<!--•   Biete Medhane Alem-->

<!--•   Biete Maryam-->

<!--•   Biete Golgotha Mikael-->

<!--•   Biete Meskel -->

<!-- Biete Denage-->

<!--•   Biete Qeddus Mercoreus -->

<!--•   Biete Abba Libanos-->

<!--•   Biete Gabriel-Rufael-->

<!--•   Biete Lehem-->

<!--Llalibela timket-->

<!--Lalibela Gena-->

<!--Lalibela Froaygeba meskel-->

<!--Lalibela Meskel Demera-->

<!--Lalibela Ashendye-->

<!--Lalibela Town-->

<!--Lalibela Hotels-->

# Gebre Mesqel Lalibela was a great king of the Zagwe

dynasty whose reign lasted forty years, spanning

the end of the 12th century and the opening decades

of the 13th.

He is credited with the building of the rock-hewn

churches in Roha, later renamed in his honor.

Emperor and Saint - Lalibela is celebrated by the

Ethiopian Tewadeho Orthodox Church on the 12th of

Sene or June 19th.

According the a well-known fable, a swarm of bees

surrounded the infant Lalibela at his birth, a sign

which his mother took to be a portent of his long and

prosperous reign as king.

Indeed, his reign was fruitful, and the name Lalibela

means "the bees obey him in Agew/Agaw."

Due to this prophecy, his brother the Emperor

Harbay became jealous of him, which caused Lalibela

as he matured to leave the world and become a

hermit in the mountainous region of Tigray.

During his stay in Tigray he met his wife Mesqel

Kibra or "glory of the cross" and proceeded to make a

pilgrimage to Jerusalem or the Holy Land which at

the time was under the Roman Catholic rule.

The isolated Ethiopian empire was beginning to make

overtures to the West, through Pope Alexander III,

for an alliance.

Lalibela upon hearing what his brother was up to,

returned to Roha in Ethiopia with his supporters and

forced Emperor Harbay to abdicate the throne.

The Ethiopian Tewadeho Church is recognized to have

helped Lalibela ascend the throne due to their

opposition of Harbay's relationship to Catholic Rome.

Lalibela took the name Gebre Meskal or "servant of

the cross" at his coronation as Emperor of Ethiopia.

He went on to be a beloved ruler of the land despite

trouble brewing from the nobles in Shewa and Tigray

as well as Muslim's who were encroaching upon the

land.

Lalibela's greatest achievement undoubtedly lies in

the eleven monolithic churches he constructed in his

new capital city.

The cultural and religious hub, which bears his name

to this day, is modeled after Jerusalem.

In a vision, King Lalibela saw that he was to build a

new Jerusalem after the old Jerusalem was besieged

by Saladin in 1187.

The new city was to be located at the site of the

present-day town of Lalibela and to be made the

Zagwe dynasty's new capital.

It is said that King Lalibela built ten of the churches,

and his wife built the eleventh one in his honor.

A pious man an lifelong devotee of the church, he

was made a saint by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

after his death.

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Lalibela's incredible rock-hewn churches are a

UNESCO World Heritage Site today and are a major

pilgrimage destination for the Ethiopian church.

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# Rock hewn churches

Walking through the village you will see the mountainous

landscape of the region of Lasta, where the peasants labour to

cultivate their patches of stony fields with the traditional

hook-plough. Strolling across a gently undulating meadow, you

will suddenly discover in a pit below you a mighty rock -

carefully chiselled and shaped -the first rock church. None of

these monuments of Christian faith presents itself to the

visitor on top of a mountain as a glorious symbol of Christ’s

victory, to be seen from far away by the masses of pilgrims on

their road to the 'Holy City', they rather hide themselves in the

rock, surrounded by their deep trenches, only to be discovered

by the visitor when standing very close on top of the rock and

looking downwards.

In Lalibela itself you will find two main groups of churches, one

on each side of the river Jordan and one other church set apart

from the rest. The town of Roha-Lalibela lies between the first

and the second group of churches. It is situated on the higher

part of a mountain-terrace on a vast plateau of rock. At

Timkat (Ethiopian Epiphany. ca. January 19) a vivid ritual

unfolds before the spectator: here the dances of the priests

take place after the annual repetition of mass baptism in the

river Jordan.

