

# Southern Ethiopia



Shiver under moonlight in the splendid Bale Mountains, swelter politely, slack-jawed in a Mursi village or silently savour the spotting of a rare bird. Known for its rich natural attractions, southern Ethiopia proffers captivating wildlife, scenic landscapes, great trekking possibilities and some of the continent's most diverse and fascinating peoples.

The southwest's Omo region has been called 'Africa's last great wilderness', and is home not just to Ethiopia's few remaining large mammals including lion and elephant, but also its last isolated tribes, including the famous Mursi lip stretchers and body-painting Karo.

Africa's renowned Rift Valley cuts through the south and hosts lakes, astounding birdlife, national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

East of the Rift, the Bale Mountains tower over the surrounding pastures of the Oromo people. Within these peaks is one of Africa's largest mountain parks. The Bale Mountains National Park is the best place in Ethiopia to see endemic wildlife, including the endangered Ethiopian wolf. Trekking in the mountains, in the rain, among the heather, is fantastic.

The southeast's Oromo are predominantly Muslim and two significant Islamic shrines are found here: Sheikh Hussein, southern Ethiopia's most important annual Muslim pilgrimage site; and the mystical Sof Omar Caves.

Before putting the brakes on your northern journey to head south, know that travel here is as tough as it is astounding. We'll only make one guarantee – it will be memorable.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Baking, sweating and swearing there's nowhere you'd rather be than in the **Lower Omo Valley** (p204) while witnessing lip stretchers, bull jumpers and body painters
- Counting to 20 using your fingers and toes *after* visiting Lake Chamo's amazing **crocodile market** (p196)
- Breezing through bleached savannah grasses, with Burchell's zebra in the rear-view mirror and Rift Valley lakes stretched out below, at **Nechisar National Park** (p199)
- Spotting the world's rarest canid, the Ethiopian wolf, while trekking the sublime **Bale Mountains** (p181)
- Dining on fresh tilapia and doing the backstroke in the world's largest cup of tea at **Lake Langano** (p172)



## Climate

With elevations varying from 450m in the Lower Omo Valley to 4377m in the Bale Mountains, daytime temperatures in this region range from 10°C to 40°C.

Rain traditionally falls between March and October in the highlands, with July, August and September receiving the most precipitation. April, May and October are the wettest months in the Lower Omo Valley, with sporadic precipitation falling the rest of the year.

## National Parks & Wildlife Sanctuaries

Offering splendid trekking, the rarest of mammals and hundreds of bird species, Bale Mountains National Park has every-

thing in spades. Nechisar National Park offers diverse scenery, Rift Valley lakes, massive crocodiles, Burchell's zebras and the odd Abyssinian lion.

Although African plains wildlife also roams Mago National Park and Omo National Park in the remote and rugged Lower Omo Valley, the real attraction in these national parks is the isolated traditional tribes.

If birds are of interest to you, head to Lake Abiata-Shala National Park, Senkele Wildlife Sanctuary and Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary, which host a range of unique and endemic species.

For more on these parks and sanctuaries, see p66.

## Getting There & Away

**Ethiopian Airlines** (www.flyethiopian.com) connects Addis Ababa with Arba Minch and Jinka.

Overland, the only real options to enter southern Ethiopia are from the north via Addis Ababa and from the south via Kenya at Moyale. Daily buses and minibuses serve both routes. If you have your own vehicle, it's also possible to reach Arba Minch from Jimma in western Ethiopia via an upgraded road between Jimma and Sodo. The journey's supposed to take five to six hours in dry season.

## Getting Around

Paved roads of variable quality link Addis Ababa with Arba Minch in the southwest and Moyale in the deep south. The remaining roads rate from decent to devastatingly painful.

Daily buses and minibuses cover most routes, with the Lower Omo Valley and remote southeast being the only exceptions. There you must hop on or in Isuzu trucks that sporadically trundle between villages. Most people visiting isolated areas hire 4WDs from tour operators in Addis Ababa (see p282). A few 4WDs can also be rented in Jinka and Goba.

# RIFT VALLEY LAKES – ADDIS ABABA TO AWASA

With mysterious ancient stelae fields, numerous hot springs and five unique Rift Valley lakes hosting everything from historical island monasteries to endangered birds, this 275km-long corridor is more than just a gateway to southern Ethiopia's riches.

## SOUTH TO LAKE ZIWAY

Travellers heading to Lake Ziway from Addis Ababa have two routes to ponder: one via Mojo, the other via Butajira. Along the way you'll see countless shade houses, all part of Ethiopia's blossoming business venture. Flowers are already a US\$360-million industry in Kenya and with Kenya losing its developing nation trade status with the EU in 2007, Ethiopia hopes to take over the reins.

## Via Mojo

This is the quickest route south and offers more public transport, but it's less interesting than travelling via Butajira.

After heading east for 94km, you'll turn south at Mojo. About 20km south from there, you should be able to spot **Koka Dam**. Part of a hydroelectric power station, it supplies most of Addis Ababa with electricity. Birdlife is good near the water and hippos can sometimes be seen.

Continuing southwards, keep an eye out for the **Oromo tombs** that dot the countryside, decorated with bright murals, some of elephants and warriors on horses. In season, delicious watermelons (Birr2 to Birr5) are sold on the roadside.

## Via Butajira

With fresh asphalt now linking Addis Ababa and Butajira, this route is significantly less painful than it used to be. And with two of the intriguing sites within easy walking distance of the road, it's possible to visit them with public transport, either en route to Butajira or as a two-day return trip from Addis Ababa.

Just southwest of Melka Awash village is **Melka Kunture Prehistoric Site** (admission Birr10; ☎ 9am-5pm), famous for the remarkable prehistoric stone-tool factory discovered in 1963. Extending over 5km on both sides of the Awash River, it encompasses numerous sites dating as early as 1.7 million years ago.

A series of explanatory panels are posted around the site and a *tukul* (hut) displays some well-captioned finds, including the tools used by the *Homo erectus/Homo sapiens* who once inhabited the area. It's a fascinating place.

The nearest accommodation is in Melka Awash. **Awash Ber Hotel** (s/tw with shared bathroom Birr12/24) has small austere rooms with shared squat toilets that are crude, but adequate.

Around 4km south of Melka Kunture, there's a signposted turn-off to the impressive rock-hewn church of **Adadi Maryam** (admission Birr30). It sits within the village of Adadi, some 12km west of the turn-off. Believed to date from the 12th or 13th century, Adadi Maryam is a semimonolithic church (only three of its four sides are detached from the surrounding strata) and is fairly crude in comparison with its counterparts in Lalibela and Tigray. However, if this is your

only chance to see a rock-hewn church, you should jump at it. On Adadi's market days (Thursday and Saturday) public transport runs to and from Melka Awash.

**Tiya** (admission Birr10), a fascinating Unesco World Heritage site, is found further south, almost 40km from Melka Awash. The site contains around 36 ancient stelae, 32 of which are engraved with enigmatic symbols, notably swords. Despite the largest standing 2m tall, they're as intriguing and mysterious as any of the standing stones found in Europe. Tiya is the most important of several stelae clusters that dot the countryside all the way down to Dila.

Almost nothing is known about the monoliths' carvers or their purpose. French excavations have revealed that the stelae mark mass graves of individuals aged between 18 and 30.

The stelae lie 500m from the village of Tiya. A guard, who'll charge you the Birr10 and open the gate, now lives in a small building next to the fenced compound; he occasionally offers tours.

## LAKE ZIWAY ነቀይሐይቅ

Surrounded by blue volcanic hills, 158km south of Addis Ababa, and covering a massive 425 sq km is Lake Ziway, the largest of the northern group of Rift Valley lakes. It's an attractive enough place, but it's best known for its **birdlife**. White pelicans, black egrets, saddlebill and yellowbill storks are all seen here, as well as a variety of kingfishers and waterfowl.

One of the best spots to see birds is from the earthen 'jetty' in the town of Ziway; you'll find it about 1.5km due east of the Bekele Mola Hotel. The birds are particularly numerous here in the early morning and evening, when they gather to pick at the fishermen's castoffs. You can also take a local punt (Birr35 per person after hefty negotiation) or pay a fisherman (Birr25 to Birr30) to see the **hippo pods**, about 15 minutes by boat from the jetty.

The lake is also home to five little volcanic islands, of which three once boasted medieval churches. Tullu Gudo, 14km from Ziway and the largest island, is still home to three monasteries. **Debre Tsion**, the most famous, has a long and enigmatic history. According to tradition, it once housed the Ark of the Covenant. Priests, fleeing the

destruction of the city of Aksum at the hands of Queen Gudit in the 9th century, brought it here. The original church now lies in ruins and a new one has been built. Interestingly, the oldest written documents on Aksum were discovered here.

Tullu Gudo is a beautiful, little-visited place. The walk to the church through the *tef* (an indigenous grass cultivated as a cereal grain), wheat and barley fields is pleasant and there are very good views from the church. You can also bathe in hot springs; the islanders have created a little tub near the shorefront. A brief exploration of the island takes around two hours.

Currently rather slow (15HP) motorboats can be hired from private operators in Ziway (but they lack radios and life jackets). Head for the jetty and inquire there. Starting prices were an absurd Birr800 per person for the return trip to Tullu Gudo. Negotiations should bring that down to Birr500 for the entire boat. It takes between two and three hours one way. If you're lucky you may be able to hop on an early morning boat that takes locals to the island. Locals pay Birr5 for the trip, which means if you're honed in the art of negotiations you may only pay Birr25!

Trips to the nearer islands of Debre Sina, Galila and Bird Island cost from Birr150 each, or Birr200 to Birr300 to visit all three (for one to six people).

## Information

There's a Commercial Bank on the Addis-Shashemene road in Ziway, but only cash (US dollars and euros) is exchanged.

## Sleeping & Eating

Camping is permitted on Ziway's islands. If that doesn't float your boat, the town of Ziway is a pleasant, laid-back little place, with good, reasonably priced hotels, restaurants and cafés. All the following listings are found along the Addis-Shashemene road.

**Brothers Hotel** (☎ 0464 412609; s/d Birr22/32) Just south of the bus stand, this option is easily the best in town. The tile floors, blue walls, bed sheets and bathrooms (complete with hot showers) are all spotless. There's a popular local restaurant attached.

**Bekele Mola Hotel** (☎ 0464 412077; s/d Birr29/35) Behind the Shell station, Bekele Mola's aged but clean rooms surround a pleasant and peaceful courtyard that's brimful of birds.

The bathrooms are dog-eared and some mattresses are on their last legs, so poke a few before choosing. The shady terrace restaurant (mains Birr17) is nice and caters to Westerners.

**Ziway Tourist Hotel** (☎ 0464 413993; r 50) Towards the southern end of town, this option has a range of rooms, some much better than others. It can also be loud at times and *faranjis* (foreigners, especially Western ones) pay double. The garden restaurant (mains Birr7 to Birr15) has less ambience than its counterpart at the Bekele Mola, but it serves a wider variety of dishes.

**Firehivot Pastry** (pastries Birr1.75) Just north of the bus stand, this is a perfect place for a quick breakfast.

### Drinking

**City Snack & Juice House** (juice Birr2-3) Swig a glass of orange, papaya or blended avocado at this new spot just south of Brothers Hotel.

### Getting There & Around

Buses leave for Shashemene (Birr10, two hours, four daily), Butajira (Birr7, 1½ to two hours, seven daily) and Addis Ababa (Birr17, three hours, three daily). Numerous minibuses also serve Addis Ababa (Birr20). For Debre Zeyit or Nazret, take a minibus to Mojo first (Birr10, 1½ hours).

For Lake Langanano, take the Shashemene bus or a minibus to Arsi Negele (Birr7, 45 to 50 minutes); ask to be dropped at the junction to the Bekele Mola or Langanano Resort (Wabe Shebele) Hotels.

Bikes can be hired near the bus station and Jemaneh Hotel in Ziway for Birr3 per hour. *Garis* (horse-drawn carts) across town cost Birr1 to Birr2.

### LAKE LANGANO ገንጋኖ ሐይቅ

Lake Langanano, set against the 4000m blue Arsi Mountains, is a dream come true for many Brits. They can don their swimming kit and cross 'doing the backstroke in the world's largest cup of English tea' off their list of fantasies – yes, Langanano's water is on the brown side. That said, it's actually clean and is one Ethiopia's few lakes to have been declared bilharzia-free. British or not, get in and get wet!

The birding is excellent on some of the more remote sections of this 300-sq-km lake, and over 300 species have been

recorded, including the Ethiopian cliff swallow.

Lake Langanano also makes a convenient and comfortable base to explore nearby Lake Abiata-Shala National Park. Visit Langanano during the week; it's cheaper and you'll avoid the hoards of weekenders making the 180km trip from Addis Ababa.

### Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation and dining options around Lake Langanano are limited to several resorts, two of which are southern Ethiopia's premier ecolodges. More lodges are scheduled to open in coming years.

The following rates are for weekdays (Sunday through Thursday). Add about 50% for weekends.

**Bishangari Lodge** (☎ 0115 517533, 0911 201317; www.bishangari.com; s/tw with shared bathroom US\$32/57, s/tw US\$52/92, ste US\$63-109) Hyped as Ethiopia's first ecolodge when it opened in 1997, Bishangari is an amazing place to stay. Sleep in one of nine beautiful *godjos* (bungalows), each nestled privately along the lake's south-eastern shore in stands of fig trees (complete with hammocks). Inside, natural woods blend with local artwork in the bright surroundings. There are also 12-traditional *tukuls* (mud huts), which are more down to earth and have shared facilities (hot showers). The 12-hectare site is a peaceful place and the Tree Bar and outdoor restaurant are wonderful touches. Activities include horse riding, mountain biking, fishing, trekking, hippo spotting, bird-watching and swimming. Rates listed include breakfast (an extra US\$20 per person will include a lovely lunch and dinner). Partial proceeds go to the Bishangari Community Fund, which supports sustainable development in the local community. A shuttle runs between the lodge and Addis Ababa (Birr200 return).

**Wenney Eco-Lodge** (☎ 0988 766249, 0911 203614; www.wenneyecolodge.com; s/tw US\$42/52) Located on Langanano's remote southern shore, Wenney Eco-Lodge opened in 2005. Although it offers similar serene surrounds to Bishangari (and the same activities), it's accommodation and dining areas are less refined.

**Bekele Mola Hotel** (Map p173; ☎ 0981 190011, 0911 486014; camping Birr32.50, 1-2-/3-bedroom bungalows Birr208/276/346) Unlike the secluded nature of Bishangari and Wenney's bungalows, accommodation here is densely packed along

the lake's southwestern shore. Although it's popular with families (thanks to its playground and swimming area), it's the loudest and most crowded on weekends. The beach here is better than that seen at Langanano Resort Hotel, though it's still coarse and pretty grey. Rooms are old and simple, yet clean and sport mosquito nets. Facilities include horse riding (Birr34.50 per hour), tour boats (Birr345 for 40 minutes; up to 30 people) and pedal boats (Birr27.60 for 30 minutes). It also hires out two-person tents (Birr92 including camping fees). The restaurant (mains Birr33 to Birr45) serves delicious tilapia (a freshwater fish). If you bring your own food, you're charged Birr100 per person per day!

**Langanano Resort Hotel** (Map p173; ☎ 0981 190131; camping Birr25, 1-2-/3-bedroom bungalows incl breakfast Birr146/254/352) Like Bekele Mola Hotel, this resort only sits 3km off the main Addis Ababa–Shashemene road. The site is less attractively designed and situated than the Bekele Mola, but it's much more peaceful, particularly at weekends. Motorboats (maximum five people) can be hired (Birr2.50 per person per minute!) for visits to the hot springs (20 minutes one way) and for lake tours. Tent rental is Birr50 per person. Set two-course meals are Birr40.

### Getting There & Away

To get to/from Lake Langanano, take any bus plying the Addis Ababa–Shashemene road, and ask to be dropped off/picked up (just signal) at the turn-off to your hotel. Rides to Wenney and Bishangari Lodges can usually be arranged in advance.

### LAKE ABIATA-SHALA NATIONAL PARK አባይታ ሻላ ሐይቅ ብሔራዊ ፓርክ

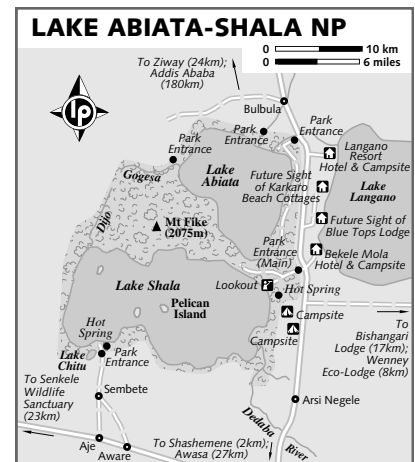
West of Lake Langanano lie the twin lakes of Abiata and Shala, which form part of the 887-sq-km Lake Abiata-Shala National Park (admission per 48hr Birr50, 5-seat vehicle Birr10). Identical twins these lakes are not. Shala's 410-sq-km surface sits within a collapsed volcanic caldera and depths exceed 260m in some areas, while Abiata's highly alkaline waters rest in a shallow pan no more than 14m in depth.

