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Subject: Out of Africa

Posted by [David Fanning](#) on Mon, 25 Jul 2011 17:01:58 GMT

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Folks,

I've returned from Ethiopia and just wanted to give a short report on my adventure of teaching IDL classes in Africa. As usual in third-world countries, it is a combination of good news and bad news.

First of all, let me say that I think \*everyone\* should have the opportunity to travel to a third-world country. It is eye-opening, to say the least. Ethiopia is booming, at least in Addis Ababa, where much construction is going on and the economy is growing in double digits. Alas, inflation is out-pacing the economy.

One of the problems with global markets in poor countries is that farmers find it much more lucrative to export their products to richer countries who can pay more, and the poor in their own countries find it harder and harder to afford food and other goods. Government tries to help by implementing price controls and other measures, but the governing power there, as in most countries, resides in land-owners and businessmen whose wealth depends on growing the economy, not feeding the masses.

Eastern Ethiopia is suffering from a 10-year drought. Little or no help is coming from the government. Rather, the government relies on International Aid efforts to help with the problem. When I toured the Afar region east of Addis I saw cows that couldn't possibly be any skinnier. If rain doesn't come soon, I don't see how the pastoral Afar people, and many like them, can survive.

Education has recently become a government priority, and the good news is more people are being allowed to attend the universities. The bad news is there are no additional teachers, facilities, or support for the additional students. I had lunch with the directors of the Institute of Technology at Addis Ababa University, and they told me they had planned for 750 students and had received 3500. They have NO idea how they are going to teach this many students with their current staffing budget. Their current plan is to video tape a lecture in one class, and show it in 15 others!

I was teaching IDL in a classroom that could perhaps hold

20 students comfortably. I had 47 students in the classroom. Each had a laptop that needed to be plugged into one of the three outlets in the classroom. If any of us moved, we were in danger of being electrocuted. Add to this the certain power outages whenever the thunder and lightening started (it is the rainy season in Ethiopia!) and you have conditions for a most interesting and challenging classroom!

Still, the students in the new Institute of Water Resources were terrific! Very engaged. Very hard workers. No one complained. Everyone just got on with it. We moved slowly, but we moved steadily.

Addis is an incredibly safe and interesting city. I moved freely in it and never felt the least bit threatened. I didn't move around too much after dark, but not because I felt afraid of people. Rather, there are few street lights in Addis and there are gapping holes in the sidewalks that lead directly to the sewer 10 feet below. There are no barriers or warnings to alert the unsuspecting walker to these holes, so walking at night in unfamiliar territory is *\*extremely\** dangerous!

Ethiopians are invariably friendly and open people. But, be careful. The most friendly of them, especially those who engage you on the street when you are walking along minding your own business, are hoping you will repay their friendliness and helpfulness with money. You get a sense for this after you have accumulated a couple of especially good friends you hope you don't run into again!

I had many interesting experiences in Ethiopia, but two stand out in my mind. I stayed at the Bilen Lodge east of Addis in the Afar region, along the Awash River. This is dry, dusty country, but perfect for birds, which is what I was after. The "Lodge" is slightly misnamed. It is a primitive place with screened-in grass huts, basically, to stay in.

One night, about 2AM, I was awakened from a deep sleep by a lion roaring about 15 feet from my unlocked screen door! Goodness! I jumped up and looked out my window in time to see him moving away from me (thank goodness!) in the light of the full moon.

In the morning, I wondered if this had just been a dream, so I went out to investigate. No, sure enough, it was a lion, as big cat prints were everywhere outside my hut.

Later that morning, I also saw a cheetah moving in the dry river bed below the Lodge, along a path that during the day carried a never-ending stream of people, cows, and goats. Before I left

the area I had seen spotted hyenas, a jackal, and a crocodile in the river.

And, of course, birds. In four days I had identified about 40 new species I had never seen before in my life time, and probably saw two or three times that number, which I wasn't able to identify.

The other interesting experience was attending a local Muda celebration in the Bale Mountains. Ethiopia is about evenly divided between Christians and Muslims, but a surprisingly large number of local people still follow their traditional African religious celebrations. The Muda celebration is one of these.

It appeared to me to be a combination of a Southern Baptist revival meeting and a rave. It was held in a two-room smoky hut, about the size of my kitchen here at home. There were 60-70 people in attendance, all dancing and singing around the small fires set on the dirt floors in the center of the rooms. Two drummers provided the trance-like atmospheric effects. The idea, it seemed to me, was to sing and dance yourself into an altered state of reality, or maybe just religious ecstasy. It brought my own Pentecostal religious upbringing back to me in a very real (and surprisingly pleasing) way.

The celebration started about 8PM, with the singing, dancing, clapping, and drumming being interspersed with short quiet times where various individuals offered prayers and short speeches. Occasionally there was a break for specially prepared foods. The celebration went on until 4AM, when I was finally able to catch a few hours of sleep. What a way to experience the real Africa!

Cheers,

David

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David Fanning, Ph.D.

Fanning Software Consulting, Inc.

Coyote's Guide to IDL Programming: <http://www.idlcoyote.com/>

Sepore ma de ni thui. ("Perhaps thou speakest truth.")

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