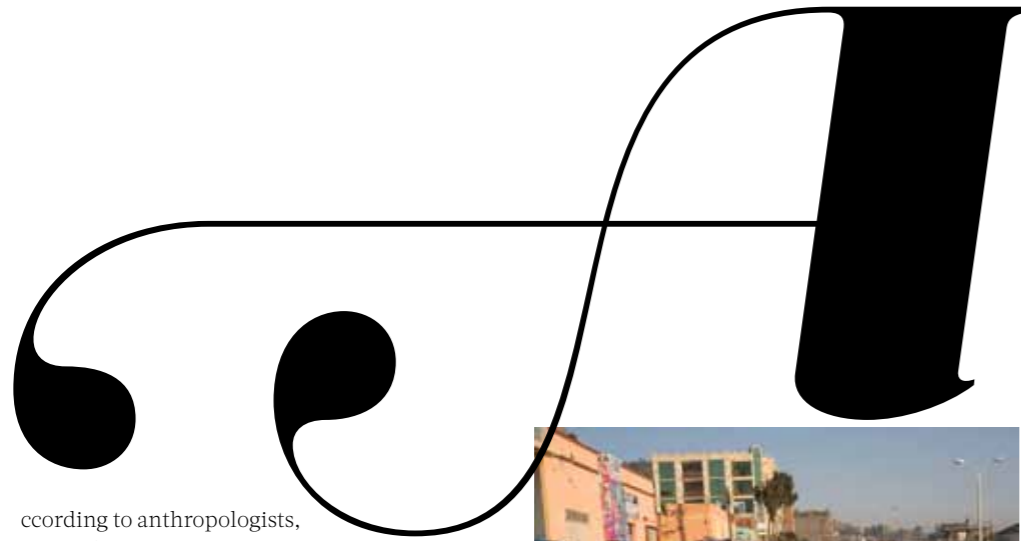


Cradle of Civilisation

Thanks to pristine new roads, Ethiopia is now an exciting destination for cyclists. Expect tough climbs, friendly people and views that go on forever

Words **PETE MUIR** Photography **PATRIK LUNDIN**

It becomes very apparent on the first climb out of Adigrat that this is not your average Big Ride



According to anthropologists, it was about 200,000 years ago that the first modern human beings originated in Africa. Another 100,000 years later they set out to colonise the rest of the world, by all accounts starting in the Horn of Africa, in what is now Ethiopia. By 50,000 years ago humans were in Europe. It took another 49,800 years for mankind's greatest achievement – the bicycle – to be invented (the original 'Dandy Horse' celebrates its 200th anniversary this year). Leap forward to January 2017 and *Cyclist* is packing a modern carbon bicycle into a travel case to make the journey back to where it all began: Ethiopia.

The landlocked country in the northeast of Africa is not the first place you might think of when considering a cycling destination. For those of us of a certain age, perhaps the thing that springs most to mind about Ethiopia is Live Aid. I remember vividly back in 1984 seeing the disturbing news reports of starving children in a barren country riven by civil war, and Bob Geldof imploring us on TV to 'give us your f***ing money' as the world's largest music concert raised funds for the famine relief.

More than 30 years later, Ethiopia is very different. It's still at the mercy of its climate, as demonstrated by the famine that hit the country in 2016, but it's politically stable and one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

