## Lake Tana, Dallol, Blue nile falls, Coffee, Endemic animals, Karo/Omo valley tribes, Religious festivals

## Addis Ababa

Since its establishment in1886, Addis Ababa (Amharic: አዲስአበባ) has always seemed like a magical portal, a gateway to another world. For the rural masses of [Ethiopia](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia) it was, and is, a city whose streets are paved in gold; and for a foreign visitor, the portal of Addis Ababa is at the verge of an ancient and mystical world.

For both these groups, Addis – Africa’s fourth-largest city and its diplomatic capital – is a place of contrasts: the shepherd from the countryside bringing his flock to a city market; the city priest with the business investments; the glossy nightclubs with the country-girl prostitutes. Despite this merging of worlds, many foreign visitors try to transit Addis as quickly as possible. But take note: by skipping out on the contradictions of this happening city you run the risk of failing to understand [Ethiopia](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia) altogether.

## Lalibela

I am weary of writing more about these buildings, because it seems to me that I shall not be believed if I write more…but swear I by God in Whose power I am, that all that is written is the truth, and there is much more than what I have written, and I have left it that they may not tax me with its being falsehood.

*Francisco Alvares (early 16th-century Portuguese writer) from* Ho Preste Joam das Indias: Verdadera informa-cam das terras do Preste Joam *(1540)*

Lalibela is history and mystery frozen in stone, its soul alive with the rites and awe of Christianity at its most ancient and unbending. No matter what you’ve heard about Lalibela, no matter how many pictures you’ve seen of its breathtaking rock-hewn churches, nothing can prepare you for the reality of seeing it for yourself. It’s not only a World Heritage Site, but truly a world wonder. Spending a night vigil here during one of the big religious festivals, when white-robed pilgrims in their hundreds crowd the courtyards of the churches, is to witness Christianity in its most raw and powerful form. Unfortunately, for both independent travellers and the locals who benefit from tourism, the new Birr1000 (tripled from the previous Birr350) entry fee means that some people now choose not to come here.

With its cobblestone streets, distant views, good food and lack of cars, the town itself is a pleasant surprise.

## Simien Mountains National Park

No matter how you look at them, the Simien Mountains are awesome. This massive plateau, riven with gullies and pinnacles, offers tough but immensely rewarding trekking along the ridge that falls sheer to the plains far below. It’s not just the scenery (and altitude) that will leave you speechless, but also the excitement of sitting among a group of gelada monkeys or watching magnificent walia ibex joust on rock ledges. Whether you come for a stroll or a two-week trek, the Simiens make a great companion to the Historical Circuit’s monument viewing.

Thanks to the combination of scenery and wildlife, the park is a World Heritage Site. However, it’s long been on the World Heritage in Danger list due to the large number of people living in the park and the local authorities’ lack of serious action on the problem. Despite this, as one of Africa’s most beautiful ranges, the Simiens aren’t to be missed.

## Gondar

It’s not what Gonder is, but what Gonder was that’s so enthralling. The city lies in a bowl of hills where tall trees shelter tin-roofed stone houses, but rising above these, and standing proud through the centuries, are the walls of castles bathed in blood and painted in the pomp of royalty. Often called the Camelot of [Africa](http://lonelyplanet.com/africa), this description does the royal city a disservice: Camelot is legend, whereas Gonder is reality.

Surrounded by fertile land and lying at the crossroads of three major caravan routes, it’s easy to understand why Emperor Fasiladas (reigned 1632–67) made Gonder his capital in 1636. To the southwest lay rich sources of gold, civet, ivory and slaves, to the northeast lay Massawa and access to the Red Sea, and to the northwest lay [Sudan](http://lonelyplanet.com/sudan) and [Egypt](http://lonelyplanet.com/egypt).

At the time of Fasiladas’ death, Gonder’s population already exceeded 65,000 and its wealth and splendour had become legendary. Drifting through the old palaces, banqueting halls and former gardens, it’s not difficult to imagine the courtly pageantry, ceremony and intrigue that went on here.

The city flourished as a capital for well over a century before infighting severely weakened the kingdom. In the 1880s what remained of Gonder was extensively looted by the Sudanese Dervishes. Despite this, and further damage sustained by British bombs during the liberation campaign of 1941, much of Gonder remains intact.

Although Gonder is fairly spread out, it’s still a great place to navigate on foot. The Italian-built piazza marks the centre of town and packs in most shops and services travellers need. The Royal Enclosure is just south of the piazza while the road leading north is dotted with restaurants and hotels.

## Axum

Aksum is a riddle waiting to be solved. Did the queen of Sheba really call the town’s dusty streets home? Does the very same Ark of the Covenant that holds Moses’ 10 Commandments reside in a small Aksum chapel? Are there still secret hordes of treasure hidden inside undiscovered tombs? And what exactly do those famous stelae signify?

