

Ethiopia's Historic Route

This itinerary takes in the four sites on Ethiopia's Historic Route, but can easily be amended to include more days in the Simien Mountains for example, or some road journeys, such as driving between Gondar and Axum, to take in the stunning scenery of Lima Limo and the Tekezze Gorge. (NB The road is currently under repair/renovation, and there are lots of dusty detours.) Also, from Axum, we could proceed to Hauzien to explore some of Tigray's rock hewn churches, flying back to Addis Ababa from Mekele. In Hauzien, we would stay at Gheralta or Korkor Lodges, which needs to be booked well in advance, or do a trek staying at local villages.

Another possible extension is to the Afar Region, the Danakil Depression, the salt mines and the volcano at Erta Ale, which would take 3-4 days from Mekele, from where one would fly back to Addis Ababa.

The order of places visited in this itinerary reflects the current Ethiopian Airlines flight schedules, which may change, as may flight times.

Hotels listed here are the best available, we can use cheaper alternatives if preferred, to meet the budgets of our clients.

Visitors should not expect the same standards of accommodation and service as they might have experienced elsewhere in East or Southern Africa, but there are many compensations, including the freedom to wander around at night in safety.

Visitors arriving and departing on Ethiopian Airlines qualify for a substantial discount on domestic flights.

Day 1: Depart Europe/USA/China on Ethiopian Airlines

Day 2: Arrive Addis Ababa about 0700 and transfer to the Hilton/Sheraton Hotel (or other hotel of your choice). Rest up until lunch time, after which we will begin the city tour. We first drive north up to Mount Entoto. In 1881 Emperor Menelik II made his permanent camp there, after remains of an old town (believed to have been the capital of 16th century monarch Lebna Dengel) were discovered, which Menelik took as a divine and auspicious sign. Addis Ababa at between 2300 - 2500 meters is the third highest capital in the world and Entoto is several hundred meters higher - as we drive up the hill there is an appreciable drop in temperature and the air is filled with the scent of the Eucalyptus trees which line the road.

From the top, there is a panoramic view of the capital and surrounding countryside. Entoto is an important watershed; to the north, water flows to the

Blue Nile and on to the Mediterranean, to the south to the Awash River and east to Djibouti. Your guide will point out the important landmarks of the city.

Entoto was soon abandoned as a site for the capital - it was cold, difficult to provision and there was a shortage of wood. Empress Taytu was said to have led the move down to the plain of Finfine in 1889, and to have named the new capital Addis Ababa, or New Flower. However, two important structures remain within the old imperial compound on Entoto, the churches of Mariam and the Archangel Raguel. It was in the church of Mariam that Menelik was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia in 1889, and in the small museum in the compound there are various clothes, court and household implements and weapons dating from the period. The church of Raguel is unusual in that it is octagonal, rather than round. There is a first story balustrade around which Menelik liked to stroll.

Leaving the churches we descend to Addis Ababa, stopping off at the National Archaeological Museum. Here visitors can see exhibits ranging from the 3.5 million-year-old bones of Lucy, from the Axumite and Gondarene periods through to the period of the monarchs Tewodros and Menelik II.

We now return to our hotel. After the long flight and with an early start the next day, visitors will probably feel like taking an early night.

Day 3: Early transfer to the airport (we should leave the hotel at about 0530) for the flight to Bahir Dar (0710-0810), an attractive town, well laid out with tree lined avenues and with the blue of the lake in the background.

On arrival we check into the Kuriftu Lodge and Spa, situated on the shores of Lake Tana. 68 km wide and 73 km long, Tana is Ethiopia's largest lake and is dotted with islands, on many of which are found churches and monasteries.

We should leave out luggage here (check in to the rooms will not generally be possible until later), and leave by boat for the Zeghie Peninsula, which is known for its 14th century, round, grass roofed churches and their magnificent wall murals. We visit two churches, Betra Mariam and Ura Kidane Mehret, walking through dense forest with lots of bird life, before returning by boat to our hotel for lunch.

This afternoon we can either make an excursion to the Blue Nile Falls, some 30 km from the town, or undertake a city tour.

From where we get down from our vehicles, a 20 minute walk brings us to the falls themselves, which are at their most spectacular during and after the rainy season (from about June to January). Here the Blue Nile, which contributes 85% of the main Nile flow, starts its long journey to the Mediterranean.

Outside the rainy season, the Falls will be less striking. In which case we could forego the trip to the Falls, and instead visit the former palace of Emperor Haile Selassie at Bizeit, with great views of the town and the place where the Blue Nile flows out of the lake, and then the markets.

Bahir Dar has several clubs and bars where visitors can see traditional and modern Ethiopian music and dancing, and is also quite safe for wandering around at night. o/n Kuriftu Lodge.

NB The Kuriftu Lodge is the best hotel in Bahir Dar, but is significantly more expensive than other hotels.