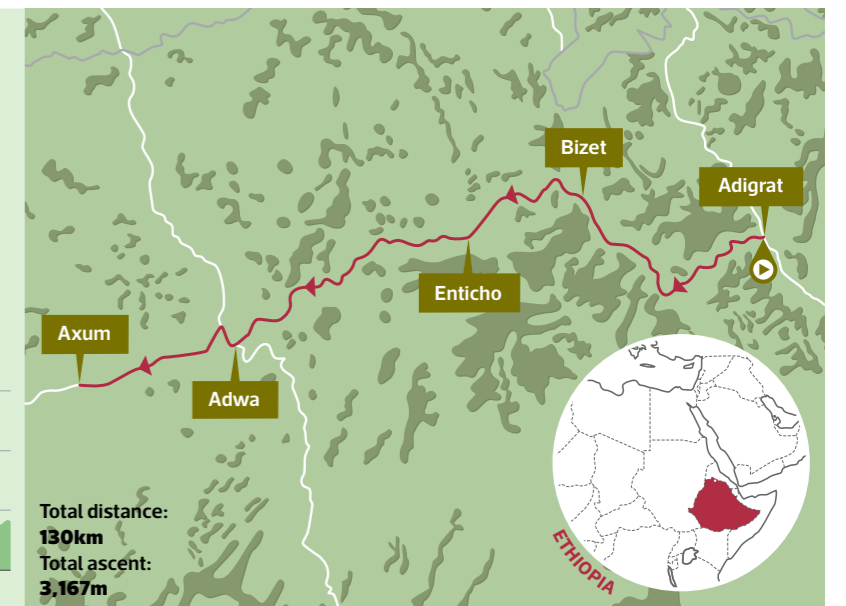
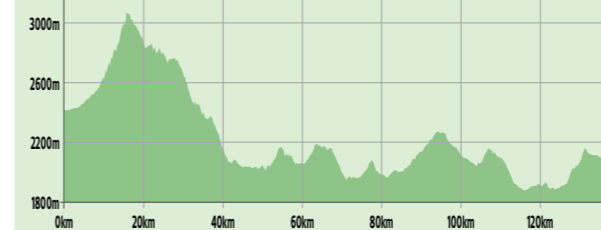
In recent years China has invested heavily in Ethiopia, including dams, railways and a network of shiny new roads, mainly in the Tigray region in the north of the country (apparently the ruling party all comes from Tigray, so much of the infrastructure investment finds its way there). The roads have helped improve commerce and been vital in reducing the impact of drought, but they've also had a more unexpected effect – the region is now a rather wonderful place to ride a bike. 🚲

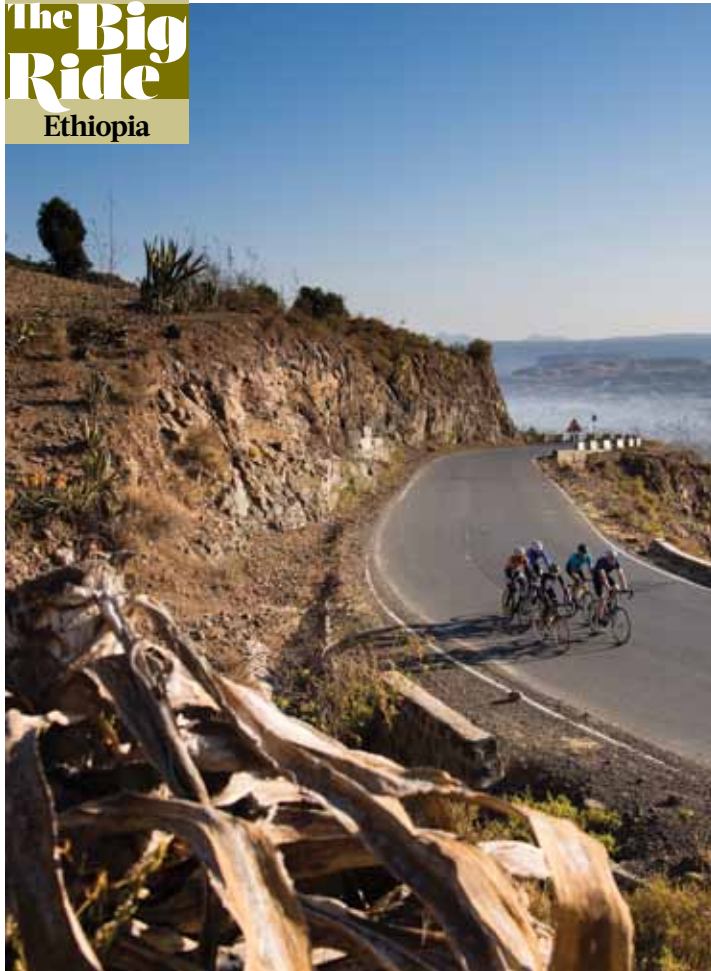


Triple-A rated

Follow our route from Adigrat to Adwa to Axum

This is a point-to-point ride, as loops are hard to come by in Ethiopia, so be sure to have suitable back-up. *Cyclist* started out from the Agoro Lodge, about 4km outside the city of Adigrat. In the centre of Adigrat is a large roundabout – take the road heading west (Route 2) towards Adwa. Stay on this road (there is only one road) for the next 110km to the town of Adwa, stopping along the way in Bizet and Enticho for food and water. Pass through Adwa and, at the main junction, turn left onto Route 30 heading for Axum, which is about another 20km further on.





