

Western Ethiopia



Western Ethiopia's Anuak people believe that if you keep walking, you'll eventually fall off the world's end. If you keep walking west in Ethiopia, you'll fall into another world. Almost 350km due west of Addis Ababa the highland plateau drops dramatically to lowland plains. The remarkable transition sees fields of golden *tef* (an indigenous grass cultivated as a cereal grain) and feral coffee giving way to plantations of verdant banana and mango; Semitic people to dark Nilotic people; and a bracing climate to the torrid humidity of the tropics. Geographically, climatically and culturally, the western lowlands have much more to do with Sudan than with Ethiopia.

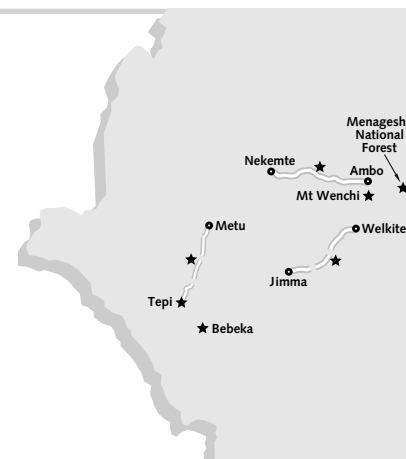
Sadly, like in Sudan, the western lowlands are currently experiencing ethnic and political problems (see the boxed text, p248). For their sake more than yours, we hope peace is achieved and the doors to tourism open again.

Conversely, the western highlands are as stable as can be and a trip through the lush 'birthplace of coffee' can be richly rewarding and eye-opening (thanks to the scenery – not the caffeine!). It was this 'little bean that could' that was responsible for opening up what was once an almost impenetrable region. Some good roads now ford the great rivers and gorges, which for so long isolated the area from the rest of Ethiopia.

While visitors spoiled by countless must-see sights in other regions will be disappointed by the absence of major natural or historical attractions, those simply looking for an interesting journey through beautiful surroundings will get an engaging peek into everyday Ethiopian life.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Straddle a mule for a scenic descent into the lake-filled crater of **Mt Wenchi** (p238)
- Search for birds, colobus monkeys and Menelik's bushbuck while meandering in **Menagesha National Forest** (p237) on the slopes of Mt Wuchacha
- Savour coffee in the old kingdom of Kafa, the birthplace of the bean, before heading west to tour the verdant coffee plantations near **Tepi** (p241) and **Bebeka** (p242)
- Stare steadily at the striking scenery moving past your window while driving from **Ambo to Nekemte** (p238), from **Metu to Tepi** (p241) and from **Jimma to Welkite** (p247)





Climate

The western highlands receive almost 1600mm of annual rainfall. Heavy rains fall between April and September, with moderate precipitation in March and October. The highlands never exceed 29°C nor ever reach frost point.

The western lowlands receive slightly less rain than the highlands, with most falling between May and October. Unlike the moist highlands, December through February is very dry. Temperatures average 27°C but can reach 40°C in February and March.

National Parks & Wildlife Reserves

The newly delineated Didesa Wildlife Sanctuary (p240) holds some hope for future wildlife viewing in the region, while the lowlands' troubles continue to hamper the health of Gambela National Park (p250).

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (www.flyethiopian.com) connects Addis Ababa with Jimma, Mizan Tefari and Gambela.

Most people who enter western Ethiopia overland are travelling by bus from Addis Ababa, which provides access to the south-west via Jimma and to the northwest via Nekemte.

If travelling with a vehicle it's also technically possible to reach Jimma from Sodo in the south and to reach Nekemte from the Addis Ababa-Bahir Dar road in the north.

Getting Around

Jimma and Gambela are connected with flights three times weekly by Ethiopian Airlines.

There are new sealed roads that are heading west from Addis Ababa. It is planned that these roads will reach Nekemte and Jimma in the next few years. When this happens, travel times will be cut significantly.

With the exception of remote lowlands areas, most areas are covered by regular bus services. However, during the wet season, roads and schedules can run equally amuck.

THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS

Carpeted in lush forests, dense patchworks of cultivation, shady coffee plantations and deep river valleys, the western highlands seem like an Ethiopian Arcadia.

ADDIS ABABA TO AMBO

If you are into bird-watching but won't have a chance to visit some of southern Ethiopia's birding havens, a stop at the **Gefersa Reservoir** may be warranted. Watted ibis, endemic blue-wing geese and, occasionally, pelicans peruse its sparsely vegetated shores. The reservoir lies 18km west of Addis Ababa, and supplies the capital with its water.

Just west of the reservoir is the domed profile of **Mt Menagesha**. According to local tradition, many Ethiopian kings' coronations were held on this forested mountain.

If forested hikes and the odd antelope suit your fancy, continue west past the tiny village of Menagesha and turn left at the Teseday Farm Horticulture Development Enterprises sign. A rough road leads 18km to the forestry office on the lower slopes of **Mt Wuchacha** where you can ditch your vehicle and take to the **Menagesha National Forest** (admission Birr20). Almost a dozen trails (up to 9km in length) meander through the forest, with one even heading above the treeline to Wuchacha's 3380m summit.

On the crater's western slopes, you can get a good idea of how Ethiopia's ancient, indigenous forest must have looked before the arrival of the eucalyptus and mass settlement. Some trees, among them giant juniper and *wanza* (*Podocarpus*) are over 400 years old.

Colobus monkeys and Menelik's bushbuck are the most seen mammal species here, while only the lucky get to spot duikers and klipspringers. The endemic Ethiopian oriole and Abyssinian woodpecker are just two of the many bird species present here. You'll need a 4WD to get here in wet season.

On foot, the national forest is more easily accessed from the village of Sebata on the Addis Ababa-Jimma road (p247).

Addis Alem አዲስ አለም

This unprepossessing agricultural town 55km west of Addis Ababa was the site of Emperor Menelik II's future capital; Addis Alem literally means 'New World' in Amharic. He'd sent engineers and builders to start construction here when Addis Ababa was crippled by the late-19th-century fire-wood shortages. The introduction of eucalyptus ended up saving the new flower (Addis Ababa) and killed the new world.

Of the remaining buildings, **St Maryam Church** (admission Birr25) is the most interesting. It stands out for its lavish decoration: the basilica's exterior, as well as the *maqdas* (inner sanctuary), is entirely covered with murals of Ethiopian rulers, saints, landscapes, plants and wild animals, including four grumpy-looking lions of Judah. If you're not going to northern Ethiopia, the church is worth visiting.

Unfortunately, a fire in 1997 destroyed the adjacent museum and many of the church's old treasures that it housed. However a new **museum** (admission incl with church; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun) opened in 2004 and displays crowns and clothing belonging to Menelik and Haile Selassie, and relics from the Battle of Adwa. The royal dining room survives nearby but it's looking rather derelict.

The site sits atop a rocky hill 600m south of the main road.

Numerous buses pass heading east to Addis Ababa (Birr6, 1½ to two hours) and west to Ambo (Birr10, two to 2½ hours). You may have to wait for one with a seat.

AMBO አምቦ

pop 41,500 / elev 2101m

Mineral water is Ambo's claim to fame; it's bottled here and sold throughout Ethiopia. It's so fizzy that it continues to sparkle even in a glass left overnight! Although you can't visit the factory, you can take a dip in the famous thermal mineral-water **pool** (admission Birr5.75; ☎ 6am-8pm Thu-Sun) run by Ambo Ethiopia Hotel. Despite the murky green colour, the pool is cleaned weekly. It's a pleasant setup, but does become manic on weekends.