There are twelve churches and chapels, including various

shrines. Four churches are monolithic in the strict sense; the

remainder are excavated churches in different degrees of

separation from the rock. The walls of the trenches and

courtyards contain cavities and chambers sometimes filled with

the mummies of pious monks and pilgrims.

# Types of Churches

There are three basic types of rock churches in Ethiopia:

1. Built-up cave churches, which are ordinary structures inside

a natural cave (Makina Medhane Alem and Yemrehanna Krestos

near Lalibela are examples of this style).

2. Rock-hewn cave churches, which are cut inwards from a

more or less vertical cliff face sometimes using and widening an

existing natural cave (Abba Libanos in Lalibela).

3. Rock-hewn monolithic churches, which imitate a built- up

structure but are cut in one piece from the rock and separated

from it all round by a trench. Most churches of this type are

found in or near Lalibela (Bet Medhane Alem. Bet Maryam. Bet

Giorgis, and others). Nowhere else in the world are

constructions of this particular kind found.

There are some fairly obvious technical details to prove the high

standard of technical knowledge the architects of Lalibela must

have had: the churches in a group are set on several levels, in

order to carry off the heavy summer rains. The trenches serve

also as a drainage system to the river Jordan. With churches

whose placing conforms to the slope of the terrain, the ridge of

the roof, gutter edges, the base of the plinth, are slanted in

line with it.

Whoever has experienced the "rainy season" in Ethiopia will

appreciate the great skill shown by these early builders. The

rains are so heavy that Lalibela is inaccessible in the rainy

season; landing at the airport as well as an approach by Land-

Rover from the main road are impossible.

Authorities claim that the rock churches in Ethiopia have two

roots:

(1) the Axumite architecture with its palaces of wood and

stone construction and with its monolithic stelae, and

(2) the early Christian basilica.

The rock churches reflect the blending of Axumite tradition and

early eastern Mediterranean Christianity: Yet they are an

entirely new creation of early Christian art on Ethiopian soil.

# The First Group of Churches

The churches of the first main group lie in their rock cradles

one behind the other north of the river Jordan. The original

approach might well have been from the river Jordan up to the

churches Golgota-Debre Sina (Mika'el) in the west. The whole

complex, seen in an east-westerly direction, may be divided into

three smaller groups:

Bet Medhane Alem in the east, the Bet Maryam group in the

centre, and the twin church Golgota- Debre Sina (Mika'el) with

the Selassie Chapel in the west.

While each sub-group has a courtyard of its own, the whole

complex is surrounded by a deep outer trench.

# Bet Medhane Alem

Approaching the most eastern church of this group, Bet

Medhane Alem (House of the Redeemer of the World) , you first

catch a glimpse of the roof, decorated with relief crosses

connected by blind arcades, and the upper part of the solemn

colonnade surrounding the church: The roof still shows traces

of the plaster remains of the restoration efforts of the early

1930's. The tuff, from which the church is carved, glows a

typical deep pink colour in striking contrast to the brownish-

yellow earth and green-leaved trees of the landscape.

Standing in the courtyard you face the largest of the rock-

hewn churches.

It has been cut free from a block of stone 33.7 m. in length,

23.7 m. in width and 11.5 m. in height. It is a noble structure,

standing on its plinth with its pitched roof and surrounding

external columns, somewhat reminiscent of ancient Greek

temple architecture.

Exterior

The low-pitched saddle-backed roof lies directly on the order of

columns, so that there is no entablature as there would be in a

Greek temple. A frieze of round arches in relief decorates the

vertical edges of the roof. The gallery running round the four

sides of the church between the colonnade and the outer wall of

the church itself is only 70 cm wide. While most of the slender

pillars, which are square in cross-section, are still the original

ones some of them had collapsed and have had to be replaced by

new built-up structures. Note the fine sarcelly cross relief on

the slabs of stone which connect the four corner pillars with

adjacent pillars about two thirds of the way up. Traditional

sarcelly crosses like the ones seen here have been copied in

modern buildings in Addis Ababa, e.g., the entrance pillar

stumps of the Municipality.

