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DESTINATIONS

A Guide to the world of Hospitality and Tourism

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Readers: Our Most Precious Asset

Meskel Celebrations: An UNESCO intangible heritage



Ethiopia is beautiful with delightful people, abundant history, rich culture, many UNESCO sites mesmerising **Chandragupta Amritkar** by its charm.

Having romped across the globe to 40+ countries, never been to an African country apart from Seychelles (where I was hosted thrice), it was Tadesse Tilahun, Regional Director, Indian Sub-continent, Ethiopian Airlines who invited me to experience a part of Ethiopia and his airline. “How can you miss out on such a beautiful country – the Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, Nile fall and our unique Meskel Festival,” said Tadesse Tilahun. Coordinating with Yvonne Rodricks, Senior Administrative Assistant, Ethiopian Airlines and the Ethiopian Airlines HQ we planned the trip coinciding with Meskel Festival.

While Ethiopian Airlines was also extending local hospitality I told Tadesse Tilahun that at Addis Ababa I would like to stay at Hilton. The next day afternoon I e-mailed Claus Steiner GM, Hilton Addis Ababa requesting Hilton to host me and by evening, the same day, I got a reply confirming my stay (efficiency at its best).

I opted for e-visa as Tadesse Tilahun encouraged me, “We have recently launched the e-visa and I would like you to try that out. An initiative taken by our Group CEO Tewelde GebreMariam and collaborating with The Ethiopian Immigration and Nationality Affairs main Department the e- visa will be issued online on online approval.” He was right - the process was quick and simple.

The next step was getting yellow fever vaccination and oral

vaccination, which unfortunately is only done at a handful of centers across the India. One needs to carry original passport and confirmed ticket / visa for the registration. It took me two hours at the center. The vaccination becomes valid 10 days after it is taken.

After 10 days and all set for my maiden visit to Ethiopia I took the early morning flight from Mumbai – check in was quick and fast. The airline calls their business class seats as CloudNine and their new aircrafts have state-of-the-art seats. The flight took off on time and my business class seat was as expected full flat. The service from the beginning was excellent from the friendly proactive flight attendants. While talking to one of the airhostess she enlightened me on the upgrade option provided by the airline where economy passengers can bid for CloudNine seats and pay only when confirmed. The movie selection was OK. The food served onboard was good with vegetarian option. I was not impressed by the amenity kit and I am sure the airline can do a better job.

The flight landed on time (8 am – Ethiopian time) as I arrived into Addis Ababa on the eve of Meskel, the Finding of True Cross festival. I proceeded to the e-visa immigration desk. Being the second person in line it took hardly five minutes and I was out. Coming out with baggage is a cumbersome process and I think the airport authorities should seriously look into this.

The Hilton staff was there to receive me and in 15 minutes I reached the hotel and was quickly checked into the spacious King Suite (review of Hilton hotel separately done). In the evening Ashenafi Kassa, CEO, Celebrity Ethiopia tours, a leading tour operator from Ethiopia, and his beautiful colleague came to pick me up for Meskel.

Hilton turned out to be the ideal hotel as Meskel Square, the venue of the celebrations, is walking distance. We reached the venue a couple of hours earlier and cleared the security to enter the square. I think we arrived early and I was a bit disappointed as there were hardly any crowds or the festive environment.

But how wrong I was to be as the sun started to set and the crowds turned up in huge numbers with special candles. Hundreds of priests and deacons attired in Ethiopia's traditional



plain white clothes were singing and doing the necessary rituals as we from the media started clicking photos and interviewing them (I was also interviewed by a couple of local channels

including EBC). As the crowds started swelling the demonstrations started which were feast to one's eyes as people, priests, followers and even school students in colorful clothes, unique robes joined the parade across the square.

Meskel is a religious feast celebrated by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians across the country commemorating the discovery of the True Cross by Queen Helena, known in Ethiopia as Nigist Eleni. Its celebration dates back to 1600 years.

Demera, the tradition of burning bonfire on the eve of Meskel, ceremony was lit by HH Abune Mathias, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church along with HH Baselios Mar Thoma Paulose II, Catholicos of the East and the Supreme Head of the Indian Orthodox Church who was the Chief Guest in the presence of President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Dr. Mulatu Teshome.