The town also offers some fine Italian 1930s architecture and an interesting Saturday market where you can find the brightly coloured Ambo baskets.

Almost 2km west of Ambo is **Teltele Park** (admission Birr20), a new pint-sized park that encapsulates walking trails, sections of the Teltele and Huluka Rivers and a few waterfalls including the 25m-high **Huluka Falls**. Campsites and a permanent tented camp should be completed by the time you arrive. Check with the Ambo Ethiopia Hotel for details.

Sleeping & Eating

Ambo Ethiopia Hotel (☎ 0112 362007; amboethotel@ethionet.et; tw with shared bathroom Birr28, tw Birr52.50, d Birr46-125; 🏠) Set around well-manicured flowering gardens, this old colonial place has bundles of charm. Though it shows its age in places, it's still quite comfortable and some rooms have satellite TV. Rooms 25 and 26 overlook the garden. The classic dining hall (mains Birr11 to Birr16) serves tasty Western and Ethiopian selections. Guests have free use of the town's mineral pool.

Abebech Metaferia Hotel (☎ 0112 362365; twtw@birr60/70) This modern tower, cascading with marble, sits just east of town and houses Ambo's most comfortable rooms. Rooms are big, bright and have nice balconies. The restaurant (mains Birr20 to Birr40) is known for quality *faranji* (Western foreigner) fare, but it's a bit pricey.

Jebatna Wecha Hotel (☎ 0112 362253; d Birr25) These rooms are better value than Ambo Ethiopia's twins with shared facilities. It's clean and pretty bright, though showers are all cold.

Gimbi Restaurant (mains Birr4-12) A thriving local restaurant serving well-prepared Ethiopian selections. Try the *shekla tibs* (sautéed meat served on a hot clay pot).

Getting There & Away

A dozen daily buses serve Addis Ababa (Birr10, three hours), while only one serves Nekemte (Birr22, 5½ hours, 6am). For Guder (Birr1.50, 15 minutes) minibuses run approximately every 30 minutes.

MT WENCHI ወንጭ ተራራ

Resting within the beautiful collapsed caldera of Mt Wenchi, 31km south of Ambo, is **Lake Wenchi**, the island monastery of **Cherkos** and several **hot springs**. The crater itself is a patchwork of cultivation, and locals living here have set up boat trips (Birr40 per person return) to the island monastery. This price should include a trip to the hot

springs, though some people have managed to talk the boat operator into also visiting a second island that's home to a local village.

At Cherkos ask to see the large 'Gonder bell', which once belonged (according to tradition) to the Emperor Fasiladas and was brought here by Menelik. Sunday services (before 10am) are classic; catch one if you can. There's no official entrance fee. A fair price is Birr10 per person, though you may well be asked much more.

Water birds are found on the lake; raptors soar above the crater. On the paths up and down, look out for the monkeys and baboons.

With a vehicle, it makes a good day trip from Addis Ababa. You can picnic at the crater before taking a dip in Ambo's mineral pool. The 3km road from Wenchi village to the crater rim typically requires a 4WD; from there you usually have to hike about 30 minutes. Climbing back takes about an hour. It's also possible to hire mules in Wenchi village. Prices are fixed at Birr15 per person each way, plus Birr60 per party for a guide. Without your own wheels, there's usually an early morning Landrover taxi running between Ambo and Weliso during dry season; ask to be dropped at Wenchi village. Unless you come on Sunday (market day), there's no return transport, so bring camping gear. A hotel on the crater is planned but has yet to be built; ask in Ambo.

Private 4WDs with driver can usually be hired in Ambo. A return trip costs between Birr300 and Birr500, depending on your length of stay at the lake. Ask at the bus station or talk to Tadessa Hailu (a reputable guide) at Ambo's Abebech Metaferia Hotel.

AMBO TO NEKEMTE

The journey towards Nekemte soon takes you through Guder, which sits only 11km west of Ambo. About 1km from Guder, after crossing the river, you'll see a gate for **Guder Falls** (admission Birr5; ☎ 7am-6pm). It isn't spectacular, but is worth a peek in the wet season.

The Guder River is an important tributary of the Blue Nile. The ubiquitous Ethiopian red wine, Gouder, was ostensibly named after the river, and a few vineyards can still be seen covering the surrounding area.

As you climb from Guder the views open up and you'll see endless fields of quilted yellows, reds and greens. Although the views

down are great, don't forget to look up too – there are some impressive columnar basalt flows along the road cut above Guder.

While winding circuitously westward through coffee, sorghum and barley crops, you'll catch glimpses of gaping northern canyons, which hammer home the lofty heights of this seemingly subdued plateau.

About 65km from Ambo, you'll reach an escarpment offering westward vistas over distant volcanic landscapes. Heading further west things start to feel less cultivated and more raw and natural. This area is part of the historical Wolega province and is home to gold reserves and precious frankincense. Both still fetch high prices in Middle Eastern and Egyptian markets.

NEKEMTE ነቀምቲ

pop 98,000 / elev 2101m

Nekemte, 202km west of Ambo, is the sprawling commercial and administrative centre for the Oromia region's East Wolega zone. Although busy, it still has a sleepy enough ambience. If you wander you'll notice many leftovers from the Marxist Derg, namely star and sickle emblems.

Although there's little besides a well-put-together museum to hold you here, Nekemte has decent facilities and makes an obvious spot to break your westward journey.

Information

Commercial Bank (☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) The manager told us he changes travellers

cheques but not cash. Play it safe and don't count on either.

Hiwot Clinic (☎ 0576 612036; ☎ 8am-7pm) A better bet than the local hospital. The doctor speaks English and there are X-ray and laboratory facilities. A malaria test is Birr7.

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

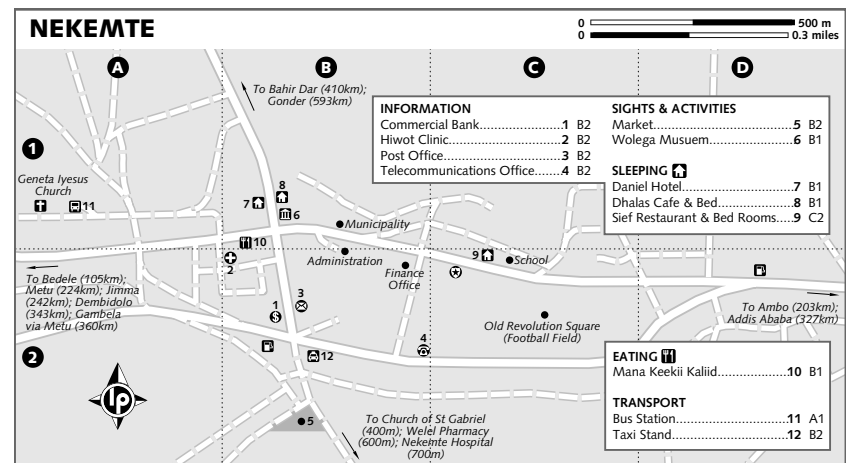
Telecommunications office (☎ 0576 611090) International calls. Standard rates (p267).

Welel Pharmacy (☎ 0576 613611; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat) Well stocked and helpful.

Sights

The remains of an Italian military plane shot down by the Black Lion Patriots in 1935 proudly sits in front of the **Wolega Museum** (admission Birr25; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun). Inside, displays give a good insight into the Wolega Oromo life and culture. It contains traditional musical instruments as well as displays on the local spinning, carving and basket-weaving industries. There is also a wooden coffin; according to traditional Oromo culture, men must prepare their own. Other exhibits include a reconstruction of an Oromo hut and a good collection of arms including a traditional hippo- and buffalo-hide shield. Guided tours are available – expect a whole lot of hand waving!