Traditionally, fish thriving in Abiata's waters fed storks, cormorants and pelicans that bred in safety on volcanic islands dotting Shala's surface. Pelican Island was one of only seven nesting sites in all of Africa

for the great white pelican. We say 'was' because the last decade has seen Lake Abiata suffer greatly at the hands of humans. The thick acacia woodland surrounding it has been turned into charcoal by illegal settlers, and commercial farms and a soda-ash factory have caused pollution and a substantial drop in the water level. The lake's increased salinity has killed the fish population, resulting in the pelicans and other birds deserting their former nesting grounds. The opposite is true for flamingos, who've been lured here by the newly thriving algae population. The only problem is that the shrunken lake and flamingos sit in the middle of an impenetrable dust bowl!

The saviour of the park still has to be Lake Shala, with its scenery and its abundant acacia-related bird species, such as the weaver bird, red-billed hornbill, Didric's cuckoo, Abyssinian roller and superb starling. There are some nice **lookouts** within walking distance of the main gate, though you'll need to take a guide/scout for directions/security (Birr30/100 for short vehicle trips/whole day by foot). If you have a vehicle, don't leave it unattended; guards can also be hired at the gate.

On the northeast shore of Shala, there's a **sulphurous hot spring**, which is often crowded with locals bathing and cooking maize in the thermal waters. At Shala's southwestern shore there's a second hot spring and a stunning, though pint sized, crater lake. Looking 80m down from the rim to **Lake Chitu** and



## RASTAFARIANS

Unbeknown to Ras Tafari, he gained subjects who lived far beyond the confines of his own kingdom when he was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930. In Jamaica, where Marcus Garvey's 'return to Africa' movement had been established, many saw the emperor's coronation as fulfilment of the ancient biblical prophesy that 'Kings will come out of Africa'.

Identifying themselves passionately with Ethiopia's monarch, as well as with Ethiopia's status as an independent African state, Garvey's followers created a new religion.

In it, the emperor was accorded divinity – the Messiah of African redemption. And the new faith would bear his former name.

What did the Emperor think of all this? Well, it was said that he was a bit embarrassed by it all. In 1963 he did grant them land in Shashemene though.

Rastafarians follow strict dietary taboos: pork, milk and coffee are forbidden. Ganja (marijuana) is held to be a sacrament.

Today the Rastas still patiently await the restoration of the Ethiopian monarchy. The recent Ethiopian–Eritrean War was seen by Rastafarians as a punishment visited on the country for having killed its king – the chosen one of God.

Treatment of Rastafarians by Orthodox Ethiopians ranges from a guarded tolerance to all out accusing them of spreading drugs and crime – claims Rastas dismiss as springing from prejudice. To date, no Ethiopian government has granted citizenship to any Rastafarians, including their Ethiopian born children.

spotting its semiresident flamingos is a sight worth the effort. The south shore is accessed via Aware or Aje. Note that admission must be paid at the main park entrance.

## Sleeping & Eating

Nearby Lake Langano is the obvious place to base yourself. However, if Langano's lodges will break the bank, head south to Arsi Negele.

**Tsaday Hotel** (☎ 0461 160813; Arsi Negele; d Birr15) Arsi Negele's best has cleanish rooms with cement floors, soft foam mattresses, decent sheets and passable bathrooms (squat toilets and cold showers). There's no English sign, so look for the battered green gates south of the Commercial Bank.

**National Park camping** (adult per 48hr Birr20) Camping is permitted anywhere in the park, but two main sites are suggested by officials. Don't leave anything unattended and bring a scout for security.

## Getting There & Around

The main park entrance is signposted on the highway. Any bus doing the Addis Ababa–Shashemene run can drop you off.

From the main park entrance to Lake Abiata-Shala National Park (up to the hot springs) is around 8km. If you're driving, road conditions usually make a 4WD essential.

## SHASHEMENE ቫሽመኔ

pop 89,680 / elev 1700m

Shashemene is a grubby and raucous town that sits at southern Ethiopia's most important crossroads, which connects north to south and east to west. It has little to offer travellers besides transportation links, and it has sadly gained a reputation for its occasional rude and hostile treatment of travellers. A decent alternative is to stay in nearby Awasa, which has reasonable transportation links. If you just need a break, head for nearby Wondo Genet.

In February 2005 Shashemene hosted thousands during part of the 'Africa Unite' celebrations put on by Rita Marley (Bob Marley's widow), the African Union and Unicef.

## Information

There's a post office, Commercial Bank and two Internet options (per hour Birr15) stretched out along the main drag, along with most of the hotels and restaurants.

## Sights

Shashemene can boast one claim: it's the unofficial capital of Ethiopia's Rastafarian community. Straddling the road to Addis Ababa just north of town, the community is known to locals as 'Jamaica'. Previously reluctant to welcome tourists, they've now opened the informal **Black Lion Museum** (☎ hrs vary),

which honours their Rastafarian heritage. They still don't take kindly to those looking to buy marijuana.

## Sleeping & Eating

**South Rift Valley Hotel** (☎ 0461 105710; s/tw Birr48/138, d Birr66-138) This large terraced garden complex is quiet and comfortable. The pink 'palace' out back has the best rooms, with balconies, TVs, firm mattresses and modern bathrooms. The cheaper rooms within the hillside structure are smaller, but are equally clean and also have TVs. The restaurant is the town's best and prepares local and *faranji* fare.

**Bekele Mola 1** (☎ 0461 103344; tw Birr46) Clean rooms surround a palm-fringed courtyard that's set slightly back off the main drag. The beds are comfortable and the bathrooms boast hot water. The restaurant (mains Birr14 to Birr20) serves decent Western food, but lacks atmosphere.

**Bekele Mola 2** (☎ 0461 103348; r Birr35) Less charming than its sister across the street, this modern cement block of a hotel has clean but weathered rooms.

**Hoteela Cilaalo** (☎ 0461 103720; d with shared bathroom Birr20) The best of the bottom feeders. The medium-sized rooms are brightly lit and pretty clean. The bar can get noisy at times.

**Fasil Hotel** (mains Birr8-12) The best of many local Ethiopian eateries.

## Getting There & Away

Shashemene is the principal transport hub of the south. There are buses servicing Addis Ababa (Birr24, five hours, four daily), Arba Minch (Birr26, six hours, one daily), Goba (Birr26, six to seven hours, two daily), Ziyaw (Birr10, two hours, four daily) and Moyale (Birr54, 1½ days, one daily), overnighting at Yabelo (Birr35, 12 hours).

Six minibuses run daily to Dila (Birr12 to Birr17, three hours), and leave every 15 minutes or so for Awasa (Birr4, 30 minutes).

Bekele Mola 1 hotel is a convenient spot to hitch a ride, as tourist vehicles often take breakfast or lunch there.

## WONDO GENET ወንድ ገነት

Found 15km southeast of Shashemene, and surrounded by dense forest, bird song, a variety of larger wildlife and – in season – fruit and honey, the mountain resort village of Wondo Genet is truly a breath of fresh air.

Although its hot springs pools receive the most accolades from Ethiopians due to their therapeutic powers, we have to say that the surroundings are the true attraction here. Go hiking into the bird-filled forest, catch glimpses of the Rift Valley below and search for everything from yellow-fronted parrots and white-backed black tits to bushbucks, baboons and hyenas, though we'd imagine you'd rather not meet up with the latter! A short but interesting walk is to the source of the springs, which is about 10 minutes from the resort hotel. There you'll find cowherds cooking their lunch in the springs: 17 minutes for potatoes, 35 minutes for maize!

The cement **hot springs pools** (admission Birr5; ☎ 24hr), although soothing to swim in and surrounded by gardens, have more the feel of a water treatment plant than a resort. Things can also get awfully crowded on weekends.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Wondo Genet Resort Hotel** (☎ 0462 203763; washo .et@ethionet.et; camping Birr37.50, s/tw incl breakfast Birr205/273) Set amid citrus orchards, flowering gardens and playful colobus and vervet



monkeys, this resort sits on a natural balcony overlooking the Rift Valley. With high prices, 1970s décor and run-down bathrooms, you're obviously paying for the location. Reservations (via email) are advised for weekends. Guests have free use of the hot springs pools. The hotel restaurant (mains Birr12 to Birr14) can prepare picnic lunches or barbecues around a campfire.

**Abyssinia Hotel** (d Birr40) Although *faranji* prices are in full effect, this hotel 3km down the hill in Wondo Washa is the best budget bet. Reasonable-sized rooms, set in a pleasant garden behind the hotel's restaurant, are bright and clean.

Though closed when we visited, there's a nameless rudimentary budget option just below the hot springs pools.

Delicious seasonal fruit can be bought in the area, including papaya, avocado, banana and mango. Try a local favourite, the *kazmir*. The area is also known for its *chat* (see p228).

### Getting There & Away

From Shashemene, buses and minibuses run regularly (until 5pm) to and from the village of Wondo Washa (Birr4, 40 minutes), which is 3km from the springs. From there, you can walk or take a *gari* (Birr5 per person).

A contract minibus (up to 10 people) from Shashemene costs Birr250 to Birr300 return (including waiting time).

### SENKELE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Originally established to protect the endemic Swaine's hartebeest, the open acacia woodlands of the **Senkele Wildlife Sanctuary** (admission Birr70) also hosts Bohor reedbucks, greater kudus, spotted hyenas, serval and civet cats, caracals, warthogs, common jackals and oribi antelopes. The globally threatened *Aquila clanga* (greater spotted eagle) is one of 191 bird species documented.

With a population of approximately 450, the Swaine's hartebeest is the most easily spotted species in this 36-sq-km park.

The park has had a troubled past, with large numbers of livestock and illegal settlers, but since an agreement between Aje administration, elders and park officials in 2001 things have been on the mend.

The park is 53km west of Shashemene and is worth a visit if you're in the vicinity.

There's a 65km track around the park, but it's usually only driveable between October and March. From the Borana Hill, around 6km east of the park office, there are good panoramic views. It's also possible to explore on foot.

### Sleeping & Eating

Ideally, you would visit this park en route between Shashemene and Arba Minch. However, those without vehicles will have to stay in Aje as there's no camping in the park.

**Zed Hotel** (s with shared bathroom Birr10) The best thing we can say about this Aje option is that the sheets are clean. The dimly lit rooms aren't tidy and the shared bathrooms are pretty grim. Cold showers come in buckets. It's not signed, but it's across from the communications tower. You can eat in its restaurant.

### Getting There & Away

The park turn-off lies 5km west of Aje. From there, it's at least 10km to the park headquarters. Around 20 minibuses run between Shashemene and Aje daily (Birr5, 30 minutes). In Aje, a contract minibus to the park should cost Birr250 to Birr350 return, including two hours waiting time; in the dry season, it's possible to drive around parts of the park.

### AWASA አዋሽ

pop 140,999 / elev 1708m

Perfectly poised at Lake Awasa's edge, the capital of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' region is both large and attractive. While there are no major sights, the lake and its surrounds offer a relaxing respite from the rigours of travel for a day or two. It definitely makes a more pleasurable stop on the north-south route than Shashemene, 25km to the north.

### Information

The town centre has the telecommunications building, post office and other major services.

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 8-11am & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 8-11.30am Sat) Changes travellers cheques, US dollars and euros.

**Kibru Medical Center** (☎ 0462 210950; ☎ 24hr) Awasa's best medical facility. Includes a pharmacy, clinic and diagnostic laboratory.

**M-Link Internet Center** (per hr Birr18) Slow and steady Internet connections.

**Nardos Computer Service** (per hr Birr18) As slow and as steady as M-link.

### Sights & Activities

The waters of **Lake Awasa**, teeming with tilapia, catfish and barbus, attract good birdlife. Kingfishers, herons, storks, cranes, darters and plovers are among the species commonly seen on the water's edge, while weavers, hornbills and the endemic black-winged lovebird are found in the fig forest and scrub surroundings.

The easiest way to take in the lake and its wildlife is to stroll the footpath at the edge of the lake, leading north from the military post near Wabe Shebele Hotel 2. If your legs need slightly more stretching than strolling, hike up the steep and stubby **Tabour Hill**, which sits about 1km from the fish market. Your legs will have long recovered before you tire of the summit's view.

A trip onto Awasa's shimmering waters in a row boat is the best way to experience the lake. Boats, with rower, cost Birr50

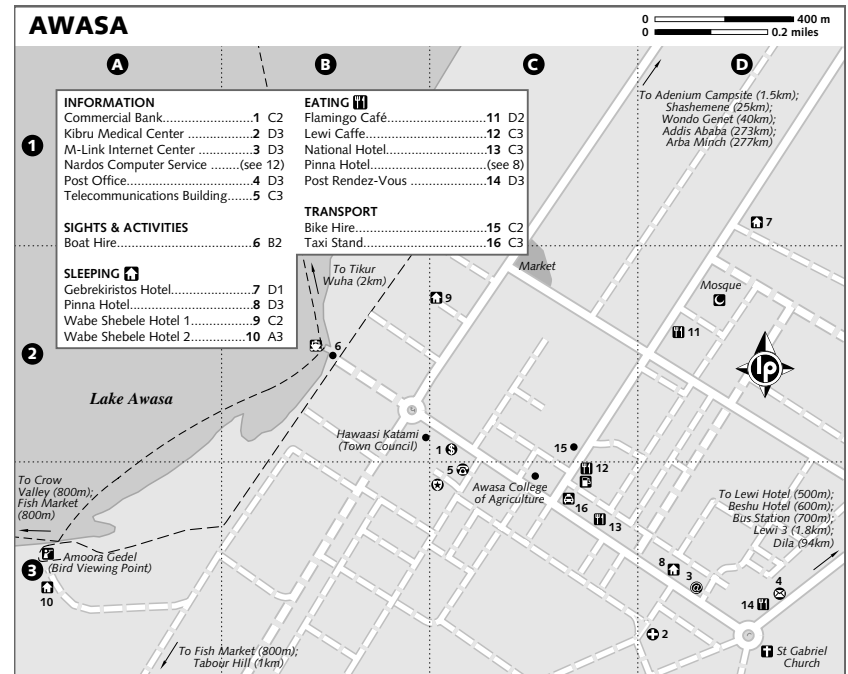
per hour (one to five people) and are hired from the pier at the base of the main drag. Row row row your boat north to **Tikur Wuha** (Black Water) to see the hippos and birds (around three hours return) or south to **Amoora Gedel** (1½ to two hours return), one of the best places for birds.

If you fancy some fishing, hooks and line are cheap and easy to find in town. Otherwise, boat owners will charge Birr30 per hour to rent theirs!

The **fish market** (admission Birr10; ☎ 8am-10am), located on the shores of Crow Valley, is well worth the wander. With colourful boats lining the shore, children untangling nets, birds soaring above, massive marabou storks watching from treetops and pelicans patrolling the shallows, you'll have plenty to look at. Follow locals' lead and devour raw fish (Birr1). Come by foot, *gari* (Birr2) or row boat (three hours return).

### Sleeping

**Gebrekiros Hotel** (☎ 046 202780; d Birr63-76, tw Birr79) The best-value hotel in town. The Birr76 doubles are big, bright and boast



balconies, satellite TVs, telephones, fridges and mosquito nets; angle for room 317 or 217. The twins and cheaper doubles are equally clean but lack TVs and fridges.

**Lewi Hotel** (☎ 0462 206310; d Birr70-180; 🏠) Rooms range from utterly spartan and small, with linoleum floors, to incredibly comfy, with velvet sitting chairs, parquet flooring and queen-sized beds. All but the cheapest options have satellite TVs. It's 200m west of the bus station.

**Pinna Hotel** (☎ 0462 210336; fax 0462 202343; d/tw Birr160/192, ste Birr225-272) Well-located on the main drag, this modern option is pleasantly furnished and comfortable. Rooms have satellite TV, veranda and telephone.

**Beshu Hotel** (☎ 0462 206957; d with shared bathroom Birr33, d Birr56) Between Lewi Hotel and the bus station, Beshu has small, clean rooms. The doubles with private bathroom have satellite TVs, hot showers and mosquito nets.

**Wabe Shebele Hotel 1** (☎ 0462 205395; 1-/2-/3-bedroom bungalows from Birr127/166/400; 🏠) Lovely lakeside location and beautiful gardens, though rooms are incredibly worn and seriously overpriced. Only rooms 19 to 39 (one bedroom) are worth considering.

**Wabe Shebele Hotel 2** (☎ 0462 205397; camping per tent Birr40, bungalow tw/d Birr78.25/93.75; 🏠) Think Wabe Shebele Hotel 1, but with worse rooms and nicer gardens.

## Eating

**Pinna Hotel** (mains Birr9-30) Shrimp risotto, gnocchi, ravioli with spinach, and mixed grills are just some of the items on this hotel's renowned *faranji*-friendly menu. The pastry shop downstairs has the town's best cakes and a selection of chocolate bars from Europe.

**Post Rendez-Vous** (mains Birr6-15) An eclectic outdoor restaurant and popular local hang-out, this place is good for a variety of Western food including pasta, pizza and even veggie burgers.

**National Hotel** (mains Birr5-10) A local restaurant that dishes out traditional Ethiopian fare to the masses. It's usually packed.

**Lewi 3** (mains Birr12-18) On the Shashemene-Dila road that skirts the town's northeast edge, this restaurant offers a wide range of dishes from curries to club sandwiches and pizza.

Options for cakes, pastries and coffee:

**Flamingo Café** (cakes Birr1.25)

**Lewi Caffè** (cakes Birr2)

## Getting There & Away

The bus station lies about 1km east from the town centre. Since most southbound services will drive through town before reaching the station, simply ask to hop off in town. Otherwise, *garis* are available at the station.

