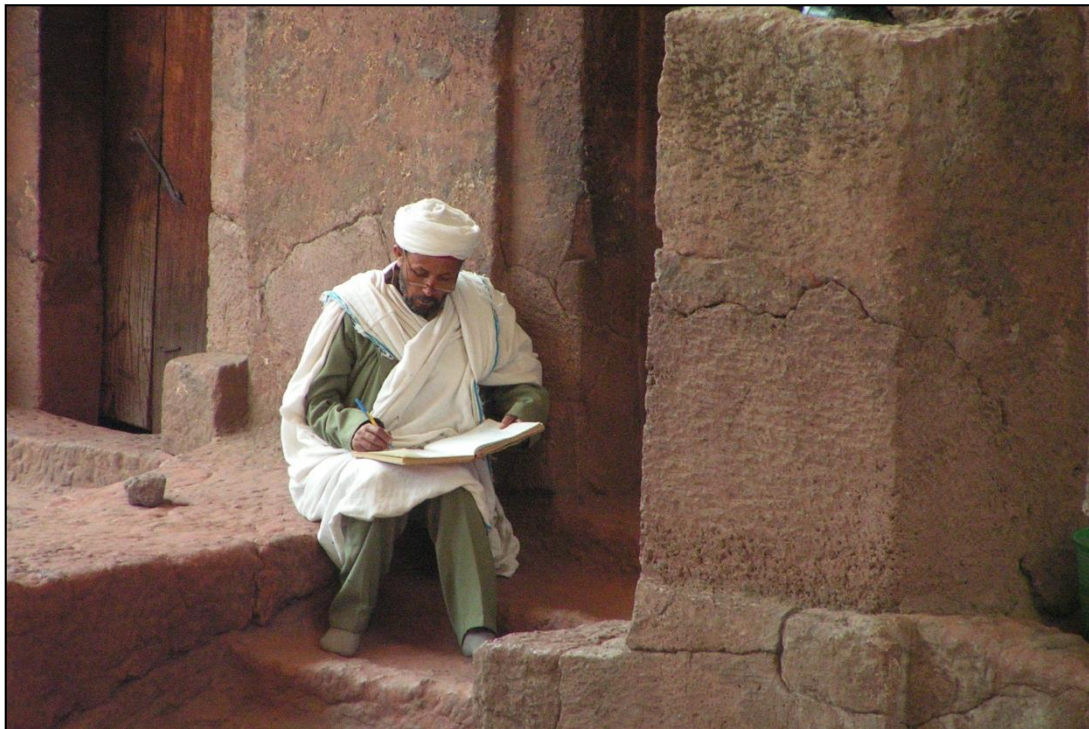


ANCIENT ETHIOPIA

Guided photography tour led by Simon Stafford

7th to 16th April 2017 to coincide with the Palm Sunday and Easter festivities



Fri 7 April: Depart London

Depart London Heathrow at 9pm on the night flight to Addis Ababa.

Sat 8 April: Arrive Addis Ababa / Fly to Mekele

Arrive into **Addis Ababa** on Ethiopian Airlines at 7am. You will be met at the airport by your guide, Zablon Beyene, ready to start your tour.

After a relaxed pre-trip briefing from Zab over coffee and breakfast, embark on a morning tour of the capital, taking in the **Holy Trinity Cathedral**, Ethiopia's second holiest site, and, time-allowing, the **Addis Ababa National Museum**. Your flight to **Mekele**, in Tigray, departs this afternoon at 3pm.

On arrival in Mekele transfer to the Planet Hotel for one night.

Your Financial Protection

All monies paid by you for the air holiday package shown [or flights if appropriate] are ATOL protected by the Civil Aviation Authority. Our ATOL number is ATOL 3145.

For more information see our booking terms and conditions.

Sun 9 April: Palm Sunday in Mekele

Today is Palm Sunday, or Hosanna, one of the major religious festivals in the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar. The Palm Sunday festivities in Mekele centre on **St. Michael & Medane Alem Church**.

