

A Cultural Mosaic

14 Days North & South

ITINERARY

DAY 1: An early morning transfer brings us to the airport in Addis Ababa where we board the plane to Bahir Dar. After a one-hour flight we are right on schedule. Our guide will then take us to our hotel where we check in and freshen up. Now we can begin!

The morning is spent 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.

In the afternoon 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.

The sun is now nearing the horizon. At the beautiful promenade we'll enjoy this special evening while watching the many colourful birds in the thicket of papyrus.

DAY 2: After breakfast we make our way to Gonder, the ancient imperial capital of Ethiopia. Once there, we visit the imperial palace district at the highest point in the city, which is 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 Gonder. 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 Gonder. Its name can be misleading, however, as this wonderful property is more like a small moated castle than a public bath.

The next 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.

In the evening we find ourselves on the terrace of the Goha Hotel, which sits on the 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 3: Today we take a day trip to the beautiful mountains of Ethiopia, the Simien Mountains National Park. Early in the morning we depart for Debarq, a small town where we find the gateway to the park. From there, we head a short distance into the Simien Mountains to the starting point of our hike.

We set off and follow the path that will shortly lead us to the first, steep canyon with a fantastic panoramic view. At our feet lies a wide, deeply jagged landscape filled with mountain ranges, steep crags and valleys. After a short rest we continue on our journey, passing gelada baboons frolicking about in the surrounding fields and hills.

After a hike of about four to five hours, we reach the end of our trek where our car is waiting for us. Pleasantly weary from our trip we head back to Gondar.

DAY 4: We take the morning flight to the UNESCO World Heritage town of Lalibela. A day full of fascination with the amazing architectural masterpieces of past centuries awaits us.

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 11 rock-hewn churches and 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 5: We fly back to Addis Ababa. After arriving in the capital we can relax a little and reminisce upon the experiences and impressions of the past few days.

In the afternoon, we start our small tour of the city. We will visit the bustling Mercato, which is said to be the largest market in Africa. There is nothing that cannot be found here and errand boys and donkey drivers fill the streets amongst the traders with their goods for sale.

After a stopover in one of the most traditional coffee houses in the city we travel to the National Museum, which welcomes us with a pleasant break.

Lucy is kept here, the world famous 3.5 million year old human skeleton, which was found in 1974 in the northeast of the country. (At the museum, it's possible to view the original copy).

DAY 6: In the morning we depart from Addis Ababa and start on the second leg of our journey. Our first stop is Awassa, an attractive bustling city on the lake of the same name. We take the road heading south and soon drive deeper into the Great Rift Valley where we follow its course. The climate is warmer here and the vegetation becomes more tropical.

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 7: 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. We then drive on towards Arba Minch, a city with 40 springs (the literal meaning of 'Arba Minch').

If we arrive early enough, we take a turn directly before Arba Minch for a small detour in Dorze. This fertile land is located in the scenic mountains high above the city and is known for its traditional huts, which have a very unique tapered shape.

We take a look around Chench, the capital of Dorze, and then wind our way back through steep roadways down into the depths of the African Rift Valley and leave the cool mountain air of Dorze behind us.

The sun nears the horizon and creates a warm, golden light. We can now look forward to a warm summer evening.

DAY 8: Arba Minch is on the edge of two large lakes, Lake Chamo, abundant with wildlife, and Lake Abaya. At the border of the two lakes begins the Nechisar National Park.

On the shore, we charter a boat and take a trip on the tranquil Lake Chamo. 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.

Back on land, we head southbound again until we reach the city of Karat-Konso in Konso territory. From there, we spread out into the surrounding hills to visit the picturesque villages of Konso located 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 Gesergiyo 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'. We'll spend the night in Karat-Konso.

DAY 9: 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 10: 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 11: 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 12: From Turmi we make our way back to Arba Minch. We pass a broad arid plain in the Arbore territory. Mountains rise in the west along the horizon.

After about one and a half hours drive we reach the village of Arbore, characterized by its unique huts. Here, intermarried Borena and Hamar women mingle with the Arbore.

The road then leads us back into the land of Tsemai and again through Konso. We turn to the north and leave the colourful tribes of the south behind us. In the afternoon we arrive at Arba Minch.

DAY 13: Today we take the last long leg of the journey. We head to Lake Langano where we will spend our last night of the journey. By late afternoon we reach Shashemene, a place inhabited by many Rastafarians.

Near Shashamane lie the southern foothills of the Abiata-Shala National Park. If desired we can take a detour to the small lake Chitu Hora, located in an old volcanic crater. A huge flock of flamingos, which can reach 10,000, populates the lake. A little further, near the shores of lake Shala hot springs are found where the locals bathe.

We take the rest of the way to Lake Langano. For dinner, we enjoy some fresh fish. We then sit around the campfire on the shore of the lake and enjoy the balmy weather and the starry sky above.

DAY 14: We spend the morning sitting by the lake and relaxing our body and soul. By late morning we make our way back to the capital. After a stopover at Debre Zeit, we continue towards Addis Ababa. Here we use the time to pick up some last minute souvenirs and memorabilia.

The last evening has arrived and our farewell is approaching. But before saying our goodbyes, Awura Tours invites us to a farewell dinner in a traditional 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.