



Story **Robert Bevan** Photographs **Joël Tettamanti**

ROCK OF AGES

High in the Ethiopian hills, a mysterious Jerusalem exists – marked by churches hewn into the sandstone of the ground

Where the land falls away from the Mount of Olives to the River Jordan, a bronze bell droops from a tree, its clapper silent in the heat. A boy walks barefoot past the House of Mount Sinai church, the recently cured hide of a goat wrapped around his shoulders. Its head and hooves, still attached, clatter against his back. This biblical scene is set not in ancient Palestine but in the mountain town of Lalibela in modern-day Ethiopia. The town is named for the thirteenth-century priest-king who is said to have created a new Jerusalem in this highland region after the Muslim conquests had blocked the pilgrimage routes to old Jerusalem from Ethiopia – one of the first Christian countries.

King Lalibela's sacred landscape, some 220 miles north of the urban maelstrom of Addis Ababa, contains 11 Ethiopian Orthodox churches, and several of these holy buildings have been hewn down into the living rock. They are linked by deep trenches, bridges, and ceremonial underground passages. Some are remodeled from existing caves, but others are single blocks of red volcanic stone, meticulously structured and carved. The majestic Bet Medhane Alem (House of the Saviour of the World) stands nearly 40 foot high and is the largest rock-hewn church in the world. It is as if a giant sculptor has begun to chisel beneath his feet to reveal a hidden marvel: an entire hollowed-out church, complete with columns and arches, windows and doors.

So how did these churches appear? Frustratingly, no one really knows; all is cloaked in mystery, which only adds to the otherworldly atmosphere. So far, there has been no sustained archaeological study, but we do know that it was a Christian kingdom, Aksum, that flourished across northern Ethiopia in the first centuries after Christ. When it fell into decline, around A.D. 900, a new Christian dynasty, the Zagwe, rose to power. Lalibela (then called Roha) was its capital. It was the Zagwe who began to carve out these astonishing churches, and in later years the church-building was attributed solely to their king, Lalibela, who ruled from around 1180 to 1220. The area was renamed in his honor. In fact, the clergy now insists that the churches were created in just 23 years by the king alone, helped by battalions of builder angels and with a prod from St. George, whose visit is recorded by the imprint of his horse's hooves in the rock.

Over time though, this wondrous town of churches slowly declined, and the meticulously carved grottoes and passageways began to fill with earth. They

remained half-buried until they were rediscovered and returned to worship during the late nineteenth century. Rain and wind erode the monuments in what is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site – temporary canopies offer protection until restoration can begin – but the churches are still in regular use.

Each has its guardian priest; its icons, lit by shafts of sun that penetrate the gloom and drifting incense; its holy books; and, in high season, its hordes of tourists, here to witness the very particular local liturgy that encompasses elements of Judaism, African drumming, and a swaying dance. The extraordinary Church of St. George (Bet Giorgis) is a bravura piece of architecture that makes the achievements of Europe's Renaissance sculptors look a touch half-hearted. Your feet arrive at the roof level of the cross-shaped structure that rises three floors from its sunken courtyard in a design symbolizing Noah's ark. Inside, a sleepy-eyed priest leans back against the orange brocade curtain that fronts the church's inner sanctum. A man kneels before him, is quietly, tenderly blessed, and then nestles down on the ground, his head wrapped in the hem of the priest's robes.

You can fly to Lalibela from Addis, but better to take the two-day drive there to really understand its place at the heart of Ethiopia's spiritual *terroir*. This is a living tradition, with the country's identity still wrapped in an ever-present religious symbolism, be it in the capital's monuments, crowned with the Lion of Judah, or the Aksumite motifs on the trash cans at Lalibela airport – all in a landscape that has barely changed in millennia.✦

For more on this subject see the exclusive content on Patek Philippe Magazine Extra at patek.com/owners

The Church of St. George (left), last of the monoliths to be built – probably around 1210 – but the best known and best preserved. Carved from

red volcanic rock, it stands 40ft high, rising three floors from its sunken courtyard. Like many of the churches of Lalibela, it is still operational (below)