Also worth a wander is Nekemte's **market**, which bustles most on Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. Although the **Church of St Gabriel** casts a nice silhouette from town, it can be classed as good from far but far from good.



Sleeping & Eating

Sief Restaurant & Bed Rooms (☎ 0576 612499; nonresidents of Ethiopia d Birr60) A new place with spotless rooms, large comfy beds, bedside lamps, clean bathrooms and a friendly owner. Ethiopian residents (even *faranji* ones) pay Birr35. The Ethiopian fare here is pretty good.

Dhalas Cafe & Bed (☎ 0576 611849; d with shared bathroom Birr40, d Birr50) The austere rooms are large and host beds with comfortable foam mattresses. The shared bathrooms are very clean and boast hot water and toilet seats. The only downer is knowing locals pay half.

Daniel Hotel (☎ 0576 615999; d Birr35) Although rooms here are clean and have private bathrooms (cold showers), they aren't as bright and put together as those at Dhalas. However, its restaurant (mains Birr5 to Birr15) is popular and well recommended.

Mana Keekii Kalid (mains Birr3-5) Known locally as 'Ephrem', this is a great place for a local breakfast. Try spicy, tomato-based *sils* or puréed chickpea *ful*. There's also a selection of cakes and fruit juices. If you hear screaming inside, there's obviously a football game on TV (Birr1 per game).

Getting There & Around

One daily bus serves Addis Ababa (Birr33.50, 8½ hours, 6am), though five more pass through each morning and pick up passengers if they have free seats. Other 6am services include Ambo (Birr20, 5½ hours), Dembidolo (Birr41, 12 to 13 hours), Jimma (Birr29.60, 10 hours) and Bedele (Birr13.90, 4½ hours).

Contract taxis cost Birr10 to Birr15 for short hops about town. A ride in a share-taxi is Birr1 to Birr2.

DIDESA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Roughly halfway between Nekemte and Bedele is this new 1300-sq-km wildlife sanctuary. Although there's currently no access, you'll have a glimpse of its beauty when descending into the Didesa River valley. The views from the top are grand. It's thought the deciduous forest holds small populations of elephant, buffalo and lion, as well as numerous guereza monkeys, baboons and birds. Some people have been lucky enough to see hippos in the river. Future access is still being planned, so inquire about its progress in Nekemte.

BEDELE ቤደሌ

pop 16,000 / elev 2162m

Bedele lies 105km south of Nekemte and sits at an important crossroads linking Metu, Jimma and of course, Nekemte. Besides a tour of the celebrated **Bedele beer factory** (☎ 0474 450134, ext 21; admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), there's little reason to even stop here. Sadly, *faranji* frenzy (unwanted attention from local children) can be really rude here.

If you're stuck here, try **Hagere Selam Hotel** (d with shared bathroom Birr20, d Birr30). Its Birr30 doubles are quiet, set at the back of the property. The Birr20 rooms aren't nearly as nice. It's signposted at the main roundabout.

For eating, head to **Hoteela Mo'aa** (mains Birr5-7), which is the best local restaurant. There are some outdoor tables out back.

Between 6am and noon four buses pass here heading for Jimma (Birr15, 3½ hours), while six head to Metu (Birr12, four hours). There's a 6am service to Nekemte (Birr13.90, 4½ hours) and another to Addis Ababa (Birr75, 12 to 13 hours) via Welkite.

METU ሙተ

pop 24,000 / elev 1600m

Spreading over the slope of a small hill 115km west of Bedele is Metu, the capital of the old Ilubador province. It's far from being an ugly town, but you'll find few reasons to stick around. For travellers, Metu acts as the primary gateway to the western lowlands, as well as a springboard for trips south through some of the west's most wild and beautiful scenery to Tepi and Mizan Tefari.

Metu's **market** is worth a stroll and you can pick up everything from fresh coffee and berries to wild honey.

Antenna Hotel (☎ 0474 411002; d Birr40-70) sits only 50m from the bus station. Its *faranji*-priced upstairs options are large, clean and bright and have decent bathrooms. The downstairs Birr40 rooms aren't as nice as those at Hoteela Tinsaa'ee.

Hoteela Tinsaa'ee (☎ 0474 411557; d with shared bathroom Birr22, d Birr30), near the Commercial Bank (no forex facilities) 1.4km east of the bus station, has small, basic rooms that are reasonably clean. The shared squat toilets house a few flies but they pass the nostril test.

Snack & Bakery (snacks Birr2-5; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) is good for breakfast and fruit juices. The honey is tasty as is the local *ir'go* (yogurt).

Buses depart for Gambela (Birr22, six hours, two daily), Bedele (Birr12, four hours, six daily) and Addis Ababa (Birr64, 1½ to two days, 6am) via Jimma (Birr28, nine hours). Regular minibuses serve Gore (Birr5, around 35 minutes).

To reach Tepi take a minibus to Masha (Birr18, four hours) and go from there. If you start early enough, you can reach Tepi or Mizan Tefari in a day.

SOR RIVER WATERFALLS

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A worthwhile excursion from Metu is to the Sor River Waterfalls, one of the most beautiful falls in Ethiopia. It lies close to the village of Bechu, 13km southeast of Metu. The last 15 minutes of the one-hour walk from Bechu takes you through some dense forest teeming with birds and monkeys. In a small opening, the Sor River suddenly drops 20m, over the lip of a wide chasm. Amazing. Brave souls can take a dip in the pool below.

A daily Land Cruiser leaves Metu for Bechu (Birr10, one hour) around 7am. It returns as soon as it's full, which means you may have to walk back to Metu or battle a night of fleas in Bechu. To find the falls, you can enlist the help of a Bechu villager (Birr10). With a 4WD you could make the return trip from Metu in less than four hours.

METU TO TEPI

Although the first 25km south of Metu to the inconsequential Gambela-junction town of Gore is regularly travelled, the 150km gravel road south from there to Tepi rarely sees traffic (local or visitors). Around Gore the road snakes along a ridge and offers vistas over the western lowlands and flirts with sections of thick forest that have so far survived the axe. Some large trees, shrouded in vegetation, seem to have ecosystems of their very own. You may even spot a colobus monkey or two.

North of Masha you'll pass through some rolling hills carpeted in tea plantations before entering thick sections of forest and the occasional stand of bamboo south of town. We managed to spot a duiker just before the scenic descent to the village of Gecha.

After Gecha the road winds through *enset* plantations (false-banana tree, used to produce a breadlike staple also known as *enset*), traditional villages and lovely areas of forest.

As you near Tepi, you'll start to see coffee drying outside homes along the roadside.

In a private vehicle the drive takes between 4½ and seven hours depending on the season. It's also possible in a day by riding local minibuses, though you'll likely have to change minibuses at Masha and Gecha.

TEPI ቴፒ

elev 1238m

Tepi is famous for its coffee plantation. It's Ethiopia's second-largest and stretches over a huge 6290 hectares. Just over 2000 hectares lies around Tepi while the remainder, including Beshanwaka (a beautiful crater lake) is in the Gambela region about 30km away. The state-run plantation produces about 25,000kg of raw arabica coffee per year.

Because of Ethiopia's lowly latitude, the coffee requires extra protection from sunlight. The forest's natural trees (*Gravilia robusta*, *Melia*, *Cordia africana*, *Cupressus* and rubber trees) give natural protection, providing plants with 70% shade.