Ethiopian cities come alive during Palm Sunday, as both laity and clergy gather together to mark the occasion. It is common to see priests dressed in full ceremonial attire, and laity wearing white robes and handmade palm rings.

Depart Mekele after the morning festivities and drive to Gheralta, stopping at a number of the more prominent Tigray rock churches en route.



On arrival in Gheralta, check into **Gheralta Lodge** for dinner and overnight (three nights). 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. Enjoy a fine dinner overlooking the dramatic landscapes of Tigray.



If time allows, you will be able to include some church visits or a stop at a traditional Ethiopian coffee house en-route to Gheralta. Evening will be at leisure.

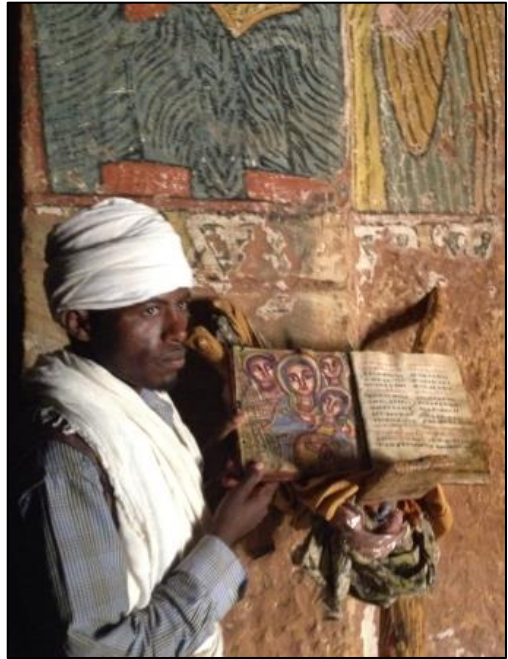
Overnight at Gheralta Lodge.

Mon 10 April to Tues 11 April: Gheralta

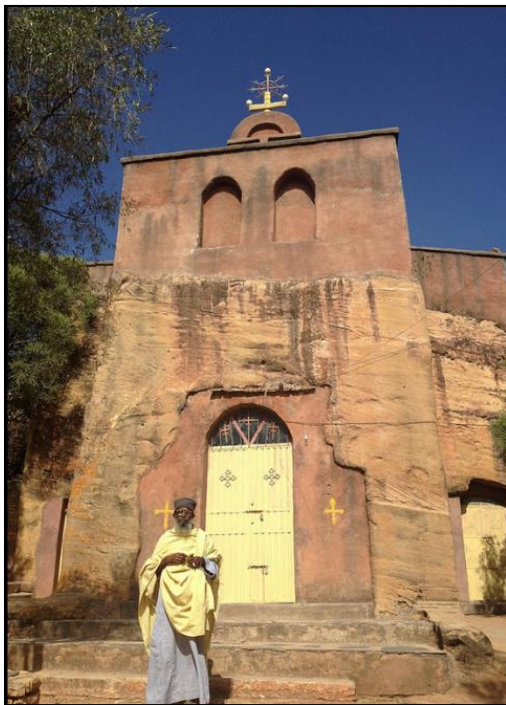
The next two days are dedicated to exploring the dramatic landscapes and rock churches of Tigray, with a particular emphasis on the Gheralta region. The number of holy places visited will depend on group dynamics as well as the amount of time spent at preceding churches. The below outline is provided as an example itinerary but can easily be adapted to suit the interests and preferences of the group.

Day 1 – Begin your explorations 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 region.

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 ground.



From Michael Imba, 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 4th-century converts to Christianity, Abreha & Atsbeha, this church is renowned for its magnificent 17th-century murals.