Day 4: After breakfast we set off to Gondar by road. The road is asphalt and well maintained, and the 160 km journey should take about 3 hours. There is attractive scenery en route, as the road skirts Lake Tana, passing through rural villages.

On arrival, we check into the Goha Hotel, and start our city tour after lunch. The Goha Hotel is situated on a hill with a panoramic view of the town and its monuments, and with great sunsets from the terrace. Occasionally visitors will see the giant Lammergeyer, with its 3 metre wing span, soaring on the air currents by the hotel.

Gondar was the imperial capital from the 17th to mid 19th centuries, and the Royal Enclosure or *Fasil Gibbi*, provides visitors with a idea of what it must have been like in its hey day. Within the compound are the castles of various Gondarene emperors - extensive renovation has been and is still being carried out - along with a banqueting hall, stables and churches. About 2 km from the town centre is the bath of King Fasilides, where at Timkat (Ethiopian Epiphany) a nearby river is diverted to fill an area the size of a small swimming pool. Worshippers plunge into the cold water in a re-enactment of the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan.

Although most of Gondar's churches were destroyed during the Mahdist invasion from Sudan in the 1880s, one very fine example, Debre Berhan Selassie, was saved, according to the legend, by a swarm of bees which routed the invaders. The walls and ceiling are completely covered with murals - the angels' faces on the ceiling have become a common motif in Ethiopian design.

A good place to end your tour of Gondar is the ruined palace of Queen Mentowab, and the church of Qusquam Mariam, situated on a hill just outside town.

Gondar is a great place for experiencing the Ethiopian tradition of *azmari* music, where a couple of wandering minstrels, a girl with a strident voice clapping in time to the music accompanied by a man playing a single stringed violin or

masinqo, entertain their listeners with songs about life, the world and their audience. Currently the best place is the Belageru. Goha Hotel.

Day 5: After an early breakfast we leave for the Simien Mountains National Park.

We set off north to Debark, a distance of about 100 km (around 3 hours' drive), heading up through clouds and mist. In Debark we pay the park entrance fees and pick up the game scout.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since the late 1960s, the Simien Mountains National Park presents perhaps the most dramatic scenery in Africa - great volcanic plugs, formed some 40 million years ago and eroded over the aeons into fantastic crags, pinnacles and flat topped mountains, "the chess pieces of the Gods", as one writer described them, tower over precipitous gorges, river valleys and plains stretching all the way to Eritrea. There are many peaks over 4000 metres, and Ras Dashen at 4620 metres is the highest in the country and the fourth highest in Africa.

In the Simiens visitors can see the endemic *Gelada* or bleeding heart baboon, the *Walia Ibex*, the *Simien Wolf* (the rarest canid in the world) and rock hyrax, and endemic birds such as the *Thick billed Raven*, *Black headed Siskin*, *White Collared Pigeon*, *Wattled Ibis*, *White billed Starling*, *Spot breasted Plover* and *White backed Black Tit*. Cruising *Lammergeyers* are often seen.

The park is also famous for its *Afro-Alpine* flora, meadows and grasslands punctuated by *Giant Lobelia* and flowering *Red Hot Pokers*.

Our destination today is the comfortable *Simien Lodge*, where we will arrive in time for lunch. The floors are heated by solar power, and there is a good bar and restaurant. At 3600 metres, it is the highest hotel in Africa.

This afternoon we will head a little deeper into the park, up to and a little past *Sankaber*, for marvelous views and plenty of *Gelada* baboons. Those who feel up to it can walk, otherwise we can simply enjoy the views. It has become increasingly easy to spot the elusive, endemic *Walia Ibex* - we could do this today by driving to *Buhait*, or the following morning. o/n *Simien Lodge*.

Day 6: The energetic can get up early for sunrise in the Simien Mountains, but otherwise we will set off after breakfast for a tour further into the park, and return to *Gondar* late afternoon. o/n *Goha Hotel*.

Day 7: Transfer to the airport for the flight (0910-0940) to *Lalibela*.

At the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries King *Lalibela* of the *Zaghwe* dynasty built a series of rock hewn churches - the *New Jerusalem* as he called it - now rightly acknowledged to be one of the wonders of the world.

There are 11 churches in the town named after him, with others in the surrounding countryside. All are still in use today. (The churches are divided into two groups, the division being the River Yordanos or River Jordan.)

It is estimated that the churches took 25 years to construct - for the Kingdom based on Roha (later renamed Lalibela) to have kept a large work force engaged in economically unproductive labour for such a long period means that it disposed of a large economic surplus and was very wealthy. The area then was clearly fertile and agriculturally productive, whereas now deforestation and population pressures on the land have reduced its productivity.

We check into the Jerusalem Hotel and can start our tour of the first group of churches before lunch (churches are closed 1200-1400), continuing in the afternoon.

In Lalibela, as part of an initiative undertaken by Ethiopian Quadrants, local hotelier and the Guides' Association, we can arrange visits to a typical farm. The guide can explain issues relating to farm work and the daily life of people engaged in agriculture. The fee for visiting goes to the farmer and his family.

