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TRAVEL WRITING COMPETITION

## Ian Wood: Ethiopia

In fourth place in our Travel Writing Competition 2015, Ian Wood witnesses a hyena feeding frenzy in Harar, eastern Ethiopia

By Ian Wood. Published on 28th July 2015



Hyena man in Harar, Ethiopia. Image: Getty

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"Most people think they're just dirty, scavenging, sexual deviants associated with death," said Hamid, squinting in his rearview mirror as his taxi rumbled along the cobbled street. "But it's different here."

Barely 200 metres beyond Harar's city wall he stopped at a scruffy patch of dirt. The lingering embers of twilight had gone and broken bars of glass twinkled in our headlight beams.

"You can get out if you want to; some people like to watch from the car. Up to you," he said. I stood near the front of the taxi and as if on cue a wiry man scuffled out from the shadows.

With a hessian sack slung over one shoulder, Hamid stopped centre stage — dust misting around his feet like dirty dry ice. Sitting on the floor, he began to chant. Softly at first, then shifting up a pitch in tone and volume until three hyenas appeared — eyes glowing blood red — skulking at a distance.

Reaching in his sack, Hamid tossed a lump of meat on the ground and a flurry of bodies rushed forward, snarling and ripping the flesh before retreating to the gloom. His mantra grew louder until a raw, primeval cackle announced the arrival of the next

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hyena, this time stopping just a few metres in front of him.

Looping some meat on the end of a stick, Hamid held it out and the hyena tore it off before prowling away. Then he looked at me and beckoned with his hand. "Your turn," he whispered, grinning. It seemed churlish to refuse, so I edged forward, keeping a careful watch on another hyena lurking to his left.

Squatting down near his pungent sack, Hamid slapped a strip of goat meat on the skewer and passed it to me with a hand clearly two fingers short of the full set. Holding my breath, I clasped it at full arm's length. Teeth flashing, the hyena ran at me, juddering the stick as it ripped the meat off, sending a shot of adrenalin coursing through my veins.

Back at the safety of the car I watched him empty the rest of his sack. After the last hyena had gone, Hamid stepped forward and gave him a few wrinkled Ethiopian birr notes. He stood up, bobbed his head and shuffled off, leaving just the distant sound of crunching bones in the cool night air.

*The other runners-up and winner will be announced on natgeotraveller.co.uk this week*

You can read more about the hyena men of Harar here...

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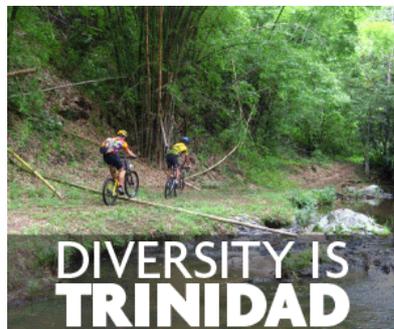
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