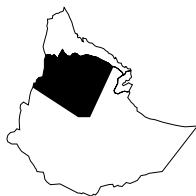


Northern Ethiopia



The bounty of northern Ethiopia's historical African treasures is only rivalled by that of Egypt's. In Aksum, elaborate pre-Christian tombs underlie ancient obelisks; in Lalibela a medieval maze of rock-hewn churches lies frozen in stone. The wealth of history continues in Gonder, where grand 17th-century castles overlook the celebrated source of the Blue Nile, Lake Tana. The lake's waters host centuries-old island monasteries and countless religious artefacts.

Northern Ethiopia's landscape is equally captivating and is unparalleled in Africa in both scale and beauty. Although the amazing backdrop of endless canyons, chasms, gorges and high plateaus covers most of the north, there's no better way to absorb it than trekking the Simien Mountains. You'll also be able to experience some of Ethiopia's endemic wildlife.

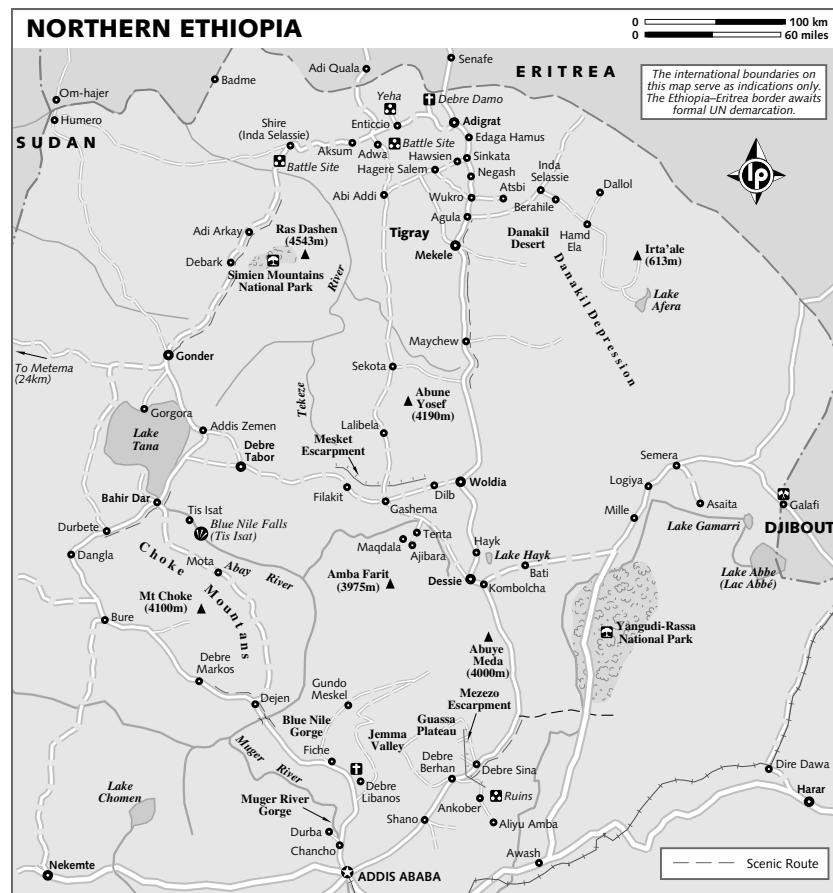
Nature takes on hostile tones in the Danakil Depression, where harsh conditions make molten lava feel more at home than you. At over 100m below sea level it's one of the lowest, hottest and most inhospitable places on Earth.

Depending on your mood and budget, getting around northern Ethiopia can be as easy as hopping a plane or as difficult as wedging your big toe into a precarious cliffside crevice.

Intrepid travellers have been returning from here for centuries with incredible tales of adventure, ancient civilisations, marvellous buildings and enchanting legends. Don't you think it's time you do the same?

HIGHLIGHTS

- Question time, history and reality while wandering dumbfounded through the rock-hewn maze of churches in **Lalibela** (p155)
- Descend into the darkness of ancient Aksumite tombs or let your eyes follow 1800-year-old stelae skyward at **Aksum** (p131)
- Exercise your eyes while trekking the sublime **Simien Mountains** (p125), home to magnificent wildlife and unparalleled panoramas of endless Abyssinian abysses
- Share **Lake Tana** (p115) with patrolling pelicans and centuries-old island monasteries
- Catch the sun's last light kissing the abled remains of 'Africa's Camelot' in **Gonder** (p118)
- Flirt with gravity and reach new heights at **Abuna Yemata Guh** (p149), one of the rock-hewn churches of Tigray



Climate

The central and northern highlands are fairly mild with average daytime temperatures of 18°C. The bulk of the rain falls between May and September, with July and August being the wettest. The region of Tigray and parts of northeastern Amharaland are drier, only receiving significant rain in July and August.

The Danakil Depression, with elevations cracking 116m below sea level, regularly surpasses 50°C.

National Parks

If northern Ethiopia was devoid of astounding historical finds, Simien Mountains National Park would truly be on the world

map. It's home to rare endemics, like the walia ibex and Ethiopian wolf, as well as large populations of the intriguing gelada baboon, and offers Ethiopia's best trekking and some of Africa's most astounding panoramas from its 4000m plateaus and peaks.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (www.flyethiopian.com) connects Addis Ababa with Bahir Dar, Gonder, Lalibela, Aksum, Shire, Mekele and Dessie.

Most people who enter northern Ethiopia overland are travelling by bus from Addis Ababa, which sits conveniently at the bottom of the historical circuit. Although possible, few people access the Addis Ababa-Bahir Dar road from the western

highland town of Nekemte. The only other overland option is from Sudan at the Metema crossing (p275).

Getting Around

Ethiopian Airlines has flights interconnecting Bahir Dar, Gonder, Lalibela and Aksum. Flights also link Mekele with Aksum.

Road construction is booming and freshly sealed sections of road now connect Addis Ababa with Bahir Dar and Gonder (though still expect a few older potholed sections!). In the east, new sections of sealed road now all but link Adigrat, Mekele and Woldia. The old sealed road connecting Addis Ababa to Woldia is currently being overhauled. While fresh roads have reduced the extensive bus network's travel times, journeys are still lengthy due to the massive distances being covered. Expect at least 10 solid days of bus journeys to complete the 2500km-long historical circuit.

The only area you'll have trouble finding regular public transport is around the rock-hewn churches of Tigray.

To visit the Danakil Depression, you'll have travel by private or rented 4WD.

THE HISTORICAL CIRCUIT

The historical circuit stretches over the entire breadth of northern Ethiopia and covers all the major historical sites and provides access to natural attractions like the Simien Mountains and Danakil Depression.

Most visitors move in a clockwise direction, travelling through Bahir Dar, Gonder and Aksum, before looping back southwards. This leaves what's arguably the best for last – lovely Lalibela.

ADDIS ABABA TO THE BLUE NILE GORGE

The road north to the Blue Nile Gorge offers some historical and natural sights for those wishing to break up the long journey to Bahir Dar.

Even if you don't plan on stopping, keep an eye out for the shepherds in their delightful reed 'raincoats', the Amhara women in their pleated highland skirts, and the men carrying their indispensable *dula* (see right).

Muger River Gorge የሙገር ወንዝ ስለቆ

The Muger River Gorge, some 50km north of Addis Ababa, is a good spot for a bit of rambling and wildlife-watching. The endemic gelada baboon is often seen here, as are a good variety of birds.

Access is from the village of Durba, which sits 17km west of Chancho and the Addis Ababa–Bahir Dar road. There are a couple daily share-taxis linking Durba and Chancho (Birr5, 45 to 60 minutes), though more run on Saturday. To continue north or south from Chancho, you can hop on the buses running between Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar.

Debre Libanos & Fiche ደብረ ሊባኖስና ፍንጭ

Lying 104km north of Addis Ababa, 4.2km off the main Addis Ababa–Debre Markos road, is one of Ethiopia's most holy sites. The monastery of **Debre Libanos** (admission Birr50, personal video cameras Birr50) was founded in the 13th century by a priest credited not only with the spread of Christianity throughout the highlands, but also with the restoration of the Solomonic line of kings. The priest was Tekla Haimanot, today one of Ethiopia's most revered saints (see the boxed text, p49).

Although no trace of the ancient monastery remains (a casualty of the Muslim-Christian wars), the site is impressively set beneath a cliff on the edge of a gorge and is a peaceful place to wander.

Since the saint's time, Debre Libanos has served as the principal monastery of the old

THE DEADLY DULA

The *dula* is the chosen travelling companion of almost every Amhara man. The 1m-long hardwood staff serves a variety of purposes: to carry loads to and from market, to brace the shoulders on long treks, to lean on during never-ending church services, and to defend oneself when needed.

In the past, every Amhara was skilled in its use. The *gabi* (toga) was spun around the left arm to make a shield, and the right arm brought the *dula* crashing down on the adversary's cranium – sometimes with devastating consequences. Today its most common use is fending off unfriendly dogs.

Shoa region, and remains one of Ethiopia's largest and most important. Today, five religious schools are found here.

Many Ethiopians continue to make pilgrimages and some still seek out the area's curative holy waters – said to be good for evil spirits and stomach disorders!

The present **church**, the latest in a succession of structures, was built in 1961 by Haile Selassie after a priest apparently prophesied that a new church would ensure a long reign. It's built in the emperor's peculiar style: monumental and pretty hideous.

Besides what's believed to be the saint's tomb, the church interior isn't too interesting. The stained-glass windows and mural paintings aren't by Afewerk Tekle, as church literature claims.

Five minutes up the hill from the monastery is Tekla Haimanot's **cave**, where the saint is said to have done all his praying. It's also the source of the monastery's holy water.

If you climb past the cave, there's a marvellous view of the monastery in its dramatic setting. The cross-shaped tomb near the car park is dedicated to those executed by the Fascists (see the boxed text, right).

Near the turn-off to the monastery is the so-called **16th-century Portuguese Bridge**, in fact built at the 19th century's end by Emperor Menelik's uncle, Ras Darge. However, like Debre Libanos, the scenery and atmosphere make up for the lack of tangible historical remains. Look out for the gelada baboons, which are often seen here, as are the huge and soaring lammergeyer vultures.

Two buses run daily from Addis Ababa to Debre Libanos (Birr10, two to 2½ hours). Another option is to take a bus to the nearby town of Fiche (Birr10, 2½ hours). Minibuses connect Fiche to the monastery, 16.5km to the south (Birr3, 30 minutes, three or four minibuses daily).

If you get stuck in Fiche, the **Alem Hotel** (rwithshower Birr35), on the Addis Ababa–Debre Markos road, is still the best bet. From Fiche, there are numerous buses plying the Addis Ababa–Bahir Dar route.

Blue Nile Gorge አባይ ስለቆ

North of Fiche, around 200km from Addis Ababa, begins one of Ethiopia's most dramatic stretches of road. It serpentine to the bottom of the Blue Nile Gorge, 1000m below.

DEATH AT DEBRE LIBANOS

During the Italian occupation, Debre Libanos witnessed some of the worst excesses of Fascist brutality. Following the attempt on the life of the infamous viceroy Graziani, the monastery, long suspected as a hotbed of rebel activity, was singled out for reprisal.

On 20 May 1937, 267 monks – 'all without distinction' – were executed; a week later, Graziani ordered the execution of all of the 129 young deacons as well. Satisfied at last, he wrote to Mussolini, 'The monastery is closed – definitively'.

Before the Italians built the bridge with their usual civil engineering flair, the Blue Nile River separated the historical provinces of Shoa and Gojam. Although your eyes will undoubtedly be drawn downward to the bridge and gorge, don't forget to look up – lammergeyer vultures regularly soar the gorge's thermals.

The **Alem Hotel** (☎ 0587 760010; s with shared bathroom Birr30, s/d Birr70/80) in Dejen, on the gorge's northern rim, is the nearest sleeping and eating option. The rooms are clean and bright, but prices are seriously *faranji*-fied. Running water is in short supply (check the taps before settling on a price). The hotel lurks behind an unnamed petrol station.

NORTH TO BAHIR DAR

There are now two ways of reaching Bahir Dar from the Blue Nile Gorge: via Mota, along the shorter but bumpier unsealed road; or via Debre Markos (100km longer) along a slightly potholed section of sealed road.

Most Addis Ababa buses travel through Mota as it saves fuel and allows them to reach Bahir Dar in one day. Private vehicles should travel via Debre Markos – your backside will thank you and it only takes six hours to link Addis and Bahir Dar.

If you're driving and want to split the journey, Debre Markos' **Shebel Hotel** (☎ 0587 711410; s/d Birr50/80) is the best option. Most rooms are bright and boast new carpets and hot showers. Some even offer balconies with views.

Those on a bus travelling the Debre Markos route will usually end up spending the night in Dangla, 78km south of Bahir Dar. Dangla's **Ha-Hu Hotel** (☎ 0582 210849; d Birr30) has comfortable rooms with clean

bathrooms. It's behind the NOC Mart petrol station.

BAHIR DAR ባህር ዳር

pop 166,928 / elev 1880m

Despite Bahir Dar being one of Ethiopia's most attractive towns, you'll have a hard time not turning your back on it. Just like the rest of us, you'll helplessly gravitate down the wide palm-lined boulevards to Lake Tana's gorgeous shore and once there, you'll nary look over your shoulder.

It's a great place to spend a few days. Besides some sights around town, you're on the doorstep of Lake Tana's mystical monasteries.

Although geared up to tourism, Bahir Dar is a booming business centre in its own right. It's also capital of the Amharaland region.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, various temporary Ethiopian capitals were established in the vicinity of Lake Tana. It was here where Jesuits attempted – with disastrous consequences – to impose Catholicism on the Ethiopian people. One Jesuit building, which was built by the well-known Spanish missionary Pero Pais, can still be seen today in the compound of St George's church.

In the 1960s Haile Selassie toyed with the idea of moving his capital here.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Ghion eDrums (Map p113; per hr Birr18)

Global Computer (Map p113; per hr Birr18) Can also burn images to CD using USB connection (Birr15).

MEDICAL SERVICES

Gamby Higher Clinic & Pharmacy (Map p113;

☎ 0582 202017; ☎ 24hr) Town's best medical facility, complete with satellite TV in the waiting room.

MONEY

Commercial Bank (Map p113; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Of Bahir Dar's three Commercial Bank branches, this is the only one that changes travellers cheques and cash (US dollars and euros).

Dashen Bank (Map p113; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Wegagen Bank (Map p113; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) Only changes US dollars and euros cash.

POST

Bahir Dar is served by its obligatory post office.

TELEPHONE

Telecenter (Map p113; ☎ 8am-9pm) This outdoor kiosk lacks a sign, but only charges Birr15 per minute for reasonably sounding international calls.

Telecommunications office (Map p113; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) International calls. Standard rates (p267).

TOURIST INFORMATION

ANRS Tourism Commission (Map p113; ☎ 0582 201686; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Although staff are keen to help, it offers little more than brochures on the area (Birr3).

TRAVEL AGENCIES

The follow agencies are noted for arranging boat trips onto Lake Tana.

Exodus Boat Tour Agent (☎ 0918 760056; Tana Hotel) Catering to well-heeled travellers. It's northeast of town.

Dib Anbessa Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 0582 201436) A bit pushy saleswise, but reliable enough.

Ghion Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 0582 200111) Less polished but best for budget travellers looking to share costs.

Tis Abay Tour & Travel Agency (Map p113; ☎ 0582 208541, 0918 762307; Papyrus Hotel) Offers quality service in either 25HP or 40HP boats.

Dangers & Annoyances

Malaria is endemic, particularly in May and from mid-September to mid-October. Take adequate preventive measures (see p373 for more information).

Tourist hustlers can be a problem here, especially around the bus station. Most 'know' the best place to stay or the 'cheapest' boat operators – thankfully you know better.

Some travellers have also complained of hassle from children at the market and on the Zege Peninsula. Taking a guide would solve the problem, but it isn't essential.

Sights & Activities

Lounging lakeside and watching pelicans skirting the surface might be the most relaxing way to pass time. You may also glimpse the flimsy, yet unsinkable *tankwa* canoe. Made from woven papyrus, they can take huge loads, including oxen! On Thursday, many bring charcoal and firewood from the Zege Peninsula; have a look out. If you'd like to see them being made, head west of town to the little village of **Weyto**.

If you are allergic to scenic lakesides and love dusty action, visit the large and lively **main market** (Map p113) in the town's

southwest. It's busiest on Saturday. Sure a guide would help you find things more quickly, but isn't getting lost half the fun?

Just to save you a day of unfruitful looking, we'll be kind enough to tell you the delightful *agelgil* (ingenious leather-bound lunch boxes used by local travellers) are no longer sold in the market. They're sold by streetside kiosks near the ANRS Tourism Commission. Bahir Dar's versions are funky and furry, thanks to being made from goatskin.

The famous **outlet of the Blue Nile** (Map p116) is located some 5km outside the town, around 1km north from the Blue Nile bridge. Along the river, keep an eye out for hippos and crocodiles. For more information on the outlet of the Blue Nile, see p117.

Just south of the bridge is a massive new **war memorial** (Map p116) dedicated to those who died fighting the Derg (p37). We were told it may eventually host a museum, but we couldn't confirm this. Do let us know! It's quite the sight, its fountain cascading down to the Blue Nile.

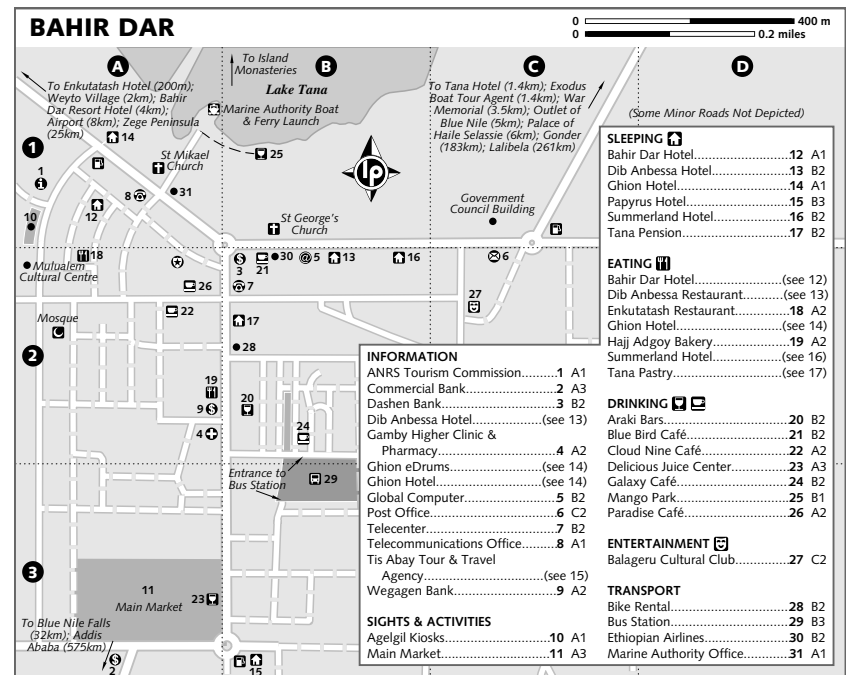
Further south of the memorial is Bezawit Hill, the summit of which hosts the former **Palace of Haile Selassie** (Map p116) and offers panoramic views over the Blue Nile River. The palace isn't currently open to visitors.

For those Lake Tana monasteries you may have heard about, see p115. Information on the Blue Nile Falls is found on p118.

Sleeping BUDGET

Ghion Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 0582 200111; ghionbd@ethio.net.et; camping Birr33, d & tw Birr75-125; 🏠) Although the rooms here are as tired and worn as your favourite pair of travel socks, there's no denying Ghion's beautiful lakeside setting. Rooms vary, and size and prices are entirely negotiable, despite what the smarmy manager tells you. Mosquitos are problematic here – bring a mossie net. It's a great place to camp (free tents are occasionally available) and airport pick-ups are free.

Enkutatash Hotel (☎ 0582 204435; d/tw Birr40/50) Just west of town, this place has rooms set



off a pint-sized quaint courtyard. They sport rugs, mosquito nets, cold-water showers and tiny 'verandas'.

Bahir Dar Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 0582 200788; d with shared bathroom Birr40, d Birr50) Hidden behind the telecommunications office, this place offers simple and clean rooms. The private showers are hot, the common ones not so. Rooms surround the ever-so-popular courtyard restaurant, which means noise may be a problem on weekends.

Tana Pension (Map p113; ☎ 0582 201302; d with shared bathroom Birr20) Its cheap rooms are big and bright and boast clean sheets. The stained Raggedy Anne red carpets and the smelly shared bathrooms are its weak points.

MIDRANGE

Summerland Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 0582 206566; www.enjoybahirdar.com; s/d/tw Birr238/361/375) What this newish place lacks in character, it makes up for in comfort and cleanliness. The Summerland Hotel has sparkling tile floors, gleaming bathrooms, satellite TVs, mosquito nets, the odd bit of marble and balconies all up for grabs.

Tana Hotel (☎ 0582 200554; ghion@ethionet.et; s/tw/stc US\$38/50/75; 📺) Sitting lakeside just north of town, this hotel's rooms offer sunset views over Lake Tana. Triangular partitions divide the somewhat stylish accommodations, which include embroidered bedding and satellite TVs.

Papyrus Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 0582 205100; fax 0582 208543; s/d Birr215/269, stc Birr322-537; 📺 📺) Rooms here are reasonably sized and well furnished with comfortable mattresses, wardrobes, desks and mosquito nets. Some boast balconies overlooking the pool's emerald waters. However, it lacks Summerland's polished feel and Tana's location, and only the suites offer satellite TV.

Dib Anbessa Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 0582 201436; fax 0582 201818; d/tw Birr165/180) The carpeted rooms here are comfy and clean, but they aren't ageing well. For instance, our 'hot' shower was cold and the showerhead threw more water on the ceiling than our soap-covered face. Crafty negotiations can knock off around Birr50.

Bahar Dar Resort Hotel is a behemoth lakeside place that's been 'almost' ready to open for over half a decade. Don't hold your breath.

Eating

Bahir Dar Hotel (Map p113; mains Birr7-12) If you want local atmosphere and great Ethiopian fare, there's nowhere better than this hotel's courtyard. Sit under the stars, enjoy the music (and bonfires on weekends) and dine for pennies.

Dib Anbessa Restaurant (Map p113; mains Birr13-24) A wide-ranging menu, with everything from *minchet abesh* (thick minced-meat stew topped with a hard-boiled egg) to Hungarian goulash and American meatloaf. We chose the Indian curry and were pleasantly surprised.

Ghion Hotel (Map p113; mains Birr12-20) Its lakefront terrace is a pleasant spot for a meal. The tilapia (a freshwater fish) is usually well prepared.

Enkutatah Restaurant (Map p113; mains Birr12-20) Since gaining a reputation for fine fish cutlets, the prices here have doubled. The food is still good, but the restaurant has little ambience.

Summerland Hotel (Map p113; mains Birr18-25) Like its rooms, this place is bright and modern but is devoid of character. However, it does prepare some of town's best *faranji* (foreigner, especially Western) food.

Tana Pastry (Map p113; mains Birr4-12) A good place for a pastry or omelette. Locals say it's the best place for cheap fresh fish.

Haji Adgoy Bakery (Map p113; ☎ 5am-8pm) Town's best bread – perfect for early morning bus journeys. The sign is in Amharic, so just follow your nose.

Drinking

Tana Hotel (beers Birr10) This hotel's lakefront gardens are *the* perfect place for a sunset drink.

Mango Park (Map p113; beers Birr5) Although it lacks Tana Hotel's sunset dramatics, this tiered terrace also overlooks the lake and is a cool spot for a drink. It's usually packed with local students, families and pelicans.

Delicious Juice Center (Map p113; juices Birr3) Collapse into its streetside chairs and introduce some fresh juice to your insides.

There are numerous cafés (Map p113), like Cloud Nine, Paradise, Galaxy and Blue Bird, which all serve great coffee.

If you want something that will knock you off your feet, visit the hole-in-the-wall *araki* (a grain spirit) bars near the bus station.

Entertainment

Balageru Cultural Club (Map p113; admission free; beers Birr6) If you'd like an entertaining cultural experience and a good laugh, visit this place. Various *azmari* (see the boxed text, p53) do their thing to the rapturous joy of locals. If you're brave enough to dance and do your thing, you'll win lots of friends.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Ethiopian Airlines (Map p113; ☎ 0582 200020; ☎ 8-11.45am & 2-5.45pm) has two or three flights daily to Addis Ababa (US\$78, 30 minutes), and one or two to Gonder (US\$37, 17 minutes), Lalibela (US\$61, 1½ hours) and Aksum (US\$86, two to three hours).

BUS & MINIBUS

One bus departs for Addis Ababa via the Debre Markos route (Birr60.35, 1½ days, 6am), while a simultaneous service departs via the Mota route (Birr56.60, 12 hours). Gonder (Birr22.15, four hours) and Debre Tabor (Birr12.70, three hours) are each served by two morning buses. Several buses a day trundle to and from Tis Isat (Birr4.20, 45 minutes) for the Blue Nile Falls. There's also the odd unscheduled service to Lalibela (Birr46, 10 hours). All buses leave from the main station.

Private minibuses also operate to Addis Ababa (Birr120 to Birr150, six hours) and Gonder (Birr30, three hours); ask at your hotel.

FERRY

A ferry sails every Sunday at 6am for Gogora (Birr104.50, 1½ days), on the northern shore of Lake Tana. It typically overnights in Konzola (Map p116). Buy tickets the day before at the **Marine Authority office** (Map p113; ☎ 0582 200730; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat).

There's no restaurant or café on board, though there are stops at restaurants en route.

Getting Around

Bikes are perfect for Bahir Dar; hire one just south of Tana Pension (Birr3 per hour).

If you're in a hurry, flag a passing taxi. They cost Birr10 for short hops or Birr20 to the Tana Hotel. The 8km airport trip will set you back Birr40.

LAKE TANA & ITS MONASTERIES

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Upon first observation, Lake Tana's beauty is obvious; its blue waters lapping on lush shores, islands dotting its distant horizon and squadrons of pelicans flirting with its surface. Explore a bit further and you'll discover famous centuries-old monasteries lurking on some 20 of its 37 islands.

The lake is Ethiopia's largest, covering over 3500 sq km, and its waters are the source of the Blue Nile, which flows 5223km north to the Mediterranean Sea.

Sights & Activities

A trip out onto the lake is as obligatory as it is enjoyable. Although the obvious highlights are the monasteries, the lake also offers some prime bird habitats.

MONASTERIES

While the boat engine's buzz is anything but a throwback to ancient times, your first meetings with remarkable cross-wielding priests after stepping onto the islands just may be.

Many monasteries date from the late 16th or early 17th century, though most were founded much earlier and may even have been the site of pre-Christian shrines.

