

Annex 3: Information about some Touristic Attraction Sites in Ethiopia

A. The Historic North and the Simien Mountains

- Three thousand year old Aksum, where obelisks as tall as ten-storey buildings overlook mysterious ruined palaces dating back to the reign of the Queen of Sheba.
- The 4th century church of Tsion Maryam, whose Temple of the Tablet reputedly houses the original Biblical Ark of the Covenant.
- Classically proportioned rock-hewn churches, carved into the pink tuff of Lalibela and the sandstone cliffs of Gheralta many centuries ago, yet still active shrines of worship today.
- Masterfully-painted medieval monasteries nestled away in the forested islands and peninsulas of the beautiful Lake Tana.
- Negash, Ethiopia's first Islamic settlement established by Muslim refugees, including close relatives of the prophet Mohammed.
- Windswept Afro-Alpine moors dotted with otherworldly giant lobelias and inhabited by a range of wildlife found nowhere else on earth.

This is Northern Ethiopia. An ancient and enigmatic land of undulating green mountains and vast inland seas, where the histories of Africa, Arabia and the Mediterranean have intersected over the millennia to forge a unique cultural heritage celebrated at four magnificent UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Aksum, Lalibella, Gondar and the Simien Mountains National Park-as well as a vast array of lesser-known but equally fascinating historical sites.

- a) **Simien Mountains National Park:** registered by UNESCO in 1979 as a 'Natural World Heritage Site', with spectacular landscapes that rises to 4,533 m at Ras Dashen, which is described as 'Roof of Africa'. It comprises Ethiopian endemic mammals such as the *Walia ibex* and Simien Mountain Wolf.

b) Gondar

The Gondar city centre is dominated by Fasil compound, a stone-walled Royal compound with several castles and ancillary buildings, including three-storey original castle built by Gondar's founder Emperor Fasil in the 17th century. The Fasil compound is UNESCO World heritage site also incorporates the church of Debre Berhan Slassie, with its wealth of vivid ecclesiastic paintings attributed to the 17th century master artist Haile Maskal, as well as Fasilidas's bath, a pool used during the Timkat festival.

c) Lake Tana, origin of the Blue Nile

Lake Tana is UNESCO's newly proclaimed 5,000km² Biosphere reserve, Ethiopia's largest lake is a perennially popular tourist destination blessed with a balmy tropical climate, fabulous birdlife and excellent amenities focused on the city of Bahir Dar. The lake's forested islands-37 in total- and peninsulas are studded with atmospheric and beautifully painted monasteries, most of which were founded between the 13th and 19th centuries. Easily visited from Bahir Dar, the Blue Nile Falls were described by the Scottish traveller James Bruce as 'a magnificent site', that ages, added to the greatest length of human life, would not efface or eradicate from my memory.

d) Aksum

The town of Aksum was founded more than 3,000 years ago, when the Queen of Sheba ruled over a vast trade empire from her palace there. It later served as capital of the Aksumite kingdom, the only sub-Saharan African empire that coexisted with Greece and Rome and was known to the literati of the classic world. The great Aksumite rulers included King Balthazar, who according to some legends was one of the three wise men who visited the baby Jesus, as well as king Ezana, who established the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in 341 AD. Now a UNESCO world heritage site, Aksum is replete with ancient artefacts dating back to its glory days, ranging from towering stele reaching 33 metres to vast ruined palaces. Tsion Maryam, the church founded by Ezana, remains the spiritual home of Ethiopian Christianity, while its associated Temple is believed to be the last resting place of the biblical ark of the Covenant

e) Lalibella

The rock-hewn churches of Lalibella form the single most breathtaking historical site in sub-Saharan Africa. Excavated by hand at the end of the 12th century, the complex of 11 churches and chapels was created under the direction of king Lalibella, who conceived it as a king of "new Jerusalem" after series of Muslim conquests had halted Christian pilgrimages to the holy land. Lalibella finest churches are subterranean monoliths carved into massive stone blocks enclosed by an artificial courtyard. Most spectacular among these is the 15 metre tall bet Giyorgis, a systematically cruciform freestanding church dedicated to Saint George. Architecturally, Lalibella is utterly mind-blowing. But it is also one of the few UNESCO world heritage sites of comparable vintage to function as a living shrine, one whose ancient stone churches have remained in active use since their excavation eight centuries ago.

Amazed by the architectural beauty of the churches, the 16th century Portuguese traveller Francisco Alvares, the first European to visit Lalibella., wrote of its rock-hewn churches: ' I

weary of writing more about these buildings, because it seems to me that I shall not be believed if I wrote more...'