As part of the same initiative, we can also arrange cookery classes in Ethiopian cuisine.

We would like to set these up in advance of your visit. o/n Jerusalem Hotel.

Day 8: After breakfast we set off on mule or on foot to the church of Ashetun Mariam, about 4 hours' round trip. We pass small villages on the way up and there are wonderful views of the surrounding countryside from the top of the mountain where the church is located. Those of our visitors who do not feel up to a hike or mule ride can go a shorter distance by car to the cave church of Neakuto Leab.

After lunch we set off by car to the cave church of Yemrehane Christos, built by the king of the same name before the reign of King Lalibela. The church is constructed inside a cave, in Axumite style, similar to the 7th century monastery at Debre Damo in Tigray, with alternating levels of wood and stone. A 40 km trip from Lalibela followed by a 10 minute hike brings you to this beautiful church, the finest example of its kind in Ethiopia. (The road is bumpy and dusty, but most visitors feel it is well worth it.) o/n Jerusalem Hotel.

Day 9: Transfer to the airport for the flight to Axum (1000-1040). From around 200 BC to 700 AD, Axum was the seat of an Empire which extended across the Red Sea to Arabia, traded with India and China, minted its own coinage, had its own alphabet and notational system, constructed great engineering works and dams and which was reckoned by the 4th century Persian historian Mani to be one of the four great powers of the ancient world,

alongside Persia, China and Rome. Today the visitor can see stelae (the largest single pieces of stone erected anywhere on the world, it is still not understood how they were transported from the quarry 4 km away and erected), the tombs and castles of kings, Axum Museum and Mariamtsion Church, built on the site of Ethiopia's first church. A chapel within the church compound is believed by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians to house the Ark of the Covenant, or the original tablets of Moses on which are inscribed the 10 Commandments (see Graham Hancock's *The Sign and the Seal*).

On arrival we transfer to the Yeha Hotel, situated on a hill overlooking the stelae. After check in and a break for refreshments, we can start our tour with a visit to the newly constructed museum, immediately behind the stelae, and then the stelae themselves.

We could break here for lunch, and continue our tour, ascending the hill to the east to see the castle and tomb of King Kalab, passing on the way Mai Shum (or the bath of the Queen of Sheba), and also the stone on which is carved exploits of the Axumite kings in three languages, *Ge'ez*, *Himyar* (from Yemen) and *Greek*.

Coming back into town we will see the tomb of King Basen, whom Orthodox Ethiopians believe was one of the three Magi who brought presents to the infant Jesus.

We then proceed to the grounds of Mariamtsion Church, we can see the ruins of the old church, and the stone seats of judges.

Inside the grounds we will visit the small museum (women are not allowed inside, nor into the 17th century church built by Emperor Fasilides, but the priests usually bring out some crowns of kings for women visitors to see), and end the day with a visit to the site known locally as Queen Sheba's Palace, although in fact it is of a later date, the villa of an Axumite notable from around the 1st century AD. o/n Yeha Hotel.

Day 10: We finish off any sites we might have missed the day before, and then set off on the 55 km trip to Yeha, Ethiopia's first city - settlement in the area dates back more than 2800 years. There are the remains of a temple dedicated to Ilmuqeh, the moon god, and next to the temple is the church of Abune Aftse, one of the "9 Saints" who did much to spread Christianity in Ethiopia. The temple at Yeha is the oldest building in sub Saharan Africa.

Some 5 km out of Axum on the road east we come to the top of a hill and are confronted with the dramatic mountain backdrop of the "teeth of Adua" - the striking scenery around the area where in 1896 King Menelik II defeated the invading Italian forces. We can probably take better photos later in the day on our return, with the sun behind us.

We could have a picnic lunch in Yeha, or at one of hotels in Adwa, returning to Axum late afternoon. o/n Yeha Hotel.

Day 11: Transfer to the airport for the return flight (0915-1015) to Addis Ababa.

We can use the rest of the day for souvenir shopping or other city visits. For example a visit to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, where we can see clothing from different regions, along with artefacts, household utensils and in a separate section, paintings reflecting the history and culture of the country.

This building was once the *Genete* Palace of Emperor Haile Selassie, and visitors can see his bedroom and bathroom.

There is an interesting display in *Giorghis* Church, and/or could visit *Menelik's*

Mausoleum, where *Etege Taitu* and *Queen Zauditu* are also buried.

Or we could take in the *Mercato*, the largest market area in Africa, where virtually every possible commodity is on sale, from livestock to computers. For the visitor good at bargaining, there is a huge selection of Ethiopian arts and crafts.

Day rooms can be arranged for taking a shower, changing clothes etc. We can have a farewell dinner at *Yod Abyssinia*, or another cultural restaurant, and see dancing from different regions of the country. At about 2200 we leave for the airport, for a departure after midnight on Day 12.