

ETHIOPIA TRIP DOSSIER

January 7th to January 21st 2006

Fly from Birmingham to Addis Ababa via Schipol Intl Airport (Holland)

7th Jan. Fly to Addis Ababa. Check into Ras Hotel (Churchill Road)

ADDIS ABABA

Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, is a bustling African city, dotted with Italian architecture, interesting churches and friendly inhabitants. It is also a city of immense contrasts – the Addis Sheraton, with its ‘singing fountain’ is one of the most luxurious in all of Africa, yet you only need to travel a few streets away to find yourself among busy markets, dirt roads and the odd goat or two wandering the streets. The city is a relatively new city – established by the Emperor Menelik II in 1887, and at 2,400m has the distinction of being the third highest capital in the world. Although Ethiopia was the only African nation never to be colonised, parts of it, including Addis, were briefly occupied by the Italians in the twentieth century, and in many parts of the city their legacy lives on in the form of old art deco buildings and coffee shops, particularly in the area known as the Piazza. Addis can seem daunting at times, but even the briefest foray into the busy streets can reveal interesting new insights.

NATIONAL MUSEUM – ADDIS ABABA

One of Addis Ababa’s greatest treasures is the National Museum, home to an excellent collection of artefacts and remains from Ethiopia and around. Most people come here to see ‘Lucy’, the replica of the famous remains of one of the earliest known descendants of humans, but there are also many other sights to see which provide the visitor with a good background to this fascinating country.

9th Jan. Fly to Bahar Dar, a pleasant town situated on the shores of the impressive Lake Tana, Ethiopia’s largest lake and the source of the Blue Nile. Check into the Ghion Hotel.

BAHAR DAR

BLUE NILE FALLS – BAHAR DAR

The famous explorer James Bruce, when he first laid eyes on the Blue Nile Falls, described them as 'a most magnificent sight, that ages, added to the greatest length of human life, would not deface or eradicate from my memory.' Flowing from the mighty Lake Tana, the Blue Nile Falls were once the second largest in Africa, after Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. However, since the construction of a hydro-electric dam upstream in 2003, the falls have been reduced somewhat, and are quite different to those seen by Bruce. The walk to the falls

takes you through the village of Tis Isat, then crosses the river using an old and picturesque bridge built by the Portuguese sometime in the seventeenth century, before winding through small homesteads and ending up at a viewpoint over the falls.

LAKE TANA – BAHAR DAR

Lake Tana, one of the fabled sources of the Nile, is one of Ethiopia's greatest natural treasures. With a surface of around 3,600 square kilometres, the lake is also famous for the series of ancient monasteries and churches located on twenty of the islands that are found within the waters. Life on Lake Tana goes on as it has done for centuries, and local people traverse the lake on *tankwas*, boats made from papyrus that are capable of holding enormous weights. The monasteries themselves are fascinating and unlike any others outside Ethiopia, often decorated with bright frescoes. Because of their isolation they were used to store art treasures and religious relics from all over the country. Local history says the Ark of the Covenant was kept on one of these islands when the city of Axum was under threat, and the remains of five Emperors - including the renowned Fasilidas - are to be found at Daga Istafanos.

11th Jan. Fly to Gonder, the old capital of Ethiopia. The town is home to the Royal Enclosure, a collection of well-preserved castles built in the seventeenth century. Check into the Circle Hotel.

GONDER

THE ROYAL ENCLOSURE - GONDER

The town of Gonder is often described as 'The Camelot of Ethiopia', and when you approach the Royal Enclosure, situated in the middle of the town, it's easy to understand why. The city itself was founded by the Emperor Fasilidas around 1635, and soon became dominated by a collection of almost European looking castles and

buildings, still standing in an excellent state of preservation today. Different stories abound as to who built them – some say Portuguese craftsmen, others believe they were built by Ethiopian hands. Whatever the truth, the Royal Enclosure has to be one of the most of the most striking and unusual sights in all of Africa, standing as it does in utter contrast to everything around. The highlight is without a doubt the two storey Fasiladas' Palace, an almost intact fortress castle complete with turrets and battlements. The complex also houses many other intriguing buildings, including a library, chancellery, a lion house and many other palaces.

FASILADAS' BATH - GONDER

Around 2km northwest of the city centre lies Fasiladas' Bath. A large, rectangular sunken pool is overlooked by a small but charming two storeyed-tower, surrounded by a stone wall. Once a year, Fasiladas' Bath is filled with water for the important *TIMKAT* ceremony.