Buses run to Addis Ababa (Birr28, 5½ hours, five daily), Arba Minch (Birr27, 6½ hours, one daily) and Wondo Genet (Birr9, one hour, one daily). Regular minibuses run to Shashemene (Birr4, 30 minutes) and Dila (Birr10, 2½ hours). For Moyale, go to Shashemene or Dila and get a bus from there.

## Getting Around

*Garis* charge Birr1.50/2 for short/long journeys or Birr3/20 per hour/day. Taxis cost around Birr30 per hour, or Birr10 to Birr20 for journeys around town; you'll need to negotiate hard.

Bikes (Birr4/20 per hour/day) can be hired near Lewi Caffè.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Adenium Campsite** (☎ 0462 212787; kuratujana@yahoo.de; camping Birr20, tw with shared bathroom Birr60) Adenium is potentially the nicest campsite and budget accommodation in all of Ethiopia. Although there are currently only two rooms, they're a haven of simplicity and artsy elegance. Cheaper huts in the flowering garden are coming soon. Campers and guests have use of a communal kitchen, clothes-washing area and spotless bathrooms. For overlanders, there's even parking. It's run by Jana (German) and her Ethiopian husband, Kuratu. Jana prepares exquisite three-course dinners (Birr25 to Birr30), which fuse European, Middle Eastern and Ethiopian elements (you must pre-order in the afternoon). Simple eats are available for breakfast and lunch. The Adenium lurks unmarked in an alley about 2km north of town. Head northeast from the market and take two successive rights when you see the SOS School. Its GPS coordinates are N07° 04.627 E038° 28.050.

## A BALE BABY *Matt Phillips*

It was the grimmest day of my research for this book, with rain and fog obscuring everything but the road immediately ahead. Approaching Dodola, my driver and I spotted a crowd of almost 40 people carrying a bed with a blanketed body over their heads.

It seemed obvious that this poor soul was knocking on death's door, so we offered to help. The crowd was overwhelmingly distraught and tears were everywhere, my eyes included. As the body was being placed on the laps of three locals who'd piled into the back seat, a surprisingly young woman's head popped from beneath the blankets and mustered a few words. Before I knew it, the woman was whisked out and the quiet sullen air was pierced with the cries of...a newborn baby!

Worry instantaneously turned to elation and celebrations broke out amongst the crowd. I'm happy to say mother and baby are doing well.

It was undoubtedly the brightest day of my Ethiopian trip.

# THE SOUTHEAST & BALE MOUNTAINS

Offering adventure, whether by foot, horseback or roaring 4WD, this unique region of southern Ethiopia fascinates those who visit.

## DODOLA – HORSE TREKS IN THE BALE MOUNTAINS

Resting between Shashemene and the Bale Mountains National Park, the diminutive town of Dodola has become a base for some unique trekking. It's all due to the pioneering Integrated Forest Management Plan (IFMP), which was initiated in 1995 by the German aid organisation GTZ. Now self-sufficient, the nonprofit programme works to conserve natural Afro-alpine forest environment by offering local people an alternative income to felling the local forests.

Thanks to five simple but self-contained and comfortable lodges built along the route, it's perfect for those without tents and camping gear to explore the Bale Mountains' western range.

Due to the high altitudes and steep gradients, IMFP prefers people to trek on horseback (no riding experience is necessary), but this isn't mandatory and those with large lungs and legs of steel can trek on foot.

For information on Bale Mountains' geography, climate, plants and animals, see p181.

## Planning

**IFMP** (☎ 0226 660036; www.baletrek.com; 🕒 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat), which is located on the main

Shashemene-Dinsho road in Dodola, organises horses (Birr20 per day), horse handlers (one per four horses, Birr20 per day) and mandatory guides (Birr70 per day). Fees are paid to the service providers, not IFMP. IFMP also sells a 1:75,000 scale trekking map (US\$3). The **Bale Mountain Motel** (☎ 0226 660016; gtz.ifmp@es-raisting.de), which is associated with the IFMP, can also provide the same services. The motel is located a few hundred metres east of the IFMP office.

Limited foodstuffs (pasta, rice, lentils, biscuits, cheese, tomato paste etc) can be purchased in Dodola and goats can be bought en route. Stoves, cooking utensils, beer (Birr5) and soft drinks (Birr4) are found within the lodges. Lodge keepers can provide local meals, but these are an acquired taste – bring supplies! Water is also available but requires treatment before drinking.

## Trekking

Please review the Safety Guidelines for Trekking (p254) and Responsible Trekking (p255) boxed texts before embarking.

To complete the full circuit would take six days, but since every lodge is within four to five hours of a trail head, treks of even two days can be catered for. The full circuit (moving west to east) is described here. Times given are for those on horseback.

## DAY ONE

Starting from Changiti (2750m), 11km south of Dodola, the trail leads 7km (2½ to 3½ hours) up the Tikiku Lenشو River (very wet for those on foot) to the lodge at Wahoro (3340m). Spend the afternoon bagging Tute (3705m) and checking out Idjar Waterfall. The sunrise from Wahoro is amazing.

**DAY TWO**

Take the short 10km route (three to four hours) to the lodge at Angafo (3460m) or the longer 13km (four to five hours) option that offers better views and chances of spotting an Ethiopian wolf. After lunch climb Tullu Hangatu (3546m) for an astounding view.

**DAY THREE**

Continue 5km (1½ to two hours) east to the lodge at Andele (3350m), which is nestled within the Herero Forest, or continue 13km (or 18km depending on your route) further to the lodge at Moldicho (3349m).

**DAY FOUR**

If you slept at Andele, head east to the lodge at Moldicho. If you're up for it, you can visit Moldicho Waterfall.

**DAY FIVE**

From Moldicho, you'll skirt the Tinsich Boditi Ridge before crossing the Wageda Forest to reach the lodge at Duro (3400m). The day covers 18km (five or six hours).

**DAY SIX**

Descend the 11km (three hours) to the trail head at Bucha Raja (2680m) or continue 9km further (two hours) to the town of Adaba. Alternatively, you could spend a second night at Duro and explore Berenda Ridge.

**Sleeping & Eating****DODOLA**

**Bale Mountain Motel** (☎ 0226 660016; gtz.ifmp@les-raisting.de; camping Birr20, d with shared bathroom Birr20, d/tw Birr30/60) Although bare and small, the rooms here are comfortable and clean. It's a long and chilly walk to the outhouse-like loos for those with shared bathrooms. It has a homy little restaurant (meals Birr8 to Birr10) out back, but meals should be ordered in advance.

**ADABA**

**Tourist Hotel** (☎ 0226 630591; d Birr50) Located on the main Shashemene–Dinsho road, this option has two cosy Dorze huts (p201), each with comfy bed and clean bathroom. Meals and coffee are served in a massive Dorze hut.

**ON THE MOUNTAINS**

Each of the **lodges** (camping Birr15, s with shared bathroom Birr35) at Wahoro, Angafo, Adele, Moldicho and Duro has eight beds, complete with mattresses, bedding, blankets, sleeping bags and towels. The kitchen facilities can also be used by campers for a Birr5 fee. Guests and campers both must pay Birr5 for a hot shower.

**Getting There & Around**

From Dodola, two early morning buses serve Shashemene (Birr11, three to four hours) along a horrendous section of road. For Dinsho, take the Robe bus (Birr20, 3½ to four hours, four buses daily) and ask to be dropped off. Numerous minibuses run between Dodola and Adaba (Birr4.50, 40 minutes).

IFMP in Dodola provides 4WD transportation to and from trail heads (Birr3 per kilometre).

**BALE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK**  
**የባሌ ተራሮች ብሔራዊ ፓርክ**

More than any other park in Ethiopia, the Bale Mountains National Park is known for its wildlife. Over 60 mammal species and 260 bird species have been recorded here.

The scenery may be less spectacular than the Simien Mountains, but it's certainly no less beautiful. As you approach the park from Dodola, ridges to the east are punctuated with fortresslike escarpments, while those to the north are more gentle, their rounded rock pinnacles dotting the ridges like worn teeth protruding from an old man's gums. Within the park, rivers cut deep gorges; alpine lakes feed streams; and water accepts gravity's fate at several waterfalls. In the lower hills, Highlanders canter along century-old paths on their richly caparisoned horses, and the noise of shepherds cracking their whips echoes around the valley. Among the abundant wildflowers, beautiful birds such as the malachite and Tacazze sunbird flit about.

**Geography & Geology**

The park stretches over 2400 sq km and ranges in altitude from 1500m to 4377m.

The Harena Escarpment splits the park in two, running fracturelike from east to west. To the northeast of the escarpment lies the high-altitude plateau known as the Sanetti Plateau (4000m). The plateau is broken

by a series of volcanic plugs and small peaks, including Tullu Deemtu, which at 4377m is the highest point in southern Ethiopia.

To the south, the land gradually falls away from the plateau, and a thick heather belt gives way to heavily forested areas known collectively as the Harena Forest.

**Wildlife**  
**PLANTS**

The park can be divided into three main zones. The northern area of the park, around the park headquarters at Dinsho, consists of grassy, riverine plains and bushland of mainly sagebrush and St John's wort. From 2500m to 3300m, woodland of mainly *Hagenia abyssinica* and *Juniperus procera* is found. The abundant wildflowers in the area include geranium, lobelia and alchemilla.

Higher up, montane grassland gives way to heather. Here the plant can be found not only as little bushes, but as large and mature trees.

The second zone, the Sanetti Plateau, is home to typical Afro-alpine plants, some of which have adapted to the extreme conditions by either remaining very small or becoming very large. The best known is the curious-looking giant lobelia (*Lobelia rhynchopetalum*), which can reach 5m in height. The silver *Helichrysum* or 'everlasting' flowers are the dominant wildflowers. Keep an eye out for the indigenous Abyssinian rose, with its lovely subtle scent.

The third habitat, the moist, tropical Harena Forest, is home to tree species such as *Hagenia*, *Celtis* and *Podocarpus*.

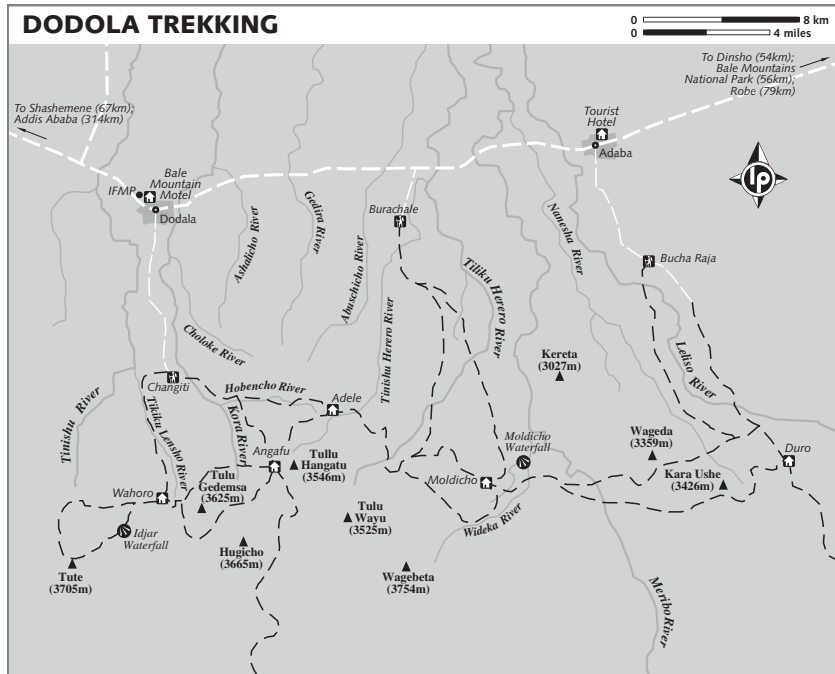
**ANIMALS**

The Bale Mountains are known for their endemic wildlife, particularly the Ethiopian wolf and the mountain nyala.

The sighting of an Ethiopian wolf, the world's rarest canid, is a highlight of a trip to the Bale Mountains, and is almost guaranteed on the Sanetti Plateau. But there are plenty of other no-less-remarkable endemics to be seen, including Menelik's bush-buck and the giant molerat.

Other large mammals commonly seen in the northern area include grey duikers, Bohor reedbucks and warthogs. Serval cats and Anubis baboons are occasionally seen.

In the Harena Forest, giant forest hogs, bushpigs, warthogs, colobus monkeys and



spotted hyena are all found, as well as leopards, lions and African hunting dogs. The last three are rarely seen.

Though most of you can't wait to get trekking, the area around the park headquarters at Dinsho is, ironically, the one place where many of the larger mammals are easily seen. The animals are less shy here and the early morning and late afternoon provide great photographic opportunities.

Bale is also famous for its incredible number of endemic birds – 16 at the last count. Unusually, the endemics are very easily seen. No self-respecting twitcher should leave the mountains off their itinerary! On the plateau, sightings of endemics (the blue-winged goose, wattled ibis,

thick-billed raven, Abyssinian longclaw, black-headed siskin, spot breasted plover and Rouget's rail) are almost guaranteed. The birdlife in the juniper forests around the park headquarters is also worth a peek; try to spot the elusive Abyssinian catbirds and yellow-fronted parrots.

Near the park headquarters, a 1km nature trail leads up to Dinsho Hill, from where there are quite good views of the surrounding park. The little **museum** (admission free with park entrance; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm) below headquarters is also worth a peek. Though tiny, it's crammed with various local stuffed animals including those not commonly seen, such as the honey badger, civet cat and aardvark. There also some interesting

### POTENT PLANTS

While trekking in the Bale Mountains, look out for the endemic plant *Kniphofia foliosa*, a member of the red-hot poker family, found quite commonly in the hills between 2050m and 4000m. The plant flowers from May to October and from December to January.

Long valued by the local Bale people for its medicinal properties, it's used to relieve stomach aches and cramps. Scientific investigation has revealed that the plant does in fact contain several anthraquinones including islandicin, which is found in fungi such as *Penicillium islandicum*!

information panels about conservation efforts, flora, fauna, and the local people.

### Planning

All treks begin and end at park headquarters, which sits 2.5km from the village of Dinsho or 160km west of Shashemene.

Plan to arrive in the early afternoon, so you can sort out your trek for the following morning. A night spent in Dinsho is also a good start towards acclimatisation.

### WHEN TO GO

The hottest and driest days here fall between December and February, but late September to early December is when the scenery is greenest and the wildflowers are out. Night-time temperatures between December and January are also the coldest – frost and snow are occasionally seen.

### PARK FEES & REGULATIONS

All fees are good for 48 hours and are payable at the **park headquarters** (admission Birr50, vehicles Birr10; camping Birr20; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.30pm Sat). Outside these opening hours, someone can usually be summoned.

Fires are permitted only at campsites. Ensure guides and scouts only use dead erica wood or eucalyptus for their fires.

### MAPS

Dinsho Lodge usually has a decent park map (Birr10) and a small Bale Mountains booklet (Birr10), which gives a good overview of the park's environment. *Bale Mountains: A Guidebook* by Ethiopian wolf expert Stuart

Williams is an excellent accompaniment; look for it in Addis Ababa.

### SUPPLIES

There are a few stores in Dinsho selling bare basics (pasta, rice, tomato purée etc). If you're planning more elaborate menus, stock up in Addis Ababa. Eggs (Birr1 for three or four) and chickens (Birr20 to Birr25) can be bartered for in Dinsho or in the mountains.

Water is available in various places on the mountain but should be treated.

Bring your own camping gear or hire it in Addis Ababa – there's slim pickings in Dinsho.

### GUIDES, SCOUTS & HORSES

Organising the 'team' (guide, scout, horses) is done at park headquarters and should be arranged the day before you plan to start.

All trekkers must be accompanied by a guide and an armed scout, though it's OK to walk around the woodland near park headquarters without them.

Guides work as freelancers, but by rote, so there's little point recommending individuals. Few scouts speak English, but they make willing additions to the team. Guides cost from Birr70 per day (one to three people) to Birr90 (four to 20 people); scouts Birr40 (one to 40 people).

Porters aren't available, but horses (Birr25 per day) and horse drivers (Birr30 per day) can be hired. The guide and scout will expect you to pay for at least one horse to carry their blankets and provisions.

