

Through The North Over Land

In 14 Days

ITINERARY

DAY 1: We leave Addis Ababa early in the morning and head north. After Debre Birhan we start to gain altitude. Shortly before Debre Sina we cross the crest of Tarmaber mountain revealing a wonderful view to the deep valley below. We stay and enjoy the cool mountain town of Debre Sina for lunch.

Leaving Debre Sina the road winds steadily downhill. Beautiful landscape accompanies us along the smooth transition from the cool Christian highlands to the hot Muslim lowlands. We'll spot camels along the way and will make a stop in the small town of Sanbete. Sunday is market day here and we will visit the colourful market full of hustle and bustle and have a look at the unique curiosities available.

We'll then put the rest of our travels behind us as we head back up to Kombolcha. The road rises steadily again and soon we're back in the highlands. We'll spend the night in Kombolcha.

DAY 2: From Kombolcha we take a 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. We'll visit the sprawling market area and admire the camels and other livestock followed by a visit to the regular market offering other useful products.

We continue our trip north. In the town of Hayk we'll visit the lake of the same name and pay a short visit to the beautiful monastery of St. Stephanos (entry is only allowed for men). Then we'll travel non-stop all the way to Woldia where we'll spend the night.

DAY 3: After breakfast we'll head off to Lalibela. We'll witness enchanting landscapes and scenery along the way through the mountains. In the early afternoon we'll arrive at the UNESCO World Heritage city.

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 let the incredible architectural feats of the past centuries fascinate us.

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 4: 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 5: 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.

At noon we'll reach a wide expanse of land as we approach 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. We stroll along the wide, palm tree-lined boulevards and enjoy a balmy summer evening and stop in one of the best pubs for some traditional music and dance performances.

DAY 6: 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 7: In the morning 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.

After lunch in Bahir Dar, we make our way to the old imperial city of Gondar, which we will reach in the late afternoon. After a tour of the city we end on the terrace of the Goha hotel 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 8: After breakfast we head off to the imperial palace district at the highest point of the city and 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.

After lunch we'll make final preparations for the upcoming hike in the Simien Mountains and pack all the provisions required. We're ready to start! We begin in Debarq where we'll spend the night. Over the next two days we'll hike through the Simien Mountains. If desired, additional days can be added to the tour, also for an ascent of Ras Dashen, Ethiopia's highest mountain.

DAY 9: Debarq is the starting point of our two-day trek in the Simien Mountains. Early in the morning our car will bring us to Sankaber (3,200 metres) where our packs will be loaded onto pack animals.

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. A waterfall plunges hundreds of metres down. After a short rest we continue on our journey, passing gelada baboons frolicking about in the surrounding fields and hills.

By late afternoon we'll arrive at the village of Gich, just a head of our first camp (3,600 metres). The pack animals are waiting with our packs and the tents are already pitched. The cook is already there and eager to get started preparing our meals. (If desired, you can choose to cook yourself and the required cooking equipment can be provided by Awura Tours).

DAY 10: We wake to the morning sun. For breakfast we dine on tea and scrambled eggs made from fresh eggs bought at the village the night before.

The first leg of our journey takes us through a wide plateau covered with bizarre-looking Giant Lobelias. High grass shimmers white in the morning light and we keep our eyes peeled in search of the Ethiopian wolf (Simien fox), sometimes spotted here in the early morning hours. After about two hours we reach our first summit, the Imet Gogo (3,926 metres). The peak is located right on the edge of deep canyons, creating a breathtaking view in all directions.

After a further ascent we approach the second highlight of our day. Just before reaching the mountains summit Inatye (4,070 metres) we cross the 4,000 metre ridgeline. At this high altitude we dive into our picnic while enjoying the beautiful view.

Along the cliff of the canyon we descend to Chennek Camp (3,650 metres). At the foot of the steep cliffs it's often possible to spot the endemic Walia Ibex as we peer into the depths. We'll camp here for the night. Speedy hikers who reach the camp early enough can also be picked up by the car and brought back to Debarq for the evening

DAY 11: Our travels take us further north. The serpentine roads wind through the breathtaking scenery of the Simien Mountains as we slowly lose altitude. We pass the picturesque river valley of the Tekeze and stop in Shire for a short lunch break. Afterwards we head directly towards Axum - the last leg of our journey.

DAY 12: Axum looks back on a glorious past. Today a world heritage city, it once was the centre of the Axumite kingdom, a great early civilization at its prime about 2,000 years ago. The empire stretched from Eastern Sudan to what is Yemen today and is the cradle of Ethiopian identity and Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia. Even today, Axum is still one of the most important and sacred cities of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The buildings and artefacts of the past continue to shape the face of the city. Particularly famous are the giant stone stelae that rise up from the royal Axumite tombs reaching heights of 30 metres, and some still stand as they did hundreds of years ago.

We'll visit the large and imposing main field of tombs, which consists of 75 stelae. Some of the grave chambers are still accessible. We then drive to the gates of the city where more stelae fields and the ruins of the old royal palaces are located.

In the afternoon we'll visit the holiest church in Ethiopia. Tsion Maryam consists of old and new cathedrals and stands on the ruins of the first ever church in Africa. Sensational is another apparently rather unassuming building: Here is said to hold the Ark of the Covenant with the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses once received at Mount Sinai.

DAY 13: We leave Axum and head east. Before long we take a sharp turn north to the temple of Yeha. This former pagan shrine dates back to the 5th century (!) and is the oldest monumental structure of the pre-Axumite period in Ethiopia, which has been for the most part well preserved. Ornaments and inscriptions refer to southern Arabia.

We then head to our next destination, the Orthodox Christian monastery of Debre Damo. Alone, the surroundings of this ancient and traditional monastery are remarkable. Surrounded by a rocky precipice, the monastery site is located high up on the plateau of a flat mountain top. Physical skills are needed here as a 15 metre climb is required to reach the top of the plateau. The only tool is a leather rope, which a monk pulls up for visitors (access for women is forbidden). At the top we will visit the public buildings of the monastery, the oldest surviving church of Axumite construction (built between the 7th and 11th centuries).

Happily back in the car, we drive until we reach the beautiful landscape of Gheralta. High red rock formations emerge on the horizon, and scattered giant trees provide shade for the people and their livestock. Far from the urban hustle and bustle we find the wonderful Gheralta Lodge, with stylish ambience, tranquility and fantastic views. Time to relax and enjoy!

DAY 14: The last day of our journey has begun. We eat a leisurely breakfast and then set off towards Mekele. Along the way we find a number of semi-monolithic rock-hewn churches, including the famous church of Abreha we Atsbeha. Depending on our time and energy we can stop and visit some of the sights along the way. The rock-hewn churches of Debre Maryam Korkor and Abba Daniel Korkor are highly recommended due to their high locations on top of the massive rock formations. The views of the country beyond are quite phenomenal here. The trip takes approximately one hour of hiking and moderate climbing and therefore requires fitness, surefootedness and a head for heights.

We reach Mekele and take the afternoon flight back to Addis Ababa. After arriving in the capital we relax and run any last minute errands. In the evening you're invited for a farewell dinner hosted by Awura Tours 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.