Unlike on many European rides, the scenery remains unchanged as the climb out of Adigrat goes up and up over the first 12km

Natural athletes

It's early in the morning and there's a chill in the air, just enough to warrant a light jacket over my jersey. With me is my guide for today, Richard Nerurkar, and we clip in by the side of the road to pedal the 4km to the town of Adigrat, where the ride will start in earnest.

Richard is co-founder of travel company Tedele Travel, specialising in tours around Ethiopia. It's a country he knows well as, despite hailing from the West Midlands, he lived in Ethiopia for many years after a career as a long-distance runner. He represented Great Britain in the 10,000m at the 1992 Olympics and in the marathon at the 1996 Olympics. He then went on to manage the Great Ethiopian Run, an annual mass participation event in the capital, Addis Ababa, working alongside Ethiopia's most famous sporting hero, Haile Gebrselassie. [▶](#)

Carbon race bikes are a rare sight, and our little crowd is garnering a lot of attention from the locals





Above: Adigrat recedes into the distance – it will be the last major town *Cyclist* sees for quite some time



◀ As we make the first gentle pedal strokes of the day, I can't help noticing that Richard looks as trim as his competing days, and has obviously adapted well to the bike. After a winter spent reacquainting myself with my sofa, I'm now a touch apprehensive about a long day in the hills with a man who has a 2hr 10min marathon time to his name.

In the middle of Adigrat, beside a large roundabout, a welcoming party is waiting for us. Members of the local APF Cycling Club are gathered by the road, two of whom are to join us on our ride. Afewerki and Haftom are essentially professional cyclists, although it's a fairly loose term in Ethiopia. Like many clubs in the country, a sponsor (in this case local pharmaceutical company APF) provides bikes, food and a house where riders can stay, but that's about it.

For these riders it's a lean existence – eat, sleep, ride – but there is now a glimmer of hope for aspiring pros such as them. Tsgabu Grmay

I'm a touch apprehensive about a long day in the hills with a man who has a 2hr 10min marathon time to his name

was brought through the same system at a club in the nearby city of Mekele, and now rides for WorldTour team Bahrain Merida. He's the first rider from Ethiopia to make it to the top ranks of the sport and serves as an inspiration for a generation of young cyclists looking to make a proper living from cycling. And if the country's history of producing world-class distance runners is anything to go by, we should expect to see more Ethiopian riders at the big races in the near future.

Usually Afewerki and Haftom would ride hefty steel bikes with flat handlebars – the standard machines that everyone races on in the country – but for today they have managed to get hold of a pair of carbon race bikes. They are a rare sight in Ethiopia, and our little crowd is garnering a lot of attention from the locals. Richard spots a friend, Kidane, among the gathered club members and invites him to join us for the first part of our ride, so now we are

a group of five. Keeping a close eye on the little blue tuk-tuks that buzz around the streets, we roll out of town, straight into the biggest climb of the day.

'It's not too bad,' says Richard by way of encouragement. 'Perhaps 10km. Maybe 12km. Or 15, at 7%-8%. Maybe 10%.'

Up and away

Despite Adigrat being the second-largest town in Tigray, it doesn't take long before we've left the urbanisation behind and are climbing into a landscape of earthy brown terraces dotted with green shrubs and trees. Looking back down the winding road, the town sits bathed in a morning haze, while the temperature rises quickly into the 20s.

As the road continues, so the gradient creeps up and I find myself dropping behind the group. My lungs begin to heave as the altitude makes itself known. We started the climb at almost ▶



The initial 12km climb from Adigrat is followed by a 20km descent with views over the Ethiopian Highlands. At this point we are higher than any Alpine col



By the numbers

The details in decimals

2,441

Altitude (in metres) at start of the ride

3,066

Altitude (in metres) 12km later

130

Distance (in kilometres) of route

35

Max temperature (in °C) during the ride

3

Eggs for lunch

26

Children shouting 'Ferege!' (foreigner) as I pass



I finally look up from my stem, and the sight that greets me is like no other I've seen on a bike

2,500m – the height of the biggest cols in the Alps – and we are now rising to over 3,000m, higher than almost any road in Europe. Up here, it's not just the views that are breathtaking.

