

Ethiopia – The Simien Mountains

Known as 'The Roof of Africa', Ethiopia is a land of surprises, with superb trekking and a rich cultural heritage. From the capital, Addis Ababa, we fly north to Gondar, with its astonishing array of medieval churches and castles. The real journey begins a few hours drive away, where we enter into the spectacular Simien Mountains, which comprise several high plateau bounded by gigantic eroded precipices. Seven days of trekking lead us through a land of natural wonders and of rare wildlife, including the Simien Red Fox, the striking Gelada Baboon and the majestic Lammergeyer. Passing several villages, notable for their carefully tended farmland and friendly people, the trek reaches its climax at the summit of Ras Dashen, 4533m, where the views extend northwards to Eritrea.

Spending time with the people of Ethiopia is one of the great delights of travelling in this country. With over eighty different people groups and languages, you will encounter a variety of cultures, and religion is a constant and central feature of Ethiopian society. Christianity is said to have reached Ethiopia soon after the death of Christ and the traditions and festivals that take place are deeply rooted.

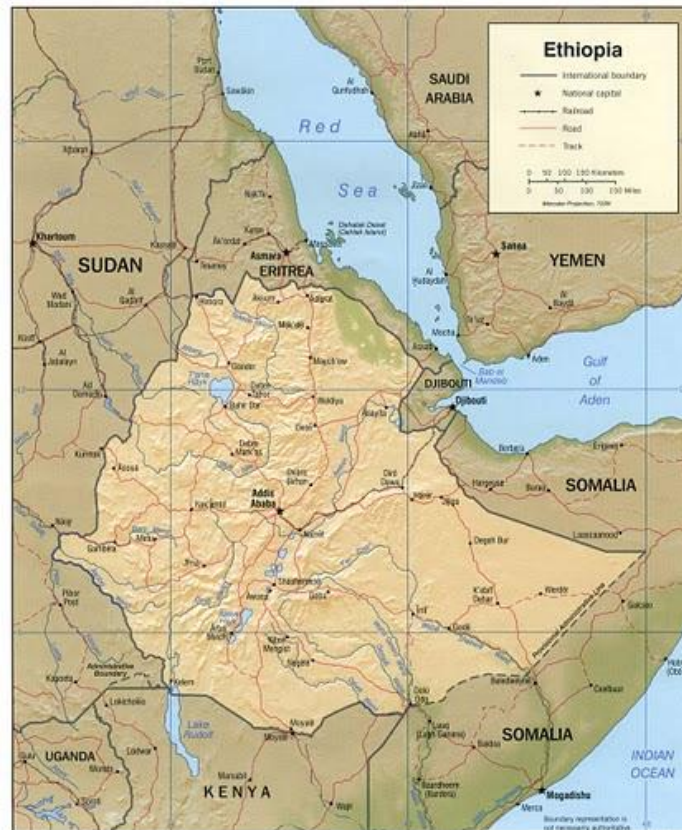
After the trek we make a 3-day visit to Lalibela, with its collection of amazing Rock Hewn Churches, carved deep into the solid rock.

This holiday is an exceptional adventure and will leave a lasting impact.



Detailed Itinerary: 20th Oct – 2nd Nov 2011

Day	Date	Activity	Hotel
1 - Thur	20 Oct	Arrival day in Addis (main group land 02.00am on the 21 st)	Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa, 2400m
2 - Fri	21 Oct	City tour or visit to Entoto Hills	Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa
3 - Sat	22 Oct	Early flight to Gondar, city tour to visit castles and churches	Goha Hotel, Gondar, 2300m
4 - Sun	23 Oct	Transfer to Buyit Ras, begin 7 day trek	Sankabar Camp, 3200m
5 - Mon	24 Oct	Steeper climb via waterfall and village to reach the plateau ridge	Geech Camp, 3600m
6 - Tues	25 Oct	First summit, Imet Gogo, 3926m, and dramatic ridge walk	Chenek Camp, 3620m
7 - Wed	26 Oct	Optional summit of Bwahit, and long descent and climb	Ambiko Camp, 3200m
8 - Thur	27 Oct	Longest day to the roof of Ethiopia, 4543m	Ambiko Camp, 3200m
9 - Fri	28 Oct	Traverse through fields and passes to reach a small village. Local interaction and house visit.	Arquaziye Camp, 3600m
10 - Sat	29 Oct	Final half day to Chenek, drive to Gondar	Goha Hotel, Gondar
11 - Sun	30 Oct	Fly to Lalibela, visit some rock hewn churches	Jerusalem Hotel, Lalibela
12 - Mon	31 Oct	Hike up to St Mary's Church in the hills; visit more rock hewn churches	Jerusalem Hotel, Lalibela
13 - Tues	01 Nov	Fly to Addis, rest of day free to explore	Ghion Hotel, Addis
14 - Wed	02 Nov	Fly home	



Day 1: Thursday 20th October 2011

Arrive in your own time. (Main group depart from London on British Midland flight BD913, and arrive in Addis Ababa at 02.00am on the 21st Oct.) Visas can be purchased on arrival, and you will be met and transferred to the city hotel.

