

# Ethiopia's

# Rule 13b

Few cyclists explore the oldest independent country in Africa. In March this year, **Greg Woodford** led a CTC Cycling Holidays tour there

'S top!' A tiny tuk-tuk had caught up with us as we cycled out of Awash in central Ethiopia. The policeman leaned out and waved his gun at us. 'You... stop!' We stopped. You don't argue with policemen armed with guns.

We had arrived in Ethiopia in the small hours of Saturday and spent Sunday acclimatising to the heat and altitude. Addis Ababa, the capital, is 2,300 metres above sea level. Monday we spent travelling eastwards by bus to where the tour would start: Awash National Park. We had barely set off on Tuesday when the order came to stop.

We pulled in at the side of the road, the heat beginning to build.

'What's the problem?'

'No cycling allowed. Rule 13b. Look.'

The policeman waved a rulebook. Our hearts sank. We knew cycle tours weren't common in Ethiopia, but didn't want to finish ours before we'd even begun.

Half an hour later, the issue was solved. There was a bridge a mile ahead that cycles, for security reasons, were not allowed to cross: Rule 13b. Since cars and lorries could cross, the policeman flagged down a lorry. We climbed on board with our bikes, thanked the driver on the far side of the bridge and set off again.

This wasn't the first time we had encountered Rule 13b. The night before we had visited – by coach – the Awash National Park, a haven for birdlife and Oryx. We had planned to cycle through it. Rule 13b forbade it: no cycling in national parks!

## The road east

There were no further hitches. We cycled onwards, the road a smooth ribbon of tarmac stretching ahead



To cross a bridge that was banned to cyclists, the group put their bikes onto a flagged down lorry

for miles. Tarmac in Ethiopia? This one road was recently laid as far as the Somali border. It was the only one; everything else was dirt track.

Ethiopia is an ancient mountain fastness, an early Christian Orthodox kingdom with thousands of years of history and culture. It is unusual in Africa in that it was never truly colonised. It is still one of the poorest countries in the world. In many areas, understandably, there is no running water or electricity.

We were heading to the ancient Muslim city of Harar and then on to camp on top of a mountain called Kondudu, which is home to wild horses. Its flat top, at 3,000m, is half a kilometre by a kilometre across.

On the way to Harar we passed through an amazing cratered landscape. The road snaked its way past small volcanic cones, which were surrounded by the rim of an enormous crater a kilometre across.

The route then rose up through a mountain range with passes higher than 2,600m. The higher terrain made for great cycling as it was cooler. The altitude meant that the mosquitoes were below us too.

## Fresh coffee

On our fourth night we stayed in a motel: small bungalows dotted around a courtyard with the bar/restaurant in the centre. We woke early to see five different types of raptor sitting on poles within the motel area. The birdwatchers scabbled for cameras, long lenses and binoculars, while the rest of us looked forward to breakfast: bread, honey, omelette and plenty of coffee.

Coffee in Ethiopia is a cultural icon and is fantastically good. The Ethiopians claim that coffee originally came from the Kaffa region of Ethiopia. From there it spread across the Persian Gulf with





the Yemeni traders and throughout the world via the Turkish Empire.

It's served with ceremony. Women bring fresh green coffee beans and roast them on small charcoal burners in front of you. Sticks of incense are inserted into these burners, giving wonderful aromas. The women then grind the roasted beans and make the coffee in slender coffee pots. You are offered three cups from three different coffee infusions. The second is supposed to be the best.

### Market trends

We cycled through Harar and off the beaten track into the more traditional Ethiopian villages such as Gursum, which was close to our final destination, Mount Kondudu. In Gursum we were warmly welcomed by the villagers, who put a sign up: 'Welcome CPC'. Nearly!

White people and bikes were rare

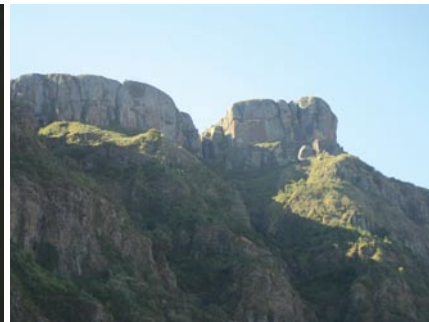
in this part of Ethiopia. White people *on* bikes – that was like an alien spaceship landing. Wherever we went we felt like the Beckhams, with crowds of curious onlookers.

The local markets were bright with strange fruits, spices, and colourful clothing. People laughed and bartered. Small children led goats around and followed the foreigners. My wife Claire and I enjoyed buying some traditional cloth and incense with assistance from some giggling local girls.

