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Ethiopia Meskel Festival - Historic Route & Simien Mountains
Set departure 25 Sep – 5 Oct 2009

Ethiopia has many celebrations throughout the year and all over the country. Every one of the 54,000 parish Churches and the 800 monasteries of the Orthodox Tewahido Church all have at least one minor monthly and one major annual festival. These may share origins with Christian, Muslim and tribal festivals elsewhere in the world, but have unique indigenous characteristics in Ethiopia.

Meskel Festival means “The Finding of the True Cross” is celebrated on the 26th September at an open amphitheatre (Meskel Square) in Addis Ababa with a huge bonfire and priests in splendid ceremonial attire.

Itinerary - brief

25 Sep, Friday	Arrive in Addis Ababa, Adot Tina or Bole Ambassador Hotel (dinner)
26 Sep, Saturday	Addis Ababa, Meskel Festival, Adot Tina or Bole Ambassador Hotel (full board)
27 Sep, Sunday	Flight Addis Ababa – Axum, Yeha Hotel (full board)
28 Sep, Monday	Flight Axum – Lalibela, Mount View or Roha Hotel (full board)
29 Sep, Tuesday	Lalibela, Mount View or Roha Hotel (full board)
30 Sep, Wednesday	Flight Lalibela – Gondar, Goha Hotel (full board)
1 Oct, Thursday	Gondar – Simien Mountains, Simien Lodge (full board)
2 Oct, Friday	Drive Simien – Bahir Dar, Summer Land or Tana Hotel (full board)
3 Oct, Saturday	Bahir Dar, Summer Land or Tana Hotel (full board)
4 Oct, Sunday	Flight Bahir Dar – Addis Ababa, Adot Tina or Bole Ambassador Hotel (full board)
5 Oct	Flight out

Physical address: 12 George Street, Bryanston, Johannesburg, South Africa
 Tel +27 (0) 11 706 1991 | Fax +27 (0) 11 463 1469 | Email info@unusualdestinations.com
 Postal address: PO Box 97508 Petervale 2151 South Africa | Docex address: Docex 10 Rivonia



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Itinerary – full description

Friday, 25 September: Addis Ababa

Fly from Johannesburg to Addis Ababa. Meet and greet on arrival and transfer to the Adot Tina or Bole Ambassador Hotel. (Dinner)

Saturday, 26 September: Addis Ababa

After breakfast visit the National Museum of Addis Ababa, Entoto Mountains, and St George's Cathedral dedicated to the national saint of Ethiopia. The cathedral was built by Menelik II to commemorate his victory over the Italians at Adwa in 1896. Its' museum houses the best collection of ecclesiastical materials in Ethiopia - paintings, crosses, parchments, books and beautiful handicrafts and the "Merkato" The biggest open air market in Africa.

After an early lunch we proceed to view the **Meskel Festival**. The celebration starts at 14:30 and continues until about 18:00 or 19:00. Return to the Bole Ambassador or Adot Tina Hotel for dinner. (Full board)

Sunday, 27 September: Axum

Fly from Addis Ababa to Axum. Early flight from Addis Ababa to **Axum**. Transfer to the Yeha Hotel, which is situated above the town and provides a marvellous view of the famous stelaes scattered below.

Once we have settled in we leave for Stelae Park to view the granite monoliths dating to the 3rd and 4th c. AD, as well as the Mausoleum. Originally six carved stelae stood here, with the tallest rising to 33m, but today only a 160t, 20,6m high stelae still stands. The stelae were all decorated with doors, windows and beams to resemble multi-storey palaces and mark the royal tombs of kings. Many other unmarked stelae are also visible.

We visit the archaeological excavations and explore the Tomb of Remhai "Tomb of the False Door", the entrance of the Tomb of the Brick Arches, the narrow entrance passage of which was discovered by Dr David Phillipson of Cambridge University right underneath a fallen stelae, Axum's National museum (now moved to the Stelae Park into a new building). This is widely rated as Ethiopia's best.

Return to the hotel for lunch. Afternoon continue onto the modern Tsion Maryam Church built by Haile Selassie (1964). It is built on or next to the probable site of Axum's original Christian church erected in the 4th century, the foundations of which are visible to the right.

