

**Pre-Tour Extension to Danakil Depression & Tigrai Rock Hewn Churches**  
**January 9-16, 2022**



**Jan 9: Arrival in Addis Ababba/ Jupiter Hotel Bole (L,D)**

Transfer to hotel early morning; room is available for early check-in. The rest of the morning, time to recuperate from the long flight.

Founded in 1886 by Menelik II, the city is located 2,500m (8,200ft) above sea level in one of the highest parts of the Entoto Mountain Chain, which rises to 3,000m (9,800ft) above sea level. It enjoys an excellent climate all year round, with an average temperature of 25C (77F).

We depart at 12 noon and head out to lunch at the fabulous Lucy Restaurant and then to the National Museum next door. The National Museum exhibits many archaeological and historical findings. Its' collection is considered one of the most important in sub-Saharan Africa. View the paleontology exhibit, including two remarkable casts of Lucy. The real bones are preserved in the archives of the museum.

We also visit Addis Ababa University campus and the Ethnological Museum (Institute of Ethiopian Studies) in the same compound. This is close to the National Museum.

**Jan 10: Fly to Mekelle and drive to Ahmedela (4.5 hrs)/ (B, L,D)**

Transfer to airport for flight to Mekele, capital of Tigray state, ET 100 dep 8 am, arrive 9:25 am. On arrival, we drive to Ahmedella visiting beautiful Tigray villages en-route and the escarpment of the Afar depression, commonly known as the cradle of mankind and which is part of the Great East African Rift Valley.

Here you will see very long camel caravans going to the traditional salt mining, or to the North Eastern highlands of the country, loaded with salt bars in old traditional way.

We will have a stop at BrehaAlle, where we get permission and scouts for the trip then drive to Hammed Ella, a small village where you camp the next two nights.

Overnight camping at Hammed Ella.

#### **Jan 11: Hammed Ella - Dallol - Hammed Ella / (B, L,D)**

Early in the morning, we visit the caravans that are leaving to the traditional salt mining at sunrise.

After breakfast we drive to Dallol, one of the lowest places in the world not covered by water. Here in Dallol we visit the beautiful land mainly covered by salt, sulphur and different minerals that give the area a spectacular color. We also spend time in the salt lake where you can see the Afar and Tigre men, who cut the salt into bars and carry it by camel to the highland of Ethiopia.

Overnight camping at Hammed Ella.

#### **Jan 12: Hammed Ella - Dodom - Erta Ale Volcano (6.5 hrs) / (B, L,D)**

In the morning, drive to Erta Ale, meaning the smoking Mountain, via the small Afar villages called Kusrewad and Dodom. Erta Ale is one of the few volcanoes in the world that have an almost persistent lava lake. It is an isolated basaltic shield volcano, 50 km wide, rising more than 600 meter from below sea level. Absolutely unique Lava lake erupting all the time in this part of the world. It is part of the Great Rift valley which is even visible from space.

This day we will have packed lunch and dinner will be in the rim of the volcano. We park our vehicles at the basecamp, and start hiking to the volcano. Depending on the condition of travellers, the walk will take about 2hrs. At night, visit the most spectacular boiling lava lakes on earth. It is famous for being the longest existing lava lake in the world. The summit is truncated by a complex, elongated 1700 x 600 m wide caldera, which contains vast lava flows and several larger and smaller pit craters. Please note that the best time for photography is at night.

Overnight camping at Erta Ale

#### **Jan 13: Drive to Mekelle (6 hrs) / (B, L,D)**

Early in the morning, walk down to Dodom where we have breakfast and then drive to Mekele via Abala. Balance of the day will be free in Mekele.

Overnight Planet Hotel.

#### **Jan 14: Drive Wukro - Hawzein (Gheralta) / (B, L,D)**

This morning we drive towards Wukro (1hr) and visit the rock hewn church of Wukro Cherkos, carved from sandstone. It is a semi-monolithic church whose side walls, front and roof are completely separated and projecting from the main rock. It is attached to the rock only on its floor and at its back wall. The church is believed to have been carved during the 4th century. Internal architecture and art works, rectangular carved columns, supporting arches and carved ceilings decorated by similar designs characterize this church.

Next is a visit to the archeological museum in Wukro, Tigray, one of the best museums in Ethiopia's north. Here we see collections of archeological findings from different archeological sites. It has a well preserved cult inventory, such as its libation altar with royal dedication text, a seated female votive statue, architectural blocks and limestone incense burners, had been sculptured by Sabeans to an outstanding artistic quality and with excellent craftsmanship. These objects and their Sabean inscriptions can be dated to the Ethiopia Sabean period of the first half of the last millennium BC, when significant south Arabian cultural innovations such as literary language, monumental architecture and fine arts blended with African traditions in the Northern Horn forming the cultural foundations of the Aksumite Empire and consequently today's culture of northern Ethiopian and Eritrea.

Onward, to Hawzein with lunch stop along the way. En-route we visit Medhane Alem Church, also known as Adi Kesho (approx. 45 min drive from hotel + a short but steep walk). This is one of the oldest, tallest and best preserved rock hewn churches in the Tigray region and exhibits some beautiful wall paintings. A unique feature is the painted narthex connecting the north and south of the church. In the interior of the church the ceiling is supported by six huge square pillars. The ceiling is decorated with reliefs and geometrical patterns.

