

Bada Ridge Camp Site

AFTER ZENO'S ROADSIDE stop, the next stage southwards was expected to take about four hours, depending on the state of the roads. Louise and Carmen leaned back on their pillows in the 4WD and made themselves as comfortable as possible in the cramped conditions. Beyond them now, lay the pastoral and arable lands of the south where sudden torrential rains would turn pastures into a sea of mud and where a day or two later burning sun would shrivel flowing streams into stagnant pools. In low gear, they struggled up a steep gravel track shaded by straggly acacia and eucalyptus.

After almost four hours along a bumpy pot-holed road with Abebe wrestling the steering wheel, they turned sharply, drove up an even steeper track, and parked on a plateau area on which were erected a dozen substantial tents, each with a wooden platform base. Degu parked alongside. An unpainted breeze-block, drop-toilet ablutions block and simple kitchen were the only permanent buildings.

A deep wide valley spread below them, dotted with distant villages. Louise looked across a spur of the plateau. It had been raining and from the plateau's edge runnels scoured the slopes.

'I'll bet you haven't seen anything quite like this,' Zeno said proudly to his students, as he stood alongside Louise and Carmen.

Louise walked to the edge of the plateau and gazed on a distant village, a sensation of wonder spreading from the back of her head into her eyes and then into the pit of her stomach. She breathed in the fragrance of acacia and eucalypt. She saw streams carving out

little ravines and spreading silt on the flood plain floor, where fields and gardens were cultivated.

‘It’s like falling in love – we’ll never forget this,’ she said to Carmen, as she contemplated her first encounter with Oromo village people.

Meanwhile Abebe and Degu collected wood and arranged the fireplace. Water and food were carried in from the vehicles. A petrol generator provided limited lighting and some power for refrigeration. Abebe cooked expertly over three gas rings and prepared the evening meal of vegetable and goat meat stew. The atmosphere was intoxicating, a compelling mixture of people: experienced and inexperienced, black and white, Ethiopian, American, Australian, Arab, English and German – an exciting collision of values and cultures. Watching Abebe, Degu and Zeno, Louise realised how these different men were very much at home. She stared at them, aware she was beginning a new life.

‘*Enebla, enebla!*’ Abebe called to tell them that food was ready. The cool air hung in stillness over their site and after such a long day they were all hungry. They sat in two groups. In the centre of each was a single large bowl containing the thick stew. Before each person was a thin *injera* pancake. Louise watched Zeno and Abebe as they scooped food from the central bowl with their pancakes. The students did likewise, gingerly. Louise enjoyed the slight sour taste of the soft *injera* as she mopped up the stew’s rich juices. Zeno looked at her and smiled.

Zeno sat next to Carmen, opposite Louise and Rick the American. Eating and drinking while talking to students about Ethiopia was natural for Zeno. He and Rick spoke of people practising permaculture on terraced fields; of small boys keeping birds away from crops of sorghum; of women walking great distances to collect water for their village and of nomadic herdsman protecting goat and cattle herds from hyenas, cheetahs or sometimes leopards.

‘And so there it is, our first fieldwork site,’ said Zeno pointing to the valley below. ‘Villagers will talk to you about their work, their family life. We’ll get a picture of a community’s health, particularly

of women and children. The more you listen to the women, the more information you'll uncover.'

The students murmured acknowledgement as they sat at the meal table on packing cases and a few old canvas-backed captain's chairs.

'Surviving in this country is what these people do every day. They are strong, never forget that. They are one thread in a vast tapestry.' Louise couldn't help gazing at Zeno. Distracted and silent, she imagined spending time alone with him. She made herself look away.

Zeno continued, 'Remember also, people subsist, there is no safety net for them.' Louise wondered what this land was like during the big drought and what happened to the people.

Zeno spoke softly as if reading Louise's thoughts. 'In the droughts the land forgot itself and because I was well fed, I felt like a foreigner in my own country. Pasture land broke into huge cracks and then came the dust, the endless dust ... During the recent famine, everywhere, and particularly in the north, people hoped, but sank in the dust of their starving world.' Zeno grasped his hands and lowered his head as paraffin table lamps flickered and early moonlight filtered through the clouds.

'Mothers carried their children great distances to food centres. And, of course, there were deaths, thousands of them. Despite the drought, these deaths need not have happened. I knew some of these people ... they tumbled wasted bodies into a thousand stony graves – and that's how it was. Humble, beautiful people brutalised by poverty – individuals lost among so many dead.' Zeno paused. 'To be or not to be ... that is what life is like for Ethiopia's rural poor.'

Louise sensed his mood and felt for him.

'What's the answer, Zeno?' Rick asked. 'Is there an answer?'

'Education to improve literacy levels, and the desire to change people's thinking so that famine is not considered inevitable. It's difficult.'