Dr Neville Chittick once described Aksum (often incorrectly spelled Axum) as ‘the last of the great civilizations of Antiquity to be revealed to modern knowledge’. Yet even today, despite being one of the most important ancient sites in sub-Saharan Africa, this Unesco World Heritage Site has revealed only a tiny fraction of its secrets, and an exploration of its ruined tombs and palaces is sure to light a spark of excitement.

Aksum is more than just a collection of lifeless ruins, though. Proudly Tigrian, the town remains rural at heart and has a vibrancy, life and continuing national importance very rarely found at ancient sites. Pilgrims still journey here in the thousands to pay homage at its great churches and what they have no doubt is the magical [Ark of the Covenant](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/northern-ethiopia/aksum/sights/landmarks-monuments/ark-covenant).

## Dire Dawa

The fourth-most populous city in [Ethiopia](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia), Dire Dawa usually elicits strong reactions. We think its colourful storefront, tree-lined streets, neat squares, and foreign influence (look for Arab, French, Italian and Greek styles in some of the architecture and design) are a refreshing change from the filthy disorder and lack of character in most Ethiopian towns. Others just consider it a more vibrant version of tedium.

Dire Dawa is made up of two distinct settlements, divided by the trash-strewn DechatuWadi (seasonal river). Lying to the north and west is the European-influenced ‘new town’ known as Kezira. To the east is the more colourful ‘old town’, known as Megala, which has a distinctly Muslim (and, coincidently, a slightly Mexican) feel.

## Dallol (volcano)

The term *Dallol* was coined by the [Afar people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afar_people) and means dissolution or disintegration describing a landscape made up of green acid ponds ([pH](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PH)-values less than 1) [iron oxide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_oxide), [sulfur](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sulfur) and salt desert plains. The area resembles the hot springs areas of [Yellowstone Park](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellowstone_Park).

The Dallol volcano, or rather the Dallol hydrothermal field is located in a remote part of the northern Danakil Depression in NE Ethiopia. It is the lowest known sub-aerial volcanic area in the world.   
Dallol is one of the world's most spectacular landscape: a vast area of uplifted thick salt deposits affected by intense fumarolic activity, probably caused by an active volcanic system beneath several kilometers of evaporation salt deposits.   
Dallol is said to be the hottest place on the planet, with average annual temperatures well above 30 deg C.   
The area commonly referred to Dallol volcano contains the approx. 1.5 x 3 km wide Dallol "mountain" (rising about 50 m above the great salt lake) near the border with Eritrea, and nearby warm springs including the Yellow Lake, the Black Mountain with the Blue Lake, said to be an explosion crater from a hydrothermal eruption in 1926.   
Dallol is famous for its hot brine, and multicolored white, pink, red, yellow, green, gray and black salt deposits, hot springs and miniature geysers. These bizarre structures form in a complex interaction of solution and recrystallization processes driven by hydrothermal waters and rapid evaporation.

## Harar

##### The town of Harar dates from before the thirteenth century. Its strategic location between the coastal lowlands and central highlands led to its development as an important centre of Islamic culture and commerce. A period of instability led to a loss of its traditional power between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries but it regained its importance in the following century.

World Heritage–listed Harar is a place apart. With its 368 alleyways squeezed into just 1 sq km, it’s more reminiscent of [Fez](http://lonelyplanet.com/morocco/the-mediterranean-coast-and-the-rif/fes) in [Morocco](http://lonelyplanet.com/morocco) than any other city in the Horn. Its countless mosques and shrines, animated markets, crumbling walls and charming people will make you feel as if you’ve floated right out of the 21st century. It’s the east’s most memorable sight and shouldn’t be missed. And, as if that wasn’t enough, there are many chances to get up-close and personal with wild hyenas. It’s a rare traveller who doesn’t enjoy themselves here.

## The Lower Omo Valley

The villages of the Lower Omo Valley are home to some of Africa’s most fascinating ethnic groups and a trip here represents a unique chance for people to encounter a culture markedly different from their own. Whether it’s wandering through traditional Daasanach villages, watching Hamer people performing a Jumping of the Bulls ceremony or seeing the Mursi’s mind-blowing lip plates, your visit here will stick with you for a lifetime. This is quite a beautiful region, too. The landscape is diverse, ranging from dry, open savannah plains to forests in the high hills and along the Omo and Mago Rivers. The former meanders for nearly 800km, from southwest of [Addis Ababa](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/addis-ababa) all the way to Lake Turkana on the Kenyan border.

South Omo, as it’s also known, is not a land frozen in time as many visitors with visions of *National Geographic* articles imagine it, though ancient traditions still form the backbone of daily life. But perhaps not for much longer. Outside factors such as huge hydroelectric dams, sugarcane and palm oil plantations, road construction, oil exploration and laws aiming to ‘civilise’ the people (like outlawing stick fighting) are forcing rapid change. Tourism, though not without its problems, is about the last stabilising influence on the tribal culture because tourists are generally interested in and respectful of it.