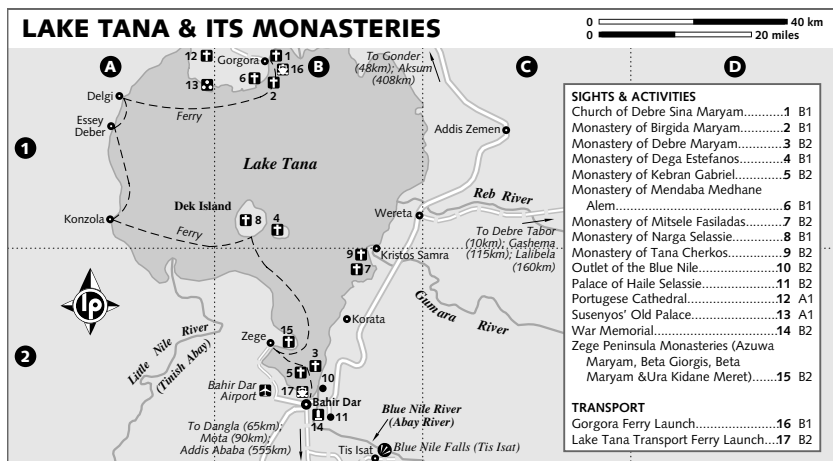
If you want help deciphering the murals adorning the monasteries' walls, check out Know Your Ethiopian Saints on p49.

Although it's possible to see all the monasteries over several long days, you'll likely have your fill after one full day. Yes, it is possible to have too much of a good thing. If you have a 40HP speedboat, 11 hours and priests who are quick with the keys, you could conceivably visit these gems: Kebran Gabriel, Narga Selassie, Daga Estefanos, Tana Cherkos and Ura Kidane Meret.

Note that women can visit only certain monasteries, although these number among the most interesting. Admission to each monastery is collected by the priests. Priests rarely have change, so bring lots of Birr1 and Birr10 notes for tips and fees. Toting a small video camera costs an additional Birr50 per monastery.

For important information on church etiquette, see the boxed text on p44.

All the stated journey times are for a one-way trip from Bahir Dar in a 40HP speedboat (add about 30% more time for a



25HP boat). See Getting Around (opposite) for boat-hire information.

One of the most beautiful and atmospheric monasteries, **Kebran Gabriel** (admission Birr20, men only) dates from the 17th century. It features a 12-columned portico and good paintings on the *maqdas* (inner sanctuary). Spot the depiction of Iyasu before Christ. It's half an hour away by boat and a short walk from the landing stage.

The original 14th-century church at **Debre Maryam** (admission Birr20) was rebuilt by Tewodros in the 19th century. It contains beautiful old manuscripts and a collection of church treasures. It's 30 minutes by boat and a short walk through coffee, mango and fig trees.

Ura Kidane Meret (admission Birr20) is the Zege Peninsula's most famous monastery and its *maqdas* is very beautifully painted. A compendium of Ethiopian religious iconography, it holds an important collection of 16th- and 18th-century crosses and crowns. The peninsula is 35 minutes by boat from Bahir Dar. Turn left from the landing stage and it's a straightforward 15-minute walk (despite what would-be guides tell you). As the most-visited monastery, it attracts the most souvenir sellers and hustlers.

Set in the middle of the lake on Dek Island, **Narga Selassie** (admission Birr20) is peaceful, atmospheric and little visited. Built in the mid-18th century, it resembles Gonder's castles. Effigies of Mentewab and James Bruce are engraved on the church's exterior, as are fine 18th-century paintings and

crosses. It's 2½ hours by boat and a two-minute walk from the landing stage.

One of the lake's most sacred monasteries, **Dega Estefanos** (admission Birr50, men only) was rebuilt in the mid-19th century and houses a 16th-century painting of the Madonna, and mummified remains in glass coffins of five former Ethiopian emperors (13th to 17th centuries). It's set on a hill nearly 100m above the lake, 35 minutes' walk one way. The island is east of Dek Island.

It's said the Ark of the Covenant was hidden at mysterious and historic **Tana Cherkos** (admission Birr50, men only) for 800 years. The present 19th-century church is rather modest. Tana Cherkos is 2½ hours from Bahir Dar by boat. From the landing it's a 45-minute walk uphill.

Though most of the treasures of **Mitsel Fasiladas** (admission Birr20) were stolen in the 1990s, it's still worth visiting if you're in the vicinity. The setting is attractive and the old church's foundations remain. It's on an island just south of Tana Cherkos and is a short walk from the landing.

Like Ura Kidane Meret, **Beta Giorgis** (admission Birr20) and **Beta Maryam** (admission Birr20) are found on the Zege Peninsula, there's an important collection of crowns in a little 'museum' (attributed to Yohannes IV) and interesting paintings in the monasteries, probably dating from the 19th century or later. They're a short walk from the landing stage through lemon trees and coffee plants.

Also on Zege Peninsula, **Azuwa Maryam** (admission Birr20) has interesting 19th- or 20th-century paintings and a small museum. It's five minutes' walk from the landing stage.

BIRD-WATCHING

For those with an eye for birds, Lake Tana's various habitats offer up numerous species. Besides the heralded white pelicans, you may glimpse the likes of lesser flamingos, lesser kestrels, wattled cranes, bush petronia, hornbills, paradise flycatchers, kingfishers and various parrots.

Spots to peruse include the areas around Mitsel Fasiladas (popular breeding ground for wetland birds), Debre Maryam, the Blue Nile's outlet, Dek Island and Lake Tana's eastern shore.

OUTLET OF THE BLUE NILE

You don't visit the outlet of the Blue Nile to say hello to the river. You visit it to say goodbye to Lake Tana's water and wish it well on its 5223km journey to the Mediterranean. You may even see a hippo or two.

It's about 30 minutes from Bahir Dar by speedboat. For info about reaching the outlet by road, see p113.

JAMES BRUCE: IN SEARCH OF THE SOURCE

Half undressed as I was by the loss of my sash, and throwing my shoes off, I ran down the hill towards the little island of green sods, which was about two hundred yards distant. ...It is easier to guess than to describe the situation of my mind at that moment – standing in the spot which had baffled the genius, industry and enquiry of both ancients and moderns, for the course of near three thousand years.

James Bruce, Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile (1790; Gregg, Godstone, 1971)

One of the first European explorers in this part of Africa was a Scot, James Bruce, who was passionate about unknown lands.

After serving as consul general in Algiers, he set off in 1768 in search of the Nile's source – a puzzle that had preoccupied people since the time of the Egyptian Pharaohs.

After landing in Massawa, Eritrea, he made his way to the powerful and splendid court of Gonder, where he became close friends with Empress Mentewab.

In 1770 he reached the source of the Abay, the main river that empties into Lake Tana. There he declared the mystery of the Nile's source solved. He dedicated his discovery to King George III, and returned home to national acclaim.

In fact, Bruce had traced only the source of the *Blue Nile River*, the main tributary of the Nile. Not only that, but he'd been beaten to his 'discovery' – as he very well knew – over 150 years earlier by a Spanish Jesuit, Pero Pais.

Of greater interest was the account of his journey, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, published in 1790. It remains a very useful source of information on Ethiopia's history and customs. His contemporaries considered much of it as gross exaggeration, or even as pure fiction. Given his earlier claims, no wonder.

Getting Around

There's no shortage of boat operators in Bahir Dar, and shifty commission agents lurk everywhere.

People who've been happiest have booked boats through the travel agencies on p112.

Prices are always negotiable and range from Birr120 (one to five people) for a 90-minute trip to Debre Maryam and the Blue Nile outlet in a 25HP boat to Birr1000 (one to five people) for an 11-hour trip in a 40HP speedboat. A half-day trip to the Zege Peninsula costs between Birr250 and Birr330. Always ensure that a guide is included in the cost. Although last-minute arrangements are possible, it's best to arrange things the day before.

Before leaving, ensure your boat has life jackets and spare fuel. It's wise to bring a raincoat or umbrella and something warm.

The **Marine Authority** (☎ 0582 200730; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) in Bahir Dar offers a daily ferry service to the Zege Peninsula (Birr44 return). It departs Bahir Dar at 6.30am and returns at 10am, which gives you enough time (two hours) to visit the monasteries there. Zege Peninsula can also be reached by road (25km).

The adventurous can troll the shoreline and try to hire a *tankwa* to visit Debre Maryam.

BLUE NILE FALLS (TIS ISAT) ጢስ ኧሳት

The impressive plumes of mist bellowing from the depths of the Blue Nile Falls led locals to name it Tis Isat (Water that Smokes) or Tis Abay (Nile that Smokes). Today, thanks to a hydroelectric project, the once mighty falls have withered like an aged chain smoker. How do you say 'Nile with emphysema' in Amharic?

Instead of the river's 400m width cascading over a sheer chasm to the rocks 37m below, now there is only a stream (as little as 4m wide) off the shallowest section (29m high). The remaining mafic volcanic rocks that were once cooled by the flow now bake in the sun and beg for water.

If you can manage to forget that it was once one of the most spectacular falls in Africa, a visit here is still worthwhile, particularly in wet season. It's a pretty picnic spot and you may see parrots, bee-eaters, lovebirds, touracos, white-throated seed-eaters and vervet monkeys.

The falls are located 32km southeast of Bahir Dar, just beyond Tis Isat village. The **ticket office** (admission Birr15, personal video cameras Birr100; ☎ 7am-5.30pm) can arrange official guides (Birr30), but they aren't really necessary.

The path to the falls starts 50m west of the ticket office. From there, walk east for about 1km until you see a tiny waterfalls sign at a small junction. Go left (north) and after 400m you'll see a couple of rocky footpaths (on your left). They lead down the so-called eastern route, which crosses a 17th-century Portuguese bridge before turning west and climbing up past the little settlement towards the falls.

From the main viewpoint, continue along a path that leads over the narrow Alata River before backtracking to the base of the falls.

From here you can complete the circuit by winding up along the path to the river above the falls and crossing its banks by motorboat (following the so-called western route). The entire walk shouldn't take more than 90 minutes. The **boat service** (one way/return Birr10/20) usually operates daily from 6.30am to 6pm. Trips in local *tankwas* are forbidden. If you're here early in the morning, watch for crocs.

Less energetic and less mobile people may want to approach and return from the falls on the less steep western route.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Bahir Dar leave every few hours for Tis Isat village (Birr4.20, one bumpy hour), which is also known as Tis Abay.

From Tis Isat, the last bus travelling back to Bahir Dar leaves between 3pm and 4pm. We've sadly heard of locals trying to make travellers miss the last bus and then charging them Birr100 for a ride. Another scam we discovered was men telling us upon arrival in Tis Isat that to ensure a seat on the bus back, we'd need to pay them to hold it for us.

It's usually pretty easy to hitch back to Bahir Dar (Birr8 to Birr10) if you've missed the bus.

The **Ghion Hotel** (☎ 0582 200111) in Bahir Dar runs two daily tours (8am and 3pm) to the falls. It charges Birr300 per group for transportation and guide (up to 10 people).

GONDER ጎንደር

pop 158,019 / elev 2210m

It really isn't important whether your friends believe that you slipped beneath the shadows of grand 17th-century African castles, slid into a classic Italian Art Deco

café and sipped early-morning *macchiatos* while wandering Gonder one day. It's just important that you savour the surreal experience.

With several complexes laden with classical centuries-old stone castles and palaces, it's easy to see how Gonder rightfully earned the moniker 'Africa's Camelot'.

And knowing that it is (and was) surrounded by fertile land and that it was at the crossroads of three major caravan routes, it's just as easy to understand why Emperor Fasiladas (r 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 and Egypt.

By 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 capital for well over a century before infighting severely weakened the kingdom (see The Rise and Fall of Gonder on p31). In the 1880s what remained of Gonder was extensively looted by the Sudanese Dervishes. Despite this and the damaged sustained by British bombs during the liberation campaign of 1941, much of Gonder remains amazingly intact.

While luck and strong construction preserved most structures from rubbly fates, local legends state a timely swarm of bees saved Debre Berhan Selassie, one of Ethiopia's most colourful and famous churches, by simply chasing the devastating Dervishes away!

Today, Gonder is a great place to spend a few days and is a convenient base to make the leap into the Simien Mountains.

Orientation

Although Gonder is fairly spread out, it's still a great place to navigate on foot or by bicycle. The piazza marks the centre of town and is laden with the most shops and services. Just south of the piazza is the Royal Enclosure and all its treasures, while the road leading north is dotted with a series of restaurants and hotels.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Circle Internet Cafe (Circle Hotel; per hr Birr15) Some of town's fastest connections.

Proxy Computer (per hr Birr15; ☎ 24hr) Slow connections but always open.

Star Internet (per hr Birr15) Decent connections and will burn images to your CD using USB connection (Birr15).

MEDICAL SERVICES

Birhan Tesfa Clinic (☎ 0581 115943; ☎ 24hr)

Gonder's best medical facilities.

Goha Pharmacy (☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) Helpful and well stocked.

MONEY

Commercial Bank (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

United Bank S.C. (☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 3.30pm Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

POST

Post office (☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri)

TELEPHONE

Oddly, the telecommunications office above the post office no longer offers international calls.

Telecenter (☎ 8am-9pm) This outdoor kiosk lacks a sign, but only charges Birr15 per minute for international calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information centre (☎ 0581 110022;

amhtour@ethionet.et; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-

5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat) Helpful information and licensed city guides (Birr150 per day). Can arrange out-of-city 4WD tours (Simien Mountain day trips etc).

TRAVEL AGENCIES

These reliable agencies can arrange everything from city tours to Simien Mountain treks. Prices range and negotiations are always in order.

Explore Abyssinia Travel (☎ 0581 115311; explore.abyssinia@ethionet.et)

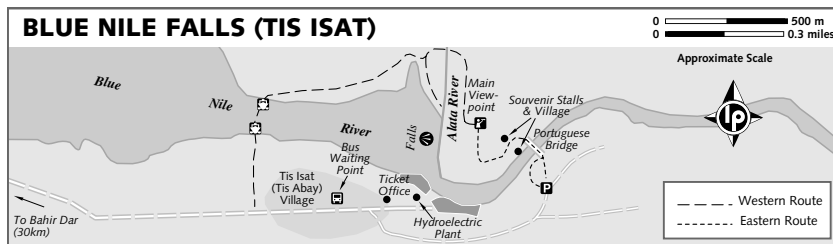
Explore Simien Tours (☎ 0581 116690, 0918 770280; fasilm_675@yahoo.com; Quara Hotel)

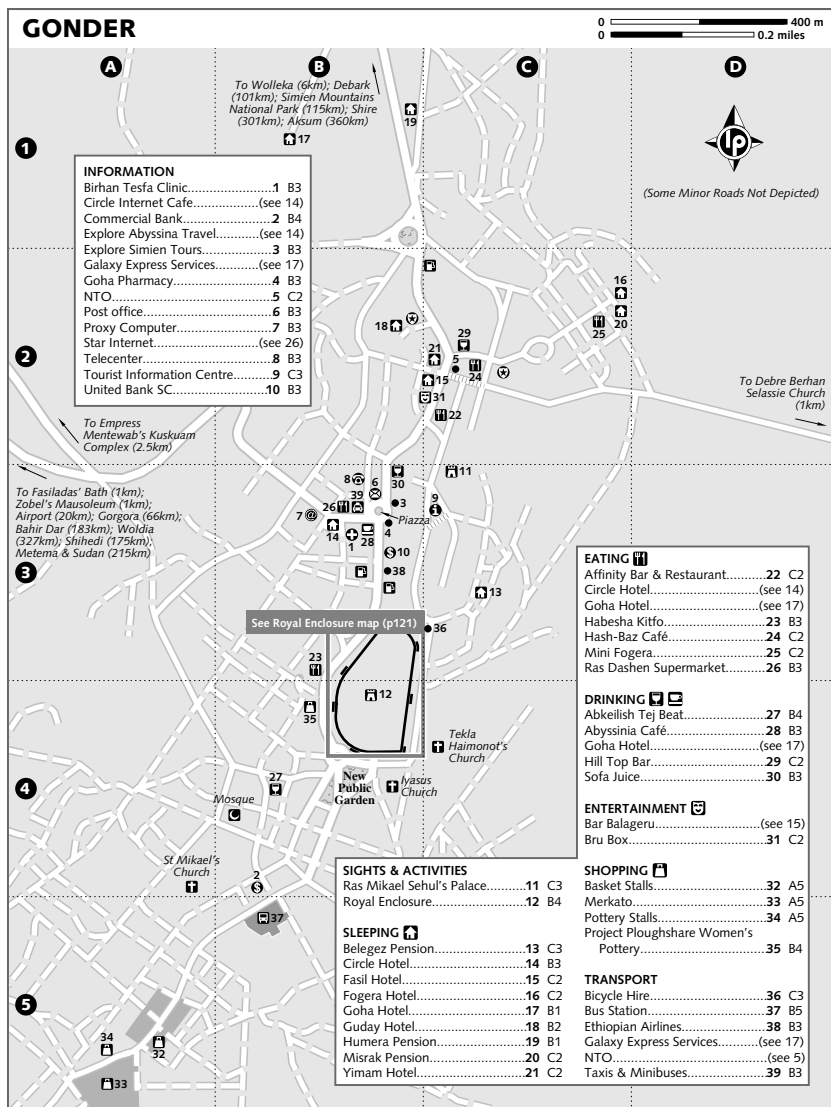
Galaxy Express Services (☎ 0581 111546; Goha Hotel)

NTO (☎ 0581 110379, 0918 775948)

Dangers & Annoyances

Several travellers have complained about children hassling them for money with improbable 'sob stories'. The Notebook Scam (p157) is a popular ploy. A really good





local initiative is the Peace of Mind project (which helps the genuinely hungry). Peace of Mind food tokens (Birr5 for 10) can be bought from various hotels and restaurants, including Habesha Kitfo.

Another annoyance, especially if you're left lathered at the time, is Gonder's lack of water – do your best to conserve.

Sights

ROYAL ENCLOSURE የፋሲለዳስ ግዢ

It is pretty hard not to notice Gonder's impressive **Royal Enclosure** (admission Birr5, personal video cameras Birr75; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm), with its regal castles and high stone walls sitting streetside. The entire 70,000-sq-metre site (also known as Fasil

Ghebbi) was declared a World Heritage site by Unesco in 1979.

Free 90-minute guided tours (a tip will be expected) are worthwhile and available weekdays. On the weekend, you can hire a local licensed guide near the gate for about Birr30. See the Royal Enclosure Map (p121) for the following sight locations.

Almost completely restored with the aid of Unesco, **Fasiladas' Palace** (found in the compound's south) is the oldest and most impressive castle. It stands 32m tall and has a crenulated parapet and four domed towers. Made of roughly hewn stones, it's reputedly the work of an Indian architect, and shows an unusual synthesis of Indian, Portuguese, Moorish and Aksumite influences.

The main floor was used as a dining hall and formal reception area; note the recessed Star of David above several doorways, which trumpet Fasiladas' link to the Solomonic dynasty. The small room in the northern corner boasts its original beam ceiling and some faint frescoes.

On the 1st floor, Fasiladas' prayer room has windows in four directions, each overlooking Gonder's important churches. On the roof, religious ceremonies were held, and it was from here that the emperor addressed his people. Above Fasiladas' 2nd-floor bedroom was the watchtower, from where it's possible to see all the way to Lake Tana.

Behind the castle's eastern corner are various ruined buildings, including the remains of the **kitchen** (domed ceiling) and **water cistern** (thought by some to be a pool).

To the palace's northeast is the saddle-shaped **palace of Iyasu I**. The son of Yohannes I, Iyasu I (r 1682-1706) is considered the greatest ruler of the Gonderine period. Iyasu's Palace was unusual for its vaulted ceiling. The palace used to be sumptuously decorated with gilded Venetian mirrors and chairs, and gold leaf, ivory and beautiful paintings adorning the walls. Visiting travellers described the palace as 'more beautiful than Solomon's house'. Although a 1704 earthquake and British bombing in the 1940s have done away with the interior and roof, its skeletal shell reeks of history.

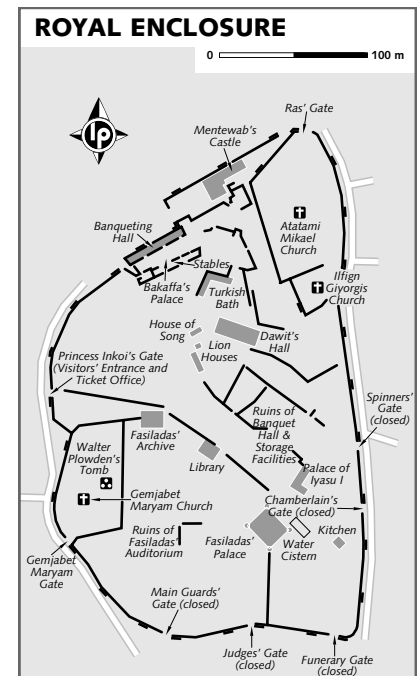
North of Iyasu's Place are the relics of its **banquet hall** and **storage facilities**. To the west is the quadrangular **library** of Fasiladas' son, Yohannes I (r 1667-82), which was sadly renovated and plastered over by

the Italians. Although only the tower and walls remain of **Fasiladas' archive**, which sits northwest of the library, the beauty of the large arched doors and windows remains. It was once an impressive palace decorated with ivory.

The compound's northern half holds vestiges of Emperor **Dawit's Hall** and **House of Song**, in which many religious and secular ceremonies and lavish entertainments took place. Dawit (r 1716-21) also built the first of two **Lion Houses** (the second was built by Selassie) where Abyssinian lions were kept until 1992.

When Dawit came to a sticky end (he was poisoned in 1721), the Emperor Bakaffa (r 1721-30) took up the reins of power and built the huge **banqueting hall** and the impressive **stables**.

Between the stables and Dawit's Hall is the **Turkish bath** (*wesheba*), which apparently worked wonders for those suffering from syphilis! Inside, some of the original cow-horn clothes hooks still protrude from the walls. At the southern end you'll see the fire pit and the ceiling's steam vents.



Bakaffa's consort was responsible for the last castle, **Mentewab's Castle**, a two-storeyed structure that's now part of an Ethiopian cultural heritage project. Note the Gonder cross being used as a decorative motif.

FASILADAS' BATH ቆሲሊ ልብዳኝ

Around 2km northwest of town centre lies **Fasiladas' Bath** (admission incl in Royal Enclosure ticket; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm), a shady, beautiful and historical spot attributed to both Fasiladas and Iyasu I. Until the five-year project to fully restore the complex (financed by the Norwegian government at a cost of Birr6.4 million) is completed in 2008, we'll stop calling it peaceful too. That said, it's still worth a visit.

The large, rectangular sunken pool is overlooked by a small but charming building, thought by some to be Fasiladas' second residence. Almost out of Cambodia's Angkor Thom, snakelike tree roots envelop, support and digest sections of the stone wall surrounding the pool.

Although the complex was used for bathing (royalty used to don inflated goatskin lifejackets for their refreshing dips!), it was likely constructed for religious celebrations, the likes of which still go on today. Once a year, Fasiladas' Bath is filled with water for the Timkat (p261). After being blessed by a priest, the pool becomes a riot of spraying water, shouts and laughter as the crowd jumps in. The ceremony replicates Christ's baptism in the Jordan River, and is seen as an important renewal of faith.

Just east of the main compound is **Zobel's Mausoleum**. Local legend states it's named after Yohannis I's horse, which heroically brought Iyasu (Yohannis' son) back from Sudan after his father's death.

If you don't want to walk, minibuses (Birr0.85) leaving from near the piazza pass here.

You must obtain your ticket at the Royal Enclosure before visiting Fasiladas' Bath.

DEBRE BERHAN SELASSIE CHURCH

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Despite the walls of **Debre Berhan Selassie** (admission Birr25; ☎ 6am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm) hosting the most vibrant ecclesiastical artwork in the nation, it's the ceiling that captures most visitors' imaginations. Think of Mona Lisa's mysterious smile and multiply it 104

times over! Yes, each of the 104 winged Ethiopian cherubs dotting the beamed ceiling seem to have slightly different, but equally quizzical expressions.

Full of all the colour, life, wit and humanity of Ethiopian art at its best, the walls provide a compendium of Ethiopian saints, martyrs and lore. The devilish Bosch-like depiction of Hell has to be our favourite. A close second is the Prophet Mohammed atop a camel being led by a devil. Although most paintings within the church are historically and happily attributed to the 17th-century artist Haile Meskel, this can't be the case because the remarkable rectangular church of today only dates back to the late 18th century. The original church was circular (its foundations are still visible) and was created in the 1690s by Iyasu I.

A large stone wall with 12 rounded towers surrounds the compound and represents the 12 apostles. The larger 13th tower (entrance gate) symbolises Christ and is shaped to resemble the Lion of Judah. If you have a keen eye, you'll be able to spot the lion's tail in the wall west of the church. Some historians hypothesise the symbolic architecture is evidence the emperor planned to bring the Ark of the Covenant here from Aksum. Theories aside, it's clear Debre Berhan Selassie or 'Trinity at the Mount of Light' is one of Ethiopia's most remarkable churches.

Flash photography inside the church is forbidden. Priests offer tours but a small contribution for the church should be left afterwards.

The church lies around 2km northeast of the Royal Enclosure.

EMPRESS MENTEWAB'S KUSKUAM COMPLEX ቁስቋም ደብር

Although less preserved than the Royal Enclosure, this royal compound known as **Kuskuam** (admission Birr25, personal video cameras Birr75; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm) is equally captivating. It offers an impressive mix of views over the countryside, each dramatically framed by the complex's crumbling remnants. It was built in 1730 for the redoubtable Empress Mentewab, after the death of her husband (Emperor Bakaffa).

Like the Royal Enclosure, it's made up of a series of buildings including a long, castelated palace used for state receptions and to house the royal garrison. Its exterior is

decorated with red volcanic tuff; spot the figures of crosses and Ethiopian characters and animals, such as St Samuel riding his lion.

The nearby smaller building is said to have been the empress' private residence. To the residence's west used to be a fine church. However, after damage from British bombing, it had to be rebuilt. A tiny glass-roofed coffin in its crypt contains the skeletons of the empress, her son and her grandson, the Emperors Iyasu II and Iyo'as.

The complex lies in the hills 3.5km northwest of town. A taxi from the piazza should cost about Birr25 return.

RAS MIKAEL SEHUL'S PALACE

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Although simply a smaller version of Fasiladas' palace, this place has a slightly foreboding air. Perhaps it's because it was the residence of Ras Mikael, the dictator who usurped power at the 18th-century's end, as the monarchy became increasingly impotent and ineffectual. Later, the building was used – more chillingly – as a prison during the rule of the Derg, and is said to have been the site of untold brutality and torture.

After long being closed to the public, it should be finally open by the time you read this.

WOLLEKA (FALASHA VILLAGE) ወለቃ

Around 6km north of Gonder is the little village of Wolleka, once the home of a thriving population of Falashas or Ethiopian Jews. Before Christianity arrived, Judaism was the dominant religion of most of northwestern Ethiopia.

After the adoption of Christianity as the state religion, Falashas had their land confiscated for refusing to convert. To survive, many became skilled craftsmen. Recent research suggests Falashas may have provided the labour for the castle's construction and decoration.

