

## Volunteer traveling suggestions from Richard James, 12/2004

### Purpose

This document has been prepared in order to help volunteers traveling to Ethiopia or other countries on behalf of Bridges to Prosperity have a safe, enjoyable and productive visit. I offer a variety of information which may be useful for packing as well as for while you are in Ethiopia.

### Luggage

Be sure to check with your airline and find out how many items you can check, how many you can carry-on and the size and weight limitations of each. Depending on your ticket, these values may vary on a segment by segment basis.

I carried two large checked items and one small backpack as my carry-on.

Chris (the engineer already in Ethiopia) had a very strong and secure plastic lock box for his computer. If you bring valuables, I suggest one of these. I brought a laptop computer, camera, Ipod and never had a problem with anything being taken. I was pick-pocketed once in the town of Hayk, so keep all currency, tickets, passport etc., in a small travel bag around your neck inside your shirt.

For the most part it is a safe country. But, standing out as you surely will, makes you a target for any undesirable folks that may be around.

If you can, bring items that are not brand new. Showing up with a bunch of shiny new gear from REI will only announce your incredible wealth that much louder. It will further differentiate you from the locals. Most people in rural areas wore the same cloths every day. Be prepared to sell or give some of your gear to the friends you make. Also be prepared to have the locals ask you to give them nearly everything you have.

While in Ethiopia I stayed in three areas, each of which had different accommodations.

Addis Ababa – I stayed at a local hotel. Cost about \$40 per night. Not bad.

When working in Addis, I usually wore a t-shirt and jeans, a hat and light boots. I brought gloves but rarely used them. I never put on any sun screen the entire time.

Desse – I stayed in a variety of horrible hotels (by Western standards, hell any standards). I would leave my luggage in my room while working. I wore the same, t-shirt, jeans, hat, light boots. The plumbing in these hotels was installed during the time of Haile Selassie and has not been serviced since. I offered more than once to repair the shower heads and leaky faucets if the hotel would provide the parts. The woman at the front desk only laughed. She was more interested in counting money. Every time I saw her as I came and went for the day, she was holding a large wad of filthy bills, carefully counting them. I mean every time. After I commented on this during my last stay at her hovel, she discontinued this practice, or at least closed the door to the office while counting bills. If only she was a money launderer too. I have never seen dirtier money. I took to buying 100 brand new 1 birr notes from the bank and keeping it in my camera case. I could pay taxi, bus, café bills without having to receive change that consisted of a pile of dirt clinging to a tattered bill.

Eating in this town became dull. We ate either at hotels or at peoples' homes. I ate a lot of scrambled eggs (Ankelel fir fir) and pastries in the morning along with coffee. Lunch and dinner

was often vegetable soup or Shero Wat with Enjira. Beer and Coke were staples as well. I purchased European chocolate from Domus, the wealthy ferenj store at the Hilton in Addis. This was one of my guilty pleasures while in Ethiopia.

Marye – I brought my own tent (North Face Westwind, 2-person, 4-season) and other camping gear and this was my home. BTP has tents that worked fine. There is no need for such a sturdy tent as what I have, it is what I have. A 2-person REI dome tent would be quite nice. I would leave my luggage in my tent, computer, solar panel system, etc. while out working. We were camped at 8000' or so above sea level during the months of April and May. We had some mosquitoes, fleas rarely and a gazillion flies. As we were far above the sea, the mosquitoes were NOT the malaria bearing type. Although, I did spend about two days down around Kombulcha where there ARE malaria carrying Mossies. The flies are very bothersome everywhere. On muggy days, sitting inside the tent was too warm during the day. It did provide an escape from the flies, but was sweltering. While in Marye, we were camped in the front yard/compound area of the local agricultural official. This yard served as pasture for a calf, chickens and goats. As you can imagine, there was a great deal of manure around. It also served as soccer field for the officials' children and their friends after I presented them with a soccer ball purchased in Desse. The yard was surrounded by barbed wire. The ball survived intact for two play periods of about 1.5 hours total. Later, in Addis and Desse, I witnessed amazingly clever repair of balls that had suffered a similar fate. These folks are resourceful.

No matter where you go, be prepared to feel like a movie star being followed by papparazi. Everyone will shout at you, touch you, talk broken English at you. Yell broken English at you. Beg, beg, beg from you all the time. This was one of the most unpleasant aspects of my stay In Ethiopia. Once I left my room/tent, I was on display. Be prepared for this. With respect to beggars, I rarely gave them money. Sometimes I would give a few coins or a Birr to severely disabled folks on the sly so as not to attract attention. Near the end of my stay, I saw Chris buying dictionaries and other text books for children. He quickly regretted this. The entire town of Desse soon came to know that the white guy was handing out books. As Chris and I seemed to be the only two ferenji's (white) guys there most of the time, we both became deluged with requests for books. Be careful about the expectations you create.

## Clothing

Ten shirts, cotton or synthetic, some long sleeve shirts

Five pairs of jeans

Two other trousers, I had quick dry nylon

Ten pair socks

Light hiking/work boots

Flip flops or other around camp shoes

Sneakers

Light to medium rain jacket and pants or a poncho

Toiletries

The usual kit one would carry for such a trip. I was fortunate in that I only got Dehli belly once or twice for short periods. A doctor in the US told me to bring chewable Pepto-Bismal and eat one every day. She said this would create an environment in my belly that would slow the spread of but not eliminate entirely intestinal pests. I did this, but only when I was feeling the presence of unwanted guests in my belly.

Bring several packs of your favorite baby wipes.

Hand lotion. My hands were in water or mortar often. My hands got very dry. The locals will want to use your lotion too. So bring extra.

Rivers in Ethiopia are akin to duct tape in the US. They are used for everything. Irrigation, swimming, bathing, drinking, cooking, washing clothes, defecating, urinating, you name it. In Desse, after several days of looking for the pile of poo we could strongly smell near the bridge site, we finally figured out that the mortar we were mixing with river water was the source of the smell. The flies were horrible. I taught the people at each bridge site a new chant, "The river is not a toilet. Huaah!" Or, in Amharic, "Wenz, shin-TOH bett, eye dellum! Huahh!!"

## Camera

I found my camera to be problematic. Either people did not want to be photographed, the authorities did not want me to photograph something, or, once one photo had been taken, everyone wanted their photo taken. Do not point your camera at any military installation. Even if said installation is 3 miles away and you can not see it. I found 2 or 3 places in Addis that could accept my camera memory card and print photos. I had prints made several times and gave them to the people in the image. They were VERY happy to get a picture of themselves. Cost was about 3-4 birr per 4x6 image (30-50 cents). The place I liked best was located near the Stadium. They would let me sit next to the machine and tell them how many of each photo I wanted. If they were not busy, they would do it while I waited.

## Food

Since I do not eat beef or pork, I brought several packages of turkey, salmon and tuna jerky. I am glad I did. The chicken I did eat in the rural areas was pretty sad. The chickens eat less well than the people do. Tough, oily and not so flavorful.

## Personal Hacks

I usually travel with a kite. The children and adults loved it when I flew in Marye. If I had the funds, I would have brought numerous small kites to hand out as gifts at the END of my stay. Remember to be wary of setting up the perception of being your own personal UN aid mission. Or, as Chris called it "The Great Ferenj Sweepstakes".

I brought duct tape and plenty of tie wraps to make field repairs.

If you can bring small paperback English dictionaries for gifts, that will go over well. Most of the English textbooks I saw were horrible and full of errors.

Bring a copy of the Lonely Planet Amharic-English phrase book. It is quite handy (Thanks Ken).