Decent roads allow visits all year, though note that even just one day of rain (April, May and October are the wettest months) can render some roads south of the main Konso–Jinka route temporarily impassable due to both mud and lack of bridges. Most of the park is below 500m elevation, so temperatures can soar over 40°C, but some nights get cool enough to necessitate a light jacket. For a cultural insight into the region, the best time to visit is January to April when many celebrations take place, including marriages and initiation ceremonies. The driest period (January and February) increases the odds of animal sightings in Mago National Park.

The towns featured here are completely ordinary, with modern buildings that look no different from elsewhere in the country because they were built and populated mostly by Ethiopians from elsewhere in the country. Tribal peoples generally only visit on market days and you should try to coincide with as many markets as you can. Likewise, the surrounding villages have few people on the market days, at least until late afternoon when they return home.

Accommodation is mostly rough and ridiculously overpriced. Even the ‘luxury’ places in [Turmi](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/turmi) and Jinka are prone to electricity (and sometimes water) failures. Generators usually only run from 6pm to 10pm. Reservations in [Jinka](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/jinka) and [Turmi](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/turmi) are recommended for January to February and September to December.

## Rock-hewn Churches of Tigray

The landscapes of northern Tigray are almost fairytale-like. The luminous light bathes scattered sharp peaks that rise high into the sky out of a sandy, rolling semidesert. The stratified plateaus, particularly between Dugem and Megab in the Gheralta region lead to inevitable comparisons with the USA’s desert southwest.

And the 120-odd churches are as intriguing as the landscape is beautiful. Very different from the more famous monolithic (carved out of the ground and only left attached to the earth at the base) churches of [Lalibela](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/northern-ethiopia/lalibela), the Tigrayan churches are generally semimonolithic (only partially separated from the host rock) or built into pre-existing caves. Most sit high atop cliffs and the improbable perches add to their attraction. To approach these hidden galleries after a long sweaty and sometimes slightly scary slog makes for a very rewarding excursion. And beyond a few famous churches, you’ll likely get to explore on your own, even in the high season.

## Bale Mountains National Park

More than any other park in [Ethiopia](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia), this soon-to-be World Heritage site is known for its wildlife, but it’s a very beautiful place, too. As you approach from [Dodola](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/dodola-around), ridges to the east are punctuated with fortress-like escarpments, standing out from the gentler, rounded rock pinnacles to the north, and the great wildlife watching commences right from the start when the road cuts through the Gaysay Grassland in the valley between them, which is home to the densest concentration of large mammals in [Ethiopia](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia).

Up in the hills, accessible by footpath and road, are deep gorges, alpine lakes, rushing streams, several waterfalls, lava flows and views that go on almost forever. If it weren’t located in such a remote corner of the country it would probably be as popular as the Simien Mountains.

## Danakil Depression

Bubbling volcanoes light up the night sky, sulphurous mounds of yellow contort into otherworldly shapes, and mirages of camels cross lakes of salt. Lying 100m and more below sea level, the Danakil Depression is about the hottest and most inhospitable place on Earth. In fact it’s so surreal that it doesn’t feel like part of Earth at all. If you want genuine, raw adventure, then few corners of the globe can match this overwhelming wilderness. But come prepared because with temperatures frequently saying hello to 50°C and appalling ‘roads’, visiting this region is more an expedition than a tour.

Trips here can be organised through tour operators in [Addis Ababa](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/addis-ababa) or Mekele. The [Mekele](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/mekele) companies are in the habit of joining travellers together into large groups and you can usually just show up and find a trip departing in a day or two. The going rate in [Mekele](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/mekele) is US$500 per day with a big enough group, but all prices are negotiable. Four-day tours visiting Irta’ale, Dallol and Lake Asale are the norm. You can also add one day and add Lake Afdera to the itinerary or do only Dallol in two days or just Irta’ale in three. Some companies will take you year-round, but between July and early October there’s a good chance of flooding and you may not be able to make it to Irta’ale or Lake Afdera.

The main base is the half-village, half-tourist camp of Hamedela where you’ll sleep outdoors or inside simple shelters against the wind, if necessary. Tours starting in Addis usually enter or exit from the south via Serdo, with formalities handled in Semera. From the [Mekele](http://lonelyplanet.com/ethiopia/mekele) side, registration and hiring of security is done in Berhale. Private travel is no longer allowed.

This is a largely lawless area and there have been killings and kidnappings in recent years, so do check the situation carefully before going. But the climate is a more serious concern: people with heart conditions shouldn’t visit and everyone should heed signs of heat exhaustion.