Overnight: Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa

Day 2: Friday 21st October 2011

Today will be a leisurely introduction to Ethiopia. We will make a sightseeing tour to the Ethnographic Museum and the Church of the Trinity where Haile Selassie's remains lie; or we may make a tour to the surrounding Entoto Hills where the city of Addis was originally settled. Addis is situated at 2200m, so we will begin to acclimatize here.

Overnight: Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa (B, D)

Day 3: Saturday 22nd October 2011

Depart on an early flight north to Gondar, former capital of Ethiopia, situated at 2300m. The city was founded by Emperor Fasilidas around 1635. We visit the medieval-looking castles, built in the walled Royal Enclosure in the 17th and 18th centuries by several generations of Ethiopia's kings. Gondar has dozens of churches, the most important being Debre Berhan Selassie (Trinity Church of the Mountain of Light), with its famed ceiling painting of the winged heads of 80 Ethiopian cherubs. Nearby is the bathhouse of Fasil where thousands of Ethiopians celebrate Timkat festival every January. Our hotel is up on a cliff top with wonderful views overlooking the town.

Overnight: Goha Hotel, Gondar (B, L, D)

Day 4: Sunday 23rd October 2011

We drive the scenic road 105km to the small market town of Debark, 2700m, close to the boundary of the Simien Mountains National Park. Its colourful and busy market area is surrounded by corrugated-iron roofed buildings. There is some time to look around as preparations are made at the park headquarters nearby. We continue driving to the real entry to the park at Buyit Ras, passing carefully tended fields, open pasture with grazing horses, stands of trees and distant rocky peaks.

The trek starts at an altitude of 2900m, and we walk gently for about 4 hrs to reach our first camp called Sankaber at 3200m. We may be lucky enough to spot our first lammergeiers and gelada baboons of the trip. The 3 nights already spent in Ethiopia will have helped us to adjust to the higher elevations, and the trek will be taken slowly to aid acclimatization, as well as allowing time to take in the surroundings.

Overnight: Sankaber Camp (B, L, D)

Day 5: Monday 24th October 2011

From camp we descend in to the Kebaw Valley and begin the climb up the other side, making a short diversion to see one of the most impressive sights: a waterfall from the Jinbar River that plummets 500m to the bottom of the gorge. On the left-hand side the land rises up steeply to a high plateau and there are eroded pinnacles and steep cliffs, the home of the gelada baboons, ibex and Egyptian vultures. There is a good trail up, which we may be sharing with the locals travelling between their villages. After fording the Jinbar River we climb through fields of barley to reach Geech Village at 3550m, a cluster of thatched-roofed huts and enclosures, situated on an open hillside with scattered groups of giant lobelias. There may be time to stop off at one of the village houses before we continue to the campsite above the village, situated on a huge open ridge. As an optional afternoon stroll, the viewpoint at Kadadit (hole in the rock) is 20 minutes away to the north. However there are a few longer days coming up, so it is also recommended to relax at this time. We can expect to be visited at camp by curious bands of children and (in the night) by hyenas.

Overnight: Geech Camp (B, L, D)

Day 6: Tuesday 25th October 2011

The first two hours today are spent hiking to one of the finest viewpoints in the area, the promontory and small peak known as Imetgogo at 3926m. This is actually a spur protruding from the escarpment and is reached after a couple of hours' pleasant walking. The last part of the ridge leads by way of an easy scramble to the summit. From here there are outstanding views of the gorge and mountain range and it is easy to understand why the striking formations have been described as 'the chess pieces of the Gods'.

We should get our first glimpse of Ras Dashen from here and we can see clearly our route for the coming days. We should see more of seeing the indigenous Gelada, also known as the 'bleeding heart' Baboon or Lion monkey. The Gelada is in fact neither baboon nor monkey, but the last remaining species of a branch of high altitude, grass-eating primates that have all but vanished from the face of the earth.

From the summit we retrace our steps and then branch off, descending and then climbing again to reach the edge of the escarpment which leads to a long summit called Inatye, 4070m. The dramatic views continue all the way down to our campsite at Chenek, 3620m. From the camp there are superb views across the escarpment. Total time today is about 9 hrs.