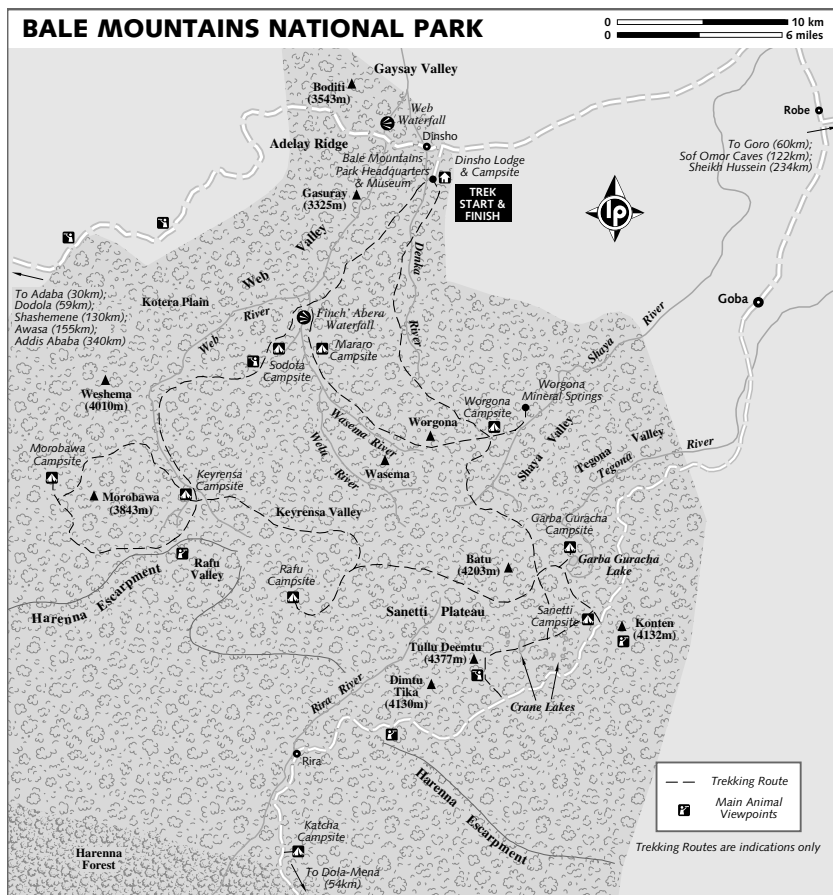
Guides, scouts and handlers should provide food for themselves. Some bring token offerings or nothing at all and will then look to you for sustenance. Either check they have enough or bring extra. As if by compensation, the guide is happy to act as cook, and the scout to collect dead wood.

See the boxed text on p264 for post-trek tipping advice.

### Trekking

Most trekking is fairly gentle and undemanding, following good, well-trodden paths or sheep tracks. But don't forget that altitude makes easy-looking terrain quite heavy going.

The trekking routes cover a relatively small area, and most treks last six days, or four days with a vehicle.





## THE ETHIOPIAN WOLF

The Ethiopian wolf (*Canis simensis*) is the rarest canid (dog family member) in the world. Found only in the Ethiopian highlands, it's thought to be on the verge of extinction. Only about 600 wolves are believed to remain in the whole country.

Wolves are found on both sides of the Rift Valley, in the old provinces of Gonder, Wolo, Menz, Arsi and Bale. The Bale Mountains are home to the largest population (approximately 200). In Amharic, the wolf is known as *ky kebero* or 'red jackal'. Though the wolf does look like a jackal, its connection to the wolf family has firmly been established.

Living in family groups of around 13 animals, the wolves are highly territorial and family oriented. When the dominant female in the pack gives birth to her annual litter of between two and six pups, all members chip in, taking turns to feed, look after and play with the young. When it comes to hunting, however, the wolves forage alone. Any of the 19 rodent species found in Bale provide snacks. The giant molerats provide a feast and are the favourite food of the wolves.

The main threats to the wolves are rabies and canine distemper caught from the domestic dog population, and crossbreeding (male wolves with female dogs). In the Bale Mountains, the 1991–92 outbreak of rabies reduced the population from around 400 animals to 120. In 1995 distemper also took its toll.

Loss of habitat to livestock and cultivation (such as in north and south Wolo), and local superstition are other obstacles to be overcome. Locals believe that the antirabies vaccine changes the character of their dogs, or renders them less efficient as guard dogs. It's also considered very bad luck if a wolf crosses your path. In the past wolves have been deliberately run over or shot by truck drivers.

Current measures to try and save the animal from extinction include an antirabies vaccination, a sterilisation programme for local domestic dog populations and local education. There is still talk of starting a captive breeding programme in the future. Though it's still threatened, the Bale population of wolves now looks healthier than it has in decades.

Please review the Safety Guidelines for Trekking (p254) and Responsible Trekking (p255) boxed texts before lacing up.

The following routes and approximate trekking times have been devised in consultation with local guides.

### CLASSIC ROUTE

#### Day One

Work your way southwest up the Web Valley towards the Finch' Abera Waterfall (two or three hours from the park headquarters), before continuing on to Mararo, where there's a pleasant campsite.

#### Day Two

Keep an eye out for giant molerats while trekking through the Wasema Valley. Next, start climbing up to the Sanetti Plateau as you approach Mt Batu (six to eight hours).

#### Day Three

Bag Mt Batu before you walk to the picturesque campsite situated in the Tegona Valley under the sheer cliffs beside the Garba Guracha Lake (six hours). The campsite is a great spot for birds of prey. Lammergeyers,

buzzards and eagles are all commonly seen here.

#### Day Four

Trek to the Crane Lakes (six hours; marked on some maps as the 'Alpine Lakes'). Although known for their water birds, they're a great place to glimpse Ethiopian wolves. A detour can be made to Tullu Deemtu (4377m), which affords good views from the summit. The mountain itself is little more than a monotonous scree slope. This area is close to Goba–Dola–Mena road, which means it's possible to end your trek here (if you've pre-arranged a 4WD pick-up in Goba or if you're patient enough to hitch).

#### Day Five

Descend off the Sanetti Plateau to Worgona (six or seven hours). A good detour from Worgona is the nearby mineral springs.

#### Day Six

Follow the Denka River down to Dinsho (six hours).

(Continued on page 189)

(Continued from page 184)

### THE KEYRENSA VALLEY LOOP

This six- to seven-day loop takes in Garba Guracha Lake and the mineral springs near Worgona.

**Day one** Dinsho–Sodota (four hours).

**Day two** Sodota–Keyrensa campsite (five to six hours).

**Day three** Keyrensa–Rafu campsite (five to six hours).

**Day four** Rafu–Garba Guracha campsite (five hours).

**Day five** Garba Guracha–Worgona campsite (five hours).

**Day six** Worgona–Dinsho (six hours).

### ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

One-day excursions include walks up the Web Valley to Gasuray Peak (3325m) and Adelay Ridge. The Web Gorge takes around 1½ hours to reach, and is good for seeing colobus monkeys. Go early in the morning.

For a very pretty walk that includes birds and a good chance of seeing the Ethiopian wolf (and the slightest chance of spotting a leopard), go to the Finch' Abera Waterfall (two to three hours' walk one way). You could also spend the night at the nearby campsite. Another good overnight excursion is to the Kotera Plain, where Ethiopian wolves are often seen. The walk takes five hours one way.

For those who want to spend longer periods in the mountains, the almost totally unexplored Harena Forest offers great hiking potential.

### Nontrekkers

If you've limited time, or can't walk far, you can still see a great deal of wildlife, particularly in the forest around park headquarters where mountain nyala, warthogs and other species reside.

With your own vehicle, the top of Tullu Deemtu can also be reached by 4WD, via Goba and the Sanetti Plateau. If you reach the plateau by 7am, you're almost guaranteed a sighting of the Ethiopian wolf; they spend this time intently searching for food. Failing an early start, the late afternoon is your next best bet.

If you approach the wolves from downwind, you can get very close indeed. If you're lucky, you may spot a klipspringer here too.

A pleasant, short stroll from the Goba–Dola–Mena road is to the Crane Lakes, an excellent spot for birds (though in the dry season some of the lakes evaporate).

Wattled cranes often nest here during June and September.

### Sleeping & Eating

#### DINSHO

**Dinsho Lodge** (tw with shared bathroom Birr50, 3-/5-/11-bed dm Birr25/15/10) Located at park headquarters and surrounded by endemic species – a stay here is a no-brainer. It feels like an abandoned ski chalet, with lots of aging rustic charm. It's usually pretty cold, but you can buy wood (make sure it's eucalyptus or dead erica) in the village to stock the lodge's fireplace and to heat the sauna. A large bundle should cost Birr20. The rooms are clean but there's little in the way of bedding, so you'll have to use your sleeping bag. Showers are cold...really cold. During the high season, reservations should be made in advance by writing directly to: The Warden, Dinsho Lodge, PO Box 107, Goba, Ethiopia.

**Camping** (per person per 48hr Birr20) Three basic but scenic sites sit on Dinsho Hill behind the lodge. Expect oodles of wildlife.

**Hotel Tsahayi** (meals Birr5-10) This hotel makes the town's best grub. Its bedrooms (Birr10) are dark and dank.

#### ON THE MOUNTAINS

**Camping** (per person per 48hr Birr20) The national park has established various sites for camping, though there are still not yet any huts, shelters or other facilities. You'll need to be fully independent with tent, sleeping bag and cooking gear.

### Getting There & Away

If coming from Addis Ababa, catch an early morning bus to Robe (Birr48, 12 hours) or Goba (Birr49.85, 13 hours) and leap off in Dinsho. If the return buses to Addis Ababa are full when passing Dinsho, head to Shashemene (Birr25, seven hours) and go from there. One daily bus runs to Robe (Birr8, one hour).

By private vehicle, it's possible to reach Dinsho from Addis Ababa in a day if you make a dawn start.

### Getting Around

A great way to take in a lot of the park without your own vehicle is to catch one of the buses or trucks that ply the Goba–Dola–Mena road. The road takes you right through the park, up over the Sanetti Plateau

and down into the Hareenna Forest. You can explore the area from the road, then hitch back, which isn't too difficult, but don't leave it too late in the day.

## ROBE ቦቤ

pop 43,713 / elev 2600m

For most people, their love affair with Robe is brief and unmemorable. Feelings, sparked by an attractive eucalyptus-lined river on the northern edge of town, are typically extinguished seconds later by the sight of Robe itself. It's a mucky 1½-street town, 25km east of Dinsho, that's growing rapidly and is due to host the region's only university.

Islam is strong here and you'll notice a palpable change in the atmosphere from points further west. There's nothing here to warrant a visit, but it makes a convenient stop en route to the Sof Omar Caves.

At the Thursday market, seek out the delicious local acacia honey, the attractive basketry and the heavy cotton *buluko* (togas).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Bekele Mola** (☎ 0226 650065; d/tw Birr40/52) On the road towards Goba, 350m north of the bus station, Bekele Mola has the town's most comfortable accommodation. Three-room blocks of rooms are set in a grassy garden with several huge acacia trees. Inside they're big and bright, but the paint is cracking and rugs are weary. The restaurant serves local fare and bland *faranji* food.

**Bale Park Hotel** (☎ 0226 651197; s with shared bathroom Birr12, s/d Birr20/25) Immediately north of Bekele Mola, just off the main drag, is this cheap and cheerful choice. The double rooms are the prize winners – they're reasonably sized and sport comfy beds. The cheaper singles are much smaller, though they still have access to hot showers. All toilets are of the squat variety. It's signposted as 'Parkii Baalee'.

**Mana Nyata Jeddah** (meals Birr5-15) This Muslim restaurant, at the north end of the main drag, is known for *hanid*, a meal of rice, *injera*, French fries and goat meat. It tastes more Middle Eastern than Ethiopian.

**Fountain Café** (snacks Birr1-1.50) Cakes, coffee and smiles served here. Next to the main roundabout.

**Shamshat Cafe** (snacks Birr3-7) Just east of Fountain Café, Shamshat is good for a breakfast omelette.

## Getting There & Away

The bus station is at the southern end of town. One bus runs daily to Dinsho (Birr8, one hour), Shashemene (Birr25.50, eight hours) and Addis Ababa (Birr48, 12 hours). Two daily buses serve Goro (Birr9, two hours). There are regular services to nearby Goba (Birr1.50, 20 minutes).

## GOBA ጎባ

pop 33,000 / elev 2743m

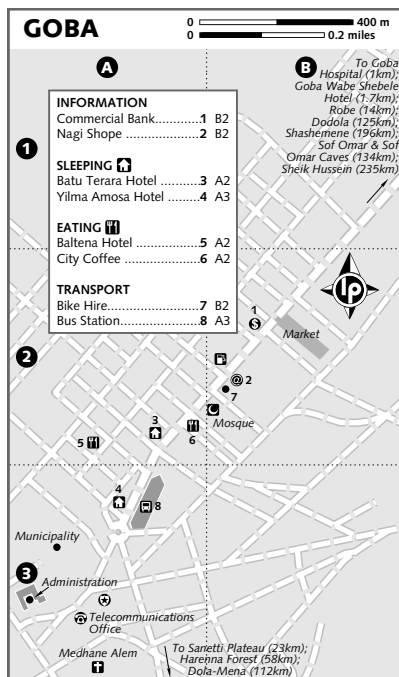
Goba, the old capital of the Bale region, is 13km south of Robe. Goba is in a state of decline and Ethiopian Airlines has even cancelled its flights here. The only reason to visit this ramshackle town is to access the stunning Sanetti Plateau within Bale Mountains National Park.

## Information

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri, 8-11.30am Sat) Changes US-dollars cash only.

**Goba Hospital** (☎ 0226 610258; ☎ 24hr) This local hospital is 1km north of town.

**Nagi Shope** (per hr Birr21; ☎ 2-7pm) Its Internet connection is as sketchy as its opening hours.



## Sleeping & Eating

**Goba Wabe Shebele Hotel** (☎ 0226 610041; s/tw Birr135/170, ste Birr180-345) For this price, you'd expect more than just clean rooms and toilets. Only the expensive suites have any character, with most rooms being boringly bland. The restaurant is well regarded and prepares Western dishes, including three-course set meals (Birr37.50). It's almost 2km north of town.

**Batu Terara Hotel** (☎ 0226 610712; s Birr25) This place is bruised and battered but bright enough.

**Yilma Amosa Hotel** (d with shared bathroom Birr25, d Birr50) This place is past its prime and the rude owner (the joys of undercover research!) smugly charges *faranjis* more than double for everything. Make it an option of last resort.

**Baltena Hotel** (mains Birr6-10; ☎ 6am-midnight) This garden restaurant is the best place for a local meal.

**City Coffee** (snacks Birr1; ☎ 6am-9pm) Sip coffee, inhale cake and imagine what life behind bars is like in this fortified café.

## Getting There & Around

Regular minibuses serve Robe (Birr1.50, 20 minutes), while two daily buses reach Goro (Birr10, 2½ hours). Robe offers more reliable services to Shashemene and Addis Ababa.

Daily Isuzu trucks (inside/outside Birr40/20, five to six hours) are the best option to Dola-Mena and the Sanetti Plateau, especially on Dola-Mena's market days (Wednesday and Saturday); inquire at the bus station.

4WDs, with driver and fuel, can usually be rented in Goba (ask around the bus station). Postnegotiation prices should be about Birr750 per day or Birr 250 for a short trip to the plateau.

Always check on the condition of the road to Dola-Mena as it's occasionally impassable after rains.

Bikes can be hired to get around town (Birr3 per hour).

## SOF OMAR CAVES

### የሶፍ ሳሙር ዋሻዎች

If the Web River's water and its suspended sediments weren't the artists and if the sublime carvings weren't welded to the Earth's insides, sections of the Sof Omar Caves would be housed in some of the

world's finest galleries. They're simply that stunning.

Accessed from the village of Sof Omar, 122km east of Robe, the labyrinth of caverns stretches some 16km through limestone hills. Unless you intend on swimming into the darkness (never a good idea!), you can only explore the first 1.7km on foot. Luckily, the walkable portion houses the remarkable formations known as the Chamber of Columns, the dome and the balcony. With vaulted chambers, flying buttresses, massive pillars and fluted archways, these sections almost resemble an Antonio Gaudí cathedral.

The caves have been an important religious site since ancient times and despite being greatly venerated by Muslims in the area, due to Sheikh Sof Omar reputedly taking refuge here in the early days of Islam, many pagan rites and ceremonies seem to carry on.

Some Sof Omar villagers ask Birr100 for a tour, but Birr30 ought to be adequate. Wear footwear you don't mind getting wet and always bring a torch, though turning it off once in the depths is as eerie as it is extraordinary.

Once in the light of day, twitchers should search for Salvadori's serin, a rare endemic species.

## Getting There & Away

From the village of Goro, about 60km east of Robe, infrequent pick-ups leave for Sof Omar (Birr22, 1½ hours). Sof Omar's market day (Saturday) is the only day there's guaranteed transport. Two daily buses connect Robe and Goro (Birr9, two hours).

## SHEIKH HUSSEIN ሸክ ሱሴን

Located north of Sof Omar, Sheikh Hussein is southern Ethiopia's most important centre of Muslim pilgrimage and attracts thousands of pilgrims every year. The complex consists of an attractive little mosque, various tombs, and shrines and caves that are found within an hour's walk east. It's said Sheikh Hussein himself used the caves to seek some peace and quiet for prayer.

At least 500 years old, it's dedicated to the 13th-century holy man, who was responsible for the conversion of many Bale and Arsi Oromo to Islam. Pilgrims come here to make wishes and to offer thanks for wishes fulfilled. Feast days are during

May and October, with minor ones during February and September; the exact dates depend on the lunar calendar.

This peaceful and atmospheric place is open to people of all faiths. Local religious leaders will give you a tour. It's customary to leave a small contribution of Birr20. The most colourful time to visit is during a major pilgrimage.

### Getting There & Away

Unless you time your visit with a pilgrimage, you really need your own vehicle to visit Sheikh Hussein. Daily minibuses from Robe do reach Jara (Birr25, six to seven hours), which is 57km south of Sheikh Hussein, but from there you're on your own.

### DOLA-MENA ደላ ጤና

Although Dola-Mena's intense heat, striking Somali herdsman and camels are a novelty after the Bale Mountains, the main reason to visit this bleak town is for the captivating 110km journey south from Goba.