Afterwards, drive 30 min to the Abraha We Atsbeha Church. Abraha We Astbeha is considered among the country's earliest churches. It is cruciform in shape with cruciform pillars and well-preserved 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century magnificent murals.

The ceiling is decorated with sophisticated patterns and its' walls are dotted by curved crosses. More than a dozen enormous columns divide the interior of the church into several aisles. Without doubt, Abreha Atsbeha is a rock church masterpiece.

Scholars estimated the date of construction to be the 10th century. What is certain is it is built well before the famous rock churches at Lalibella where the level of sophistication of rock architecture reached its peak. Some of the churches treasures, including what is believed to be King Atsbeha's golden shoes, are displayed in the adjacent museum.

Continue driving one hour to Hawzein. Check-into Gheralta Lodge or Korkor Lodge.

### **Jan 15: Hawzein (Gheralta) / (B,L,D)**

This morning we visit Dugum Silassie church, a 40 min drive from the lodge and no walking required. The site of Degum is an important chapter of Ethiopia architecture. It is the only site displaying in a single area three sanctuaries, a baptistery and a crypt-tomb, all of them copying accurately in the rock the ancient Aksumite architecture. The tomb is a rock hewn duplicate of the tombs built in the underground of Aksum. The design of the baptistery follows the pattern of the Mediterranean baptisteries built from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

In the neighbouring Nubian region, such baptisteries have been built up to the 10th century. Many remains of Aksumite ceramics have been collected on the site (and deposited at Addis Ababa museum in 1971). It is not possible to date a precise duration for the site, but it could be tentatively dated from the 7th till the 10th c. It is on the southern edge of the village off the road.

We continue 15 minutes to visit Mariam Papisite church. It is one of the most accessible and rewarding churches in the region. It's a semi-monolithic structure (only the 'Holy of Holies' is hewn from the rock) while the main sanctuary has some exceptional paintings, most of which date from the 17th century.

Return to Gheralta, approx. 1 hour drive. Overnight in Gheralta.

### **Jan 16: Drive to Axum (245km; 5 hrs drive) (B,L,D)**

In the morning drive to Axum, which was the ancient capital of Ethiopia and the cradle of Ethiopian civilization. En-route, we will visit the 5<sup>th</sup> century Yeha temple, a well preserved stone temple standing

12 metres high and consists of 52 layers of masonry. The temple is believed to be the oldest standing building in Ethiopia.

Just before reaching Axum, we visit the Abune Gerima church- one of the oldest churches in Ethiopia named after Abune Gerima who is believed to be one of the nine saints. It houses the oldest known Ethiopian manuscript, the vellum gospel books, carbon dated to the late Aksumite period (6<sup>th</sup> century). Apart from being one of the oldest places of Christian worship in the country, the monastery is famous for being the resting place of the body of the African General, Ras Alula Aba Nega.

Overnight in Axum. You will meet the main group members tomorrow morning.

**If you do not wish to visit Danakil Depression you can start with arrival in Addis on Jan 12 night or Jan 13 morning; tour Addis Jan 13 afternoon and fly to Mekelle on Jan 14 to join the tour of Tigray villages and cave churches.**

### Prices

**Full Tour:** \$2765 per person based on min 6 people twin share, single room supplement: \$218  
**Plus air estimate:** Addis Ababa-Mekele \$140 if on ET international; \$265 if flying other carriers.  
(instead of flight Addis Ababa-Axum).

#### Includes:

7 nights Accommodations: (hotel in Addis on arrival is included in main tour price)  
2 nights Camp at Hamed Ela: privately owned not where other groups are camped.  
2 nights Camp Erta Ale  
1 night Mekelle: Planet Hotel [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel\\_Review-g1392610-d5611886-Reviews-Planet\\_Hotel-Mek\\_ele\\_Tigray\\_Region.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g1392610-d5611886-Reviews-Planet_Hotel-Mek_ele_Tigray_Region.html)  
2 nights Hawzein: Korkor Lodge <http://korkorlodge.com>  
1 night Axum: Sabean Hotel <http://sabeanhotel.com/>

All meals starting Jan 10, private cook for camping days, accompanying guide, separate driver, airport transfers, transport by 4WD for Danakil part & minivan for Tigray, scout fees, full camping gear: mobile tents, cots, shower bags at Hamed Ela, in Erta Ale sleep under the stars on mattresses; toilet pit in ground at both camps; bottled water during drives, entrance fees.

#### Tigrai Churches only:

\$975 per person based on min 6 people twin share, single room supplement: \$150  
**Plus air estimate:** Addis Ababa-Mekele \$140 if on ET international; \$265 if flying other carriers.  
(instead of flight Addis Ababa-Axum).

#### Includes:

3 nights Accommodations: (hotel in Addis on arrival is included in main tour price)  
2 nights Hawzein: Korkor Lodge <http://korkorlodge.com>  
1 night Axum: Sabean Hotel <http://sabeanhotel.com/>

All meals starting Jan 14, accompanying guide, separate driver, transfers and transport, bottled water during drives, entrance fees.

**Does Not Include:** camera fees if any, tips to guide, driver