The beautiful forest is brimful of birds and makes a lovely walk or drive. However, because of the plantation's size, a vehicle (your own) is really required for a proper tour. To cover the plantation, crater lake, experimental spice and fruit plantations and the pulping and processing stations, you'll need about eight hours. A morning and afternoon tour is ideal. The coffee harvest (May through October) is a good time to visit.

Although you're welcome to turn up, it's a good idea to arrange for a proper tour in advance by calling the **Coffee Plantation Development Enterprise** (☎ 0114 168789) in Addis Ababa. Tours are currently free, but charges will be implemented in the near future.

The **plantation headquarters** (☎ 0475 560468) are signposted 400m beyond the main roundabout on the Jimma road.

Sleeping & Eating

Coffee Plantation Guesthouse (☎ 0475 560062; s/tw Birr40/80, d Birr50-60) Located at the plantation headquarters, this guesthouse is good value and is set in pleasant gardens. The large first-class doubles vaunt bright-green laminate floors, frilly bedspreads, small verandas and clean washrooms (cold showers). The bathrooms in the smaller second-class doubles and twins aren't as nice. If you order ahead, the 'workhouse club' can prepare meals.

Tigist Hotel (☎ 0475 560227; d with shared bathroom Birr24-32, d Birr40-50) The top-floor rooms have queen-size beds, shiny bathrooms (cold showers) and mosquito nets. Rooms 20 and 21 have views over town. The lower-floor rooms aren't as clean or bright.

Feleggion Hotel (☎ 0475 560015; d with shared bathroom Birr10) Just around the corner from the bus station, this is the most tolerable of the cheapies.

Abysinia Hotel (mains Birr5-10) The best place to fuel up on *tibs* (sliced lamb, pan fried in butter, garlic, onion and sometimes tomato) or *kitfo* (minced beef or lamb like the French steak tartare, usually served warmed – but not cooked – in butter, *berbere* and sometimes thyme). Excuse the motor oil and woodchips on the floor – it's a novel approach to dust containment! It wouldn't be such a worry if your wobbly chair didn't seem like it was about to topple.

Getting There & Away

Three buses run daily to Masha (Birr15, three hours), while one continues to Gore (Birr30, 5½ to nine hours). Two buses serve Jimma (Birr30.40, eight hours). For Mizan Tefari (Birr10, 1½ hours), seven buses run daily.

Ethiopian Airlines flies to/from Addis Ababa (US\$91, 2¼ hours) and Mizan Tefari (US\$40, 20 minutes) on Thursday.

MIZAN TEFARI ሚኒን ተፈሪ

Mizan Tefari, the old capital of the Bench people, serves as a base for a visit to the nearby Bebeke coffee plantation. On Tuesday, there's quite a colourful market.

Aden Hotel (☎ 0473 330542; d with shared bathroom Birr26, d Birr40) is our top pick and sits in a leafy compound west of the main drag at town's south end. The Birr40 rooms are a decent size and sport mosquito nets, firm but comfy mattresses, bright windows and clean bathrooms. Its restaurant is good, though prices often succumb to *jaranji* fluctuations.

Nuhamin Cafe (snacks & mains Birr2-4), 50m east of the Total station, is a fine breakfast spot. Perfect for a chocolate doughnut, *macchiato*, omelette or *ful*.

Buses run to Tepi (Birr10, 1½ hours, seven daily), Bonga (Birr25, five hours, two daily) and Addis Ababa (Birr63, 1½ days, one daily) via Jimma (Birr28, 7½ hours, one daily).

Ethiopian Airlines flies to/from Addis Ababa (US\$91, 1¾ hours) and Tepi (US\$40, 20 minutes) on Thursday.

BEBEKA COFFEE PLANTATION በበቃ የቡና እርሻ

Twenty-eight kilometres southwest of Mizan Tefari is Ethiopia's largest and oldest **coffee plantation** (☎ 0471 118621). A tour of the 9337-hectare plantation gives a fascinating insight into Ethiopia's most important export.

As with Tepi, you should arrange for a proper visit in advance by calling the **Coffee Plantation Development Enterprise** (☎ 0114 168789) in Addis Ababa. Fees for tours will be implemented in the near future.

Around 15,000 quintals of arabica coffee are produced annually; during the harvest, up to 20,000 workers are employed. Almost 1500 hectares are devoted to honey production and experimental spice and fruit plantations. The honey is delicious and costs just Birr15 for a kilogram; pots can normally be provided. Spices grown include black pepper, cardamom and cinnamon, while bananas, oranges, jack fruits and pineapples are some of the fruits dotting the plantation's hills.

Bebeke has much more comfortable and attractive accommodation than Tepi. The **plantation guesthouses** (camping per 2-person tent Birr42, dm/d Birr10/52, 2-bedroom cottages Birr90) sit in the thick of the plantations and are surrounded by birdlife. The dorms are rough but the doubles and cottages are very comfortable. There's a nearby employee lodge with decent meals and satellite TV.

Since you require your own 4WD for a tour, there's really no point in rocking up on foot. The plantation is about an hour's drive from Mizan Tefari.

EAST TO WUSHWUSH

The road east to Wushwush from Mizan Tefari climbs through lush, intensively cultivated valleys and past neat rows of *tukuls* (traditional cone-shaped huts with thatched roofs). Stop and pick up some mangos if you can; 30 still just cost Birr5!

About 5km before the sleepy town of Wushwush, 92km east of Mizan Tefari, is the 1242-hectare **Wush Wush Tea Development plantation** (☎ 0471 112979; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat). A tour of the privatised plantation's tea-covered hills and its

STARBUCKS THANK KALDI'S GOATS

At some point between the 5th and 10th centuries, long before Starbucks opened its first store in Seattle's Pike Pl public market in 1971, coffee was discovered in Ethiopia. Although rumours abound of how its properties were realised, the following story is the most accepted account.

An astute herder by the name of Kaldi noticed that his goats were behaving rather excitedly each time they chewed a certain plant's leaves and berries, so he decided to give it a go himself. Sure enough, after a few chews and a couple of swallows, Kaldi was one hyper herder! Off he rushed to the nearest monastery to tell of his discovery, only to be reprimanded for 'partaking in the Devil's fruit'. However, all it took for the monks to come around was the aroma emanating from the fire where they'd thrown Kaldi's beloved beans.

Soon the monks were drying the beans for transport and shipping them to Ethiopian monasteries far and wide. There, monks would rehydrate them in water, eat the fruit and drink the fluids to keep them awake for nocturnal prayers. Surely something that helped them pray into the early hours must be the work of God and not the Devil!

Soon Arabs were importing the beans and the coffee business was well and truly underway. Although it wasn't until the 15th century in Turkey that today's style of coffee was first brewed, the name of Kaldi's kingdom stuck to the elixir of awakenedness. And to what kingdom did Kaldi belong? Kafa, of course!

packaging factory is possible and makes an interesting excursion for those with time.

Wushwush Guest Lodge (camping free, r Birr25) is 200m off the main road. If heading towards Jimma, take the first right after passing the plantation's turn-off. It's a reasonable place and is set in pleasant grounds. You'll need to register with plantation's administration office before arriving.

You can use the lodge's kitchen or walk about 1km to a simple restaurant catering to plantation workers.