Interior

Around the high walls of the nave runs a frieze of blind windows

framed by protruding beams at each corner. Along the sides,

the windows are either blind windows with decorations or actual

openings between the "galleries" and the nave. The "galleries"

can be reached from a cell to the left of the narthex. The

doorways inside again exhibit Axumite framework style.

One particular pillar in the centre is covered with a cloth. This

is the "amd" - the symbol of the unity of faith. The priests

explain that Christ touched the pillar when appearing to King

Lalibela in one of his visions. Since that time the past and the

future of the world are written on it. Since man is too weak to

bear the truth revealed by God the pillar is covered.

In the nave the shafts, capitals and corbels of the columns and

pilasters as well as the arches are carved in bas-relief some of

them painted. There is a great variety of crosses.

Paintings proper can be found on the spandrels, the string-

courses above the arches, the area of friezes of the blind

windows and the barrel vault.

# Bet Maskal

The chapel of Bet Maskal(The House Of The Cross) has been

excavated in a bulge in the northern wall of the Bet Maryam

courtyard. It is a broad gallery of 11 m. length and 3.4 m.

width. A row of four pillars divides the space into two aisles

spanned by arcades. The doorways show imitation of monkey-

head framework. Beams of light deflect downwards into the

chapel from two windows, one of them having a swastika design

through which is pierced a Greek cross, while the sanctuary

window opening has a Maltese cross motif. A frieze of arches

between two projecting horizontal courses finishes the facade

on top.

# Bet Danaghel

Bet Danaghel (The House Of The Virgins Or Martyrs). Jutting

out at the south of the Bet Maryam courtyard is the little

chapel of Bet Danaghel (8.6 m. length and 3.6 m. height). This

tiny chapel is connected with one of the most fascinating

legends of Lalibela. Priests will tell you that the chapel was

constructed in honour of maidens martyred under Julian. The

memorial day of the maidens is the 10th of Hedar (November) in

the Ethiopian calendar.

Located just outside the southern wall of the courtyard proper

is the twentieth century memorial to Ras Kassa Darge. Ras

Kassa was the governor of central and northwestern Ethiopia,

prior to the Italian occupation. He died in 1956.

Bet Debre Sina and Bet Golgota with the Selassie Chapel and

the Tomb of Adam

This is the most mysterious complex in Lalibela, housing its

holiest shrine, the Selassie Chapel, and according to the

whispers of the priests - perhaps even the tomb of King Lalibela

himself. While the ancient entrance to this group was probably

from the west, passing the hollowed block of the Tomb of Adam,

the courtyard is now entered from the south, being connected

by the trench leading to the Bet Maryam churches. A side door

leads to the first church, Bet Debre Sina or Bet Mika'el.

# Bet Debre Sina

Bet Debre Sina(House Of Mt. Sinai) displays a proper east-

west orientation and has a raised chancel. The holy of holies is

in the east. Thus, we may assume that it has always been an

independent and separate church. It is a semi-monolithic

creation measuring 9.5 X 8.5 m. and resting on a steep plinth 3

m in height. On three sides it is exposed by excavation to a

trench, the northern side leading to Bet Golgota.

Exterior

The exterior walls are smooth, with two rows of windows. In

the bottom row of the south facade there are window openings

in the shape of key-holes.

Interior

The interior is simple and solemn in atmosphere. It is divided by

pillars into a nave and two aisles with five bays each. Round

arches connect the pillars and pilasters in the walls. Cruciform

in section, the pillars support round arches; their pseudo-

capitals are decorated with Greek crosses in relief, which are

also found on the blind arches and on the ceiling.

# Bet Golgota

Leaving Bet Debre Sina you enter its northern twin church, Bet

Golgota (The House Of Golgotha). Bet Golgota represents the

type of excavated church with one worked facade (the west

face).

