



How to Take Part in an Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony

HOW TO: In Ethiopia, people who have no one to drink coffee with have no friends. **Jenny Dunlop** explains why you must stay for the third cup.

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The situation: You've just arrived in Ethiopia. You ask a local for directions and exchange a few pleasantries. Out of the blue, he invites you back to his house to attend a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony. You don't even know what a coffee ceremony is. It sounds formal. Are there any rules?

Indeed there are. Here's your primer.

The basics: The coffee ceremony is part of daily life in Ethiopia. It's a social ritual usually performed by women (but attended by everyone), and a chance for family and friends to catch up, exchange news, debate politics or click their tongues about recent scandals. "Don't let your name get noticed at coffee time" is a local saying to watch your reputation.

Accept your invitation as a gesture of friendship. In Ethiopia, people who have no one to have coffee with have no friends.

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Bring a small gift—some sugar or incense will be appreciated. And don't be in a rush: The coffee ceremony can take a few hours.

Know your bean mythology: Local legend has it that coffee was discovered by a goatherder from Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia) called Kaldi. One day Kaldi noticed that his normally docile goats were strangely lively. He investigated and found they had been nibbling the bright red berries of a nearby bush. Kaldi tasted a few berries and felt invigorated. Convinced of a miracle, he ran to the local monastery to share his discovery. But the Abbot wasn't so impressed. He thought the berries were the Devil's work and flung them onto the fire.

Suddenly, a wonderful aroma filled the air. When he smelt it, the Abbot changed his mind and decided that the berries were God's work after all. He ordered that they be raked from the fire. That night the Abbot and his monks sat up drinking the rich brew made from the scorched beans and vowed that from then on they would drink coffee daily to keep themselves awake during their long devotions.

The coffee is roasted: The ceremony kicks off with all its equipment—green coffee beans, popcorn, sugar, incense, pan, pot, pestle, mortar, stove and a tray of china cups—arranged on a bed of long grasses. The grasses symbolize abundance and, before the invention of plastic grass, also added a fresh-cut outdoorsy fragrance.

After introductions, you'll be offered a cushion or a low stool to sit on. Your hostess will begin the ceremony by lighting small lumps of Frankincense resin to drive away any bad spirits that happen to be lurking. Then she'll take the raw green coffee beans and roast them on a flat pan over the stove. The pungent smell of roasting coffee mingles with the dense smoke of the incense. It's a heady mix.

When the beans are dark and shiny, your hostess will waft the aromatic smoke towards you. Tell her it smells delicious, wonderful and heavenly. You won't be lying.

After everyone else has had their personal snort of smoke and remarked on how good it is, the coffee is ground in the pestle and mortar.

The coffee is boiled: Next the grinds are poured into a long-necked pot called a *jebena*. They are boiled and decanted and cooled and recanted and brought back to a boil. Then decanted and cooled and recanted and brought back to the boil again.

It all takes a while. Don't worry if you can't speak Amharic and only the school-aged children speak a few words of English. Sit quietly and smile, there's no pressure. You're among friends. Eat some popcorn.

The coffee is poured: When the coffee is ready, the hostess will stuff a horsehair filter into the spout of the *jebena* to stop the coffee grounds from escaping. She'll pour the dark brew from a great height—over a foot—into the tiny white china cups lined up

on the tray below. She will make it look easy, but pouring is a fine art. Some of the coffee will inevitably spill over onto the tray; this is normal, you're not watching an amateur.

The young child you noticed hovering quietly in the background will suddenly step forward. It's his duty to serve the coffee to the guests. Traditionally the first cup goes to the eldest person in the room, but don't worry if you end up with it—you're not suddenly looking ancient, you are just being honored as a guest.

Drink up: The coffee will be served strong and black, with plenty of sugar (or salt if you happen to be in the countryside) already added. Everyone will watch you take your first sip to see how you enjoy it. Be lavish with your praise. Smack your lips and admire the rich flavor. Congratulate your hostess on her skillful preparation.

Soon you will be offered another cup. Nod your head enthusiastically and accept it.

Not long after, you will be offered still one more cup. Say yes, even if you can feel your heart beginning to palpitate and your pupils contracting to pinpoints. The third cup of coffee is called *baraka*, which means, "to be blessed." This is the cup that seals your new friendship, and the coffee ceremony is not complete until it's drunk.

Once you've consumed three cups you can go. Though you might not want to—by now you'll be feeling so welcomed and part of the family, you'll take your leave reluctantly. [WH](#)

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