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# Axum, Ethiopia Fulbright 2017

OCTOBER 2017

## Fulbright: Settling in in Axum

by Janet Lee

It is hard to believe that October is nearly over. I am settling into routines, but still marvel at the everyday wonders of living in a city and a country that is enchanting and truly becoming home. Each day I see something that reminds me of Colorado (and it is not the Denver Street sign that I pass daily on my walk to the Foundation Library). Blue skies, cool nights, rock formations, mountains, rolling hills, rocks, cacti. Of course, it is also very different, but that is the wonder of living in Ethiopia.

### Those who are Important to Me

If one were to ask what is the greatest attraction in Ethiopia, bar none, it would be the people. These are the people that are most important to me, and not in any particular order. Well, except for Jeremy.

Jeremy Moree. Third year extended Peace Corps Volunteer, from Louisiana. He is ever patient, especially when it comes to setting up my phone. He has been assigned to the Foundation Library and we will be working together quite closely. He has shown me the ropes when it comes to living in Axum,

including restaurants, shops, and the big market. He has introduced me to many of my new-found friends (and warns me of those to be wary of, few though they may be). It is rare that we go anywhere where someone does not ask, "Is she your mother?" I really don't mind. He has noticed a new phenomenon, the Bajaj drivers stop when we cross the road together. He says that never happens when he is alone.



Desalegn and Jeremy.

Desalegn Weldu is the Peace Corps Country Director for the Tigray Region and is based in Mekelle. He is always "on," working, thinking, or planning. He really cares for the Volunteers. I have been fortunate that I have been able to spend some time with him as he does site visits and installations for new Volunteers. He is dedicated to his job, but does occasionally take some time for "shy/buna" (tea/coffee breaks), a ritual in these parts. He has a brother in Denver, not surprisingly, there are so many Denver connections.

Arefeine Berhane is the library manager for the Foundation Library as well as the lead for the digital library at the University. He is greatly trusted by Dr. Tsehaye Teferra, the Foundation Director. I feel my job is to empower him, not to teach him new skills. He is always on call, is interrupted constantly, but always gets back to you. If anyone is spread too thin, it is he.





Negus is the construction foreman of the Foundation project. He is just an all-around good person. Despite the enormity of this project, he never appears stressed. He manages both skilled and unskilled workers well, and treats the female workers (construction is heavily populated by female labor) fair and equally. He is a good family man, of strong character, and positive in spirit. Just seeing him, brightens my day.



Lest the one think that I don't have female friends, I will introduce Tsehaynesh (You are the Sun), my Amharic tutor. She is patient and exacting. We are concentrating on pronunciation rather than a large vocabulary. Getting the fundamentals early is more important than speed at this point. I have also been concentrating on the Fidel, the Ethiopian alphabet. This is tough going, but things are beginning to click. Once again, she is precise when it comes to pronunciation. She has just been accepted into the University's MBA program. Besides being my Amharic teacher, she is in the ICT department. A single mom, she is looking at me as a strong female role model.



Finally, there is Hana Equbagerges, the owner of Hani Pastries. I had the unexpected pleasure of attending the Meskal celebration with her. This is the annual celebration in September of Finding the True Cross, the finale being the burning of a large bonfire or demera. It is hard not to like someone when she always seems so pleased to see you.

Fortunately, her shop is just a block or two from the Sabeen Hotel.



### Aksum University Library

This has been a greater challenge than I expected. The library is grossly underfunded and understaffed. The infrastructure campus wide is very weak and the Internet has extremely low bandwidth. I celebrate the small things, such as being picked up by campus service every morning and not having to negotiate with a Bajaj driver (the one privilege I will not turn down). The drivers are often very serious, but I have drawn a smile or two out of them with my attempts at Amharic. I celebrate accomplishing just one thing a day such as content for a website or a form for ILL. Early on I took photos of most of the lead staff and turned them into ALA "Read" posters. Even the Library Director participated. It was good networking and not that terribly expensive.

I am negotiating with the Auraria library to provide document delivery. This is a slow process, made even slower because of the nine hour time difference. But we are making great headway. I hope to be able to provide limited ILL between the universities in time to come.