My Ethiopian companions, of course, seem entirely unaffected by the altitude and tap away gently while chatting, occasionally looking over their shoulders to wonder what happened to the guy who was with them just a minute ago. Haftom drops back to nurse me up the final couple of kilometres, and I try to repay him by getting out of the saddle and giving it my full effort to the summit, safe in the knowledge that there is a 20km descent to come.

Once over the top I can finally look up from my stem, and the sight that greets me is like no other I've seen on a bike. Stretching far into the distance are crags and canyons of soft brown rock, looking like the American Wild West but on an even grander scale.

Beneath a cloudless blue sky, a complex network of valleys is fringed by sheer cliffs and bordered by dusty plains, and through it all runs a perfect ribbon of tarmac, untroubled by traffic. That's not to say it's deserted. All along the road are groups of people carrying loads, driving donkeys laden with water barrels, or just hanging around in the shade of a tree.

Whenever we stop to take a photo, no matter how remote the location, we're quickly surrounded by a gaggle of children who seem to appear magically out of nowhere. The braver ones make demands for 'birr', the local currency, but most just seem intrigued by our mini peloton and study us quietly from the roadside.

Occasionally, as we ride past, I'll hear a friendly cry of 'ferenge!' (foreigner!), revealing just how rare it is for European faces to be seen around these parts. Certainly I haven't seen another westerner since being in the country, ▶

The hairpins at 30km are slightly dusty in the first corner but pristine further down





A glance over the barrier reveals a sight to gladden the heart of any cyclist. Beneath us is a series of tight hairpins like a coiled spring, plunging into the valley below

and I have a real sense of exploring roads that few cyclists from outside the local area will have ever seen.

The long and winding road

About 25km into our ride, Kidane makes his farewells and turns back towards Adigrat, leaving the remaining four of us to continue our onward journey. The road descends in long, sinuous curves that invite us to get low on the bars and sail through the corners, sucking in the ever-thickening air and replenishing the energy expended on the initial climb.

At around the 30km mark, the road suddenly drops away to the right, and a glance over the stone barrier reveals a sight to gladden the heart of any road cyclist. Beneath us is a series of tight hairpins like a coiled spring, plunging into the valley below. We dive into them with glee, twisting back and forth on the pristine tarmac, before a 10km stretch of flat road brings us to Bizet, the first town we've seen since Adigrat.

By now the temperature is into the 30s and the mixture of heat and altitude means I've already drained my water supplies, so we stop in Bizet to replenish stocks. Again, our arrival attracts a small crowd of onlookers and children who scramble to collect our plastic water bottles once we have emptied the contents into our bidons.

After Bizet the road becomes more rolling, with climbs of up to 10% followed by flowing descents. Although we are neither gaining nor losing altitude, the road is rarely flat, and the



The rider's ride

Canyon Endurace CF 8.0, £1,499, canyon.com

The name says it all – the Endurace is an endurance bike with a bit of raciness thrown in. Or it could be a race bike with added endurance. Either way, it manages to blend the two elements pretty well. The geometry is fairly relaxed and it does a decent job of cancelling out the bumps, so is perfect for long days in the saddle where comfort is the priority. But the ride never felt sluggish or sloppy. The frame is stiff enough to be responsive when kicked into action, and it even has aero pretensions. At a smidgen over 8kg (size XL), it's not a lightweight by today's standards, but you'd be hard pushed to find something of better quality for under £1,500. DT Swiss's R24 Spline wheels are decent performers, albeit eminently upgradeable, while the Shimano 105 groupset is the epitome of workmanlike functionality (although it did develop an annoying click during the ride, which I still can't pinpoint to this day). All in all, an excellent partner at an unbeatable price.



increasing heat ensures that I'm working hard throughout (although that may also have something to do with the fact I'm trying to stay on the wheels of an Olympic athlete and two local riders of half my age and twice my lung capacity).

The payoff is that the scenery remains spectacular, with endless views over the parched plains. This is topped off at the 60km mark, when a push over the crest of a hill reveals our first sight of the Adwa mountains.