After leaving Goba you'll traverse the eastern part of the Bale Mountains National Park (see Nontrekkers, p189), cross the Harenna Escarpment and wind up onto the lofty Sanetti Plateau itself. The route is the highest all-weather road in Africa and must rank among the continent's most surreal.

The road takes you through the extraordinary *Podocarpus* woodland known as the **Harena Forest**. With its twisted trunks draped in 'old man beard' lichens, mosses and ferns, and with cloud swirling all around, the forest is straight out of a Grimm brothers fairy tale.

The forest, undoubtedly one of the most remarkable in Ethiopia, is home to a whole host of endemic plants, amphibians (see the boxed text, p60) and insects, as well as wild coffee. Unfortunately local demand for firewood is now seriously threatening the forest.

After a steady descent you'll eventually find yourself in dusty Dola-Mena. The **Makuriya Mengistu Hotel** (d with shared bathroom Birr10), centrally placed on the main drag, is the best of the basic options. You'll have to dodge cows on the way to the toilet and put up with some occasional loud music, but the people are very friendly. There are some decent unnamed local restaurants near the mosque.

### Getting There & Away

See Goba's Getting There & Away section (p191) for transport details to Dola-Mena.

If you don't want to backtrack, you'll have to wait for a rare truck (one or two per week) heading 179km south to Negele Borena.

There is no fuel station in Dola-Mena, but a black market exists, if you're desperate.

### NEGELE BORENA ነገሌ ቦረና

Negele Borena sits at an important crossroads of the remote southeast and serves as a useful transport hub. Fervent birders will undoubtedly pass through here while tracking rare endemic species like the Sidamo long-clawed lark, Degodi lark, Prince Ruspoli's turaco and Salvadori's seedeater.

The **Green Hotel** (s with shared bathroom Birr20, s Birr30), southwest of the bus station, is simple and clean. Its restaurant isn't a bad choice for local fare.

### Getting There & Away

A couple of trucks per week serve Mega (Birr40, eight to 12 hours), to the southwest. There are no direct services to Dila or Yabelo, so you'll have to make short hops from village to village.

## SOUTH TO MOYALE

The northern half of this route will take you through verdant *enset* plantations (false-banana tree found in much of southern Ethiopia, used to produce a breadlike staple also known as *enset*), past wild coffee and enable you to visit some of southern Ethiopia's most important archaeological sites. Travel the southern half and you may witness singing wells, salt-filled craters and a rare bird or two. Complete the journey and you'll be wiping sweat from your brow and drool from your chin as you stare across the baking plains and desolate glory that is northern Kenya.

### DILA ደላ

pop 48,348 / elev 1592m

No matter how unremarkable this administrative centre and college town is, there's no denying the importance of its surroundings. To the south sit two of southern Ethiopia's most important stela fields and resting to its northwest are little-known ancient rock carvings.

Before visiting the sites, you must pay Birr30 at the **Gedeo tourism office** (Gede'iinxee Zooneke; ☎ 0463 312697; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) in Dila. Since the archaeological sites are tricky to find, especially the rock carvings, organise a guide while you're at the office. The office is 250m west of the main drag, down the road opposite the Brook Pharmacy.

With over 80 stela variously carved with facial features, phalluses etc, **Tutu Fella** is the most impressive site. It's accessed from an eastern turn-off, some 3km south of Wenago or 17km south from Dila.

The tapered stones at **Tututi** also mark graves, but are generally larger (up to 7.5m tall) and lack the detailed carving seen at Tutu Fella. The Tututi field rests on a hill 2.3km west of Chalba village, which sits 8.5km south of the Tutu Fella turn-off.

About 10km northwest of Dila are the remote **Manchiti rock engravings**. A vertical rock face hosts an ancient herd of some 50 stylised cows, which were chiselled over 3000 years ago.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Lalibela Pension** (☎ 0463 312300; d with shared bathroom Birr20, d Birr40) Although the frilly bedcovers may induce convulsions in male customers, this place fits everyone's bill. Bathrooms (shared and private) are sparkling and the Birr40 rooms even have satellite TV. It's signposted off the main street west of Dilla Rendez-Vous, a haven of pastries.

**Zelege Hotel** (☎ 0463 312834; d with shared bathroom Birr15, d Birr25) The Birr25 rooms are clean, and have large beds with soft foam mattresses. The shared bathrooms are on the smelly side. It's at the south end of town, near the bus station.

**Aregash Tourist Lodge** (☎ 0462 251136; alltour@ethionet.et; d Birr300) Located in the village of Yirga Alem, midway between Dila and Awasa, this

new lodge is a brilliant choice. Accommodation is housed in elaborately woven Dorze huts, which sit in garden surroundings.

**Warka Hotel** (mains Birr5-7) The spot for tasty Ethiopian fare in Dila. It's found one block west of the post office.

### Getting There & Away

At 6am a bus departs for Yabelo (Birr25, four hours) and Moyale (Birr34, seven hours). Four or five buses run daily to Shashemene (Birr14, three hours) via Awasa (Birr10, 2½ hours). A few minibuses also serve these four destinations.

### YABELO ያቤሎ

Yabelo, 5km west of the main Moyale-Shashemene road, makes a convenient base for a visit to Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary. It's also the southern gateway to the Omo Valley via Konso.

Sitting at the Yabelo junction on the main Moyale-Shashemene road, **Yabelo Motel** (☎ 0464 460237; tw/d with shared bathroom Birr25/50, d Birr100) is the town's only tourist-class hotel. The pricey doubles, with mosquito nets and satellite TV, are clean and comfortable. The cheaper options aren't nearly as special and *faranji* prices are in full effect. The restaurant pumps out expensive Western fare (up to Birr30).

With glass windows instead of wood shutters, **Girooserii Hawwii** (s/d with shared bathroom Birr15/20) is the brightest of the cheap hotels. It's found just north of the market.

On Yabelo's main street, **Girooserii Salaami** (mains Birr5-10) is the most popular local restaurant.

A few minibuses leave daily for Moyale (Birr25, 3½ hours), while only one bus and one minibus serve Dila (Birr30, five hours). If you're out of luck in Yabelo, head to the Shashemene-Moyale road and try to hop on the buses heading north or south. A few daily Isuzu trucks run to Konso (Birr25, three hours).

### YABELO WILDLIFE SANCTUARY ያቤሎ የዳር ኦራዊት ፓርክ

Covering an area of 2496 sq km, the **Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary** (admission free) was originally created to protect the endemic Swayne's hartebeest. However, it's now better known for two truly unique range-restricted bird species. Although commonly seen within

### COWS & CROWNS

Cattle rearing is the mainstay of the south-east's economy, and cows are greatly prized. Cows supply meat, milk, butter and blood for food, as well as dung for fuel and for building houses. Ownership of cattle confers great social status on Oromo men: traditionally, if a herdsman owns more than 1000, he's entitled to wear a crown.

the sanctuary, the Stresemann's bush crow and white-tailed swallow are not found anywhere else in the world. Why they never stray more than 100km from here is still anyone's guess. The semi-endemic brown sawwing is also found here.

The 25 mammal species inhabiting the acacia woodland and savannah grass include Burchell's zebras, dik-diks, greater and lesser kudus, gerenuks and Grant's gazelles, all quite commonly seen. The golden jackal and ostrich are sometimes spotted.

Only visitors with a park scout are allowed to enter. Scouts (per day Birr50) are available from the **park office** (☎ 0464 460087; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) in the town of Yabelo.

## YABELO TO MEGA

The 100km between Yabelo and Mega offers up an interesting array of cultural and physical phenomena.

Delve into Borena territory near Dublock, about 70km south of Yabelo, where several of the famous *ela* or 'singing wells' (below) have been operating for more than a century.

To find them you'll need a guide from Dublock. Borena chieftains now charge entrance fees, which vary widely depending on how many people they bring to work the well. Expect to pay about Birr80 per group. To see the real water gathering (rather than a performance), come during dry season (January through March) when the cattle come to drink. Getting to some wells involves quite long walks.

The village of **El Sod**, around 20km south of Dublock, lies beside one of Ethiopia's

largest salt deposits. Known as the **House of Salt**, it's famed for its 100m-deep crater lake, one of four in the region. The lake is about 800m across and is so dark, it looks like an oil slick. Valuable, muddy, black salt has been extracted from the lake for centuries. Today, donkeys laden with the mud continue to toil up the steep sides of the crater.

From the village, it's a 30-minute walk into the crater and a one hour walk up (admission Birr50 per person and per vehicle, Birr100 for two compulsory guides). It's best to visit during the morning's cooler temperatures.

A couple kilometres north of Mega, you'll see vestiges of an old **Italian fort** overlooking the distant plains below. Though impressive from the road, there's little to see within.

At least nine buses ply the Addis Ababa-Moyale road from towns north and south of Dublock and can drop you off at the various turn-offs. Hitching is usually required to reach the House of Salt.

## MOYALE ሞያሌ

elev 1090m

There's only one truly compelling reason to visit Moyale: Kenya.

Although a seemingly porous border cuts the one-street town of Moyale in two, the difference in feel between the two sides is immediately palpable. The Kenyan side, with dust-swept dirt streets, expensive petrol being served from barrels and ragtag vehicles trundling in from the punishing northern plains, has a true wild frontier atmosphere.

### THE SINGING WELLS OF THE BORENA

The Borena are seminomadic pastoralists who occupy lands that stretch from northern Kenya to the dry, hot plains around Yabelo. Their lives revolve entirely around their cattle and during the long dry season, it's a constant struggle to keep their vast herds alive. To combat the problem, the Borena have developed their own peculiar solution: a series of wells dug deep into the earth. Each Borena family and each clan is assigned its own well.

A series of water troughs are dug close to each well's mouth. Approaching them is a long channel that drops to about 10m below the ground level, which funnels the cattle to the troughs. It's just wide enough to allow two single columns of cattle to pass one another.

When it's time to water the cattle, the men create a human ladder down the well (which can be up to 30m deep), tossing buckets of water between one another from the bottom up to the top, where the troughs are gradually filled. The work is very strenuous, and the men often sing in harmony to encourage one another as well as to reassure the cattle. Several hundred or even thousand cattle come to drink at a time; it's a memorable and unique sight.

### WARNING

Thanks to a 1999 conflict between the government and Oromo Liberation Front (fighting for independence in southern Ethiopia) spilling over into Kenya around Moyale, there have been land mines reported – stick to well-marked paths outside town.

### Information

Black market moneychangers hang around the border and change Birr and Kenyan shillings (KSh). For convenience, Birr1 is about KSh8.50.

### ETHIOPIA

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Changes travellers cheques and cash. It doesn't exchange Kenyan shillings or buy back unused Ethiopian birr. It's 2km north of the border.

### KENYA

**Kenya Commercial Bank** (☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat) Changes cash (US dollars, euros and pound sterling) and travellers cheques (KSh50 charge per leaf, plus KSh300 commission). Ethiopian birr are not accepted.

**Post office** (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) With Internet and cardphones.

### Sleeping & Eating

#### ETHIOPIA

**Gihon Hotel** (☎ 0464 440065; d with shared bathroom Birr15, d Birr20) This place is cheap, clean and has one of Moyale's best restaurants. The bathrooms (shared and private) are weak but passable. It's 2.2km from the border.

**Bekele Mola Hotel** (☎ 0464 440030; camping Birr20, d Birr40) Located 150m north of Gihon, this dog-eared hotel has large rooms with private bathrooms and mosquito nets. Sadly, there's no running water so showers come in buckets.

**Tourist Hotel** (s with shared toilet Birr15) Sheltered behind its cool Rasta-inspired bar, this sleeping option just over the Ethiopian border has decent rooms with private showers. The shared toilets are nothing to sing about, but thankfully they're nothing to scream about either.

**Hagos Hotel** (meals Birr8-12) Have your last Ethiopian meal here. There's a terrace out back and some shady seating below a flowering tree. It's just up from the border.

**Ethio-Kenya** (breakfast Birr3-6) Across from the Hagos Hotel, Ethio-Kenya's leaf-laden terrace is a great place for breakfast and an animated location for drinks later in the day.

### KENYA

**Tawakal Hotel & Lodging** (s/tw with shared bathroom KSh150/200) This place, with a relaxing TV lounge, has comfortable beds in large, rather dark rooms. Unfortunately the toilets are a cockroach committee room during the evenings, so go during daylight hours! If that last bit didn't turn you off, the restaurant (meals KSh80 to KSh150) serves decent local meals. It's off the main drag and is northeast of the bank.

**Baghdad Hotel II** (meals KSh80-150) On the main drag just south of the post office, this is a popular place to eat – sit down, swipe some flies and get stuffed.

**Prison Canteen** (meals KSh70-150) This kitsch place, with its zebra motifs and thatched pavilions, is the canteen for prison workers and makes an atmospheric place for a meal and cold beer. It lurks west of the police station on a side street.

### Getting There & Away

Two early morning buses depart daily for Addis Ababa (Birr79, 1½ days), one over-nighting at Dila (Birr40, seven hours), the other at Shashemene (Birr48, 11½ hours). A few minibuses leave daily for Yabelo (Birr25, 3½ hours).

For those driving, fill up on the Ethiopian side – petrol is half the cost and more reliable.

For details about heading south into Kenya, see p275.

## ARBA MINCH & AROUND

Bordered by verdant mountains and home to Ethiopia's two largest, and arguably most beautiful, Rift Valley lakes, this region offers an eye-ful. Ogle zebras in the resurgent Nechisar National Park and watch your fingers and toes at Lake Chamo's crocodile market, where they're the ones doing the shopping.

While travelling to the region from Shashemene, you'll pass through some of the most fertile land in Ethiopia, where abundant fruit and cotton are grown. Don't miss the bananas – no bigger than your

middle finger, but as sweet as honey. The local *gishta* fruit is worth tasting!

## ARBA MINCH አርባ ምንጭ

pop 73,072 / elev 1400m to 1600m

Arba Minch is southwestern Ethiopia's largest city. Although its grubby streets and chaotic atmosphere won't immediately endear it to you, one drink on the terrace of Bekele Mola Hotel's lofty terrace and you'll start to see the city's charm. Stretched scenically below is the Rift Valley and waters of nearby lakes.

Considering Arba Minch is also on the doorstep of the rejuvenated Nechisar National Park and the highland towns of Dorze and Chencha, you'd do well to base yourself here for a few days.

## Orientation & Information

The town consists of two settlements connected by a 4km stretch of asphalt: Sikela, to the north, and Shecha, perched on the hill overlooking the lakes to the south.

There are countless private telecentres that charge Birr25 per minute for international calls. Cheaper is Shecha's telecommunications office, which charges standard international rates (see p267).

**Arba Minch Hospital** (Map p197; ☎ 0448 810123; 🏥 24hr) The region's best hospital, just south of Sikela.  
**Commercial Bank** (Map p197; Sikela; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 2-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) Changes American Express travellers cheques and cash (euros and US dollars).  
**ESA Business Center** (Map p197; per hr Birr30) Sikela's best Internet connections.

**Sol Internet Caffe** (Map p197; per hr Birr30) Shecha's only Internet option.

**Tourism office** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810127; Shecha; 🕒 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Bring any question to the excellent and indefatigable Kapo Kansa. He can also suggest treks in the park, surrounding forests and Guge Mountains as well as bird-watching expeditions. He can organise everything from guides (within/outside town Birr50/100) to boats.

## Sights & Activities

### LAKES ABAYA & CHAMO

Ringed by savannah plains and divided by the 'Bridge of God', Lakes Abaya and Chamo (Map p199) are truly beautiful. Measuring 1160 sq km, Lake Abaya is the Rift Valley's largest lake. If out on the Abaya's waters, try to spot the Haruras in their high-prowed *wogolo* boats. Made of *isoke* (a very

lightweight local wood), the boats are capable of carrying quite heavy loads (including cattle).

The lake's peculiar red waters are a result of the massive crocodile population's regular feeding frenzies on unfortunate cattle. No, we're not serious! Elevated natural concentrations of suspended ferrous hydroxide is the lacklustre and all-too-boring answer of science.

If you impulsively bellowed 'cool' when you thought hungry crocs coloured Lake Abaya, you'll love Lake Chamo. Check out its massive crocodiles at the aptly named crocodile market (see following).

The colour of Chamo? An unadventurous blue.

### CROCODILE MARKET

Where the Kolfo River empties into Lake Chamo, you'll find oodles of fat and famous crocodiles sunning themselves. The area, simply known as the crocodile market (Map p199), is truly one of Africa's best crocodile displays.

The safest and most rewarding way to visit is by boat. The launching point is 8km southeast of Shecha, down a dirt track leading east of the Konso road. Although it's only a 15- to 30-minute boat ride to the spot, a minimum of 1½ hours should be allowed for the trip. It's best to visit during late afternoon or early morning. Remember to keep your limbs in the boat! Keep an eye out for hippos and birdlife.

The crocodile market can also be approached by land through Nechisar National Park (p199). However, be very careful and bring an armed park scout (Birr30); you won't find it otherwise. Scouts are typically mandatory; park rangers are wary of you being lost to the crocs (as still happens with local fishermen).

Whether you're visiting by water or land, you'll need to pay park entrance fees (Birr70 per person) at park headquarters (p200) prior to your visit.

See Getting Around (p199) for boat-hiring information.

### FORTY SPRINGS

Arba Minch or 'Forty Springs' (Map p199) derives its name from the innumerable little springs that bubble up in the evergreen forest covering the flats below the town.

The semipluvial vegetation is home to good birdlife and a variety of mammals. It's a nice hike from town and you can bathe in the pools around the springs. It's also a great place for a picnic.

