Tour Code
ET1

ADVENTURESABROAD

ETHIOPIA

the Historic North

13 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Ethiopia

Arrive in Addis Ababa, (2450 m/8,038 ft) Ethiopia's capital city.

THIS IS A TRIP FOR THE ADVENTUROUS. The itinerary has been designed to be as comfortable as possible, but this part of the world is still undeveloped. Accommodation is basic in some places and some road journeys are long, dusty, and rough. This trip is suitable for hardy travellers who do not expect "creature comforts" or things to work smoothly everywhere. Despite the often-rustic conditions, delays, and bumpy roads, this will be a fascinating journey, full of epic moments for the experienced traveller who possesses a sense of humour, flexibility, and a true spirit of adventure.

Overnight in Addis Ababa.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Addis Ababa: City Tour

This morning we tour Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, which translates as "New Flower" in the Amharic language. The city shows little sign of losing its youthful, lusty edge and is the pulsing heart of this eclectic nation's resurgence as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. "Addis," as it's often simply known, is the world's third-highest capital city at 2400 meters (7,880 ft), and has worn its heart on its sleeve since it was founded by Ethiopian Emperor Menelik about 1892.

Although not well-known outside the country, the Ethiopian National Museum is a world-class museum; truly a hidden gem! The most famous exhibit is the replica of Lucy, an early hominid, but the museum offers much more. With Ethiopian civilization being one of the oldest in the world, the artifacts within the museum span thousands of years, including some from its earliest days. During our visit, we'll see a wide variety of artifacts, from sculptures to clothing to artwork, both traditional and modern.

Next is the Ethnological Museum, a fascinating place with exhibits relating to the history and culture of Ethiopia. There are many displays of the various ethnic groups with information about each of their lifestyles. A large amount of ethnic outfits, instruments, tools, and other artifacts accompany each ethnic exhibit, making it one of the most interesting museums in the city.

We also visit the Holy Trinity Cathedral, the second most-important place of worship in Ethiopia and the final resting place of Emperor Haile Selassie.

At some point today we should be able to sample Ethiopia's 'Black Gold'. It's impossible to separate Ethiopian culture -- that unparalleled Ethiopian-ness -- from coffee, and this is the land of the finest Arabica coffee. As legend would have it, it was discovered by an Ethiopian shepherd boy and his goats sometime around the sixth century.

Overnight in Addis Ababa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Addis Ababa - Fly to Bahir Dar: Tis Abay (Blue Nile Falls)

This morning our journey through Northern Ethiopia begins with a flight from Addis Ababa to Bahir Dar.

Bahir Dar, a small town nestled on the southeastern shore of Lake Tana—Ethiopia's largest lake, where local fishermen still navigate papyrus boats—welcomes us to a region renowned for its picturesque scenery and profound history.

This afternoon we have an excursion to Tis Abay (Blue Nile Falls),* a cascade 45m (150 feet) high. The locals call it Tisissat, which means "Water that Smokes."

We'll also have a comprehensive city tour of Bahir Dar, allowing us to explore and immerse ourselves in the city's vibrant local culture.

* PLEASE NOTE: Our visit to the falls is dependent on variable water levels and/or accessibility.

Overnight in Bahir Dar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Bahir Dar Area Touring

Today we have a boat excursion on Lake Tana and the Zege Peninsula, home to seven ancient monasteries.

It has been said that the inside of the Ura Kidane Mehret monastery is the most impressive and beautiful in the whole region. Just a 25 minute walk from the boat landing point takes us to the monastery, winding through coffee plantations under tall shady trees. The monastery is highly decorated with beautifully painted, colourful and vibrant frescoes depicting Ethiopian saints and the history of the Ethiopian-Orthodox Church. Both men and women are permitted to enter and there is also a small museum, the Zege Satekela Museum, for visitors to learn about hand-crafted objects and musical instruments that are still used be the local communities today.

Another enchanting stop is the Azuwa Maryam Monastery, a distinctive round church with a thatched roof, whose vibrant paintings truly come alive upon stepping inside.

Overnight in Bahir Dar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Bahir Dar - Gondar

Today marks a significant transition as our journey leads by road to Gondar (aka Gonder), the former imperial capital of Ethiopia, situated approximately 1818 meters (6,000 feet) above sea level. This 'City of Castles' is acclaimed as one of Ethiopia's most intriguing historical destinations, set beautifully at the base of the Simien Mountains. Its unique imperial precinct contains a remarkable collection of a dozen castles, each constructed by various emperors over a span of 236 years, reflecting centuries of imperial grandeur. Upon our arrival, the afternoon is dedicated to free time in Gondar, allowing for personal exploration and relaxation within this historically rich city before our deeper immersion.

Overnight in Gondar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Gondar Touring

The historical depth of Gondar is fully explored on today with a comprehensive city tour.

Our day is dedicated to a thorough acquaintance with the historical wonders of Gondar, beginning with the impressive castle of Emperor Fasiledes, the esteemed founder of the former capital, a two-story structure with distinct domed towers that was once described as 'one of the most marvelous of buildings' by a visiting Yemeni envoy. We also visit the Bathing Palace, a site once surrounded by a moat of water, which today is ceremonially filled only during Epiphany for an annual baptism celebration. Further enhancing our historical immersion are visits to the monasteries of Qusquam and Debre Berhan Selassie. The latter is renowned not only for its numerous detailed 16th-century frescoes but also for possessing one of Ethiopia's most photographed ceilings, exquisitely painted with angels' faces.

