

## Ancient Ethiopia Small Group Tour

*Timket, 17-29 Jan 2016*



*This fully escorted small group tour takes in the very best of Ethiopia, including the classic 'Historic Route' (Addis Ababa, Axum, Lalibela, Gondar and Lake Tana), the beautiful Simien Mountains, and little-visited Tigray, one of the most remote yet historically rich regions of the country. The programme is timed to coincide with the annual Timket festivities, when Ethiopians celebrate the Epiphany. Information on how you can book a place on this tour is provided at the end of the itinerary.*

### **Sun 17 January 2015: Depart London**

Depart London Heathrow at 2100hrs. on the night flight to Addis Ababa.

### **Mon 18 Jan: Arrival Addis Ababa**

Arrive **Addis Ababa** on Ethiopian Air at 0700hrs AM. Upon arrival at Bole International Airport, you will be met by your guide and driven (approx. 20 mins.) to your hotel.

Founded in 1886 by Menelik II, Addis is located at 2,500m above sea level in the Entoto mountain chain (which rise to 3,000m above sea level). Addis enjoys an excellent year-

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round climate, with an average temperature of 25°C. It is a vibrant, developing city that is a pleasure to explore.

After lunch at the hotel, we visit the **Orthodox St. Trinity Cathedral**, or Kidist Selassie, the second holiest site in Ethiopia. Unlike many of the churches you'll visit during the tour, Kidist Selassie is a modern building, built between 1931 and 1944, though contained within its grounds is a much older church, the **Bale Wold**. The Cathedral is as much a national as it is a religious icon (in Ethiopia, Church and State are traditionally very closely bound) and commemorates those who fought against the Italian occupation of the late 1930s, many of whom are buried in the church grounds alongside Emperor Haile Selassie I. Today you can expect the Cathedral to be busier than usual in preparation for tomorrow's celebrations.

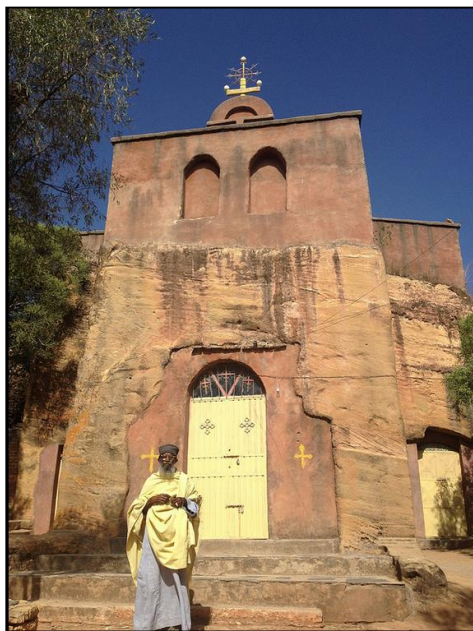


*Addis Ababa during the festive period*

After touring the Cathedral, we visit the **National Museum**. Addis Ababa's museum is among the best in Africa, containing an impressive collection of archaeological relics, foremost among them the plaster cast of "Lucy," the 3.2 million-year-old Hominid.

If time permits, we'll take a stroll through the 'Mercato', East Africa's largest market, before we return to the hotel for dinner.

Dinner and overnight stay in Saro Maria Hotel (4-star), or similar.



*Abreha & Atsbeha Church, Tigray*

### **Tue 19 Jan: Addis Ababa-Hawzen, Tigray (First day of Timket)**

After breakfast you will be transferred to the airport to catch your early morning flight to **Mekele**, where the group will board comfortable vehicles and commence the tour of ancient Tigray. Today marks the first day of the two-day Timket festival.

We begin the tour of Tigray with a visit to the dramatic **Church of Michael Imba**. This is an early cruciform and semi monolithic church that is typical of the churches found in the region. Situated on a hill, reaching Michael Imba involves an easy walk up a rocky incline, followed by a short climb down to the church entrance, which is carved into the rock below the surface level.