On the other side of these ruins lies the chapel where the Ark of the Covenant, which is believed to have been brought to Axum from Israel by Menelik I some 3 000 years ago, is said to be housed. Then visit the new museum in the church yard where the crowns of former Ethiopian rulers, crosses and religious books, umbrellas and many more things are visible.

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Visit the 17th c. Tsion Maryam Monetary, the holiest church of Ethiopia (to which women are unfortunately not permitted access) with beautiful paintings. The complex enclosure is also a storage area for many artefacts, including stones from the ancient church and stone thrones. After this visit Mai Shum, more popularly known as the 'Bath of Queen Sheba' and the Tombs of King Kaleb (514 - 542 AD) and Gebre-Meskal, which are roofed and walled by massive, exact-fitting granite blocks.

Kaleb's tomb reportedly had brass unicorn-adorned towers on each corner. The underground galleries and chambers could have served as a treasury. The tombs were later topped by a church, the remains of which can be seen. Continue your tour with a visit to the 4th c. tablet inscribed in three ancient languages (Sabeian, Ge'ez and Greek) by King Ezana to record his victories, next we visit the impressive Dungur ruins, reputedly the palace of Queen Sheba. Dinner and overnight at the Yeha Hotel. (Full board)

Monday, 28 September: Lalibela

After breakfast leave for the airport for your flight to Lalibela. This 40-minute flight takes you over vast desert and mountain landscapes to Lalibela. Lalibela is Africa's most important historical Christian site, often referred to as 'The New Jerusalem' and 'the eighth wonder of the world'. Its claim to fame is the spectacular complex of 11 churches hewn out of the solid volcanic rock. Until now scholars have dated the churches to around AD1200, but just-announced research by David Phillipson, professor of African archaeology at Cambridge University, suggests that three of the churches - Gabriel & Raphael and Danagel in the southern group - may have their origin half a millennium earlier to the waning and politically unstable days of the Axumite Empire.

Based on the monuments' architectural styles and other factors, he suggests that the Merkurios and Gabriel churches, built in highly defensible positions, were initially carved out of the rock as some sort of elite palace or fortress complex, while another structure from the mid-7th c. became the church of Danagel. He believes that at least four of the remaining churches were constructed specifically as places of worship in the 10th and 11th c., with a further four built by the mid-13th c. Prof. Phillipson's research demonstrates a substantial continuity between the Axumite civilisation and that of medieval Ethiopia. The dark and lofty monolithic churches of varying shapes and sizes, with high pillars, windows and a maze of tunnels, display a level of masonic expertise that is astounding even in modern terms. They are mostly still in use and contain wondrous gold and silver artefacts. The churches are said to have been built by the kings of the Zagwe dynasty, starting with Emperor Lalibela, but this information now probably applies to the younger churches only.

Balance of the day to visit the first group of the church complex which are: Bete Medhane Alem, Bete Mariam, Bete Maskal, Bete Danaghel, Bete Golgotha & Bete Mikael and Bete Giorgis. Dinner and overnight stay at the Mount View or Roha Hotel. (Full board)

Tuesday, 29 September: Lalibela

Morning drive through impressive scenery to the Ne'akuto Le'ab Church, built inside a cave on the side of a cliff. It has wonderful treasures, including medieval manuscripts. It is a relatively simple church and probably predates the Lalibela churches. Afternoon visit of the second group of the rock hewn churches which include: Bete Amanuel, Bete Markorious, Bete Aba Libanos, and Bete Gabriel-Rufael. Dinner and overnight stay at the Mount View or Roha Hotel. (Full board)

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Wednesday, 30 September: Gondar

Fly from Lalibela to Gondar. Arrive in Gondar which is set in a landscape of incomparable beauty and hosts what is often referred to as the 'Camelot of Africa.' In 1636 King Fasilides expelled the Portuguese from the territory and made Gondar his capital. It remained the seat of power until the capital moved to Addis Ababa in the second half of the 17th c. King Fasilides built the first of cities many enchanting castles. The architecture of these castles with upper towers and round turrets is fascinating: at first glimpse it has a vaguely Moorish feel, but closer scrutiny reveals influences of the Axumite tradition and strong links with southern Arabia.

