

Episode 97: Ethiopia

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about one of their favourite countries in Africa: Ethiopia. They discuss the country's history and food and talk about some of the places they liked the most in Ethiopia.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about Ethiopia, which we visited on a stand-alone¹ trip seven years ago now. And I think it's safe to say that it's one of our favourite countries in Africa.

Wendy: Yeah, I'd say that's definitely true. It's hard to believe it's been seven years.

Nick: Yeah, it was when we were living in Switzerland and so we weren't really doing a lot of long-term travel at that time. And so we were just taking some short trips where we could, you know, one per year usually. And one of the years we chose Ethiopia.

Wendy: Yeah, so we've done three big trips in Africa that have been multi-country trips each time. We did a big one in East Africa, a big one in West Africa and a big one in Southern Africa. But, yeah, Ethiopia, as you said, we visited that country separately on, yeah, just a stand-alone trip where that's the only place that we went, but there was lots to see, and it was quite a packed trip, I would say.

Nick: Yeah, we spent about three weeks there, and so that was, you know, enough time, we thought, to go to various places in the country. We didn't go to all the places that, uh, we could have gone to, so we could have spent longer there as well. But I think that the thing that made us want to go there, the thing that really attracted us to Ethiopia, was that it's very different from all the other countries around it.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: With the exception of Eritrea, which used to be part of Ethiopia, and then they had a civil war and it broke off. But I think it's ... something that we might say

¹ stand-alone: not in combination with anything else

is that a lot of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, to us as visitors, in terms of² the big picture, seem quite similar to each other.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And Ethiopia is just completely different from all of the other countries. And so the people are different in terms of their ethnicity, the language that they speak - Amharic - is different from the other languages, like Swahili, and the other languages around it. The food that they eat is completely different. Umm, they have a different history, both in terms of ancient history and modern history. They were a very early adopter of Christianity in the fourth century and of Islam in the seventh century. And then even in more modern times, they were the only African country, I believe, that resisted a European coloniser, which in their case was Italy. But they defeated Italy in some kind of battle. Italy had a sort of ... they were able to colonise part of the country but never really completely, fully, and so that also makes Ethiopia a unique country in Africa for that reason too.

Wendy: Yeah, and that, uhh, colonisation, or attempted colonisation of (by) Italy, that happened much later than the colonising of other parts of Africa, too. That was during Mussolini's time, so we're talking about the 1930s. Umm, and it is considered to be the only country in Africa that was never successfully colonised, so I guess it depends on what you want to interpret as successful colonisation, because Mussolini certainly intended to colonise it and, uhh, he did have some influence there, but ultimately it remained an independent country.

Nick: Yeah, and there's an interesting little story that - it's just interesting for us, I guess - is that when we first lived in Rome and were tour guides in Rome, there was an obelisk in Rome which came from Ethiopia. And there are a lot of obelisks in Rome - thirteen, I believe - that come from Egypt, and there was just this one from Ethiopia. And when we first arrived, we didn't really understand it, because we weren't really aware of this history. And then after we left Rome, it ended up getting, umm ... the obelisk was given back to Ethiopia. They demanded it back, and Italy decided to give it back. And it had been taken during this Mussolini era that you're talking about. And then when we went to Ethiopia, we saw it, the exact same obelisk that we used to see in Rome - right at the Circus Maximus, it was in a very prominent³ location in Rome. And then all these years later, we saw the exact same obelisk, umm, back in Axum in Ethiopia where it belonged, or where it originally came from.

Wendy: Yes, along with many other obelisks, because there are actually quite a few of them in Axum.

Nick: And it was actually in Rome and in Italy as part of this colonial history that we first really became aware of Ethiopia, when we went to an Ethiopian restaurant.

² in terms of: with regard to, concerning. See also: Episode 16.