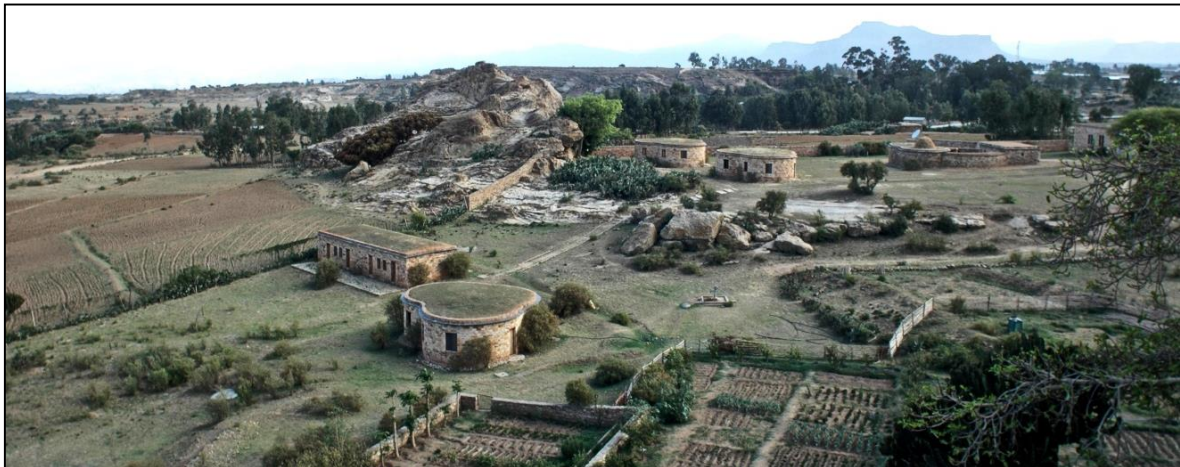
From Michael Imba, we continue to **Wukro** for a leisurely lunch at a local restaurant, and then on to **Abreha & Atsbeha**, one of the most dramatic of the rock-hewn churches of Tigray. Dedicated to the famous kings of Axum, the two brothers and 4<sup>th</sup>-century Christian converts Abreha & Atsbeha, this church is renowned for its magnificent 17<sup>th</sup>-century murals.



At Abreha & Atsbeha you will also have the chance to view the beginning of the Timket celebrations. Watch as the priests, dressed in traditional garb, walk in procession while carrying the Tabot, a model of the Arc of the Covenant, accompanied by crowds of worshippers. This is a lively, joyous festival to commemorate the baptism of Christ, not a dour ceremony. Tigray, where you can expect to see few other travellers, is perhaps the best place in the country to witness the celebrations, its rural

tranquility and its ancient rock temples providing the perfect setting for this age-old ritual.

After the spectacle, we drive to **Gheralta Lodge**, a remote mountain retreat, where we check-in for dinner. This boutique, Italian-owned lodge is set on a high hill overlooking the Gheralta plains. Constructed in the local Tigrayan-style, its stone, wood and thatch huts blend in effortlessly with the wild, rural surrounds. Tonight you'll enjoy a marvelous dinner to mark Timket.



*Gheralta Lodge, Tigray*

For those interested there is a small cave church, **Teklehaimanot Hawzien**, a few minutes' walk from the lodge. Depending on the time of your arrival, you might like to visit it before dinner.



**Wed 20 Jan: Timket in Gheralta region and then on to Yeha and Axum (B, L, D)**

This morning, after an early breakfast at Gheralta Lodge you'll have the chance to take part in a blessing ceremony, the highlight of the Timket festivities, right here in Tigray, away from the busy tourist hot spots that become so crowded during this most celebrated Ethiopian festival. It's a short drive and then walk to the river where the blessing takes place. During the ceremony, which is intended to symbolise the baptism of Christ, the congregation is sprinkled with holy water. The ritual marks the culmination of the Timket festivities and is followed by dancing, singing and chanting.

After the ceremony we continue to **Axum**, stopping en route to visit the ancient **Temple of Yeha**. A Sabeen construction, Yeha is reputedly the oldest standing stone structure in Ethiopia, dating back to 700BC (est.). There is also a lively market at Yeha, which we can explore.

Reach Axum early evening and check-in at the Yeha Hotel, or similar, for dinner and overnight.

**Thu 21 Jan: Axum**

Ethiopian tradition holds that the royal city of Axum was founded in the 10th century BC as the royal seat of the Queen of Sheba. Around this time, the tradition continues, Menelik, the son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, brought the Ark of the Covenant to Axum where it remains to this day, preserved in a sanctuary within the church of St Mary of Zion. Whatever the veracity of this legend (archaeologists prefer to date the origins of Axum to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC), Axum has played a crucial role in Ethiopia's history and remains very much the religious and historic centre of the country to this day.

The city was the capital during the long Axumite reign (est. 5<sup>th</sup>-century BC to 10<sup>th</sup>-century AD), and was thus at the heart of one Africa's greatest and oldest empires. During this time, it represented a crucial connecting-point between Africa and Asia.