After lunch visit the walled royal enclosure where seven well-preserved castles and other buildings, as well as the ruins of others, erected between 1632 and 1855 of massive blocks of stone without mortar stand in rolling parkland. Many of the castles can be entered. Later we tour the Bathing Palace of Fasilides. A highlight of the day is the elaborately decorated 17th c. Debre Birhan Selassie Church - its well-preserved angel-faced ceiling murals have been described as being among the most charming in Christendom. The 18th c. palace of Ras Mika'el Sehul, is closed but we can pass by it and see. Overnight and dinner will be at the Gondar Goha Hotel. (Full board)

Thursday, 1 October: Simien Mountains

According to Homer, the Simien Mountains were so beautiful that they became the playgrounds of the gods. They boast some of the highest peaks in Africa including the fourth highest. Here you should see troops of Gelada Baboon (the bleeding heart baboon, endemic to Ethiopia) enjoying very wonderful scenery, several mountain vegetations like the endemic Giant Lobelia, St. John's Wort, Rumex nervulosa, etc and birds like Lammar Gayer, Augur Buzzard, the wattled Ibis and more. Overnight Simien Lodge the highest lodge in Africa. (Full board)

Friday, 2 October: Bahir Dar

After an early breakfast, drive to Gondar (4 hours). On the way before arriving in Gondar, visit the former village of the black Ethiopian Jews (Bete-Israel) until they relocated to Israel in the 1990s. Today's inhabitants continue to make pottery in the Felasha tradition. Lunch at Gondar. Then, proceed to Bahir Dar (185km, about 3 hours). Overnight stay at Summer Land or Tana Hotel. (Full board)

Saturday, 3 October: Bahir Dar

Morning visit the 'Smoking Water' Tissisat Falls, 35 km downstream from Lake Tana. It is reached after a one-hour drive and a 30-minute walk through lush riverine woodland teeming with colourful birds, such as the Yellow-Fronted Parrot. The path crosses over a castellated bridge built by Goan artisans in the 17th c. At the 400 m wide falls, the Blue Nile begins its torturous 800 km journey through Ethiopia by thundering down a 45 m cascade.

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Much later it will enter the Sudan and join the White Nile. Afternoon boat trip on Lake Tana from where "the Blue Nile commences its long journey." It has been claimed that 80 per cent of all Nile water derives from here. The lake is fringed with woodland, which hosts excellent bird life.

At the hotel's shore, take a boat to visit two of 20 monasteries located on individual islands. The monasteries date from as early as the 11th c. Some have excellent displays of bibles and frescoes, but many are closed to women. They are built in a distinctive round style of mud, wood and reeds woven into intricate patterns and are decorated with colourful, almost Byzantine, frescoes that reflect Biblical traditions and legends. Our first stop is at the 14th c. Azua Mariam, a lovely small church. It is believed that the paintings of all the Lake Tana churches and monasteries originate from here and the monastery is therefore also called 'The Painting House'. Then, proceed to the 14th century church of Ura-Kidane-Mihiret. Overnight stay Summer Land or Tana Hotel. (Full board)

Sunday, 4 October: Addis Ababa

Morning transfer to the airport for your flight to Addis Ababa. Balance of the day free to relax for shopping and more sightseeing. Overnight stay at the Adot Tina or Bole Ambassador Hotel. (Full board)

Monday, 05 October:

Transfer to the airport for your flight out.

Price per person sharing

2-3 passengers travelling together	R23 302 / US\$2 988
4-5 passengers travelling together	R22 349 / US\$2 866
6-7 passengers travelling together	R20 921 / US\$2 683
8-12 passengers travelling together	R20 206 / US\$2 590

Price includes

- International return economy class flight Johannesburg/Addis Ababa with Ethiopian Airlines
- Domestic Ethiopia Airlines flights
- Airport taxes
- Accommodation on a full board basis as per itinerary
- All transfers
- All excursions and entrance fees to sites of interest as per itinerary
- English speaking guide throughout the tour

Not included

- Visa fee

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- Drinks, tips, personal expenses
- Travel insurance

Joining our trip from Addis Ababa and organising your flights to get to Addis?

Just let us know your international flight details and we will arrange the meet and greet and transfers accordingly. There is a special domestic fare within Ethiopia if using the services of Ethiopian Airlines (ET) on the international sector. If not flying with ET the domestic sectors are considerably higher.

We are looking forward to hearing from you.

The Unusual Team