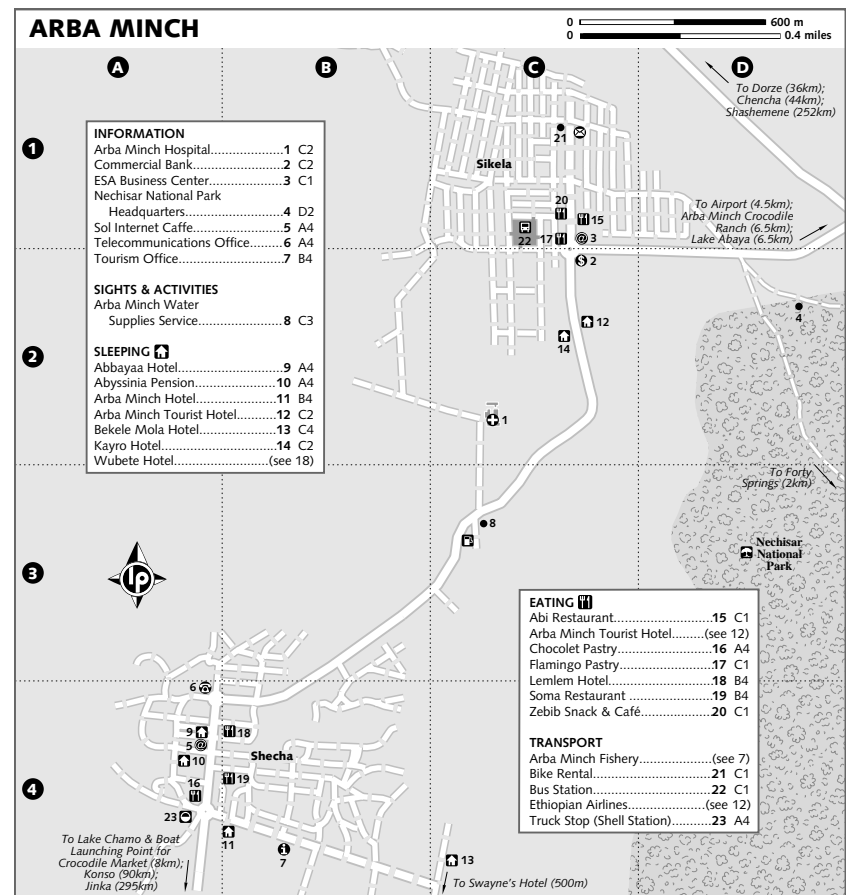
A visit to the springs (the town's main water supply) requires a permission paper from the **Arba Minch Water Supplies Service** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810252; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri), halfway between Sikela and Shecha. It's a simple, quick and free procedure. It's not worth trying to sneak into the springs – guards have fired warning shots at travellers doing so!

The springs lie within the Nechisar National Park and there's talk that park entrance fees may be charged in the near future; inquire at the tourism office.

To get here, take the road towards Nechisar National Park; stay right when the road forks. The springs are a further 2.8km.

### ARBA MINCH CROCODILE RANCH

The government **crocodile ranch** (Map p199; admission Birr20; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm) currently contains around 10,000 crocs and serves four purposes: to boost the crocodile industry, to educate the public about the economic and ecological importance of crocodiles, to conserve crocs, and to attract tourism. Of the 10,000 crocs, 8000 are less than a year old and are still hidden within incubators. The remainder are kept in cramped quarters with others of the same age.



Although it's slightly exciting to walk over the open compounds, a visit here is more depressing than inspiring. Most of the hapless crocs are killed at the age of five (when the skin is the best quality), and will end up as handbags or belts in Middle Eastern markets.

More enjoyable is the rickety platform by the lake's edge. It's good for spotting hippos in the late afternoon.

The guided tour (20 to 30 minutes) is free, but you should tip afterwards.

The farm is situated off the Addis Ababa road, about 7km from the Sikela. Walk, bike, hitch or get a contract taxi (Birr50 one way, Birr80 to Birr100 return).

## Sleeping

Most of Shecha's accommodation options outgun Sikela's. Shecha is also slightly cooler, quieter and has a better choice of restaurants.

## SHECHA

**Swayne's Hotel** (☎ 0468 811895; [www.swayneshotel.com](http://www.swayneshotel.com); camping Birr50, s/tw Birr200/250) Woven Dorze huts envelop half of this hotel's bungalows and give the place a quirky, yet traditional feel. Colourful local artwork hangs from the modern rooms' walls, hand-carved wooden furniture sits on spotless floors and colourful lamps shine light on it all. Book a room number between 4 and 22, as they have private terraces boasting stunning lake views. The hotel is southeast of Shecha.

**Abyssinia Pension** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810381; d Birr125) A quiet option, Abyssinia has new rooms that are large and very clean. Considering it lacks hot showers, it's a little bit expensive – try negotiating.

**Bekele Mola Hotel** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810046; camping per tent Birr40, s Birr179-225, d Birr266-312) Its terrace is a city highlight, but the rooms are very plain, well worn and overpriced (despite rates including breakfast and dinner).

**Wubete Hotel** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 811629; d with shared bathroom Birr20, d Birr40) This place is pretty friendly and rooms are quite clean. Mosquito nets are the norm and most toilets even don't have seats! For doubles, the beds are rather small.

Other options:

**Arba Minch Hotel** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810206; s with shared bathroom Birr30, s/tw Birr40/60) Simple, spartan and reasonably clean. Quieter than others.

**Abbayaa Hotel** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810181; d Birr40) Best of the worst. Do the dozen 'Roach Killer' bottles at reception tell you there's a problem, or does it show they care?

## SIKELA

**Arba Minch Tourist Hotel** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 812171; fax 0468 813661; s Birr150, d Birr170-200) Since it lacks any views and charges *faranjis* double, the new Arba Minch Tourist Hotel tries to distract you with spotless modern rooms boasting satellite TVs, bright windows and quality furnishings. The doubles have comfortable queen-sized beds and built-in wardrobes. The compound contains coffee and juice bars, a leafy seating area and a pizza restaurant. They even have plans for an outdoor theatre.

**Kayro Hotel** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810323; d with shared bathroom Birr15, d Birr25) The best of Sikela's budget choices. Although the beds are a squeeze for couples and the bathrooms are a bit grungy, it's still decent value.

## Eating

Fish has long been a staple in the diet here, with *asa kutilet* (fish cutlet) being a particular speciality. Sadly, overfishing means it's harder to come by these days.

## SHECHA

**Lemlem Hotel** (Map p197; mains Birr7-16) Sit under the trees and devour the best Ethiopian food in Arba Minch. The menu is only in Amharic, so just ask for your favourite (see Eat your Words, p72). We indulged in *minchet abesh* (minced beef or lamb in a hot sauce).

**Soma Restaurant** (Map p197; mains Birr7-100) This restaurant, aimed at tourist groups, offers some great meals like *asa gulash* (fish served with a tomato and chilli sauce). Although the *asa filetto* (grilled fish) is lovely and may feed two of you, Birr100 is ludicrous.

**Swayne's Hotel** (mains Birr25-35) This open-air restaurant prepares the best Western fare in town. Pick from the menu or enjoy a set meal (breakfast/lunch or dinner Birr22/44).

**Chocolet Pastry** (Map p197; pastries Birr2) Mmmmm...tasty pastries.

## SIKELA

**Arba Minch Tourist Hotel** (Map p197; mains Birr6-20) This hotel opened the day we arrived (good timing!), but the restaurants hadn't yet

opened. Judging by its impressive kitchen and pizza oven, food should be top notch.

**Abi Restaurant** (Map p197; mains Birr5-17) The *asa kutilet* and *asa gulash* are the top picks at this local eatery. Eat streetside or in the courtyard out back.

**Flamingo Pastry** (Map p197; pastries Birr2) Sikela's best pastries, cakes and fruit juices.

**Zebib Snack & Café** (Map p197; pastries Birr3) Now in a modern two-storey building, Zebib has literally grown up. The pastries are as good as ever.

## Getting There & Away

**Ethiopian Airlines** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810649) now flies between Addis Ababa and Arba Minch on Tuesday and Sunday (US\$81, 2½ hours). The office is located near the gate that leads into the Arba Minch Tourist Hotel, along with a line of other shops.

One or two daily buses leave Sikela's bus station for Addis Ababa (Birr51.50, 12 hours), Awasa (Birr27, 6½ hours), Shashemene (Birr23.35, six hours), Jinka (Birr33, eight hours), Konso (Birr11, 3½ hours) and Weyto (Birr20, five hours).

Trucks also run south to Konso, Weyto and Jinka. They pick up passengers at Shecha's Shell station. They typically charge 10% more than buses.

## Getting Around

Frequent minibuses connect Sikela and Shecha (Birr1.50) from around 6am to 9pm. To reach the airport grab a contract taxi (Birr20 to Birr40) near Flamingo Pastry in Sikela.

The tourism office rents 4WDs for Birr600 to Birr700 per day (including fuel and driver) for trips to Nechisar National Park.

Bikes are a good way to get around. New specimens are rented near Sikela's post office (Birr5 per hour).

Boats for the crocodile market or Lake Abaya are available through the tourism office (Birr300 for 1½ to two hours, one to five people) and the **Arba Minch Fishery** (Map p197; ☎ 0468 810197), which charges between Birr240 and Birr670 for 1½ to two hours, depending on numbers of passengers. Readers also recommend the boat of **Berhane-Wolde Mariam** (☎ 0468 811257), a charismatic and knowledgeable ex-fisherman. He charges Birr250 for 1½ to two hours.

## NECHISAR NATIONAL PARK

Spanning the narrow, yet mountainous 'Bridge of God' that separates Lakes Chamo and Abaya, Nechisar National Park ranks among the most scenic – yet least visited – in East Africa.

Although only 514 sq km, the park contains diverse habitats ranging from wide-open savannah and acacia woodland to thick bush and sections of riparian forest. The bleached savannah grasses actually spawned the park's name, which means 'white grass' in Amharic.

Reflecting the diversity of habitats is the diversity of birds and animals – and this is what makes Nechisar special. Ninety-one mammal species are found in the park. In the forest, bushpigs, warthogs, Anubis baboons, thumbless colobus monkeys, genets, bushbucks and vervet monkeys are found. On the savannah plains (where animals are most easily seen), the Burchell's zebra is the most conspicuous animal, sometimes seen in unusually large herds of 100 animals or more. They're a beautiful sight, bucking defiantly or baying as they canter off before your 4WD. And let's not forget the massive crocodile population in Lake Chamo! They're best seen at the crocodile market (p196).

Of the antelopes, the most commonly seen is the greater kudu in the cover of the bush, with its beautiful spiralling horns, and the monogamous Guenther's dik-dik, which is often seen in pairs. The Grant's



gazelle, with its horns pointing forward, is easy to spot on the plains, as is the endemic Swayne's hartebeest.

If you're very lucky you may get to see an endangered African hunting dog, a spotted hyena, leopard, black-backed jackal or one of the few Abyssinian lions inhabiting Nechisar.

Like the mammals, the birds here are diverse: 320 species have been counted including hornbills and bustards. It's also the home of the Nechisar nightjar, Ethiopia's rarest endemic bird (see the sidebar on p64).

Up until recently the local Guji and Koira people (and thousands of their cattle) also inhabited the park, much to the detriment of wildlife. Finally, after a government-negotiated settlement in 2004, the Koira successfully resettled 15km south. By the time you read this, the Guji should have followed suit. Although negotiated, these re-settlements have been highly controversial and many Guji and Koira accuse the government of using heavy-handed tactics.

In 2005 park management was taken over by the nonprofit organisation **African Parks Conservation** (APC; www.africanparks-conservation.com), which has successfully rehabilitated neglected parks in several African nations. Besides ensuring the park's ecological and financial sustainability, they plan on reintroducing some of the animals exterminated by humans, namely the African elephant, black rhinoceros, giraffe, eland, gerenuk, beisa oryx, Grevy's zebra, cheetah and buffalo.

It looks like happy days ahead for Nechisar's wildlife.

## Information

Whether entering the **park** (Map p199; admission Birr70, vehicle Birr20) by land or water, you must first pay park fees at the **park headquarters** (Map p197; ☎ 6am-7.30pm), which is located 1km southeast of Sikela.

The park is not keen on letting visitors on foot enter, but they've been known to make exceptions if an armed scout (per day/day and night Birr30/50) is taken. A basic map and information sheet are also available at headquarters.

## Sleeping

**Camping** (per tent Birr30) Possible anywhere, but there are two official camping grounds: one

beside the Kulfo River, south of park headquarters, and the other in the Sermule Valley. Most travellers sleep in Arba Minch.

## Getting There & Around

Being only a stone's throw from Arba Minch, the park is easily accessible. However, the roads within the park can be treacherous, making a 4WD necessary.

There's a 120km-long complete circuit, as well as a shortened 85km version that covers an excellent variety of landscapes, viewpoints, animals and birds. The shortened version takes between five and seven hours to complete (including stops). If you're pushed for time, there's a reasonable three-hour circuit.

See Getting Around under Arba Minch (p199) for details about 4WD and boat rental.

## DORZE & CHENCHA

ድርድር ና ርብራብ

High up in the **Guge Mountains**, to the northwest of Arba Minch, is the cold and cloudy Dorze territory. The journey up here affords some spectacular views over Arba Minch and the Rift Valley lakes and is worthwhile in itself.

The Dorze belong to one of the many Omotic peoples of the southwest and are famous for their huge huts (see the boxed text, opposite). Some fine examples can be seen around 30km from Arba Minch in the village of Dorze. The people are skilled farmers who prevent soil erosion of the mountainside with ingenious terracing.

Some of Ethiopia's best woven cotton comes from Chencha, which sits 8km northwest of Dorze village. Fine cotton *shammas* (cotton togas) and *gabis* (thicker *shammas*) can be bought here. Interestingly, men weave and women spin. You can visit the **weaving cooperative** (☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) at the village of Gambela Doko, 1.2km from Chencha. You'll be expected to pay at least Birr10 to Birr20 if you want to take photos. *Gabis* cost Birr30 to Birr80, depending on their size.

There's a very colourful **market** (Tuesday and Saturday) at Chencha, and at Dorze (Monday and Thursday). Woven blankets (around Birr100), honey (Birr7), traditional woven Dorze trousers (Birr40 to Birr80) and decorated gourds (Birr15 to Birr20)

## DORZE HUTS

Standing up to 12m high, the famous Dorze hut resembles a giant beehive. Constructed with vertical hardwood poles and woven bamboo, it's topped with a thatched roof of *enset* (false-banana tree) leaves. On the outside, a section juts out, which serves as a small reception room.

Though fragile-looking, huts can last up to 60 years. Thanks to the structure's vertical poles, huts are easily transported to new locations. When rot or termites get the better of it, huts are eventually abandoned.

Most Dorze huts also boast their own little garden containing vegetables, spices, tobacco and *enset*.

can all be bought there. The piles of white, mushy dough wrapped in green leaves are *enset* (see the boxed text, p69).

The Guge Mountains are also home to Ethiopia's most underrated trekking possibilities. One option would be a five- or six-day cultural journey from Doko Masho to Chosa via Mt Guge (4000m). The best time is late September during the Meskel festival. For details, inquire at Arba Minch's tourism office (p196).

## Getting There & Away

In the early mornings, a couple of Landrover taxis (Birr12) leave Arba Minch's Sikela bus station for Dorze (Birr12, two hours) and Chencha (Birr12, 2½ hours). They return around lunchtime.

If you're driving, check the condition of the road in advance as rains turn the road into a steep and slippery quagmire.

## KONSO & THE LOWER OMO VALLEY

If there's anything in southern Ethiopia that can rival the majesty of the north's historical circuit, it's the people of this region. Whether it's wandering through traditional Konso villages, watching Hamer people performing a Jumping of the Bulls ceremony or witnessing the Mursi's mystical stick fights and mind-blowing lip plates, your visit here will stick with you for a lifetime.

## KONSO ኮንዶ

elev 1650m

For those in a hurry to the Omo Valley, Konso is little more than the place they down a cold Coke and top up on fuel. For those who have some time to invest, Konso may just be the sleeper sight that steals the southern Ethiopia show.

While the town is unequivocally unattractive, despite its lofty ridge-top setting, it's the ancient, complex and fascinating culture of the Konso people (see the boxed text, p203) and their architecturally inspiring villages that really take the cake.

If you're interested in visiting some of the sights around Konso (p202), you must visit Konso's **tourism office** (☎ 0468 811755; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) to pick up visitation forms. A Birr30 fee (whether you intend to visit one village or 12) must then be paid at the revenue office. You're also encouraged to take a trained guide (up to Birr50 per day).

The tourism office is a slight sight itself, with a room holding dozens of famous Konso *wagas* (carved wooden sculptures raised in honour of Konso warriors after their death). It's about 200m northwest of town's main roundabout; ask a local to point it out (or to find the staff on weekends).

A walk to the **market** (☎ Mon & Thu), which sits 2km west along the ridge, is worthwhile as it proffers grand views over the Rift Valley. Once there, you'll find tea, millet, tobacco, raw cotton, sweet potatoes, butter, incense and cassava. Locally woven cotton blankets (Birr15 to Birr160) make a good souvenir. The giant two-handed pots are for making *tella* (home-brewed beer). If you're lucky, you may find some lovely old Konso glass beads.