*Obelisk of Axum*

Start your tour of the ancient city with a visit to its most famous site, the dramatic **Stellae Field**. These granite monoliths almost certainly pre-date the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia, and their symbolic engravings, which remain a mystery, provide an insight into early Ethiopian religious culture. (The stellae also figure in



Ethiopia's more recent history, as during the Italian occupation Mussolini had one of the obelisks removed to Rome. It has since then been returned, restored and re-erected in Axum, its status as a national monument reaffirmed.)

After visiting the stellae, stop for lunch at a local restaurant before continuing to the **Church of St Mary of Zion**, Ethiopia's holiest site. The Church is said to house the Ark of the Covenant. Visitors, of course, aren't allowed to see the Ark, but there are a number of other treasures on display, including the royal crowns of successive Ethiopian kings.



*St Mary of Zion, Axum*

End the day with a late afternoon visit to the **Palace of the Queen of Sheba**, and then drive to a high viewpoint overlooking this ancient site, before returning to the hotel.

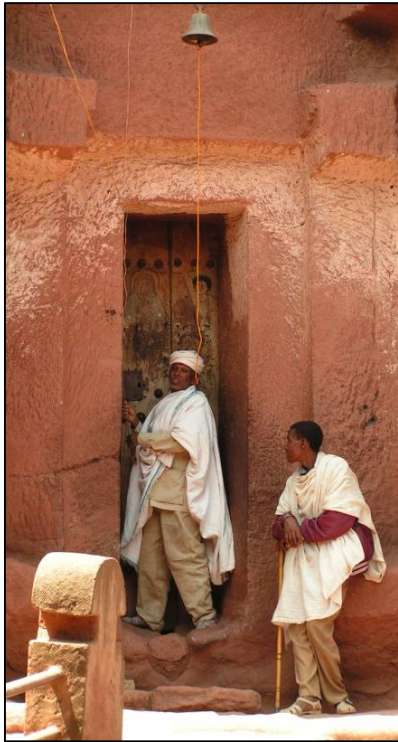
### **Fri 22 Jan: Axum-Lalibela**

Catch the early flight from Axum to **Lalibela**, arriving late morning.

Located at an altitude of 2,600 metres above sea level, the mountain city of Lalibela is remote even by Ethiopian standards. It has long been a holdout for the Orthodox Ethiopian Church, untouched by the Islamic conquests of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century and later European attempts at colonisation. For Orthodox Ethiopians, pilgrimage to the churches of Lalibela, where services are still held daily, is as important as the pilgrimage to Mecca is to devout Muslims. Nowhere in Ethiopia does the spirituality of its people echo louder than in Lalibela.



*Church of St. George, Lalibela*



Lalibela is of course most famous for its 12<sup>th</sup>-century monolithic churches, of which there are 11, each carved out of pink granite rock and collectively considered to be one of the wonders of the world. Each of the churches has a unique architectural style, though they share many features; most notably, each has been carved from the top-down, a technique not practiced anywhere else in the world. They are also beautifully decorated. Looked at in isolation, each of the temples is remarkable, but taken together they are a wonder; the entire city has been described as a sculpture dedicated to the glory of God, and as you wander the complex network of tunnels and subterranean passageways that connect its underground structures you'll come to appreciate why.

The temples at Lalibela are loosely divided into two groups, and today we'll take our time visiting the first.

Overnight at Tukul Village, a charming lodge located within walking distance of the main Lalibela churches.

### **Sat 23 Jan: Lalibela**

Today we visit the second group of churches as well as the **Monastery of Nakuto La'ab**, named after its patron, the nephew and successor to King Lalibela. This is a simple cave church that is reminiscent of the rock churches of Tigray. Removed from the main Lalibela complex, it is often overlooked.

### **Sun 24 Jan: Gondar**

Leave Lalibela on the late morning flight to **Gondar**, arriving early afternoon. After lunch, we begin our tour of the medieval city.

Gondar was the capital city of the Ethiopian Empire during the reign of Fasilidas, who founded the city in the 1630s (the precise dates are unclear). It is set in a mountainous landscape of stunning beauty.

Today we shall visit the city's historic centrepiece, **Gondar Castle**, built by Emperor Fasilidas and his descendant, Yohannes I, as well as the fascinating **Debre Birhan Selassie Church** (a World Heritage site). With its walls and ceilings decorated with scenes of Biblical lore and medieval history, Birhan Selassie serves as one of the best examples of the religious art of the Gonderian period.



*Gondar Castle*



You stay in town tonight in the Taye Belay Hotel, a comfortable 4-star city hotel.

