

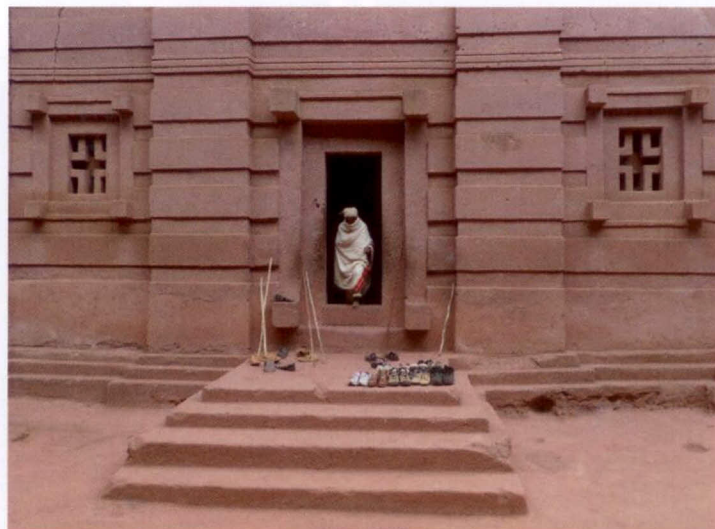
Travel

THIS PAGE Children (this picture) gather at a ferry crossing on the Blue Nile river, which flows from Lake Tana. Lalibela (below), with its historic, rock-hewn churches, is one of Ethiopia's holiest cities



SACRED AND SUBLIME

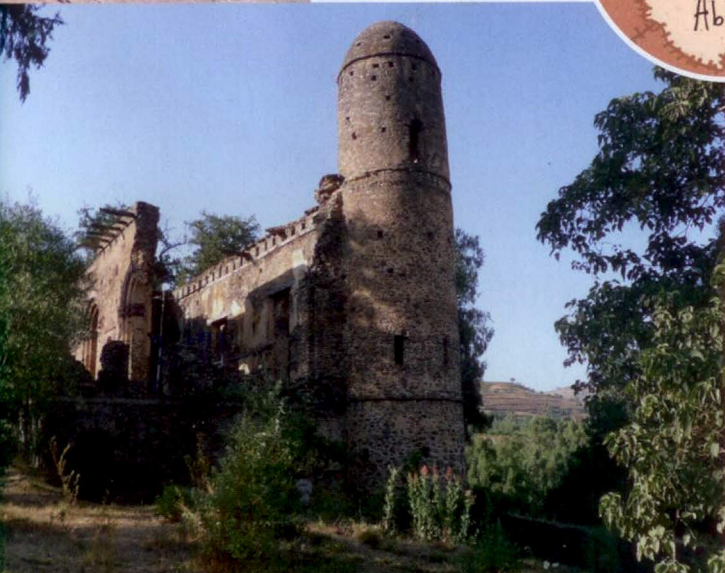
Celina Fox is left in awe and wonder when she takes a whistle-stop tour of some of Ethiopia's most significant sites



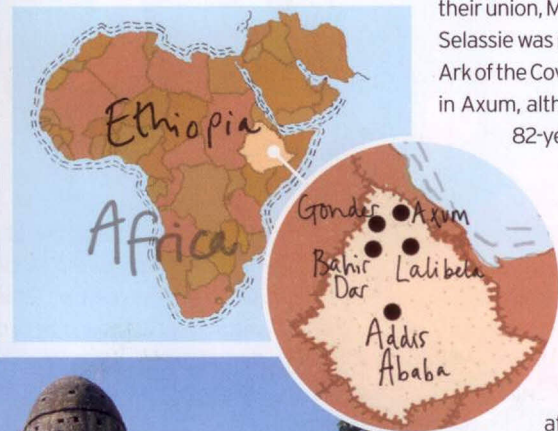
'They are building a new hotel,' said our guide, pointing to an ominous pile of concrete on the shores of Lake Tana. Long associated with war and famine, today Ethiopia feels ripe for tourism. No longer do you have to travel for days on dirt roads, or swarm up ropes to remote cliff-top monasteries. We hopped between the major sites in the north on Ethiopian Airlines' efficient, punctual flights. We saw amazing churches and were deterred from reaching the more hermitic merely by their being male-only preserves.