BONGA ቦጌጋ

pop 10,851

Bonga used to form part of the great kingdom of Kafa, the birthplace of coffee (see the boxed text, above). In the surrounding area are a number of unexcavated historical sites, including what's thought to be an ancient burial site for kings. Various battle sites, including defensive ditches believed to date from the 14th century, and some 500-year-old churches, have also been found.

There's also terrific potential for hiking in the surrounding hills. Caves, waterfalls, natural bridges, hot springs, natural forest, wildlife and birdlife are all found close to town.

For more information on this almost unexplored but fascinating and beautiful area, visit the little **Bonga Information & Culture Office** (☎ 0473 320842; PO Box 6, Bonga, Kafa).

Kafa Development Programme Guesthouse

(KDP; ☎ 0473 310195; supaks@ethionet.et; camping Birr35, r incl breakfast Birr80), set up a hill behind town, is a great choice for a rest. This NGO has several comfortable cottages, with kitchens, common areas and clean confines. It can also arrange guides for exploring the area.

National Hotel (☎ 0473 310051; d with shared bathroom Birr18) is a giant drop in quality and cleanliness from KDP, but it's also one quarter the price and much closer to the bus. Its restaurant (meals Birr5 to Birr10) is known as Bonga's best.

Jimma (Birr20, four hours), Mizan Tefari (Birr25, five hours) and Wushwush (Birr5, 30 minutes) are each served with one bus daily.

JIMMA ጃማ

pop 132,360 / elev 1678m

How you interpret western Ethiopia's largest city really depends on which direction you arrive from. Enter from Addis Ababa and it's a smaller and quirkiest version of the raucous capital, with wide boulevards, lots of honking horns and a massive coffeeport rising from its main roundabout. Arrive from the wild, wild western lowlands and Jimma is a place of great sophistication and gentility. Cake shops, topiary hedges, city planning and fat policemen are among the city's attributes, and there's no shortage of decent hotels and restaurants.

For centuries, a powerful Oromo monarchy ruled the surrounding fertile highlands from its capital at Jiren (part of present-day Jimma). The region owed its wealth to its situation at the crux of several major trade routes and to its abundant crops. At its height, the kingdom stretched over 13,000 sq km. When Menelik came to power in the late 1800s, he required the region to pay high tribute.

When the Italians entered the picture in the 1930s, they had grand plans to create a modern city in the heart of Ethiopia's breadbasket and Jimma was subsequently born from Jiren. The town still boasts some good examples of Italian Fascist architecture.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Jiffar Computer Center (per hr Birr18) Slow and steady Internet connections.

Leo Computer Service Center (per hr Birr18) Internet as slow as the rest, but the owner is friendly.

River Tele Center (per hr Birr12) Cheap, but a slow go – bring a book!

MEDICAL SERVICES

Dr B Cossar Higer Clinic (☎ 0471 112814; ☎ 24hr) Decent facilities and an English-speaking doctor.

Ethiopia Red Cross (☎ 0471 111257) Ambulance services.

Pharmacy (☎ 0471 116699) Helpful and well stocked.

MONEY

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

Dashen Bank (☎ 8am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon Sat) Similar services and rates to the Commercial Bank.

POST

Post office (☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, to noon Sat)

PHOTOGRAPHY

Super Photo (☎ 8am–8pm Mon–Sat, to 1pm Sat) Produce pictures from digital cameras (Birr2.50 per photo).

TELEPHONE

Telecommunications office northside (☎ 8am–6pm Mon, Thu & Fri, to 4pm Tue & Wed, to noon Sat); southside (☎ 8.30am–5pm) International calls. Standard rates (p267).

Sights

JIMMA MUSEUM ጁጁጁ ሙዚዚየም

The traditional culture section of the **Muuziyemii Jimmaa** (admission Birr25; ☎ 9am–12.30pm Mon

& Wed, 9am–noon & 2–5.30pm Tue, Thu & Fri, 2–5.30pm Sat & Sun) houses examples of Jimma's traditional arts and crafts, and includes some fine examples of woodwork, musical instruments and weapons. The bark skirts and the grass raincoats on display are still worn in areas of western Ethiopia today.

The historical section plays home to numerous artefacts ranging from a rickety-looking Italian machine gun and an Italian-made walking stick-cum-gun to possessions belonging to Kafa kings, including a carved wooden throne and two massively bulbous and cartoonish nightclothes boxes. Much less regal is one king's loo, which looks like a frying pan with a hole in it.

The enormous wheel (1.3m in diameter) was used to summon the people to war.

PALACE OF ABBA JIFFAR

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Looking more out of America's wild west than the Kafa kingdom, the forlorn-feeling **Palace of Abba Jiffar** (admission Birr25; ☎ 9am–12.30pm Mon & Wed, 9am–noon & 2–5.30pm Tue, Thu & Fri, 2–5.30pm Sat & Sun) sits atop a hill 7km northeast of the town centre, near the village of Jiren.

King Jiffar (1852–1933), who was one of the most important Kafa kingdom rulers, held power at the end of the 19th century.

The palace contains a private family mosque (which is still in use) and rooms that used to serve as a library, throne room, reception chamber, king's guard room, sentry tower, courthouse and guesthouse.

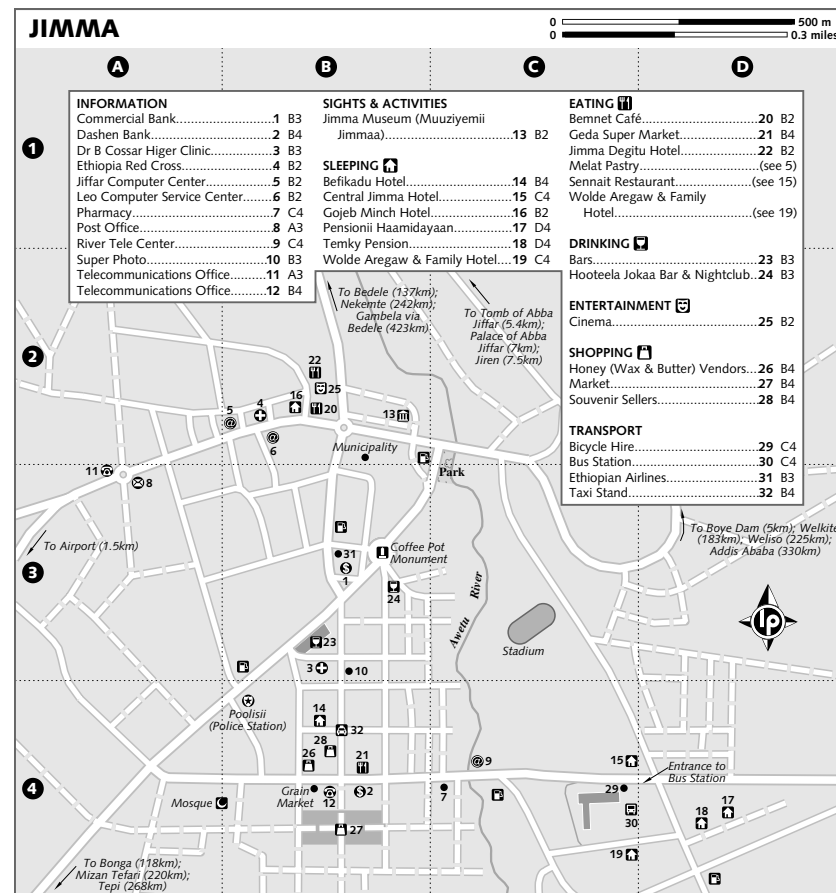
The adjoining house is said to have belonged to the king's grandson, the sultan. From the balcony overlooking the courtyard, the royal family watched musicians, wrestlers, singers and poets. Almost 1.6km back down the hill lies the tomb of the king.