Sitting on the horizon like a giant collection of rock sculptures, the mountains resemble some lost prehistoric world. I fully expect to see a pterodactyl soaring around the jagged peaks. It's certainly like no other setting I've cycled in, and far ahead of us I can see the road winding deep into its heart.

Of eggs and emperors

As we ride, the perspective on the Adwa mountains keeps changing, and the giant shapes grow and morph as we get closer. Eventually we are among them and the road twists and turns as it picks a line through the maze of hills.

By the time we reach the next town on the route, Enticho, we are 75km into our ride and the temperature is up to 35°C, so it seems like the perfect place to stop for some lunch. Richard tells me not to expect a lunch stop like we might find in Italy, and as we ride up the main street it becomes plain that there will be no shady cafe for a bowl of pasta and a gelato.



This is not a hat but a mesob, which is used to serve injera, the local food

Hairpins announce that we're nearing the town of Bizet, and the first opportunity to top up our water supplies since leaving Adigrat 30km back



Right: We get our first glimpse of the Adwa mountains at around the 60km mark



A boy appears from a doorway with a bucket of boiled eggs, and this, it becomes clear, is our option for lunch

Some low stools beneath a large umbrella indicate that food is on offer, so we park the bikes (which immediately attract a small crowd of children) and squash into the patch of shade beside the road. A round of soft drinks is swiftly ordered and Richard enquires as to the options for eating. He speaks fluent Amharic, but it turns out that this is just one of about 90 languages in Ethiopia, and around these parts the locals speak Tigrinya. Eventually a boy appears from a doorway with a bucket of boiled eggs, and this, it becomes clear, is our option for lunch. Strangely delicious they are, too, sprinkled with a mixture of salt and spices, so I have several, washed down with multiple Cokes.

When we get back on the road, there's a mercifully flat section while I get my legs working again, before a 14km uphill drag sees me puffing once more in the thin air. Through it all, Haftom sticks by my side, my guardian. His English is limited but significantly better than my Tigrinya, so we occasionally make half-understood comments about the bikes or the

heat, but mainly we ride in silence side-by-side. I can only hope he makes the pro ranks one day because he'll be an excellent domestique.

We continue our journey along the endless road, beneath the towers of crumbling rock. We pass small villages and lonely farmsteads, and always there are people along the road, walking, working, playing or just standing. It's another 40km of magnificent, barren landscapes between Enticho and the next town, Adwa, where we stop to have a coffee on a hotel terrace.

While we sit and sip, Richard tells me about how Adwa is one of the most significant places in Ethiopia, as it is the site of the famous Battle of Adwa, when native Ethiopian soldiers defeated a force of Italian troops in 1896. It was a time when the great European powers were staking claims to all the African nations, and the victory ensured that Ethiopia remains the only country on the continent never to be colonised. It's also the reason that many African nations adopted the colours of Ethiopia – green, yellow and red – when they eventually gained independence



from their colonial overlords. The Italians invaded the country once again during the Second World War, and on that occasion it was the British who came to Ethiopia's aid, helping to restore Emperor Haile Selassie to his throne.

The last gasp

History lesson over, we remount for the 20km stretch to our ultimate destination in Aksum. 'I forgot to mention,' says Richard as he clips on his helmet. 'There's another 10km climb to come.'

The layer of salt encrusting the straps of my own helmet is testament to just how much I've been sweating. The temperature is still in the 30s and we're still riding at an altitude higher than the summit of Mont Ventoux, so I refill my bidon and gird myself for the final push.

Afewerki and Haftom look entirely unflustered, as though they have been on a gentle ride round the local park, and when we hit the bottom of the climb I can sense that they're keen to attack it, and they pull ahead with the easy grace of natural athletes.

I drop my head and try to settle into a rhythm, aware that my legs are tingling with the telltale signs of cramp – probably something to do with

It's in the 30s and we're still riding at an altitude higher than the summit of Mont Ventoux

all the salt that has transferred from my body to my helmet. When I look up, Haftom has dropped back again and silently taken up his position a few inches from my side. Together we crawl up the hillside, at one point sheltering in the shade of a huge lorry that is struggling with the gradient just as much as I am.

Eventually the road levels out and Richard informs me that the climbing is over for the day. The news comes as a relief, because although this ride is far from the most mountainous I've done, the environment and altitude has ensured that it is amongst the most demanding.



What, no spaghetti?