From 1985 to 1991 many Falashas were airlifted to Israel, and today only a handful remain. Sadly, the pottery for which they were once famous has degenerated into clumsy, half-hearted affairs. However, the Project Ploughshare Women's Crafts Training Center, which helps disadvantaged women learn a craft, is worth supporting.

The old synagogue and Falasha homes can be visited, but a special trip can't be

called worthwhile. To get here from Gonder, you can take a taxi (Birr40 return) or a *gari* (horse-drawn cart; Birr10 return).

Tours

City tours, which take in all the major sites, are easily arranged at the tourist information centre. Guides cost Birr150 per full day, and you can either walk, ride bikes, hop on local minibuses or charter a taxi for the day (around Birr30 per hour).

For Simien Mountains tours and treks, see Planning (p127).

Festivals & Events

Particularly good times to visit Gonder are during the festivals of Leddet (Christmas) and Timkat. For more information on both of these festivals, see p261.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Belegez Pension (☎ 0581 114356; d with shared bathroom Birr60, s/d Birr70/80) Simple smallish rooms surround a paved private courtyard that's perfect for parking your tired truck. The rooms are bright and clean, as are the toilets and hot showers. They have Ethiopia's best budget-hotel towels – huge and soft! Too bad the pillows are exactly the opposite! Reservations are wise.

Fasil Hotel (☎ 0581 110221; d/tw with shared bathroom Birr50/60) The top-floor rooms are huge, bright, airy and have a slight Italian feel. Ask for one that opens onto the balcony. The shared showers are hot and usually clean. It's occasionally a little noisy.

Misrak Pension (☎ 0581 110069; d Birr100) Prices are entirely *faranji*-fied but the rooms are spotless and the mattresses are comfortable. The tiny bathrooms are oh so clean. It's set off a simple garden.

Yimam Hotel (☎ 0581 110470; d & tw with shared bathroom Birr50) If next-door Fasil is full, this is a close option. The rooms are on the small and dark side, but the shared toilets (squat) are as clean as they come. Showers are sadly all cold.

Circle Hotel (☎ 0581 111991; s/tw Birr92/115) With glass exterior walls, this high-rise offers some nice views and is easily the brightest hotel in town. Sadly, all that light means you won't miss spotting the stained green carpets and occasional cockroach. Some rooms are better than others, so check a few.

Other options:

Humera Pension (☎ 0581 110959; tw Birr80)

Guday Hotel (☎ 0581 110959; d/tw with shared bathroom Birr50/70)

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Goha Hotel (☎ 0581 110634; ghion@ethionet.et; s/tw/ste US\$38/50/75) Perched on a high natural balcony and boasting a gorgeous garden terrace overlooking the town, this is easily Gonder's nicest hotel. While wool wall hangings, stone walls and embroidered bedding are nice touches, it's the views from rooms 201 to 209 that steal the show. The room layout, with nifty triangular partition, is identical to all other government Ghion Hotels.

Fogera Hotel (☎ 0581 110405; s/tw/tr US\$20/25/35) While the rooms in the old Italian building are begging for renovations, the garden *tukuls* (conical thatched huts) have aged well and are quite attractive and comfortable. Each has high ceilings and hot-water showers.

Eating

Habesha Kitfo (mains Birr17-35) Lovingly and traditionally decked out with woven mat floor, cowhide stools and leather chairs, this is a good place for great Ethiopian food. Vegetarian fasting food is available daily.

Mini Fogera (mains Birr8-12) Although this place's cushion-covered cement stalls won't win your bottom's approval, its Ethiopian fare just might win your stomach's.

Goha Hotel (mains Birr16-23) Dine on roast lamb, fish cutlet, lentil soup or other Western favourites in this hotel's massive and bright dining room. If you order wine, ensure it's opened at the table.

Circle Hotel (mains Birr20-30) After singing 'the wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round...' as you make your way up the spiralling stairs, plant yourself on the rooftop restaurant and cross your fingers – *faranji* fare here is hit or miss. We happily hit a good burger.

Affinity Bar & Restaurant (mains Birr7-15) This place is popular with local businessmen for an Ethiopian meal at lunch. Dine inside or on the parking-lot-looking patio.

Hash-Baz Café (snacks Birr2) With great croissants, cakes and pastries, it's a fine spot for breakfast.

Ras Dashen Supermarket (☎ 8am-9pm) Load up on Simien Mountain supplies here.

Drinking

Goha Hotel (beer Birr7) There's nowhere better in town for a sunset drink than the hotel's lofty garden terrace.

Abyssinia Café (drinks Birr1.50-4.50) This classic Italian café in the heart of the piazza is a true throwback to the days of old. The coffee is great and the beer is cheap.

Abkeilih Tej Beat (bottles of tej Birr5) This well-known *tej beat* (purveyor of honey wine) is the best place to delve into some stiff *tej*.

Hill Top Bar (☎ 6pm-1am) American-inspired but inexpressibly Ethiopian. Try, if you dare, a *gin fir fir* (gin mixed with beer), or, less potent, wine diluted with Coca-Cola!

Sofa Juice (juices Birr3) If your insides are calling for drinks of a healthy variety, get your vitamin and fruity fix at this juice haven.

Entertainment

Mimicking the success of Bahir Dar's Balageru Cultural Club, several traditional bars have opened in Gonder. *Azmaris* (see the boxed text, p53) sing along to their *masenkos* (single-stringed fiddle), women dance and everybody has a good time.

Bar Balageru (admission free) The most fun and most packed. A glass of *tej* is Birr5.

Bru box (admission free) You'll hear the drumbeats from a block away. It's good fun but the *faranji* drink prices are stupidly steep.

Shopping

Merkato (☎ sunrise-sunset) The obvious choice for shoppers. Within the market and on surrounding streets you'll find basket, pottery and cloth stalls.

You can support Project Ploughshare by buying pottery in Wolleka or at the unmarked stall opposite the Royal Enclosure.

Getting There & Away

For information about reaching Sudan, see p275.

AIR

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0581 110129) flies once or twice daily to Addis Ababa (US\$102, 1½ to two hours), Bahir Dar (US\$37, 17 minutes), Lalibela (US\$51, 30 minutes) and Aksum (US\$73, 1¼ hours).

BUS

Buses leave for Addis Ababa (Birr82.50, two days, 6am), Bahir Dar (Birr 22, four

hours, three daily), Debark (Birr14.10, 3½ hours, two daily), Gorgora (Birr9.10, 1½ hours, two daily) and Woldia (Birr53.35, two days, twice weekly). For Aksum, go first to Shire (Birr40.60, 11 hours, 6am). For longer journeys, buy tickets a day in advance.

CAR & 4WD

NTO (☎ 0581 110379) and **Galaxy Express Services** (☎ 0581 111546; Goha Hotel) rent out vehicles with drivers; this should be prearranged. On short notice, **Abraham Tigabu** (☎ 0918 770386; abrahamtig@yahoo.com) and his trusty Land Cruiser will do the trick. Day trips to Sankaber in the Simien Mountains should cost no more than Birr900 with driver and fuel.

There are occasionally fuel shortages, so fill up when you can.

Getting Around

A taxi to or from the airport, which is 21km from town, costs between Birr30 and Birr40. Chartering a taxi to see Gonder's sights costs about Birr30 per hour, but you'll have to negotiate hard for this. Taxis and minibuses congregate near the piazza.

Minibuses charge between Birr0.50 and Birr1.75 for hops around town; *garis* cost around Birr1 to Birr5.

Bicycles can be hired (Birr5 per hour) outside the Royal Enclosure's northeast corner.

AROUND GONDER

Gorgora ጎርጎራ

pop 3100 / elev 1880m

The little lakeshore town of Gorgora, 67km south of Gonder, makes a pleasant excursion for those with time, particularly for travellers interested in birds (see p117).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The most interesting relic of Gorgora's former days as a temporary capital is the attractive **Church of Debre Sina** (Map p116; admission Birr25). Built in 1608 by Emperor Susenyos' son on the site of a 14th-century monastery, it's decorated with vivid 17th-century polychromatic frescoes. Ask to see the 'Egyptian St Mary'.

Emperor Susenyos (r 1607–32) built a **palace** (Map p116; admission free) on a peninsula 10km west of Gorgora, which can be reached in 30 minutes by road or boat. Compared to Gonder, it's in shambles but historical

architecture buffs should make the trip. Also in the area is the **Portuguese Cathedral** (Map p116; admission free) built by Susenyos. It's decrepit state is evidence of his failed attempt to force Catholicism on his people.

If the lake's waters are calling, you can visit Tana's northern monasteries. **Mendaba Medhane Alem** (Map p116; admission Birr20, men only) hosts ancient biblical manuscripts and some of Ethiopia's most dedicated priests, while **Birgida Maryam** (Map p116; admission Birr20, men only) is known for its 16th-century painting of Mary. Both are around 30 minutes from Gorgora by boat.

With the exception of Debre Sina, you'll need a local guide to find most of the sights. **Tesfaye Mekonnen** (☎ 0581 117732), who's usually found at the Gorgora Port Hotel, is a reliable option.

SLEEPING & EATING

Gorgora Port Hotel (☎ 0581 117732; camping Birr25, tw Birr80, 3-bedroom ste Birr180) The two massive suites scream Brady Bunch, ooze 1970s and are a little worn, but sit mere feet from the shore, allowing the sounds of lapping waves to put you soundly to sleep. The small twins are also bright and clean, but are further from shore. Electricity runs between 6pm and 10pm. The restaurant (mains Birr7 to Birr16) is good and specialises in fish.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Two daily buses run to Gonder (Birr9.10, 1½ hours).

A ferry sails from Gorgora for Bahir Dar every Thursday at 6am (Birr104.50, 1½ days). The ferry typically overnights in Konzola, where there's food and a couple of cheap hotels. Buy tickets at the **Lake Tana Transport Enterprise office** (☎ 8am-11.30am & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat). The same office rents speedboats (Birr112 per hour for one to six people) for trips to the monasteries and local ruins.

SIMIEN MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

የሰሜን ተራሮች ብሔራዊ ፓርክ No matter how you look at them, the Simien Mountains will leave you speechless. For trekkers, the lack of words will be the result of their lungs screaming after slogging up a scree slope at 4200m. For animal-lovers, it will be the trepidation of sitting among a group of 100 gelada baboons that zaps their vocabulary. For everyone with a heartbeat,

it will simply be standing atop a panoramic precipice and looking out over the Abyssinian abyss that takes their breath away.

Whether you come for a stroll or two-week trek, the Simien Mountains make a great break from the historical circuit's constant monument-bashing. Besides the mythical baboons (see the boxed text, p128), it's also home to a variety of endemic mammals, birds and plants, including the beautiful and massively horned walia ibex. Thanks to its wildlife, the park is a World Heritage site.

Although facilities for trekkers are few (the undeveloped state of the park is actually one of its attractions), the mountains are nevertheless easily accessible and treks can be quickly organised.

The Simien Mountains aren't to be missed – they undoubtedly rank among Africa's most beautiful ranges.

Geography & Geology

Comprising one of Africa's principal mountain massifs, the Simiens are made up of several plateaus, separated by broad river valleys. A number of peaks rise above 4000m, including Ras Dashen (4543m), which is highly touted – incorrectly so – by Ethiopian tourism officials as the fourth-highest mountain in Africa. They seem to have happily forgotten the Ruwenzori Range's Mt Speke (4890m), Mt Baker (4844m), Mt Emin (4792m), Mt Gessi (4717m) and Mt Luigi (4626m), as well as Tanzania's Mt Meru (4566m)!

The Simiens' landscape is incredibly dramatic. It was formed by countless eruptions, some 40 million years ago; layer upon layer of molten lava was poured until it reached a thickness of 3000m. The subsequent erosion produced the mountains' jagged and spectacular landscapes seen today.

The famous pinnacles that sharply and abruptly rise from the surrounding landscape are volcanic necks, the solidified plumbing of the eroded ancient volcanoes.

The 179-sq-km park lies within the 'Afro-alpine' zone, between 1900m and 4543m elevation.

Wildlife

The mountains are home to three of Ethiopia's larger endemic mammals: the walia ibex (numbers estimated at 515 in 2005), the gelada baboon (estimated to number around 6000) and the elusive Ethiopian wolf (estimated between 45 and 70). Other mammals sometimes seen are rock hyraxes, jackals, bushbucks and klipspringers.

Endemic birds include the often-seen thick-billed raven, and the less common black-headed siskin, white-collared pigeon, white-billed starling, wattled ibis, spot-breasted plover, white-backed black tit and Ankober seedeater or serin. Though common, one of the most memorable sights (and sounds!) is the lammergeyer soaring low.

Along the roadside on the approach to Sankaber, look out for the ivory-coloured, endemic Abyssinian rose.

Planning

Although organising trekking yourself at park headquarters in Debarq is straightforward, it still takes two hours to complete. It's best to arrive at headquarters the afternoon before you plan on starting your trek.

Organising treks through agencies in Gonder and Addis Ababa is easy, but you may end up paying more for the same trip.

WHEN TO GO

December to March is the driest time; after the rainy season in October, the scenery is greenest and the wildflowers are out.

During the main rainy season, between June and September, mist often obscures the views and trails can be slippery underfoot. But, you're still assured of several hours of clear, dry weather for walking; the rain tends to come in short, sharp downpours.

Daytime temperatures are consistently between 11.5°C and 18°C, while 3°C is typical at night. October to December nighttime temperatures can dip below freezing.

PARK FEES

All fees are good for 48 hours and are payable at the **park headquarters** (☎ 0581 113482; admission Birr50, camping Birr20, 5-seat vehicle Birr10; 🕒 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon & 2-5pm Sat & Sun).

Entrance and camping fees won't be refunded once paid. However, if mules, cooks, guides and scouts aren't used (because of bad weather or acclimatisation difficulties),

VANISHING WOLVES

Though it derived its original name (Simien fox) from these mountains, the Ethiopian wolf is close to extinction in the area. Many have died from diseases caught from local dogs, others have died after eating rats poisoned by villagers to protect their crops, or in traps. Hybridisation with dogs is another threat to the species' survival. Fortunately, the endemic animal is faring far better in the Bale Mountains to the south (see the boxed text, p184).

their fees can be refunded; make sure this is clear before setting off.

MAPS

The most useful trekking map is produced by the well-respected Institute of Geography, University of Berne, Switzerland: the *Simien [sic] Mountains Trekking Map* (2003; 1:100,000). The park rents a laminated version for Birr20 per day. If you want your own copy, it's best to get it before leaving home. It can also occasionally be found in Gonder or in Debarq's Simien Park Hotel (p130; Birr200 to Birr215).

EQUIPMENT

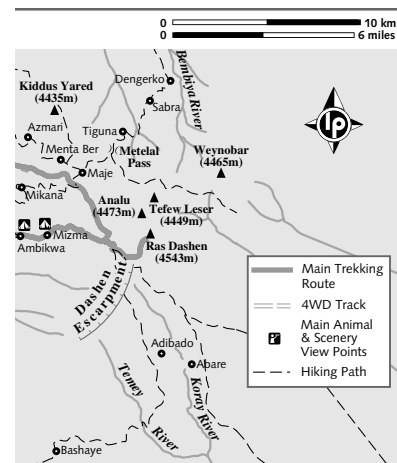
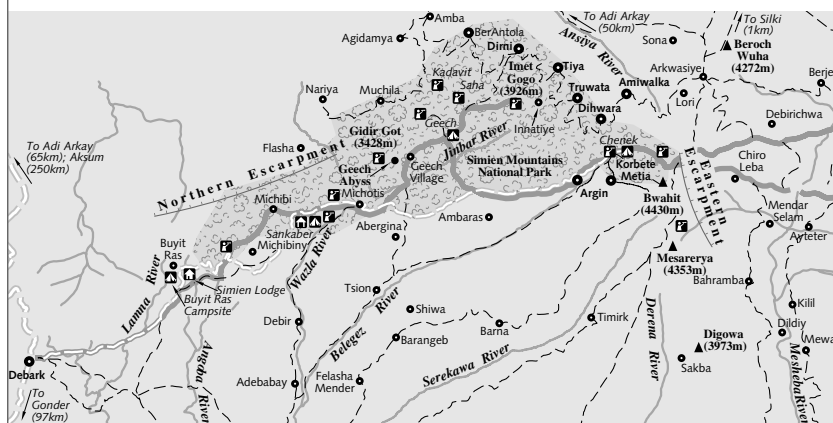
Mattresses (Birr10 per day), sleeping bags (Birr10 per day), two-person tents (Birr25 per day) and cooking equipment and gas stoves (Birr30 per day) can be hired at park headquarters. Debarq's petrol station sells kerosene.

SUPPLIES

Outside Debarq, there are no shops; you can buy eggs (three eggs Birr1), chickens (Birr15 to Birr20) and sheep (Birr80 to Birr150) from mountain villages. Your guide will negotiate prices. Mule handlers will gladly kill, skin and roast a sheep if they can tuck in too. If you leave the carcass a little way from camp, it may attract a lammergeyer.

Gonder is a better place to stock up as Debarq's food supplies are limited to a few tin cans, biscuits, pasta, tomato sauce and milk powder, plus some fresh fruit and vegetables. Stoves, lanterns and kerosene (paraffin) are also available in Gonder. Anything 'specialised', such as packet soups, should be bought in Addis Ababa.

SIMIEN MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK



MONKEY TROUBLE

Astoundingly beautiful, and ever so slightly scary when they yawn (those are serious choppers!), gelada baboons are a favourite sight among visitors. However, the extraordinary animal is little appreciated by locals. Resented for its alleged damage to crops and pasture, it has become the scapegoat for more sinister goings-on, too. According to local police reports, gelada baboons are responsible for local thefts, burglaries, rapes and even murders – in one case bursting into a house to drag an adult man 1.5km before shoving him off a cliff face! If in doubt, blame the gelada!

Unless you want to test locals' theories, don't chase or try to feed the gelada. See also the boxed text, p61.

Water is available during the trek but should be treated. Make sure the cook, if you have one, boils the water sufficiently.

Though eucalyptus wood (sold by villagers on the mountain) is permitted for fires, it's best to bring a stove. Burning wood from indigenous trees is strictly forbidden.

If you're worried about warmth, do as the locals do: buy a *gabi* (Birr45 to Birr90 depending on the size) at Debark market, which makes a great blanket, sheet, pillow, shawl or cushion.

GUIDES, SCOUTS, COOKS & MULES

Cooks, scouts, mules and guides are all organised at park headquarters.

Official guides (Birr75 per day) are recommended and help translate while in villages. Although freelancers, they're trained by the national park on courses established by an Austrian team. Most are excellent, a few are less so. Guides work by rota, but you should not be afraid to ask for another if you're not happy with the one assigned to you.

Most people who've hired cheaper unofficial guides off the street end up regretting the decision. See p260 for more.

'Scouts' (armed park rangers) are compulsory (Birr30 per day). Few speak English, but what they lack in conversation they make up for in willingness to help.

Cooks can be hired for Birr50 per day (cooking for one to five people), a welcome and not-too-costly luxury for some.

Porters aren't available, but mules (Birr20 per day) with handlers (Birr20 per day) can be hired. The guide and scout will expect at least one mule for carrying their blankets and provisions. Check mules for tender feet (ask the owner to walk the mule up and down) and signs of saddle sores. If in doubt, ask for another.

Guides, cooks and mule handlers should bring their own food. Many bring token offerings or nothing at all and will then look to you for sustenance. Either check that they have enough or bring extra packets of rice etc.

If you plan on covering two days' worth of trekking in one, you'll have to pay your team double for the day.

See p264 for post-trek tipping advice.

ORGANISED TREKS

There are numerous tour operators or travel agencies in Addis Ababa (see p282) and several more in Gonder (p119) that can organise transport, guides, equipment rental and food. Since the agencies are just hiring the same services from park headquarters that you'd get if organising it yourself, you can use the costs mentioned previously (park fees, equipment, supplies, guides, scouts, cooks and mules etc) to judge the agencies' quotes and negotiate accordingly. See Getting There & Away (p131) and Getting Around (p131) for transportation costs.

There are also numerous freelance 'agents' in Gonder offering to organise treks for you, but most receive mixed reviews at best from travellers.

Trekking

The foot that is restless, will tread on a turd.

Ethiopian proverb

Most treks begin and end in Debark, but it's possible to use 4WDs to start or end your hike anywhere between Debark and Chenek. If you have time, strong legs and a hatred of doubling back, you could finish your trek at Adi Arkay, 75km north of Debark.

Once on the mountains you'll be following centuries-old paths that crisscross the slopes and connect villages with pastures. They make terrific trekking routes; the walking itself is generally not challenging and gradients aren't too steep.

Be sure to allow time for acclimatisation when planning your routes, particularly if you're aiming for Ras Dashen. Review the Safety Guidelines for Trekking (p254) and Responsible Trekking (p255) boxed texts.

CHOOSING A TREKKING ROUTE

For spectacular scenery, head for Geech. For walia ibex, Chenek is good (be sure to get here no later than 9am). Gelada baboons are best between Buyit Ras and Sankaber; Chenek and Geech aren't bad either. For pleasant walking, the stretch between Geech and Chenek is good. For lammergeyer, head to Chenek.

Ras Dashen, frankly, doesn't offer a great deal beyond the satisfaction of 'bagging it'. And thanks to an odd perspective from its summit, nearby peaks actually look higher. This has led disgruntled trekkers to drag their guides up peak after peak, repeatedly musing the 'one over there' is higher!

With two days you could walk from Debark to Sankaber and back. With four days you could reach Geech; with five you could get to Chenek, taking in Mt Bwahit; and with around 10 days you could bag Ras Dashen (these times include the return journey to Debark). If you're short on time and want to maximise your time in the mountains, using a vehicle to access Sankaber will save at least two days.

The following is a classic route; the lower camps can be bypassed using a vehicle. Times vary from person to person, and also depend on whether exact routes are followed. The following routes and times have been devised in consultation with local guides.

Debark to Ras Dashen Trek

DEBARK TO BUYIT RAS (10KM, THREE TO FOUR HOURS)

Sankaber can be reached in a single day, but many trekkers prefer to break at Buyit Ras, where there's an abundance of gelada baboons. There's also a camping spot with beautiful views, though you'll have to share the area with a new resort that opened in 2006. If you push on to Sankaber, it's another 13km (around three to four hours).

BUYIT RAS TO GEECH CAMP VIA

SANKABER (25KM, SEVEN TO EIGHT HOURS)

The dirt road will take you straight to Sankaber, but the scenic route along the

escarpment isn't to be missed. There are particularly good views between Michibi and Sankaber. Look out for gelada baboons.

From Sankaber to Geech it's between four and five hours' walk.

GEECH CAMP TO CHENEK VIA IMET GOGO (20KM, SEVEN TO NINE HOURS)

Geech to Chenek takes about five to six hours, but you'd be crazy not to take in Imet Gogo, around 5km northeast of Geech. It takes 1½ to two hours one way.

The promontory, at 3926m, affords some of the most spectacular views of the Simien Mountains. To make a day of it, you could continue to the viewpoint known as Saha. From Saha, you can head for the viewpoint at Kadavit (2.5km, 30 to 40 minutes), then return to camp.

You can also trek to Chenek via Imet Gogo using Saha as a starting point (eight to nine hours). Saha lies around 3km from Geech.

From Imet Gogo you have two choices: the first is to return to Geech by your outward route, then head directly south, back across the Jinbar River to where you'll eventually meet the dirt road that leads to Chenek. The alternative, which is harder but more scenic, is to follow the escarpment edge south all the way to Chenek.

Near Chenek is Korbete Metia, a stunning spot with a sinister side. It was here that some regional officials were executed. Korbete Metia loosely translates to 'the place where skin was thrown down'. Lammergeyers are often seen here.

Chenek is probably the best spot in the Simien Mountains for wildlife.

For those who want to return to Sankaber from Chenek (seven to eight hours) but avoid most of the dirt road, a scenic local trail up to Ambaras through the village of Argin can be followed. The trail affords good views of the escarpment and the foothills of Mt Bwahit.

CHENEK TO MT BWAHIT & RETURN (6KM, TWO TO THREE HOURS)

The summit of Mt Bwahit (4430m) lies to the southeast of the camp. From the top, you can see a tiny piece of Ras Dashen.

Around 20 minutes from the camp towards Mt Bwahit, there's a spot that affords one of the best opportunities for glimpsing, at long range (around 300m to 400m), the

walia ibex. This animal, a member of the wild goat family, lives on the crags of the steep escarpment above 3000m. Come very early in the morning or late in the afternoon (after 4pm) with binoculars. On our last trip we were lucky enough to see two males going head to head on a precarious slope, with the crashes of their collisions echoing through the crisp air.

CHENEK TO AMBIKWA (22KM, EIGHT TO NINE HOURS)

From Chenek, a track leads eastward then southeastward up towards a good viewpoint on the eastern escarpment, to the north of Mt Bwahit. To the east, across the vast valley of the Mesheba River, you can see the bulk of Ras Dashen.

AMBIKWA TO RAS DASHEN & RETURN (17KM, EIGHT TO 10 HOURS)

Most trekkers stay two nights at Ambikwa and go up to the summit of Ras Dashen on the day in between. It's a good idea to start at first light.

At Ras Dashen there are three distinct points, and much debate about which is the true summit. Whichever peak you go for, the total walk from Ambikwa to reach one summit is about five to six hours. If you want to knock off the others, add two to three hours for each one. Returning by the same route takes about three to four hours.

Return Routes

AMBIKWA TO DEBARK (77KM, THREE DAYS)

Most trekkers return from Ambikwa to Debark along the same route via Chenek and Sankaber. If you're tired or have had enough, you may be able to hitch a lift (Birr30) with the odd truck that plies the route.

AMBIKWA TO ADI ARKAY (ABOUT 65KM, THREE TO FIVE DAYS)

One alternative return route is to trek from Ambikwa to Arkwasiye, to the northeast of Chenek, taking in the nearby peaks of Beroch Wuha (4272m) and Silki (4420m).

From Arkwasiye to Adi Arkay will take another two to three days of strenuous walking, via Sona (three hours from Arkwasiye).

From Adi Arkay, which lies 75km north of Debark, you can continue northward to Aksum.

Other Routes

There are endless alternatives for keen trekkers, such as a return route from Ras Dashen back to Ambikwa and Chenek, via the east and north sides of the Mesheba River.

One slightly more challenging route that will give you a taste of the highlands as well as the lowlands, and bags some 4000m on the way (and is much more interesting than climbing Ras Dashen), is from Debark to Adi Arkay via Sankaber, Geech, Chenek (climbing Mt Bwahit at 4430m), Arkwasiye (climbing Beroch Wuha at 4272m) and Sona (climbing Silki at 4420m). The route should take around nine to 10 days. Note that, since it takes the guides, mules and other members of your trekking entourage two further days to return to Debark from Adi Arkay, you must pay two days' extra fee.