The students have arrived and classes are starting to form. Despite the official count that there are as many female students as male, the campus feels overwhelmingly male. Since the students come from different parts of the country, they seem to wander in at leisure. In past visits, I found the library to be very busy.



So far, the students seem to congregate on the first floor where the WIFI is the strongest. The library should be open 24/7 and there is a room that is designated female only, but I have yet this term see anyone use it. Once again, classes have not necessarily started. As I walk across campus, I get double-takes and side glances. One student did offer to help me carry a bag of books. He was quite brave to speak to me. They seem to be concerned about their English language skills.....doesn't stop the Bajaj drivers or shoe shine boys.

There is a student center on campus, but no equivalent for faculty and staff. All faculty and staff leave campus for lunch, a lost opportunity to connect. The ex-pat community includes Indians and Filipinos, but I have not yet had a chance to meet with either group.

Aksum University Library is entering into an agreement with Addis Ababa University to acquire the Elsevier journal collection. The best I can make out, the license will start in January. The lack of a viable web presence also impedes service. A year ago, during my visit, the IT department had loaded KOHA software for the online catalog. It has not yet been implemented. After a month of requests, I am yet to have a password. But word just came in that they will be reloading the software and I have been asked to help configure the software. A small victory.

Among the many items in the shipping container that arrived a couple of weeks ago was a recent set of the World Book Encyclopedia donated by the Broomfield (CO) Public Library. This was one of two sets that I was able to acquire and put on the container. Pictured below are members of the Cataloging and Documentation Department: Berihuley Kahsay and Gebre/Gereziher Gidey.



My laptop crashed last week and my laptop is my life. I contacted the Regis ITS department and they were able to provide me with a recovery key, a bit of a nuisance but provided access. A few days later, I arranged a call with ITS (there is a 9 hour time difference) and they were able to remotely log in to my computer, reset the settings and I am good to go again. It took a little bit of time because my connection was slow. The hotel wifi was down and I was using my iPhone wifi hotspot. Patience is a virtue here.

### Axumite Heritage Foundation Library and Cultural Center

I have been working with the Foundation for a number of years and this library is the reason I chose Axum over another city in Ethiopia for the Fulbright. When I entered the library a year ago, the beauty of the building took my breath away. Negus gave me a tour and he was justifiably proud of what had been accomplished. Much has happened in the meantime, primarily with

containers filled with furniture, books, and computers.



Our long-awaited container arrived and we have been sorting through the contents. Of importance was the receipt of heavy metal bookshelves. Before we can move the collection from the other building, we need shelves to put them on. Also, on this container were the 30 Chrome books that Bill Graff (RPCV Addis Ababa, Sodo 63–65) and I purchased to be used with a server that Bill had donated. At this point, it looks like we may have two computer labs. The various containers filled with books have been emptied and moved into the three classrooms. This will take a lot of sorting with books staying at the Foundation Library and books going to the University. In one box, I found a near complete run of *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. Who but a librarian or a researcher could be excited about this find?



### Day to Day Life

Finding suitable housing was a challenge and I have been staying in the Sabeen hotel. The advantage is that I have breakfast, wifi (at least part of the day), BBC, housekeeping, a guard at the front door, and wait staff/

housekeeping/reception that are more than willing to speak with me in Amharic. The downside is that there is no privacy, but if I were in a compound with domestic help and other tenants, there would be no privacy there either. Everyone knows when and where I walk, that I am taking Amharic lessons, EVERYTHING I do. But they also consider me family. Two of the women in housekeeping stitched together the fabric for my netella (shawl). They greet me daily. There were tears of joy when I returned from Addis a couple weeks ago. A major downside is that we are now coming into tourist season. I would much prefer being around my Ethiopian friends.



Each day I walk to the Foundation library, which is not too far from both the stelae and St. Mary of Zion church. On weekends I walk all the way to the stelae and marvel at the wonder of them. I feel quite safe here and am not bothered too much by shoe shine boys and other children in general.

### Visitors

Staying at the Sabeen means that I am always available when visitors come to town, planned or not. RPCV Rick Stoner and his wife Else have a home and building project in nearby Adwa, the site of a historic battle against the Italians. Although they are from the DC area, they make frequent trips to Ethiopia and Adwa.



