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The People of the South

9 Days in the Omo Valley

ITINERARY

DAY 1: Early in the morning we depart Addis Ababa and head south. Our first stop is Melka Konture on the Awash River. Melka Konture is one of the most important prehistoric archaeological sites in Ethiopia. A number of Stone Age tools and interesting fossils have been discovered here, including human skeletons, some which are up to 1.7 million years old.

From Melka Konture we'll travel farther to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Tiya. A mysterious band of stelae fields stretch throughout southern Ethiopia, through Dila all the way up to Negele Borana. Tiya is the northernmost of these fields where over 40 stelae stand next to one another. Each one includes an engraved relief with symbolic characters and figures of unknown meaning. Little is known of the origins of these estimated 700-year old stelae. However, they were probably used to mark the mass graves of dead young men and women who lie buried together beneath the columns in an embryonic posture.

We continue our journey south, dipping into the Great African Rift Valley and follow its course. The temperature rises and the vegetation becomes more tropical. In Sodo we'll stop for lunch. Through varying terrain we'll then continue our journey until we reach Arba Minch where we'll spend our first night.

DAY 2: From Arba Minch we head towards Konso. After lunch in the town of Karat-Konso we fan out to the surrounding hills to visit the picturesque villages of the Konso people that are situated on the hilltops.

The Konso are a traditional tribe with unique rites and customs. Typical for this region are 'Wagas' which are carved wooden statues decorated with bone material and placed on the graves of great warriors. The surrounding farmlands are as picturesque as the villages themselves and have been intelligently cultivated by the Konso into many terraces in order to prevent further leaching of the steep, barren land.

Near the Konso village of Gesergiyu we find another scenic highlight. Over centuries a depression has been formed here out of sand resembling a cluster of tall buildings, hence its nickname 'New York'. For the night we'll return to Karat-Konso.

DAY 3: After breakfast, we head in the direction of Jinka. By lunchtime we reach Weyto, a village in a valley in the region of Tsemai. After freshening up, we continue our drive to Key Afar.

Key Afar is mainly populated by Ari and is known for its large market, held each Thursday. Here we will see for the first time a colourful mixture of the people of the region: the proud, topless Ari, the beautiful women of the Bana tribe, and the ornate Hamer, all hawking their wares.

Our next stop is Jinka, where we will spend the night. Like Key Afar, Jinka is part of the Ari territory, a tribe with roughly 100,000 people. The Ari live from agriculture and farming and, like the Hamer, speak a south omotic language with 10 local dialects. On Saturdays an important transregional market is held in Jinka, which attracts people from all different ethnicities of Southomo.

DAY 4: Not far from Jinka lies the border to the Mago National Park, home to many wild animals. It is very likely to spot a herd of buffalo, zebras and kudu.

The most fascinating inhabitants of the park, however, are the Mursi. This tribe, with about 5,000 inhabitants, lives in small villages along the river Mago and is probably the best known of all of the tribes of the Omo Valley. This fame is probably due to their very special jewellery worn by the wives - the large plates, which are worn in their lower lips.

But the men of the Mursi tribe also maintain very special customs. Most spectacular is the initiation rites for young men. Before a Mursi man can marry, he has to win one 'Donga'. This is the traditional hard stick fight fought man against man.

After a busy day in this ancient and traditional world of the Mursi, we return for an overnight stay in Jinka.

DAY 5: Today we visit the land of the Hamer, a tribe of about 35,000. The Hamer are known particular for their opulent dress and the typical hairstyle of the women. Heavy metal bands adorn their necks, colourful beads are worn on their heads and swing on their hips over skirts made of animal fur. A legendary initiation rite of the Hamer is the so-called bull jumping ceremony. Naked without any clothing, young men must run several times stepping and jumping over the backs of bulls. Only when this is completed, may he marry his bride.

The first stop along our route is Dimeka, where we enjoy our lunch. Dimeka is in Hamer territory, directly at the border to Bena country. The best days to visit Dimeka are Saturdays and Tuesdays when the colourful markets are held. Countless tribes from Hamer and Bena travel from the countryside for miles to this vibrant city full of colourful life and activity.

We leave Dimeka and head towards Turmi, a small and very traditional Hamer village that is surrounded by several other villages. Market day here is Monday, but there are many other things to see and discover in and around Turmi on other days of the week. We will spend the night here.

DAY 6: Shortly after breakfast we'll begin our journey to Omorate, the largest town in the area of Dassanech, located near the border to Kenya. Soon we'll reach the banks of the River Omo, which flows into the great Lake Turkana just a few kilometres away. Omorate is located on the opposite side of the river, but how will we cross? On the shore we'll find delicate dugout canoes, which are the traditional mode of transportation for the Dassanech people over the Omo. We'll also take these unique boats across to the other side - a special treat indeed. Our own vehicle will stay behind.

We'll complete the last part of our journey to the village on foot. Women with colourful hanging beads approach us alongside the men who bear the particular clay hair weaves with pride. These are used to honour a victorious warrior, for example after they have killed a large animal.

It's Monday, so we return for lunch in Turmi to the colourful Monday market of the Hamer people. As a rule, the major initiation ceremonies are held as part of market days. We'll be sure to travel in the proper season, so that with a little luck we can attend the famous bull jumping ceremony of the Hamer. Around a dozen bulls are lined up side-by-side. Completely naked and with a wild mane of hair, a young man enters the scene. He climbs onto the back of the first bull and jumps from bull to bull covering the entire row. Meanwhile, the crowd dances and cheers him on.

DAY 7: We leave the colourful people of the south behind and make our way back to Arba Minch. The wonderful scenery of the Omo Valley passes before us. In the afternoon we'll arrive at Arba Minch, a city of 40 natural springs (which is the literal meaning of Arba Minch).

The sun is nearing the horizon providing a warm, golden light. This is the perfect time of day for an idyllic boat trip on Lake Chamo in the Nechisar National Park. We pass hippos, a variety of water birds and fishermen, delicately balanced on their traditional fishing boats. Our destination is the so-called crocodile market, located on a stretch of land where countless reptiles sprawl out lazily in the sun.

We'll stay in Arba Minch and enjoy the balmy evening.

DAY 8: Today we head towards Awassa, an attractive bustling town on the lake of the same name. But first we will make a detour to Lake Abaya to catch a glimpse of flamingos, hippos and other water animals.

After arriving in Awassa, the shady promenade invites us for a refreshing drink on the waterfront. We relax under the trees directly on the shore and watch the small boats on the lake during the sunset.

DAY 9: Early in the morning we visit the picturesque fish market on the south shore of the town square where the local fishermen sell their fresh catch daily. Then we head back to Addis Ababa. By noon we reach Lake Langano spreading peacefully against the background of the blue Arsi Mountains. After lunch spent on the terrace of the lake we'll head up to Debre Zeyt, which lies adjacent to several small lakes of volcanic origins. We'll then cover the rest of the journey 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.