Sleeping & Eating

DEBARK

Simien Park Hotel (☎ 0581 113481; s/d/tw with shared bathroom Birr30/40/50, tw Birr70) About 600m north of park headquarters, this place is simple and reasonably clean. Rooms come in baby blue, and showers (shared and private) are hot. Reservations are advised, particularly in January. Its bar/restaurant serves local and *faranji* food (Birr8 to Birr13) and drink.

Red Fox Hotel (☎ 0581 117807; s/d/tw with shared bathroom Birr25/35/45) This should only be an option if Simien Park Hotel is full. It has big rooms and a satellite TV in its bar, but it's not the cleanest and the shared bathrooms are rather rough. It's set a block west of the main street.

ON THE MOUNTAINS

Camping (per 48hr Birr20) The obvious choice for trekkers. It's possible anywhere, but if you're in the vicinity of an official camp (Sankaber, Geech and Chenek) it's more convenient to drop your tent there. These camps have huts for your guides and scouts, as well as long drop loos. Besides the new block of toilets just south of Sankaber, most toilets are rather filthy.

If you don't have camping equipment (and don't want to rent it) you can do as the guides do: stay with locals (you should contribute about Birr10 per night). Don't expect luxuries. A floor or wooden platform

covered with a goatskin serves as your bedroom; any number and combination of animals, children, chickens and especially fleas will be your roommates.

Simien Lodge (☎ 0116 189398, 0911 203937; www.simiens.com; dm US\$15-20, d US\$95-105, 4-person VIP tukul US\$135-150) This new lodge opened at Buyit Ras in 2006. Dubbed northern Ethiopia's first ecolodge, it plans to promote sustainable development and encourages guests to help with charity work in Debark. The thatch-roofed *tukuls* are very comfortable and come complete with solar-powered underfloor heating. The 16-bed dormitory even has solar-powered showers, though immersion heaters help things along during the rainy season. The bar and restaurant are centred on open fires; meals must be ordered when booking the room.

Sankaber Lodge (dm Birr40) For day-trippers, there is this spartan lodge, which has a couple of nine-bed dorms. Don't expect more than a rickety bed, blanket, some old bed linen and possibly the odd flea.

Getting There & Away

Two morning buses run from Debark to Gonder (Birr14.10, 3½ hours). The only bus running north to Shire (for Aksum) is the Gonder service (Birr35, 7½ hours). It typically arrives in Debark between 9am and 10am, but is usually full. If so, either head back to Gonder or hitch a lift north. From Shire, take the Gonder bus (Birr40.60) and ask to be dropped at Debark.

It's possible to arrange 4WDs in Gonder to drop you off at Debark (Birr450, two hours), Sankaber (Birr850, 3½ hours) or Chenek (Birr1000, five hours). If arranged, they can also pick you up. Return costs are the same. See Car & 4WD on p125 for contact details.

If you hike out to Adi Arkay, you can try to get a seat on the Gonder-Shire bus. We had no luck, so paid Birr50 for a cab seat in a local truck heading to Shire.

Getting Around

It's possible to arrange a 4WD at park headquarters to drop you off and pick you up at Sankaber (one way/return Birr400/800 after negotiations).

Usually at least one supply truck plies the road daily to Chenek (leaving Debark at around 6am and returning the same day).

You may be able to hitch a lift in the back (around Birr30).

SHIRE ሻራ

pop 53,195 / elev 1923m

Shire, marked on some maps as Inda Selassie, is of interest to travellers only because it provides a link with Aksum, 60km to the east. However, the journey from Debark to Shire (and in particular the stretch of road between Debark and Adi Arkay) is one of the most dramatic in Ethiopia.

The beautifully constructed Italian road cuts its way through the mountains in a series of neat loops and bends and provides impressive views. Around Adi Arkay, look out for the peak known as Awaza (occasionally represented on the back of Ethiopian Airlines tickets).

The plains on the outskirts of Shire were the scene of fighting between the Tigrayans and the advancing Italians in the 1930s, and later Mengistu's army in the civil war. Keep an eye out for war relics.

If you get stuck in Shire (and you will if you arrive here after 4pm), the **Jelly Café** (s with shared bathroom Birr15) is by far the nicest sleeping option. The rooms are small, tidy and bright (No 7 is best). The toilet and shower is basic but clean. It's 200m west of the bus station.

There are several buses and minibuses to Aksum daily (Birr10 to Birr15, 1½ hours). One daily bus serves Gonder (Birr40.60, 11 hours, 6am).

AKSUM አክሱም

pop 41,500 / elev 2130m

Sprawling, dusty, and rural – Aksum is modest almost to a fault. On first sight, it's hard to imagine that the town was ever the site of a great civilisation. Yet Aksum is one of Ethiopia's star attractions. Littered with massive teetering stelae, ruins of palaces, underground tombs (most still undiscovered) and inscriptions rivalling the Rosetta stone itself, the town once formed part of the Aksumite kingdom that Dr Neville Chittick described as 'the last of the great civilisations of Antiquity to be revealed to modern knowledge'. Aksum is undoubtedly one of the most important and spectacular ancient sites in sub-Saharan Africa. Justifiably, Unesco lists it as a World Heritage site.

Aksum has a vibrancy, life and continuing national importance very rarely found

AKSUM'S FALL

After Aksum lost its grip on Red Sea trade, due to the rise of Islamic Arabs' fortunes, the society quickly imploded and sent Ethiopia into the dark ages for five centuries. Why this happened when it was still rich in natural resources is the subject of many theories.

The environmental argument suggests that Aksum's ever-increasing population led to over-cropping of the land, deforestation and eventually soil erosion. The climatic explanation claims that a slight 'global warming' took place, which finished Aksum's agriculture and eventually led to drought and famine. The military argument claims that Aksum was undermined by continual incursions from neighbouring tribes, such as the Beja from the northwest of the country.

According to tradition, Aksumite power was usurped around the 9th century by the dreaded warrior queen Gudit (or Judit), a pagan or Jew, who killed the ruling king, burnt down the city and sabotaged the stelae (definitely the least boring explanation!). Intriguingly, this legend seems to be born out by at least two documents written at about this time.

at ancient sites. Pilgrims still journey to Aksum and the great majority of Ethiopians believe passionately that the Ark of the Covenant resides here.

Though no longer a wealthy metropolis, the town continues to flourish as a centre of local trade; life continues as it has for millennia. Around the crumbling palaces, farmers go on ploughing their land, women continue to wash their clothes in the Queen of Sheba's Bath, and marketgoers and their donkeys hurry past the towering stelae. You won't find pyramid-parking coaches or sound-and-light shows here. And inextricably interwoven with the archaeological evidence is the local tradition – the legends, myths and fables.

A good time to visit is during one of the major religious festivals, particularly the celebration of Maryam Zion in late November. To do the town justice, you should schedule a bare minimum of two days, or one full day if you have a vehicle.

History

According to local legend, Aksum was the Queen of Sheba's capital in the 10th century BC. More fantasy than fact that may be, but what's certain is that a high civilisation started to rise as early as 400 BC.

By the 1st century AD, Greek merchants knew Aksum as a great city and the powerful capital of an extensive empire. For close to 1000 years, Aksum dominated the vital sea-borne trade between Africa and Asia. The kingdom numbered among the ancient world's greatest states. For more information see Kingdom of Aksum (p27) and the boxed text, above.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Africa Hotel (Map p133; per hr Birr60) Town's fastest and most reliable Internet option (though that's not saying much!). Found in a small room off the courtyard. Ask the manager to open it for you.

Alpha Internet (Map p133; per hr Birr48) Slow but usually steady connections.

John Telecenter & Internet Cafe (Map p133; per hr Birr48) Offers slow Internet and international telephone calls (per minute Birr25).

MEDICAL SERVICES

St Mary Hospital (Map p133; ☎ 24hr) Town's only hospital, though was hard to find anyone who spoke English.

St Mary Pharmacy (Map p133; ☎ 0347 752646; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm) Helpful and well stocked.

St Michael Clinic (Map p133; ☎ noon-2pm & 5-10pm Mon-Fri, 8am-10pm Sat & Sun) Helpful clinic and the doctor speaks decent English.

MONEY

Commercial Bank (Map p133; ☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Wegagen Bank (Map p133; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) Exchanges cash and travellers cheques.

POST

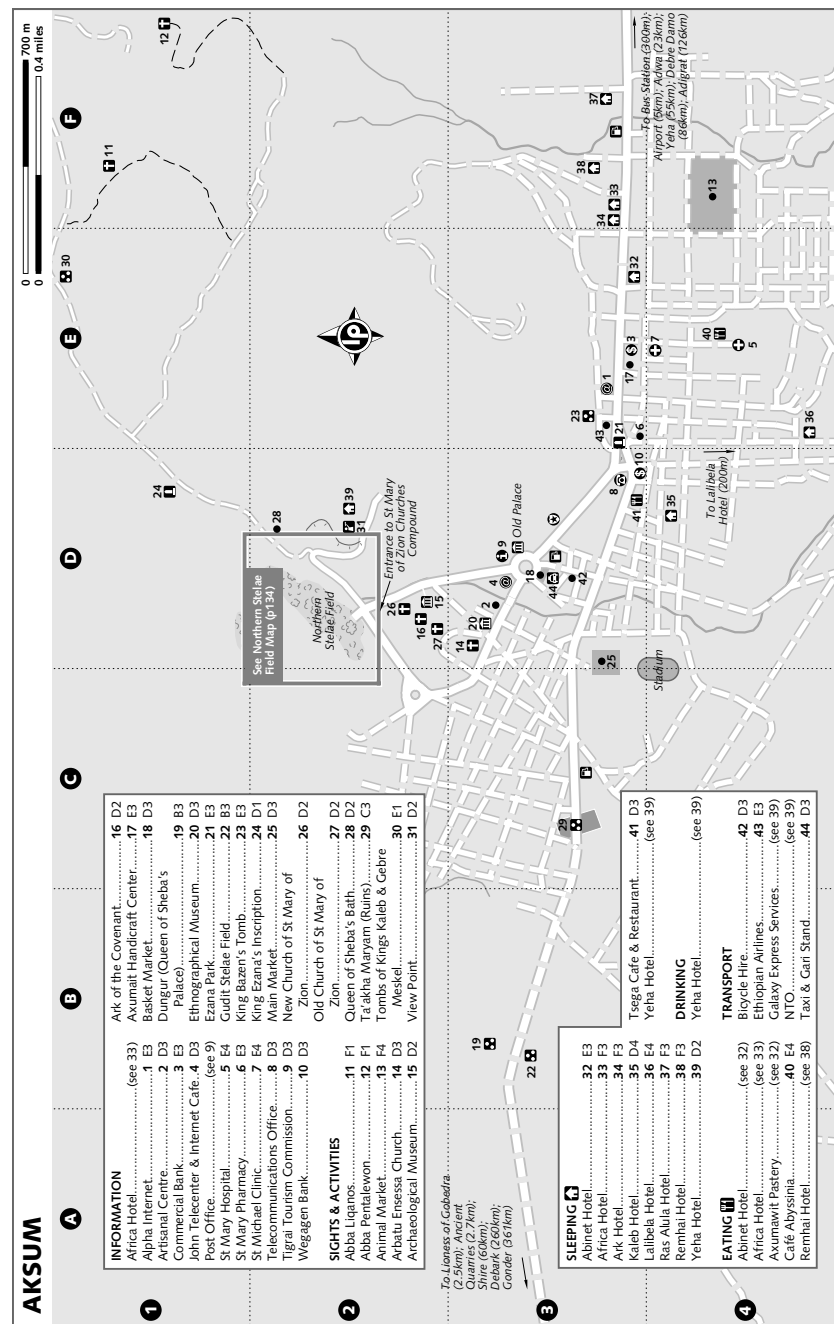
A small and pretty reliable post office (Map p133) is next to the tourism commission.

TELEPHONE

Telecommunications office (Map p133; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat) International calls. Standard rates (p267).

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tigrai Tourism Commission (Map p133; ☎ 0347 753924; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) One of the country's most friendly and helpful offices. It has a couple of



official guides who give free Aksum tours on weekdays (tips are appreciated; Birr50 per group is fair). Guides are limited so arrange a time at least a day in advance. On weekends the office told us official guides charge Birr50 per person.

Sights

One admission ticket (adult/student Birr50/25) covers all sights within the immediate vicinity of Aksum, except the St Mary of Zion church compound and the monasteries of Abba Pentalewon and Abba Liqanos. The ticket is good for the duration of your stay and is sold at the Tigray Tourism Commission. It's thought when the future Ethiopian Cultural Heritage Project museum opens behind the Northern Stelae Park, tickets will be sold there. All sights are open between 8am and 5pm unless stated otherwise.

If you can get your hands on David Phillipson's *Aksum: an archaeological introduction and guide* you'll find an excellent compendium to Aksum's history, archaeology and major sites and monuments.

Although you can see the monuments on your own, an official guide is recommended. All are trained and many are history students, so you'll get much more out of your visit. Bring a torch for the tombs.

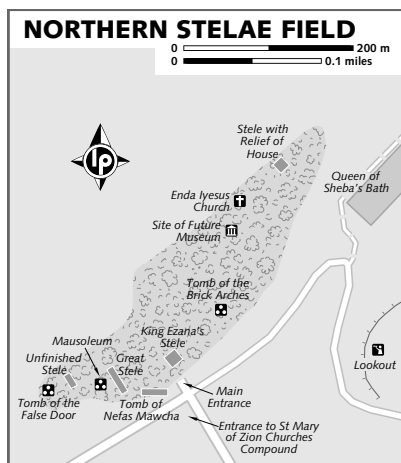
AKSUMITE STELAE የአክሱም ሐውልቶች

Ancient Aksum obelisks (stelae) pepper the area, and whether you're looking down on a small specimen or staring up at a grand tower, you'll be duly bowled over. See the boxed text, p136 for the lowdown.

NORTHERN STELAE FIELD TOMBS

Despite the grandeur above the surface, some of the Northern Stelae Field's greatest treasures are found beneath it. Amazingly, 98% of it lies undiscovered and you may find yourself hearing the sound of an unopened tomb echoing below your feet as you explore. This is part of Aksum's appeal – the thought that fascinating finds, secrets and maybe even treasures lurk in the depths. Try not to return under the cover of darkness with a shovel!

Though it's unlikely that anything as spectacular as an Ethiopian Tutankhamen will turn up, the importance of the Aksumite kingdom in the ancient world, and the potential for discovery of future excavations, shouldn't be dismissed.



Most of the tombs excavated to date had been pillaged by robbers (remember, no shovels!), so very little is known about Aksumite burial customs or the identities of those buried.

Tomb of the Brick Arches

Dating from the end of the 3rd century, this tomb (Map p134) is remarkably well preserved and contains four rock-cut chambers, subdivided by a series of brick arches built with lime mortar. If it's still closed, you'll still be able to look down its 18 stone steps to its signature horseshoe-shaped brick arch entranceway.

It's just one of two tombs so far excavated that have avoided wholesale robbery. Among the many finds were the remains of at least two skeletons, finely carved ivory including two beautiful tusks, pottery, fragments of glass vessels, and, in a pit in the first chamber, a large quantity of bronze, including decorative panels.

It was at this site that archaeologists discovered the cast plaque, the holes of which matched rivets atop one stele (see the boxed text, p136).

The tomb should be open to the public by the time you read this.

Tomb of the False Door

In 1972 the unique Tomb of the False Door (Map p134) was discovered (known locally as the Tomb of King Ramhai). It lies in the western extremity of the Northern Stelae

Field and is thought to date between the 4th and 6th centuries AD. More complex in structure, its stone blocks are also larger and more finely dressed than those found in some other tombs. Comprising an antechamber and inner chamber, it's surrounded on three sides by a passage.

Above the tomb, at ground level, a rectangular, probably flat-roofed building would once have stood (measuring some 12 sq metres by 2.8m high). Above the stairs descending into the tomb's chamber was a stone slab carved with a false door almost identical to those found on the stelae. Look for the iron clamps fixing blocks of stone together like giant staples.

All the tomb's contents were stolen in antiquity and, judging from the lengths to which the robbers went to gain access, it's thought to have contained objects of great value. The much-mutilated single stone sarcophagus can still be seen.

Tomb of Nefas Mawcha

The megalithic Tomb of Nefas Mawcha (Map p134) consists of a large rectangular central chamber surrounded on three sides by a passage. The tomb is unusual for its large size, the sophistication of the structure and the size of the stones used for its construction (the stone which roofs the central chamber measures 17.3m by 6.4m and weighs some 360 tonnes!). It's believed the force of the Giant Stele crashing into its roof caused the tomb's spectacular collapse.

Mausoleum

The so-called mausoleum (Map p134) was discovered in 1974, but not excavated until the mid-1990s. A monumental portal (hewn from a single slab of granite) marked the tomb's entrance and was also carved with the stelae's curious false door motifs. The portal leads into a passageway with 10 chambers. Part of the tomb had been disfigured at some unknown date by robbers, who succeeded in digging through 1.5m of solid masonry! The mausoleum was almost set for its opening to the public during our visit – enjoy!

ST MARY OF ZION CHURCHES

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Opposite the Northern Stelae Field in a walled compound lie the two churches of

St Mary of Zion (admission Birr60, personal video cameras Birr100; ☞ 8am–noon & 2–6pm).

The rectangular **old church** (Map p133) is a remarkable example of traditional architecture and was built by the Emperor Fasiladas, the founder of Gondar, in 1665. It's thought that the old podium on which it sits may well belong to Africa's first church, which was erected by King Ezana or King Kaleb in the 4th or 6th century. Unfortunately, the original church was destroyed during the incursions of Mohammed Gragn the Left-Handed in 1535.

Inside there are fine murals, including a painting of the Nine Saints (see *The Coming of Christianity*, p28), and a collection of ceremonial musical instruments.

A carefully guarded chapel in the church compound is said to contain the **Ark of the Covenant** (Map p133). Don't think you can take a peek: just one specially chosen guardian has access to the Ark. And many the unfortunate onlooker has 'burst into fire' just for getting close!

The little **museum** in the same building contains an unsurpassed collection of former Ethiopian rulers' crowns. Neither the chapel nor the museum is open to women, but some of the crowns can be brought out by obliging priests; you should tip them afterwards. The chapel isn't always open; try and get here early in the morning. This museum may move to the Archaeological Museum's building, when the future museum in the Northern Stele Field opens.

The huge **new church** of St Mary of Zion (Map p133) was built in the 1960s and displays Haile Selassie's usual unusual taste. We've previously awarded it the 'hideous carbuncle' prize, but we'll be kinder this time around (perhaps it's growing on us!). It does cut a dramatic silhouette on the skyline when viewed from the Yeha Hotel at sunset. Beside it, a disproportionately tall bell tower, shaped to resemble the biggest stele of all, sprouts heavenwards.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

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The **Archaeological Museum** (Map p133; ☞ 8am–noon & 2–6pm) contains fine and well-preserved Sabaeen and early Ge'ez inscriptions, some dating back over 2500 years. There's also an interesting variety of objects found in tombs, ranging from ordinary household

A QUICK GUIDE TO AKSUM'S STELAE

For as long as 5000 years, monoliths have been used in northeast Africa as tombstones and monuments to local rulers. In Aksum, this tradition reached its apogee. Like Egypt's pyramids, Aksum's stelae were like great billboards announcing to the world the authority, power and greatness of the ruling families. Aksum's astonishing stelae are striking for their huge size, their incredible, almost pristine, state of preservation, and their curiously modern look. Sculpted from single pieces of granite, some look more like Manhattan skyscrapers than 1800-year-old obelisks, complete with little windows, doors and sometimes even door handles and locks!

Despite the stone being famously hard, Aksum's masons worked it superbly, often following an architectural design that mirrored the traditional style seen in Aksumite houses and palaces (for more details on Aksumite architecture see p56).

Metal plates, perhaps in the form of a crescent moon and disc (pagan symbol of the sun), are thought to have been riveted to the top of the stelae both at the front and back. The crescent is also an ancient pagan symbol, originating from southern Arabia. In 1996 a broken plate that perfectly matched the rusty rivet holes atop a stela was excavated. It bore the effigy of a face, perhaps that of the ruler to whom the plate's stela was dedicated. Despite these discoveries many aspects of the stelae are still shrouded in mystery.

For one, Ethiopian traditions believe that the Ark of the Covenant's celestial powers were harnessed to transport (4km from the quarries) and raise the mighty monoliths; the largest weighed no less than 517 tonnes! While far from proven, archaeologists think that the earthly forces of elephants, rollers and winches were responsible.

NORTHERN STELAE FIELD

The Northern Stelae Field is Ethiopia's biggest and most important stelae field. It contains over 120 stelae, though the original number was higher – some have been removed, others probably lie buried.

The stelae range from 1m to 33m in height and from simple slabs of stone (the majority) to finely dressed rectangular blocks, usually with flat sides and a rounded or conical apex. Though they were undoubtedly connected with the practice of human burial, it's not yet certain if every stela marks a tomb. The three largest and most famous stelae (Great Stele, King Ezana's Stele and Rome Stele) are found here and are described in this box.

In the courtyards of **Enda Iyesus** (Map p134), a stela decorated with a disc and a crescent moon can be seen. In 1997 another huge stela (18m) was discovered near the church.

Among the various other stelae is one that boasts a unique decoration. It lies on the ground around 200m to the north of King Ezana's Stele. Measuring around 9m in length, its upper section is carved like a pointed arch. Near the top, a small house-like object is carved in **relief** (on one side of the stone, supported by a pillar; Map p134), formed by a rectangle surmounted by a triangle. Some have claimed that this is early proof of Aksum's claim to house the Ark of the Covenant!

Laying prone between the Mausoleum and Tomb of the False Door is another important stela, albeit unassuming and **unfinished** (Map p134). The fact it's unfinished is strong evidence that the final carving of stelae was finished on site and not at the quarries.

King Ezana's Stele

Although standing slightly off kilter, this magnificent 24m-high stela (Map p134) at the field's entrance has done something no other stela of similar stature has – remained standing! Henry Salt, the British traveller and first foreigner to describe it in 1805, proclaimed it 'the most admirable and perfect monument of its kind'.

It's considered by many as the most important of Aksum's stelae because it holds important religious significance. The stone platform at its base is believed to have served as an altar. Within the platform are four foot-deep cavities, which probably held sacrificial offerings. And what's the grand significance of all those little cavities? It depends on how important you think *gabeta* (a traditional board game) is! Kids will be kids no matter what century they live in.

Despite its pagan background, this stela has been embraced by the Ethiopian Orthodox church and is a centrepiece during the celebrations of Maryam Zion.

The Great Stele

Lying like a broken soldier, this massive 33m stela (Map p134) is believed to be the largest single block of stone that humans have ever attempted to erect, and overshadows even the Egyptian obelisks in its conception and ambition.

Scholars theorise that it fell during its erection sometime early in the 4th century. Comparing the unworked 'root' to the sleek, carved base and the intricate *walia ibex* carvings near its top gives you a vivid idea of the precision, finesse and technical competence of Aksumite's stone workers.

As it toppled it collided with the massive 360-tonne stone sheltering the central chamber of **Nefas Mawcha's tomb** (Map p134). This shattered the upper portion of stela and – according to Unesco – collapsed the tomb's central chamber, scattering the massive roof supports like tooth-picks. Seeing that no other stela was ever raised here, it's obvious the collision sounded the death knell on the long tradition of obelisk erection in Aksum. Some scholars have even suggested that the disaster may have actually contributed to the people's conversion to Christianity, like an Ethiopian Tower of Babel. More controversially, some propose it may have been sabotaged deliberately to feign a sign of God. Whatever the origin of its downfall, the stela remains exactly where it fell 1600 years ago, a permanent reminder of the defeat of paganism by Christianity.

The Rome Stele

At 24.6m high, the Rome Stele (or Aksum Obelisk to those in Rome) is the second-largest stela ever produced at Aksum and the largest to have ever been successfully raised. Like the Great Stele, its ornate carvings of multistoried windows and doors adorn all four sides. Pillagers raiding the site are believed to have accidentally caused its collapse sometime between the 10th and 16th centuries.

In 1937 its broken remains were shipped to Italy on Mussolini's personal orders. There it was reassembled and raised once more, this time in Rome's Piazza di Porta Capena. It remained in Rome until 2005, when decades of negotiations finally overcame diplomatic foot-dragging.

After its return to Aksum in April 2005, Unesco planned to raise the stela in its original position. However, while doing a geophysical survey of the site they discovered numerous new tombs surrounding the field, some even under the parking lot. Not wanting to damage these new discoveries with the massive cranes required to raise the stela, Unesco is having a rethink. Some are also worried that the original site may also not be stable enough to hold the stela. All this modern head-scratching regarding the raising of the stela throws into perspective the massive achievement of the ancient Aksumites almost 2000 years ago.

So until final decisions are made, the magnificent Rome Stele sits at the side of the road, near the park's entrance, in four neat pieces.

GUDIT STELAE FIELD

Though less immediately arresting than those found in town, the stelae in the Gudit Stelae Field (Map p133), on the south side of Dungur (Queen of Sheba's Palace), are still worth a visit.

Named after Queen Gudit (see Aksum's Fall, p132), most stelae in this field are small, undressed and lie on the ground. Locals suggest the largest stela marks the Queen of Sheba's grave.

Despite excavations in the 1970s and 1990s, little is known about the field. Though some mark graves, neither rock-hewn nor constructed tombs have been found. Finds here did include a set of fine 3rd-century glass goblets, which has led scholars to suggest the area was the burial site of Aksumite society's lesser nobles.

The walk to the complex is lovely at dusk, when you'll meet the farmers and their animals returning home before nightfall.

objects such as drinking cups, lamps and incense burners, to quite sophisticated glassware including perfume bottles.

There's a particularly nice collection of Aksumite coins dating from the 4th to 6th centuries AD, though those housed in the Ethnological Museum (p84) in Addis Ababa are finer. You'll also see beautiful lion gargoyles, and the charming pot shaped like a three-legged bird. Much of the pottery was produced in ancient Aksum and the tradition continues today. An ancient amphorae from Turkey or Cyprus also provides evidence of ancient trading routes.

The free guided tours (15 to 20 minutes) are comprehensive though not wildly inspiring; tips are expected.

Everything from this museum and oodles more that's in storage will eventually be moving to a grand, modern museum (Map p134) that's to be built within the Enda Iyesus Church compound, behind the Northern Stelae Field. We were optimistically told it would be completed in 2007.

TOMBS OF KINGS KALEB & GEBRE MESKEL

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Set on a small hill 1.8km northeast of the Northern Stele Field and offering views of the distant jagged mountains of Adwa are these two monumental tombs (Map p133). According to local tradition, they're attributed to the 6th-century King Kaleb and his son, King Gebre Meskel. Kaleb was one of Aksum's most important rulers and succeeded in bringing southern Arabia under Aksumite rule.

Although the twin tombs' architecture resembles the Tomb of the False Door, they actually show more sophistication,

using irregular-shaped self-locking stones that don't require iron clamps. The 19th-century British traveller Theodore Bent exclaimed magnanimously that the tombs were 'built with a regularity which if found in Greece would at once make one assign them to a good period!'