³ prominent: important, something that stands out

Wendy: Yes, that's true, which is funny, because in general, Italy is not a place that has a lot of ethnic cuisines. I mean, the Italians generally just like to eat Italian food, right? They like to eat pizza and pasta and not too much else. Umm, but, so you don't find, you know, a lot of Thai restaurants and Vietnamese restaurants. I guess that's changing a little bit now, but when we lived there, you know, fifteen years ago, you didn't have many ethnic restaurants. But, one of the few exceptions was that you had a couple of Ethiopian restaurants because there was a sizeable Ethiopian community. And, again, that dates back to these links that go back to Mussolini times.

Nick: Right, so Ethiopian food - what's that all about?

Wendy: It's awesome! I love it. Uhh, it is unique. It's not like any other food that I've ever tasted from anywhere else in the world. The base of any dish is always a special type of bread, which is called *injera*. And it's a fermented⁴ bread. It doesn't really even look like bread. It looks more like a pancake or something like that.

Nick: Yeah, it's a spongy⁵ bread.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And so that is used basically as the plate, and then all of these little dishes, little stews and sauces and vegetables and things, they are placed on top of the piece of *injera*. And then you eat with your hands, so there's no cutlery⁶, there's no knife or fork or anything, uhh, and you take another piece of *injera* and tear off some of that and you use that to scoop up⁷ the stews and the sauces that are on your plate of *injera*. And then at the end when you get to the bottom and you've finished all of the food on top of the *injera*, then you have this bottom piece that has soaked up all of the juices from all of these stews, and that's the best part.

Nick: For sure, for sure. And when we were living in Geneva, there were also Ethiopian restaurants there as well. And so we had an idea of what Ethiopian food was, and then that was, you know, one of the highlights for us was to go, actually, to the country and find that the food that we had been eating was authentic and that this was really what everybody ate in Ethiopia, and we loved it.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, we absolutely loved it. It seemed like not all the tourists did, though. I remember one time in particular, we were just sitting at a restaurant, eating our *injera* and our stews, and some other tourists walked by, and they said something like, 'How's the *injera*?' And we said, 'It's great!' And they said, 'No, it's not.' Like, they couldn't believe that we were really enjoying it. And when they

⁴ fermented: processed using yeast or bacteria

⁵ spongy: something that absorbs liquid

⁶ cutlery: tools that you usually use to eat food with (i.e. knife, fork and spoon)

⁷ scoop up (phrasal verb): gather something together in one motion

asked, 'How's the *injera*?' they were being sarcastic. Umm, but we told them, 'No, we really love this food, we eat this food, you know, in Geneva where we live, and we were really looking forward to tasting the real thing while we were here.' And so for us, the food was a big part of it.

Nick: For sure. Umm, and so as we said earlier, we travelled around the country a bit. One of the first places we went to and one of the highlights of Ethiopia is a place called Lalibela. And this is where there are all these rock-cut churches, and so it's a very, uhh, special place for Ethiopians within their, uhh, beliefs, and it's also an amazing place to go because you have all these churches that are just carved into rocks, and so that was a special place.

Wendy: Yeah, it's hard to describe, really. Umm, if you say rock-cut churches, or rock-hewn⁸ churches, I don't know if that really gets it across in words. Because, yeah, you have just, you know, this huge landscape of rock and then the church has actually been carved out of it, like you would carve a sculpture. You know, you'd have a great big gigantic piece of rock and then you would chisel⁹ away at the rock until you'd created a shape of a human body or of whatever it was. But they did that, but on a much, much bigger scale, where it's this whole church where, you know, a hundred people can fit inside it.

Nick: Yeah, and one of them in particular was carved, essentially, into the ground. You know, the rock was the ground. And they just dug and dug and dug and then carved this church out of the inside of this hole that they'd dug. Uhh, so it was super impressive and really, really interesting.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Umm, one of the other highlights for me ... I mean, there were all these other historical highlights which were great - Axum that we mentioned, umm, which is part of an ancient kingdom of Ethiopia. Uhh, Gonder which has these castles. Umm, but one of the other places I really liked was Tigray, and it's a whole region, and we did some community tourism there. And so we spent, I think, three days and two nights, umm, with local guides, walking through this whole region and I thought that was fantastic.