With the road in its current state, only 4WDs can make it up. Until it's repaired you'll have to catch one of the town's shared taxis or minibuses (Birr0.50 to Birr2) to the end of the asphalt (about halfway), from where it's a one-hour walk.

OTHER SIGHTS

In the vicinity of Jimma, there are various caves, hot springs and a hippo pool (at the Boye Dam, 5km from town) that can be visited; inquire at your hotel.

If you're a connoisseur of Italian Fascist architecture, take a peek at the cinema, post



office, municipal buildings and some of the old hotels.

Sleeping

Jimma hotels have openly embraced the *faranji* price scheme – the one where you pay double! Prices listed here are *faranji* rates. Sadly, paying double doesn't make your room immune to Jimma's regular power cuts. All listings have hot showers unless stated otherwise.

Central Jimma Hotel (☎ 0471 118283; d with shared bathroom Birr51, d Birr76, ste Birr173–230; ☎) There are some hotels you wouldn't dream of walking barefoot in. This is not one of those hotels! The Birr76 doubles and suites are spotless, comfortable and bright. The

suites also have satellite TV. The rooms with shared bathrooms are smaller and don't have mosquito nets – they also aren't barefoot worthy. A swim (guest or not) will set you back Birr23.

Wolde Aregaw & Family Hotel (☎ 0471 112731; d with shared bathroom Birr51, s Birr67–78, d/tw Birr92/115, ste Birr126–184) Opposite the bus station and set in quite large grounds, this hotel's shared bathroom options are better value than Central's. The other rooms are less so. Most are large and well kept, but aren't as comfortable and feel old – the dated pink bathrooms don't help.

Temky Pension (☎ 0471 110844; d/tw with shared bathroom Birr25/35, d/tw Birr39/46) Down a dirt lane east of the bus station, this *pension* has

cheap, small and tidy rooms with shared bathrooms, as well as larger rooms with mosquito nets and private bathrooms. The music in the lively garden courtyard can be a drawback for those wishing to go to bed early.

Pensionii Haamidayaan (☎ 0471 116014; d/tw with shared bathroom Birr23/40, d/tw Birr33/50) This economical place is a quieter version of its neighbour Temky, though the rooms, bathrooms and shared facilities are more worn.

Befikadu Hotel (☎ 0471 111757; d with shared bathroom Birr15, d Birr23) This is the least you'll pay for private bathrooms, though showers spurt cold water and most toilets lack seats. It will do for a night, but keep your flip-flops handy for the odd roach. The rooms at the back are less noisy.

Gojeb Minch Hotel (☎ 0471 110103; r with shared bathroom Birr40-50, r Birr80-120) We'd heard that this hotel's newly renovated rooms were something special, so we posed as tourists seeking accommodations for our parents' upcoming visit and popped in. Unfortunately the manager was entirely unhelpful (dare we say rather rude!) and he demanded we pay just to see them. So you'll have to find out for yourselves.

Eating & Drinking

Dining is not Jimma's strong point, though after returning from a foray into the west it's a culinary extravaganza.

Sennait Restaurant (mains Birr10-14) Within the confines of the Central Jimma Hotel, this is Jimma's most respected restaurant. The menu is a mix of Ethiopian and Western fare.

Jimma Degitu Hotel (mains Birr6-24) The *faranji* food here is quite good (if you remember you're in Ethiopia) and more varied than elsewhere. We happily wolfed down a cheese burger. The French fries were cold but good, as they more resembled crisps or potato chips. Pizza is also on the menu.

Wolde Aregaw & Family Hotel (mains Birr6-12) This hotel's menu is much the same as Sennait's. Dine on choices like *doro arrost* (roast chicken), spaghetti or fish cutlet.

Bemnet Café (snacks & drinks Birr1-2) This streetside café serves great coffee and is extremely popular with local students. The chocolate-coated doughnuts look lovely,

but one bite and you realise it's more sugar than substance.

Melat Pastry (snacks & drinks Birr1-2) Its shaded terrace vaunts the best selection of cakes and fruit juices in town.

Geda Super Market (☎ 8am-8pm) The best stocked store in Jimma, though that isn't saying much!

Try tasting the local *besso* drink, made from ground barley. Some of Jimma's swinging bars – or rather dingy dives – are marked on the map. Hooteela Jokaa Bar & Nightclub is a particular favourite of locals.

Entertainment

Cinema (admission Birr2) North of Bemnet Café; shows Western movies with English subtitles.

Shopping

Thursday is the main market day; search out Jimma's famous three-legged stools. Good-quality basketware can also be found in and around the market. Jimma honey is well known and costs from Birr10 to Birr12 per kilo. You can find it in the warren of shacks opposite the grain market.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0471 110030) flies daily to Addis Ababa (US\$63, one hour) and on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday there are flights to/from Gambela (US\$74, one hour). Note that during the rainy season, flight delays and cancellations are common.

Two early morning buses leave daily for Addis Ababa (Birr34.60, nine hours). More Addis Ababa-bound buses pick up during the day, but most will overnight somewhere en route. Tepi (Birr30.40, eight hours), Mizan Tefari (Birr28, 7½ hours), Bedele (Birr15, 3½ hours) and Nekemte (Birr29.60, 10 hours) each have one early morning service. There are up to six minibuses to Welkite (Birr20 to Birr25, five hours).

Getting Around

Garis (horse-drawn carts) cost Birr0.50 to Birr2 for hops around town depending on the distance. Bikes can be hired (Birr3 per hour) just north of the bus station.

No buses or minibuses go to the airport, so you'll need to flag a contract taxi (Birr50) or walk to a taxi stand.

JIMMA TO ADDIS ABABA

After Jimma, the road begins to wind back in a northeastern direction towards Addis Ababa. Approximately 57km out of town, the road detours around the Gilgel Gibe Dam, which, when finished, will be Ethiopia's second-largest hydroelectric plant (after the one on the Tekeze, begun in 2002). Anubis baboons are commonly seen along the road.

Much further west you'll see several impressive bulbous rock pinnacles rising from the seemingly subdued plateau in the distance. Once you pass the major outcrop, the road serpentine down into the gaping Gibe River Valley. The view west after you've ascended the opposite side is even more impressive.

If you get stuck at **Welkite**, the **Gebra Mamo Hotel** (☎ 0113 301505; d with shared bathroom Birr35, d Birr50) has large comfy beds, hot-water showers, mosquito nets and clean bathrooms. It's also home to Welkite's best restaurant.

Two buses leave daily for Addis Ababa (Birr15 to Birr20, 3½ hours) and for Jimma (Birr20 to Birr25, five hours). There's one service to Hosaina (Birr15 to Birr20, four hours).

The little town of **Weliso**, 43km northeast of Welkite, is known for its hot springs. A great naturally heated **swimming pool** (admission nonusers Birr12.50; ☎ Fri-Sun) can be found at the **Negash Hotel** (☎ 0113 410002; d & tw Birr62.50-137.50; ☎). The hotel is 1.4km from the town centre; you can hop on a *gari* for Birr0.50. Camping is occasionally permitted. The grounds are full of birds and vervet monkeys.

Ten buses travel daily to Addis Ababa (Birr10, 2½ hours) and to Welkite (Birr5, one hour). For Jimma, go to Welkite. There's usually one early morning Land-rover taxi heading north to Ambo (for Mt Wenchi) during the dry season.