Of the two tombs, Gebre Meskel (to the south) is the most refined. The precision of the joints between its stones is at a level unseen anywhere else in Aksum. The tomb consists of one chamber and five rooms, with one boasting an exceptionally finely carved portal leading into it. Inside that room are three sarcophagi, one adorned with a cross similar to Christian crosses found on Aksumite coins. While this points towards an age around the 6th century, which, very interestingly, corresponds with local tradition, many believe that Meskel was actually buried at Debre Damo.

Like Meskel's tomb, King Kaleb's is accessed via a long straight stairway. Inside you'll notice the stones are larger, more angular and less precisely joined. Of those who attribute the making of the tomb to Kaleb, few accept that he was ever actually buried here. Common theory is that his body lies at Abba Pentalewon Monastery, where he lived after abdicating his throne following his return from Arabia. The tomb's unfinished state adds credence to that theory. If you feel like a long walk, have several extra sets of batteries for your torch and, most importantly, have a knack for finding secret passages, local rumour has it that there's a secret tunnel leading from here to Arabia!

Above ground, a kind of raised 'courtyard' combines the two tombs. Some scholars have suggested that two parallel

AKSUMITE COINS

Aksumite coinage provides a vital and fascinating source of information on the ancient kingdom. The coins bear the names, effigies and sometimes lineage of no fewer than 20 different kings, and probably served propagandist purposes.

Beautifully struck, the coins depict the royal crowns, clothing and jewellery of the kings – even the large earrings worn by some monarchs. A curiosity still unexplained by historians is the fact that almost all the coins are double-headed: on one side the king is depicted with his crown, on the other, he dons a modest head-cloth.

In the mid-1990s a find near the little town of Hastings in southern England caused a mild sensation: an original Aksumite bronze coin was unearthed. In fact, the coin almost certainly arrived on English shores not through ancient trade with Britain, but through a modern tourist with a holey pocket.

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

Ethiopia's most famous legend is that of the Queen of Sheba. According to the *Kebrā Negast* (Ethiopia's national epic), the Ethiopian queen once undertook a long journey to visit the wise King Solomon of Israel.

While there, Solomon assured the queen that he would take nothing from her so long as she took nothing from him. However, the crafty king had placed a glass of water at her bedside. During the night, awaking thirsty after the spicy food served to her, the queen reached for a drink.

Solomon wasted little time demanding his side of the deal, and the queen returned to Ethiopia carrying his child, the future king Menelik.

Menelik later visited his father in Jerusalem in the Holy Land, but sneakily returned to Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant (it seems Solomon got his comeuppance after all). Menelik then established a dynasty that would reign for the next 3000 years.

Though the queen is thought to have lived a thousand years before this period, many Ethiopians believe this legend passionately, at least in parts. Haile Selassie himself, the last Ethiopian emperor, claimed direct descent from King Solomon, and therefore the divine right to rule.

churches with a basilica plan lay here, probably postdating the tombs.

KING EZANA'S INSCRIPTION

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On the way up to the tombs of Kings Kaleb and Gebre Meskel, you'll pass a little shack containing a remarkable find stumbled upon by a farmer in 1981. Inside is an Ethiopian version of the Rosetta stone, a pillar inscribed in Sabaeen, Ge'ez and Greek.

It dates between AD 330 and AD 350 and records King Ezana's Christian military campaigns in Ethiopia and southern Arabia, as well as his quest to return the Ark to Aksum from Lake Tana.

The inscription (Map p133) apparently contains a curse: 'the person who should dare to move the tablet will meet an untimely death'. Needless to say, the tablet remains exactly where it was found! You should tip the guardian Birr3 to Birr5 for opening the hut.

QUEEN OF SHEBA'S BATH

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Despite the colourful legends, this large reservoir (Map p133) postdates the queen by at least a millennia. It was also more likely an important source of water rather than a swimming pool or gargantuan bath. Its large size is even more impressive considering it was originally hewn out of solid rock, no small feat in the world of ancient engineering. It's also known as Mai Shum, which translates to 'Water of Chief'.

Sadly, the outer portion of the bowl was coated with concrete in 1960s, bestowing

it with the feel of a half-hearted attempt at a modern water reservoir, instead of an impressive ancient relic.

Today, despite locals claiming that the waters are cursed (local boys occasionally drown here), you'll see lines of women fetching water and washing clothes on its steps.

ABBA PENTALEWON & ABBA LIQANOS MONASTERIES

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Around 2km from the tombs of Kings Kaleb and Gebre Meskel, and thought to date from the 6th century, is the **Abba Pentalewon Monastery** (Map p133; admission Birr20, men only). Inside are some fine illuminated manuscripts, metal crosses, censers and sistra, which can usually be brought out by the priests. The site of the monastery was sacred to pagans and it's thought the monastery was built here to bolster Christianity and eradicate pagan beliefs.

From Abba Pentalewon, it's around 20 minutes by foot to the **Abba Liqanos Monastery** (Map p133; admission Birr20, men only), which boasts excellent views and contains similar religious paraphernalia. Ask to see the so-called crowns of King Kaleb and Gebre Meskel.

Neither church is a must-see, but the walk to them is pleasant.

KING BAZEN'S TOMB የንጉስ ባዜን መቃብር

Despite being the crudest of tombs, roughly hewn into solid rock instead of constructed with fine masonry, this place (Map p133) has a slightly magical feel about it. Stand in its dark depths and look up it's rock-hewn stairs through its arched entranceway and

you'll see why. It's even better if explored by candlelight.

According to local tradition, King Bazen is thought to have reigned at Christ's birth. The style of the tomb is likely consistent with that period.

Near the tomb's entrance there's a rectangular pit containing a row of smaller burial chambers (including a few that appear to be unfinished). Judging from the number of tombs and stelae found nearby, the burial site may once have been quite large and important.

EZANA PARK ኢዳና መናፈሻ

Within a rather ugly tin-roofed *tukul* in this central park (Map p133) is another famous 4th-century AD stone of King Ezana. This inscription is also written in Sabaeen, Ge'ez and Greek and records the honorary titles and military victories of the king over his 'enemies and rebels'. One section of script thanks the God of War, thus placing the stone's age before Ezana's conversion to Christianity.

It was moved to its present location from eastern Aksum by the Italians in the 1930s because, of all things, it stood in the way of their plan to widen the road.

TA'AKHA MARYAM ተክ ማርያም

Early excavations revealed that Ta'akha Maryam (Map p133) was a magnificent palace, probably dating from the 4th or 5th century AD. Unfortunately, much of the stone was removed and what remained was obliterated when the Italians cut a road straight through it.

Today, little more than a few piles of rubble and a couple of dressed stone blocks remain, strewn on either side of the road.

Covering a vast area of some 120m by 80m and encircled by huge stone walls, Ta'akha Maryam would have been far larger than medieval European palaces of the time, and contained at least 50 rooms.

DUNGUR (QUEEN OF SHEBA'S PALACE)

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The structure at Dungur, popularly known as the Queen of Sheba's Palace (Map p133), is similar to Ta'akha Maryam, but much better preserved (though smaller), and fully excavated (in places rather clumsily restored).

The architectural style with small undressed stones set in a timber framework and walls recessed at intervals and tapering with height are typically Aksumite. The stairwells suggest the existence of at least one upper storey. The well-preserved flagstone floor is thought to have belonged to a throne room. The palace also contains a private bathing area and a kitchen, where two large brick ovens can still be seen.

Much like Queen of Sheba's Bath, archaeologists date the palace to around the 6th or 7th century AD, some 1500 years after the Queen of Sheba.

LIONESSE OF GOBEDRA ኅቦድራ

It was here that the Archangel Mikael fought a tremendous battle with a fierce lioness. The fight ended when the saint mustered all his strength and hurled the lion into a massive boulder. The impact had such force that the outline of the beast is still visible today. If it sounds like a story that legends are made of, you're right. It's only a legend!

Who's responsible for the work or when it was created is still anyone's guess.

It's often overlooked by visitors, but is worth the visit, especially since it's so close to the ancient quarries of Aksum. It's around 3km west of Aksum off the Shire road. It's quite a rough walk from the road over boulders and through scrub, and you'll need a guide or one of the – all too willing – local children to help you find it.

ANCIENT QUARRIES

Near the lioness, at a site on Gobedra Hill known as Wuchate Golo, are the ancient quarries of Aksum, the birthplace of the famous stelae. Mystery still surrounds the tools that were used by the master craftsmen of Aksum, but you can see clearly, in one area, the process by which they cut the hard stone from the rock. After the intended break was mapped out, a row of rectangular sockets were cut. Wooden wedges were next inserted into the sockets and made to expand either by the use of water, by percussion or by hammering in metal wedges, which caused the rock to fracture. In another place, you'll see a stele almost completely freed from the rock, but strangely abandoned.

Fascinating? Definitely.

ARTISANAL CENTRE

Although well behind schedule (it was slated to open in 2004), this Ethio-cultural heritage project (Map p133), funded by the World Bank, should finally be open by the time you read this. The traditional-style Aksumite house and compound will house local craftsmen who'll produce, exhibit and sell arts and crafts produced using ancient Aksumite techniques.

If it's still not open, check out the craftsmen at the **Axumait Handicraft Center** (Map p133), which also houses a large collection of good-quality, but not cheap (by local standards) handicrafts. Ask for the energetic and well-informed Haile, himself a carver for over two decades.

OTHER SIGHTS

Aksum has two sleepy markets that burst to life on Saturday. In the centre of town is the traditional **main market** (Map p133), with spices and the like, while to the east is the **animal market** (Map p133), ripe with camels, donkeys and fodder. A **basket market** (Map p133; ☹ Sat) takes place near the massive tree shading the taxi and *gari* stand.

An elderly woman runs the so-called **Ethnographical Museum** (Map p133; admission Birr10; ☹ 8am-noon & 2-6pm) from her home. The museum showcases eclectic arts and crafts (from her wedding dress to fine basketry and other household objects). It gives a tangible glimpse into life 'in the old days'. The museum sits next to **Arbatu Ensessa Church** (Map p133), a good example of traditional architecture.

Festivals & Events

On 30 November Aksum hosts one of Ethiopia's largest festivals, the **Festival of Maryam Zion**. In the days leading up to the event, thousands of pilgrims arrive and sleepy Aksum truly awakes. Celebrations start at King Ezana's Stele, where the monarchs of the Orthodox church line the steps and watch performers in the street below.

For an unforgettable experience make your way to the compound of the St Mary of Zion Church between 1am and sunrise on the day of the festival and witness a sea of white-robed pilgrims curled up asleep. Standing among the slowly shifting sea are a few scattered priests who are reading by candlelight.

Sleeping

Aksum suffers from water shortages so please conserve. If you don't, may you end up nicely naked and lathered when the supply runs out!

Rooms become scarce and prices rise during major festivals, especially during Maryam Zion. Reservations are wise.

BUDGET

Africa Hotel (Map p133; ☎ 0347 753700; africa@ethionet.et; d with shared bathroom Birr30, d/tw Birr50/70; ☹) With an eager and omnipresent owner, this place offers a smooth stay. The rooms are simple and bright enough, the beds are soft and the bathrooms are very clean. For an extra Birr10, you can nab one with satellite TV. There's also a café and restaurant out front. Call for a free airport transfer. The doubles with shared facilities are its weak point.

Kaleb Hotel (Map p133; ☎ 0347 752222; s with shared bathroom Birr30, d/tw Birr50/70) With quiet rooms set around a garden courtyard, Kaleb is probably the nicest budget setting. The rooms are large and quite pleasant, while the pretty clean bathrooms are showing their age. There's a bar with DSTV, but no restaurant.

Abinet Hotel (Map p133; ☎ 0357 753857; d with shared bathroom Birr30, d/tw Birr50/100) Most rooms here see a fair amount of sun and boast nice wee balconies too. Some of the Birr50 options are quite small, so check out a few.

Ras Alula Hotel (Map p133; ☎ 0347 753622; d Birr50) Rooms here are on par with those at Africa Hotel, but the bathrooms are a bit cramped and it lacks any extra amenities like TVs, restaurant or Internet facilities.

Ark Hotel (Map p133; ☎ 0347 752676; d/tw Birr70/120; ☹) This newish place has good-sized rooms that are bright and clean; most also offer balconies (though they aren't as private as those at Abinet). Its biggest downfall are its lack of service and the noise emanating from chairs screeching across its floors.

Lalibela Hotel (☎ 0347 753541; d with shared bathroom Birr20) Rooms here are large, tidy and anything but dark. The foam beds are pretty comfortable and the shared bathrooms are nothing to scream at.

MIDRANGE

Yeha Hotel (Map p133; ☎ 0347 752378; ghion@ethionet.et; s/d/ste US\$38/50/75) Perched atop a bluff

overlooking the stelae and the Mary of Zion churches, this hotel has the most enviable location. The rooms are identical to its state-owned brothers (Bahir Dar's Tana Hotel, Gonder's Goha Hotel and Lalibela's Roha Hotel), which means they're comfortable, cosy and contain satellite TVs. Rooms 127 to 133 and 226 and suites 228, 230 and 232 are our picks as they offer sunset views.

Remhai Hotel (Map p133; ☎ 0347 751501; www.remhai-hotel.com; s Birr128-305, d Birr170-395, ste Birr475; 🍷 🍷) The expensive rooms here are huge and most king-sized beds, carpets, fridges, phone as well as the odd Juliet balcony. The cheaper options are rather dark, but are very clean and also have satellite TVs. If it weren't for the pool, terrace and upcoming sauna and gym, this out-of-the-way place would be seriously overpriced. Nonguests can patrol the pool for Birr15.

Eating

Restaurants tend to wrap things up early in Aksum, with most places being closed or out of food by 8pm.

Remhai Hotel (Map p133; mains Birr13-28) This hotel's Western restaurant, with pepper steak (our favourite), roasted chicken and even French toast, is unquestionably top dog when it comes to *faranji* fare. Tony Wheeler adds, 'their traditional restaurant had the best local food we had in Ethiopia.'

Abinet Hotel (Map p133; mains Birr12-17) If you ask locals where the best place to eat is, they'll say Remhai. But if you ask them where they like to eat, they'll say Abinet. The spaghetti and the array of Ethiopian dishes are quite good.

Yeha Hotel (Map p133; mains Birr17-25) The food is fair, the view is grand. The menu is a mix of *faranji* and Ethiopian selections.

Tsega Cafe & Restaurant (Map p133; mains Birr3-10) This is another favourite of locals (they rave about the *tibs* – sliced lamb, pan fried in butter, garlic, onion and sometimes tomato). Omelettes and scrambled eggs are on offer as well.

Café Abyssinia (Map p133; mains Birr8-12) Right in front of the hospital, this place serves as café, bar and restaurant. The Ethiopian and *faranji* fare is quite good, but you'll pay double what locals do.

Africa Hotel (Map p133; mains Birr5-10) If they didn't always run out of food early evening, this place would be more recommended.

The bread and local honey is a perfect way to start the day.

Axumawit Pastery (Map p133; cakes Birr2) Below Abinet Hotel, it's a good spot for a piece of pastry (or would that be a piece of pastery?) and sip of coffee.

Drinking

Yeha Hotel (Map p133; beers Birr8) The lofty terrace of this hotel is the perfect place for a cool beverage, especially during a scenic sunset when kites (a type of raptor) ride the fading thermals and soar low overhead.

Or for something entirely different, seek out a *tella beat* (local beer house) in the tiny streets around town; they're great places for Tigrayan dancing. The locals will help you find one.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (Map p133; ☎ 0347 752300) flies to Addis Ababa (US\$131, two to 3½ hours, daily) via Lalibela (US\$72, 40 minutes), Gonder (US\$73, two hours) and Bahir Dar (US\$86, 2½ hours) or via Mekele (US\$40, one hour, Monday and Thursday).

For buses to Gonder and Debark (Simien Mountains), go to Shire first. There are several buses and minibuses before 4pm (Birr10, 1½ hours). There are also many services to Adwa (Birr5, 45 minutes), but only one daily bus to Adigrat (Birr20 to Birr25, five hours) and Mekele (Birr35, 8½ hours).

Numerous freelance agents rent 4WD vehicles (with driver and guide) for trips to Yeha (Birr400), Debre Damo (Birr600) and even the rock churches of Tigray (per day Birr750). These figures required lengthy negotiations. The tourism office can help arrange vehicles, or talk to NTO and Galaxy Express services at the Yeha Hotel.

Getting Around

A taxi to the new airport, 7km from town, costs Birr40, or Birr10 'shared'. From the airport, rates are set at Birr10 per person.

Contract taxis charge foreigners from Birr5 to Birr10 for short hops; longer journeys cost Birr8 to Birr15. Share-taxis cost Birr0.75 to Birr1 to cross town.

Garis cost Birr2 to Birr5 for short journeys or Birr15 for Dungur and Birr20 for the Lioness of Gobedra. You'll need to negotiate hard. *Garis* and taxis linger near the giant tree at the basket market grounds. Just

THE BATTLE OF ADWA

In September 1895, as the rains began to dwindle, Emperor Menelik II issued a decree: all the able-bodied men of his empire should gather for a march north, a march for all of Ethiopia. Behind the vast army trundled 40 cannons, hundreds of mules and 100,000 rifles. In the north, the Italians were ready.

Initial skirmishes followed and amazingly the Ethiopians and their sturdy mules captured the Italian strongholds at Amba Alage and Enda Iyesus. Serious shortages of food soon followed, leading both sides to sue for peace, but Italy's continued insistence on their protectorate claim meant an agreement couldn't be reached.

In February 1896 Crispi, Italy's prime minister, sent his famous telegram to General Baratieri. In it he declared the motherland was 'ready for any sacrifice to save the honour of the army and the prestige of the monarchy'.

In the early morning hours four days later, the Italians made their move. Stumbling in the darkness over difficult terrain, with inaccurate maps and with no communication between the three offensive brigades, the surprise attack was a disaster. Menelik, whose spies had long before informed him of the forthcoming attack, met the Italians with thundering artillery and fierce fighting on every front.

Nearly half the Italian fighting force was wiped out – over 6000 soldiers – and of the five Italian field commanders, three were killed, one was wounded, and another was captured. Finally, laying down their arms, the Italians ran. Though the Ethiopians had lost almost equal numbers, the day was clearly theirs.

To this day the battle of Adwa is justly celebrated annually and, like the Battle of Hastings in Britain or the War of Independence in America, it's the one date every Ethiopian child can quote.

south from there, bicycles (Birr6 per hour) can be hired.

ADWA አድዋ

pop 45,823 / elev 1907m

Like Aksum, unassuming, urban Adwa belies its status. For Ethiopians, the town holds huge significance. It was in dramatic mountains surrounding Adwa that the Emperor Menelik II inflicted the biggest defeat ever on a colonial army in Africa and Ethiopia was saved from colonisation (see the boxed text, above).

Though Adwa is a pleasant enough town, there's not much to see here besides a couple of churches (the Selassie Church contains some good murals), but you may want to use the town as a base from which to visit Yeha or Debre Damo.

About 6km due east of Adwa is the **monastery of Abba Garima** (admission Birr20; men only). Said to have been founded by one of the Nine Saints in the 6th century, it's known for its collection of religious artefacts including what may be Ethiopia's oldest manuscript. Perhaps dating to the 8th century, it's kept under lock and key and only the lucky are given a glimpse. Head 7km south of Adwa before turning east for

the final 3km. It's possible to drive or hike; bring plenty of water.

The scenery around Adwa is captivating, particularly en route to Adigrat where the horizon bursts with both bulbous and jagged peaks, and endless terraced slopes climb from the road to dramatic escarpments.

Teferi Hotel (☎ 0347 711828; d with shared bathroom Birr30, d with cold/hot shower Birr40/50), next to the bus station, is the best snoozing option in Adwa. The shared bathroom rooms are actually the brightest, but they're all quite clean.

Numerous minibuses connect Adwa to Aksum (Birr5, 45 minutes). For Adigrat (Birr15, 3½ hours) three buses run daily. For Yeha, catch a bus to Enticchio (four run daily), and hop off at the Yeha signpost (Birr6, 30 to 40 minutes) on the main Adwa–Adigrat road. Unless you hop a lift with a tourist vehicle, it's a very hot and dusty 5km walk from there. Go early to ensure return transport. Contract taxis cost around Birr200 to Birr300 to Yeha and Birr400 to Birr500 to Debre Damo.

YEHA ዩሃ

Yeha, 58km north of Adwa, is considered the birthplace of Ethiopia's earliest civilisation nearly three millennia ago. Heated debate

continues among scholars as to whether it was founded by Sabaeans settlers from Arabia or by Ethiopians influenced by Sabaeans ideas. We can't figure out who's screaming louder, so we'll hold off choosing sides, though the so-called temple's immense, windowless, sandstone walls do indeed look like something straight out of Yemen.

Yeha's **ruins** (admission Birr50, personal video cameras Birr100) are impressive for their sheer age, dating between the 5th and 8th century BC, and for their stunning construction. Some of the temple's sandstone building blocks measure over 3m in length and are so perfectly dressed and fitted together – without a trace of mortar – that it's impossible to insert so much as a 5¢ coin between them. The whole temple is a grid of perfect lines and geometry.

Almost 200m to the northeast are the remains of **Grat Beal Gebri**, a monumental structure distinguished for its unusual, square-sectioned, monolithic pillars (such features are also found in the Temple of the Moon in Ma'rib in Yemen). Important rock-hewn tombs have also been found in the vicinity. Amazingly, these finds and the temple are all that remains of Ethiopia's first capital.

Next to the temple is the new **Church of Abuna Aftse** (admission incl with ruins), which was built over the 6th-century original. Incorporated into its walls are stones removed from the temple. In the west wall, there's an exceptional relief of ibexes, stylised and with lowered horns. The ibex was a sacred animal of southern Arabia.

Inside there's also an outstanding collection of beautifully incised ancient Sabaeans inscriptions, believed to originate from the temple, as well as some good (and unusually large) manuscripts and silver and gold crosses. There is talk of moving some

artefacts to a nearby building and creating a small museum.

Getting There & Away

See Adwa (p143) and Aksum's Getting There & Away section (p142) for transport information.

DEBRE DAMO ደብረ ዳሞ

Perched precariously atop a sheer-sided *amba* (flat-topped mountain), 86km northeast of Aksum, is one of Ethiopia's most important religious sites. **Debre Damo** (admission Birr50, men only) is thought to date back to Aksumite times and the 6th-century reign of King Gebre Meskel. It boasts what's likely the oldest standing church in the country (10th or 11th century AD), which is also a great example of an Aksumite-style building.

According to local tradition, the monastery was founded by Abuna Aregawi, one of the legendary Nine Saints, with a little help from a heavenly snake (see the boxed text, p49).

The monastery's formidable cliffs also allowed Aksumite's monarchs to coop up excess male members of the royal family here, thus removing possible threats to their reign.

Today, the 500-sq-metre monastery hosts some 80 monks, who are entirely self-sufficient. They even have their own livestock (if you could bring up a cow they'd be grateful), and water reservoirs hewn deep into the rock. Gifts of coffee, sugar or honey are also greatly appreciated.

While the monastery sits firmly entrenched on the *amba*, we said 'precariously' earlier because of the journey required to get here (see the boxed text, below).

For male travellers, a visit to Debre Damo is well worthwhile, and gives you an idea of

the extraordinary artistic heritage Ethiopia might have had, had it not been for the devastation of the Muslim-Christian wars.

Sights

The remarkable **Abuna Aregawi church** is an almost prototypical example of Aksumite architecture. One window, with its wooden tracery, is virtually a replica of that depicted in stone on the largest of the Aksumite stelae. Look out for the famous Aksumite frieze: a row of false window openings constructed of wood. Also notable are the beams and ceiling, famously decorated with carved wooden panels depicting Ethiopian wild animals such as elephants, lions, gazelles, rhinos, giraffes and snakes. Various recent paintings can be seen too.

The monastery has long been used as a safeguard for religious treasures. It now has an outstanding collection of at least 50 **illuminated manuscripts**, among them some of Ethiopia's oldest surviving fragments, though they're rarely brought out to visitors (don't insist).

If you've never seen Eritrea before, the view from the monastery magnificently lays it out before you.

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to Debre Damo, although any transport on the Aksum-Adigrat road can drop you at the well-signposted junction (5km southeast of the village of Bizet). From there it's a toasty 11km walk (around three hours); bring water, food and sunscreen.

Catching rides to Adwa, Adigrat or Aksum from the junction is hit and miss, especially in late afternoon. If there's a group of you, it's easiest to hire a 4WD in Aksum (p142) or Adigrat (p146). Contract minibuses are cheaper, but can only get you within 4km or 5km of Debre Damo.

ADIGRAT አዲግራት

pop 88,342 / elev 2473m

Adigrat is Tigray's second-largest town and is situated on what was Ethiopia's most important junction with Eritrea prior to the 1998 conflict. Today the border is still closed and with tensions remaining high after the escalation of rhetoric and troop movements in late 2005, expect to see a large UN military presence.

If border tensions ease, Adigrat makes a useful and pleasant enough stop-off point to or from Aksum. It's also a good base from which to explore some of the northern rock-hewn churches of Tigray.

At sunrise, the stratified mountains above town resemble Table Mountain in Cape Town.

Information

Commercial Bank (☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30-11.30am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Post office (☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat)

Telecommunications office (☎ 8am-noon & 2-9pm) International calls. Standard rates (p267).

Ytbarek Internet (per hr Birr60; ☎ 7am-6pm) Adigrat's only Internet access.

Sights

Nothing is screaming to be seen here, but if you're filling in time, a couple of Orthodox churches are worth a peek: the 19th-century **Adigrat Chirkos** south of the town centre, and the 20th-century fortresslike **Medhane Alem** in the north. Early mornings are best when the grounds are full of devotees.

The large tiled dome on the skyline belongs to the **Holy Saviour Catholic cathedral**. Completed in 1916, it's Italian-designed, but with a distinctly Ethiopian flavour. Look out for the paintings by Afewerk Tekle.

There's a peaceful **Italian war cemetery** just over 4km east of town. Dante Giuseppe, Bertagna Italo and Vaudano Mario are just three of the 765 Italian soldiers commemorated here. Six hundred and fifty-nine plaques are dedicated to *caduto ignoto* (unknown fallen) who perished between 1935 and 1938. En route here you'll pass the crumbling walls of the **old Italian fort** zigzagging along a small sandstone bluff. It's now an Ethiopian army barracks, so don't go poking around!

The labyrinth of tin shacks that's now the **market** is found 500m east of Medhane Alem church. In season, you'll find locally produced pale honey, and *beles* (prickly pears), which cost just Birr1 for 10; they're deliciously refreshing.