HH Abune Mathias during the occasion emphasized that this year's Meskel is special for it is marked at the beginning of the third millennium and the apostolic visit of the Indian Orthodox Church HH Baselios Marthoma Paulose II.

HH Baselios Marthoma Paulose II said "This religious festival has made us all witness the reason why this intangible world heritages of Ethiopia is registered by the UNESCO." Many may not be aware but Meskel celebration has been inscribed under UNESCO's intangible heritages.

For me it was an eye-opener.

They had organized a dinner for me but I was too fatigued and opted to rest as the next day was going to be a long day with travels to other towns in Ethiopia.

(In the next issue we focus on Bhair Dar, Lalibela and Addis Ababa)



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See you in Ethiopia!

“For our passengers we have introduced a free stopover package”



I had the pleasure of interacting with **Esayas Wolde Mariam, MD Ethiopian International Services** who has been with the airline since 1991 at their office. He has worked as Manager Space Control and Yield Country Manager Greece, Nigeria and Germany, VP of Ethiopian Cargo, SVP Global Sales and now finally as MD Ethiopian International Services. In an exclusive Interview with **Chandragupta Amritkar** he highlights the success and future plans of the airline. **Excerpts**

Most African carriers are in red how has Ethiopian Airlines always been profitable? Can you share the magic formula?

It's one word Customer. We have always been customer centric as our employees are well aware that they pay our salaries. So service wise we are among the top airlines globally and certainly the best in African continent. We try to give best air connectivity as we fly to 120 + international destinations and as we speak more destinations are getting added.

We have also invested in the best and latest aircrafts. We have a fleet of around 90+ aircrafts including some of the best globally. We recently got 6 Airbus A350-900 and the latest Boeing B787-9 should join our fleet soon. We have regularly upgraded our aircrafts so that customers know that they are getting the best. We have fully refurbished our Boeing 767-300 ER fleet which serves India too including brand new full flat-bed seats in Cloud Nine, 17 inches screen and in-seat power outlets.

All this has helped us get the vote of confidence from our customers in turn multiple awards which are a byproduct of our dedication to customers.

I met an Ethiopian from USA and she was saying that your airline prices out of USA are expensive and so she preferred another airline. Your comments.

Pricing is a critical factor. Let me tell you selling an airline ticket is much more than selling a water bottle. We do have attractive fares and manage to upscale when required. Many factors are involved in pricing – location, size of aircraft, type of aircraft, flight timing, stopovers, amenities provided, in flight service etc. Also in today's environment the price fluctuates substantially.

How do you view the Indian market and any specific expansion plans?

It is a very important market for us. We currently have 28 flights i.e., a double daily flight from Delhi and Mumbai. Ahmedabad and Chennai are on our radar. More Indians are now flying to Africa either for business or leisure. We hope to make our airline as their preferred choice. We also have good connections to Europe and USA. For our transit passengers we have introduced a free stopover package.

The free stopover offer sounds interesting. Can you elaborate?

This is one of the ways to attract transit passengers (with more

than 8 hrs transit time at Addis) to see part of our wonderful country and then talk about it to friends and come with families for a longer duration or conduct events. The offer includes hotel accommodation, free transfers to hotel and back, free sightseeing in Addis Ababa. Time permitting a nice cultural evening. After relishing Ethiopian hospitality they will be safely deposited back to the airport to catch their connecting flights to USA/Europe.

Coming back to the Indian market who are your target passengers?

As I said both business and leisure. With business expansion and more Industrial parks coming in Ethiopia I am sure Indians will find potential opportunities. Then there are the ethnic Indian Africans. The growing Indian middle class with good spending power are ideal for leisure market. Pilgrimage can be a major segment. From Ethiopia we have seen a substantial increase in medical tourism to Indian and many hospitals have tie-ups with our airline.

What about MICE?

Huge potential. Addis Ababa is the headquarters for African Union. We now have a wide variety of international standard hotels with state of the art conference centers. Our airline has tied up with several of these hotels. For the delegates there is a lot to see and experience in Ethiopia and we can provide excellent fly, stay and experience packages.