RPCV Dwight Sullivan comes at least annually to work on the Foundation Library. He is staying at a nearby hotel and getting



together is easy. Jeremy lives about a block away from the Sabea and is always up to being a dinner companion or a walk to Hani Pastry for “shy/bunna.”

There is also a steady stream of people from the Foundation who come and go, including Dr. Tsehay Teferre, the Founder of the Ethiopian Community Development Council, and Fantahun, a member of the ECDC staff.

Desalegn arranged a meeting of the ten Peace Corps Volunteers in the area, all of whom live in remote parts of Tigray. Desalegn, Jeremy, and I met with them to brainstorm plans for programming at the Foundation Library. He hopes that we can set up a spot for the Volunteers to call their own in the library. Desalegn was in town last week to conduct installations of new Volunteers to their sites and I accompanied him to the nearby site of Sally Moore. Any chance I get to visit a site, I will take the opportunity.



Brannon Brewer, Director of Peace Corps Ethiopia in Addis, also stopped by Axum to meet with the Volunteers and visit their sites, including for Jeremy, the Foundation Library. Everyone is impressed with what has been accomplished.



Because Axum is a historical area, it is a destination spot. Recently, I spent a day touring the historic sites of Axum with Timnet Gedar, a Fulbright Student Scholar from the University of Michigan. I was honored to share this experience with her as she attempted to recreate a photo of her mother in front of the stelae in dashiki dress (the original photo was taken in the 60s). Although I have seen these sites before, I

thoroughly enjoyed seeing them through the fresh eyes and wonder of Timnet, knowing that she was having an experience of a lifetime and that I could share it with her. I am grateful to be living in Axum, where every day is a gift.



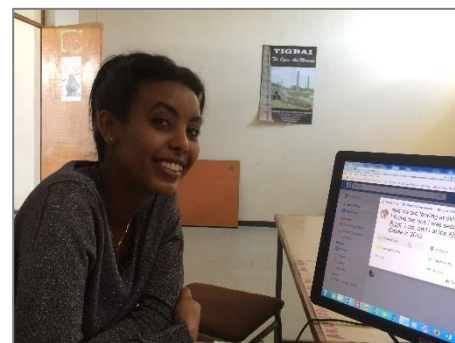
### Surprises

As I was working on unloading the container, I received a call from Tsegaye. I didn't recognize the voice nor the number and he spoke excellent English. I was bewildered as he was trying to figure out my location so that we could meet. Was I at the Foundation or the University? Thirty minutes later in walks Tsegaye Hailu from Denver. I was in shock! I had no idea he was in Ethiopia. We work together on the Denver Sister City International/Axum Committee. He was staying in Adwa because he has a school project nearby. We met for “shy/bunna” and he was off.



In 2010, while I was on sabbatical in Mekelle, I was befriended by two young girls, about 11-12 years old, Lula and Rigat. They went everywhere together. They would show up at the library, and the workers would say,

“Janet, your girls are here.” I met them a few years later when I was in Mekelle for a publishing workshop. Rigat's father was blinded during the resistance and Lula's father is confined to a wheelchair because of a war injury. They lived in a nearby compound called Sefra Jeganu, the Heroes' Residence. Thinking that surely they might be in college by now, I contacted a friend of a friend who had dropped off a “watch that talked” for Rigat's father that I had purchased a few years back. The friend persisted until he found Rigat's sister who told him that Rigat was attending college in all places, Aksum University! I had a feeling! I texted her that I was working on campus. We met the following day. More tears of joy. She is in her second year and is working on a degree in textiles and now we have a full year to catch up and rebuild our friendship, this time as adults.



### The Future

As October closes, who knows what November will bring? I have a trip planned to visit Debre Birhan to attend a workshop on the African Storybook project, the Ethiopian expert a faculty member at the university as well as a library and bookstore owner.

I expect great progress on the Foundation Library, movement on the online catalog at the university, and donors and other visitors. I am always up for guests.

The end of November brings a significant celebration of St. Mary of TSION church. The town is transformed.

