notably prospective deposits of oil and natural gas), and massive removal of traditional tin-roof mud houses in neighborhoods that traditionally lacked regular road access, electricity, indoor plumbing for sanitation and drinking water, and for which were generally thought of as slums. In their place, buildings are going vertical - lots of higher rise structure throughout the city for residential and commercial use. And much of the financing of this construction has been driven by private remittances to Ethiopia, which have been considerable in recent years.



Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, 1967



Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, 2009

As the landscape of Addis changes, the city is hard put to complete road surfacing, sidewalk surfacing, water and sewage connections, in addition to landscaping. However, it is clear from even the most casual comparisons with life in the 1960s that Addis has far more completed roads than before, and that the proportion of traditional neighborhoods has been declining. It is remarkable that this takes place even as urbanization and population growth take place, and I sometimes wonder what happens to displaced populations in neighborhoods slated for large-scale apartment and commercial buildings.



Arat Kilo, Addis Ababa, 1967



Arat Kilo, Addis Ababa, 2009

Despite the growth of roads and neighborhoods, Addis' land area remains relatively fixed. Urban dwellers now wind up paying for firewood that some were still able to gather at near zero costs from neighboring hillside eucalyptus groves. One result of this is that urban dwellers use a higher proportion of stoves than in the countryside, and they use a higher percentage of charcoal than in the country. Addis also is the location of most natural gas and kerosene stoves for cooking and heating. As to other forms of energy, Addis has a higher concentration of pollution than it did years ago - there appear to be no controls over emissions, and the major traffic jams that clog the streets give the city a Los Angeles 1960s haze that can burn the eyes and throat if you are not used to it, and even if you are, it can be bothersome at best.



Addis Ring Road Construction, 2009



Addis Pushkin Square Traffic Circle, 2009

Public Transport

Although Addis has an exploding number of vehicles on its streets, it also has one of the most efficient mass transit systems anywhere. Taxis these days are mostly aging Soviet-era Lada's, which were built on a joint venture basis in Togliattigrad by Fiat, and based on the Fiat 124 model. These days, you can find cars with loose steering, door cranks missing, and the like, but they do keep running because most Ethiopians can not afford to buy the most logical replacement, namely, a Toyota Corolla. And, because gasoline is relatively expensive (around

\$U.S. .80 a litre), you can still find drivers rolling downhill with their engines cut off from time to time, just to save a bit on expenses.



Addis Gojo Style Gas station, Churchill road, 2009

Taxis can cost a lot, in relative terms. I have been paying roughly \$U.S. 8.00 for a one-way trip from our apartment in the south of the city to the Sidist Kilo University campus where I have been teaching. In comparison, if you have a bit of patience, you can take one of Addis' many mini-vans (they are mostly the Toyota Hiace models), that can get you over the same distance for about \$.45-.50. These mini-vans have the same blue and white color as the in-city taxis, and fares are standardized, while taking a taxi may require pre-entry fare negotiations that can test your skills in Amharic from time to time. The city still has government owned Anbasa yellow and red buses, and they are always full, so the overload is handled by the mini-vans and taxis, in addition to those traveling individually in private vehicles.



Addis Taxi and Donkey Transport, 2009



Addis Toyota Hiace Minibuses, 2009

In this context, let me note that Ethiopia in general, and Addis in particular, are known for being one of the most dangerous places in the world in terms of traffic accidents. We experienced a near death event some weeks ago right in our neighborhood. We had just finished dinner, and an electrical outage left the streets in near total darkness. As we crossed a zebra striped intersection a Mercedes came on us at nearly 60-70 kilometers per hour. We tried to get out of the way as the car bore down on us, until finally we both fell to the road as the car came to a halt. It was within 5 centimeters of each of us. The driver, a young man perhaps having eaten too much tchat (a local stimulant) never got out and in hip language, asked "hey man, are you alright?"

Somehow each of us were just dazed a bit and I stood up and calmly asked him why he felt it so necessary to drive so fast, to which he had no answer. We got up and as we crossed the street, our feckless drive sped off. We were quickly approached by some local Ethiopians who asked if we were hurt, and we said that we were not aware of any physical harm, just the trauma of being nearly run over. The significance in all of this is that it reinforced our decision not to buy or even rent a vehicle to get about, and to take our chances, such as they are, in public transport. Needless to say, we now walk streets at night with a flashlight, even if the street lamps are lit.