While we were treated with nothing but hospitality in Gursum, Rule 13b reared its head again. We could not cycle eastwards out of the town. Eastwards was unknown territory for tourists. The local organiser spent two hours discussing the matter with the local chiefs and phoning tourist authorities in Addis and Harar. In the end, they let us through.

The roads were mostly dirt tracks. Guests rode touring bikes or mountain bikes





## Fact File Ethiopia, African mountains

**DISTANCE:** 50 miles per day on average

**TERRAIN:** Beautiful and diverse. Much of our trip was on mountainous plateaux over 2,000m, although the cycling wasn't too hard.

**CONDITIONS:** in March, the weather was hot but not stifling – high 20s usually.

**TRAFFIC & TRAVEL:** High levels near major towns, where we used our support bus. Otherwise virtually empty. One brand new tarmac road; otherwise dirt tracks.

**ACCOMMODATION:** We mixed camping with pre-booked hotels. However, Ethiopia is very new to tourism.

**MAPS & GUIDES:** A few large-scale maps of Ethiopia are available from Stanfords map shop ([www.stanfords.co.uk](http://www.stanfords.co.uk)). Lonely Planet's Ethiopia & Eritrea Travel Guide (£16.99) is useful.

**GETTING THERE/BACK:** Emirates, BMI and Ethiopian airlines fly direct from major UK cities to Addis Ababa.

**BIKES USED:** Most guests rode rugged touring bikes, with a few on mountain bikes.

**FURTHER INFO:** [www.tourismethiopia.org](http://www.tourismethiopia.org).

**CTC CYCLING HOLIDAYS:** Next year we'll be running a new tour to the Bale National Park in Ethiopia – details will be on [www.ctctours.co.uk](http://www.ctctours.co.uk) in due course.

### Harar's hyena men

From Gursum we rode to the base of the mountain and left the bikes to climb up to the top. This was the furthest from Addis and the closest to Somalia we were to come. The people had changed too, with different huts in the countryside and different clothes. Here Muslims predominated and Ethiopian Somalis made up a high percentage of the population. Strange beehive-shaped cloth covered huts replaced the wattle and daub huts with roofs made of sticks that we were used to.

After Mount Kondudu, we had to turn back to Harar. This time we took a shorter route along a rough track that dropped us down to 1,100m through a stunning gorge that wended its way through groves of mango trees. Lower down it was suddenly very hot.

Harar was gorgeous. We spent a long afternoon and evening there. It is an old walled city. For lengthy periods of its history its Emir had to hold out against the largely Christian Ethiopian Highlanders,

(Clockwise from top) Harar market. There was a brewery in the city too, despite it being largely Muslim

Kondudu mountain. The group camped on its flat top, which offers superb views over the countryside below

Tourism is still rare in this part of Ethiopia. At the town of Gursum, locals put up a banner: Welcome CPC

Harar is an ancient walled city. Its narrow cobbled streets date back centuries

and due to its isolation it has evolved culture and habits all of its own. Tiny cobbled streets divide mud brick and adobe buildings, many sky blue.

A chief attraction was the hyena men – men who hand fed wild hyenas on the outskirts of the city at night. Now a tourist event, it had evolved out of a need to keep the hyenas out of the town. We also paid a visit to the brewery in Harar. While it is a largely Muslim area, excellent alcoholic and non-alcoholic beer is brewed there.

### Swimming with crocodiles

After Harar, we headed back towards Awash National Park. On the way, we stopped at a Christian sanctuary called Kulubi. It was built by Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian Emperor, in memory of his father, Ras Makonnen. Kulubi had developed into a massive centre for pilgrims from all over Ethiopia. We were outside the main Christian feast periods, however, so it was quiet.

We ate late. Ethiopian food is based around the staple *injera*, a

sort of flat rubbery pancake. *Injera* comes on a huge platter and on top of it are placed small portions of *wat* (spicy stew).

We reached Awash National Park early enough to enjoy the sunset, and picnicked under a huge starry sky. Next day we looked for wildlife. We saw small snakes, possibly pit vipers, as well as abundant birdlife and a large crocodile. Despite the crocodile, we were assured by local wildlife experts that it was okay to swim here. Some of us did. No limbs were lost!

Our last stop was Debre Zeit, a town outside Addis that's in the centre of seven crater lakes. We stayed at 'Dreamland Resort', a recently built hotel. We were the only people in it, which felt odd, and in the morning the water was off. The area gets little rain anyway, and the rains had failed for years running.

On the final day we returned to Addis to pack the bikes and fly home. We hadn't cycled in any national park, but at least Rule 13b hadn't undermined the trip.