

Treasures of the North

6 Days by Airplane

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!

On the first day 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 2: 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 3: 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 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. We then drive to Debre Tsehai (Mountain of the Sun) located approximately five kilometres from the city. Here, the beautiful Empress Mentewab built the church complex of Kusquam as well as residential buildings and the obligatory banquet hall in the early 18th century.

DAY 4: The plane takes us 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: 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 6: 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).

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.