

Debre Bizen- A Pioneer Monastery

Written by Winta Weldeyesus



Traveling from Asmara to Massawa, one can witness many amazing sites beside the breathtaking twisting and winding roads, the changing climate and landscape. Around 25 kms from the capital, one finds the town of Nefasit, to the right of which is located one of the country's ancient monasteries atop the Mount Bizen.

The Bizen monastery was first established in the 14th Century AD, in the year 1360, by Abune Filipos. Since the location of the monastery is at the top of the mountains, anyone who wants to see this monastery would have to walk up the winding roads and climb up the 6 Kms rocky hills. And the moment you reach the gates of the monastery, the landscape changes from dry bushes and rocks to lush green due to the rain the place gets throughout the year. Another aspect that completely changes half way to the gates of the monastery is the regulation that says that no female beings are allowed in the monastery both in the local language, Tigrigna and English. Not even a female horse or donkey is allowed to climb to this monastery. Though there is no definite reason behind this rule, it has followed starting from the early days of the monastery. And once you reach the top of the mountain, the view is magnificent and breathtaking, from where you can even view the port city of Massawa beneath this mountain some 90kms south of the town of Nefasit.

There are three churches in the monastery and the oldest of the three was built by Abune Filipos in 1368 AD. The other two were built in the past century and the walls of those churches are built from flat stones and are covered with a mixture of mud and hay. Though some of the windows and doors of those churches were reconstructed by the Egyptian professionals in the 19th century, the main door to the monastery, built during the 14th century by the monks is still standing. This door has a height of 4.5m and a width of around 5m and is 1meter thick. There are also Byzantine style paintings within the internal walls of the churches and the colors applied in those paintings were made from eggs, soil, flowers and other materials available in the area. To the right of the churches there is a bell believed to be aging back to the beginning of this monastery.



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According to the legend in the area, there are two caves located among the churches believed to be the places where Abune Filipos used to pray during his life time in the monastery. The monastery is also famous for its collection of ancient manuscripts, there is an ancient book weighing about 40 Kgs and other around 600 spiritual books in different languages in the monastery. Majority of the books are in Tigrinya, Amharic, Arabic, Geez and Oromia languages. There are clothes, crowns and other material used by the monks who were living in the monastery starting from the 14th century. There is also a wooden cross that is believed to be 600 years old. The monastery is rich in wild life and variety of vegetation as well.

According to a monk who has been living in the monastery for the past 50 years, though the monastery and the assets in within it are ancient heritage of the country, many were destroyed by the colonial powers in the country, particularly the Derg regime.



At present, there are around hundred monks living in the monastery. All the necessary materials are produced by the monks themselves. They cook their own food, produce their own vegetables and fruits and also make their own Sewa, a local drink. The monastery has a 24 hours electricity service and several dams were constructed by the government in providing and expanding social services to the residents of the monastery.

This monastery is one of the exceptional and amazing sites of the country, though there are other monasteries which are located in very steep slopes and allow for pilgrims of both genders. But this monastery is known for its age, firm rules and ancient manuscripts and unique landscape. Every year on August 11, those who can climb the hills and of course are allowed to climb the mountains, can participate on the monastery's anniversary and festival.