DEBRE BERHAN SELASSIE CHURCH - GONDER

The superbly preserved church of Debre Berhan Selassie is seen by many as Ethiopia's finest, it's not hard to see why. Dating back to the seventeenth century, it was the only original Gondar church to escape destruction at the hands of the Dervish of Sudan in the 19th-century, reputedly saved by a swarm of bees. The interior of the church contains amazing frescoes dating back centuries, and even the ceiling is completely covered with religious images.

13th Jan. Fly to the isolated town of Lalibela, which is home to a spectacular collection of ancient churches hewn out of the surrounding rock, so astounding that local legend has it that they are the creations of angels. Check into the Blue Lal Hotel.

LALIBELA

To the south east of the Simien Mountains lies Lalibela, a small, dusty town in the Lasta Mountains that is home to some of the most fascinating sights in the country. Dispelling the myth that sub-Saharan African had no indigenous 'civilisations' before the European colonization, Lalibela and its environs house an amazing collection of rock-hewn churches, many excellently preserved and all begging more questions than they give answers. There are many stories concerning the origin of these churches, but the most popular local legend is that they were built by angels in a single night. The churches have been dated back to the reign of King Lalibela

sometime in the eleventh or twelfth centuries. Many of the churches are connected by underground tunnels and narrow walkways built into the rock, and they are still a site of pilgrimage today as they have been for centuries. In some of the churches hermits and monks live in tiny caverns in the walls, barely big enough for them to stretch out, staying here for years on end. While in Lalibela you may also be lucky enough to witness one of the religious festivals that often take place here. The jewel of Lalibela's churches is Beta Giorgis, a cross shaped church rising out of the earth, surrounded by the walls of the pit into which it was dug, which houses a wooden box said to have been carved by King Lalibela himself. Although there are many churches within the town itself, some of the most spectacular are found in the surrounding mountains.

15th Jan. Fly to Addis Ababa. Check into the Taitu Hotel. Spend a couple of days chilling out!

17th Jan. Fly to Dire Dawa before taking a minibus to Harar. Check into the Belayneh Hotel.

HARAR

A once important centre of Islamic scholarship. For many years the city was closed to Christians and early explorers were forced to enter in disguise, at their peril.

Harar, an ancient city surrounded by great walls, has the most colourful market place in Ethiopia. Harar was for centuries the main center for Islamic learning and culture in Ethiopia, and a prosperous centre for the caravan trade. Harar is the spiritual heart of Ethiopia's large Muslim community. With almost a hundred mosques in a small city of less than one square mile (the highest concentration in the world), Harar is considered by some to be the fourth holiest Muslim city in the world. The city was founded in the early 12th century. The great walls surrounding Harar were built in the 1600s to keep out powerful neighbouring hostile groups. Harar remained an important centre of Muslim learning and trade throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. The first European to visit Harar was the British explorer Richard Burton. Burton spent 10 anxious days there in 1854, not sure whether he was a guest or prisoner of the Emir. Harar's autonomy ended in 1875 with its capture by Egypt. The Egyptians left in 1884 after continued resistance. However, Harar was once again captured, this time by Menelik II three years later. It has been part of Ethiopia ever since. Today, Harar remains a lively, friendly cosmopolitan city.

ARTHUR RIMBAUD'S HOUSE - HARAR

Houses a museum dedicated to the French poet. One room in the museum contains a series of illustrated panels about the poet's life, as well as housing a small collection of books, letters and writing about the poet.

THE HYENA MAN OF HARAR

Harar is home to one of the stranger sights that you're likely to see in your journey through Ethiopia. Every night, a local man goes to the outskirts of the city and calls the hyenas from the surrounding area. A practice that has gone on for more than a hundred years, the bizarre ritual was first started to discourage the hyenas from stealing local livestock. As the hyenas approach, the hyena man holds out pieces of meat to them, either in his hands or sometimes between his teeth, which the hyenas then take from him. This is a practice that is handed down from generation to generation, and only one person fills the role at any one time. Although this practice has been carried out for many years, there are of course certain risks associated with it. Essentially the hyenas, although extremely used to human contact, are wild animals, and there is no fence or barrier separating them from any spectators.

20th Jan. Fly back to Addis Ababa

ST GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL – ADDIS ABABA

Built in 1896 in the traditional octagonal shape by the Emperor Menelik II to commemorate his victory against Italian forces at Adwa, this small cathedral is dedicated to the national saint of Ethiopia – the same saint that serves as the British patron saint. The museum that is housed within the grounds contains a wide collection of important religious paintings, crosses of many designs, historic books and parchments, and beautiful handicrafts, and is an excellent introduction to the religious life of Ethiopia – an extremely important element of society here. There are also fine examples of modern paintings by the famous Ethiopian artist Afewerke Tekle.