

An introduction to the rock churches of Tigray



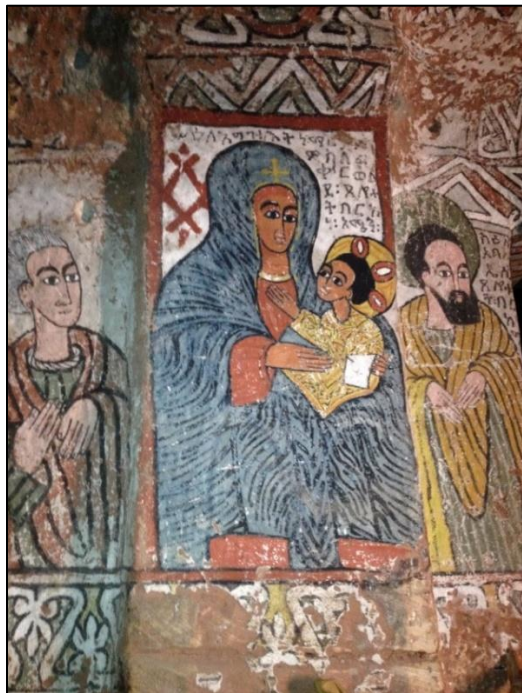
Ethiopia's most northerly region, Tigray, is also among its least explored. The birthplace of the Axumite Empire, Ethiopia's rich Christian tradition was formed in this region, whose oldest sites of worship predate even the famous monoliths of Lalibela (in some cases by several hundred years!)

Tigray is a region of great natural beauty and rugged landscapes, but undoubtedly the region's main attraction is its rock churches. There are thought to be as many as 200 of these unique sites, though only a handful are regularly visited. The Tigray churches differ greatly in design and structure, ranging from free-standing stone structures to hidden cave churches and striking monoliths carved directly from the earth. The oldest date back to at least the 6th or 7th centuries BC, pre dating the arrival of Christianity to Ethiopia, while the most recent were constructed in the last 200 years. Many of the churches are still active, and serve as vibrant places of worship that come alive during Ethiopia's major religious festivals.

Here we provide a brief overview of some of the most notable of Tigray's churches. All of these churches stand out for their unique design (Abune Abraham, Abre Atsbeha), or their dramatic location (the famous cliff-face church of Abune Yemata).

A brief overview of Tigray's major churches

1. **Cheleket Selassie Church** – Cheleket Selassie is a small church situated 17km from Mekele, in the valley at the foot of Imba Aredom Mountain, the site of a major battle during the First Italo-Ethiopian War. It is the burial site of Empress Itege Taitu, the wife of Emperor Tewodros. Built between the 18th and 19th centuries, the church contains relics and treasures of several Ethiopian kings.
2. **Eyesus Hintsä (Mekele)** – This sandstone church is located a short distance from Mekele and dates from the 14th century. With its curved pillars, it is a good example of Axumite architecture. Orthodox crosses are found inside, as well as 6 free-standing pillars, 3 doors and 9 intricately carved windows.
3. **Mikeal Imba** – One of the largest of the Tigray churches, Mikael Imba dates to the 11th century and has a similar design to the more famous monoliths at Lalibela. As it predates these, it is quite possible that it was used as a model by Lalibela's architects. It is located on a high hill and offers sweeping views of the Tigrayan landscape.



4. **Maryam Debo** – An active monastery with a large community. The journey to Maryam Debo involves a one hour trek, with spectacular views of the rift valley.

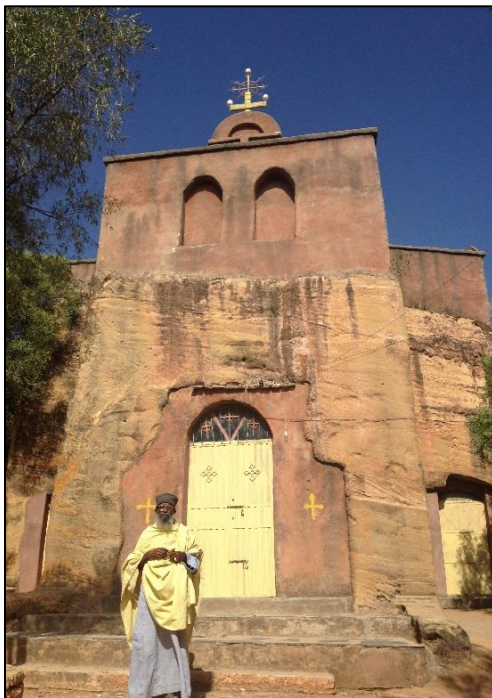
5. **Debre Selam Mikael** – Built into a cave that served as an older site of worship, Debre Selam Mikael has a unique “church within a church” design. Three large columns with a distinctly Axumite façade are painted on the exterior. The interior features intricate wood carving and Byzantine-influenced artwork.

6. **Abre Atsbeha** – Arguably the finest and most famous church in Tigray, Abre Atsbeha is a rock-hewn church built between the 7th and 11th Centuries AD and dedicated to the twin Axumite kings (who are said to have introduced Christianity to Ethiopia in the 4th Century). Thousands of pilgrims come to visit the site during Timkat. There are 13 pillars inside, as well as

elaborate murals and paintings. One of the prayer crosses of the first bishop of Ethiopia is contained within.



7. **Abune Yemata (Guh)** – This rock-hewn church is located high on Imba Mount (Gheralta) above the village of Megab – a steep climb is required to reach Abune Yemata. It is believed to have been built/hewn following the monastic renaissance in the 13-16th century AD. It has clear Byzantine influences. 30 min walk and 1 hour climbing with incredible view from the top.
8. **Abune Abraham** – One hour’s walk from the village of Degum, Abune Abraham was built in the 14th century and contains some of the most magnificent paintings of any church in the Tigray region. Its standout feature is a large architectural dome with 6 pillars. The church contains a number of artifacts, including a large ceremonial fan with wooden frame (1 metre in diameter), dating from the 15th century.



9. **Yeha Temple** – The ruined temple at Yeha is a huge, Bronze Age construction believed to have been built in the 7th or 8th centuries BC, making it roughly contemporary with the Parthenon in Athens! Almost certainly the oldest surviving building in Ethiopia, it tells us much about the pre-Aksumite era of Ethiopia’s history, of which historians otherwise know very little.

10. **Debre Damo** – 90km north-east of Axum, Ethiopia’s oldest monastery (6th century) is located on a high cliff and houses as many as 500 monks. Its church is dedicated to Abune Aregawi, one of the ‘Nine Founding Saints’, who are said to have introduced Christianity to Ethiopia. Legend has it that Aregawi founded the monastery after he was carried to the top of the mount in the coils of a mystical serpent. With this legend in mind, male visitors to Debre Damo are hoisted to the church by a 15m leather rope, or “jende”, tied around the waist.

Visit Tigray with Gane and Marshall

We are one of the few UK operators to offer extensive tours of Tigray. As well as including the region in our standard Historic Route tours (alongside Axum, Lalibela, Gondar etc), we can also offer standalone tours of Tigray lasting several days and taking in the lesser-known rock churches, or guided walking and camping itineraries where the focus is on exploring the region's beautiful landscapes as well as its places of worship.

