



MEET MONGOLIA

Ten years on the road with a Ural

The Ultimate 800GS

BUILDING A BAD-ASS BEEMER

Mending Fences

A little cross-country courtesy goes a long way

Amazing Andes

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ETHIOPIA AWAITS

Ancient kingdom, modern adventure



The Biggest Risk

Motorcycles, media and misinformation

THE KINGDOM OF

by Miquel Silvestre

One of the medieval myths still thriving in Africa is the story of the kingdom of Prester John. For centuries they searched beyond the Sahara for this legendary and rich land, as mysterious as *El Dorado*, that had been governed by this Christian prince.



"And I confess I was glad to see what the former King Cyrus and his son Cambyses, the famous Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar wanted to see." Páez wrote in his book *The History of Ethiopia*.

PRESTER JOHN

"They" were the European explorers, from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries, who pursued a dream that slowly became a reality as it followed the development of better geographical tools. It is a dream that lasted until Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Storms in 1488, opening the African route to the East Indies. The same route that, ten years later, Basque de Gama would travel. However, it was the Portuguese, as they explored the east coast of Africa, who eventually discovered the empire of the Negus, the people who ruled a Christian nation surrounded by Muslims—Ethiopia.

QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

The only open border from Sudan into Ethiopia is Metema/Galabat. At the immigration office they check my visa, take my photo, record my fingerprints with a scanner, and ask the inevitable questions about my profession as well as an address in Ethiopia... as if I ever know where I'll stay. I use the tactic explained in my first travel book through Africa, *A Million Stones*: in any hole, no matter how filthy, there's always a "Grand Hotel." So I say, "Grand Hotel in Addis Ababa"—it works every time.

The money trader unlocks a drawer and takes out a wad of bills more worn-out and dirty than any I've ever seen. He also wears a large cross hanging around his neck. Many women have the cross tattooed on their foreheads. Religion is omnipresent. Christianity came here in the fourth century by Syrian missionaries during the Kingdom of Aksum. It ushered in an era of great splendor that would extend from 400 BC to the seventh century when the Arabs began their military expansion. With the rise of this new hegemonic power in the region, Ethiopia found itself isolated and an oasis of Christianity.

Fifteen days of abstinence in Islamic Sudan has come to an end and I need to make an urgent purchase. As the refrigerator door is opened, the treasure glitters inside. Bottles of beer! *Dashen*, the cheapest, costs 10 birr. A half liter of water also costs 10 birr. But the choice is clear... I buy two bottles of beer and leave the water for another time.

CAT CHILDREN

The bright green mountains are divided into grids of labor. Corn over here, barley over there, and beyond are onions and bell peppers. These highlands are fertile. However, not everything that glitters is gold. Ethiopia has suffered from crippling deforestation and has a problem feeding its growing population of over 75 million people. Eucalyptus trees abound, they grow fast, give a lot of wood but impoverish the soil.

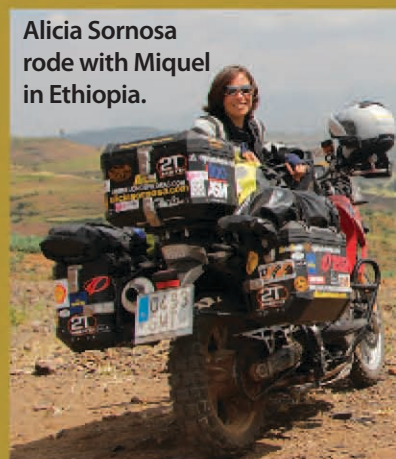


A well-worn border sign after leaving Kenya.

Castillo Gondar: A Susinios Emperor castle in the Medieval capital of Ethiopia, Gondar.



Alicia Sornosa rode with Miquel in Ethiopia.



Miquel rides the trail to Páez tomb.

The twisty road is shared with donkeys, cows and goats as it passes through dozens of villages. Houses are built with thatched roofs and wooden frames over which mud is crushed to form walls. People are everywhere. Children run behind me purring “yuiyuiyui” (“yui” means “foreigner”). Everyone here spreads their hands asking for money. Some of them are skillful rock slingers, too.

