

Life on the Hudad Plateau Dean McLaren

Philosophy

Undertaking the building of a school in any developing country is not something you should consider without first reflecting on the impact that this will have on the people and the wider community for many generations to come. There is no denying that education is crucial in any society, but imposing one's own values and beliefs on another culture or society can have disastrous implications as history has shown. This is at the very forefront of the research and planning completed by the Friends of the Hudad group as they have spent the last four years raising money and working towards the building of a school in the remote Hudad region of Ethiopia.

History/Geography

This was my 4th visit to Ethiopia and my 3rd visit to the Lalibela region, though I had not been up to the Hudad Plateau before. The plateau sits at a level of 3300 metres and is one of the most incredible places I have been anywhere in the world, with stunning vistas and an endless landscape that changes with every hour of the day. Lalibela, one of Ethiopia's most visited sites, is home to the magnificent rock hewn churches, built by King Lalibela some 700 years ago. One would assume that building a school in 2017 should not be that difficult! What you might not realise, however, is that life on the plateau for many people has changed little in the ensuing 700 years and, for most, there is still no electricity, running water or transportation. Many of the villagers beyond the plateau often travel up to 7.5 hrs on foot each Saturday to attend the local market to either buy or sell their goods. Whatever goes up or down the vast escarpments goes via donkey, mule or by foot. Even Lalibela itself, one of Ethiopia's busiest and most popular destinations for tourists and pilgrims, has very few supplies compared to a similar town in western society.

The school children currently have a temporary 4m x 4m classroom on the plateau, which houses up to 40 students ranging in age from 3 to 14 years. Prior to this the students had to walk 3 1/2 hrs down off the plateau into Lalibela to attend school and then walk all the way back up again. The new school, when completed, will comprise of three classrooms, a toilet block, storeroom, vegetable gardens and teacher accommodation. We have chosen to use local stone for the walls, which will blend in with the surrounding environment as much as possible.

Starting work

There was a huge sense the excitement and anticipation as the work began and the local community pitched in to provide the vital labour force. Finally, after more than 4 years of consultations, community meetings and Government red tape, the first sod of earth could be dug, footings poured and the walls begun for the construction of the new school. School children beamed with brilliant white teeth as they gleefully and willingly carried basalt rocks on their backs and shoulders across the plateau. Sturdy young women with 20lt water containers chattered away as they carried water for mixing with the cement for up to 40 minutes to the site, or assisted with carting the stone and the mortar, whilst bare foot men chipped away at the edge of the escarpment to chisel out the rock from the ground that would soon become the walls of the school.

The volunteers

I was one of an international contingent, comprising of 3 Brits, 3 Americans and 6 Australians, 3 of whom were founding members of FOTH, and all who had given up their time to volunteer and construct the new school. Myself and Bob, an Englishman, living not in New York but Seattle, were the only two with building experience who would be hands-on laying the stone on the school site, but what the others lacked in experience, they made up for with enthusiasm. I was delighted to have my niece and nephew and my niece's boyfriend joining me from the UK on their first trip to Ethiopia.

The school will provide education for up to 5 surrounding villages in the area and meeting the needs of so many people, who have so little, is a complex task. It is surprising how much communication can take place even when the language barriers are so wide, but humour always prevailed! Our suggestions to make signs to explain the watering system hit a wall when we realised that many of the adults could not read or write in Amharic, let alone English. When the water you use has come directly out of the ground for the last 2000 years (or even longer) how do you understand what

plumbing is? How do you know how a tap or a reservoir works? And so an education and community consultation meeting was organised to explain how the system of piping the water 2.5km to the school site would work.

Whilst our main task was to build the school, there were also a few opportunities to engage with the students when we presented them with new soccer balls, pens and books and taught them some new games and songs. The behaviour and respect the students showed during this time was remarkable and the care for the junior students was a pleasure to observe. It is true that we had a few uncomfortable things to put up with, like going without water for a couple of days, but we all knew that unlike the locals we would eventually have plentiful water when we headed down off the plateau. These few discomforts were more than made up for by the hospitality and generosity of the local people as well as the stunning and breathtaking scenery that surrounded us on a daily basis.

The experience

It is hard to describe the experience of working in such a remote, harsh and beautiful location, but when working with the locals you do get a real sense of what it must be like to live on the plateau full time. The local people are so passionate about helping to build the new school and are also so appreciative that someone has bothered to listen to them and work with them to improve the lives of their children and the children of the surrounding communities.

Spending 2 1/2 weeks on the plateau is not something that everyone 'could' do, but it is definitely something that everybody 'should' do if the opportunity ever arises. It will not only change your perspective on life, it will change your perspective on wants and needs and what is important in life. You will see the best and worst of life and realise and appreciate just how fortunate we are to live where we live, and to have what we have. You will meet people who will break your heart and make you smile with a new sense of wonder. You will see scenery that will take your breath away and make you slow down and appreciate the wonders of nature. You will mix with people who are as concerned and compassionate about providing education to those in need as yourself. You may sit in amongst a troop of 100 baboons and wonder at their fascinating grooming and community traits. You will be amazed at the incredible diversity of birdlife and you will rest on the edge of escarpments and realise just how small we are in the scheme of things, but you will also begin to understand that you can make a difference to the lives of those who have so little in comparison to you.

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July 2017

