



# WORLDS APART

When Scottish teacher Susan Aitchison retired she was ready for a change. So she moved to Ethiopia and opened her own restaurant. By Nick Redmayne

It's nearly 30 years since Michael Buerk filed his first shocking report for the BBC from the frontline of the Ethiopian famine. Even now the country's name is synonymous with the hunger and starvation seen in 1984-85 for many people, but the reality of this diverse and beautiful country is far more complex than that.

It's still a shock, though, to walk into an Ethiopian restaurant which looks like it belongs in Star Wars and find a 64-year-old woman from Motherwell behind the counter. I meet Susan Aitchison – a twinkly-eyed culinary missionary – quite by chance one February evening in the Ethiopian highlands as prayers drift across from sacred sites in the holy city of Lalibela, a Unesco World

Heritage Site. After spending the day hiking I notice an intriguing structure on the horizon, an otherworldly edifice of swooping walkways, multiple levels and a soaring canopy. Is this a film set, a cinematic homage from some indolent offspring of the emperor Haile Selassie? We're still dumbstruck by the design of the building as waiters light a campfire to warm our limbs and bring a round of St George's beers. "Are they looking after you?" comes a distinctly Scottish voice, and into the flickering light steps Aitchison.

A home economics teacher all her working life, Aitchison tells me she was 57 years old and ready for a challenge after taking early retirement so she packed up and quit Scotland for Lalibela in September

2007. "I was teaching at a rural village school," she says. "A young Ethiopian, Habtamu Baye, drove me each day. By chance he said he'd love to have a small restaurant. That was the start of the Ben Abeba dream."

The restaurant's name was chosen early on and seemed right – Ben is the Scottish part and Abeba is Amharic for flower. Thus was born the "hill of flowers".

Lalibela is an important pilgrimage site for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Its 13 remarkable rock-hewn churches date from the 12th century and draw a small but steady flow of tourists. And here I am, two days' drive from the capital Addis Ababa, more than 2440m (8000ft) above sea level, enjoying a cold beer in a restaurant that if not built by the heavenly host is at least worthy of Grand Designs. In order to secure the location, which affords breathtaking views towards mountains and over lowland plains, the business partners had to sign a 99-year lease. Once that was accomplished, the next step was designing Ben Abeba.

"Two young Ethiopian architecture graduates produced the plans," Aitchison explains. "Everyone presumed we would flatten the hill and build a small rectangular restaurant. The boys looked at the surrounding hills and decided to make the restaurant reflect their shape."

Flowery concrete goblets hold tables aloft, offering up diners to the skies. Above a central open kitchen a lofty canvas tube towers upwards, and the extraction system is designed to look like a sail, mirroring the contours of the nearest hills. Beneath the main mezzanine Ben Abeba's cloakrooms and toilets are unlike any others in Ethiopia, the sliding doors on the circular pods more sci-fi than sanitary necessity.

"All the build was done by hand," Aitchison says. "More than 120 local people were involved. There's no machinery here and no B&Q. The stones were brought from the river, then chiselled by hand."

Aitchison and Habtamu hold equal shares in the venture. "Ben Abeba could not have been completed without Habtamu's expertise managing a large workforce and dealing with government offices and rules and regulations very alien to a Scot."

The social impact of the project is not to be underestimated. Ethiopia's population has risen from 39 million in 1984 to more than 90m today and finding work in rural



areas is difficult. "The aim was to generate employment for local young people," says Aitchison. "In 2011 we took on 40 youngsters and did a six-week training programme. Initially 22 were given full-time employment, now we have 30." Aitchison, who is divorced and has no children, also runs a scholarship scheme to educate local youngsters.

It's a two-day journey for anything to arrive by road from Addis. Did this throw up any difficulties? "Our policy is to use what's available locally," she replies. "This means we always have fresh though limited ingredients, but it does generate business for the local community."

It can be a shock to any foreign visitors, though. "As she watched her dinner walk in, a friend from Wishaw said she preferred her meat to arrive in plastic."

As well as traditional Ethiopian foods served on the ubiquitous injera – a fermented flatbread – such as spicy chicken doro wat or even more piquant chilli beef tibs, the menu at Ben Abeba has some unexpected additions. "One of our most popular dishes is shepherd's pie," says Aitchison. "Another is our beef and beetroot casserole inspired by Lady Claire Macdonald's venison and beetroot casserole."

For afters, the desserts use locally renowned ingredients. "The town is famous for its honey – Lalibela means 'honey eater' – and our special is a crepe filled with fresh banana and coated with a honey and lemon sauce."

The Scottish influence is apparent elsewhere too. "We serve freshly baked scones with our own jam," says Aitchison,

“One of our most popular dishes is shepherd's pie and we serve scones with our own jam”

Susan Aitchison and Habtamu Baye's restaurant juxtaposes sci-fi aesthetics with traditional Ethiopian cuisine augmented by a few Scottish staples

quite the home economics mistress. "The building needs time to grow into the hill," she continues. "Two years ago, Habtamu planted 30,000 trees. They need time to grow and bring the wildlife back. More than 5000 are fruit trees and this year we've been using our own guava and our own papaya. Most exciting has been picking our own coffee" – Aitchison begins to laugh – "something not possible in Motherwell."

So, what do her friends in Scotland think of her idea of a quiet retirement? "I get emails asking if I am OK. I read these as I'm sitting with my glass of wine being asked what I'd like for lunch." She laughs again. "I get parcels from friends with chocolate and cheese – you can't get either here – so I have to word my replies carefully."

The notion of Ethiopia as a diverse and strikingly sublime country can be difficult for those overseas to come round to, but that's not to say life is easy. Although welcoming, most Ethiopians are faced with limited educational facilities, earn low incomes and live in marginal housing. I ask Aitchison whether her priorities have changed since leaving North Lanarkshire.

"My time here has made me think of the important things in life," she says, carefully. "I now realise that if you have no car, no money and don't own a house, you don't have to worry about these things. It's amazing how good you can feel to wake up and have both water and electricity."

Asked what her future might be, she replies, "Who knows? I'm often asked when we hope to complete [the restaurant] – my answer is always 'not in my lifetime'. I'm very aware I'm 64 years old and healthcare is very limited. The day may come when I'm not fit enough to live here. In an ideal world, I'd love six months here and six months in Scotland. Scotland will always be home, but Lalibela has gained a corner of my heart."

Visit [benabeba.com](http://benabeba.com). The Susan Aitchison Scholarship supports the education of 16 young Ethiopians in schools and universities – for more details email [susan@benabeba.com](mailto:susan@benabeba.com). Steppes Travel ([steppestravel.co.uk](http://steppestravel.co.uk), 01285 880980) offers tailor-made 11-day journeys through Ethiopia visiting Addis Ababa, Axum, Lalibela, Gondar and Bahir Dar. Tours cost from £2500 per person including flights from Glasgow, accommodation, all meals and tour guides.

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