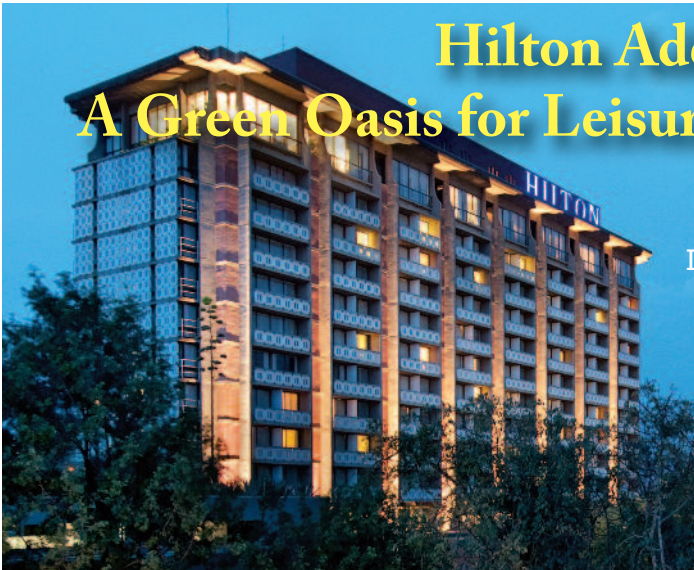
You are the largest carrier in Africa as well as Africa's largest cargo operator.

Yes, that's true. Cargo is an integral part of our business and 1/5th of our revenue comes from cargo. It is one of the seven strategic business units of our group. We have 8 dedicated freighters including 6 Boeing B777-200LR and 2 - Boeing B757-260F. We recently inaugurated a state of the art Cargo Terminal which can accommodate 600,000 tons per annum. By 2025, we plan to uplift over 820,000 tons per year.



Hilton Addis Ababa

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It was truly an experience visiting Hilton Addis Ababa with all its grandeur and getting treated like a royal says **Chandragupta Amritkar**

It was my friend Dagmar Muhle, GM, Hilton Munich Airport who connected me to Claus Steiner, who was then the Cluster General Manager – Seychelles Hotels. She talked highly of him and his efficiency and I thought I should meet such a person. Due to time constraints was not able to visit him in Seychelles.

When Ethiopian airlines invited me to cover Ethiopia as a tourist destination as well as promote their airline experience especially the new business class seats to Addis Ababa to my august readers, I thought this would be an excellent opportunity for me to meet Claus Steiner who had subsequently moved as GM, Hilton Addis Ababa and also cover his property.

Having e-mailed him in the afternoon by evening, the same day, I got a reply confirming my stay (efficiency at its best). He connected me to Seifedin Badi, Director of Business Development, Hilton Addis Ababa with whom I co-ordinated the stay.

Arriving into Addis Ababa, I was impressed when the Hilton staff at the Hilton kiosk, right after international customs, recognized me and greeted me even before I reached the kiosk. When queried he said we were all informed about your arrival and had then seen your photo. Pretty impressive.

Getting into the shuttle I reached the hotel in 15 minutes (The hotel offers a scheduled shuttle from/to airport). Seifedin Badi was there to greet me and so was the smiling staff who quickly checked me in. The lobby is huge with an ancient touch.

I was allotted the extremely spacious King Suite, a corner suite featuring a large living area, a cozy bedroom, a small kitchenette



and three bathrooms. The view from my room the balcony superb – the huge expanse of greenery with a geothermal pool giving me a fair idea of the huge area covered by the hotel.

After freshening up went down to meet the Claus Steiner who guided me to a small patio overlooking the pool. Over the conversation he not only enlightened me on the hotel but also on Ethiopia and what to see around. After spending an informative hour with him, I proceeded for lunch at the Gazebo Bar and Restaurant (offers covered outdoor dining) adjacent to the large geothermal pool. I was surprised to see vegetarian samosas on the menu and without hesitation ordered it. The pool seemed quite popular among guests as it was quite full.

Later Seifedin Badi took me around for a show round of the hotel. What a property – with sprawling grounds, spacious green zones, a miniature golf course, basketball, fitness room, squash, tennis court etc. The lobby has two Ethiopian Airlines offices – one exclusively for airline gold members.

There are a few shops just below the restaurant as with any five star hotel. But what I did not expect was a nice supermarket and coffee/pastry shop on the outside around the back of the hotel. It can be easily missed if you are not aware. “Yes but it’s quite popular among the localities. Many come to pick up the cakes – which are quite popular,” said Seifedin Badi.

