

San Francisco Chronicle

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TOP OF THE NEWS

World/Nation

► **U.S. budget:** Senate Democrats break GOP filibuster, pass \$1.1 trillion spending bill. **A28**

Sporting Green

► **Heisman to Ingram:** Alabama's Mark Ingram edges out Stanford's Toby Gerhart in closest voting in history. **B1**



Travel
Discovering the ancient holy sites of Ethiopia's highlands. **M1**

Food
Recipes and tips on how to survive the holiday meals. **K1**

Bay Area
► **UC protests:** Berkeley chancellor's home was attacked, windows broken, 8 arrested. **C1**
► **Mattier & Ross:** The governor in Copenhagen. **C1**

Business
► **Business mensh:** Founder of Noah's Bagels offers business advice from a Jewish ethical perspective. **F1**



Home
Green kitchens — making smart choices from floor to ceiling. **L1**

Insight
How families cope — holidays in the war zones. **D2**

Now it's 3 cities wooing 49ers

Santa Clara still No. 1, S.F. hangs in, L.A. enters race

By **John Coté** and **Tom FitzGerald**
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITERS

The stage is set for a high-stakes contest to determine the future home of the San Francisco 49ers, with Santa Clara sitting at the forefront. San Francisco officials pri-

vately concede that something would likely have to go awry with the 49ers' effort to build a stadium in Silicon Valley for the team to remain in its birth city. There is, however, another potential suitor looming in the background: Los Angeles.

More specifically, it's the City of Industry, home to

about 800 residents in eastern Los Angeles County.

While Niners President Jed York said he's "very confident" that the 49ers will have a new stadium in Santa Clara in time for the 2014 season, major crossroads are approaching, including a make-or-buy vote there and a pivotal battle

over a proposed bridge at the San Francisco site that is essential to the team's demand for smooth game-day access.

A lot would have to happen for the 49ers to move to Southern California. But billionaire developer Ed Roski Jr., who got fast-track approval for his stadium plan from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in October, has named the Niners and Oakland Raiders as among

seven teams he views as candidates to move to Industry after he buys a major stake in the club.

York said he hasn't talked to Roski about his plan and wouldn't discuss questions about Los Angeles or whether his family would consider selling to Roski.

"We don't want to move to L.A.," York said. "Our focus is **Stadium continues on A14**

SUNDAY PROFILE *Stanlee Gatti*



Michael Masor / The Chronicle

Event planner Stanlee Gatti at City Hall, decorated for the San Francisco Symphony opening in September.

Party planner? He cordially invented the art of the bash

By **Julian Guthrie**
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The outdoor wedding of Mayor Gavin Newsom and Jennifer Siebel was an hour away when Stanlee Gatti got the call.

His assistant said, "I don't want to make you nervous, but ..."

Gatti, who was running the show on this hot summer day in Montana, closed his eyes. It was your basic nightmare: Heavy gusts of wind had knocked over tables, chairs and centerpieces. And swarms of mosquitoes had descended on the wedding site.

As one of the best-known event planners in the country, Gatti has been creating visual fantasies and averting disasters for more than 20 years — and he wasn't about to let wind and pestilence ruin the night.

He rushed to the wedding site, and with his team, quickly put the tables, chairs and centerpieces back in place. As if by divine intervention, the

Gatti continues on A18



Catherine Bigelow / The Chronicle 2007

Gatti's designs include SFMOMA's Modern Ball, above, and a Fine Arts Museums gala, right.



Thomas J. Gibbons / Special to The Chronicle 2007

POLITICS

Tea Party radicals fire up for 2010

By **Joe Garofoli**
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Organizers of the conservative Tea Party movement are forging plans to translate the anger that fueled nationwide anti-tax rallies and town hall protests into an electoral force that can boot incumbents in next year's midterm elections.

Their targets range from big names like Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., to county assessors.

The East Bay Freedom Fighters, a Tea Party group based in the Pleasanton area, is already vetting 43 Bay Area candidates, many of them first time office-seekers. Other branches in California are gathering signatures for a ballot initiative that would restrict the political clout of unions.

Those sympathetic to the Tea Party and the 912 Project — nine principles and 12 values including God, marriage, freedom, honesty and thrill — (inspired by Fox News commentator Glenn Beck) are forming political action committees and rallying around screenings of the newly released "Tea Party: The Documentary Film."