Exterior

The facade is smooth and scantily decorated. Piercings are

functional, providing the church with light and air. A few

protruding beams frame the uppermost windows, while the

lower ones, semicircular and cruciform in shape display a few

mouldings only

Yet there are two harmoniously designed window openings in

the southern wall which give light to two shrines, the one on

the left to the "lyasus-Cell" (Cell of Jesus) of Bet GoIgota;

the right-hand one to the Selassie Chapel.

Interior

Entering the church proper you will find that it is divided into

two "naves" by three cruciform pillars that display no

decoration apart from the usual corbels. Flattened arches

connect the pillars with the corresponding pilasters at the wall.

The "Iyasus-Cell" at the east end of the right-hand nave and

the "tomb of Christ", an arched recess in the northeast corner

of the church, add an air of sanctity. The church with the name

of Golgota is dedicated to the passion and Death of the

Saviour.

The church, simple in its architecture, houses, however, some

of the most remarkable pieces of early Christian Ethiopian art:

figurative relieves, rare elsewhere in Ethiopia. The "tomb of

Christ" displays behind a wrought-iron grille a recumbent

figure in high-relief with an angel in low-relief above its head.

The figures of seven saints, mostly larger than life, decorate

arched niches in the walls.

The Selassie Chapel

From Bet Golgota a doorway at the east end of the right-hand

nave next of the one leading to the "Iyasus-Cell" opens on to

the Selassie Chapel - the place of greatest sanctity in Lalibela.

A curtain covering two thirds of the wall will offer you only a

glimpse inside the shrine. The ribs decorating the ceiling in the

shape of a cross might also be discernible. This holy place is

rarely open even to the priests themselves, and very few

visitors have been permitted to enter it.

The shrine is completely imprisoned in the rock. A single pillar

supports the roof with its barrel-vault in the rear section and

flat-arch above the platform with the three monolithic altars.

This pillar, which has no base, rises up more than five metres to

the apex of the vault.

# The Tomb of Adam

Impressive in its simplicity, a huge square block of stone stands

in a deep trench in front of the western face of Bet Golgota.

This is the Tomb of Adam. The block has been hollowed out, the

ground floor serving as the western entrance to the first

group of churches. The upper floor houses a hermit's cell. Again

it is a cross that is the only decoration of this "tomb ". The

large opening in the eastern wall provides light for the cell and

has the shape of a harmonious croix pattee with flat-pitched

finials.

# The Second Group of Churches

This second group comprises from east to west, the churches

and sanctuaries of Bet Emanuel, Bet Mercurios, Bet Abba

Libanos, the Chapel of Bet Lehem and Bet Gabriel-Rufa'el.

Approaching the town of Roha-Lalibela from the south, you will

see, south of the river Jordan, a bastion of red tuff severed

from the rock plateau in the north, east and south by a broad

artificial outer trench, eleven metres deep. Another deep

central trench cuts this area into two parts, leaving at its end

a cone-shaped hill. An old entrance led from this central trench

to the sanctuaries mainly by way of narrow subterranean

passages. The 'Original function of this complex of churches

has not yet been clarified. Two of them were certainly planned

as such, Bet Emanuel and Bet Abba Libanos. They have a proper

church plan and are oriented to the east.

# Bet Emanuel

Art historians consider Bet Emanuel to be the finest and most

impressive church in Lalibela. Looked at from above, its mighty,

flat- pitched roof can be seen glistening from the rock cradle

that houses the church. It is the only true monolithic structure

of this group, carefully sculptured from a block 18 X 12 X 12 m.

The church offers an almost classic example of Axumite style

despite the fact that the floor and side plans follow the true

basilica pattern with a proper east-west orientation.

Exterior

Entering the courtyard you will see this fascinating church on

its stepped platform shining in the bright red colour of the

Lalibela tuff. The imitation of Axumite wood and stone

construction is striking, its walls built in horizontal and

vertical bands, alternately recessed and projecting. At the

three entrances, in front of which the stepped platform widens

into landings, the church has a framework of protruding

beams; genuine monkey-heads are missing. There are three

rows of windows, the bottom and top ones having frames with

corner posts. The bottom windows are pierced in that shape of

straight Greek crosses; those in the top row have no fillings.