Eating Ethiopian style

As Ethiopia modernises and opens up more to tourism, so the big cities are seeing the infiltration of Western-style restaurants, with burgers and pizzas on offer. But travel to the remoter towns and villages and those options disappear. Luckily, the local Ethiopian food is truly delicious.

Main meals in Tigray will almost certainly come with *injera* – a form of spongy flatbread, like a pancake, made from teff wheat, which is particularly suited to the dry conditions and high altitudes of Ethiopia. There's no need for additional crockery or cutlery as the *injera* serves as a plate for various stews of spiced vegetables or pulses such as lentils (*wat*) or meat (*tibs*), which are eaten by tearing chunks of *injera* and scooping up the contents. Ethiopian tradition is to only handle food using the right hand.

As for drink, the cyclist's favourite – coffee – originated in Ethiopia and it remains the country's biggest export. As such, Ethiopians make quite a ceremony of preparing coffee. You can expect to be shown the raw beans, and then have them brought to the table while they are roasted so you can enjoy the smells.

The coffee is brewed in a *jebena*, a round-bottomed clay pot, which is stuffed with strands of material (originally horse hair) to prevent the grounds coming out of the spout when it is poured.



The local riders still look eminently comfortable as we near the town of Adwa, 110km into the ride





The Tsion Mariam church claims to contain the Ark of the Covenant – yes, the one from the first *Indiana Jones*

► The sight of blue tuk-tuks on the road informs us that we are nearing a major town, and soon we are on the outskirts of Aksum. As I will come to learn, Aksum is another place of great historical interest, being the seat of the Axumite Empire that stretches back more than two millennia, and the site of Ethiopia's oldest Christian sanctuary, the Tsion Mariam church from the 4th century, which claims to contain the Ark of the Covenant – yes, the one from the first *Indiana Jones* movie. But all that will have to wait until tomorrow, as right now I have an engagement with a cold beer.

It's been a truly extraordinary ride in a country that before today I would never have considered as a road cycling destination. It's proved to be fascinating and friendly, beautiful and challenging – everything I could have hoped for. Who knows, perhaps one day the sight of people in lycra on road bikes will be commonplace along the road from Adigrat to Aksum. ✿
Pete Muir is editor of Cyclist and has now replenished his salt levels

Above: And... relax. The locals come out to greet us on our arrival in Axum

Below: Cyclist's trusty guardian, Haftom, ensures we're never left alone in the thin air



Do it yourself

TRAVEL

Cyclist flew with Ethiopian Airlines to the capital city Addis Ababa, before an internal flight of around an hour to Mekele, the main city of the northern province of Tigray. From there it is around a two-to-three hour drive to Adigrat. Ethiopian Airlines (ethiopianairlines.com) flies daily from London Heathrow to Mekele via Addis Ababa. Return fares start from £627. Bike carriage costs £75 for the return journey if transported as part of Ethiopian's two-piece 46kg baggage allowance.

ACCOMMODATION

The night before the ride we stayed at the Agoro Lodge (agorolodge.com), about 4km from the start point in Adigrat. Nestled in a hillside up a steep gravel track, the lodge has simple, comfortable rooms and great views, and we were the only guests at the time of our trip. In Axum, at the end of the ride, we stayed at the Yared Zema hotel, a high-quality and modern hotel (although apparently not modern enough to have a website). Find out

more on its Facebook page at @yaredzemainternationalhotel. In Addis Ababa, Cyclist stayed at the upmarket Golden Tulip Hotel (goldentulip.com).

THANKS

Many thanks to Richard Nerurkar of Tadele Travel for making the arrangements and looking after us in his one-time home of Ethiopia. Tadele Travel (tadeletravel.com) offers three eight-day cycling itineraries in Ethiopia for different levels of cyclist. Prices start from £1,965 per person (two sharing) including accommodation in three and four-star hotels, three meals a day, transfers and both local and international cycling guides. Flights are not included, however.

Also thanks to Abebe Baye for acting as our guide, Kalayu Haiku for driving the support vehicle so patiently, and Afewerki Hadush and Haftom Yemane of APF Cycling Club for joining us on the ride (and the occasional push on the hills).

Finally, thanks to the Tigray Tourism Bureau for helping to facilitate the trip. For more on Tigray, see tigraitourism.com.