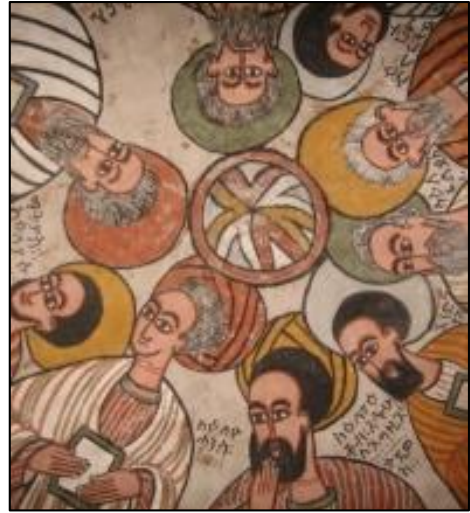


In the late afternoon, visit several of the more prominent rock churches of the region, such as **Wukro Cherkos** and **Michael Debre Salam**.

Wukro Churkos (pictured), situated north of Wukro town, is another early cruciform and semi monolithic church notable for its striking interior adornments—its Axumite friezes and vaulted ceiling—is not dissimilar to Michael Imba. Both churches share Axumite architectural qualities that support the claim that these are the earliest of Ethiopia's rock-hewn churches and quite likely pre-date the more famous rock churches at Lalibela. Your guide will explain more about their history, and the debate surrounding the precise date of their construction, during the visits.

During the course of the day we will also try to find time to visit a local village market.

Day 2 – After breakfast at Gheralta Lodge, drive and then walk to the nearby rock churches of **Debre Maryam Korkor**, remarkable for its Byzantine-inspired paintings, and **Abune Yemata (Guh)**, the most remote and isolated of the Tigray rock churches. A steep climb is required to reach Abune Yemata, which has been carved into the cliff face of Mount Imba, but it is worth it for the spectacular murals (and equally spectacular views – wideangle lenses at the ready!)



Late this morning, you'll have the chance to watch a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony in a local coffee bar, followed by lunch. Late afternoon, you may like to explore the colourful **Selassie Dugum**.

In the evening, return to Gheralta Lodge for dinner and overnight.

Wed 12 April: Drive to Axum

Depart Gheralta Lodge this morning and drive approx. 3 hours to Axum.

En route there will be time to stop at the ancient **Temple of Yeha**. A Sabeian construction, Yeha is reputedly the oldest standing stone structure in Ethiopia, dating back to approx. 700BC. There is also a small market at Yeha most days of the week.

Arrive Axum in the afternoon and check into Yared Zema Hotel for one night. In the afternoon, enjoy a guided tour of Axum, taking in the city's major sights and monuments, including the famous stelae and the **Church of St Mary of Zion**.

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. During this era, the tradition continues, Menelik, son of Sheba and King Solomon, carried 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 5th century BC), Axum has played a crucial role in Ethiopia's history, and remains to this day very much the religious and historic centre of the country.



The city was the capital during the long Axumite reign (est. 5th-century BC to 10th-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.

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, the exact meaning of which remains a mystery, provide an insight into early Ethiopian religious culture. (The stellae also figure in Ethiopia's more recent history. 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, continue 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.

Thu 13 April: Fly to Gondar

Depart Axum this morning on the early flight to Gondar, where you will be met on arrival by our driver and driven into the Simiens National Park, stopping en route at Neko Kossye Village to take photos of the stunning mountain landscapes.

The drive time from Gondar to the **Simien Mountains National Park** is approximately two hours, but it can vary depending on the weather and traffic, and how much time we allow for photos. Altitude sickness is a small but real risk as you will be ascending to almost 3,500m. Drink lots of water during the day to ensure that you don't dehydrate while in the mountains.



We aim to reach Simien Mountain Lodge late afternoon and check in for two nights. The lodge occupies a superb location close to the edge of the escarpment, offering wonderful views of the surrounding landscape.

Fri 14 April: Explore the Simien Mountains

Today will be spent exploring the Simien Mountains. There is no fixed route or schedule; the amount of walking will depend on the preferences and strength of the group. Vehicles will be at your disposal to visit the interior of the park and settlements such as Chenek. There are also wonderful trekking routes along the edge of the escarpment within range of the lodge.

The Simien Mountains, which include Ras Deshen, Ethiopia's highest mountain, are located in the north-western corner of the country. 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 the region. The wildlife is hugely varied and includes the walia ibex, gelada baboon, bearded vulture, thick-billed raven and eagle.