Around Konso, keep an eye out for the traditional lozenge-shaped beehives placed in the acacias. On the road to Jinka, you'll see young boys selling tennis-ball sized clumps of *etan* (incense used in coffee ceremonies).

## Sleeping & Eating

Hotels still rely on their generators for power, so don't expect electricity between midnight and 6pm.

**Green Hotel** (camping Birr30, d Birr50) This new-ish hotel is found on the left, just as you enter town from Arba Minch. The clean rooms are neither small nor spacious and

have oversized foam mattresses, mosquito nets and cold showers. Campers must pay Birr15 for a shower!

**Edget Hotel** (s/tw Birr30/50) Set on the town's only roundabout, Edget has its rooms surrounding its popular courtyard restaurant and bar. Rooms are well worn, but will do for a night's kip. Most toilets lack seats and plumbing is sketchy at times. The food is the best Konso has to offer.

**Unnamed Hotel** (s with shared shower Birr30) Too new for a name, this spartan place has clean and bright rooms in a tiny garden compound on offer. The cement squat loos are smelly, but clean. The shower stall dividers are a bit low for female patrons. Look out for the rust-coloured gates 100m east of Edget Hotel.

**Tourism office camping** (Birr10) Behind the tourism office, there's a reasonably flat (albeit pebbly) section to pitch tents. The tin-shack toilets are grim and there's no water, but the views are amazing.

### Getting There & Away

One daily bus from Arba Minch picks up passengers here en route to Jinka (Birr25, 5½ hours, departing between 9am and 10am), via Weyto (Birr7, two hours) and Key Afar (Birr18, four hours). The bus from Jinka does the same while travelling to Arba Minch (Birr11, 3½ hours, departing between 11am and noon).

Isuzu trucks depart daily for Yabelo (Birr20 to Birr25, three hours), Weyto (Birr15) and Arba Minch (Birr15). For Turmi, go to Key Afar first (as Weyto has no accommodation if you get stuck).

### AROUND KONSO

If you have a vehicle, a great excursion is the traditional Konso village of **Machekie**. Although it sits atop a rusty bluff and offers astounding views, you'll likely prefer wandering through the narrow maze of stone-walled walkways, *Moringa oleifera* trees and thatch-roofed homes. Despite many thefts, Machekie still has some wonderful *wagas*, some more than 150 years old.

Local children, like many of those in this region are prone to 'faranji frenzy' (p259), but the village's guide (Birr50 per day) keeps them in check. The longer you stay, the less attention you'll draw and the more you'll enjoy the experience. Some people

are even offered the chance to spend the night in the community house (Birr10).

If you want to enter the clan compounds, you'll likely be charged Birr20 per person. Pictures of people cost Birr1 per person, while pictures of houses are free.

To reach Machekie, head 5km west from Konso towards Jinka, before turning south and following the dirt track another 5km. From there, you'll see the village on the hill 3km to your east. A single track will lead you to the outer rock walls.

Other interesting Konso villages are **Busso** (7km south of Konso) and **Gesergio** (17km southwest of Konso). **Gesergio** (gas-ag-ee-yo), with its bizarre landscape of entrancing sand formations, is the most famous. Thanks to the towering pinnacles resembling skyscrapers, the town is now more commonly known as 'New York'.

While local legend states that the landscape is the result of God's hands digging in search of a chief's stolen sacred drums, science chalks it up to wind and water.

Sadly, our latest trip to Gesergio was spoiled by hundreds of children attacking – yes, attacking – our 4WD when we wouldn't hand out pens or bottles of water. Either they've been spoiled by thoughtless tourists, or they'd recently been given a crate of Starbucks' chocolate-covered coffee beans (can you say hyper?) from someone visiting from Seattle. Although giving children gifts may feel good at the time, it often ends up leaving them worse off; see *Begging & Giving*, p258.

To reach Gesergio, follow the directions to Machekie but continue 7km southward instead of turning east along the 3km single track to Machekie.

A sight of an entirely different nature is the Konso-Gardula Project's **archaeological excavations**, which have unearthed many unique fossils (human and animal) dating back 1.9 million years. The area is currently on Unesco's tentative list of future World Heritage sites. If you're a closet archaeologist, inquire at Konso's tourism office (p201).

### JINKA ቧገካ

pop 18,000 / elev 1490m

Set in the hills above Mago and Omo National Parks, Jinka offers a cool respite from the lowland's steamy confines. Although its services are limited and its central

### KONSO CULTURE & CONSTRUCTION

The pagan Konso society boasts a rich culture, and a highly specialised and successful agricultural economy.

Beautifully constructed, buttressed stone terraced fields have allowed the Konso to eke out a living from the dry, unyielding land around them. Villages typically adorn hill tops and are surrounded by sturdy stone walls, which serve as a defence against intruders, as well as protecting against straying cattle. Visitors must enter a Konso house on hands and knees, via a wooden tunnel – a compromising position should the visitor turn out to be a foe.

Traditional villages are divided into nine separate compounds, one for each of Konso's clans. Within each compound there's a *pogala mugla* (representative of the clan chief), a *mora* (thatched two-storey communal house where adolescent boys spend their nights) and a ceremonial square where generation polls stand tall (one poll is raised every 18 years).

The squares also contain the famous Konso *wagas*, carved wooden sculptures raised in honour of Konso warriors after their death. Designed according to a strict formula, the 'hero' is usually distinguishable by the phallic ornamental *khalasha* worn on the sculpture's forehead, or by its slightly larger size.

Placed on either side of the hero are between two and four of his wives (identifiable by necklaces and breasts) and the hero's slain enemies (usually smaller and without phallic symbols), or animals (such as leopards) that the hero has killed. Occasionally a monkeylike figure stands at the feet of the hero, and sometimes his spears and shields are included. The eyes of the figures are usually represented with shells or ostrich eggshells, the teeth with the bones of goats.

Unfortunately, *waga* erection is dying out. The widespread theft and removal of the statues to Addis Ababa for sale to diplomats and tourists, as well as the work of missionaries who are against ancestor worship, has discouraged the continuance of this ancient tradition.

Some traditions continue to live on though, like bans on marriages between members of the same clan, and clan chiefs (and their families) living lives of amazing solitude, just so they can be impartial with intraclan conflicts. Traditions of the truly bizarre include secretly embalming clan chiefs after death, sitting them up in their favourite chair and telling clan members that they're simply sick and unable to talk for up to nine years after death.

airstrip doubles as a grazing ground for local cows and sheep, Jinka can feel downright sophisticated if you're arriving from a foray into the Omo Valley.

Jinka is known for its vibrant **Saturday market**, which sits around 400m northwest of the airstrip. It attracts a variety of ethnic groups, among them the Ari, Hamar and Banna (see the boxed text, p206); most charge Birr1 per photo. The fruit market, 300m further west, is a tasty excursion – try the delicious *fruitish* (passion fruit), also known locally as 'fashion fruit'!

The German-funded **South-Omo Museum & Research Centre** (☎ 0467 750149; admission Birr10; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-5pm Tue-Sat) is also worth exploring. It's perched on a hill northeast of town (look for the green roof halfway up the hill) and hosts an interesting exhibition on the material culture of the peoples of the region. There's even a library with ethnographic DVDs; evening showings can be requested. They're planning on building a

traditional Ari house out front, which will display and sell local artwork.

From Jinka, you can do a day trip to Mursi territory, around 60km west of the town.

### Sleeping & Eating

Jinka, like most of this region, charges foreigners up to double for everything. Reservations are advised June through September.

**Jinka Resort** (☎ 0467 750143; camping Birr35, s/d/tw Birr150/173/230) Opened in 2003, this hotel is set in a lovely section of forest just east of the town centre. Easily Jinka's most cushy option. Rooms here are large, bright and spotless. The camping area is beautiful and closer to town than Rocky Campsite, but there's no cooking facilities and it's twice the price. The restaurant (mains Birr12 to Birr20) prepares cheese burgers and spaghetti, but service can be very slow.

**Goh Hotel** (☎ 0467 750033; d/tw Birr100/120) Goh's rooms are aged in comparison to Jinka Resort's, but they're still bright and clean. The



twin rooms have hot showers and are larger than the doubles. It's worth negotiating in low season. Goh Hotel is immediately east of the airstrip. It has a large satellite TV that shows movies and European football.

**Orit Hotel** (☎ 0467 750045; s/d/tw Birr100/120/150; 📍) This hotel's double rooms, with sparkling bathrooms, hot water and comfy mattresses, easily outshine its southerly neighbour (Goh Hotel). However, the opposite is true with Orit's twin rooms, which have cold showers and are rather small. Its restaurant (mains Birr8 to Birr12) serves Jinka's best pasta.

**Rocky Campsite** (camping Birr15) About 1.5km east of Jinka's Total station, this campsite is quite pleasant. Hedges separate tent sites and there are a couple of thatch-roofed cooking areas.

**Hannah Maryam** (mains Birr8-10) The spot to enjoy fine Ethiopian fare. It's 150m north of the runway; look for the blue tents with orange fringe.

**Tsion Restaurant** (mains Birr5-8) Inhale an early morning omelette or guzzle some fresh juice. It's just north of Orit Hotel.

Cheap local hotels that will do for a night's kip:

**Mengistu Pension** (☎ 0467 750419; s with shared bathroom Birr20) Often full and usually clean, it's found down a lane north of the airstrip.

**Omo Hotel** (☎ 0467 750067; s/d with shared toilet Birr40/50) Set west of the airstrip; rooms here are reasonably clean, but not pleasant.

## Getting There & Away

**Ethiopian Airlines** (☎ 0467 750126) flies between Addis Ababa and Jinka (US\$94, 2¼ hours) on Wednesday and Saturday. During wet season, flights are sometimes postponed because of poor conditions. The office is west of the airstrip.

Currently buses arrive and depart near the police station. A bus leaves daily for Addis Ababa (Birr84.35, two days) via Key Afar (Birr7, 1½ hours), Weyto (Birr12, 3½ hours), Konso (Birr25, 5½ hours) and Arba Minch (Birr33, eight hours).

Four or five Isuzu trucks depart daily (near the Orit and Omo Hotels) for Key Afar (Birr12) and Weyto (Birr20). Trucks also serve Omorate (Birr55, 10 hours), via Dimeka (Birr35, 5½ hours) and Turmi (Birr50, eight hours). *Faranji* prices are in full effect, so negotiate hard.

Various government and missionary cars also roam the region; they usually give lifts, but a contribution towards fuel should be made. The Mobil and Total petrol stations are good places to troll for rides.

The **NTO** (☎ 0467 750154) has an office near the airstrip and rents 4WDs (US\$110 per day). This includes driver, fuel and 100km (US\$0.75 per additional kilometre). Private vehicles are also available, though they carry their own risks. Ask at your hotel.

## LOWER OMO VALLEY ዝቅተኛው የአዳም ሸለቆ

With the Lower Omo Valley hosting some of Africa's most fascinating and colourful ethnic groups, as well as Ethiopia's worst roads, a trip here is as captivating as it is uncomfortable.

The landscape is diverse, ranging from dry, open savannah plains to riverine forests bordering the Omo and Mago Rivers. The vast Omo River meanders for nearly 1000km, from southwest of Addis Ababa all the way to Kenya. There it's the sole feeder of Kenya's massive Jade Sea (Lake Turkana). The river also bisects Ethiopia's largest, wildest and most inaccessible national parks: Omo and Mago.

Undisturbed and little visited, the parks boast a remarkable mixture of wildlife and remote tribes. It's here that ancient customs and traditions have remained almost entirely intact. Animism is still the religion, and some still practise a purely pastoral economy. Hostility between neighbouring tribes is still high and internecine warfare is common.

Culturally, the best time to visit is from June to September, when many celebrations take place, including harvest-home dances, marriage ceremonies, and initiation ceremonies including the famous bull-jumping. The driest period (January and February) increases the odds of animal sightings in Omo and Mago National Parks. Avoid coming in October or between mid-March and early June when rains are traditionally the worst. Be aware just one day of rain can render the roads temporarily impassable, so keep your itinerary flexible.

Or you can avoid the roads all together and river raft through the region (see White-Water Rafting & Kayaking, p255).

When visiting the villages of the Lower Omo Valley, try and coincide with at least one market day (see p209). Otherwise, a good time to visit the villages is between 5pm and 6.30pm, when the workers return from the fields or from market.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Tsetse flies continue to be a problem in some areas, particularly Mago National Park after the rains. Malaria is also prevalent, so precautions are essential. For more information, see p373.

For many ethnic groups, raiding is a part of life – a means of survival in a very harsh environment. Camps should never be left unattended, and all jewellery, including watches, is best removed before you mingle with some groups such as the Mursi.

Recently, groups have given wrong directions to inexperienced drivers. No sooner is the vehicle stuck in mud, than a fee of up to Birr1000 is demanded to help pull it out!

Oddly, photography here can be rather stressful; see Tips for Photographers in

Ethiopia on p266. If you don't want to deal with the photography shemozzle, the coffee-table book *Don McCullin in Africa* contains stunning photographs from the Lower Omo Valley.

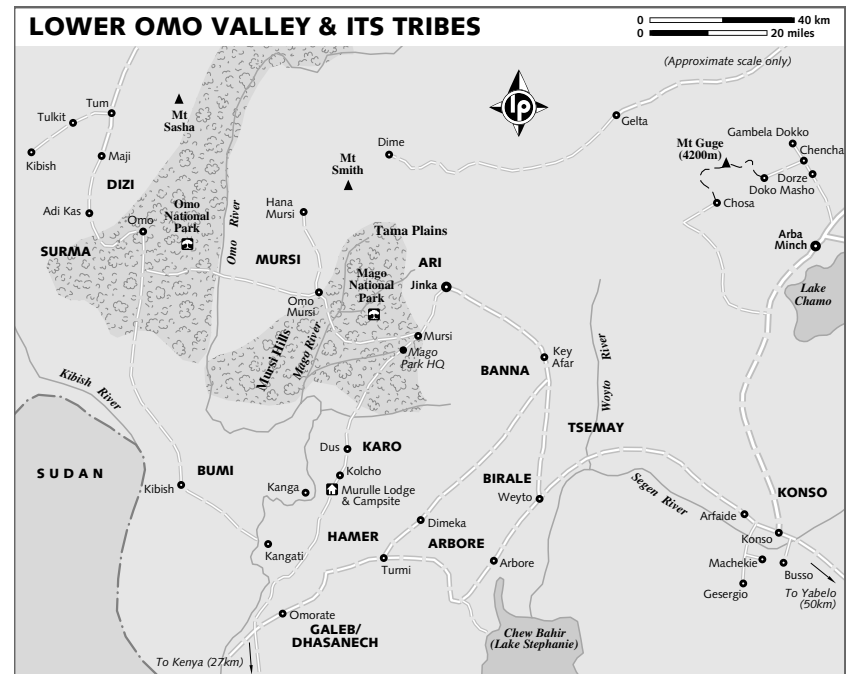
## Omo Valley Villages

A good itinerary that gives you a glimpse of diverse ethnic groups, as well as diverse scenery, begins in Konso and takes you through the little villages of Weyto, Arbore, Turmi, Omorate, Dimeka and Key Afar, before finishing at Jinka. An alternate route from Omorate could be to pass through Mago National Park, stopping at the villages of Kolcho and Dus.

If you plan on staying in any of these villages, know that accommodation is bare-bones budget at best and electricity is only at establishments with generators (usually between 6pm and 10pm).

### WEYTO ወይጦ

This little village lies at the junction to Arbore, roughly halfway between Konso and Key Afar. The Tsemay, part farmers, part



pastoralists, inhabit the region. Besides the Sunday market and the popular **Mihirat Restaurant** (mains Birr5-10), there's little reason to stop here.

It's possible to camp at the restaurant, but at Birr30 it's quite the rip-off.

Arba Minch–Jinka buses stop here, but there are rarely empty seats. Daily Isuzu trucks serve Konso (Birr15, two hours), Key Afar (Birr12, 1½ hours) and Turmi (Birr25, four hours) via Arbore (Birr12, 1½ hours).

### PEOPLES OF THE LOWER OMO VALLEY

The Lower Omo Valley is unique in that it is home to so many peoples in such a small area. Historians believe that the south served for millennia as a kind of cultural crossroads, where Cushitic, Nilotic, Omotic and Semitic peoples met as they migrated from the north, west, south and east.

Described here are some of its most notable peoples. The map on p205 illustrates the geographical distribution of all tribes.

#### The Ari አሪ

Almost 120,000 Ari inhabit the northern border of Mago National Park. They keep large numbers of livestock and produce large amounts of honey, often used for trade. The women wear skirts made from the *enset* tree.

#### The Banna ባኖ

Numbering around 45,000, the Banna inhabit the higher ground east of Mago National Park. Most practise agriculture, though their diet is supplemented by hunting. After killing a buffalo, they decorate themselves with clay for a special celebration and feast for the whole village.

#### The Bumi ቡሚ

Inhabiting the land south of the Omo National Park are around 8000 Bumi. They occasionally invade the southern plains when fodder or water is scarce.

The Bumi are agropastoralists, growing sorghum by the Omo River as well as fishing and rearing cattle. They also hunt and smoke bees out of their hives for honey. Known as great warmongers, they're regularly doing battle with the Karo, the Hamer and the Surma.