**Mon 25 Jan: Simien Mountains Excursion**

Wake for a light, early breakfast and then begin the drive into the Simien Mountains, stopping for coffee en route. The drive time from Gondar to the Simiens National Park is approximately two hours but it may vary depending on the weather and traffic. Altitude sickness is a small but real risk as you will be ascending to approx. 3,500m (though your time in Lalibela should have helped acclimatise you to the altitude). Nevertheless, drink lots of water before you reach the Simiens to ensure you don't dehydrate while in the mountains.



The Simien Mountains, which include Ras Deshen, Ethiopia's highest mountain, are located in the north-western corner of the country. Now a world heritage site, the Simiens boast some of Africa's most beautiful mountain scenery, as well as flora and fauna that is endemic to this region. The wildlife is hugely varied and includes the walia ibex, gelada baboon, bearded vulture, thick-billed raven and eagle.

Many gelada baboon can be seen on the escarpment. There are currently an estimated 2,700 baboons in the park, their numbers fairly static. Although their predators have declined, increased farming in the park means that the gelada do not have the same grasslands and woodlands as before, and are suffering as a result.



*Gelada Baboon*

Gelada live in family groups made up of a dominant male and up to 8 females with their young. They come together in huge bands, which during the dry season can be as large as 800 animals. Be careful not to rush at gelada, or even look them in the eye, as they can interpret this as a threat. You'll have plenty of time to watch the Gelada at a distance this afternoon. If you're lucky you may also spot the rare Walia Ibex, which is endemic to the Simiens.

Late afternoon, we check into the Simien Mountain Lodge, which occupies a superb location on the escarpment.

### **Tues 26 Jan: Simiens to Gondar**

This morning enjoy a short trek along the escarpment after breakfast at the lodge, before returning by car to Gondar in the afternoon. Overnight stay in Taye Belay Hotel, or similar, in town.

*NB. This itinerary has been designed to make allowance for those who are not keen walkers, so the morning's trek will be limited and not at all strenuous. If the group is willing to start early, however, a longer Simiens walk can be arranged.*

### **Wed 27 Jan: Bahir Dar**

We depart Gondar this morning for **Bahir Dar**, a pleasing city located at 1,800 meters above sea level on the shores of **Lake Tana**, the largest lake in Ethiopia. On arrival we check into our hotel, the Jacaranda.



*Wall mural depicting St. George in Debre Mariam, Lake Tana*

After lunch in Bahir Dar enjoy a half-day boat trip on Lake Tana to explore some of its island monasteries, including a visit to the Zeg peninsula to view the famous 14<sup>th</sup> century monastery of **Ura Kidanemihret**; then walk through the coffee trees to **Azewa Mariam** to see its wonderful 16<sup>th</sup> century mural paintings, crowns, crosses and many old church treasures, and finally, **Debre Mariam** (14c).

Return to the Jacaranda for overnight.

### **Thu 28 Jan: Bahir Dar-Addis (flight)**

Time allowing visit the old established church school at St Michael in **Debre Birhan** before you drive to the airport for your flight back to Addis (early afternoon).



Transfer and check in to Saro Maria Hotel for overnight or day room according to your flight schedule. Later we go to a hilltop restaurant to mark your last evening in Ethiopia. Those flying out on the evening flight will be transferred to the airport after dinner.

### **Fri 29 Jan: Departure**

Transfer to the airport after dinner to catch your flight to London (time to be confirmed).

Those members of the group extending to Harar or Omo Valley will be transferred separately to the airport for their internal flights (please [contact us](#) for information on options to extend).



### **Booking Information**

This tour is offered as a small group departure with fixed travel dates, and is led by our most experienced guide in Ethiopia, Zablun Beyene. If you are not able to travel during these dates, please note that we also have fixed departures scheduled for early April and September, timed to coincide with the Palm Sunday and Meskel festivities. Our Ancient Ethiopia programme can also be booked as a private departure outside of these dates and with a different guide. For a general overview of our Ancient Ethiopia programmes, including the Palm Sunday and Meskel tours, see [here](#).

*This tour costs **£2,045 per person**, inclusive of all ground costs: driven transfers, full-board accommodation, guide and activities. Flights with Ethiopian Airlines, including international flights from London and all regional flights within Ethiopia, will cost in the region of **£870 per person**. If travelling from outside of the UK, please let us know at the time of booking and we can provide a full quote for international flights.*

Please contact Jeremy Gane on [Jeremy@ganeandmarshall.com](mailto:Jeremy@ganeandmarshall.com) or 01822 600600 for further information or to book your place.