The park's most famous residents are the gelada baboon, who can be seen in large troops on the escarpment. There are currently an estimated 2,700 baboons in the park. Although they have few predators, increased farming in the park means that the grasslands and woodlands that the gelada depend on are disappearing.



Gelada live in family groups made up of a dominant male and up to 8 females (with young). These families come together in huge troops, 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 and photograph the Gelada during your stay in the mountains. If lucky, you may also spot the endemic Walia Ibex.

Sat 15 April: Easter Eve in Gondar

Descend from the Simien Mountains this morning and return to Gondar. On arrival, check into the Goha Hotel for one night. This afternoon will be spent exploring Gondar's historic monuments as the city prepares itself for Easter.



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

This afternoon you 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.

Preparations for Easter will be well underway during your visit and you'll have a chance to witness the early stages of the festivities at

Debre Birhan Selassie Church, where the Easter service extends through Easter Eve into the early hours of Sunday morning. A real air of excitement always attends major festivals in Ethiopia, making this a wonderful time to be in Gondar.

Return to the Goha Hotel for dinner and overnight.

Sun 16 April: Easter in Gondar / Int'l Departure

We will arrange for you to attend a special coffee ceremony in Gondar this morning to celebrate Easter.

After lunch, return to Addis Ababa on the early afternoon flight.

As you will be flying out of Addis Ababa this evening, we will arrange for a day room at the Radisson Hotel. The afternoon is free to rest and freshen up, or alternatively we can arrange for a short tour of Addis Ababa, taking in some of the sights not visited on the morning of your arrival, such as the 'Mercato', East Africa's largest market.

To end the day, we will arrange for you to enjoy a traditional Ethiopian dinner at a hilltop restaurant to mark your last evening in Ethiopia.



Depart Ethiopia tonight on the night flight to London, arriving early morning. End of tour.

Booking Information

This tour is offered as a small group departure with fixed travel dates, and is led by expert photographer Simon Stafford. You will also be accompanied by our most experienced guide in Ethiopia, Zablon Beyene.

*This tour cost is **£3,499 per person**, inclusive of driven transfers, full-board accommodation, guide and activities, international and internal flights.*

Nikon Owner Gold Members are eligible for a special price of £3,299 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.



Your Tour Leaders

Simon Stafford first became interested in photography while a university student. Completely self-taught, he talked his way into a job as the photographer for the university's weekly newspaper and has been shooting pictures ever since. His photographs have been used widely in newspapers, books, calendars, and magazines, and he has also enjoyed numerous successes in many photographic competitions.

Simon has built up a wealth of experience over the past thirty years in both film and digital photography. Throughout his photographic career he has used the Nikon system extensively, adopting digital photography at an early stage with the release of the Nikon D1 camera during 1999; he has been using digital cameras exclusively since 2004. He completed his first book, *The Nikon Compendium*, during 2003. With nearly 400 pages and Simon's own extensive photography of Nikon cameras, Nikkor lenses, and Nikon system accessories, it represents a comprehensive history of the Nikon system for the user and collector alike. He has also written fifteen books on the Nikon camera system for the Magic Lantern Guide series, published by Lark Photography Books, and is currently working on a new series of guides for Nikon Speedlights and the Nikon Creative Lighting System.

He is involved in a wide variety of photographic projects, which include presenting photographic workshops, and contributing illustrated articles to leading photography magazines; he is also Technical Editor to Nikon Owner magazine.

Zablon Beyene is one of the top authorities for the Historic Route and Ethiopian culture more generally. Zab has worked on numerous projects in the country, not only guiding groups but also managing film projects for TV. His great knowledge of Ethiopia enabled him to be appointed to work on such programmes as the BBC's 'Human Planet', 'the Incredible Human Journey' with Dr. Alice Roberts, 'Tribe' with Bruce Parry, 'An African Journey' with Jonathan Dimbleby, and 'Nile' with Joanna Lumley. Zab will accompany you throughout your journey, sharing with you his unparalleled knowledge of the country and its history.