As you loll beside the pool of the Addis Ababa Sheraton in luxurious ex-pat style, Ethiopia may not seem so different from elsewhere. But if you hit the wedding season, when Addis society sashays through the vast marble-floored foyer, matrons draped in elegant white shammias express the pride of a people who have never been colonised. Five years (1936-41) of Italian occupation scarcely registered, although imported espresso machines ensure you always get decent coffee, even in hotels. Better still, take part in the traditional coffee ceremony, which starts with roasting beans from native *Coffea arabica* plants, and ends in the richest and most scented cup you have ever tasted.

At an altitude of 2,400 metres, Addis Ababa is the third highest capital on earth, with a perfect winter climate - warm and sunny during the day, cool at night. There is a dusty national museum, home to the world's oldest human skeletons, and a more engaging ethnographic collection on the campus of Addis Ababa University in one of the palaces built by the last emperor, Haile Selassie



THIS PAGE ANTICLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Firewood-laden papyrus boats are a familiar sight on Lake Tana. The Tis Abay waterfalls are spectacular at most times of the year. Lalibela's 11 churches, including Bet Giyorgis seen here (both pictures), were built into the rock some 700 years ago. Gonder's past as the former imperial capital is evident in the remains of Kuskuum, one its many royal castles. The walls of Ura Kidane Mihret monastery at Bahir Dar on Lake Tana are covered with vividly painted biblical scenes



- you can see his bedroom suite at the same time. The city also boasts the largest market in Africa, the sprawling shanty town of Merkato, zoned by speciality and by nickname. According to our guide, second-hand goods are to be found in 'tell me what you want street'.

From Addis Ababa we flew to Bahir Dar, developed on Lake Tana as Haile Selassie's summer capital. With its flower-bordered promenades, it seems like a seaside town, and the Kuriftu Resort and Spa is a picturesque clutch of cottages thatched in vernacular style, arranged round a pool. From here, we set out for the source of the Blue Nile, which is less adventurous than it sounds as it simply flows out of the lake. But we also made a bumpy 70km round tour to the Tis Abay or 'Smoke of the Nile' waterfalls, still impressive in the dry season. Even more thrilling was a trip across the lake to visit medieval monasteries, passing firewood-laden papyrus boats and flocks of pelicans on the way. The walls of the church of Ura Kidane Mihret are covered with paintings of saints and vividly presented stories from biblical books unique to Ethiopia. It is humbling to see how Orthodox Christianity is such a vital force, having been the official religion since AD 337.

No town is more central to the Ethiopian Christmas, celebrated on January 7, than Lalibela, perched on top of pink sandstone mountains, overlooking ridge after ridge of escarpment, sliced through by steep river valleys. Our car snaked up the road from the airport past bands of pilgrims who had been walking for days, swelling the resident population from 20,000 to an estimated 70,000. Their goal and ours was the 11 churches carved with geometric precision down into the bedrock at least 700 years ago. It must have required the most extraordinary conceptual imagination to create architecture inside out, not by building but by reducing, chipping away at the stone with only hammers and chisels as tools.

Axum in the far north of the country was our next stop. Capital of a rich and powerful empire between the first and seventh centuries AD, it has the air of not having recovered from its demotion. There is a wealth of archaeological sites, few of which have been excavated. We explored tombs beneath monumental granite stelae and the ruins of a palace associated with the Queen of Sheba. According to tradition, she visited King Solomon in Jerusalem and the fruit of their union, Menelik, became the first emperor of the Solomonic dynasty - Haile Selassie was number 237. While staying with his father, young Menelik stole the Ark of the Covenant and brought it back to his motherland, which is why it is now in Axum, although nobody has ever seen it. Its current guardian, a delightful 82-year-old priest, blessed us with his hand cross.

We arrived in Gonder on January 6, when the market was in full swing, offering locals their last chance to buy a live sheep or hen for Christmas dinner. Not that the city seems to close for the holiday, perhaps because its main festivities take place at Epiphany, January 19. Gonder served as the imperial capital from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and is studded with castles bristling with pepper-pot towers and crenellations. Inside the oldest church of Debre Birhan Selassie, row after row of painted angels beamed down on us from the rafters, ensuring we had a trouble-free journey home □

WAYS & MEANS

Africa Travel (0845-450 5696; www.africatravel.co.uk) offers an 11-night trip, staying for two nights each in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Axum and Gonder and three nights in Lalibela, from £2,595 per person, including breakfast and dinner in most locations, the services of a private guide, international and regional flights with Ethiopian Airlines and transfers throughout.

