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**awura tours**  
ethiopian travel agency

## Call of the Muezzin, Dance of the Priests

### 13 Days in the North and East

#### ITINERARY

**DAY 1:** Early in the morning we'll depart Addis Ababa and head east. Soon we'll reach the town of Debre Zeyt, which is located adjacent to many small lakes of volcanic origin, where we'll stop for lunch. We'll then continue into the Great African Rift Valley where the temperature will rise and the vegetation change from tropical to sparse.

Around midday we'll reach the Awash National Park, through which flows the Awash River. We've arrived in the region of the Afar people, Muslim nomads who travel with their herds of cattle and camels through these barren steppes.

In the afternoon we'll explore the northern part of the national park by car. Keeping up our pace, we'll pass through dense bush and keep an eye out for the many wild residents of the park: endemic birds, giant tortoises, jackals and kudu. After a while the bush thins out. Lava rock covers the plain spotted with sporadic lush, palm-lined oases. Hot springs feed crystal pools of water where we'll take a careful dip.

We'll then head to the newly built lodge in the southern part of the national park, adjacent to the mighty waterfalls of the River Awash, where we'll spend the night. At dusk we'll keep an eye out for gazelles and antelopes that may be grazing nearby.

**DAY 2:** We continue eastbound where the road begins to ascend. We leave the heat of the Great African Rift Valley behind us and drive through the cool air of the Christian-influenced world of the Ahmar Mountains to Harar, the fourth holiest city in the entire Muslim world and the holiest city of Muslims in Ethiopia. In the afternoon we'll reach our destination.

Early in the evening, shortly after dusk, we'll meet at the gates of the city to witness a curious spectacle. Harar's traditional hyena-man emerges. He calls forth wild hyenas that creep in from the darkness of the night and are fed raw meat directly from his hand.

**DAY 3:** This day is devoted to exploring the city of Harar, once forbidden for unbelievers. We'll stroll through the narrow, winding streets of the city, populated by its colourful residents.

A medieval stone wall with five historic gates surrounds the old town centre - quite unusual for an Ethiopian city. More than 80 mosques and a number of holy shrines and graves are hidden throughout the city. We'll visit the shrines of the city and the municipal museum located in the former home of the French poet Rimbaud.

In the afternoon we'll visit a house built in the traditional Harar style of construction. We'll then explore the remaining parts of the city including the colourful market, bustling with activity.

Finally, we'll visit a local coffee roastery. Harar is one of the best regions for growing coffee in Ethiopia. Consequently, the local coffee is some of the best to be found. We'll stock up on a sufficient supply and head back to the hotel.

In the evening we'll meet at a restaurant. Although predominantly Muslim, there is an excellent local brewery in Harar. We'll have a taste of their cold beer during dinner.

**DAY 4:** We'll leave behind the old walls of Harar and from the highlands we'll continue down to the lowlands. Our first station is Dire Dawa, a friendly, lively city with shady avenues and beautiful old villas. Ethiopia's first train station is located here, built by the French in the early 20th century, but which is the now only a disused railway line to Djibouti. We'll visit the Kafira market here with its many colourful stalls.

After lunch we'll continue our journey through the arid plain of the Great African Rift Valley. Early in the evening we'll reach Gewane, which lies at the foot of the imposing Mount Ayalu, a mountain of volcanic origin that reaches over 2,000 metres high. We'll spend the night in a simple hotel.

**DAY 5:** Early in the morning we'll take the main road until just before Mile, where we'll turn sharply westward onto a short dirt road. The road soon winds through a beautiful region in sharp turns and twists up into the highlands of Wollo. Within a short time we'll overcome more than 1,000 metres in altitude. We'll witness the fascinating change of scenery and vegetation until we reach Kombolcha where we'll spend the night.

**DAY 6:** If this day falls on a Monday we'll take a short detour to Bati. The city is situated on the rim of the Great African Rift Valley and is therefore marked by a colourful mix of people. Every Monday there is a large inter-regional camel market which attracts hundreds of people from different ethnicities: Proud nomadic Afar from the hot and arid steppes as well as Christian Ethiopians from the fertile green highlands.

On all other days of the week, we'll take an alternative tour to Lake Hayk near the city with the same name and pay a visit to the pretty Istifanos monastery (where only men are allowed entrance). We'll then continue on to Woldia, where we'll stop for lunch.

Once refreshed, we'll continue our journey to Lalibela where we'll pass through some enchanting landscape along the way to the mountains, to the place where the heart of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity lies.

**DAY 7:** Today we'll spend at the UNESCO World Heritage City of Lalibela and marvel at the amazing architectural masterpieces of past centuries.

Lalibela is one of the holiest places in Christian Ethiopia as well as one of the most original. In Lalibela, time seems to stand still. Here we will visit the famous 11 rock-hewn churches. We explore the dimly lit rock chambers, passages and secret underground passageways lit only by the candlelight of our guide.

Back in the daylight, the rhythmic beating of a drum ceremony welcomes us. White-robed priests sing and sway their bodies to the beat. Followers, shrouded in white sheets, stand in silent prayer before the doors of the church. One has the feeling of being transported back in time to the 12th or 13th century, to the time when these remarkable religious buildings were chiseled into the stone. We take our time to explore this wonderful place and to absorb the special atmosphere.

