

HISTORIC ROUTE – TOWNS VISITED

ADDIS ABABA

The capital of Ethiopia lies in the central highlands at an altitude of 2400m, making it the **third highest capital** in the world.

Climatically, Addis is a highly encouraging introduction to Ethiopia, with comfortable temperatures all day long dispelling any lingering preconceptions about searing deserts. Some may find Addis a bit overwhelming at first due to the large numbers of beggars and street children, but don't let first impressions put you off.

History

Emperor Menelik II founded the modern city in 1887 and gave it the name **Addis Ababa ('New Flower')**. His choice of site was one that held strong traditional significance as the Entoto Hills that surround Addis Ababa have long been a centre of Shoan politics.

Where to eat

Locating an inexpensive meal in Addis is easy.

For western food the famous **Castelli's Restaurant**, in the Piazza, specializes in Italian dishes and seafood. The **Oroscopo Restaurant** (Piazza) and **Hong Kong Restaurant** (behind the National Theatre) offer Italian and Chinese food respectively.

What to see and do

Firstly a word of caution: Addis Ababa is a large city, its streets are generally un-signposted, and many of its features go by more than two or even three names, with the name shown on most maps differing from the one in common use.

The area known as **the Piazza** lies north of the city center. It is a busy shopping area, with many budget hotels and restaurants, especially along Adwa Avenue. About 1km west of the Piazza, **the Mercato** is a tight grid of streets centered around what is reputedly the largest market in Africa. Barter hard and be wary of pickpockets.

There are several interesting museums in Addis, most notably the **National Museum**, which is probably the best of its type anywhere in Africa, and which contains the skull of 'Lucy' who lived around 3.5 million years ago. Since November 2000 the **Holy Trinity Cathedral**, with its lavish interior, is the final resting place of Emperor Haile Selassie. At walking distance from the capital is the **Washa Mikael church**, a roofless rock hewn church that has been excavated entirely from below the ground, and its enclosure is reached via a short tunnel through the rock.

Addis and its environs have more than enough to keep a curious traveler going for a week, something you couldn't say of too many African capitals.

Please also visit www.fistulahospital.org for information on the Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa.

BAHAR DAR

Bahar Dar is a large town on the southern shore of Lake Tana, Ethiopia's largest lake. Palm-lined avenues and pretty lakeside vistas make Bahar Dar a **decidedly attractive town** and it is also the base for visits to Tis Abay and Lake Tana's many monasteries. With tourist amenities that are among the best in the country, Bahar Dar is an excellent place to settle in for a few days.

LAKE TANA

Lake Tana is the largest lake in Ethiopia and it is also the source of the Blue Nile, a fact that may explain many of Ethiopia's links with the ancient world. Even today the papyrus **tankwa** that sail the lake bear a striking resemblance to the boats of Ancient Egypt. The main tourist center for the Tana area is Bahar Dar, which lies on the southern shore. The only other significant settlement is Gorgora, on the northern shore.

The Tana area is the traditional home of the Amhara, a Christian people. However Tana was also the homeland of the **falashas** who practised a form of Judaism that appears to have severed from the Jewish mainstream before 650BC. There are now few, if any, falasha people left in the Tana region: after centuries of persecution most of them were airlifted to Israel in 1991.

History

Between the collapse of the Zagwe Dynasty in the late 13th century and the establishment of Gondar as a permanent capital in the early 17th century, Tana was the political and spiritual **focus of the Christian Empire**. Several temporary capitals were established on or near its shores. Gorgora dates to this period, as do many of the **island monasteries** that dot Lake Tana. An exception is the monastery at Tana Chirkos, which appears to have been a spiritual retreat long before Christianity was established in Ethiopia.

What to see and do

There are several **monasteries** on Lake Tana's islands.

The closest monastery to Bahar Dar is **Kibran Gebriel**, which lies on a tiny, lushly wooded crescent - presumably part of the rim of an extinct volcano.

The island monastery of **Daga Istafanos** is the most interesting of those within easy reach of Bahar Dar. Although the church itself is relatively new it houses a 15th century Madonna painting. The main point of interest is the mausoleum, which contains the glass coffins that hold the mummified remains of five Ethiopian emperors, including King Fasiledes who founded Gondar as his capital.

One of the more remote and intriguing of Tana's monasteries is **Tana Chirkos**, which lies on a densely covered island near the eastern shore. Apparently the priests on Tana Chirkos have an ancient tradition that the Ark of the Covenant was kept here for 800 years before it was removed to Axum in the 4th century AD. As this monastery is so remote the round trip takes a full day.

GONDAR

Gondar is probably the most immediately impressive of Ethiopia's major ex-capitals, but it is perhaps less enduringly memorable than either Axum or Lalibela. Gondar is one of Ethiopia's largest cities, yet it has retained its **friendly** character and is generally considered to be one of the most **welcoming** towns on the 'tourist route'. Much of the modern town center dates from the Italian occupation of 1936-41, although in the last few years a number of bars and hotels have been repainted and refurbished and a number of new buildings are being constructed as you read this.

History

Emperor Fasiledes founded Gondar in 1635. For several centuries Ethiopia had been ruled from a succession of temporary capitals and Fasiledes recognized that a permanent capital might help provide greater internal stability.

By the time of Fasiledes' death in 1667 Gondar was the **largest and most important city in the empire**. It retained its position as the capital of Ethiopia for 250 years, though this status was largely nominal from the late 18th century onwards.

What to see and do

The **Royal Enclosure** lies at the heart of Gondar and gives the city much of its character. Containing five castles, and several smaller buildings, it is a fascinating place to explore. It may be worth getting a guide as they are very knowledgeable. The most impressive castle, built by Fasiledes around 1640, shows a unique combination of Portuguese, Axumite and even Indian influences.