GONDAR

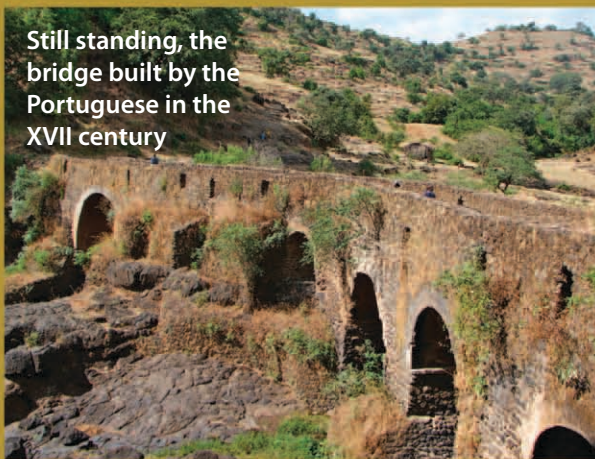
Gondar is known as the African Camelot where one is assaulted by the typical opportunist guides offering visits to the busy Fasilides' Castle. Fasilides, who made this city the capital in the 17th century, was the son of Susinios, the emperor-friend of the Jesuit explorer, Pedro Páez.

Páez, from Madrid (*Olmeda de las Cebollas*, 1564), has the distinction of being the forgotten explorer of east Africa. Although originally sent from Goa, along with another priest, he traveled in disguise as an Armenian merchant. When their ship was boarded by Yemenis pirates, he was taken prisoner and forced to walk, tied to a horse tail, the vast desert of Yemen. Páez then spent six years in slavery before being rescued, whereupon he returned to Goa, eventually making his way back to Africa before finally able to step into Ethiopia in 1604.

While in Gondar, I ran into a group of Spaniards who had just visited the Tis Isat waterfalls. When I asked if they knew who the first European was to explore the area they shrugged and could not recall Páez's name.



Still standing, the bridge built by the Portuguese in the XVII century



THE FALLS

On April 21, 1618, Susinios provided Páez the opportunity to visit the sources of the Blue Nile. They travelled south of Lake Tana in the Sahala Mountains close by the Tis Isat waterfalls ("the water that smokes"), about 30 km down a dirt road from the pleasant lakeside city of Bahir Dar.

"And I confess I was glad to see what the former King Cyrus and his son Cambyzes, the famous Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar wanted to see," Páez wrote in his book *The History of Ethiopia*. Although the water level has subsided somewhat since then (due to the construction of a power plant) it may not be as spectacular, but I'm also glad to see what Páez saw—one of the Spaniards with whom history has been so unfair.

GORGORA

The road turns to gravel for the next fifty miles. A large cloud looms on the horizon. Soon it begins to turn the shade of grayish lead, pregnant with rain. When it breaks the ground quickly becomes a slippery skating rink, impossible to ride. There is no other shelter for me than the huts of peasants.

As the rain subsides, I take the muddy path through another village

full of animals, children and curious eyes, and climb a hill. From there I can see the brown and rough Lake Tana, and a long straight line that leads to Gorgora, a village of just a hundred or so mud houses.

On the way I spot a sign, "Tim and Kim Camping." The camp is like a little paradise with a few small conical lodges with thatched roofs. A young European man with long curly hair greets me with a smile. It's Kim, the wandering Dutchman, and the proprietor of this simple overlanders' sanctuary.

SUSINIOS' CONVERSION

During dinner I tell him that I am looking for the Spanish "discoverer" of the Blue Nile source.

"Ah, Pedro Páez," says Tim.

I look at my host with surprise.

"Do you know about him?"

"Yes," he nods. "I love the history of Ethiopia."

As the darkness surrounds us, mosquitoes buzz obsessively and unforgivingly.

"Did you know that Páez converted the emperor Susinios to Catholicism?" Tim nods.