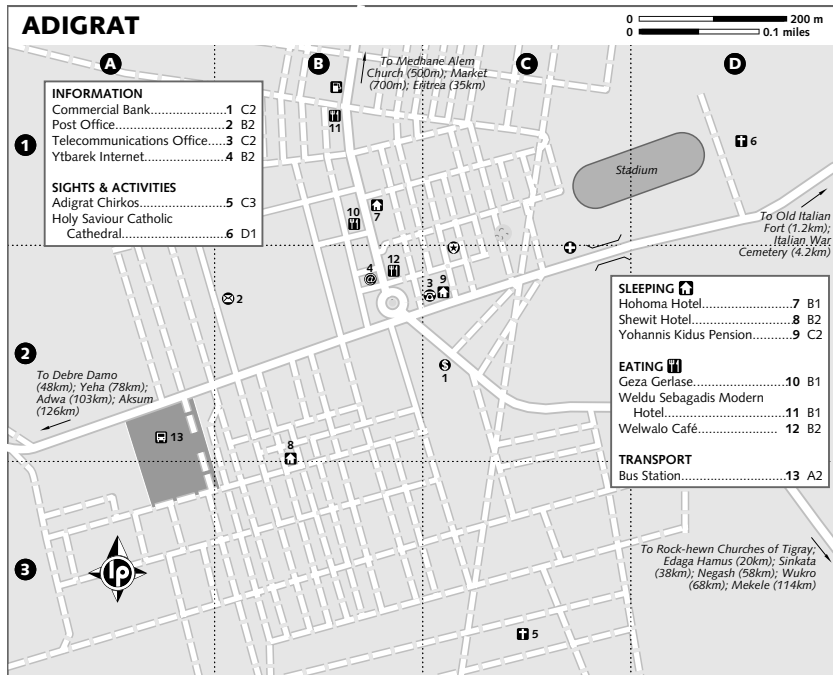
Travelling south from Adigrat, look out for the attractive Tigrayan stone farmsteads with their **dry-stone walls**. The houses have few windows; those they do have are small to keep the interior cool.

ROPE TRICKS

Your only option to reach Debre Damo, completely encircled with sheer cliffs, is to white-knuckle and red-toe it straight up over 15m! White knuckles thanks to squeezing the aging rope for dear life, and red toes from trying to madly insert your shortest digits into tiny toe holds for traction (see the boxed text, p147).

For safety, a Birr20 tip and a laugh – oh, and to help too – priests tie a leather strap around your waste and tug, tug, tug from the top.

The ascent isn't difficult, but requires some nerve and a bit of biceps. Women aren't allowed to visit the monastery, but the priests may let you have a dangle on the rope if you really want to. Shouts of '*becka, beckal!*' (enough!) will soon make it clear you've come far enough!



Sleeping & Eating

Hohoma Hotel (☎ 0344 452469; d/ste Birr50/60) Its name, inspired by Santa's brother who gave up the life of giving gifts for the cello, is just as fantastic as this hotel's value – easily Ethiopia's best deal. The modern rooms are small, but are well furnished, bright, spotless, comfortable and even boast TVs with the BBC. When we asked the price and they said *hamsa* (50), we had to ask if they meant dollars!

Shewit Hotel (☎ 0344 453028; d with shared bathroom Birr30, d Birr50) This old place is still in good shape, with its old but pristine chequered tile floors looking rather retro. The rooms are tidy, the beds are comfy and the bathrooms are clean. All but the shared showers are hot.

Yohannis Kidus Pension (☎ 0344 450284; s with shared bathroom Birr15) While it's no Hohoma (we'll never get tired of saying Hohoma – sorry), this small place with a paltry price is well looked after and is a friendly, clean choice. It's only fault: teeny rooms.

Geza Gerlase (mains Birr8-20) If you're only in Adigrat one night, head straight to this

cultural restaurant. Wrap your lips around the special *tibs*, delve into the local speciality *ta'ilo* (a dough made from sorghum and dipped in spicy meat and tomato sauce) or enjoy simple spag bol under the traditional thatched roof.

Welwalo Café (mains Birr3-10) Grab a snack, juice or a tomato, onion and pepper omelette to start the day at this pleasant café.

Getting There & Away

Sealed road now connects Adigrat to Mekele, with buses (Birr14, three hours, six daily) and minibuses (Birr20, 2½ hours, four daily) covering the route. Buses also serve Adwa (Birr15, 3½ hours, three daily), Aksum (Birr20 to Birr25, five hours, two daily) and Shire (Birr30, 6½ hours, one daily). For Wukro (Birr10, 1½ hours) and Negash (Birr8, 1½ hours), take the Mekele bus.

Minibuses run to Sinkata (Birr5, one hour), Edaga Hamus (Birr3, 30 minutes) and Wukro (Birr10, 1½ hours).

If the Eritrea border reopens, it's about a seven hour journey to Asmara.

The owner of **Welwalo Café** (☎ 0344 450218) rents his Land Cruiser (including himself as driver) for trips to Debre Damo (Birr400) and the rock-hewn churches of Tigray (per day Birr600).

NEGASH ንገሻ

On a small hill, 56km south of Adigrat, is the tiny town of Negash, which, like Aksum and Adwa, belies its prestigious past.

Negash was the first site of Muslim settlement in Ethiopia. Fleeing persecution in Saudi Arabia in Mohammed's own lifetime, a community of Muslims, including Mohammed's daughter, took refuge here. In 2003 Ethiopia's richest man, billionaire Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Al-Amoudi (the Addis Ababa Sheraton is one of his belongings) built a new mosque here. It overshadows a small mosque that stands on the site of the 7th-century original. An ancient cemetery, also believed to date from the 7th century, was recently excavated.

To many Ethiopian Muslims Negash is the most holy Islamic site after Mecca, and thousands make a pilgrimage here each year. Despite this, just 3% of Tigray is Muslim; the mosque sits amid a sea of Christian churches.

Minibuses and buses that ply the route between Adigrat and Mekele stop here.

ROCK-HEWN CHURCHES OF TIGRAY

Although no less significant or interesting than their famous cousins in Lalibela, the rock-hewn churches of Tigray are far less famous. Lucky you.

Some of the 120-odd churches may even predate those at Lalibela, and possibly represent a crucial link between Aksum and Lalibela – chronologically, artistically and technically. The architectural features, though less perfect than at Lalibela, where the rock-hewing tradition reached its zenith, are just as remarkable and intriguing. And the stunning (and sometimes scary) cliff-face locations of some make exploring Lalibela seem like a snoozy Sunday stroll in the park.

For those who want to combine trekking with terrific art and history, this may be just the ticket. The Tigrayan churches may well prove to be Orthodox Ethiopia's best-kept secret. Bird-watchers will also love the area as it's home to the semi-endemic Rupell's black chat and white-winged cliff chat.

History

Until the mid-1960s, the churches were almost unknown outside Tigray itself. Even today very little is known about their origins, their history or their architects. Their remote and precarious positions have led scholars to think they were being hidden from raiding Muslims.

While local tradition attributes most of the churches to the 4th-century Aksumite kings, Abreha and Atsbeha, as well as to 6th-century rulers, most historians date them between the 9th and 15th centuries.

Orientation & Information

Most churches are located in groups or clusters. Gheralta cluster, with the highest number of churches, is considered the most important, while the Takatisfi, only 3km east of the Mekele-Adigrat road, is the most accessible. Other famous clusters are the Tembien and Atsbi.

Churches are supposed to charge Birr20 for admission. If you're asked for more, simply hand over Birr20, firmly but politely. However, many priests (who receive no salary) drop work in the fields to open churches for you, so you should offer a tip of Birr5 to Birr10 after your visit.

Good walking shoes are essential. Bring a torch, lots of small notes (priests never have change) and water.

Mekele makes the best base from which to explore the churches, but Aksum and Adigrat are also viable options. The helpful staff at the Tigray Tourism Commission offices in Aksum (p132), Mekele (p151) and now **Wukro** (☎ 0344 430340; ☎ 8am-5pm) advise

TOEHOLDS IN TIGRAY

Though daunting at first sight, most of the ascents up rock faces required to reach some of the Tigrayan churches aren't difficult if taken carefully. Just focus on the footholds, get a good grip, don't stop and never look down. If you're having trouble, or finding that your nerves are getting the better of you, get someone to climb in front showing you the footholds. Sometimes the holds are very small, hewn by the bare feet of generations of priests. In which case, do as they do and take off your shoes. It's amazing the grip a toe can get!

NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

on itineraries, sell maps and the informative *Tigray: The Open-Air Museum* booklet (Birr5), and can usually wrangle up an official guide (per day Birr100). You'd be foolhardy to attempt visits without a guide, not only to locate the more remote churches, but also to act as an interpreter and for tracking down the often elusive priests, keepers of the all-important church keys.

If you're really keen, search for Ivy Pearce, David R Buxton or Ruth Plant's research on Tigray before leaving home.

Sights

Between Adigrat and Mekele there's a plethora of churches, 120 at last count. Many are pretty inaccessible, meaning visiting some churches involves steep climbs or scrambling up almost sheer rock faces using toe-holds (see p147).

All this somehow adds to the churches' attraction. To come across an absolute jewel hidden for centuries in the mountains, after a long and arduous toil through Tigray's arid and rocky landscape, makes for a very rewarding excursion. Just remember that

the churches' remote locations haven't made restoration work feasible yet and several are in desperate need of repair.

Unlike many of the churches of Lalibela, which were monolithic (carved out of the ground and only left attached to the earth at the base), the Tigrayan churches are generally semimonolithic (only partially separated from the host rock) or built into pre-existing caves.

Patience is essential for your enjoyment, as it can often take up to an hour to locate some priests. With a full day, a 4WD and quick-keyed priests, you can usually see four to five churches (depending on the hikes involved).

GHERALTA CLUSTER

The drive through the Gheralta cluster is fantastic, particularly between Dugem and Megab, with stratified mountains and sharp peaks rising from the plains. Avoid visiting this cluster on Wednesday as the priests are usually at market. Minor churches of note in this cluster include Giyorgis Debre Mahar and Tekla Haimanot.

Abraha Atsbeha አብርሃ አጵ-ሰሃ

Architecturally, this semimonolithic 10th-century church is one of Tigray's finest. It's large and cruciform in shape, with interesting architectural features such as cruciform pillars and step capitals. There's also well-preserved 17th- and 18th-century murals. The obtrusive portico was an attempt by Italians to win over locals by proving they weren't Muslims. It's easily accessible and sits just off the road, 45km west of Wukro.

Abuna Yemata Guh አቡነ የሚታ ጉሠ

Although less impressive architecturally, this church is likely the most rewarding in Tigray. It's spectacularly located within a cliff face, halfway up a rock pinnacle around 4km west of Megab. The first 45 minutes of the climb is mildly challenging, with a couple of tricky sheer sections requiring toe-hold action. The last two minutes require nerves of steel – our hands are sweating just thinking about it! Even if you can't make the final scramble and precarious ledge walk over a 200m drop (like us last go around!), it's still worth getting that far as the views from the baptism chamber are astounding.

Inside are beautiful and well-preserved frescoes that adorn two cupolas.

Debre Tsion Abraham ደብረ ጳዮን አብርሃም

Rectangular in shape, with six massive free-standing pillars, this church is known for its diverse architectural features, including decorated cupolas, bas-reliefs and carved crosses on the walls and ceiling. It also has beautiful, though faded and damaged, 16th-century murals and an unusual, large 15th-century ceremonial fan. It sits like a fortress on a hill about 500m south of Dugem and requires a steep 50-minute walk.

Maryam Korkor ማርያም ቆርቆር

Although an unsightly green from the outside, this impressive, cross-shaped church is known for its architectural features (cruciform pillars, arches and cupolas), fine 17th-century frescoes, and church treasures. It's also one of the largest churches in the area. The church is around 500m from Megab and involves a fairly steep 50-minute ascent. Just a couple of minutes' walk from

Maryam Korkor is the church of **Daniel Korkor**. It sits atop a paralysing precipice and offers astounding views.

Dugem Selassie ዳግም ሰላሴ

This tiny, older church lies within a newer one. Its large, double-tomb chamber has three 'shelves'; look out for the beautifully carved ceiling above the *maqdas*. It was probably converted to a church later. It's on the southern edge of the village of Dugem, just off the road.

Yohannes Maequdi የሃንስ መኸዳዴ

This rectangular chapel has six freestanding pillars that support a ceiling carved with geometrical designs. While it's best known for well-preserved murals covering the walls, it's the intense atmosphere that most visitors remember. From the village of Matari it's around a 40-minute walk (about 1km south of Dugem) via a steep footpath.

Abuna Gebre Mikael አቡነ ገብረ ሚካኤል

Considered one of Gheralta's finest churches, this church's cruciform plan is hewn into a domelike rock. It features good frescoes and carefully carved columns, pillars, cupolas and arches. It's around 15km south of Abuna Yemata Guh and requires a steep climb, negotiating a few obstacles on way.

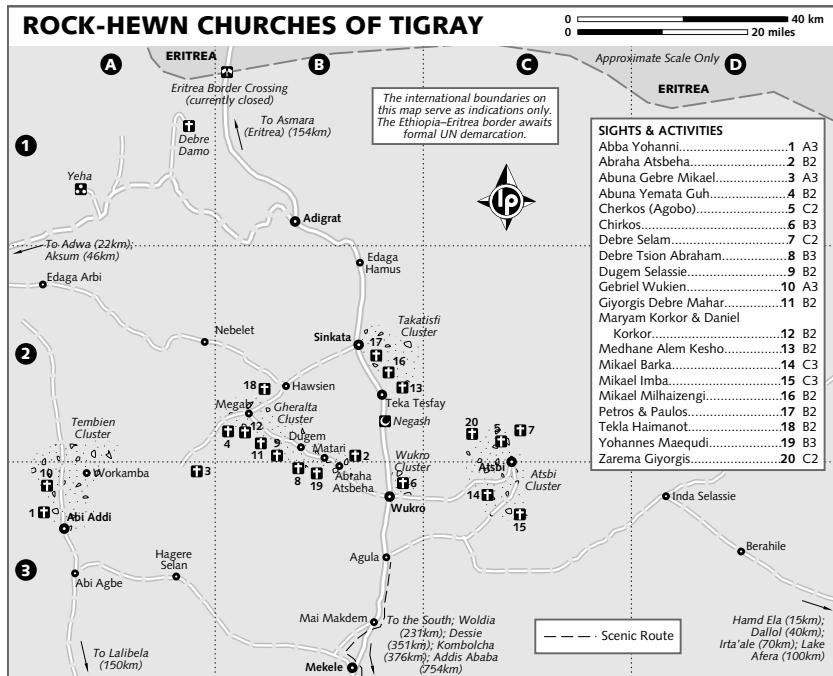
TAKATISFI CLUSTER

Medhane Alem Kesho መድኃኔና ሰም ክሾ

Also known as Adi Kesho, this church is one of Tigray's oldest and finest rock-hewn churches. Its exterior and interior walls are roughly hewn, which only makes the elaborately carved coffered ceiling that much more special. Ask if you can watch them unlock the door from the inside – rather ingenious indeed! From the end of the 4WD track, it's a leisurely 10-minute climb.

Mikael Milhaizengi ሚካኤል ምልሃንገ

This tiny church, with its stooped doorway, is hewn into the top of a small bleached hill and is thought to date from the 8th century. It's known for its 3m-high carved dome ceiling that resembles an *himbasha* (a favourite round bread of Tigrayans). It's about 45 minutes' walk from Medhane Alem Kesho and a 15-minute walk from Petros & Paulos.



HEAVENLY VISIONS

One day, St Gabriel appeared in a dream to a farmer. The saint commanded the man to build a new church to replace the old one, and gave his messenger careful instructions as to its location and construction.

Yet another Ethiopian legend? Yes, only the day in question was in 1982, and the church in question was Petros & Paulos, near Sinkata.

In Ethiopia, legends are made every day.

Petros & Paulos ጴጥሮስ ና ጳውሎስ

Only partly hewn, this wood, stone and mortar church is built on a steep ledge and has delightful old murals that are very rapidly deteriorating. From Wukro, or Adigrat, take a minibus to Teka Tesfay and walk about 3km from the junction. It's a five-minute climb to the church using footholds up one precarious part.

WUKRO CLUSTER**Chirkos ጨርቆስ**

This crooked cruciform sandstone church is semimonolithic and boasts beautiful cruciform pillars (notice the swirling sandstone laminae), cubical capitals, an outstanding Aksumite frieze and a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Haile Selassie oddly and unfortunately ordered the angular roof squared with concrete for aesthetic reasons in 1958. It lies around 500m from Wukro and is the most easily accessible church.

TEMBIEN CLUSTER

Avoid visiting on a Saturday, as most priests will be away at market.

Abba Yohanni አባ ዮሀን

Impressively located partially up a 300m-high sheer cliff face, this church has a three-aisled and four-bayed interior, eight finely hewn cruciform pillars that support the ceiling, and 10 vaults. It's also home to interesting church treasures and sits 15km from Abi Addi, including a 1km walk and a short climb with footholds.

Gebriel Wukien ገብርኤል ወ-ፎን

Architecturally interesting, this church has three aisles and four bays. It features well-carved, interesting details; six massive,

finely hewn freestanding pillars and three cupolas. It's 16km northwest of Abi Addi and involves a 15-minute easy walk, then a 10-minute climb up a mountain.

ATSBI CLUSTER

Like the Tembien cluster, most priests (and their keys) are away at market on Saturday. Minor churches in the Atsbi cluster include Cherkos (Agobo) and Zarema Giyorgis.

Mikael Barka ሚካኤል ባርካ

Atop a small but panoramic hill and behind an ugly 1960s façade sits this small rock-hewn church. It's cruciform in shape and probably dates from the 13th century. It's 17km from Wukro, and reaching it involves a 10-minute climb.

Mikael Imba ሚካኤል ጸምባ

Of all Tigray's rock-hewn churches, Mikael Imba most resembles those seen at Lalibela. A three-quarter monolith, the interior is huge (16.6m wide and 9m deep) with 25 pillars (nine freestanding) holding up the 6m-high ceiling. The view from here is great. It's 9km south of Atsbi and has an easy 20-minute ascent, which is finished with a short ladder.

Debre Selam ደብረ ሰላም

This church or 'church within a church' has exceptional architecture, with an inner rock-hewn section and interior structures constructed according to ancient Aksumite architectural style (alternating layers of rock and wood). There's a beautiful carved arch leading into the *maqdas*. The setting is lovely and there are good views from the top. It's close to Atsbi and also involves a simple 20-minute ascent.

Sleeping & Eating

To put it mildly, accommodation in the nearby villages is brutal. Most have more fleas than water and electricity.

If you're travelling with a vehicle, sleep in Aksum, Mekele or Adigrat. Without one, the best accommodation in the midst of things is Wukro's **Luwam Hotel** (☎ 0344 430126; d with shared bathroom Birr30, d Birr50). It's handily behind the tourism office and has small but very clean rooms – we hope you like aquamarine. Another option is to camp and to be fully self-sufficient.

Getting There & Around

Many of the churches are in remote places, some 20km to 30km off the main road. A private 4WD is the easiest way of reaching them, but if you have camping equipment and lots of time, an exploration by bus and foot is both possible and very enjoyable.

The villages of Hawsien, Edaga Hamus, Wukro, Atsbi, Abi Addi and Sinkata are all served by minibuses. Some villages (such as Megab and Hawsien) are only well served on market days.

Quite good gravel roads now connect the villages with most churches. Unfortunately, the road linking Megab with Abi Addi (shown on most maps) is still impassable. See Getting There & Away under Aksum (p142), Adigrat (p146) and Mekele (p153) for details on hiring 4WDs.

MEKELE መቐሌ

pop 157,688 / elev 2062m

Mekele, Tigray's capital, owes its importance to the Emperor Yohannes IV, who made it his capital in the late 19th century. For the traveller, it's home to two rewarding museums and provides a useful base for visits to the nearby rock-hewn churches of Tigray and the baking Danakil Depression. And unlike other large historical-circuit cities, it's almost hassle-free.

Information

There's no shortage of cheap Internet cafés (Birr8 to Birr15 per hour) along the south end of Alula and Guna Sts. The town also has its requisite post office.

Commercial Bank (Alula St; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 8-11.30am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques. There's a second branch near Lucy Park.

Dashen Bank & Western Union (☎ 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Rates as per Commercial Bank.

El-Fami Business Internet Center (per hr Birr30; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-8pm) Overpriced Internet, but the only provider to offer CD burning.

Emmanuel Clinic & Dental Unit (☎ 0344 404692; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) A reliable clinic with diagnostic laboratory. Around the corner is northern Ethiopia's best bet for dental action.

Telecommunications office (☎ 0344 410667) International calls. Standard rates (p267).

Tigray Tourism Commission office (☎ 0344 409360; tigray.tourism@ethionet.et; 5th fl, Commercial Bank Bldg, Alula St; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri)

Helpful and can advise you on an itinerary for Tigray's rock-hewn churches.

Wegagen Bank (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) Slightly higher commissions than the Commercial Bank, but better hours.

Sights**YOHANNES IV MUSEUM**

The Italian-designed stone palace built for Emperor Yohannes IV (r 1872–79) in 1873 is now an interesting **museum** (admission Birr24; ☎ 8am-5pm). Beneath the impressive vaulted juniper roof is a significant collection of Ethiopian manuscripts, crosses and icons. Many items had mysteriously formed part of a private collection in France, before being rightfully returned to Ethiopia in 2001. There's a 50kg bronze sculpture of Mussolini's head, which was brought here by Italy to adorn the palace's façade – it's now on the floor in the corner. Touché il Duca! Upstairs, in the emperor's personal quarters are some ornate gilded saddles and an audacious throne.

MARTYRS' MEMORIAL MONUMENT & MUSEUM

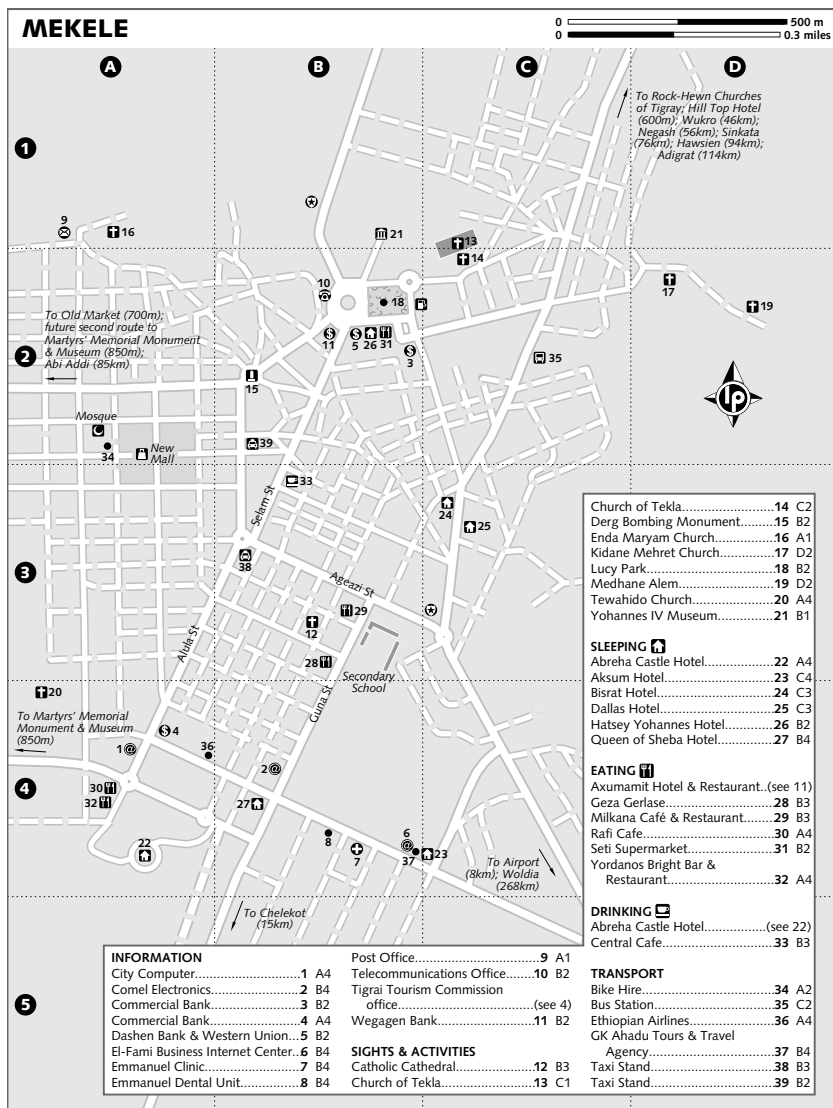
From a distance this **memorial** (admission Birr10; ☎ 8am-5pm) could be mistaken for the world's biggest golf ball and tee. From up close it's another story, with stirring statues flanking the towering monument and compellingly illustrating the true cost of war. A plaque nearby proudly reads, 'you completely defeated the seemingly immortal chauvinist enemies...' The enemies it's referring to are the communist, Russian-backed Derg, while the 'you' refers to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Just north is a **museum** (admission currently incl with memorial) that hauntingly and proudly exalts the successes and sacrifices made by TPLF during the 1970s and '80s.

A second access road is being built to the museum from the north side of town.

OTHER SIGHTS

Thanks to this city's burgeoning economy and rapidly increasing population, the **old market** has been cast out of the town centre (in favour of a modern concrete mall) and now sits almost 1km to the west. It's definitely worth a stroll, particularly on Saturday before 10am. Witnessing salt bars brought in by camel from the Danakil Depression (see the boxed text, p154) is the unmistakable highlight.



About 200m southwest of the telecommunications building there's an intriguing statue rising in a roundabout. It's a **monument** dedicated to 2500 people who were killed in Hawsien by a Derg bombing raid.

There are several **churches**, both old and new, dotting the city and their large towers are visible throughout.

Sleeping BUDGET

Hatsey Yohannes Hotel (☎ 0344 406760; s/tw incl breakfast Birr103/138) This big and bright place is opposite Lucy Park and has dozens of rooms. Most are carpeted and have balconies, satellite TVs (one English channel only) and hot-water showers. Rooms 414 to

418 and 310 to 320 (excluding 313 and 317) have nice views over the park and palace.

Queen of Sheba Hotel (☎ 0344 401387; Guna St; d with shared bathroom Birr40, d Birr50) Rooms here are spartan yet sizable, and house wardrobes, stone tile floors and clean bathrooms with hot showers. The spiral staircase isn't to be attempted after a few wobbly pops (beers).

Dallas Hotel (☎ 0344 414100; d with shared bathroom Birr20, d Birr50) A good budget bet near the bus station; the rooms here are austere but clean and comfy. They surround a vegetation-trimmed courtyard/parking area.

Bisrat Hotel (☎ 0344 401434; d with shared bathroom Birr30) Just north of Dallas Hotel, this place has simple, large rooms with clean tile floors. Some windows face the hall, making some options brighter than others. The shared bathrooms are clean and hot water is available.

MIDRANGE

Aksum Hotel (☎ 0344 405155; axum.n@ethionet.et; s/tw Birr180/210, ste Birr360-500) Everything from the chairs to the exterior screams stylised Aksum stelae at this fine hotel. The rooms here are Mekele's most comfortable and all boast satellite TVs, telephones and balconies. The hotel is well looked after and very clean.