But the biggest challenge facing the movement is how to organize hundreds of local groups, and dozens of Tea Party leaders nationwide with divergent interests, into a force that can influence elections — and how to fund that effort.

"It's a hard question to answer," said Mark Meckler, a Grass Valley (Nevada County) attorney who is a national coordinator for Tea Party Patriots, which claims to reach 15 million people nationwide. "We are a leaderless movement and that's a good thing. I don't think you're going to see a unified movement yet."

Tea Party organizers acknowledge that most

Elections continues on A19

► **California:** The Golden State is "ground zero" for election battle of 2010.

► **Who's who:** Five reasons to vote in the midterm elections, and key political races. **A19**



Travel

Departures: Read how the jackalope makes the world a better place M4

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Mendocino
County M4



SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | Sunday, December 13, 2009 | Section M



Photos by Mark Sisson

A 17th century castle, from left, known as Africa's Camelot; artwork in Ethiopian Orthodox Church; a worshiper outside Ura Kidane Meret monastery.

ETHIOPIA

A leap of faith at holy sites

Arid highlands said to hold ancient Ark of the Covenant

By Mark Sissons
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The mind tends to wander when you're trying to catch a glimpse of the only man on Earth who's allowed to see the Ark of the Covenant, the shiny gold box said to hold the tablets of the Ten Commandments.

How do you get that job? Is there a security clearance? Does it come with medical and dental, or is your well-being pretty much overseen by the Almighty?

I couldn't help but think: Indiana Jones would have loved Axum.

Capital of sub-Saharan Africa's oldest empire, Axum is the epicenter of this mystical country's pious and aus-

tere brand of Orthodox Christianity; ground zero for the true believers who make pilgrimages to this ancient city set amid the soaring hills and deep chasms of Ethiopia's arid northern highlands. It also marks the final stop on the "historical route," a circuit through ancient and mysterious Christian kingdoms that have thrived here in what has been called Africa's Holy Land for more than 1,500 years.

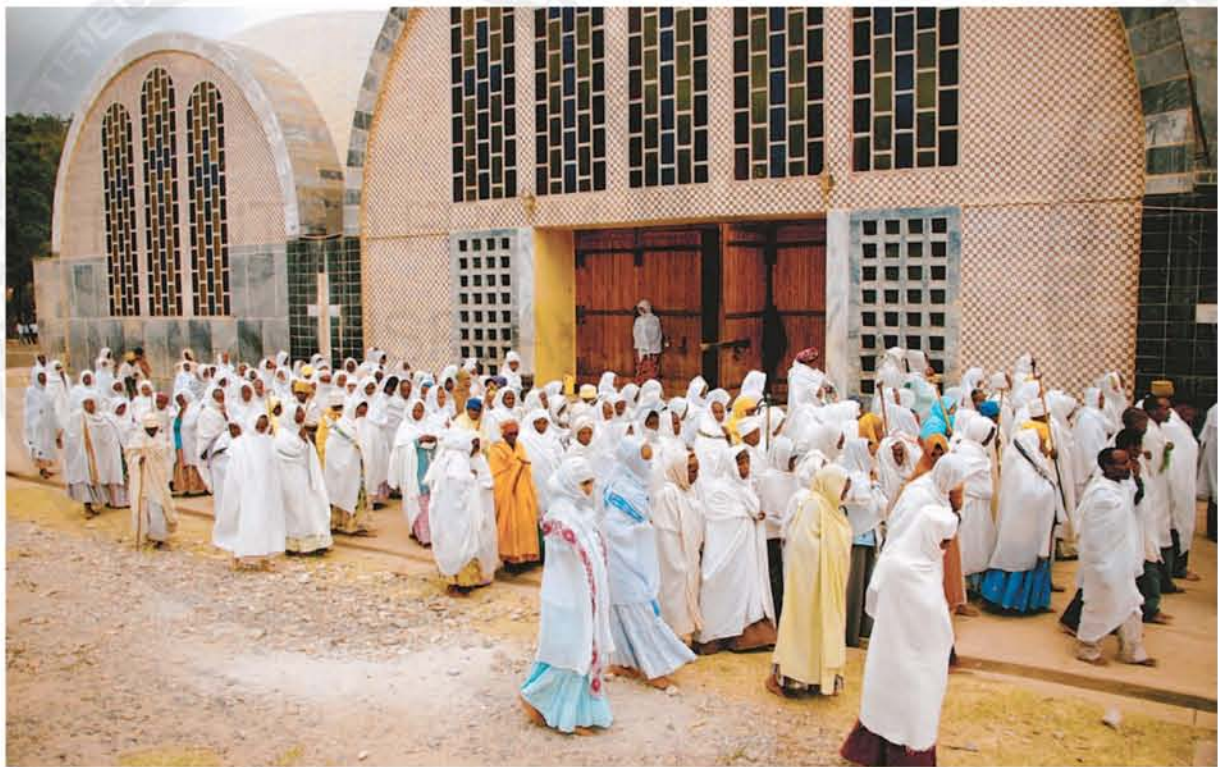
Most intriguing, Axum might be the resting place of the not-so-lost Ark of the Covenant, one of the holiest relics of Christianity (and Hollywood). During my time in Ethiopia, it seemed like a moral imperative — a commandment, even — to seek out the mysterious Keeper of the Ark, the sole soul permitted to see it.