Overnight: Chenek Camp (B, L, D)

Day 7: Wednesday 26th October 2011

A hard and memorable day of ascents and descents. We should see birds such as the Ground Scaper Thrush, Siskins, Falcons and Kestrel, and we have our best chance of sighting the rare and endangered Walia Ibex, a species that can be found only in this Park. From Chenek we climb to a pass at 4200m where there are two route options. The harder choice is to climb to Bwahit Peak, 4430m, and the second peak in the region, which takes a further hour. We take a different route to descend, and two trails meet again lower down. For those not going to the summit, the trail from the pass leads down into an intensively farmed valley, where oxen are still used to draw the plough. We pass through the village of Chiro Leba, where we may be able to visit a school and clinic if open, and drop down to the Meshah River at 2850m, before climbing steeply to the village of Ambiko at 3200m, our base for the next two nights. Today's trek takes about 7-10 hrs.

Overnight: Ambiko Camp (B, L, D)

Day 8: Thursday 27th October 2011

A very early start as the return trip to Ras Dashen takes 11-12 hrs and is our longest day. We climb slowly and steadily through farmlands, passing the tiny, perched village of Mizma, then through an area of open pasture where there are herds of cattle, sheep with their attendant herdsmen, and Giant Lobelia forest. Ethiopia's highest mountain looms above and has three peaks, the highest of which is the middle one, 4543m. Close to the top we reach steeper, rocky ground and there is a short and fun scramble to the summit. After enjoying the extensive views we descend by the same route to our campsite for a celebration, or possibly to rest.

Overnight: Ambiko Camp (B,L,D)

Day 9: Friday 28th October 2011

Another wonderful day, and not as difficult as the previous one, although still 8 hrs. From Ambiko we trek through fields and small settlements on a undulating trail, crossing two passes, and eventually arriving at the village of Arquaziye, 3600m, where we may be able to interact with the people, visit the market, and take coffee in a local house. This is our final camp so a party may be in order!

Overnight: Arquaziye Camp (B, L, D)

Day 10: Saturday 29th October 2011

A final trekking day in the sensational Simien Mountains. We depart early today and return to Chenek. After three hours we reach the junction with the earlier main trail at Bwahit Pass. From here we descend

the final hour to Chenek. Our transport will be waiting and the drive out of the park via Debarq and back to Gondar takes about 5 hrs. In Gondar we return to the same hotel for (hopefully) a hot shower.

Overnight: Goha Hotel, Gondar (B, L, D)

Lalibela Extension: 30th Oct – 1st Nov

The rock-hewn churches at Lalibela are the finest of their type in the world. Carved out of solid rock in the 12th century, the churches are a UNESCO World Heritage site and by described many as the 'eighth wonder of the world'. The first European ever to see them, a Portuguese priest in the 16th Century, was so aware of their 'splendour' that he wrote: 'it wearied me to write more of these works, because it seems to me they will not believe me if I write more.'

Day 11: Sunday 30th October 2011

This morning we fly from Gondar to Lalibela, an isolated village situated in the mountains at 2600m. In the afternoon we visit the first cluster of the 12 rockhewn churches. These churches are Ethiopia's top attraction, mostly cut from solid rock, and therefore have the appearance of being underground. The most famous church is Bete Giorgis (St George, patron saint of Ethiopia), carved in the form of a Greek cross. It is exceptionally well preserved.

The churches are quite dark inside, and have limited natural light. In each one there is a resident priest, who is usually happy to put on richly embroidered vestments and pose for a photo with his crosses, ancient bibles and sunglasses (due to constant camera flashes). Although the churches are remote, they are not short of worshippers: many Ethiopians are devout Orthodox Christians, and the services in the churches on religious festivals are of marathon length: sixteen hours is not unusual

Overnight: Jerusalem Hotel (B, L, D)

Day 12: Monday 31st October 2011

In the morning we enjoy hike up to Asetan Maryam (St Mary), built on a ridge with excellent views over the surrounding countryside. The trip takes about 4 hours return and will start early to avoid the heat. After lunch we visit another cluster of churches that include the churches. Bete Emanuel is the best in this group and is exceptionally carved with unique Axumite building features, such as indentations on the walls, symbols of the multi-storey building taken from the stelae of Axum, monkey heads and false windows.

The rest of the day is spent absorbing the atmosphere of this extraordinary town with its tukul or round houses. There is time to explore and visit shops or relax in a Tej cafe and sample the local fermented honey drink

Overnight: Jerusalem Hotel (B, L, D)

Day 13: Tuesday 1st November 2011

Depending on flight timings, we are likely to leave in the morning. On arrival in Addis we transfer back to the hotel in the centre. Some flights leave late at night, so you will have a room in the hotel until departure time, or overnight if you are leaving tomorrow. There should be free time in the afternoon. If you are departing overnight, there will be a transfer back to the airport.

Overnight: Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa / or flight (B)

Day 14: Wednesday 2nd November 2011

The trip will end after breakfast today, and an airport transfer will be available if you fly out this morning.
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