As the temperature fell each person's breath floated up into the night sky. Abebe cleared the table and the students retired to their tents. In her sleeping bag, holding her torch, Louise tried to read but

found it difficult to concentrate. Carmen was already dozing. Louise thought of the village people and tried to imagine their lives. She was eager to begin writing about them but she drifted to sleep.

A Village below the Bada Ridge

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Abebe was up early and had kettles boiling away. He put cups, plates with *injera* and jars of *mari* (honey) on the camp table. ‘Gotta look after you people with all you’re going to do today with Dr Wolde,’ he said to the early risers who were clustering around him. ‘Anyone doesn’t like *mari* and *buna* (coffee)?’ He smiled broadly.

The group assembled, some yawning. Abebe measured water and coffee into each cup. They sat chatting and drinking.

‘We’ll leave in about half an hour and take the track down into the valley where we can meet village people,’ Zeno said to Abebe.

Zeno wanted to introduce students to this little-known group of Oromo-speaking villages below the Bada Ridge. They would provide a contrast with the subsisting nomadic people of the Omo Valley region, the final destination on this trip. He hoped the progress in these villages could be adopted elsewhere, a beacon of progress, he thought, like a lighthouse light flickering on, off, on – with a message guiding and telling people what to do and what to avoid.

‘It’ll take a good hour to get to the bottom of the valley. Three of you have already walked in this valley so you can go with Abebe to the market in Asela,’ Zeno said.

Abebe brought a large earthenware water jug and filled the students’ water bottles. Zeno laid his map on the table and the students gathered round. ‘We’ll start our walk from the track head on the edge of the plateau. It’s easy walking from here to the beginning of the descent, but over an hour to the bottom of the valley. It could

take longer. It's not an easy walk, but you'll see how spectacular it is. I'll give you fifteen minutes to get ready,' Zeno said. 'Make sure your water bottles are full and you've packed enough bananas and chocolate and anything else you need to keep going. Bring some warm clothing as we might stay the night in the valley, but don't worry about sleeping bags. If necessary, villagers will provide you with goatskins and cowhides. You'll be warm enough.'

Zeno led the party off the edge of their tented plateau site and slowly down the steep gravelly track which wound its way along the valley side. Sometimes they were climbing as their narrow path took the safest route before descending again. Skirting rock outcrops, they saw goats grazing on precipitous slopes. Zeno stopped on a lip of the path with a sheer drop. The valley far below was yellow, brown and purple. He took a step back and asked the students to do the same in order to avoid any rush of vertigo.

The track ahead became broken as they climbed again until they reached slabs of rock and a bend in the track leading down. The early sun was not yet hot, but the students were bathed in sweat. Zeno paused on a flat spur to wait for those at the back. There was just sufficient room for them to stand above the sheer drop and see the tilled land near to a village below.

'These tracks are the shortest way into the valley. The road we were on yesterday skirts the valley but is well away from the villages. When we get closer to the bottom you will see how, despite its rocky nature, many sides of the valley have been terraced for cultivation. The people use every inch of arable land.'

'When did the terraces first appear?' asked Louise.

'Good question. In this region, probably as far back as the fourteenth century there were terraces here in some form or another or perhaps even earlier. Not exactly these same terraces, of course.'

'That's incredible.'

The students stood about staring at the landscape, reluctant to move. The morning light was brighter and the dry air was heating up.

‘Another half hour and we’ll be on the valley floor,’ Zeno said, while turning to see if all the students were safe on the steep incline. Louise walked behind Zeno. He turned again to check the students and caught her eye. ‘You’re doing well,’ he said. He met her gaze and did not avert his eyes.

Finally they walked off the track onto the undulating valley floor. Ahead of them was the first evidence of tilled land. As they approached the settlement of a dozen huts above a dry creek bed, a young woman appeared, carrying a baby. She walked slowly from a hut towards a *gwaro* (garden). Noticing the approaching party she turned, stared and waved. Zeno waved back. A girl of eight or nine joined her. She was a slight child, thin at ankle and wrist. Her skin was dark brown, her thick black hair curly and cropped, showing the fine structure of her face. Her feet were bare, her dress torn. Despite her thinness, Louise thought she had rarely seen a prettier child. Zeno knew the girl from a year ago. ‘She’s a beautiful child, bright but also subdued,’ said Zeno. ‘She’s interested in going to school but out here, that’s impossible, especially for a girl.’

Louise wished the girl could grow beyond a woman’s narrow, burdened back-breaking life. She hoped the traditional opposition to a girl being educated would soon fall away. The little girl stood close to the young woman with the baby, who gently directed her to pick up a bucket and collect water from the distant stream. Louise was sad as she watched the girl lug her bucket and disappear beyond the gardens. The battered bucket in the girl’s hand seemed like a betrayal of her life.

Zeno introduced the students and, with a welcoming gesture, the young woman, Biftu, invited them to walk around the settlement. She took them alongside the tilled garden on which some ten women were working, mainly weeding and breaking the earth with hoes around their corn plants, leafy vegetables and what looked like bok choy. The women wore brightly-coloured cotton skirts, thin and faded so that the patterns could just be discerned; their skin could be seen through the fabric. To begin with, they ignored the students

and continued working. Zeno asked the woman with the baby if her mother was in the village.