On the accommodation side the hotel has multiple room options – almost a dozen options. Connected with the hotel is are the apartments, which also have a separate entrance. They have many guests staying for long duration including one guest who has been staying for 26 years.

For MICE the hotel has spacious meeting venues including a grand ballroom accommodating up to 800 guests. “The lawns can be used for weddings accommodating up to 4,000 guests. For other marriage rituals our meeting places can be used. We have a



huge parking space for up to 650 vehicles,” said Seifedin Badi.

The hotel provides a sumptuous breakfast buffet including a selection of breads/pastries, International variety, freshly made smoothies and juices. I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast.

The hotel is ideally situated for exploring the capital city with several attractions in close vicinity or just a few kilometers away including The National Palace, the Economic Commission for Africa, Stefanos church, the Trinity Cathedral and St. George Cathedral, Grand Mosque, the National and Ethnological museums etc.

The hospitality was remarkable and I believe all guests should sample the multiple hotel facilities.



“This hotel has a soul and we have loyal customers for decades”

In a tête-à-tête with **Claus Steiner, GM, Hilton Addis Ababa** he spoke fondly of his property and his vision as the property gets ready to celebrate its golden jubilee year.

Excerpts

What do you think are the uniqueness of the property?

There are quite a few. Firstly it’s spread over 14 acres with almost all the necessary facilities for a luxurious resort - right from a golf course to tennis courts to a squash courts to large pools and huge banqueting facilities etc. But located in the heart of the city. Also it is a historic hotel that was opened in 1969 - the second Hilton Brand to open in Africa following Hilton Nile in Cairo – so most of the public areas date from 1969.

This is a heritage hotel – seen as a social hub – a place where business meets pleasure for many of our guests. This hotel has a soul and we have loyal customers for decades and many residents and expats love to hang around the place. Infact one of the guests was mentioning how his father adored this place and he continues the tradition. The hotel is inspired by the famous Lalibella Cross Church and is the only hotel with geothermal outdoor swimming pool, an 18-hole mini golf and a paid members club in Addis Ababa.

Unlike many city hotels your hotel has so many room options.

Yes that’s true. We try to give our guests multiple options. Earlier we used to have 256 rooms now we have 372 rooms. So apart from our normal Guest rooms and Executive rooms we have the Presidential Suite with 3 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, kitchenette, separate living room; Ambassador Suite (1571 sq. ft.); King Duplex Suite that features a wooden stair case; King Junior Suite (796 sq. ft.); King Corner Suite (893 sq. ft.); 1 and 2 bedroom apartments and configurations offering mountain, park, pool, garden or city views.

What are your options for dining?

That’s where we score in a big way. We have some excellent chefs (I had to agree as the executive chef Yvonnick Jegat-Deniau made some excellent vegetarian food for dinner) and from far and wide guests and from far and wide guests come to relish our dishes. Most popular venues include the Kaffa House, the Sheba

Lounge, Jacaranda restaurant, Lobby bar and the Gazebo Restaurant. For the Indians we have plenty of vegetarian options.

In today’s scenario MICE is very important for the success of any hotel. What is the scene at your hotel?

We have been fortunate from the start. With our lush green lawns spread over 14 acres and huge banqueting spaces we have always been the preferred option for MICE and weddings for over four decades. Most International events right from Africa Hotel Investment Forum, financial forums, government meetings prefer our venue not just for the space but also as it also gives the event a historical touch.

We are able to cater for large and small meetings, conferences and exhibitions. The Rose Garden next to the Ballroom is ideal for special exhibitions and large weddings. Our Ballroom is capable of hosting up to 800 guests and if required split into three rooms. Add to this seven spacious and functional meeting rooms. We have the latest presentation equipment including bright LCD projectors. Most MICE guests today want to relax as well as remain fit during conferences. For them we have massage rooms, sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi as well as a well-equipped gym. We also have a 1.8 km walking path for those who love a morning walk.

The hotel is nearing 50 years and does require restorations. Also any expansion plans in Ethiopia?

Absolutely. We are regularly doing refurbishments. Now we have planned to do it in phases starting with lobby and then moving on to dining areas and rooms. Hilton has huge plans for Ethiopia. We have signed 2 Hilton resort hotels and a double tree Hilton is expected soon.





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