After dinner, we round off the day on a whim with a visit to a small local tavern where delicious honey wine or 'Tedj' is served alongside traditional music.

**DAY 8:** In addition to Lalibela, there are a number of impressive churches and monasteries surrounded by beautiful countryside. The Yemrehanna Kristos monastery is situated approximately 30 kilometres away from Lalibela at the end of an idyllic valley. A small footpath leads uphill to a natural cave, which pours over with a small waterfall after the rainy season. The monastery is protected inside the cave and consists of two buildings that were built in the old Axumite style as part of the inside of the cave. We'll then return to Lalibela for lunch.

In the early afternoon we start our next trip, which leads us to the Abuna Yoseph, the mountain of Lalibela. On foot or by mule, we climb up and are rewarded with a breathtaking panorama. After about a two or three hour walk, we reach the Asheton Maryam monastery, a semi-monolithic church that was carved into a vertical rock face. We descend back to Lalibela while herds of endemic Gelada baboons cross our path and with luck we'll even spot an Ethiopian wolf (Simien fox).

**DAY 9:** We leave the mountains of Lalibela behind us as we head west in the direction of Bahir Dar. The road crosses rural Ethiopia and we pass villages and isolated farms lying amongst the rugged rock formations and rolling hills.

By midday, a wide plain lies before us. Just before we reach Lake Tana we'll head north and reach the city of Gondar by late afternoon. After a tour of the city we'll take a break on the terrace of the Goha hotel, which is situated on a hill overlooking the city. The sunset offers a beautiful view of Gondar and is the ideal place for a cool drink at the end of the day.

**DAY 10:** After breakfast, we'll depart for the Jewish village of Wolleka, which lies approximately five kilometres from Gondar. The area around Gondar has traditionally been home to many Ethiopian Jews, who probably descended from the people of Agau. However, the majority emigrated here in the 80's due to the repressive Mengistu regime of Israel. We'll visit the old synagogue and cemetery located behind the village.

After lunch we'll dedicate our time to the historic sites in the city of Gondar. We'll then head to the imperial palace district at the highest point of the city, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The palaces of six successive emperors are found here directly next to one another. The majestic buildings date from the 17th and 18th centuries, the heyday of Gondar. Some of the palaces have been preserved almost completely, while others are in ruins.

After this discovery tour in the world of Ethiopia's great monarchs, we drive to the valley outside the city. Here we find the so-called Bath of Fasilidas, named after the first emperor of Gondar. Its name can be misleading, however, as this wonderful property is more like a small moated castle than a public bath.

The last visit takes us to the church of Debre Birhan Selassie, with its high-quality wall and ceiling paintings. This church is famous for its ceiling decorated with the painted heads of 80 winged angels.

**DAY 11:** We'll drive to Bahir Dar, the city located on the largest lake in the country - Lake Tana. Just before Bahir Dar we'll cross a wide riverbed. It is the Blue Nile River, which has its source from Lake Tana not far from this point. Here we'll keep an eye out for crocodiles and hippos. We soon arrive at Bahir Dar, a colourful and lively town attractively situated on the shores of Lake Tana.

After lunch we drive to the massive Blue Nile falls, known as 'Tis Abay' or the Smoke of the Nile. The name comes from the fine mist created surrounding the falls like a cloud. The falls are both powerful and beautiful, particularly during and after the rainy season. These spectacular falls are reached after about a half hour walk.

In the evening we'll stroll along the wide, palm shaded boulevards and enjoy the pleasant balmy climate. We'll then head into one of the best bars in town for a taste of the traditional music and dance performances.

**DAY 12:** Today we spend nearly the entire time on the water. By boat, we explore the many idyllic islands on Lake Tana, home to ancient monasteries, most of which were established in the 14th century. First, we visit the peninsula of Zege home to two monasteries surrounded by lush tropical vegetation. We take a walk through the dense forest, accompanied by the chirping of birds and large colourful butterflies.

A clearing opens up to the walled fortress monastery of Ura Kidane Mihret. Passing through the gate, we stand in front of a large, old round building traditionally covered in straw. Three huge wooden doors lead into the dim interior, where fantastic murals cover the walls. We then head for the nearest island, past a fleet of traditional papyrus boats used to transport goods across the lake.

Afterwards we'll take a detour to the point where the Tana See feeds into the Blue Nile, a place much under control of the hippos. The sun is nearing the horizon. At the beautiful promenade we'll enjoy the fresh evening breeze and watch the many colourful birds in the thicket of papyrus.

**DAY 13:** Early in the morning we'll begin our long drive back to the capital city. We'll drive through Gojam, a section of land known for its tasty, locally produced brandy (known as 'Areke'). At noon we'll reach Debre Markos.

About an hour after we pass Debre Markos, we'll reach the Blue Nile again. The road twists and turns spectacularly into the canyon where the river has washed over the red rock for thousands of years. We'll cross the Blue Nile and work our way slowly back up the canyon wall.

Our last stop is Debre Libanos, which presents beautiful views over the deep valley of the river Robi. We'll then arrive back in Addis Ababa. Once in the capital we'll relax for a while before you're invited to a farewell dinner on behalf of Awura Tours, held in a traditional Ethiopian restaurant.

*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.*