This *conversion* had much to do with politics. Susinios had a formidable enemy: Islam. The Portuguese were a great ally, but they only assisted him in exchange for

admitting the Jesuits into the territory. After the official conversion of the emperor to the foreign faith, a civil war broke out which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of peasants. As a result, Fasilides returned to orthodoxy and expelled the Portuguese settlers. It was the end of Catholicism in Ethiopia.

Páez's legacy included a palace that he designed for Susinios. He came several times to Gorgora in order to supervise its construction. Each trip would have been a considerable effort for a man who was almost sixty years old. And on his last visit Páez succumbed to illness, and on May 25th, 1622, he died and was buried there. Tim explained, "It's a ruin covered by bushes. The road is impassable so you must go by boat. I have never managed to get over there in my 4x4."

THE TOMB OF PÁEZ

The next day I set out in search of the palace of Susinios. Tim had hand-drawn a map for me to follow. The first hurdle was a fallen bridge which forced me to ford a stream filled with loose sharp stones.

After experimenting, I found that by accelerating, and putting the wheels into the furrows, that the bike would fly over the edges. In these precarious moments I learned to appreciate my custom-made

Dutch TFX shock absorbers. Their recovery was amazing for such a heavy bike. As for grip, I rode on Continental TKC80s—the best on the market. These upgrades, along with numerous reinforcements and defenses by SW Motech, greatly improved the ride and my overall confidence.

Upon reaching a plateau, I stopped to admire the stunning views. The lake was about 10 km away in a succession of rolling hills, lush fields, forests and farms. At the end, there stood a mountain on a small peninsula. Farmers and cows roamed this idyllic horizon, and over my head flew predatory birds, the true lords of the skies in Ethiopia.

As I begin the final ascent I cannot recall another time where I rode such a tiny, bush-lined path. I rode standing, with my boots nailed to the footrests, and gritting my teeth. The jungle

swallowed us. The characters we passed greeted us but did not beg. Not many whites make it this far. It's so isolated; these people are guardians of a treasure whose value they do not know.

At last, I find the skeleton of the palace and the remains of a tower. All around lie scattered stones that once formed the walls of the church. The peasants have used them to build their homes. There is not even a single latticed Portuguese arch left. Nothing remains of the Jesuits. Ironically, the Englishman known as Speke has a plaque on Lake Victoria in Uganda as the discoverer of the sources of the White Nile. Whereas, Páez owns an unmarked black hole in a remote location. How different are the nations in the treatment of their children.

Recalling the aroma of the peppermint forests, and contemplating

that amazing landscape, brings to memory the outrageous circus of tourists around the castle of Gondar. Perhaps this perfect hidden solitude is the best tribute to a great man named Pedro Páez.

ADV

Miquel Silvestre (miquelsilvestre.com) is a Spanish writer and motorcycle world traveller. So far, he has ridden across more than 80 countries and is currently planning a multi-year adventure following the route of former Spanish explorers for a project called Ruta de los Exploradores Olvidados—The Forgotten Explorers Route (www.unmillondepiedras.com). Along with BMW Motorrad Spain, Miquel Silvestre is looking to resurrect the memories of many lesser-known explorers—retracing the humble human stories of these great men.



Miquel Silvestre and Alicia Sornosa at a crossroads.

The Pied Piper leads the delighted children in a chase.

INFORMATION

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Visa obtained at the embassy—\$20
Carne du Passage issued by the RACE

CURRENCY

1 Euro = 23 Birr

TYPICAL FOOD

Injera and tibs: acid-flat bread and
spicy meat to pour over the bread

WHERE TO SLEEP

GONDAR

Hotel Ghoa, ghion@ethionet.et
Good views over the city, clean Internet—50 Euros

BAHIR DAR

Ghion Hotel, ghionbd@ethionet.et—15 Euros
A little decrepit but centrally and conveniently
located on the shores of Lake Tana

GORGORA

Camping: Tim & Kim Lodges,
timandkimvillage@yahoo.com
Without running water—15 Euros
Idyllic situation. Environment travelers.