The area around Weliso is home to the Gurage people (p46). From the village of Sebeta, a solid 3½ hour trek (one way) takes you up to the top of Mogli, one of the peaks of Mt Wuchacha. With a vehicle, Mt Wuchacha is best accessed from the Addis Ababa-Ambo road (p237).

The Addis Ababa-Jimma road is currently being upgraded and when we visited the sublimely sealed sections had made it as far west as Welkite.

THE WESTERN LOWLANDS

The swampy western lowlands, comprised of the Gambela federal region, stand in stark contrast to the striking landscapes seen in the country's north and south. One breath of the region's moist, searing air and you'll quickly notice the difference too.

Unfortunately, a recent escalation in ethnic and political violence has made the region unsafe for travellers (see the boxed text, p248). For the region's people, who have to be some of the nicest in the country, we hope peace isn't too long over the African horizon.

GAMBELA ጋምቤላ

pop 45,308 / elev 526m

Set on the banks of the chocolate-brown Baro River, at a lowly altitude of 526m, Gambela is muggy, swampy and sweaty. These surroundings, mixed with lowland populations of the Anuak and Nuer peoples, makes Gambela unlike any other city in Ethiopia. Gambela is also the capital of the 25,274-sq-km Gambela federal region.

Although the recent ethnic and political violence may seem to say otherwise, the people here, although initially appearing reticent and deeply suspicious, are actually incredibly hospitable and treat visitors with more warmth than anywhere else in the country. Using *'daricho'*, the Anuak greeting, or *'male'*, the Nuer greeting, helps break the ice.

Gambela's past is as turbulent and intriguing as the city is today. Thanks to the Baro River being the only truly navigable river in Ethiopia, it was along this watercourse that raiding slave parties transported thousands of captured men.

Later, at the 19th century's end, the river's strategic and commercial importance was contemplated by the British and Ethiopians. Knowing that the Baro was navigable all the way to Khartoum (via the White Nile), Menelik II dreamed of linking Ethiopia with Egypt and Sudan. To help create the great inland shipping service, the emperor agreed to grant the British, who were already in control of Sudan, an enclave on the Baro River. In 1907 the site was chosen

SAFETY WARNING

We strongly suggest that you keep your eye on developments around Gambela before visiting the western lowlands. Since 1991 tensions have been rising between the Anuak and the Nuer peoples, who represent the vast majority of the region's population.

The long on-and-off conflict has been fuelled by a number of reasons, one being repeated incursions by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Another reason seems to be the minority Anuak's historical control of local government.

Since 7 July 2002, when there was a rash of retribution Anuak killings by Nuers sparked by an Anuak police station commander's killing of several Nuer in Itang, things have taken a drastic turn for the worse. From 13 to 15 December 2003, hundreds of Anuaks were killed and over 500 homes burnt and looted in the town of Gambela after police displayed eight bodies of Nuers slain by an armed Anuak group.

The fact that Ethiopian government forces were found to have done most of the killing has led Anuak leaders to believe they are victims of systematic genocide. The subsequent arrest and torture (according to Amnesty International) of hundreds of Anuak, who the government claims were involved in the armed group responsible for the killing of the eight Nuers, and the government's attempted forced disarming of the Anuak has only thrown more fuel on the fire.

A few days before our arrival from Metu, an armed group of Anuak attacked the Gambela police station and prison. In the process they killed several officers, including the state police commissioner, and freed an unknown number of prisoners. This outbreak of violence meant we weren't able to do first-hand research of the area.

and Gambela was formally inaugurated as a port and customs station.

Soon steamers were chugging up and down the wide river, laden with valuables ranging from coffee, salt and beeswax to skins, liquors and cotton. Commerce flourished and Gambela boomed.

The Italians briefly captured Gambela in 1936 and vestiges of their fort are still visible. The British won the river port back in 1941 and amazingly made it part of Sudan 10 years later. When Sudan gained its independence in 1956, the protectorate was given back to Ethiopia. It was around this time that the old shipping service formally ceased to be.

Since the fall of the Mengistu regime, there have been talks about plans to revive the river port and boost the region's economic fortunes, but nothing has been done. In the meantime, Gambela slowly sinks back into the mud.

Information

There's currently only one Internet café and the foreign-exchange policy of Gambela's branch of the Commercial Bank is up in the air at the moment, so plan ahead.

With the closure of the tourist office, the **Gambela National Park Headquarters** (☎ 0475 510912; ☎ 7am-12.30pm & 3-5.30pm Mon-Fri) seems to have taken up the reins in helping with

advice for those planning trips outside Gambela.

Dangers & Annoyances

If the heated security situation (see the boxed text, above) has calmed and travel is possible, your biggest concern should be mosquitos. Malaria continues to kill an extraordinarily high percentage of the population here and adequate precautions are essential (see p373 for more information). Giardiasis is also common.

Although much less of a risk, a much bigger thing to wrestle with are the river's crocodiles. If you do decide to take your chances, only swim where the locals do. That's no guarantee though – a local was taken not long ago.

Photographers should show even more sensitivity and caution than normal (see

THE ETHIOPIAN SLAVE TRADE

Ethiopia's slave trade was a lucrative one. From the 16th century right up to the 19th century, the country's main source of foreign revenue was from slaves. At the height of the trade, it's estimated that 25,000 Ethiopian slaves were sold every year to markets around the globe.

the boxed text, p266). It's strictly forbidden to take photos of, or from, the bridge. The Anuak and Nuer people are also notoriously camera-shy. Always ask permission before taking photos (even for people's houses and animals); if you don't, their warm hospitality may turn to real upset, anger and aggression, including stone throwing.

Sights & Activities

A pleasant walk around Gambela includes the riverside, the old steamship and pier (visible from the riverbank), the bridge and the markets. You may well come across an old colonial warehouse, bungalow or merchant villa too. This walk is marked on the Gambela map.

At sunset, many locals gather at the point where the river diverges. People come to bathe, walk or catch up on gossip. It's a colourful scene. The **Nuer villages** on the outskirts of town, known as 'New Land', can also be visited; a Nuer guide is a good idea. A **Nuer market** can be found near the Gambela Ethiopia Hotel.

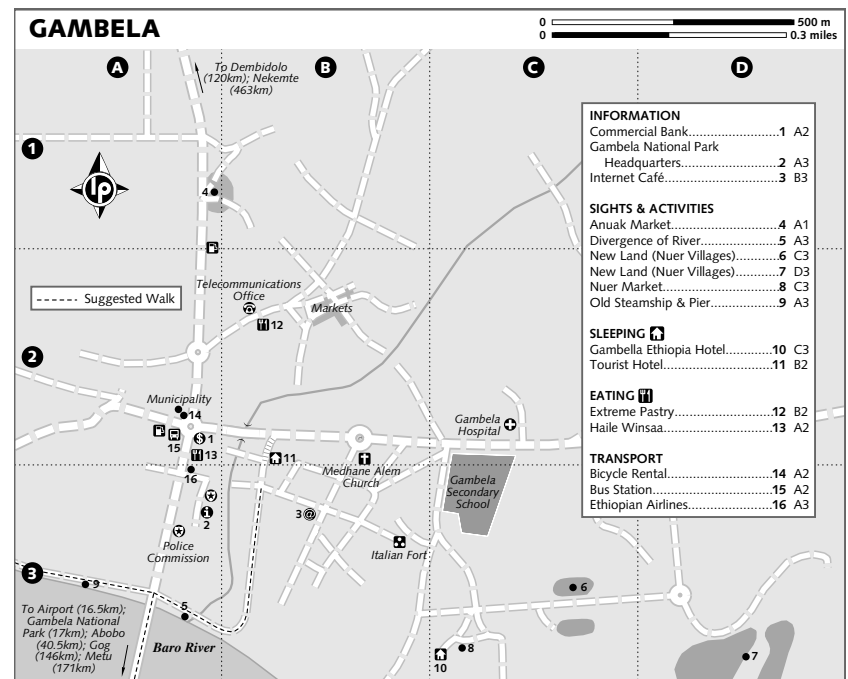
In the north of the town is the **Anuak market**. Vendors sit in the shade of the trees selling cereals, firewood, large Nile perch and tobacco. To pass the time, many indulge in *akwoyo* (water pipe) smoking. You can taste the *borde* (traditional 'beer'), served to thirsty market-goers from metal buckets.