Interior

Inside you will find the true basilica plan: aisles and a mighty

vaulted nave. Yet Axumite style is here again: the in-

dentations in the outside walls, in which all the doors and

windows are placed, reflect the internal division, as do the

mouldings, the number of aisles and bays, the position of the

galleries and the height of the vault. In the hall there are four

complete and four three-sided pillars. A rock staircase leads

from a side room by the main entrance to a second storey, here

little rock chambers surround the hall. The striking interior

feature is the double frieze of blind windows in the vaulted

nave, the lower frieze being purely ornamental, the upper one

consisting of windows alternating with decorated areas. In the

rock floor of the southern aisle a hole opens into a long,

subterranean tunnel leading to neighbouring Bet Mercurios.

Chambers and cavities for sacred bees in the outer wall of the

courtyard are reminder of the bees that prophesied kingship to

Lalibela. Some of the chambers, however, are the graves of

monks and pilgrims who wanted to be buried in the "holy city. In

this outer wall two further underground passages have been

discovered leading to Bet Mercurios.

# Bet Mercurios

The church is neither orientated nor conventionally planned.

The part serving today as a church occupies the eastern end of

a subterranean hall which opens to a courtyard. The interior

appears to be void of decoration although there is a fine mural

on the lower pan of a pillar, depicting six kings or saints in

royal apparel, holding in their hands beautifully shaped hand-

crosses, reminiscent of late Gondarene processional crosses.

Rich paintings once adorned the church but for preservation

they have been removed and are now to be seen in the National

Museum in Addis Ababa.

# Bet Abba Libanos

Lalibela's wife, Maskal Kebra, with the help of angels, is said to

have created this church in one night. It is dedicated to one of

the most famous monastic saints of the Ethiopian Church, Abba

Libanos.

Bet Abba Libanos (The House Of Abba Ubanos)

Exterior

The facade is reminiscent of Axumite architecture, although

here - unlike Bet Emanuel - the horizontal bands are missing.

It is a good example of a cave church. The roof is not

separated from the rock, but the other three sides are

detached by a tunnel.

Interior

The aisles and the nave of the church run exactly from east to

west. The priests will tell you that there is a "little light'; in

the middle of the altar-wall shining day and night "by its own

power: Conjectures by visitors run from "a piece of

phosphorescent stone" to "a hole in the wall" trying to give a

more "natural" explanation and at the same time robbing the

phenomenon" of the charm of its mystery.

Bet Lehem (The Chapel Of Bethlehem)

You may reach Bet Lehem by a passageway 50 m. long that

starts at the right-hand aisle of Bet Emanuel, and passes Bet

Mercurios and the courtyard of Abba Libanos. The shrine has

been shaped into a cone by the central trench: the tunnel still

winds up in spiral form within the hill and ends in a low, round

room. A tree-trunk in the room serves as a central pillar.

The original function of this shrine is not known. Visitors may

not be allowed to enter the interior of Bet Lehem.

Bet Gabriel-Rufa'el (The House of Gabriel And Raphael Or The

House of the Archangels)

Bet Gabriel-Rufa’el (The House Of Gabriel And Raphael Or The

House Of The Archangels). This church is more difficult to

describe in character and situation than the others. Its

disorientation and unusual plan suggest that it was originally

not intended to serve as a church. Instead, the floor plan is

labyrinthine: three angular halls with pillars and pilasters are

squeezed between two courtyards. The most impressive part of

the church is the monumental facade.

The church is usually entered from the top of the rock near Bet

Emanuel in the east, by a small bridge of logs leading over the

central trench.

You may also approach from the east by a series of small

tunnels, a gallery like passage and another log bridge 10 m,

above the courtyard.

The triangular floor of the northern courtyard is enclosed by

walls whence, high up, the facade of the church and the gallery

opposite can be seen. Down in the courtyard there is a well and

an underground cistern. Steps lead down to a subterranean

hall of pillars, where the water sinks or rises, according to the

dry and rainy seasons.

Exterior

The monumental front of the church can only be properly

examined from the opposite gallery in the north. This truly

royal façade is another example of a survival of the Axumite

style; pilasters and niches give the impression of breaking the

line of the wall into projections and the niches themselves.