B. The East - Danakil, Harar and Bale Mountains

- The scorching Danakil, where salt-bearing camel caravans traipse mirage-like across blinding-white salt-flats, swept by a gale known as the Gara, or Fire Wind.
- Volatile Erta Ale, its volcanic caldera cradling a bubbling cauldron of molten black lava and eruptive glowing fountains of red-hot magma.
- The labyrinthine alleys of Harar Jugol, an ancient walled citadel with a wealth of Islamic mosques and shrines, bustling markets overhung with aromatic spices and cafes brewing freshly-roasted coffee plucked from the surrounding hills.
- The Afro-Alpine moorland of the Sanetti Plateau in Bale Mountains, where handsome red Ethiopian wolves - the world's most endangered canids - trot jauntily through the pastel-shaded heather.
- The cool damp Haremma Forest in Bale Mountains, a vast tract of gnarled tree heathers, towering bamboo clumps and a canopy of evergreen foliage.
- A rapier-horned oryx antelope cantering across wide open plains of Awash National Park, a group of colorfully dressed sellers in Dire Dawa open-air market, the immense limestone caverns of Sof Omar.

This is Eastern Ethiopia. A land of astonishing geographic extremes, where the austere lavascapes and salt-flats of the northern Rift Valley, which plunges to 116m below sea level in the Danakil, contrast with the misty peaks of the Bale Mountains, which rise over 4,300m a short distance further south. In-between these extremes, lush well-watered slopes support the lovely crater lakes surrounding the town of Bishoftu, the largely unexplored Haremma Forest, and the historic city of Harar, the spiritual heart of the predominantly Muslim inhabitants of Ethiopia's exotic east.

- Bale Mountains National Park** is a biodiversity hotspot of global significance, more than 1,300 plant species have been identified, among them 160 Ethiopian endemics and 23 are unique to the park. It holds endangered endemic mammals such as the Ethiopian Wolf, Mountain Nyala and the Bale Monkeys.
- Danakil Depression:** it drops 116 m below sea level, and frequently experiences temperatures greater than 50°C - is one of the most harsh and brutal landscapes

anywhere on earth. This is the world's oldest lava lake with red magma from which fountains of molten rock spurt high into the sky.

- c) **Babile Elephant Sanctuary:** is a spectacular site, home to Africa's most north-easterly population of Elephants, as well as other important wildlife species
- d) **Harar Jugol:** The walled city of Harar (Jugol) was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006. For centuries the most important trade emporium on the Horn of Africa, nowadays the historic walled citadel of Harar Jugol is known for 82 mosques and over 4000 shrines crammed into its 48 hectares, along with its 'city houses' with their unique interior decorations
- f) **Bishoftu:** situated 50 km southwest of Addis Ababa along the three-lane Adama Expressway, provides an attractive rustic overnight alternative to the capital. Seven beautiful lakes surround Bishoftu. Kurftu and Babogaya lakes are attractive lakes with accommodation and entertainment. A non-volcanic lake called Cheleleka hosts large numbers of flamingo and pelicans, and thousands of migrant European cranes overnight there from November to February.
- g) **Dire Dawa:** is a site of ethnic variety whereby diversified cultural styles of Oromo, Somali, Afar, Harari and others are easily observed. Laga-oda, one of the caves in Dire Dawa, has over 600 rock paintings dating back thousands of years. The paintings in this prehistoric cave consist of pictures of domestic animals, human figures, symbols and wild animals.
- h) **Awash National Park (ANP):** 756 km² wide ANP protects a semi-arid tract of Rift Valley floor inhabited by dry-country antelopes such as the handsome Beisa oryx and magnificent spiral-horned greater kudu. A bird checklist of almost 500 species includes Arabian bustard, African swallow-tailed kite, northern carmine, bee-eater, Abyssinian roller and the endemic yellow-throated serin and near-endemic rock chat. Scenic highlights include the spectacular crater of Fantelle Volcano and peculiar Lake Beseka set amidst stark black volcanic rubble at its base, as well as the surging waterfall at the head of the Awash Gorge and a field of palm-lined hot springs regularly frequented by Hamadryas baboons. The Aga Edu Cave might reveal some 20 plus spotted hyenas in the ANP.

Birding in Bale and the Southeast

Southeast Ethiopia is the most alluring part of Ethiopia to birdwatchers. Its centerpiece is Bale Mountains National Park, which the African Birding Club recently listed as one of the continent's top five birding hotspots. The best place to see endemics, Bale harbors six species unique to Ethiopia, and another 11 shared only with Eritrea. Woodland specials

abound at Dinsho, while the Sanetti Plateau hosts high-altitude endemics such as Roget's rail and black-headed siskin alongside the only known sub-Saharan breeding populations of golden eagle, ruddy shelduck and red-billed chough. Further afield, Sof Omar is one of only two reliable sites for the endemic Salvador's serin, while the southeastern birding route through Negele Borena and Yabello incorporates the only known sites for the localized Ruspoli's turaco and Stresemann's bush crow.

Cradle of Humankind

Once far more moist and lush than it is today, Ethiopia's northern Rift Valley, which incorporates Awash National Park and the Danakil, is most likely where humans evolved. The region's most famous hominoid skeleton find is 'Lucy', the 3.2 million year old remains of a semi-bipedal hominid that almost doubled the known timeline of human evolution, back in 1974. Subsequently, what is still the world's oldest undisputed hominid fossil, dating back 5.5 million years, was also unearthed in the region. The northern Rift can also claim the world's oldest stone-age tools, dating back 2.6 million years, while a pair of skulls unearthed along the Omo River was recently dated at 200,000 years old, making them the oldest known remains of anatomically modern humans *Homo sapiens*.