

## A Short Trip to the Moon

### 5-Day Expedition in the Danakil Depression

#### ITINERARY

**DAY 1:** After breakfast, we leave Mekele and begin our travels into the desert of the Danakil Depression. An absolutely fascinating scenic journey lies ahead of us. Over the course of the day we will travel approximately 2,000 metres in altitude. The trail we follow runs along an ancient trade route that connects the desert regions to the fertile highlands. For centuries, this route has been used by the salt traders who travelling with their caravans of camels. Over the serpentine route we head deep into the valley. The landscape and vegetation changes constantly and the view is one of a kind. We'll pass forests of cactus, jagged red cliffs and isolated traditional dwellings. It will become noticeably warmer, the landscape more barren, and we'll cross paths with salt caravans on their long journey to the highlands.

By midday we'll reach Berahile, the largest Afar settlement in this region. The Afar people are nomadic Muslim cattle drivers who live a tough life here in one of the hottest and most barren areas on the planet. We'll stop for a refreshment and traditionally-prepared coffee. For those with some appetite, a small meal will also be available. We'll then continue on our journey.

By late afternoon we'll reach Hamed Ela, where we'll set up our base camp for all further expeditions. Our chef will prepare a delicious dinner, and in the meantime we'll have the opportunity to visit the desert village. Overnight accommodation will be available here in a traditional Afar hut or directly under the beautiful star-filled sky of the desert.

**DAY 2:** From Hamed Ela we'll head to Ertale, the most active volcano in Ethiopia. The route takes us past thorn bushes and over sandbars and solidified lava rock and we'll pass by many clusters of palm-lined Afar huts and lush oases. Finally, we'll reach the territory around the volcano of Ertale. We'll visit the chief of the tribe based here and ask for his hospitality. One or more tribal members will be assigned to us to show us the way to the volcano and provide an escort.

Arriving at the foot of the volcano, we set up our base camp and prepare for our climb to the crater rim, 613 metres above sea level. To avoid the heat, the climb will take place in the early evening. Normally the climb takes 3-4 hours. Should the climb be too difficult, it can also be done on camel back.

Once we reach the crater rim, all our efforts will be richly rewarded. Inside the volcanic crater simmers the world's only permanent lava lake. The glowing red light of the lava shines against the night sky. Small eruptions break through the surface of the lava and create a fireworks display of white-hot liquid rock. We'll spend the night close to the crater on the volcano under the open sky.

**DAY 3:** In the early morning we descend from Ertale to our base camp where we'll reward our efforts with an ample breakfast. We'll then break camp and make our way back through the desert.

Once back in Hamed Ela, we'll have some time to relax and reflect upon the previous days events. We'll use the late afternoon hours to explore the Afar village with its unusual and simply built huts, perfectly suited for the hot climate. In the evening we'll gather together in the camp and enjoy our dinner.

**DAY 4:** Today we depart Hamed Ela and head towards Dallol, to the hottest and lowest point of altitude on the continent of Africa. With our all-terrain vehicle, we'll cross a wide no-man's-land watching as structure of the land changes and the salt desert begins.

Dallol is located 116 metres below sea level and is a unique geological phenomenon - a surreal, fantastic discovery. Odd mineral formations grow into bizarre shapes from the desert floor. In between wide pools of sulphur-yellow and poison-green liquid flow - boiling, seething and spitting. We'll move from one incredible, dreamlike landscape to the next across this strange terrain. A few kilometres further we'll find a sink full of yellow liquid with bubbling fountains.

The tour continues to the salt lake of Asale. A surprising picture emerges here where countless caravans of camels stand by, ready to transport the precious commodity found in this desert. For centuries, the Afar have been mining bars of salt found here in the ground. During their long journeys, they bring the salt tablets, called Amoli, to the distant markets of the highlands. We'll watch the salt miners carry out their fascinating, centuries-old work.

We'll then head back to Hamed Ela. After lunch and a short break, we'll make our way back from the Danakil Depression. We'll drive to the desert settlement Berahile where we'll camp for the night on the school grounds.

**DAY 5:** After breakfast, we'll travel the rest of the way out of the valley. We'll regain in altitude continuously and as we work our way up we'll encounter even more caravans of camels. We'll finally reach the highlands and return to Mekele, the capital of Tigray, where we take the plane back to Addis Ababa.

*Please note that the above itinerary is meant as an example only and is a rough guide of what is possible. Some content may change depending on various circumstances. The tour details can also be modified accordingly to suit your interests and can be adapted to your circumstances. We are also not responsible for any deviations to the planned tour for reasons which arise beyond our control.*