Interior

The interior of the church, which is far smaller than the

exterior suggests, is carefully hollowed out forming a hall

divided by pillars. Three straight Latin crosses are incised into

the wall, the only decoration discernible.

The floor in the church has a number of partly covered holes of

various sizes which are said to go down to great depth. Drains

run across the floor and little grooves surround the holes.

# Bet Giorgis

The monolithic Bet Giorgis - dedicated to the national saint of

Ethiopia is isolated from the other two groups of churches. It

is located in the southwest of the village on a sloping rock

terrace. In its deep pit with perpendicular walls it can only be

reached through a tunnel which is entered from some distance

away through a trench. Small round caves and chambers have

been found in the walls of the courtyard graves for pious

pilgrims and monks.

The church is described as Lalibela's "most elegant" and

"refined" in its architecture and stonemasonry. Although its

floor plan is of a cross with nearly equal arms the church is

properly orientated, the main entrance being in the west, the

holy of holies in the east.

Exterior

Like a tower the cruciform church cut out of the pink tuff rises

from its triple-stepped platform, the regularity of which is

broken only by the landings in front of the three doorways in

the west, north and south. The roof decoration, often

represented as the symbol of the Lalibela monuments on

photographs and postcards, is a relief of three equilateral

Greek crosses inside each other. On the north, south and west

sides, gutters and spouts drain the water from the roof.

One of the more sophisticated details of Bet Giorgis is that the

wall thickness increases step by step downwards but that the

increase is cleverly hidden by the horizontal bands of mouldings

on the exterior walls.

# Interior

Despite the orientation you will find that the interior of the

church follows the cruciform floor plan of the church. There

are no genuine pillars; instead four three-sided pilasters with.

corbels support the arches. The dome above the sanctuary in

the eastern arm of the church is decorated with a croix pattee

in relief, while the flat ceiling of the other arms display a

straight relief cross: The ceiling of the intersection is left

without decoration.

# Other Churches Near Lalibela

There are several other churches in the vicinity :

the churches of the Bilbala district, including the beautiful built

up cave church of Yemrehanna Krestos, the tiny rock church

Arbatu Entzessa, Bilbala Gioris and Bilbala Cherqos. Also the

church of Sarsana Mika'el.

Yemrehanna Krestos

This remarkable church is located six hours by foot and mule to

the northeast of Lalibela, on the mountain ridge the peak of

which is Abuna Yosef. It is a built-up cave church in Axumite

wood and stone construction. The church has become famous

for the decoration of its interior. The flat-span roof displays

paneling richly adorned with .geometrical designs. The ceiling

over the sanctuary is domed and displays carvings and

paintings. The founder of the church is said to have been King

Yemrehanna Krestos, a predecessor of King Lalibela.

Arbatu Entzessa

can be reached from Yemrehanna Krestos proceeding to the

southwest. This tiny monolithic sanctuary is detached from the

surrounding rock on two sides. It shows remains of old

ornaments; pillars, capitals and doors are chiselled in Axumite

style. The name suggests that the church is dedicated to the

"four beasts", symbols of the Four Evangelists following the

vision of St. John. The Ethiopian synaxarium dedicates the 8th

of Hedar (November) to these four beasts.

Bilbala. Giorgis

Proceeding from Arbatu Entzessa to the west you find Bilbala

Giorgis, of which only the facade is visible. The other sides are

surrounded by a tunnel: the roof is not separated from the

rock. A frieze with emblems of the vault of heaven decorates

the facade. Legend says that holy bees live under the roof rock

in niches.

Bilbala Cherqos

Bilbala Cherqos. West of Bilbala Giorgis is this semi-monolithic

church, one day's travel by mule to the northwest of Lalibela.

The church is properly orientated and has been worked from a

piece tuff from east to west. The careful stone masonry on the

facade is reminiscent of the facade of Bet Gabriel-Rufa'el.

Sarsana Mikaél

The tiny monolithic church lies in a grove of euphorbia trees in

the Sarsana plains and is scarcely visible in its bed of rock.

Through a passage you reach a deep trench running round the

church. Three sides are exposed revealing influences of the

Axumite style.

