Tour Code
ET1

ADVENTURESABROAD

ETHIOPIA

the Historic North

13 days

Created on: 28 Mar, 2024

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, if required.

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)

Today we fly to Bahir Dar, situated on the shore of Lake Tana in northwestern Ethiopia. Bahir Dar is a small town set on the southeastern shore of Lake Tana (Ethiopia's largest lake), where local fishermen still use papyrus boats, and just 30 km (19 miles) from the spectacular Tissisat Falls.

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". The area is also home to a great variety of birds and plants.

Return to Bahir Dar.

Overnight in Bahir Dar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Bahir Dar - Zege Peninsula - Gondar

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. The Azuwa Maryam Monastery is a round church with a thatched roof, which makes it one of the most attractive churches around Lake Tana. Step inside and watch its paintings come alive.

We return to the mainland and continue by road to Gondar, the former capital of Ethiopia (1818 m / 6,000 ft). This "City of Castles" is one of Ethiopia's most interesting. Set in a beautiful landscape, Gondar is situated at the base of the Simien Mountains. The city's unique imperial precinct contains a dozen castles built by various emperors over a 236-year period.

Overnight in Gondar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Gondar: Town Tour

Today we will acquaint ourselves with the city of Gondar, touring the castle of Emperor Fasiledes, founder of the former capital. The two-story castle with its domed towers was said to be "one of the most marvelous of buildings" by a visiting Yemeni envoy. We will also see the Bathing Palace, once surrounded by a moat of water. Today the moat is only filled with water during Epiphany for an annual baptism celebration.

We will also visit the monasteries of Qusquam and Debre Berhan Selassie. The latter has not only many detailed 16th century frescoes, but also one of Ethiopia's most photographed ceilings, painted with angels' faces.

Overnight in Gondar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Gondar - Simien Mountains

Today we travel by road into the Simien Mountains. The highest point above us, Ras Dashen (4620 m / 15,246 ft above sea level), is Africa's fourth highest peak. Numerous large rivers, including the Blue Nile, drain the highlands from east to west, towards the Nile Basin. From north to south, it's the Omo River, flowing into Lake Turkana. Our overnight location approaches 2800 m / 9,000 ft (the highest point on our tour); not terribly high, but you will notice the thinness of the air and cold at night. The Simiens stretch for over 40 kilometres with an almost two mile drop into the valley below.

Overnight in Simien National Park.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Simien Mountains - Axum

Today we continue our journey north towards Axum (2202m/7,226 ft). This afternoon you may want to walk through part of the town or relax at our hotel.

Axum (Aksum) was the centre of the (eventual) Christian marine trading power the Aksumite Kingdom, which predated the earliest mentions in Roman era writings (around the time of the birth of Jesus) in good correlation to the expansion of Rome into northern Africa, and later when it developed into the Christian kingdom, was a quasi-ally of Byzantium against the Persian Empire. The historical record is unclear; primary sources are limited mainly to ancient church records.

Overnight in Axum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Axum: Area Tour

Today we explore the wonders of ancient Axum, beginning with the Stelae Park. Carved completely from blocks of granite, these stelae are truly impressive. Although never erected, the largest stelae -- now broken into several pieces -- measures over 30m (100 feet) long and dates from Ethiopia's pre-Christian era.

Our tour continues to the Archaeological Museum, and to St Mary of Zion Church. We will see the ruins of the original 4th century church, and view an amazing collection of church relics including crosses and ancient crowns. It is here that we will also see the building that houses Ethiopia's most sacred religious artifact, the supposed Ark of the Covenant.

We will wander through King Ezana's Park. Of particular interest is a tablet inscribed in three languages: Ge'ez, Sabean, and Greek. We will also visit the tomb of King Basen, who ruled Axum at the time of Christ's birth. This afternoon we will visit two sites located outside the modern town of Axum: the Palace of the Queen of Sheba, and King Kaleb's Palace. Both enjoy commanding views of the countryside -- lands that were once part of the powerful Axumite Kingdom.

On our late November departures, we watch the Hidar Zion Day processions and celebrations. This festival is attended by tens of thousands of people from all over Ethiopia, making it one of the most joyous annual pilgrimages in Axum, the "sacred city of the Ethiopians."

Overnight in Axum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Axum - 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, we may begin our sightseeing today upon arrival.

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. Similarly for non-festival dates, your leader will brief you on the actual order of attractions to be visited; in both cases, you should be prepared for some juggling, possibly last-minute, in order to achieve our intended

program.

Overnight in Lalibela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Lalibela Sightseeing

Today's sightseeing begins with a visit to the Northwestern group of churches.

Since the town, first called Roha, was founded by the eponymous King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela of the Zagwe dynasty more than 900 years ago as the "new Jerusalem", the later-renamed Lalibela has been a major ecclesiastical centre of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and a place of pilgrimage to its amazing concentration of rock-hewn churches. Pious Ethiopians often walk hundreds of kilometres in bare feet from all over Ethiopia to receive blessings. Contrary to certain spurious myths, they were not built with the help of the Knights Templar; rather, they were produced solely by medieval Ethiopian civilization.

Although all the church exteriors and interiors are carved from soft volcanic tufa, their architecture is extremely diverse: some stand as isolated monoliths in deep pits, while others have been cut into the face of a cliff. Establishing a sequence or chronology for a rock-hewn building is much more difficult than for a conventional one, especially when the churches in Lalibela are all in daily use for services. Consequently, there have been long running academic disputes as to both the time period and duration of construction.

We will visit the small site museum before our church visit begins. Most of the churches were arranged on an east-west axis with the entrance facing west and the Sancta Santorum to the east; this orientation has a precise meaning: the believer comes from the western gate that represents the darkness of sin and evil and advances towards the light of knowledge and salvation.

The Northwest cluster is the more architecturally cohesive of the two groups, and was most likely conceived as a whole, quite possibly by Emperor Lalibela. This is also the "easiest" of the two groups in terms of navigating the site; this said, you must be very careful of uneven surfaces, slippery/steep stairs and drops without handrailings, inclines, loose gravel, low tunnels, and heat. Our visit will last about three hours.

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

While in Lalibela, we'll also visit the more disparate Southeast cluster, regarded by experts to be closer in architectural style to the ancient temples and churches of the Aksumite Empire. Several of its churches started life as secular excavations centuries before Lalibela's time. Visiting the churches of the Southeastern group it immediately appears evident that the churches, belonging to this group, are smaller but more finely sculpted, compared to those of the Northwestern group.

This is also the more challenging cluster to visit; you must be sure on your feet and prepared to do a bit of scrambling. By this point, your Tour Leader will be familiar with your abilities and well-placed to advise regarding your 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.

Our January/Timkat tour will likely involve an option to observe an early morning/pre-breakfast baptismal ceremony.

Overnight in Lalibela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Lalibela - Fly to Addis Ababa

Today we fly from Lalibela back to Addis Ababa.

Depening on our flight time, your Tour Leader may have chosen to defer some previously-described sightseeing, which we can accomplish this morning prior to our onward journey.

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