The Bumi use scarification for cosmetic purposes, tribal identification and as indications of prowess in battle. Both men and women use little *pointilles* or dots to highlight their eyes and cheekbones. The women also scarify their torsos with curvilinear and geometrical designs.

#### The Hamer ሃመር

The Hamer, who number around 50,000, are subsistence agropastoralists. They cultivate sorghum, vegetables, millet, tobacco and cotton, as well as rearing cattle and goats. Wild honey is an important part of their diet.

The people are known particularly for their remarkable hairstyles. The women mix together ochre, water and a binding resin before rubbing it into their hair. They then twist strands again and again to create coppery-coloured tresses known as *goscha*. These are a sign of health and welfare.

If they've recently killed an enemy or dangerous animal, men are permitted to don clay hair buns that sometimes support magnificent ostrich feathers. With the help of special headrests (*borkotos*) for sleeping, the buns last from three to six months, and can be 'redone' for up to one year.

The Hamer are also considered masters of body decoration. Every adornment has an important symbolic significance; earrings, for example, denote the number of wives a man has.

The women wear iron coils around their arms and bead necklaces, and decorate their skin with cowrie shells. The *ensete* (iron torques) worn around the necks of married and engaged

### ARBORE አራቦራ

Arbore rests 50km south of Weyto on the Turmi road. The Arbore people are a mixed bunch, with ancestry linking back to the Omo Valley and Konso highlands. With their beads and aluminium jewellery, they almost

resemble the Borena people. To escape the area's notorious mosquitoes many Arbore sleep on 5m-high platforms; locals outside the village know it as 'mosquito town'.

South of Arbore, off the main Arbore–Turmi road, tracks lead to the strange saline

women indicate the wealth and prestige of their husband. Unmarried girls wear a metal plate in their hair that looks a bit like a platypus' bill.

The iron bracelets and armllets are an indication of the wealth and social standing of the young girl's family. When she gets married, she must remove the jewellery; it's the first gift she makes to her new family.

The Hamer territory stretches east to Chew Bahir, south to the Kenya border and north to Banna territory.

#### The Karo ካሮ

With a population of about 1500 people, the Karo people are thought to be the Omo Valley's most endangered group. Inhabiting the Omo's eastern bank, many of these traditional pastoralists have now turned to agriculture after disease wiped out their cattle.

In appearance, language and tradition, they slightly resemble the Hamer, to whom they're related. The Karo are considered masters of body painting, particularly when preparing for a dance, feast or celebration. Most famously, chalk is used to imitate the spotted plumage of the guinea fowl.

The Karo are also great improvisers: Bic biro, nails, sweets wrappers and cartridges are all incorporated into jewellery and decoration. Yellow mineral rock, black charcoal and pulverised red iron ore are traditionally used.

#### The Mursi ሙርሲ

The 6500 or so Mursi are mainly pastoralists who move according to the seasons between the lower Tama Plains and the Mursi Hills in Mago National Park.

Some Mursi practise flood retreat cultivation, particularly where the tsetse fly prohibits cattle rearing. Honey is collected from beehives made with bark and dung. The Mursi language is Nilo-Saharan in origin.

The most famous Mursi traditions include the fierce stick fighting between the men, and the lip plate worn by the women. Made of clay and up to 15cm in diameter, the plates are inserted into a slit separating their lower lip and jaw. Due to the obvious discomfort, women only wear the lip plates occasionally, leaving their distended lips swaying below their jaw. Anthropologists offer several theories to explain the practice: to deter slavers looking for unblemished girls; to prevent evil from entering the body by way of the mouth; or to indicate social status by showing the number of cattle required by the wearer's family for her hand in marriage.

#### The Surma ሱርማ

Formerly nomadic pastoralists, the Surma now largely depend upon the subsistence cultivation of sorghum and maize. The Surma have a fearsome reputation as warriors, in part inspired by their continual search for grazing lands. Fights against the Bumi, their sworn enemies, still occur.

It's believed that the Surma once dominated the area, but their territory has been reduced to the western edges of Omo National Park. The population of 45,000 is split into three subgroups: the Chai, Tirma and Bale. The Surma hunt in the park and make beehive huts. Like the Mursi, the Surma men stick fight and the women don distending lip plates.

The Surma are also known for their white, almost ghostlike body painting. White chalk is mixed with water to create a kind of wash. The painting is much less ornamental than that found in other tribes and is intended to intimidate enemies in battle. Sometimes snake and wavelike patterns are painted across the torso and thighs.

## BODY DECORATION

The people of the Omo have developed art forms that allow them not just great artistic expression, but also serve important social and cosmetic purposes. The practice of body painting and scarification developed by the tribes is among the most ornate and extravagant seen anywhere in the world.

For most tribes, scarification serves as a distinction for brave warriors; the men are not allowed to scarify themselves until they have killed at least one foe. For women, the raised texture of the skin is considered highly desirable, and is said to hold sensual value for men.

Scarification is achieved using a stone, knife, hook or razor blade. Ash is then rubbed into the wound, creating a small infection and promoting scar tissue growth. As the wound heals, the raised scar creates the desired knobby effect on the skin's surface.

lake of **Chew Bahir** (also known as Lake Stephanie). From Arbore to the junction of the main track is a 35km drive. From the junction to the lake is 60km. Oryx and gazelles are sometimes found near the lake. The ground around the lake is notoriously unstable, so take a police-guide from Arbore. They'll ask for up to Birr200 for the day, but Birr80 to Birr100 is plenty. January to December is the best time to visit.

Daily Isuzu trucks ramble past en route to Weyto (Birr12, 1½ hours) and Turmi (Birr15, two hours).

## TURMI ተርሚ

Although tiny **Turmi** (admission per vehicle Birr50) is indistinguishable from other towns in the region, it's surrounded by several traditional Hamer villages. On Monday, Hamer people descend on Turmi and pack its famed **market**.

Hamer women, with their shimmering coppery-coloured tresses, sell vegetables, spices, butter, milk and traditional items like incised calabashes, head stools, metal arm bracelets and fantastically smelly goatskins decorated with beads and cowrie shells.

The region around Turmi is known for the famous Hamer and Banna **Jumping of the Bulls ceremony** (see right). Admission fees of Birr100 per person are asked (minimum Birr300); the ceremony lasts all day (from 11am to 6pm). The *evangadi* (Hamer night dance) can also be seen or organised. It usually costs Birr10 per person and lasts three hours. Ask locally.

## Sleeping & Eating

Turmi has the Omo Valley's best range of accommodation.

**Greenland Lodge Campsite** (camping Birr30, tw with shared bathroom Birr200) Despite the hefty

price tag, these rooms are nothing special. They're housed in old semipermanent tents, with tarp floors and camp beds. The star of the site (even beating out the acacia trees) is the sparkling block of loos.

**Tourist Restaurant** (☎ 0911 190209; s with shared bathroom Birr30) Simple cement-floored singles host ageing foam mattresses and futile mosquito nets. The squat toilet stall is clean enough, though the holey shower shack is less than private. The restaurant (meals Birr4 to Birr10) is popular with tour operators and serves simple omelettes, pastas and Ethiopian fare.

**Buska Restaurant** (s with shared bathroom Birr20) Spartan rooms with small beds, clean cement floors and mosquito nets. The shared toilets are a bit of a fly feast (ughh!). The food here is similar to the Tourist Restaurant's.

## JUMPING OF THE BULLS CEREMONY

Whipping, teasing, screaming and a whole lot of leaping are part of this infamous ceremony. It's a rite of passage into manhood for all young Hamer and Banna boys and is truly a sight to behold. After 15 to 30 bulls have been lined up side by side, each naked boy taking part must leap down the line of bulls jumping from back to back. If they fall, they're whipped and teased by women. If they succeed, they must turn around and complete the task three more times!

During the ceremony young female relatives of the boys beg to be whipped; the deeper their scars, the more love they show for their boy. It's as disturbing as it's intriguing.

Ceremonies typically take part between late February and early April, July through September and the first half of December.

**Kaske Campsite** (camping Birr20) Chuck your tent in the heavenly shade provided by the canopy of lush mango trees. There are also thatched pavilions for cooking and rudimentary toilets. The site sits next to the Kaske River, 3.9km north of Turmi, just off the road to Weyto. There's a risk of flash flooding here, so check conditions before making camp.

**Camp Kaina** (camping per tent Birr15-25) This makeshift campsite is also set on the Kaske River, but is accessed from the town centre along a 2.5km dirt track that leads behind the police station. The bush toilet and shower are comically crude, but do the job. It rents reasonable one- and two-person tents, complete with mattresses, for Birr25.

## Getting There & Away

Set at an important crossroads, daily Isuzu trucks leave for Omorate (Birr15, two hours), Arbore (Birr15, two hours), Weyto (Birr25, four hours), Dimeka (Birr15, two hours), Key Afar (Birr30, six hours) and Jinka (Birr35, eight hours).

## OMORATE አሞራተ

Omorate is nestled along the baking eastern bank of the **Omo River**, 72km southwest of Turmi. For those without a vehicle, Omorate is the only place you can actually lay eyes on the mighty river. During our most recent trip, we stood onshore and watched silhouettes paddle across the silver waters at sunset – truly transcendent.

The town itself is rather unsightly, but you can hop across the river in a dugout canoe and visit traditional Galeb (also known as Dasanech) villages. Local 'guides' loitering around the hotels insist you go with one of them (Birr50) and pay an additional Birr100 for the boat and village admission – rubbish. After shaking off these pesky guides, we walked south along the bank and hired a canoe for Birr10 return (generous but fair). The driver acted as our guide and the village chief only requested Birr15 for admission.

Once in the villages, you'll be mobbed by colourful locals fishing for photographs. The going rate is Birr1 per person per photo.

There's not much difference between Omorate's **Tourist Hotel** (s with shared bathroom Birr30), **Park Hotel** (s with shared bathroom Birr30) and **National Hotel** (s with shared bathroom Birr30). Spread

## MARKET DAY IN THE OMO VALLEY

A terrific way to see the Omo's people is at local markets. Since most people have long journeys to and from the towns, markets are best visited between 10.30am and 2pm. The most interesting markets include the following:

Town	Day
Arbore	Fri
Dimeka	Tue & Sat
Jinka	Tue & Sat
Key Afar	Thu
Konso	Mon & Thu
Turmi	Mon
Weyto	Sun
Yabelo	Sat

The markets at Dimeka, Key Afar and Turmi (in that order) are probably the most colourful.

around the police station, they all charge inflated *faranji* rates for grubby, small single cells (rooms is too kind a word). National is the loudest option, but its restaurant has the best food.

It's possible to camp for free within the police compound.

## Getting There & Away

Despite rumours, you don't need permission from the tourism office in Konso or the Ministry of Culture & Tourism in Addis Adaba to visit Omorate.

There's usually a couple of daily trucks heading north to Turmi (Birr15, two hours).

The turn-off for Kolcho, Dus and Mago National Park is 9km north of town.

For details about crossing into Kenya, see p275.

## DIMEKA ዲምታ

Like Turmi, which sits 28km to its south, **Dimeka** (admission per car Birr50) is a Hamer village. However, since it borders on Banna territory its Tuesday and Saturday **markets** (Tuesday is best) attract locals from both tribes.

The **Tourist Cafeteria** (s with shared bathroom Birr15) is the best of a few weak sleeping

options. Its small rooms are tidy and have clean sheets, holey mosquito nets, squishy foam mattresses and tin ceilings.

Passing Isuzu trucks pick up people heading for Turmi (Birr15, two hours) and Key Afar (Birr20, four hours).

#### KEY AFAR ቀይ አይፋ

A haven of cool compared to Turmi or Omorate, Key Afar rests on a lush plateau along the Konso–Jinka road. Lacking the traditional atmosphere seen in other villages, Key Afar's Thursday market more than compensates, attracting Ari, Hamer and Banna people.

The **Abebe Kebede Hotel** (s with shared bathroom Birr15) and **Getay Hotel** (s with shared bathroom Birr10) offer crude rooms with cement floors, old sheets and toe-curling tin-shack toilets. Abebe Kebede has a makeshift 45-gallon drum shower, while showers at Getay come in buckets.

Arba Minch–Jinka buses can drop you here, but there are rarely empty seats if you want to get on. Daily Isuzu trucks head to Dimeka (Birr20, four hours), Turmi (Birr30, six hours), Weyto (Birr12, 1½ hours) and Jinka (Birr12, two hours).

#### KOLCHO, KANGA & DUS

These three villages all sit between Omorate and Mago National Park. Minuscule Kolcho is arguably the most beautiful, with its lofty views over the Omo River and traditional Karo dwellings. It's also a great place for traditional dancing, though it'll cost you (Birr300 to Birr700 per group depending on size). Dances last around one hour and usually take place at sunset.

Around 1km from Kolcho is **Lake Deepa**, which is a great spot for bird-watching. The Bumi village of Kanga, which lies across the river further south, can also be visited.

It's also possible to arrange traditional dancing at the large village of Dus, north of Kolcho (same prices as Kolcho).

About 6km south of Kolcho is the amazing Murulle camp built by **Ethiopian Rift Valley Safaris** (☎ 0111 552128; www.ethiopianriftvalley safaris.com). To stay at its amazing lodge, you'd have to be on one of their pricey package tours. However, it's possible to camp here for US\$9.20 per person per night.

The only way to access Kolcho, Kanga, Dus and Murulle is with a private 4WD.

South of Murulle is a beautiful savannah plain where oryx and Grant's gazelles are frequently seen. Oddly there are far more animals reported here than at Mago National Park! There are also 340 bird species in the region. Watch out for the delightful carmine bee-eaters, which fly alongside your vehicle and snap up the insects stirred up by the wheels. The clouds of little quail-like birds that explode like popcorn from the grass as vehicles pass are red-billed queleas.

#### Mago National Park ማጎን ብሔራዊ ፓርክ

Not for the pusillanimous, a visit to this 2162-sq-km park (admission Birr70, vehicle Birr100) is a two-footed leap into true African wilds. You'll battle roads that eat Landrovers for brunch, wage war with squadrons of mosquitos and tsetse flies, and sweat more than you thought humanly possible. The payoff? It's more adventure than you can shake a stick at! You'll also have the chance to visit **Mursi villages** along the Mago River and spot some animals too. One thing is for sure, you'll never forget your time here.

Most of the park is below 500m elevation, so temperatures can soar over 40°C. Landscapes range from thick acacia forest and dense riparian vegetation to typical African savannah.

Although the park was originally created to protect lions, leopards, buffaloes, elephants and giraffes, widespread poaching means you stand little chance of spotting them. Expect the Serengeti or Masai Mara and you're in for one major disappointment. Mammals you can expect to spot are Burchell's zebra, greater and lesser kudu, the defassa waterbuck and the ever so elegant gerenuk. Topis and Lelwel hartebeest are also sometimes seen. Occasionally, large herds of buffalo are reported congregated at sources of water during dry periods. The driest time is January through February.

The tiny visitors centre at the park headquarters contains some information panels, maps and the usual animals' skulls and skins. The headquarters also provides mandatory armed scouts (Birr40/60 per 12/24 hours).

It's possible to camp (Birr30 per person), but there are no facilities.

Headquarters can be reached from Jinka, 40km (two to four hours) to the north, or Kolcho, 115km (six to eight hours) to the

south. There's no public transport, so you'll have to rent a 4WD from a tour operator in Addis Ababa (see p282) or Jinka (p204).

Always try and go in convoy with another vehicle and ensure both have good tyres, a shovel, pick axe and a metal cable (a winch is even better).

When the going is heavy, you'll only average 6km/h and burn serious fuel, so plan on carrying plenty of extra fuel (some guides recommend a total capacity of 230L). A knowledgeable driver or guide is essential; sometimes the roads are little more than tracks that lose themselves in the savannah, or clearings through the jungle. Be aware that roads can become impassable after rain.

#### Omo National Park ኦሞ ብሔራዊ ፓርክ

If Mago National Park is for the adventurous, **Omo National Park** (admission Birr70, vehicle Birr100) is for the masochists. To state the obvious, travelling in Ethiopia's most remote park is incredibly tough.

Although hosting similar wildlife to Mago National Park, Omo's ecological environment is quite different. Although the reduced forest cover actually makes it easier to spot the remaining animals, you'd still need to spend a few days to maximise your chances.

In December 2005 **African Parks Conservation** (APC; www.africanparks-conservation.com), the same nonprofit international organisation that's rehabilitating Nechisar National Park

and several other parks in Africa, signed an agreement with the Ethiopian government to take over park management.

Over the next decade, APC and their social anthropologists plan to work with the Mursi, Dizi and Surma tribes who live in the park to protect the wildlife, and will eventually start to reintroduce endemic animals such as elephants, rhinos, giraffes and lions. Until APC believes the locals can handle increased numbers of visitors, infrastructure within the park will be kept at a bare minimum.

Although the APC states that it has no intention of resettling the tribes outside the park's boundaries, many are worried because the APC refused to put a 'no eviction' clause in its contract with the government. This, combined with the fact that the APC won't make this contract available to the people of the Omo Valley, worries many in the region and some activists abroad. Even if resettlement does not take place, it's crucial the APC allows tribes to retain access to vital subsistence resources so that they can continue to obtain a sustainable livelihood.

To check on the park's progress or to find information about visiting, log onto APC's website or talk to a tour operator in Addis Ababa (see p282). To further inform yourself on the potential resettlement issues (and determine if you want to spend your money in APC's park) check out www.iucn.org and plug Omo National Park into its search engine.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'