Ethiopia continues on M3



Bet Giyorgis, the best known of Lalibela's rock-hewn churches from the 12th and 13th centuries.

FROM THE COVER



Photos by Mark Sissons / Special to The Chronicle

In the city of Axum, capital of sub-Saharan's oldest empire and its holiest city, worshippers make a pilgrimage to the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion.

Historical route a pilgrimage to many

Ethiopia from page M1

The hand, or rather, chisel of God seems to have been at work in the magnificent rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia's second holiest city, about 200 miles south of Axum.

Thought to have been built during the 12th and 13th centuries, these 11 monolithic masterpieces, casually and collectively referred to as the Eighth Wonder of the World, have been a source of speculation and intrigue for centuries. Cut out of solid red volcanic rock — in a style similar to the carved buildings in Petra, Jordan — they are said by the faithful to have been etched by stonemasons by day, and by angels by night.

There was a profoundly spiritual aura in the chilly dawn as I explored Bete Medhane Alem, believed to be the largest monolithic church in the world, and Bete Maryam, the oldest of Lalibela's churches.

Sanctity veritably seeped from the stone walls lined with elderly worshippers in white hand-woven cotton prayer shawls. As they prayed quietly, the feverish spark in their eyes testified to the ability to transcend through their unshakable faith unimaginable hardship and endurance in this war-ravaged land.

Inside, only the faint glow of candles penetrated the inky blackness, illuminating intricate religious murals hung on the walls. In the shadows, monks and worshippers softly chanted while a stern bishop presided, wearing a beard that would have made Moses proud.

As I absorbed this intensely devout scene that has not significantly changed in a thousand years, I suddenly felt acutely profane — a state that didn't bode well for my chances of coming face to face with the Keeper of the Ark upon reaching Axum.

Inspirational sites

While travelers cannot gaze upon the Ark itself, there are plenty of inspirational sites along Ethiopia's historical route. I visited the medieval city of Gondar — Africa's Camelot — to wander among its fairy-tale castles built by the great Emperor Fasilidas in the 17th century.

Along the way, I journeyed into the spectacular Simien Mountains to savor astonishing vistas punctuated by gorges, chasms, precipices and pinnacles. I explored the islands on Lake Tana, Ethiopia's immense inland sea and source of the Blue Nile. Centuries-old, straw-roofed monasteries on the islands guard the remains of ancient Ethiopian emperors and some of the Ethiopian Church's greatest treasures, including replicas of the Tablets of Law, called Tabots, onto which the biblical Ten Commandments reputedly were inscribed.

The more I saw, the more I wanted to ask the Keeper of the



Ark if it's all true. Whether the existence of this most holy of relics isn't just the ultimate example of religious wishful thinking. What about Prester John, the mythic Christian ruler of Ethiopia said to have descended directly from the Magi, who benevolently presided over a realm full of unimaginable riches and magical marvels like the Fountain of Youth? (His fantastical legend, which sprang from a mysterious letter that surfaced in medieval Europe, is said to have influenced the Portuguese to first set sail for Africa in search of its treasures.)

Once in Axum, in the Park of the Stelae, it was easy to attribute extraordinary feats to a higher power. The largest of the giant, elaborately carved obelisks stood an astounding 100 feet tall, making it the largest single piece of quarried stone erected in the ancient world. It collapsed upon completion more than a thousand years ago.