Electricity in the city

Electricity shortages in Addis are fairly commonplace. Ethiopia derives all but a tiny fraction of its electricity from hydropower, notably the Koka Dam south of Addis that was built as reparations by the Italian government in the late 1950's. Although there now are projects to expand hydropower along the Blue Nile basin, and I have come across plans for some wind farms north of Addis, so far these have not prevented the periodic load-shedding that is so characteristic of daily life in Addis (and anywhere else in the national grid system).

Outages are more frequent at this time of year because the rainy season has not arrived in sufficient quantities to replenish the reservoirs that are used to generate electricity at Koka dam and elsewhere. For some, this means having a ready stock of candles and flashlights on hand to get through whatever part of the day/evening when an outage occurs. For others lucky enough to have standby generators, it means the din of truck engines churning out backup power whenever the national grid has a sectional load shed.

We happen to live in a building where the latter applies, and so we have not had to endure the bother of interruptions to our computers and television reception except in the most limited of circumstances. My sense is that probably no more than 10 percent of Addis residents have a dependable back-up generating system, and most of these are servicing wealthier sections of the community, meaning that those living in more traditional housing can add electrical outages to the list of unavailable amenities already noted above.

Addis also displays a shift to energy conservation in cooking. Open hearth fireplaces are increasingly rare as the cost of fuelwood soars from deforestation in greater Addis. As a result, more households are shifting to stoves to bake injera as well as to do regular cooking.



Addis injera and regular cooking stoves, 2009

Food in Addis

Eating in Addis means whatever combination of food shopping you plan to do for cooking at home, or what may (or may not) be available through local restaurants. Addis has a nice range of restaurants that serve not only traditional Ethiopian dishes, but some that cater to international tastes as well. We have not found any sushi places in Addis, nor have we found any fast food chains that you would find in so many other places around the world.



Addis New York Super Market, Bolé road, 2009

There are stores that claim to be supermarkets, but they would qualify at the bodega neighborhood level convenience store for the most part in Europe or the U.S. And while there are some items of interest to foreigners, e.g. wine, French butter, brownie mix, and the like, for the most part, they have an array of goods similar to that found even in the smaller local food shops. Ethiopian bread is different from what you would find elsewhere - it tends to flake easily and does not last that long, perhaps because Ethiopians are more used to eating injera (Ethiopia's teff grain bread) than they are the pursuit of that perfect croissant (non-existent to our knowledge in Addis) or baguette (ditto).

All of this said, you can eat amply in Addis and do so inexpensively on a European budget (a top-end meal for two might be in the neighborhood of \$U.S. \$25-30, and regular fare can be on the order of \$10-12). If you eat at a local Ethiopian restaurant, you can pay something on the order of \$U.S. 4-5 with a beverage. To all of this, let me add that Ethiopia has a nice selection of beer - St. George is the standby favorite, but you also can buy Castel and Harar beer as well in many restaurants and shops. Of course, Ethiopian restaurants also serve an array of soft drinks, Coke, Pepsi, Fanta, Mirinda, Seven Up, etc, in addition to available quantities of tedj (Ethiopia's honey mead), and araki (Ethiopia's answer to Ouzo, Sambuca, etc.). With all of these choices, we have been advised not to drink tap water, nor to eat fresh salads, and we generally have not done so, nor have we become sick from our periodic risky choices to eat those salads at selected restaurants. Bottled water is available in a variety of brands, and all appear fairly safe.



Addis Samet Restaurant, Bistrate Gabriel Section of town, 2009

In terms of our own eating patterns, we generally have breakfast at the apartment, occasionally lunch when we don't have a school schedule day, and mostly eat dinner in local restaurants. We have all but exhausted the limited menus of the local restaurants to which we walk in the evenings, largely because power outages complicate the return trips to our neighborhood - when the street lights are out, it is very dangerous to be on the road, whether driving or walking.

As to our personal transportation, we decided early on not to buy a vehicle for the limited time we would be spending in Ethiopia. We get about mostly by mini-vans and a dedicated local taxi driver recommended to us by a friend back in the U.S. This seems to have worked well, and we have been fortunate to have friends and colleagues who have filled in the gaps with transport to other places, e.g., Emdebir, the village where I live back in the 1960s during my Peace Corps days.

Apartment Living in Addis

Our apartment is in a brand new building, complete with an elevator to our 5th floor (called the 4th because the ground floor is the first). We have a satellite television receiver that brings us the BBC, CNN, France 24, Aljazeera, and many other stations on the Nile satellite service. It is an interesting combination, particularly the chance to see what is broadcast from a place like Iran in response to various U.S activities in the Middle East.

