



People Breaking the Pattern of Poverty

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Ethiopia experience unreal



Kathleen Griffin

It smells like camping. I learned later why — it's the wood people burn for cooking and heating their homes, as only the rich living in cities have the luxury of electricity in Ethiopia.

To me, the scent of firewood was a lasting, even comforting, first impression of a land so outside my realm of experience it was hard at times to believe I was actually there.

"We - are - in - Africa!" repeated Kyra Hoggan, a reporter from Alberta and my two-week travel companion, at least five times that first day. I know how she felt. It was the same for me. Unreal.

But when we were swarmed by children in rags and disabled beggars only steps away from the hotel, in a spontaneous but soon aborted tour around the block, we faced reality. We were in a land far away, in a culture we didn't understand, our blonde hair and Gap khakis screaming rich Westerner.

The capital city, Addis Ababa, is chaotic, teeming with people and their animals. Old-model cars from the 1950s and '60s compete for space on the few

newly paved roads with herds of goats and cattle, farmers walking to and from the markets with goods piled on donkeys, begging women carrying their babies on their backs and, occasionally, well-dressed office or hotel workers.

There are no marked lanes, speed limits or cross walks. Few stop signs and even fewer traffic lights control only the busiest intersections. They joke that if the horn on your vehicle is broken, it's time to throw out the car.

Ramshackle huts with corrugated tin roofs sit next to debilitated and dirty office buildings and stores. Women line the roadside, hunkering close to the ground where they sell what they can — grass for animal feed or hut roofs, firewood for cooking and warmth and the indispensable plastic water jugs.

Those selling brightly-coloured plastic bowls seem better off. The many more selling thin sticks of wood from their tiny, depleted plots of land, often located dozens of kilometres away, are not.

We are told to ignore the beggars, but women in ripped and mud-stained clothes, hands gesturing desperately towards a baby's open mouth, are hard to resist. We hand over a few coins. We know it means little; maybe that one baby won't be hungry today.

The women are stunning, but their dark, exotic beauty is too-often marred by dirt and exhaustion, or worse, by the chronic malnutrition endemic across the second-poorest country in the world.

The squeals of children playing soccer sound the same as they do at home. Only the ball is made of grass or rags and most play in bare feet because they don't have shoes. Sometimes they make shoes from old tires. We heard about a primary school in a nearby village which required all children to have footwear — several showed up in donated winter boots. Likely from Canada, I think to myself.

We brought bags of Canadiana with us: Pins, flags, pens, key-chains. After we were overwhelmed a couple of times, we stopped trying to hand them out to village children.

The bigger ones would grab items away from the smaller kids, who would then cry. It was clear our visits were already disruptive; the last thing we wanted was to create more problems. We left the gifts with the Canadian International Development Agency office in Addis. The staff there will put them to good use.

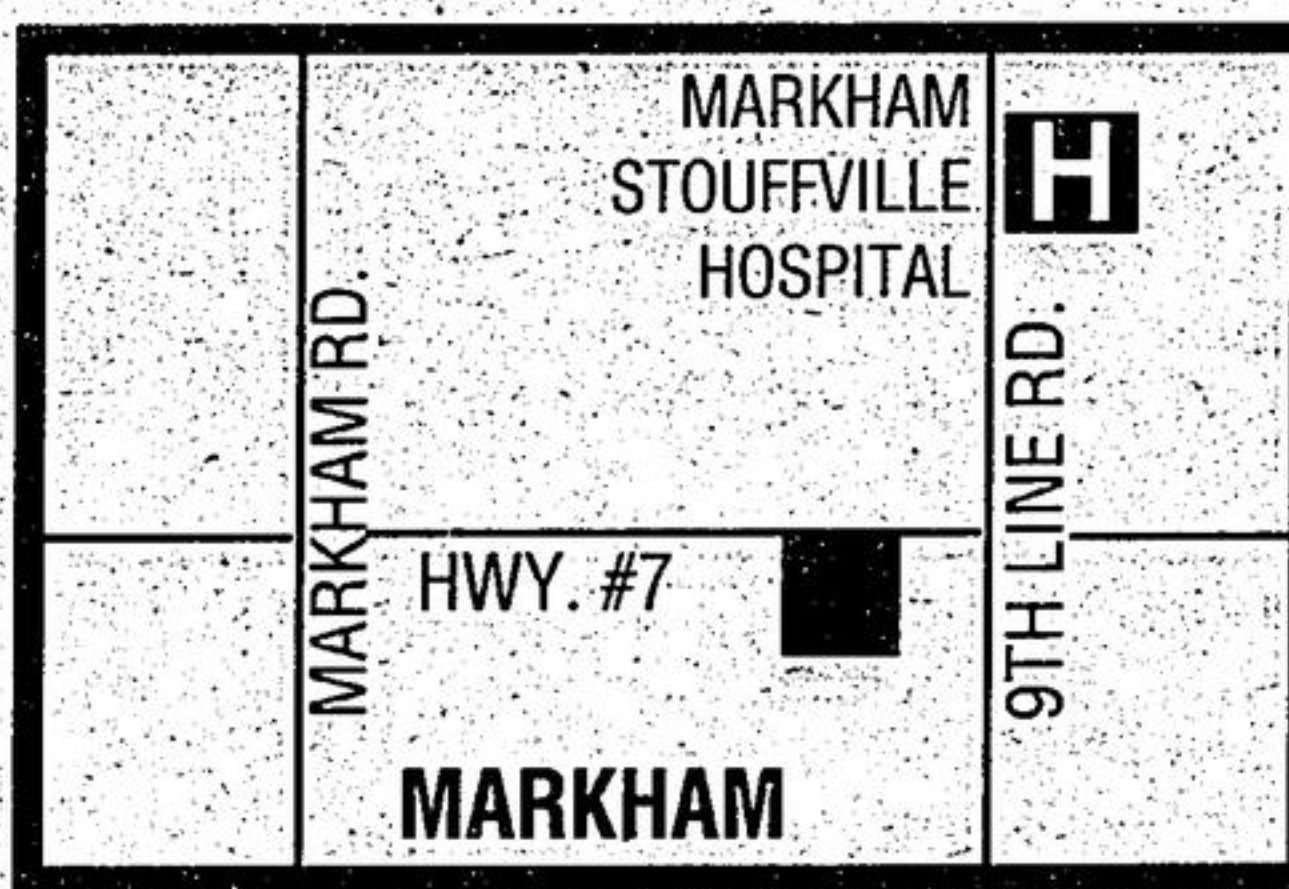
While most people we met had at least a few words of English (especially the children — "money, money, sister" or "hi! hi!") we required translators most places we visited. Some were very good. Others were not.

At an elementary school in Rift Valley, south of Addis, we tried talking to a few of the children. I asked an eight-year-old boy what he liked most about school. The translator replied: "He likes learning about hygiene." Please. He did not say that! The kid's eight. And a boy.

Many times we faced this kind of scenario: A villager, responding to a question about what changes a project has made in his life and for those in his village, would seem to think seriously for a few moments and respond with several sen-

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