Wendy: Yeah, it was. So we did a trek, or a long hike, a multi-day hike. And, uhh, yeah, they were local guides who were walking with us. And they would stop and talk to the local villagers that we would pass by, you know, they would be working in their fields. Or we'd stop and have a drink with them of the local, like, home brew, this local beer that they would brew¹⁰ themselves, which was...

⁸ hewn: roughly shaped

⁹ chisel (verb): cut or shape something by carving, using a tool that is also called a chisel

¹⁰ brew (verb): concoct or prepare a beverage that requires certain steps, like beer or tea. The noun is also *brew*, as you can see earlier in the same sentence.

Nick: Just before you continue, yeah, what did you think of that beer?

Wendy: Uhh, not so much. I mean, I don't like any kind of beer, so I'm probably not the right person to ask. But, yeah, that was not one of my favourite things that I tasted in Ethiopia, that's for sure.

Nick: Umm, but no, it was great, because the community benefits from the visits, and so all of the villages that we went through, they're all ... you know, they all get a little bit every time there are tourists who do one of these treks. And so it was really great to see that the organisers give back to the communities and, you know, that's an example of where, you know, tourism can be a really positive thing, I think.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, I think it was done very well and in a very sustainable way that benefitted everyone.

Nick: Alright, well we could talk about Ethiopia for a long time.

Wendy: Yeah!

Nick: But we're out of time, so we'll have to leave it there. But it's definitely a great country to visit.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why were Nick and Wendy interested in going to Ethiopia in the first place?
2. What did Nick and Wendy see in Ethiopia that they had seen before?
3. What are some of the features of Ethiopian food, described by Wendy?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. When people have picnics, they often eat using plastic _____. That way, they don't need to bring dirty silverware home to wash later.
2. Tempeh is a _____ soy product that comes from Indonesia. Like tofu and seitan, it can be eaten as a meat replacement in vegetarian or vegan meals.
3. In addition to the new Star Wars movies that continue the story of the original trilogy (Episodes 7-9), Disney is also producing _____ movies from the Star Wars universe like *Rogue One* and *Solo*.
4. They started to _____ their own beer a few years ago. It was so popular with their friends and family that now they bottle it and sell it as a craft beer.
5. No one had heard of her a couple of years ago, but she ran for the Senate and won and has since become a very _____ politician. She might run for President in a few years.
6. Many ancient Greek theatres are _____ into the rock on a slope at the bottom of a hill in a way that takes advantage of the natural landscape. That way, there is no need to build a foundation at the back of the theatre.
7. Russia is the world's largest country _____ of geographic size, but China is the largest _____ population.
8. If the bread is _____, it can be great for mopping up sauces from your plate at the end of a meal if you're eating a cuisine like Moroccan or Indian.
9. One form of graffiti is to _____ your name or a message into a rock.
10. He likes to _____ a handful of peanuts from a bowl and then eat them one by one.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever been to Ethiopia? If so, did you like it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever eaten Ethiopian food? If so, did you like it? If not, would you like to try it? Why or why not?
3. Nick and Wendy said their enjoyment of Ethiopian food was one of the highlights of their trip. How important is trying local food to you when you travel?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Because it's different, in many ways, from other African countries.
2. An obelisk that used to stand in Rome, but has since been returned to Ethiopia, where it originally came from.
3. That it has a base of *injera* bread, with lots of sauces and stews placed on top that soak into the *injera*, and that you eat it with your hands.

Exercises

1. cutlery
2. fermented
3. stand-alone
4. brew
5. prominent
6. hewn
7. in terms of
8. spongy
9. chisel
10. scoop up