Abreha Castle Hotel (☎ 0344 406535; fax 0344 402258; s/tw with shared bathroom US\$13.75/18, s/tw US\$17.50/21) This 19th-century mansion is rather regal from the exterior, but its interior is showing its age with 1970s green carpets and dated drapes. That said, rooms here have more character than any at Aksum Hotel. Rooms 203 and 204 have high ceilings and tall arched windows that offer great views over Mekele.

Hill Top Hotel (☎ 0344 405683; d/tw Birr120/240, ste Birr180-360) One of the only establishments without *faranji* prices, this slightly out-of-the-way place, 1km north of centre, represents good value. The large rooms have queen-sized beds, fridges, phones, satellite TVs and decent carpets. Sadly, only the restaurant takes advantage of the amazing view.

Eating

Milkana Café & Restaurant (mains Birr10-20) Off Guna St, Mekele's most popular café occupies the ground and 1st floors here, serv-

ing cakes, coffee, burgers and the like. The smart 2nd-floor restaurant prepares pizzas, pastas and traditional Ethiopian fare.

Yordanos Bright Bar & Restaurant (Alula St; mains Birr10-30) Simply called Yordanos I, this restaurant is known to produce the best Italian food in town. Eggplant, salami, anchovies, chillies and spinach are just some of the pizza toppings to choose from. The dining room here becomes quite atmospheric in the evenings.

Geza Gerlase (Guna St; mains Birr8-15) Although closed during our research due to a substantial fire, this great cultural restaurant and its traditional *tukul* should be back in action by the time you've arrived. Specialties include *zizil tibs* (strips of beef, fried and served slightly crunchy with *awazi* sauce) and *kitfo* (minced beef or lamb like the French steak tartare, usually served warmed – but not cooked – in butter, *berbere* and sometimes thyme). Vegetarians steer clear.

Axumamit Hotel & Restaurant (mains Birr8-18) If you're after an interesting Ethiopian attempt at Western fare, like 'veal garden blue' this rooftop terrace is good.

Rafi Cafe (Alula St; snacks Birr2.50) A tiny modern café with good croissants and coffee.

Seti Supermarket (☎ 5am-10pm) One of a few supermarkets for self-caterers or those stocking up for a trip to Tigray's rock churches.

Drinking

There are countless little cafés that pump out great coffee – you can't really go wrong.

Abreha Castle Hotel (beers Birr6-8) The scenic and breezy terrace of this grand old mansion is the best place for a late afternoon drink.

Central Cafe (juices Birr4) Watch them squeeze the life out of fruit, right before your eyes. Painful to watch. Delicious to drink.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0344 400055) flies to Addis Ababa (US\$125, 1½ hours, daily) and Aksum (US\$40, 30 minutes, Monday, Wednesday and Friday).

Numerous morning buses run to Adigrat (Birr14, three hours), while one runs to Aksum (Birr28 to Birr35, 8½ hours, 6am). To Addis Ababa, you have the choice of normal service (Birr82, two days, 6am) or deluxe 'Cobra Service' (Birr150, two days, 6am). For Lalibela, take the normal Addis

Ababa bus and get off in Woldia (Birr30, 5½ hours).

For the Tigray churches, minibuses leave from the bus station daily for Abi Addi (Birr15, three hours, one daily), Wukro (Birr8, one hour, 10 daily) and, on Wednesday only, Hawsien (Birr15, 2½ hours). For Atsbi, go to Wukro first; for Sinkata, take the Adigrat bus (Birr8, 1½ hours).

There are lots of private 4WD operators who offer church trips; prices range from Birr600 to Birr1000 per day. Their reliability and quality of vehicle is unfortunately left for you to determine. The only licensed operator in Mekele is **G.K. Ahadu Tours & Travel Agency** (☎ 0344 406466; gkahadu@ethionet.et), which offers quality trucks at extortionate rates: Birr1200 per day for Tigray's churches and Birr1500 for the Danakil Depression!

Getting Around

There are several taxi stands around town. A contract taxi to the airport, 8km out of town, cost between Birr30 and Birr40. You can also take a minibus (Birr2, 20 minutes) to the village of Quiha and ask to be dropped off en route; the airport's only 200m from the highway.

Short hops in a share-taxi or three-wheeled cycle costs Birr1. Contract taxis cost Birr10 to Birr20. Bikes can be hired near the mosque for Birr4 per hour.

DANAKIL DEPRESSION ደንክል ቦርሃ

Say goodbye to Earth and say hello to Venus. With several points lying more than 100m below sea level, the Danakil Depression has acquired a reputation as one of the hottest, most inhospitable places on Earth. Temperatures can soar to 50°C and with

its underlying continental crust pulled thin (thanks to being part of the Red Sea rift system), it's peppered with countless colourful sulphurous springs and an astonishing 25% of Africa's active volcanoes.

Irta'ale (613m), the most famous volcano, has been in a state of continuous eruption since 1967. Its small southerly crater is the only permanent lava lake on the planet. Despite gentle slopes, a night-time hike to its summit for sunrise is as captivating as it is exhausting. Taking camels is a viable option.

If you'd simply like to visit the lowest place on the continent, head for **Dalol** (-116m), which is about 25km north of the village Hamd Ela. More rewarding is a trip to **Lake Afera** (-102m), which is 30km (or five to nine hours by 4WD!) south of Irta'ale. Its waters are bright green and its salty shores have been harvested for centuries by the Afar people (p46), a nomadic ethnic group known in the past for their legendary ferocity.

An excursion into this harsh and astounding world isn't something everyone can handle. It is, however, something nobody will ever forget. It's best visited between December and February when it's at its coolest.

Trips here can be organised through tour operators in Addis Ababa (see p282) or through **G.K. Ahadu Tours & Travel Agency** (☎ 0344 406466; gkahadu@ethionet.et) in Mekele. If you're travelling with a group of private 4WDs (taking only one 4WD is suicide), you must contact the **Afar Tourism Commission** (☎ 0336 660181; fax 0336 660448) regarding permission and to arrange picking up your mandatory Afar guide (Birr100 per day) at the Afar tourist office near Berahile. If you'd like a hand with the Afar formalities, stop in at the Tigray Tourism Commission office in

Wukro (☎ 0344 430340; ☎ 8am-5pm) or Mekele (p151). Besides helping with advice on permissions and pointing you in the right direction, staff can also help plan your itinerary.

Remember, you need to treat a journey here in full expedition style; unprepared people have perished in a matter of hours.

WOLDIA ወልድያ

pop 24,533 / elev 2112m

The town of Woldia provides a springboard for visits to its famous neighbour, Lalibela, 120km to the northwest. Stock up on petrol, batteries, birr (the Commercial Bank exchanges cash and travellers cheques), and anything you might need from a pharmacy before leaving. Lalibela, despite its fame, is still the back of beyond.

Mechare Hotel (☎ 0333 310233; tw with shared bathroom Birr60, d Birr60-70) has tidy Birr60 doubles with comfy beds, linoleum floors, cold showers and the odd balcony. The Birr70 options offer hot water and larger beds. The shared showers are clean, but aren't so private. Its restaurant (mains Birr5 to Birr12) is considered Woldia's best. The hotel is 900m north of the bus station at the main junction.

Ganet Hotel (☎ 0333 310327; d with shared bathroom Birr12-15, d Birr25), north of Mechare Hotel, has spartan, smallish rooms with soft foam mattresses. The bathrooms aren't spotless, but they'll do. The price is right.

Selam Hotel (☎ 0333 311968; d Birr100) has large clean rooms that host satellite TVs, phones, dimmer lights and spotless bathrooms with hot showers and two toilets (one squat and one sit - take your pick!). Seeing that locals only pay Birr50, try negotiating (we got them to Birr80 before walking). It's on the main Addis-Mekele road between Mechare and Ganet.

Getting There & Away

The bus to Lalibela (Birr25, five to seven hours) is supposed to leave at 6am, but doesn't usually leave until 9am or 10am (when it's full). If there's a seat, the Addis Ababa bus to Lalibela also picks up at the bus station around 10am. There's usually at least one aid or government truck also making the daily journey; inquire at the Total station or around the Lal Hotel

There are also three daily buses to Dessie (Birr12, 3½ hours). For Mekele (Birr30, 5½ hours) or Addis Ababa, you should wait

for passing buses near the Shell station at the Lalibela junction on the main Addis-Mekele road.

LALIBELA ሳሌባ

pop 8484 / elev 2630m

I 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 informacam das terras do Preste Joam (Lisbon 1540; Lisbon 1889)

Unlike Francisco Alvares, you'll have photos to back up your stories of Lalibela's majesty. Here, high in the rugged Lasta Mountains, is 'Africa's Petra'.

An ancient world, including 11 magnificent medieval rock-hewn churches, dimly lit passageways, hidden crypts and grottoes, was carved down into the red volcanic rock underlying this remote Ethiopian town almost a millennia ago. Today that world still remains, frozen in stone.

Descend into the tunnels and pass traditional priests and monks who float through the confines like the clouds of incense, smell beeswax candles and hear the sounds of chanting coming from the deep, cool recesses, only to find yourself standing in the sunlight, slack-jawed and staring up to a structure that defies reason.

Lalibela, a World Heritage site, undoubtedly ranks among the greatest religious historical sites in the Christian world.

Though the town has drawn 'tourists' since the 16th century, it remains remarkably undeveloped. Sporadic electricity has just arrived and there are still no banks or pharmacies.

Lalibela also remains a very isolated place, sitting at 2630m. The journey overland continues to be quite long and arduous, with the sense of arrival feeling more like that after making a great pilgrimage. In fact, Lalibela is a centre of pilgrimage for many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and being here for a major festival is unforgettable.

SALT FOR GOLD

Since earliest times and right up to the present day, salt, a precious commodity for people and their animals, has been used as a kind of currency in Ethiopia. According to Kosmos, a 6th-century Egyptian writing in Greek, the kings of Aksum sent expeditions west to barter salt, among other things, for hunks of gold!

Mined in the Danakil Depression, the mineral was transported hundreds of kilometres west across the country to the Ethiopian court in Shoa. Later, the salt was cut into small, rectangular blocks, which came to be known as *amole*; their value grew with every kilometre that they travelled further from the mine.

To this day, Afar nomads and their camels continue to follow this ancient salt route. Cutting the bars by hand from the salt lakes in western Ethiopia, they spend weeks travelling by caravan to market, where the bars will be bartered.

History

Lalibela, initially known as Roha, was the Zagwe dynasty's capital in the 12th and 13th centuries. After the death of King Lalibela, the ruler credited with the construction of the churches, the town was named after him.

Scholars and local tradition both believe (a rare consensus!) that the churches date from around Lalibela's reign in the 12th or 13th century. Legend states that King Lalibela was exiled or fled to Jerusalem in fear of persecution from his half-brother. Intrigued by the buildings he found, King Lalibela vowed to build a new holy city when he returned. Another legend claims that it was, in fact, a heavenly vision that Lalibela saw.

Perhaps King Lalibela was making a deliberate attempt to create a new Jerusalem on African soil, far from Muslim usurpers, and accessible to all Ethiopians. Even the names of Lalibela's features echo those of Jerusalem: the River Jordan, Calvary, and the Tomb of Adam. However, the buildings are so different from each other in style, craftsmanship and state of preservation that they may span a much longer period than Lalibela's reign.

The consensus between scholars and local tradition is thrown out the window when discussions about who built the churches arises. Some wizardly scholars with powerful calculators have estimated that it would have taken a workforce of some 40,000 to construct the churches, while locals claim that, toiling all the hours of daylight, the earthly workforce was then replaced by a celestial one, who toiled all the hours of darkness. In this way, the churches rose at a miraculous speed!

However, foreign intervention, whether celestial or mortal, can almost certainly be ruled out. Long a victim of the usual 'it can't be African' chauvinism, Lalibela in fact almost certainly represents the pinnacle of a very long-standing Ethiopian building tradition.

Exceptional masonry skills had long been in existence during the days of Aksum, and indeed most of the churches show clear characteristics of the ancient Aksumite style. If angels did build the churches, they were almost certainly Ethiopian angels!

Information

There are several expensive Internet options in town (up to Birr2 per minute), but they rarely ever have connections. Roha Hotel (p161) can usually change cash and travellers cheques, while the Seven Olives Hotel (p161) can change cash (US dollars) – neither give good rates.

Lalibela Health Center (☎ 0333 360416; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm)

Telecommunications office (📞 8am-8pm) International calls. Standard rates (p267). It's next to the post office.

Tourism office (☎ 0333 360167; 🕒 8am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) This office offers some helpful advice and sells several small booklets on Lalibela.

Dangers & Annoyances

The biggest (but minor) gripe most travellers have with Lalibela are its smallest residents – fleas. They tend to be found on the rugs in churches. A little sprinkle of flea powder on your socks at the start of the day usually does the trick.

Harassment from unlicensed 'guides' can also be as irritating as a flea in your nether regions. Because unemployment is high, the prospect of money earned from guiding is attractive, to children as well as adults. Using children as guides encourages them to play truant at school, while using unlicensed guides encourages unhealthy migration to Lalibela (and more unemployed 'guides' harassing travellers). Hiring either also won't contribute to your visit, as few children or unlicensed guides know much about the churches.

Pestering from young children can also be a problem (see Notebook Scam, opposite).

Sights

Lalibela's **rock-hewn churches** (admission Birr100, personal video cameras Birr150; 🕒 8am-5.30pm) are remarkable for three main reasons: because many are not carved into the rock, but freed entirely from it (unlike most of Petra); because the buildings are so refined; and because there are so many within such a small area.

Although time has treated the churches with remarkably gentle gloves, Unesco has built rather hideous scaffolding and roofing over most churches to protect frescoes from water seepage. They shouldn't take away from your enjoyment, but they do make photography more challenging.

NOTEBOOK SCAM

You'll undoubtedly come across a child with an improbable 'sob story' here. One child approached us and started with, 'both my parents are dead.' After briefly consoling him, we noticed he had a Chelsea FC top on so switched to happier subjects, namely football. Soon the child was excited and before he knew it, he'd asked us to his house so his mother could perform a coffee ceremony! Oops!

Most 'sob stories', whether genuine or not, usually lead to the child feigning the desperate need of school materials, particularly notebooks. Compelled by guilt, numerous travellers have purchased notebooks only to happen upon the child gleefully returning it to the vendor for cash later.

As always, never give directly to children; it only encourages them to beg and actually keeps them away from school. If you want to help with education, it's best to approach the school and find out what materials they're short of. This will allow the teachers to distribute materials to those students actually in need. No you won't see the joy in the child's face, but if you're giving for the right reason that should not be important.

Although visiting without a guide is possible – getting lost in the warren of tunnels is quite memorable and usually not permanent – you'll miss out on many of the amazing subtleties each church has to offer. We'd recommend going once with a guide and once solo, in whichever order you so choose. Local licensed guides can be arranged at the tourism office for a set fee of Birr150 per day (Birr200 for groups of five or more). However, during slow times licensed guides on the street (always ask to see their license) will occasionally drop their fees.

The **ticket office** (🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm) lies beside the path leading to the northern group of churches and Bet Medhane Alem. Tickets give access to all churches in town for the duration of your stay.

Note that camera flashes inside churches cause great damage to the murals and frescoes, so please resist using one. Many of the priests are more than happy to show off their church's treasures and pose obligingly beside them for photos. It is customary and polite to tip them something small afterwards (Birr5).

The self-appointed shoe bearers found at each church doorway seemed to have disappeared at the time of research, but should they return a tip of Birr1 per person per church is fair.

Lastly, don't forget to bring your torch!

NORTHWESTERN GROUP OF CHURCHES

This group contains six of Lalibela's 11 churches and sits immediately behind the

ticket office. From a size perspective, this group is easily the most impressive.

Bet Medhane Alem ቤተ መድኃኔ ሉዎስ

Resembling a massive Greek temple more than a traditional Ethiopian church, Bet Medhane Alem (Saviour of the World) is impressive for its size and majesty. Said to be the largest rock-hewn church in the world, it measures 33.5m by 23.5m and is over 11.5 high.

Some scholars have suggested that the church may have been a copy in rock of the original St Mary of Zion church in Aksum.

The building is surrounded by 34 large, rectangular columns (many actually replicas of the originals). The three jointed at each corner are thought to represent the Holy Trinity. There are a further 38 columns inside which support the gabled roof.

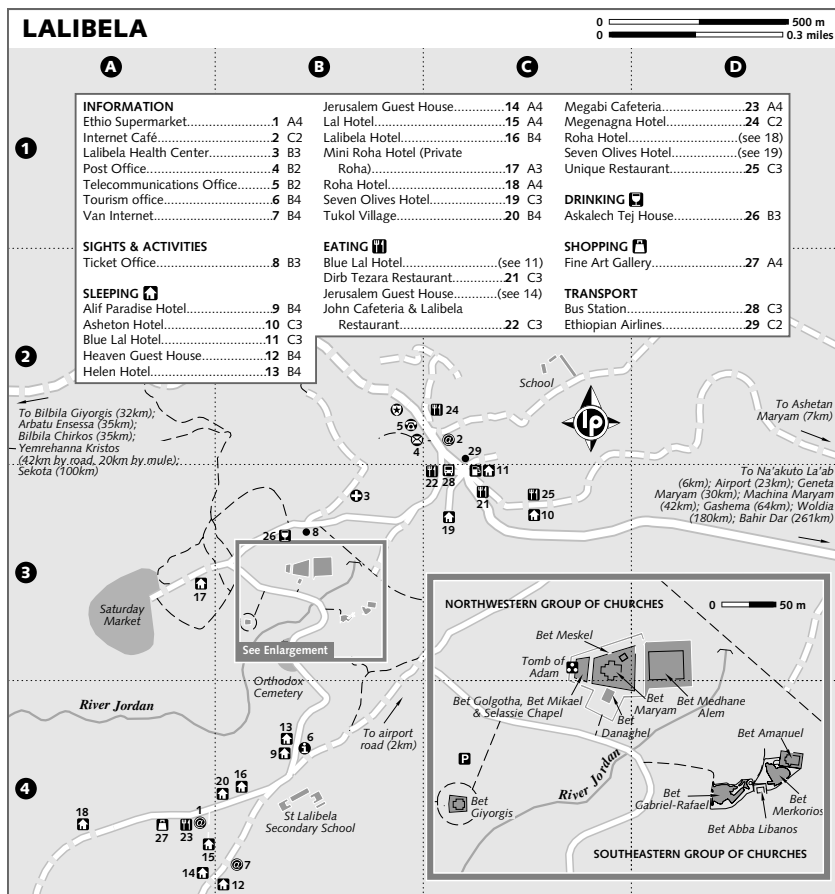
The interior consists of a barrel-vaulted nave and four aisles. Look for the three empty graves in one corner, said to have been prepared symbolically for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Pierced stone 'panels' fill the windows, each decorated with different central crosses. You may be allowed to see the famous 7kg gold Lalibela cross. In 1997 it was stolen by an Ethiopian antique dealer and sold to a Belgian tourist for US\$25,000. Thankfully, it was recovered.

Bet Maryam ቤተ ማርያም

Connected to Bet Medhane Alem by a tunnel is a large courtyard containing three churches. The first, Bet Maryam, is small,

NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

NORTHERN ETHIOPIA



yet designed and decorated to an exceptionally high standard. Dedicated to the Virgin, who's particularly venerated in Ethiopia, this is the most popular church among pilgrims. Some believe it may have been the first church built by Lalibela.

On its eastern wall you'll see two sets of three windows. According to scholars, the upper set is thought to represent the Holy Trinity, while the lower three, set below a small cross-shaped window, are believed to represent the crucifixion of Jesus and the two sinners. The lower right window has a small irregular-shaped opening above it, a signal that this sinner was accepted to heaven after repenting his sins and asking for Jesus' help. The lower left window,

which represents the criminal who mocked Jesus and was sentenced to hell, has the small irregular-shaped opening below it.

Above the western porch and squeezed beneath the roof is a rare and beautifully carved bas-relief of St George fighting the dragon.

Inside, the ceilings and upper walls are painted with very early frescoes, and the columns, capital and arches are covered in beautifully carved details such as birds, animals and foliage, including a curious two-headed eagle and two fighting bulls, one white, one black (thought to represent good and evil).

At the nave's eastern end is a column that's kept permanently wrapped in cloth.

Nobody knows what lays beneath, though rumours abound – ask your guide.

Bet Meskel ቤተ መስቀል

Carved into the courtyard's northern wall at Bet Maryam is the tiny semichapel of Bet Meskel. Four pillars divide the gallery into two aisles spanned by arcades.

Keep an eye out for the cross carved in relief beneath stylised foliage on one of the spandrels of the arches.

Bet Danaghel ቤተ ደንግል

To the south of the Bet Maryam courtyard is the chapel of Bet Danaghel, said to have been constructed in memory of the maiden nuns martyred on the orders of the 4th-century Roman emperor Julian in Edessa (modern-day Turkey). Many of its features – the cruciform pillars and bracket capitals – are typical architectural features of the churches.

Bet Golgotha, Bet Mikael & Selassie

Chapel ቤተ ኅልጎታ ቤተ ሚካኤል ና ስላሴ የጳጳሳት ቤት

A tunnel at the southern end of the Bet Maryam courtyard connects it to the twin churches of Bet Golgotha and Bet Mikael (also known as Bet Debre Sina).

Bet Mikael serves as an anteroom to the Selassie Chapel, one of Lalibela's holiest sanctuaries. It contains three monolithic altars. One is decorated with a beautiful relief of four winged creatures with their hands held up in prayer; it's thought to represent the four evangelists. Unfortunately, the chapel is very rarely open to the public.

Bet Golgotha is known for containing some of the best early examples of Ethiopian Christian art. On the so-called Tomb of Christ (an arched recess in the northeast of the church) a recumbent figure is carved in high relief; above it, in low relief, hovers an angel. Almost as amazing are the life-size depictions of seven saints carved into the walls' niches.

Close to the Tomb of Christ is a movable slab of stone, said to cover the most secret place in the holy city, the tomb of King Lalibela himself. Such is the importance and sanctity of Golgotha that a visit is said to assure your place in heaven!

Bet Golgotha also boasts some of Lalibela's most important religious treasures.

You may be shown a blackened metal cross (thought to symbolise the nails of crucifixion) and a large prayer stick (composed of wood, iron and horn), both supposed belongings of King Lalibela. Sadly women are not allowed into Bet Golgotha.

Standing in a deep trench in front of the western façade of Bet Golgotha is the so-called Tomb of Adam. It consists of a giant, hollowed-out block of stone.

SOUTHEASTERN GROUP OF CHURCHES

Although smaller in size than the north-western group, the southeastern cluster offers one of Lalibela's most finely carved churches as well as some intrigue, with various historians debating whether some churches had pasts as prisons and palaces.

Bet Gabriel-Rufael ቤተ ገብርኤል ፋፋኤል

Its entrance flanked to the west by a sloping sliver of hewn rock known as the 'Way to Heaven', this imposing twin-church marks the main entrance to the southeastern group.

Unlike most Lalibela churches its entrance is at the top and is accessed by a small walkway, high over the moatlike trench below. This, along with its curious, irregular floor plan, has led scholars to propose that Bet Gabriel-Rufael may have been a fortified palace for Aksumite royalty as early as the 7th and 8th centuries.

Although the section of Bet Rufael's roof that collapsed has been rebuilt, services only take place in Bet Gabriel. Once inside the complex you'll realise its monumental façade was its most interesting feature.

Bet Merkorios ቤተ መርቆሪዮስ

Reached via a long, narrow and pitch-black tunnel that starts from Bet Gabriel-Rufael, this current church may have started as something altogether different. The discovery of ankle shackles among other objects has led scholars to believe that the building may have served as the town's prison, or house of justice.

Due to a large section of roof collapsing, the interior is a fraction of its former size. Don't miss the beautiful fresco thought to represent the three wise men. With their little flipper hands and eyes that look askance, they're delightfully depicted; it may date from the 15th century. The 12 apostles are

also represented in a less attractive fresco, probably of a later date.

The painting on cotton fabric is believed to date from the 16th century, though the priests will claim it's 14th century. Formerly, such paintings were plastered to the church walls with a mixture of straw, ox blood and mud.

Bet Amanuel ቤተ ሐምሌ-ኤል

Freestanding and monolithic, this is considered one of the Lalibela's most finely carved churches. Some have suggested Bet Amanuel was the royal family's private chapel.

It perfectly replicates the style of Aksumite buildings, with its projecting and recessed walls mimicking alternating layers of wood and stone. To appreciate this fully, you should make a day trip to Yemrehanna Kristos (p163), which is one of Ethiopia's best-preserved Aksumite structures.

The most striking feature of the interior is the double Aksumite frieze in the nave. Although not accessible, there's even a spiral staircase connecting the four-pillared walls to an upper gallery. In the southern aisle, a hole in the floor (beneath the donation box) leads to a long, subterranean tunnel (one of three) which connects the church to Bet Merkorios and Bet Gabriel-Rufael.

Outside, you may see the odd 'sacred bee' flying about. Behind a high door in the courtyard's southern wall is their hive. Throughout Ethiopia, honey produced in churches is believed to possess special healing properties.

The chambers in the walls are the old graves of pilgrims who requested to be buried here.

Bet Abba Libanos ቤተ ሐባ ሊባኖስ

Bet Abba Libanos is hewn into a rock face and is unique among Lalibela's churches in that it's a hypogeous church. In English, that means only the roof and floor remain attached to the strata.

Like Bet Amanuel, many of its architectural features, such as the friezes, are Aksumite. Curiously, although it looks large from the outside, the interior is actually very small. The carved corners of its cubic capitals are rather unique; some guides say they may represent angel eyes.

The church is said to have been constructed in a single night by Lalibela's wife,

HOOFPRIENTS & SAINTLY REMINDERS

Just as King Lalibela was finishing off his series of churches, he was suddenly paid an unexpected visit. Astride a white horse and decked out in full armour came Ethiopia's patron saint, George. However, the saint turned out to be severely piqued: not one of the churches had been dedicated to him.

Profusely apologetic, Lalibela promised to make amends immediately by building him the most beautiful church of all.

Today, the priests of Bet Giyorgis (meaning 'Place of George') point out the hoofprints left behind by the saint's horse, permanently imprinted in stone on the side of the trench.

Meskel Kebra, with a little help from angels. The church seems to grow from the rock and gives you a vivid idea of the work required to excavate these churches.

A tunnel leads off the church to the tiny chapel of Bet Lehem.

BET GIYORGIS ቤተ ጊዮርጊስ

Resting all on its own, south and west of the northwestern and southeastern groups, is Lalibela's masterpiece, Bet Giyorgis. Standing on the brow of its compound, you'll have little doubt that it's the most mesmerising object in all of Ethiopia.

Representing the apogee of the rock-hewn tradition, it's the most visually perfect church of all, a 15m-high three-tiered plinth in the shape of a Greek cross. Due to its exceptional preservation, it also lacks the obtrusive scaffolding seen on the other churches.

Inside, light flows in from the windows and illuminates the ceiling's large crosses – beauty in simplicity. There are also two 800-year-old olive-wood boxes; one (with the opposing corkscrew keys) is rumoured to have been carved by King Lalibela himself.