We also have a clothes washing machine, an example of a growing mechanical convenience in the newer parts of Addis even though most households do their laundry in washtubs. But we do hang out our laundry to dry with clothespins on our balcony since the clothes dryer machine has not been able to work since we came. And we also have access to a dry cleaning service just down the road. The prices are comparable to what they are in the U.S. and service takes a week, but the result is every bit as good as anywhere.



Villa in Bisrate Gabriel section of town, 2009

One result of all of this apartment lifestyle is that we do not have a retinue of household help. Had we chosen to live in a villa, we would have needed a cook, a dishwasher, a night guard, and the like. That might have helped local employment, but it would have complicated our lives in ways that I did not even have to address back in my rural days in Ethiopia years ago.

The sights, sounds, and smells of Addis.

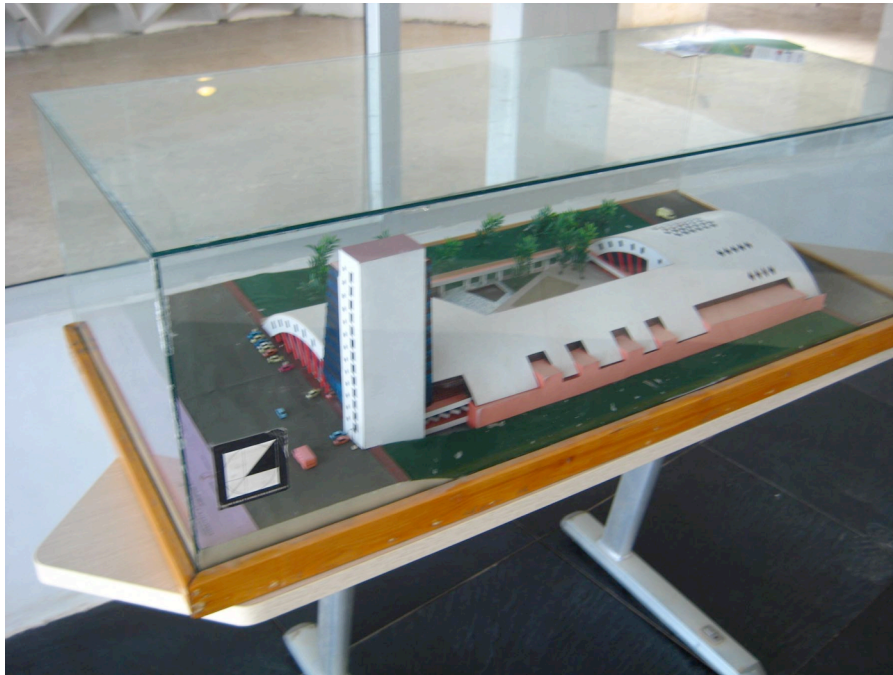
Despite the differences in size, Addis has something old and something new for the visitor. The changing landscape I have already described. In addition, Addis is a lot more sophisticated a city than it once was. You can see this in terms of the kinds of clothing men and women wear. There are fashionable boutiques catering to the urban sophisticates with the latest styles from abroad. You still see well dressed men in suits at fashionable bars and restaurants, either with family, and/or with friends, in a sign that there are moments of tranquility even in an often stressed city lifestyle.

Because Ethiopians have much more ready access to satellite television, they are far better informed on world issues, and many speak with frustration over how Ethiopia's two local television stations seem to carry so little of substance about events here at home. There are lots of newstands around, and Ethiopians have a much higher literacy rate today than they did back in the 1960s. Some of this reflects the emphasis on literacy made by the Derg under Mengistu Hailemariam, perhaps one of the more unquestionable changes that took place during the 1974-1990 period.

Sounds and the Arts.

We wake up many mornings to the call to prayer by the local muzzein from his minaret somewhere in our neighborhood. This soon is followed by chanting from the Bisrate Gabriel church nearby. At times it seems almost as though there is chanting warfare, with an intermezzo

by one or the other until the dawn is fully under way. All of this punctuated by the nightly barking of dogs throughout the city. They serve as night guards and probably more than earn their keep, even though we have heard of few instances of burglaries since we have been here. And then there are the rooster calls in the early morning. The roosters may not be calling anyone to pray, but they have voices as loud as either the muzzein or local priests doing their duty. At times, we get a chorus – the muzzein, the priest, the roosters, and the dogs all calling at once. Would it only be that it were harmonic in some fashion. Then there is the playing of popular music.



