

In Search of St. George

I took a trip through the month of May 2016 to Ethiopia for my May Term course. It was a biology class that spent the first half of the trip researching the endangered Ethiopian Wolf; fewer than 500 wolves remain due to rabies and canine distemper virus. We camped in the Bale Mountain National Park and trekked across the Web Valley in search of some wolves. We were told to expect to see between zero and three wolves, but over our stay in the national park we saw 15. Our professor, who has spent a good portion of his life doing wildlife research in Africa, was the first to discover the Ethiopian Wolf's presence in the Bale Mountains and his reputation garnered some great connections while we were there.

The second half of the trip was spent in the North. This section of the trip was dedicated to learning about the Ethiopian culture itself and its unique religious history. We visited numerous churches, most notably the church of St. George. The church of St. George, found in Lalibela, is one of 11 rock-hewn churches built during the late 12th century A.D.

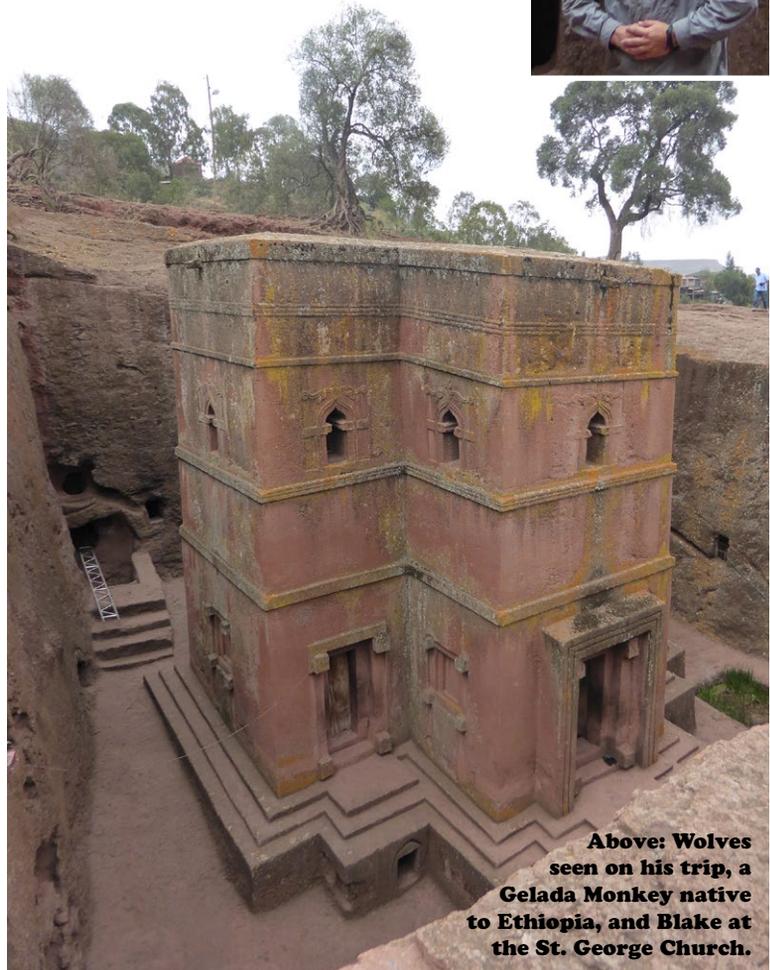
The church is dug out of one stone still connected to the rock. It's the only church, at least in Ethiopia, that was built in the shape of a cross. It is still used as a holy site visited by the local Christians and worshiped in occasionally. Most of the inside was blocked off for the "Holy of Holies", the replica of the Arc of the Covenant, and patrolled by a priest. There were carvings of crosses and lions inside and paintings of saints including a painting of St. George slaying the dragon.

Ethiopia's religious culture is unique because both Islam and Christianity are practiced so evenly throughout the country. For every church there's usually a mosque a block away. Both religions, although primarily Christianity, teach the story of St. George. This has led to St. George being a big name

in Ethiopia. Every church we visited had a huge painting of St. George and the dragon, and every bar we went to served St. George's beer on tap. The two most popular souvenir shop names in Ethiopia were "St. George's Souvenirs" and "Obama's Souvenirs". As far as the connection between the church and our schools namesake, it's the same Saint that slew the Dragon back around 300 A.D.

One thing I wish I had with me when I visited was a handful of Saint George's alumni bracelets. When I was showing the kids my bracelet they all got excited about it saying St. George. Pro-tip for the next SGS Dragon that goes to Ethiopia, bring some SGS gear for the locals.

— Blake DeWalt '14



Above: Wolves seen on his trip, a Gelada Monkey native to Ethiopia, and Blake at the St. George Church.