About 2km out of town lies the large sunken **Fasiledes bathing pool**. The pool is still used for the Timkat Festival, which takes place every January.

The church of **Debre Birhan Selassie** is known for having the finest art of its period anywhere in Ethiopia. The church is most famous for its roof, which is decorated with a painting of 80 cherubic faces.

Apparently Emperor Yohannis I intended to move the Ark of the Covenant here from Axum.

Photography is permitted but useless without a flash or tripod.

A short ride out of Gondar is the Falasha village of **Woleka**, which was vacated, by all but one of its Falasha occupants during the last famine. One Falasha woman remains but the village continues to make traditional pottery, and there's an interesting temple.

Realistically this is the only place in Ethiopia where you can check out something of the Falasha tradition.

THE SIEMEN MOUNTAINS

The Simien range lies north of Gondar and to the east of the main road to Axum. The western side of the range has been designated the **Simien Mountains National Park**. The Simien range is one of Africa's largest mountain ranges: many of its peaks rise

above 13,000ft and Mount Ras Dashen (15,245ft) is the highest point in Ethiopia and the fourth highest peak in Africa.

Most parts of the Simiens are inaccessible to vehicles, but the range is crossed by a number of tracks used by the local people, which make ideal walking routes. Combined with the **impressive scenery**, this makes the Simiens an excellent area for trekking.

Geography

The Simien range consists of several **major plateaus**, divided by large river valleys. The western plateau is bounded on the north and east by a massive escarpment, many miles long and over 3,000ft high in places, and cut along its length by steep gorges.

The **views** from the top of the escarpment look north over the vast plains to Eritrea. At their foot are the remains of ancient hills.

Wildlife

Three of Ethiopia's endemic large mammals live in the Simiens. The **Gelada baboon** is the most common of these, with an estimated 20,000 individuals living in troops of up to 400. The range of the **walia ibex** is restricted entirely to the Simiens. The **Simien fox** is now very rare in the mountains, with a population of only around 100. You may also see the **jackal**, which haunts the camps. The number of **birds** recorded in the Simiens is very low and endemics are not that well represented.

LALIBELA

Perched at an altitude of 8,680ft, among the wild craggy mountains of Lasta and vast rocky escarpments, there is a stark cathedral-like grandeur to Lalibela, a strange, isolated town famed for its rock-hewn churches.

Lalibela is arguably the one place in Ethiopia that no tourist should miss. Were it virtually anywhere but in Ethiopia, Lalibela would rightly be celebrated as one of the wonders of the world.

History

Roha, as the town was known at the time, was the capital of the Zagwe Dynasty which ruled over Ethiopia from the 10th century to the mid-13th century. Its modern name, Lalibela, derives from the most famous of the Zagwe rulers, the 12th-century King Lalibela.

What to do there

People visit Lalibela for the churches. And, no matter if you have visited other rock-hewn churches in Ethiopia, nothing will prepare you for these. The **Lalibela** churches are big - several are in excess of 30ft-high - and, because they are carved below ground level, they are ringed by trenches and courtyards, the sides of which are carved into with stone graves and hermit cells, and connected to each other by a tangled maze of tunnels and passages. In size and scope, the church complex feels like a subterranean village. Yet each individual church is unique in shape and size, precisely carved and minutely decorated. Lalibela is, in a word, awesome.

It is in the church **Bet Medhane Alem**, in the northwestern cluster of churches, that you will find the 800-year-old Lalibela Cross, which is made of solid gold and reportedly weighs around 15lbs. It is said to have been the personal property of King Lalibela, and is perhaps the most treasured artifact of the Ethiopian church, more holy than anything in Jerusalem or Rome.

AXUM

Axum lies in the northern province of Tigre, the cradle of Ethiopian culture. Axum is the oldest city in Ethiopia (it was **the ancient capital**) and is the holiest city of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is smaller than you might expect and rather inauspicious on first impression, but it does boast some stunning antiquities. In addition to Axum's historical importance, visitors can enjoy a hassle-free atmosphere and can go about their business in virtual peace.

History

The roots of modern Ethiopia lie in the **Axumite Empire**, though nobody knows for certain when Axum and its empire were founded. However there are few that would query that Axum was one of the most important and technologically advanced civilizations of its time, or that it was a major force in world trade between the 1st and 7th centuries AD.

Some idea of Axum's contemporary importance is given by the 3rd century Persian writer, Manni, who listed it as one of the four great kingdoms in the world, along with Persia, China and Rome.

Ethiopians believe that the **Ark of the Covenant** is held at Axum, and though this may be questioned the town has retained its position as the center of Ethiopian Christianity.

What to see and do

A guided tour of the town takes several hours, and two days are required in order to see everything of interest. But don't forget to bring along your torch.

The exemplary **Axum Museum** illustrates just how cosmopolitan and technologically advanced the city was.

At the main **stelae field** it is possible to see the most impressive technological achievement of the Axumites, who erected several solid granite stelaes, the largest of which (now collapsed) was taller even than the similar granite obelisks in Egypt.

Next will probably come the **St Mary of Zion Church**, inside which there are some good paintings and musical instruments (note women may not enter the church).

The **Ark of the Covenant** is allegedly kept in a sanctified building within the compound of the church; though don't expect to be able to see it!

Other historical sites include **Queen Sheba's Swimming Pool** and the **Pantaleon Monastery**. The monastery is situated on a euphorbia-clad hill known as Debre Katin, and boasts one of the oldest and most historically important churches in the country.

Women may enter the monastery compound and see the various holy crosses and books, but the church itself is men-only.