Addis Lifo Cultural Center, Bisrate Gabriel section of town, opened in June 2009



Addis Recycled Metal Miniature Train, Lifto Cultural Center, 2009

The recently deceased Tilahun Gessesse, perhaps Ethiopia's greatest popular singer in the 20th century, can be heard among the many other varieties of music blaring out of Ethiopia's local café's, taxis, and individual houses, mostly during the evening hours. Ethiopia's music scene is lively these days. Not only is there the classic sounds of someone such as Tilahun, but also others whose style embraces elements of reggae (no doubt due to Bob Marley's presence in Ethiopia - there even is a traffic circle named in his honor), hip hop, rap, and a touch of the blues, in addition to strains of modern jazz from time to time. Ethiopians seem to have become much more eclectic in their musical tastes, and it is the sheer variety, including a touch of classical, blues, and rock and roll, reflect the cosmopolitan nature of social life in the city, much more so than in the countryside, even though you can find satellite television and music videos in some of the more rural communities today.

Ethiopia abounds with budding entrepreneurs. There is a lively market in contemporary art, mostly painting, that can be seen in local galleries. You also can find a Soho-style approach to marketing, namely, art in restaurants. We haven't done much of this but have seen some examples in newer neighborhoods such as Bolé road, on the way in and out of the airport.

Smells.

Addis was founded in part because Emperor Menelik II decided to establish large eucalyptus plantations in the hills outside the city. You can still pass by neighborhoods and smell burning eucalyptus leaves, something that you probably would not detect in any other city in Africa. And then you can smell the spices being sold in local shops, or from local cooking pots in kitchens throughout the city. To this you also can smell the flavor of Ethiopian coffee beans being roasted over metal pans. All of this reinforces an exotic sense of place.



Flowerbed in Addis, 2009

I should add that Ethiopia has its local equivalent of Starbucks - Kaldi's coffee. It is a chain that makes excellent macchiato, cappuccino, and the like, along with nice little cakes that tempt you away from any dietary illusions you may have been having.



Macchiato and dessert at Kaldi's Coffee, Pushkin Square, 2009

Against all of this is the smell of human waste. There still are open sewers in various places and the stench of human and animal waste can be unbearable. And what is striking is to see poorer residents go down to an open untreated stream, lift out water and either drink it or use it in washing clothes or household wares. That is how cholera breaks out in places like Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia always has had some degree of risk of an epidemic because of the failure to foreclose open access to untreated water. While I don't have a picture to share, there was a water main pipe break in front of the Ethiopian Television Broadcasting building, not far from the state theater. I saw a woman with a dishpan collecting water from a pothole to wash her clothes, apparently oblivious to the passing cars that easily could have hit her by accident as they flew by. Animal smells abound in the streets of Addis as well.



Addis Slaughtered Goat Skins and Heads, Bistrate Gabriel section of town, 2009

While some parts of the city have closed off all such traffic, in other places such as our neighborhood, there is a regular stream of goat herders and occasional cattle herders bringing their flock to open fields for sale and slaughter right on the spot. We have not seen any direct cattle slaughtering (there is an abbatoir in the city with its own particular bouquet), but you can find regular deposits of goat skins and chicken feathers in piles along the walking paths just near the open streets in such places as our own neighborhood. No doubt this is a guarantee of fresh meat in response to intermittent supplies of electricity, but it also reflects the historical open air aspects of Addis as a market town that are only now beginning to disappear. That also applies, by the way, to the Mercato, once one of Africa's largest open air markets, but which is now gradually being displaced by many local "supermarkets" and convenience stores that ply not just food but also anything of a household or construction nature for which local Ethiopians are willing to trade.

In short, you can ride in a mini-van, smell great coffee at one point and garbage piles right afterward. What should be kept in mind is that in all of this, Addis Ababa has a crew of street cleaners who do a remarkable job of picking up the debris from the streets and footpaths every day. And to this I should add that you can find recently landscaped medians in the roads.

Health Care in Addis

For the most part we have not had any major health problems living in Ethiopia. Prior to our arrival, we took a recommended series of immunizations and boosters, but none of these seem to apply to Addis these days. The most traumatic health episode I experienced years ago was dengue fever (twice), and this time around, seem to have been blessed with nothing more than an occasional case of indigestion. As to Danièle, however, she has had some health issues, primarily what appears to have been a pinched nerve that has brought her on periodic visits to a local clinic as well as to a Chinese acupuncturist. We think the pain may have been brought on in part by the trauma of the road incident described above, but perhaps in part to a condition that was already in place and which was precipitated by the incident. At any rate, the acupuncture seems to be doing great things for her.