Overnight in Gondar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Gondar - Simien Mountains

Today we travel into the dramatic landscapes of the Simien Mountains. A scenic drive leads us into this awe-inspiring UNESCO World Heritage site, a place of extraordinary natural beauty and geological significance. This magnificent range is dominated by Ras Dashen, soaring to 4620 meters (15,246 feet) above sea level, proudly ranking as Africa's fourth highest peak. Numerous large rivers, including the mighty Blue Nile, drain these highlands from east to west towards the Nile Basin, while from north to south, the Omo River flows into Lake Turkana. Our overnight location in the Simiens approaches 2800 meters (9,000 feet), marking the highest point on our tour; while not excessively high, the thinness of the air and the cold at night will be noticeable. The Simien Mountains stretch for over 40 kilometres, offering breathtaking panoramas with an almost two-mile drop into the valley below, providing a profound sense of scale and natural grandeur.

Overnight in the Simien Mountains (3260 meters/10,700 feet).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Simien Mountains Touring - Return to Gondar

Today is entirely dedicated to exploring the majestic Simien Mountains, allowing for full immersion in their stunning scenery and unique ecosystem. This period offers us opportunities for gentle walks to appreciate the vast landscapes and perhaps spot some of the endemic wildlife that calls this rugged terrain home. In the afternoon, our journey continues with a scenic drive back to Gondar, allowing for reflection on the day's profound experiences in the high Ethiopian highlands.

Later we return to Gondar where we spend the night.

Overnight in Gondar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Gondar - Fly to Lalibela

Today we fly to Lalibela, a rural town of +/- 15,000 people in a stunning setting at an elevation of 2600 m (8,500 ft) in the midst of the Lasta mountains in the eastern highlands of Northern Ethiopia. Its unique and remarkable monolithic churches hewn from living rock, most built more than 900 years ago, are one of Ethiopia's leading attractions and were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1978. Lalibela's relative isolation and small size means you will get to understand more intimately and thoroughly the innate piety and hard lives of the rural poor.

Depending on our flight schedule, sightseeing may commence upon arrival, with the afternoon dedicated to visiting the Northwestern group of churches. This cluster is considered the more architecturally cohesive of the two main groups, and was most likely conceived as a whole, possibly by Emperor Lalibela himself. While it is the 'easiest' of the two groups in terms of navigating the site, we must still exercise great caution due to uneven surfaces, potentially slippery and steep stairs, drops without hand-railings, inclines, loose gravel, low tunnels, and the heat.

Our Ethiopia tours that occur in January coincide with the Timkat Festival in Lalibela, the biggest celebration of the year in Ethiopia, marking the Epiphany every year on the 19th of January. Timkat is celebrated all over Ethiopia, but nowhere is it quite as spectacular as in Lalibela. The festival begins with Timkat Eve and dramatic processions through a night of fasting. Crowds of revelers, all dressed in white, sing and dance in the streets to the beating of drums. Priests, decked out in jewel encrusted velvet and satin robes, carry a replica of Arc of the Covenant known as a talbot in a grand procession through the streets.

Your Tour Leader will advise in greater detail how the following described program will be organized in order to achieve our sightseeing of both church groups and the festivities. Due to the fluid nature of festival activities, our actual itinerary may vary from the next two days' descriptions, which should be regarded as a guide only.

Overnight in Lalibela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Lalibela Sightseeing & Timkat

Our morning in Lalibela is dedicated to visiting the rest of the churches, including the more disparate Southeastern cluster, which is regarded by experts as being closer in architectural style to the ancient temples and churches of the Aksumite Empire. Several of its churches surprisingly began their existence as secular excavations centuries before Lalibela's time. While the churches belonging to this group are generally smaller, they are often more finely sculpted compared to those of the Northwestern group. This cluster is also the more challenging to visit, requiring sure footing and preparedness for some scrambling, and your Tour Leader will be well-placed to advise regarding our suitability for this visit. As our overall visit will be governed by group ability and interest, our time duration will be a little more free-form than that of the Northwestern cluster.

In the afternoon, our focus shifts to attending the eve of the Timkat festival. This is the biggest celebration of the year in Ethiopia, marking the Epiphany every year on the 19th of January, and nowhere is it quite as spectacular as in Lalibela. The festival begins with dramatic processions through a night of fasting, with crowds of revelers, all dressed in white, singing and dancing in the streets to the rhythmic beating of drums. Priests, decked out in jewel-encrusted velvet and satin robes, carry a replica of the Ark of the Covenant, known as a 'tabot,' in a grand procession through the streets.

During festival time, our late afternoon/evening will be spent observing the colourful prosessions and, a rarity in Ethiopia, large crowds!

Overnight in Lalibela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Lalibela Touring Continued

Today is entirely dedicated to immersing ourselves in the grandeur of the Timkat festival in Lalibela. Our morning is spent attending the main Timkat festival, truly immersing ourselves in the vibrant ceremonies and rituals that spectacularly reenact the baptism of Jesus Christ. Timkat is celebrated throughout Ethiopia, but it is in Lalibela that it achieves its most spectacular expression, drawing tens of thousands of people from all over the country, making it one of the most joyous annual pilgrimages.

Following the profound spiritual experience of the festival, our afternoon offers a unique opportunity to join a local family for an Ethiopian Timkat holiday celebration, complete with a traditional culinary experience. This provides us with an intimate and authentic way to experience the rich cultural heritage of Ethiopia during this significant holiday.

Overnight in Lalibela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Lalibela - Fly to Addis Ababa

The final day in the north begins with attendance at the St. Michael day festival, celebrating the revered saint with traditional music, dance, and prayer, offering another glimpse into Ethiopia's vibrant religious culture.

In the afternoon, our journey concludes with a flight from Lalibela back to Addis Ababa.

Overnight in Addis Ababa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Departure

Departure from Addis Ababa, or continue to our longer Southern Ethiopia itinerary.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast