

TRAVEL

ADVENTURE TRAVEL

by Vivien Lougheed



Abbaba
a guide with a gun



When hiking in the Simien Mountains National Park of Ethiopia, foreign visitors must hire an armed scout to protect them from the bandits. Foreigners are not permitted entrance to the park unless they have a hired gunman.

I was in the Semien with three other Westerners, looking for the elusive ibex, a goat-like animal that is almost extinct. Besides a guide, a cook and a helper, we had Abbaba, a middle aged scout who had the dignity of an old soldier and the courtesy of a British nobleman.

We first met Abbaba at the park warden's office in Debark, a village near the park entrance. He was a quiet man who stood to the side while the warden made our arrangements. Abbaba's dark, pock-marked face was rimmed with a greying beard and the time-lines on his face were crevasses as deep as the mountain canyons he would take us to see. He had strong teeth that glistened against his black skin when he smiled.

Abbaba's head was crowned with a Tilly hat some previous hiker must have left him. His cotton clothes were layered for the purpose of covering the tatters of the underlayers as much as for warmth. His shoes were old oxfords that had heels worn at the sides and laces knotted at every eye.

Abbaba carried a World War 1 vintage, 9 mm Italian rifle. Made by the B.T.A. Co., it held 12 bullets. The last time the rifle was fired was in 1986 when Abbaba was helping the Ethiopian military fight against guerrilla attacks in the Debark area. During our hike, Abbaba carried his rifle over his shoulder with pride and dignity or he laid it over his lap when sitting with his hand resting gently on the stock.

We started our five-day hike by walking from Debark into the mountains. I was with Kathi Hughes, an avid and strong hiker, Richard, a 26 year old Brit who was a park warden in England (and I assumed in fairly good shape) and Rami, a macho 30-year-old Spaniard who had the stamina of a mountain lion. Abbaba was our leader, watching for any dangers while finding the route.

The other members of our group were Luol, our guide and leader, Mola, the muleteer who looked after the pack animals and Adise, our cook.

The walk was along a wide road that had at one time been used for vehicles but was deteriorating as rapidly as the Ethiopian economy. We started at 3000 feet and quickly climbed to over 10,000 feet. By mid-day, I was starting to get tired.

Once we were in the mountains, Abbaba rode behind me. He watched my plodding steps slow down. He got off his horse and insisted that I ride to the top of the hill. I did so thankfully while Abbaba walked behind me, carrying his rifle. Once at the top, Abbaba took back his horse and I walked with a quicker pace due to the rest.

I noticed looks of envy from my Western companions but I ignored them. Sometimes I like to be a girl. Sometimes, even an old girl.

When we arrived at our first night's campsite, we four Westerners plopped down on the ground in exhaustion while Abbaba and the rest of our team gathered wood for a fire, started supper and walked half a kilometre down hill to get water. The water was not only for cooking and drinking but also for washing.

Abbaba and his team were well aware of the strange habits of Westerners.

We cleaned up and sat around while Abbaba and the others made our supper, unpacked our gear from the mules and cleaned the dishes when we were finished eating.

That night, Abbaba sat on a knoll close to where we were sleeping under the stars so he could watch for any night-time dangers. When I awoke in the morning, I assumed Abbaba had sat up all night, because he was in the same place and position as he had been the night before.

The second day of our hike was a repetition of the first with Abbaba giving me his horse on every uphill we came to. I never refused. As we got higher, breathing became more difficult and walking was slow. Abbaba always watched to make certain that I was okay.

At the end of the second day, Abbaba insisted that we hire horses to take us the next few thousand feet up in elevation and 20 miles or so farther into the park. We complied.

That evening, through our interpreter, we found out that Abbaba was 52 years old, had three daughters and two sons and earned 180 Bir a month (\$30 US) but he was expecting a raise soon to 250 Bir (\$41 US). He had worked in the park since the war ended in the late 1980s and his big hope was that tourism would increase to help with the economy and the upkeep of the park.

On our third day in the mountains, we were finally in ibex country. Abbaba took out his brass binoculars that had only one lens working (the other had been smashed) and scanned the canyons until he found the main herd. We saw 39 ibex that day!

According to Abbaba, this was more than the wardens or

anyone else had ever seen in the park at one time.

By the time we finished hiking, I wanted to give Abbaba something from my culture. I gave him a bright red Mickey Mouse scarf to wear around his neck to accent his distinct face.



Above, Abbaba Mola the muleteer, Luol the guide and Adise the cook. Photo, top left, Abbaba up close. Photo, bottom left, Abbaba rides into the sunset in the Simien Mountains.

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