She pointed to the track to the village.

Zeno explained to the students that her mother was Kaboue, a respected village elder. 'She is sharp as a razor,' he said, 'and never in a hurry. Everyone agrees she is wise. You will enjoy meeting her.'

After staying for an hour, observing the women working in the gardens, Zeno told Biftu, who was now putting vegetables in a reed basket, that they would walk to the main village to meet her mother. Zeno beckoned to the students and they walked on across rough pasture and broken, sandy land.

Kaboue's village was on a tributary flood plain another mile away. Her hut was in the centre of the village compound, well above the creek in which there was a trickle of water and a few pools. Stunted trees grew alongside the creek. Dogs, chickens and the odd goat wandered around the compound which was almost empty of people because, as with the outlier settlement, women were working in the gardens.

'We'll take our time,' Zeno said. 'Kaboue is probably somewhere nearby solving a dispute or giving advice.'

'What sort of advice?' asked Carmen.

'Child rearing, crop planning, grain storage, bereavement, and dealing with the men when they return.'

'Where are the men?'

'Most likely looking after cattle on pastures alongside the main river. They'll return when plots closer to the village regenerate.'

'How long will they stay away?'

'Who knows – a few days, a week or two, sometimes months at a time.'

Zeno set about finding the sage. He asked an older woman sitting outside her hut where Kaboue could be found. The woman stared and did not reply. She was bent over trying to catch her breath.

'How old is she?' Carmen whispered to Zeno as she looked at the woman's lined, drawn face, her crinkly hair thin as spooled cotton.

The old woman ignored them and stared at the ground.

‘I have no idea, but her working days are certainly over and she’ll be cared for in the village.’ The old lady didn’t move. From time to time, she turned a knobbly walking stick handle over and over in her hands.

Kaboue could not be located, so Zeno took the students beyond the village down the creek bank, past more tilled land and onto scrubby pasture country. They walked above the pasture for another mile, climbing towards a prominent rock ledge. Louise wondered why Zeno was taking them further away from the village and the gardens where Kaboue would be found. Then he stopped and looked back towards the village.

‘Look across this pasture towards the village and you will see the cycle of these people’s lives at a glance – pasture, water supply, cultivation and settlement; and it has been like this for centuries.’

The students looked across a scattering of tree tops and boulders towards the village. Now they could understand why Zeno had brought them here: for the completeness of the picture before them.

‘The village would have begun its life as a nomadic resting place and then taken root,’ Zeno said. ‘The outlier settlement is a good example. Initially it was within easy walking distance of the main village and then gradually huts and permanent life were established. Here you can see progress from nomadic life to cultivation and pastoral settlement.’

‘Is it like this in every village in the valley?’ asked Horst.

‘Yes and no,’ Zeno replied. ‘What develops in one place may not be appropriate in another, but they buy and sell alongside each other at local markets.’

The students took photos of the nearby village, the creek, gardens and the distant outlier settlement.

‘Okay, we’ll walk back to the village and find Kaboue.’ Zeno stepped off the ledge and, sure of foot, began the descent. In half an hour they were again on the outskirts of the village. The word had got around and Kaboue was waiting for them outside her hut. She

was a neat, compact woman who remembered Zeno and spoke in a gentle but commanding voice. She shook hands and greeted each student.

Louise estimated Kaboue was probably fifty years of age. Her walk was elegant and she carried herself with quiet assurance; her directions seemed to convey a kind of code which the village women understood, as if Kaboue's gentle gestures were a secret language. Her grasp of the essentials of village life was based on a bedrock of deep, non-judgemental wisdom. Kaboue simply knew her duty, her guidance, so necessary in this isolated settlement – the principal elder on whom they relied.

'Of course we must feed you,' she said to Zeno, who translated for the students.

'She wishes to provide us all with a traditional village meal. That is their custom towards visitors who spend time with them. We should accept. Cherish the moment. We won't get to another village today but there's plenty to see here. Kaboue will answer your questions. She is well acquainted with the community and its customs.'

'Isn't their main meal taken in the evening?' Louise asked.

'That's right, but it's too dangerous for us to take the track out of the valley in the dark and we don't plan to spend the night here. We'll share a small meal with them around one o'clock and leave by mid-afternoon.'

Although it was a busy time in the garden and fields, with women looking after children as they weeded and gathered baskets of vegetables, they were aware of visitors. They soon left the fields and returned to the village to help prepare food. Kaboue had summoned them. She was like a friendly but uncompromising hen with her chicks as she rounded up women from the fields, gesturing and giving specific instructions. They responded with smiles and laughter.

With children playing around them, the women cut up vegetables, and killed and plucked three chickens. Younger women watched Kaboue carefully as she gave instructions, pointing, insisting and smiling as she emphasised how the meal was to be prepared.