

GUTS AND THE ART OF MOUTH-FEEDING A FEROCIOUS BEAST



Ir. Chin Mee Poon

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.

Harar is a small city of about 110,000 people in the eastern part of Ethiopia. My wife and I came to this place just 2 days before we left Ethiopia for Djibouti during our 36-day back-packing exploration of these two countries in the African Horn in 2016.

The main attractions of Harar lie within the centuries-old walled old town known as Jugal. Other than the main road that extends from its west gate to the main square near the centre of the town, Jugal is a maze of narrow alleys among nearly 2,000 traditional Adare houses and tiny mosques, shrines and tombs. Our accommodation was a guesthouse converted from a traditional Adare house. The guesthouse owner, a woman by the name of Zubeyda and who spoke a little English, showed us her living room. There were 5 platforms at different levels, covered with rugs and cushions, meant for the hosts and guests to sit according to their status. The white walls were almost completely concealed by colourful wicker baskets and

plates of all sizes, and niches were filled with bowls, cups and vases. On a shelf were 4 black aflala (long-necked ceramic containers), purportedly filled with money, gold, medicine and seeds respectively, according to my Lonely Planet guidebook.

The inhabitants of Harar are predominantly Muslims, and they claim their city is the 4th holiest in the Muslim world after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. This may not be true, but the city did become an important centre for Islamic scholarship in the 17th and 18th centuries; it also spearheaded the penetration of Islam into the Horn.

We derived a great deal of pleasure from getting lost and found again in the maze of alleyways in the old town. We came across a ceremony known as "shewal", where beautifully dressed girls and young men in white gowns danced to the beat of a drum – the girls and boys met in the hope that sparks of love would unite them. We also visited an Ethiopian orthodox church. It was particularly exhilarating to mingle with the colourful hawkers and

shoppers in the alleys. The vendors were almost exclusively women, and they sold mainly vegetables, fruit, spices and other foodstuff.

In the evening before we left for Djibouti, we had a most unforgettable experience that definitely could not be repeated anywhere else in the world. Through prior arrangement, a young man who was Zubeyda's relative, showed up at about quarter past seven and led us to the main road where we clambered into a waiting bajaj, a small vehicle resembling the tuk-tuk of Thailand. We were driven out of the old town through the east gate to

a spot near the edge of a forest. A man with a powerful torchlight was already there. He was the famous "hyena man of Harar" by the name of Abbas Yusuf. His wife was sitting on the ground nearby. We were the only paying spectators. Holding a bag of meat, he sat down and blew a whistle. Soon a spotted hyena appeared from the dark, followed by two more. He began to feed them. Their confidence grew and they



got closer and closer to the man. Instead of throwing the meat to the beasts, he pierced the meat with a short stick and held the stick in his hand. Eventually he held the stick in his mouth and allowed the hyena to eat the meat at the other end! The sight was most awe-inspiring! Hyenas are opportunistic scavengers and predators at the same time. Their jaws are powerful enough to crush bones and they can tear a man to pieces in seconds. Abbas dared me to try feeding one of them. Oh no, thank you.

The Hararis are uncertain about how this practice of feeding the hyenas came about. Suffice it to know that Abbas learnt the trade from his father, Yusuf Mume Saleh, who started to feed the hyenas about 30 years ago. A sizeable population of spotted hyenas live in the forest and they even venture into the old town deep at night to scavenge for food at rubbish dumps. Anyone brave enough to walk in the deserted late-night alleys is likely to encounter one or more of this ferocious beast. ■