

Carved Out of Solid Rock



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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.

After trekking for 5 days in the Simien Mountains, my friends and I flew from Gondar to Lalibela in early October 2016 to visit its rock-hewn churches which were admitted to UNESCO’s list of world heritage sites in 1978.

A small town with a population of 19,000, Lalibela is situated 2,630m above sea level on rocky highland 330km north of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. The 24km drive from the airport to the town took us through an extremely scenic broad valley with a multi-coloured patchwork of agricultural crops.

On our first day there, we had dinner at Ben Abebe, a cliff-top restaurant that resembled a large multi-level observation tower with a partially completed roof. The valley in front of us stretched all the way to the faint distant mountains behind which the sun hid after making the earth blush. The views were certainly as appetising to our eyes as the food was to our taste buds.

The highlight of our two-day stay in Lalibela was of course the rock-hewn churches that had attracted us in the first place. Imagine this: A king wanted to turn this place into another Jerusalem

by building many churches and, to make those churches stand and last for a long, long time, he decided they should not be built the normal way but rather, be carved out of solid rock.

So he mobilised hundreds if not thousands of workers to hack the rocky ground to isolate a huge block that in plan was squarish, rectangular or in the shape of a cross. Then he got the men to chisel at the block to turn it into a building with doors, windows, arches, beams and columns. Then, after artisans decorated the interior with paintings of biblical stories, the church

was ready to open its door for the first service.

The king in question was Lalibela and the place was then known as Roha. Altogether, 11 churches were successfully carved out of solid rock. There is a cluster of 5 churches northwest of River Jordan and another 5 southeast of the river while the last is neither here nor there.

King Lalibela ruled from 1181 till 1221; he made Roha the capital of the Zagwe Dynasty. Some 800 years later, these rock-hewn churches are still standing even though some of them are in need of repair and protection from the elements. Roha was renamed Lalibela after the king and, for followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, the town became the second most sacred place in Ethiopia after Axum further north.

Many historians, however, believed that not all the rock-hewn churches were completed during King Lalibela’s reign, judging from the vastly varied architectural styles and the amount of time and labour that would have been required to construct the buildings with such high standards of fine finishing.

Whatever the truth behind those buildings, my friends and I certainly had a most satisfying and enjoyable time inspecting all the 11 rock-hewn churches of Lalibela.

We also visited Yemerhane Kirstos Cave Church at the edge of a village 42km away. Even though that church, built by an earlier king of Zagwe Dynasty, was constructed of alternate layers of timber and marble, some people believed it was used as a model for some of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela.

It is truly amazing how man’s faith in the Almighty can be so solidly grounded! ■