The only obelisk still upright, a granite needle soaring past 70 feet high, remains as a singular monument to Axum's glorious past — and, perhaps, divine architectural intervention or inspiration.

It seems unlikely that the film "Raiders of the Lost Ark" would have been seen by the holy men at Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion.

The truth, however, might be stranger than the fiction.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the only one in the world that still claims to possess the Ark. The church holds that the Ark was stolen by traveling companions of Prince Menelik, the illegitimate son of the Queen of Sheba and Israel's King Solomon, when the founder of Ethiopia was returning home to Axum from visiting his father. (An archaeological site purporting to be the Queen of Sheba's palace lies on the outskirts of Axum.)

Many scholars dismiss the story as fiction, but as I waited for the Ark's illusory Keeper to appear, I wondered if there isn't some historical truth to it.

Clusters of white shrouded figures stood motionless and eerily silent under the trees in the church's compound like sepulchral sentinels, awaiting the pro-

cession of deacons and bishops to emerge from the church and encircle its sacred ground three times, as they have done every day for centuries.

As I approached the Ark's reputed resting place, I half expected the heavens to open and a lightning bolt to strike me down. At the very least, I might have been attacked, beaten and evicted by guardian deacons allegedly trained to kill all intruders.

Keeper of the Ark

At this point, I hoped — no, needed — to catch a rare glimpse of the Keeper of the Ark, the only mortal allowed to lay eyes upon it (not even the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is granted that privilege). Keepers are virgin monks chosen to protect this holiest of Christian relics for their entire lives. They remain confined to the sanctuary (some say in a chain), never setting foot outside the chapel grounds until they die.

As the afternoon light began to fade and the Keeper had not yet made an appearance, I reluctantly prepared to leave the compound. What naive presumption drove me to think that the one man on Earth entrusted with protecting the word of God would condescend to make an appearance just for me?

Just then, a bearded, almost spectral figure swathed in black glanced furtively from behind a chapel doorway protected from intruders by a spiked fence. It was the Keeper. We locked eyes — the virgin monk and the spiritual voyeur. I wondered if I should pursue him, risking life, limb (and perhaps even eternal damnation) to discover what lies behind that door? There must be something inside important enough for the Keeper and countless Keepers before him to sacrifice their freedom, and even their lives.

Before I could act, the Keeper retreated behind the chapel's heavy wooden door, closing it — as well as my fleeting opportunity to solve 3,000-year-old mysteries — behind him.

Mark Sissons is a freelance writer. E-mail comments to travel@sfgchronicle.com.

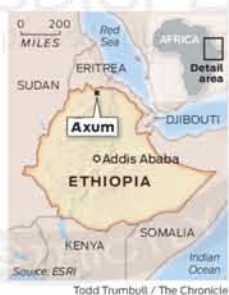


An Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest, above, inside one of Lalibela's rock-hewn churches. Left: Ura Kidane Mere monastery, known for its religious iconography.

If you go

HOW TO GET THERE

Ethiopian Airlines (www.ethiopianairlines.com) offers direct flights from Washington, D.C., to Addis Ababa several times a week. British Airways and KLM also offer direct flights from their European hubs.



Todd Trumbull / The Chronicle

GETTING AROUND

Because of the long distances and the generally poor road conditions in northern Ethiopia, flying between the main historical route sites of Axum, Gondar, Bahir Dar (Lake Tana) and Lalibela is advised. Ethiopian Airlines has frequent daily connections.

WHERE TO STAY

The capital of Addis Ababa offers a range of accommodations from simple guesthouses to the posh Sheraton and Hilton. In the northern highlands, options are fewer. The Ghion chain of midrange government-run hotels are dated but comfortable.

TOURS

Because of the relative lack of tourist infrastructure, an organized tour is a hassle-free and cost effective option on the historical route. Dinkness Ethiopia Tours (www.ethiopiatravel.com) offers multiday itineraries, including the historical route by air and by land. Dinkness is represented in North America by the Fazendin Portfolio (www.fazendinportfolio.com). U.S.-based adventure tour operators offering Ethiopia itineraries include Africa Adventure Consultants (www.adventuresinafrica.com) and Wildland Adventures (www.wildland.com).

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