Sleeping & Eating

Decent hotels and restaurants are not Gambela's forte.

Gambela Ethiopia Hotel (☎ 0475 510044; tw Birr150) Although dog-eared and dilapidated, this is by far and away Gambela's best hotel. Knowing fleapits are your only other option, prices here are now absurd. The only redeemable features are the birds and monkeys in the grounds and the cold drinks available. The restaurant (mains Birr8 to Birr15) is also one of its better traits and serves local and *faranji* food (such as steak and shish kebab).

Tourist Hotel (☎ 0475 521584; d with shared bathroom Birr20) The cleanest and quietest of the flea havens.



THE ANUAK

The Anuak's language closely resembles that of the Luo tribes in Kenya. Fishing is their main means of survival, though some grow sorghum. Outside Gambela most live in extended family groups, rather than villages, composed of a cluster of huts in a small compound.

Anuak huts are characterised by low doorways and thickly thatched roofs. The eaves, which stretch almost to the ground, keep out both the torrential rain and baking sun. The houses' walls are often decorated with engraved designs, including animals, magical symbols and geometrical patterns.

A common practice among many Nilotic peoples of Ethiopia and Sudan, including the Anuak, is extraction of the front six teeth of the lower jaw at around the age of 12. This is said to have served originally as a precaution against the effects of tetanus or 'lockjaw'.

Haile Winssa (mains Birr5-15) Although you'd never dream of staying here, locals swear it serves the best Ethiopian fare in Gambela.

Extreme Pastry (mains Birr3-5) It's the best cake shop in town, though the selection isn't enormous. It also does breakfast. Try the *ful* (chickpea purée) and *sils* (spicy tomatoes).

Getting There & Away

4WD

Although on a map it looks attractive to make a loop to Gambela from Nekemte via Dembidolo and return via Bure and Metu, the Dembidolo road is rather horrific (and impassable during the rains) and local traffic rarely uses it. This route is also prone to

bandits (see Shifty Shiftas, opposite). It's best to stick to the Metu-Gambela road.

There are no 4WDs available for hire in Gambela.

AIR

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0475 510099) flies to/from Addis Ababa (US\$100, two hours) and Jimma (US\$74, one hour) on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

BOAT

During the wet season in the past, cargo boats occasionally ran the Baro River from Gambela all the way to the Sudanese border. This is no longer the case and the border is indefinitely closed.

BUS & TRUCK

One bus leaves daily for Addis Ababa (Birr85.55, two days) overnighting at Bedele (Birr31, 10½ hours) via Gore (Birr20, six hours), Metu (Birr22, 6½ hours) and Welkite (Birr78.80, 1½ days). There's no longer any regular transport to Dembidolo.

Getting Around

There are no taxis or *garis* in town, so your only option besides walking is bicycling. Bikes are rented (Birr6 per hour) near the municipality building.

To get to/from the airport, 16.5km from town, you'll have to hitch with fellow passengers or ask Ethiopian Airlines to sort something for you.

GAMBELA NATIONAL PARK ጋምቤላ ብሔራዊ ፓርክ

Less than 50 years ago, Gambela National Park, spreading over 5061 sq km, was one of Ethiopia's richest places for large mammals.

Elephants, lions, leopards, giraffes, buffaloes, topis, tiangs, roan antelopes, hartebeests and waterbucks were all found here. The park was also home to species more typical of Sudan, like the Nile lechwe and white-eared kob.

However, today's ever-growing need for shelter, firewood, food and land for farming, as well as the influx of Sudanese refugees, has dramatically reduced wildlife and their habitats. The Alwero dam project constructed in the park's core didn't help either.

The lack of funds is a big obstacle to the park, too. Despite budget increases in 2001 after national and international interest in the park, Gambela remains one of the most neglected and threatened parks in Ethiopia.

There's also little to no tourist infrastructure, meaning you have to be totally self-sufficient.

Although discomfort is guaranteed and the wildlife rewards are few, you'll definitely have stories to tell. And encounters with the fascinating Anuak and Nuer people shouldn't be underrated.

Wildlife

Vegetation consists largely of woodland and grassland, with large areas of swamp in between.

Animals you might realistically hope to see are the common bushbuck, oribi, lesser kudu and the white-eared kob. The best place to spot these animals is 180km or so west of Gambela along the banks of the Baro.

SHIFTY SHIFTAS

Some stretches of road around Gambela (such as between Shebel and Gambela) continue to be targeted by *shiftas* (bandits).

Should you be unlucky enough to encounter gun-toting shiftas, here's a quick survival guide. Stop at once, stay very calm and hand over a respectable wad of money as calmly and quickly as possible (keeping an easily accessible stash somewhere nearby is a good idea). If you're driving, don't attempt to move until the *shiftas* have disappeared back into the bush. Accidents only happen when drivers panic and try to do a runner. If you have a driver, make sure they understand the plan of action too. Tourists are not targeted; if anything, they're avoided because of the repercussions.

Poaching has limited elephant numbers and you'd be a lucky soul to see one. The last ones were spotted around 56km south of Abobo on the road to Gog. Further south, around Gog, the odd villager still complains about livestock being taken, which leads people to think there are still lions in the area.

Birdlife is plentiful, both in the forest and around the swamps. Gog is particularly good for woodland birds, and Itang for water birds (including the pink-backed pelican).

Planning

The **Gambela National Park Headquarters** (☎ 0475 510912; admission per 48hr Birr35; ☎ 7am-12.30pm & 3-5.30pm Mon-Fri) in Gambela organises guides (Birr20 per day) and obligatory armed scouts (Birr50 per 48 hours).

Sleeping & Eating

Camping (a future fee is still being pondered) is really your only option unless you want to stay in one of Gog's or Itang's dives. Camping is permitted anywhere, though you'll have to be fully self-sufficient with food and cooking gear.

Getting There & Around

For any trips within the park, you'll really need to come with your own sturdy 4WD. You also must be prepared for some long treks if you want to increase your chances of spotting animals.

Occasional public transport runs through the park between Gambela and Gog; inquire at park headquarters.

DEMBIDOLO ደንቢዶሎ

If you're bound and determined to not double back through Bure and Metu when returning to the highlands from Gambela, you'll likely end up spending at least one night in Dembidolo. The town is known for two things in particular: its goldsmiths and its *tej* (honey wine). The former can be seen at work, the latter can be tasted in any of Dembidolo's numerous bars (*tej beats*).

Birhane Hotel (☎ 0575 550127; r with shared bathroom Birr15, r Birr25) is on the main road and has Dembidolo's cleanest rooms.

There's usually a painful daily bus to Nekemte (Birr41, 12 to 13 hours). A couple of trucks a week run to Gambela (Birr30, five hours).

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