

Faith in Rock Climbing



Ir. Chin Mee Poon | www.facebook.com/chinmeepoon

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

With the pinnacle-shaped outcrop as our guiding beacon, we walked about 1km from the road, over stony farmland and a dry river bed. Then we wound our way up a fairly steep rocky slope until we reached a narrow platform at the foot of the pinnacle itself.

My friends and I had come to visit Abuna Yemata Guh, a tiny rock-hewn church often dubbed "Church in the Sky". We were in Tigray, the northern most region of Ethiopia. Outstanding attractions in this region include the very long monolith stelae of Axum and the many rock-hewn churches scattered in 4-5 clusters in the region.

After having seen the stelae in Axum, we only had time to visit one rock-hewn church on our way to Mekele. Not wanting to see anything similar to the rock-hewn churches we had visited in Lalibela earlier, we picked Abuna Yemata Guh, without really knowing what to expect.

It was already more than an hour since we left the van on the roadside, so the church we had come to see should be just around the corner... or so we thought, until our driver-cum-guide told us to remove our trekking shoes and prepare to climb on all fours. "It's easier to climb bare-footed," he said, pointing to the sheer rock face that we were standing next to. Looking up, I saw a pointed column of rock piercing the cobalt blue sky. Oh my! I'd never



done any rock-climbing in my life, not even in a shopping complex.

Fortunately, 5 villagers came to give us a helping hand. They stationed themselves at various heights on the rock face and guided us on footholds and handholds as well as gave us a pull or a push whenever necessary. And so we made it to the next level. Whew!

But that was not the end of the story. The church was further up. Another sheer cliff face was waiting for us to climb. With more confidence

built on the little experience we had just gained, we scrambled up to the church level, though not without the help of the villagers of course.

Still, the elusive little church was not in sight. It was hidden on the back of the pinnacle, separated from us by a 10m-long ledge just 1m wide, beyond the edge of which was a drop of 100m or more.

Overcoming our fear and walking gingerly with a hand against the cliff wall, we finally made it to the church entrance and the priest welcomed us into the tiny cave with two cupolas separated by a pillar. For our efforts, we were rewarded with exquisite, bright polychrome paintings of biblical scenes covering the walls and ceilings.

The tiny, rock-hewn church, sometimes said to be the most inaccessible place of worship in the world, was believed to have

been built in the 5th century AD by Abuna Yemata, one of the 8 saints depicted on one of the cupolas. The frescoes were done in the 15th or 16th century.

Whoever built the church must have taken a long time to carve a cave into solid rock with only chisel and hammer. That it was built half-way up a sheer cliff, hidden from the open plain, seemed to indicate that the cave was originally meant to be a hermit's hideout and only became a church later. ■