Be warned that some of the cavities in the walls surrounding the church hold unsettling mummified corpses.

See also the boxed text, above.

Festivals & Events

The most exciting time to visit is during a major festival, when thousands of pilgrims crowd in for Timkat, Leddet and Fasika.

Meskel and Kiddus Yohannes are also busy. See p261 for dates and details.

Outside these periods, try to attend at least one church's saint's day; inquire at your hotel.

Sleeping

Note that vacancies are almost nonexistent during the festival period and European Christmas, so reservations up to six months in advance aren't unheard of. However, prices for reserved rooms during these times soar – one hotel's Birr150 room jumps to US\$50! If you arrive during a festival without reservations, you'll risk being forced into a dive. Conversely, if there's space, you'll end up paying a fraction of what you would have if you'd made those costly reservations.

Discounts are negotiable in most hotels from May through August.

Lalibela suffers from water shortages, particularly during dry season and high tourism season. Hotels may limit showering to early mornings and evenings or may give out buckets of warm water instead. Lengthy electrical cuts are still a problem.

Due to an increasing number of travellers visiting Lalibela, a few new hotel projects, like Tukul Village, are starting to crop up. Next on the horizon is the Yemrha Hotel, which is being built by Green Land Tours (see www.yemrha.com or www.greenlandethiopia.com for details).

BUDGET

Asheton Hotel (☎ 0333 360030; s with shared bathroom Birr50, tw Birr100) The twin rooms, with white-washed walls, local art and embroidered bedding, have more character than other budget options. They're starting to age though – our Aksumite-inspired coat hook fell from the wall and plunged to its death on the carpet floor. The showers are hot, the service is pleasant and the prices are *always* negotiable. The spartan singles aren't as pleasing.

Heaven Guest House (☎ 0333 360075; tw with shared bathroom US\$10, s/tw US\$10/15) Wood ceilings look over shiny linoleum 'wood' floors, sturdy yet comfortable beds and creative Aksumite headboards. The bathrooms are tidy and put forth hot H2O. This new place is very clean and the friendly owner is keen to keep it that way. Its future looks bright, especially with a small *tukul* restaurant under construction.

Lalibela Hotel (☎ 0333 360036; s/tw Birr50/100) A good-value option for singles, the rooms here are crisp and clean. And unlike most places in this price range, they aren't trying to hide dirty corners, so rooms and loos are actually lit by more than a 5-watt bulb. Heck, you can even read by it!

Blue Lal Hotel (☎ 0333 360380; d & tw Birr120-150) Although extremely austere, these rooms are bright, clean and the showers spurt hot water. Land room 2, 3 or 4 and you'll have a balcony to play on.

Mini Roha Hotel (☎ 0333 360394; s/d with shared bathroom Birr30/60) Also known as Private Roha, this is the best of the bottom feeders. Set around a patio, the dimly lit rooms are reasonably clean but have no glass windows. Open the shutters though, and you may land a view. Oddly, the toilet has quite the vista!

Other options:

Helen Hotel (☎ 0333 360053; s/tw Birr80/120)

Alif Paradise Hotel (☎ 0333 360023; s/tw Birr80/120)

MIDRANGE

Roha Hotel (☎ 0333 360009; ghion@ethionet.et; camping per 2-person tent US\$12.50, s/d/ste US\$38/50/75) Although the comfortable and cosy rooms are identical to its state-owned brothers (Bahir Dar's Tana Hotel, Gonder's Goha Hotel and Aksum's Yeha Hotel), its lobby, dining area and bar are a steep step up in the architectural beauty department. Rooms 220 to 229 have sunset views. Campers have access to hot showers and the hotel has its own generator.

Tukul Village (☎ 0333 360564; camping per tent US\$4, s/d US\$20/30) Scheduled to be open by the time you read this, this hotel has several two-storey red sandstone *tukuls*, some of which offer views over Bet Giyorgis from their balconies. It also rents quality two-person Dutch tents for US\$3 per day (US\$5 if you take them outside Lalibela).

Seven Olives Hotel (☎ 0333 360020; s/d US\$15/27.50) Now privately run, this place has dropped its prices by US\$10 despite the improved quality. The large rooms and bathrooms still feel a bit old, but the beds are new and the updated plumbing gushes hot water 24 hours a day. Its leafy terrace is its strongest asset. Rooms 10 to 16 offer the best views.

Lal Hotel (☎ 0333 360008; laltour@ethionet.et; camping Birr60, s/d US\$30/36) Art-clad stone walls, small bathrooms and laminate floors call these

large rooms home. Rooms 16, 20 and 57 through 65 offer views west. Discounts are usually negotiable, though all rooms cost US\$48 during festivals. Free airport transfer is offered.

Jerusalem Guest House (☎ 0333 360047; camping per tent US\$10, s/d US\$30/40) These large, rather vacant-feeling rooms have one massive thing going for them: they all open onto private balconies that overlook the lowlands and the amazing sunsets.

Eating

Seven Olives Hotel (mains Birr16-32) Eat inside the round, modernised *tukul* or dine alfresco on the leafy terrace. An Ethiopian chef with experience in America was training the staff to make more than the usual *faranji* fare when we were in town. Most meals were already hitting their mark.

Jerusalem Guest House (mains Birr15-22) This hotel's large *tukul* restaurant serves decent Ethiopian fare and *faranji* food, such as beef stroganoff and chicken curry.

Unique Restaurant (mains Birr4-10) Opposite the Asheton Hotel, this dark and understated little restaurant, serving cheap and tasty Ethiopian dishes, has received rave reviews from a number of readers.

Blue Lal Hotel (mains Birr7-20) We'd heard this hotel's owner used to live in France, so we ordered the quiche Lorraine. Forty-five minutes later we were presented with an entire behemoth of a pie – be warned! After enjoying a fifth of it, our bulging insides forced us to move on. Small appetite? Try the crêpes with honey, we hear they're great.

Roha Hotel (mains Birr20-32) Its dining gallery, with massive hangings cascading from the ceiling, has to be the flashiest place to eat. However, the food usually underperforms.

John Cafeteria & Lalibela Restaurant (Map p158; mains Birr7-16) These neighbours share a kitchen and menu. Birr10 will get you an omelette breakfast with toast, local honey and a steaming *macchiato*.

Other local restaurants to get your fill:

Dirb Tezara Restaurant (mains Birr8-12) Ethiopian dishes. Popular with small local business crowd.

Megabi Cafeteria (mains Birr4-8) Pleasant thatched pavilions. Decent *tibs*.

Megenagna Hotel (fasting food Birr5) Locals claim it serves Lalibela's best fasting food. We were still recovering from our quiche and couldn't confirm these claims.

Drinking

Besides having a cold sunset drink on the Seven Olive Hotel's terrace, there's one other drinking experience you shouldn't miss.

Askaleh Tej House (flask of tej Birr5) Also known as 'torpedo', it serves *tej* (honey wine) of varying potency. There's usually traditional music after 7pm.

Shopping

Fine Art Gallery (☎ 7am-8pm) One shop that stands out from Lalibela's throng of souvenir shacks. Inside are beautiful watercolour and sepia paintings created by Tegegne Yirdaw, a local artist who can count Princess Anne as one of his work's admirers. Small originals range from Birr150 to Birr200.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0333 360046) flies at least once daily to Addis Ababa (US\$102, 2½ hours), Gondar (US\$51, 30 minutes), Bahir Dar (US\$61, 1¼ hours) and Aksum (US\$72, 40 minutes).

Overland, the best approach is currently from Woldia via Gashema. Gashema can also be reached from the west but transport is sporadic at best. With your own vehicle (or oodles of patience) it's a rewarding journey to arrive from the north via Adwa, Abi Addi and Sekota. On that note, fuel (out of the barrel) is now available in Lalibela.

Two buses depart daily at 6am for Woldia (Birr25, five to seven hours), with one continuing to Addis Ababa (Birr75, two days) after overnighting in Dessie (Birr39, 8½ to 10 hours). Sometimes there's a direct bus to Bahir Dar (Birr46, 10 hours). Tickets are best bought the afternoon before travel (after 4pm) when the buses arrive from Woldia.

Getting Around

Most midrange hotels offer airport transfer service (from Birr25 to Birr30 one way) to the airport, which is 23km south of town.

Of the midrange hotels that arrange 4WD hire to visit the churches outside town (opposite), the Seven Olives has the best prices. Possible trips include Na'akuto La'ab (Birr150), Yemrehanna Kristos (Birr500), Geneta Maryam (Birr500) and Bilbala Chirkos and Yemrehanna Kristos (Birr600 to Birr700).

If you think Landrovers are crude brutes, you can hire a mule for longer or steeper treks; ask at your hotel. A full day should set you back Birr50 to Birr70 per mule and driver. A shorter trip to Ashetan Maryam and Na'akuto La'ab will cost Birr35 to Birr40. A tip of Birr15 for short day journeys is recommended, Birr30 for longer days.

AROUND LALIBELA

Many other fascinating churches and monasteries lie within a day's striking distance of Lalibela, and a journey to them, whether by foot, mule or 4WD, is rewarding. Don't forget to look for the endemic white-billed starlings while on the go! The stunning countryside is also home to unique ecotourism treks.

Ecotreks on the Mesket Escarpment

For a real insight into the life of Ethiopian highlanders and some astounding scenery, contact the local charity **Tourism in Ethiopia for Sustainable Local Alternatives** (TESFA; ☎ 0111 140583; www.community-tourism-ethiopia.com), which offers rewarding treks south of Lalibela.

TESFA's goal is 'to work in partnership with local communities to enable them to generate sustainable improvements in their livelihood through the development of their own tourism related enterprises, while also contributing to the protection of their physical and cultural environments'. Save the Children (UK) and the Royal Netherlands Embassy have helped fund the project.

Treks are typically three days long and take place along the top of the Mesket Escarpment, which houses caves, rock-hewn churches, fascinating columnar basalt outcrops and genuine local villages. Because you stay on the escarpment, gradients are fairly low and you'll find the walking is fairly easy.

TESFA has two camps in local villages, each currently consisting of two traditional, yet comfortable *tukuls*. Wajela camp sits near an interesting cave complex while Mequat Maryam teeters near the escarpment edge and offers incredible vistas – even the view from the toilet is inspiring.

Treks, including guides, packing mules and drivers, accommodation, meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner and the odd snack), tea and coffee, cost Birr300 per person per day (there are discounts for children).

Transportation to/from Lalibela must be arranged privately, though TESFA recommends the local 4WD operator **Habte** (habte@ethionet.et) who has fixed rates of Birr700 for drop offs at Gashema (start of trek) and Birr800 for pick-ups at Filakit (end of trek).

Due to limited space, these treks must be booked well in advance.

Churches & Monasteries

The churches around Lalibela vary greatly in style, design and age, some are even thought to predate those in Lalibela. Quite tucked away and still absent from any modern maps, the churches require a guide to find them. Although many are in need of urgent restoration, such as Ashetan Maryam, Bilbala Chirkos and Bilbala Giyorgis, a few are in amazing states of preservation.

See Lalibela's Getting Around section (opposite) for transport details.

YEMREHANNA KRISTOS የመረገና ክርስቶስ

Despite **Yemrehanna Kristos** (admission Birr50) being one of Ethiopia's best preserved late-Aksumite buildings, only 15 or so people reward themselves with a visit each week. A fact made even more astounding considering the church only sits 1½ hours (45km) away from Lalibela by 4WD.

The church is unusual because it's built rather than excavated. Seeing the stepped exterior façade, created from alternating wood and stone layers, you'll truly come to appreciate why so many of Lalibela's rock-hewn churches look like they do. And knowing that Yemrehanna Kristos may predate Lalibela's churches by up to 80 years, you have before you a virtual blueprint of greatness.

Incredibly, the whole church sits on a foundation of carefully laid olive-wood panels, which 'float' it perfectly above the marshy ground below. The carving and decoration are exceptional, especially the cruciform windows and the elaborate nave ceiling. Conceiving how the massive marble arches were placed so accurately in such surrounds is almost harder to grasp than the construction of Lalibela's churches.

Behind the church lies a pile of mummified pilgrims (the priests told us there were over 10,000 of them) who'd come here to die over the centuries. Most lay exposed

and the expression on one face was truly shocking. Watch your step walking around the back of half of the complex – we stubbed our toe on a partially exposed skull hidden beneath the grass floor.

This entirely inspiring and slightly spooky complex sits within a cave roofed by basalt lava flows. The ugly brick wall at the front was built in 1985 to improve the church's security.

It's also possible to get here by foot or mule. Both options take about five hours to cover the shorter 20km distance.

ARBATU ENSESSA አርባቱ ኢንሰሳ

West of Yemrehanna Kristos, around 35km from Lalibela, is **Arbatu Ensessa** (admission Birr30). Its a three-quarter monolith church in a wild, overgrown, but rather beautiful setting. It's thought to have been built by King Kaleb in AD 518. *Arbatu ensessa* means 'the four beasts' after the four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

BILBILA CHIRKOS ቢልቢላ ራክሮስ

Close to Arbatu Ensessa is **Bilbila Chirkos** (admission Birr30). An interesting three-quarter monolith, it's known particularly for its ancient frescoes. Also attributed to King Kaleb, it's thought to date from AD 523. It's a three-minute walk from the road.

BILBILA GIYORGIS ቢልቢላ ኒዮርጊስ

Lying to the west of Arbatu Ensessa, around 32km from Lalibela, **Bilbila Giyorgis** (admission Birr30) is another attributed to King Kaleb. It resembles Bet Abba Libanos in design.

According to tradition, five swarms of bees took up residence shortly after the church was completed. They still reside and their sacred honey is said to have curative properties, particularly for psychological disorders and skin problems. The priest will let you taste it. It's 20 to 30 minutes' walk up the hill to the church from the road.

ASHETAN MARYAM አሼታን ማርያም

Set at 3150m, atop a mountain that rises directly above Lalibela, is this **monastery** (admission Birr20). Understandably, there are commanding views in all directions. The local priests believe they're 'closer to heaven and God' here, and it's easy to see why.

The monastery's construction is believed to span Lalibela's and Na'akuto La'ab's

reign; some even claim King Na'akuto La'ab buried in the chapel. Church treasures include parchment and some icons.

Although the architecture here compares pretty poorly with Lalibela, the journey takes you through lovely country. Listen out for the francolins' witchlike cackle resounding around the valley.

The 1½-hour climb (one way) is quite steep. Many travellers take mules, though you'll still need to walk over the rockiest parts.

NA'AKUTO LA 'AB ነሐኤቱ ላላብ

Lying 7km from Lalibela, just off the airport road, is this **church** (admission Birr20) attributed to Lalibela's successor. It's simple but attractive (apart from the outer security wall) and built under a natural cave. It was almost certainly the site of a much older shrine.

Empress Zewditu built the ugly inner red-brick building. Some very old stone receptacles collect the precious holy water as it drips from the cave roof.

The church boasts various treasures said to have belonged to its founder, including crosses, crowns, gold-painted drums and an illuminated Bible.

GENETA MARYAM ገነታ ማርያም

Near the source of the Tekeze River, 31km from Lalibela, lies **Geneta Maryam** (admission Birr20). It's thought to have been built around 1270 by Yekuno Amlak, who restored the Solomonic line. With its rectangular shape and 20 massive rectangular pillars that support it, Geneta Maryam resembles Lalibela's Bet Medhane Alem. It's also known for its remarkable 13th-century paintings.

On the western wall, there's a moon-shaped face of Christ, and on the southern side, very grumpy-looking elephants. Geneta Maryam is about four hours by foot from Lalibela, or 1½ hours by vehicle.

MACHINA MARYAM መካኒና ማርያም

Two hours' walk from Geneta Maryam and six hours' walk (42km) from Lalibela is the remote church of **Machina Maryam** (Emachina Lideta Maryam; admission Birr20), said traditionally to have been constructed by three virgins during the reign of King Gebre Meskel in AD 537.

The church is constructed under an overhanging rock in a natural cave. It

rather resembles Yemrehanna Kristos in design, and many features are Aksumite, but its beautiful frescoes, some of hunting scenes with one-eyed lions, are the main attraction.

There are many bricked-up tombs in the church. Bodies buried under the rock are said to be preserved forever. The church is little visited, but is worth the long and steep ascent. Mules are a good idea in the dry season.

DESSIE ደሴ

pop 139,936 / elev 2470m

Rusty tin roofs and eucalyptus trees carpet the hills in Dessie – no, the ex-capital of the former Wolo province wouldn't win any beauty contests. However, you may end up spending a night here because it's a major transport hub for Lalibela, Hayk and Maqdaia.

Information

There are several Internet cafés (Birr18 per hour), pharmacies, a good health clinic and banks (change cash and travellers cheques) along the main drag. There are pickpockets aplenty around the bus station – be vigilant.

Sleeping & Eating

Rooms can be in short supply, especially on weekends, so call ahead.

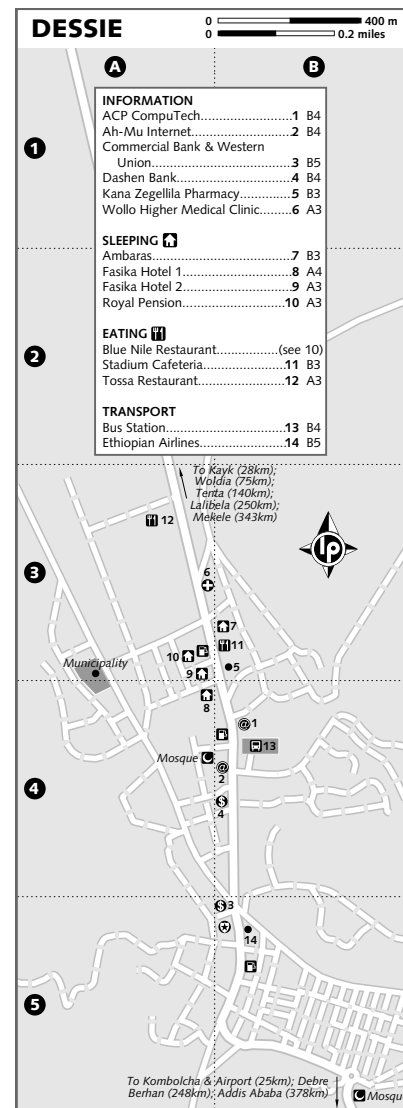
Fasika Hotel 2 (☎ 0331 117705; s/d Birr65/95) This bright and quiet place has comfortable rooms with satellite TVs, foam beds and hot showers.

Fasika Hotel 1 (☎ 0331 112930; d with shared bathroom Birr30, d Birr50) It offers smaller and darker rooms than its brother hotel, but is equally clean and also hosts hot water.

Ambaras (☎ 0331 119118; s/d/ste Birr72/88/100) This place is past its prime, with 1970s green carpets, dated drapes and dog-eared bathrooms. However, it's pretty functional and has a comfy lounge downstairs with a satellite TV.

Royal Pension (☎ 0331 114939; d Birr25) Up a small alley behind the Shell station. The rooms at the Royal Pension outshine the exterior, though that isn't saying much! While they aren't spotless and bedspreads look like shag carpets, you do get a typically tidy bathroom.

Tossa Restaurant (mains Birr5-11) This restaurant is the best place to eat in town. The



Ethiopian fare is great and you even pay local prices! It's 150m north of the Wollo Higher Medical clinic. Ask any local to point it out.

Blue Nile Restaurant (mains Birr5-14) Just west of the Royal Pension, this is another popular local place. It also serves some *faranji* options.

Stadium Cafeteria (meals Birr4) It's great for breakfast. Try the *special ful* (chickpea purée).

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0331 112571) flies daily to Addis Ababa (US\$61, one hour). Flights depart from the airport near Kombolcha, 23km from Dessie. Shared taxis to the airport cost Birr10, contract taxis cost Birr80.

Buses leave for Addis Ababa (Birr41, nine hours, five daily), Lalibela (Birr39, 8½ to 10 hours, one daily), Mekele (Birr41, nine hours, one daily) and Woldia (Birr12, 3½ hours, three daily). Buses and minibuses also run at least every half-hour to Kombolcha (Birr3, 30 minutes).

MAQDALA

Near the tiny village of Tenta, 140km northwest of Dessie, are the vestiges of Emperor Tewodros' hilltop fortress. It was here that Tewodros (r 1855–68) retreated as his formidable empire collapsed and where he took Britons hostage in a last-ditch effort to force Britain's hand in helping him militarily. Lets just say that when Sir Robert Napier arrived with 32,000 well-armed men, his last goal was to help Tewodros.

After such a route and heavy British looting (see the boxed text, below), it is not surprising that little remains besides a few remnants strewn across the plateau. Maqdalena is rather a mournful place, perhaps still haunted by the unhappy emperor who put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger before being captured.

THE LOOTING OF MAQDALA

After the British troops devastated Tewodros' army and freed the prisoners in 1868, they looted everything from the amulet around the dead emperor's neck to altar slabs, ancient manuscripts and processional crosses from the nearby church. Amazingly, much of the stolen items remain in British museums and private collections, despite strong calls from Ethiopian historians for their return.

The **Association of the Return of Ethiopia's Maqdalena Treasures** (AFROMET; www.afromet.org) continues to fight for the treasures' return, arguing that looting had no basis in law and that it was an act of sacrilege.

History aside, the 3½-hour hike to Maqdalena from Tenta is great and there are stunning views of the surrounding countryside from the windswept top. You'll need to stop at the **administration office** (☎ 8am–12.30pm & 1.30–5pm Mon–Fri) in Ajibara (10km before Tenta) to get papers and pick up your compulsory police escort (Birr50).

One bus runs from Dessie to Tenta each morning at around 6am (Birr35, five hours) and stops long enough in Ajibara for you to sort formalities. There are a couple of fleapit hotels in Ajibara and Tenta. With a vehicle, the journey to Tenta is possible in just under two hours.

HAYK ኃይቅ

Lying 28km north of Dessie on a peninsula the little town of Hayk, known for its monastery and lake.

The monastery dates from the mid-13th century and was founded by Abba Iyasus Moa. Between the 13th and 15th centuries it was among Ethiopia's most important monasteries. Today it hosts the oldest known manuscript to record its own date: the book of the four gospels produced for the monastery between 1280 and 1281. It's open to men only.

The lake and its environs, 3km from town, is an excellent spot for birders.

At least 15 minibuses or buses (Birr4, one hour) run daily to the village of Hayk.

KOMBOLCHA ኮንቦሊቻ

pop 100,954 / elev 1850m

The dramatic and curvaceous descent from Dessie to Kombolcha outdoes anything the twin towns have to offer. Kombolcha is less of a transportation hub than Dessie, but it's much less dirty and noisy and has better hotels, making it a more pleasant option to break your journey between Addis Ababa and Lalibela. It's also closer to the airport (2km).

Tekle Hotel (☎ 0335 510056; d with shared bathroom Birr30, d/tw Birr57/80) is set in pleasant grounds and the rooms come in all different shapes, sizes and levels of brightness. They're all clean so have a wander and take your pick. There's also a decent restaurant.

Kombolcha Wine Hotel (☎ 0335 512091; tw with shared bathroom Birr30, d Birr20–30), like Tekle, is about 2km up the hill from the bus station. If you don't want to walk, take a *gari*

or share-taxi (Birr1 to Birr2). It's a quiet and clean spot with a friendly owner and a range of rooms to choose from. Try the *bazana shiro* (chickpea purée with meat) in its popular restaurant.

Ama Hotel (d with shared bathroom Birr20, d Birr30) is a cheap and simple option close to the bus station. The rooms with shared facilities are actually much brighter and quieter than the more expensive options. It's opposite the Kombolcha City Service complex.

Harego Lodge (☎ 0335 513767; d Birr60) is the most comfortable option, but only viable if you have a vehicle. It's several kilometres out of town en route to Dessie.

Hikma (snacks Birr1–2) on the piazza and the **Sport Cafe** (snacks Birr1–2) are the best pastry shops.

Frequent buses serve Dessie (Birr3, 30 minutes). One bus leaves daily for Addis Ababa (Birr38.50, 8½ hours).

BATI ባተ

The little town of Bati, 41km east of Kombolcha, is known for its large, colourful **Monday market** (☎ 9am–3pm), which attracts up to 10,000 Afar, Oromo and Amharas from all around.

Bati's market is Ethiopia's largest after Addis Ababa's Merkato. It's interesting and lively (especially around 11am), so check it out if you're in the area. Look out for the old gallows (dating from the emperor's day). If you're planning to take photos, come armed with Birr1 notes. An Ethiopian companion is a good idea to keep curious children, as well as pickpockets, away.

At least one bus and 10 to 15 minibuses leave for, and arrive from, Kombolcha daily (Birr7 to Birr10, 1¼ hours).

DEBRE BERHAN ደብረ ብርሃን

pop 53,000 / elev 2840m

Small, yet somehow sprawling, the town of Debre Berhan sits 130km northeast of Addis Ababa. Despite being the 15th-century capital of Emperor Zara Yaqob and the site of Ahmed Gragn the Left-Handed's slaughter of the imperial army, Debre Berhan is most famous for its woollen blankets and rugs; check them out at the cooperative

near the telecommunications office. The only real nonwoolly reason to stop here is if you're planning on visiting nearby Ankober.

The drive from here north to Debre Sina, which takes you off the Guassa Plateau and down the dramatic Mezezo Escarpment, is unforgettable (watch for gelada baboons).

Eva Hotel (☎ 0116 813607; r Birr100), the pink palace at the town's entrance from Addis Ababa, has large spotless rooms with beautiful and bright bathrooms. New carpets prevent the traditional early morning greeting between warm toes and cold tiles.

Akalu Hotel (☎ 0116 811115; d 40) sits literally and figuratively between Eva and Helen, offering a bit of comfort at cheap prices. We delved into *kai wat* (goat in *berbere* sauce) at their reputable restaurant (mains Birr7 to Birr15); it was served with cheese and was delicious.

Helen Hotel (☎ 0116 811204; d with shared bathroom Birr20, d Birr40) lies at the opposite end of town and offers cheap but clean rooms.

Yabsera Café (drinks & snacks Birr1–3) will quell on-the-road tummy rumbles with coffee, juice, cakes or pastries. It's next to the bus station.

Numerous buses/minibuses serve Addis Ababa (Birr13/15, 2½ hours). One bus leaves daily at 6am for Kombolcha (Birr28, seven hours) and Dessie (Birr31, eight hours). Buses travelling north from Addis Ababa also occasionally have seats.

ANKOBER አንኮበር

The little town of Ankober lies 40km southeast of Debre Berhan. Right up until the late 19th century, when Addis Ababa was founded, it was the capital of the Shoan princes.

Set atop a hill 2km from town are the ruins of Menelik II's old palace. Though little more than a section of wall remains, the walk here is a good one and the area is renowned as a birders' haven. It's the official home of a very rare endemic bird, the Ankober serin. The white-throated seed-eater and yellow-throated seed-eater are often seen here too.

Three morning buses run between Debre Berhan and Ankober (Birr8, two hours).

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