One thing we decided to do during our stay was have a mosquito net installed in our bedroom. With the windows open at night, we often had mosquitos in the room, even though we might be applying a cream repellent. Once we installed the mosquito net (which Danièle had the foresight to buy while still in the U.S.), we have not had a bothersome night, save for all the chanting and noises already described.

Income Distribution in Addis

Addis, as elsewhere, has considerable inequality in the distribution of income. On the one hand there are those stylish fashionistas who are looking to move Ethiopia forward. On the other hand there is a constant underclass of individuals - some homeless, some with health problems, and many simply impoverished by the grind of daily living in a city that has had substantial inflation in recent years and with which they are not in a position to cope.

Ethiopia has always had an underclass of individuals, many of whom are the equivalent of professional beggars, and they serve as a daily reminder that Ethiopia has yet to lift itself beyond the precariousness of poverty that is periodically reinforced by bouts of drought and famine. This is the kind of image that outsiders often are given of Ethiopia, one that has its sad elements of truth even though it does not begin to reflect the cultural richness and history of the country. In our daily routines, we periodically give out change and Ethiopian birr notes to the destitute whom we come across while walking in the neighborhood, or at a busy intersection even while sitting in a mini-van or a taxi. The distinction we tend to draw is be more generous to those obviously with some physical handicap or the elderly, while remaining skeptical of more healthy-looking young boys and girls.



Addis vegetable vendor, Bisrate Gabriel section of town, 2009

Ethiopia abounds with NGO's - Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services, and the like, in addition to a host of public bilateral and multilateral agencies that operate in the country. Meles Zenawi, the current Prime Minister, recently had a series of statutes enacted by the Parliament that severely restrict the funding partnerships that many of these NGO's may pursue, largely on the grounds that for those engaged in "overt political activities", they would not be able to maintain their status. This has had a chilling effect on several NGO's, and no doubt there will be some consequences on the poor and disadvantaged in Ethiopia. It's a difficult call to make, namely, whether externally funded NGO's can serve as a stalking horse for political opposition, even if some legitimate work is undertaken on behalf of the poor.

Addis and the Future

In the last several years, Ethiopia has enjoyed relatively robust economic growth. If official numbers are correct, per capita Gross Domestic Product in real terms has been expanding at near double digit levels. You can sense some of this from the images described above, even if you wonder if any of this makes a difference in the lives of the very poorest among us. What does seem clear is that even in the face of an expanding population, Addis is a city in transition. It seems clear that the direction of neighborhoods is multi-story buildings for residents and businesses, and that Ethiopia's infrastructure will somehow advance along with the population.

There still are areas that are as frustrating as any, including the nearly non-existent internet service now in place. Yet even here, there is some cause for optimism. It may simply be that the best solution is to privatize Ethiopia's telecommunication state firm and turn over internet service to private entrepreneurs. Everywhere this has taken place, there has been a dramatic improvement in internet access. For now, the government is reluctant to embrace such a move, and so things are likely to lumber along in the very slow fashion that stands in contrast to the speed of physical building elsewhere done by private contractors in Ethiopia.

There also is hope for Ethiopia's now fragile electricity services. New dams in the Nile basin promise, at least in the short-run, exportable electricity to neighboring Sudan, suggesting that if

capacity growth at projected rates, the kinds of intermittent service we now see may fade in significance.

Finally, there is education. Not only is the literacy rate much higher than years ago. Ethiopia also has a rapidly expanding secondary and post-secondary system that is being driven in part by the expansion of private sector institutions. While not the focus here, what remains at risk is the extent to which Ethiopians can have access to quality educational institutions, and in ways in which their competency in such foreign languages as English, French, German, Italian, in addition to Chinese, can be acknowledged and put to productive economic use.



Students in the graduate course in natural resource economics, 2009

Is Ethiopia a place to visit? I am biased on this question - Ethiopia's history is rich, its culture varied and fascinating, and it seems far more interesting than so many other places I have seen. For the time being, despite the inflation in prices, the exchange rate makes this an affordable place to visit and to learn about an engaging culture full of history and the future. We will leave this place with a deepened appreciation of Ethiopians, both old friends and new, and how they will change the country over time. We know that will include its rich culture even as the many facets of creativity remain yet to be discovered.