Crosses In Lalibela

The two basic types are the Greek cross, which has equal

straight arms, and the Latin cross, which has straight arms

with the inferior one longer than the other three. These have

been developed into a great number of very elaborate and

artistic designs.

The favourite form in Ethiopia is the croix pattee -a Greek

cross with flaring arms - and its rich variations.

In the Zagwe sphere a special kind of elongated processional

cross has been developed.

Lalibela crosses very often have bird heads at the sides and

have a crown of stylized human figures as symbols of the

twelve apostles; the finial cross then represents Christ. Birds

(doves) are often depicted together with the cross.

The swastika shapes found in Lalibela should not be confused

with the old sun symbol found for example in Europe and in

India. The Lalibela swastikas were developed from the Greek

cross with bent arms and were often combined to form

interwoven patterns as was the case in Christian art and in

the Middle Ages.

The priests have developed a rich symbolism, every pattern

having a different meaning. Three- tipped crosses refer to the

Trinity; five incised circles or indentations represent the

wounds of Christ. However, these decorative patterns often

are interpreted differently according to the schooling of the

individual priest.

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cruise like travelling is covered by rental insurance as

well.

The legend of Lalibela

Ever since the first European to describe the rock churches of

Lalibela, Francisco Alvarez, came to this holy city between 1521

and 1525, travellers have tried to put into words their

experiences. Praising it as a “New Jerusalem”, a “New

Golgotha”, the “Christian Citadel in the Mountains of Wondrous

Ethiopia”. The inhabitants of the monastic township of Roha-

Lalibela in Lasta, province of Wollo, dwelling in two storeyed

circular huts with dry stonewalls, are unable to believe that

the rock churches are entirely made by man. They ascribe their

creation to one of the last kings of the Zagwe dynasty,

Lalibela, who reigned about 1200 A.D.

The Zagwe dynasty had come to power in the eleventh century,

one hundred years after Queen Judith, a ferocious woman

warrior had led her tribes up from the Semyen mountains to

destroy Axum, the capital of the ancient Ethiopian empire in

the north.

The charming Ethiopian folklore pictures telling the story of

King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, which are sold in Addis

Ababa, give a popular version of how not only the dynasty of

ancient Axum (and present day Ethiopia) descended from King

Solomon, but also the medieval Zagwe dynasty. The Queen of

Sheba gave birth to Menelik, who became the first King of

Ethiopia. But the handmaid of the Queen, too, gave birth to a

son whose father was King Solomon, and her son was the

ancestor of the Zagwe dynasty.

The Zagwe kings ruled until the thirteenth century, when a

famous priest, Tekla Haymanot, persuaded them to abdicate in

favour of a descendant of the old Axumite Solomonic dynasty.

However, according to legend before the throne of Ethiopia was

restored to its rightful rulers, upon command of God and with

the help of angels, Lalibela’s pious zeal converted the royal

residence of the Zagwe in the town of Roha in to a prayer of

stone.

The Ethiopian Church later canonized him and changed the name

of Roha to Lalibela. Roha, the centre of worldly might, became

Lalibela the holy city; pilgrims to Lalibela shared the same

blessings as pilgrims to Jerusalem, while the focus of political

power drifted to the south, to the region of Shoa. Legends

flower in Lalibela, and it is also according to legend that

Lalibela grew up in Roha, where his brother was king. It is said

that bees prophesied his future greatness, social advance and

coming riches. The king, made jealous by these prophecies about

his brother tried to poison him, but the poison merely cast

Lalibela into a death like sleep for three days. During these

three days an angel carried his soul to heaven to show him the

churches which he was to build. Returned once more to earth he

withdrew into the wilderness then took a wife upon God’s

command with the name of Maskal Kebra (Exalted Cross) and

flew with an angel to Jerusalem. Christ himself ordered the

king to abdicate in favour of Lalibela. Anointed king under the

throne name Gare Maskal (Servant of the Cross) Lalibela, living

himself an even more severe monastic life than before, carried

out the construction of the churches. Angels worked side by

side with the stone masons, and within twenty four years the

entire work was completed.