Get planning

With Ethiopia's tourist attractions as diverse as its landscape, the country can capture (and hold) anyone's attention, whether they are history buffs or outdoor adventurers.

Northern historic circuit

- Addis Ababa & Bahir Dar
- Rock-hewn churches of Lalibela
- Aksum & Debre Damo
- Gonder, Simien Mountains & Harar

Days 1-3

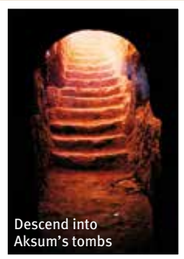
Spend your first day in Addis Ababa visiting the national museum and one of several restaurants specialising in traditional Ethiopian food and music. Fly to Bahir Dar the next morning, spend the afternoon at the Blue Nile Falls, then dedicate a full day to exploring the various island monasteries on Lake Tana.

Days 4-5

Fly to Lalibela, where you should allow an afternoon and morning to each of the two main church clusters in town, then possibly head out of town to a more remote church such as Nakuta La'ab or Yemrehanna Kristos.

Days 6-7

Fly to Aksum, spend the afternoon exploring its legendary stelae field and other sites around town. The next day could be dedicated to further sites in the vicinity of town, or to a full-day trip to the 2500-year-old Yeha Ruins or the legendary cliff-top monastery of Debre Damo.



Descend into Aksum's tombs

MATT PHILLIPS

Days 8-14

Fly to Gonder and spend the afternoon visiting its old castles and churches. For a shorter itinerary, head up to the Simien Mountains for a day or overnight trip on day 9, then fly from Gonder to Harar via Addis Ababa on day 11 or 12. Alternatively, take a longer hike in the Simiens over days 9-13 and fly back to Addis Ababa on day 14.

Tigrai and Afar for Adventurers

- Awash National Park & Assaita
- Danakil Depression & Erta Ale
- Rock-hewn churches of Tigrai
- Mekele, Lake Hayk & Ankober

Days 1-2

Drive from Addis Ababa to Awash, and then take an afternoon and morning wildlife drive before heading on to Assaita, the largest town in Afar, for a night.

Days 3-7

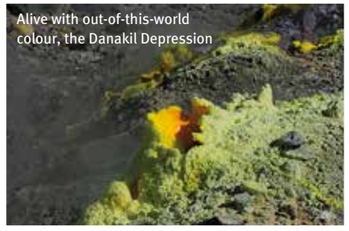
Spend five days exploring the arid north of Afar in a well-equipped 4WD, climbing to the rim of the explosive Erta Ale volcano, then continuing north to Dallol in the low-lying Danakil Depression and nearby Afar salt mines at Lake Asale.

Days 8-12

Drive to the small town of Wukro or Hawzien, stopping en route at some of the rock-hewn churches around Atsbi. Dedicate the next few days to exploring various churches along the Gheralta Escarpment between Hawzien and Wukro, as well as at nearby Teka Tesfai. On day 12, drive to Mekele, the bustling modern capital of Tigrai, and enjoy a relaxed urban afternoon there.

Days 13-14 Back to Addis Ababa

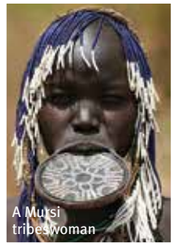
Drive back to Addis over two days, with stops at the likes of Lake Hayk (near Dessie) and Ankober.



Alive with out-of-this-world colour, the Danakil Depression

Wild South

- Northern Rift Valley lakes
- Arba Minch, Nechisar & South Omo
- Karat Konso & Awasa
- Bale Mountains



A Mursi tribeswoman

Days 1-2

On day one, drive from Addis Ababa south towards Lake Langano, ideally following the little-used back route through Butajira, with stops at the rock-hewn church of Adadi Maryam, the Tiya stelae field, and Lake Ziway. On the morning of day two, explore Abiata-Shala National Park, and then relax on the shores of Langano in the afternoon.

Days 3-4

Drive south to Arba Minch, and spend two nights there, with a daytrip to Nechisar National Park sandwiched in the middle.

Days 5-8

Drive on to South Omo, and spend the next four days visiting various traditional villages, timing your itinerary around colourful market days.

Days 9-10

It's a long drive to Bale, so allow overnight stops at Karat-Konso (famed for the lovely hilltop villages and weird burial totems of the Konso people) and at Awasa (with its lovely lakeside setting).

Days 11-14

Spend three nights in Bale National Park, split between the park headquarters at Dinsho (good for forest birds and mountain nyala) and the small town of Goba (for the best access to the Sanetti Plateau, with an optional daytrip to the lower-lying Sof Omar Caves, time permitting). Leave early on day 14 for the full-day drive to Addis Ababa.

ROUTE KEY

Northern historic circuit

Tigrai and Afar for Adventurers

Wild South

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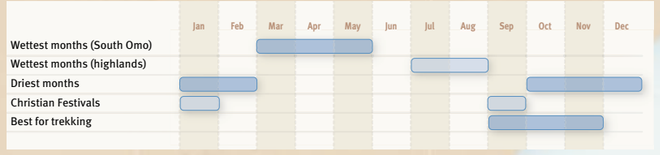
0 100 200km

0 50 100miles

The traveller's year



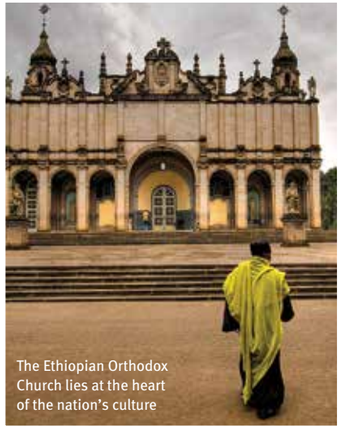
Right time, right place

Rainy season

Conventional wisdom is that it's best not to visit during the rainy season, which runs from May to Sept over most of the highlands. However, this caveat dates back to a time when Lalibela, the country's single most important tourist site, had a dirt airstrip and was forced to close during the rains. Today, all major sites of interest are accessible throughout the year, though there is a case for avoiding July and August, when many parts of the highlands receive in excess of 200mm monthly, though this is compensated for by the lack of crowds. And Sept/Oct is the optimum time to visit: the highland scenery is deliciously green, food is plentiful, and colourful Meskel flowers bloom everywhere.

Christian festivals

The unique Ethiopian Orthodox Church lies at the heart of Ethiopian culture, and it's well worth trying to time your visit to coincide with a major festival, bearing in mind that accommodation at major centres tends to be less readily available over festival dates. The best place to be for Timkat festival, which celebrates the baptism of Christ on 19 January, is in Gonder or Lalibela, while the colourful two-day Meskel Ceremony (celebrating the Finding of the True Cross) on 27 September is celebrated most colourfully in Aksum or Addis Ababa. Other key dates are Ethiopian Christmas (6-7 January) and New Year (11 September).



The Ethiopian Orthodox Church lies at the heart of the nation's culture