

# LAND OF ORIGINS

On a 10-day trip, IGA MOTYLSKA travelled through **ETHIOPIA,**

across magnificent mountainous landscapes from the capital city to its

northern reaches and back. It was a journey that took in numerous

historical, cultural and religious sites, including three of the country's

**10 UNESCO World Heritage Sites.** Here are her highlights...

A priest of a rock-hewn church reads his holy book near one of Lalibela's churches.



## AFTER A FLIGHT IN FROM THE CAPITAL, ADDIS ABABA,

our Ethiopian odyssey began in Gondar, a city known for its walled Fasil Ghebbi fortress and palace compound that was once the seat of Ethiopian emperors...

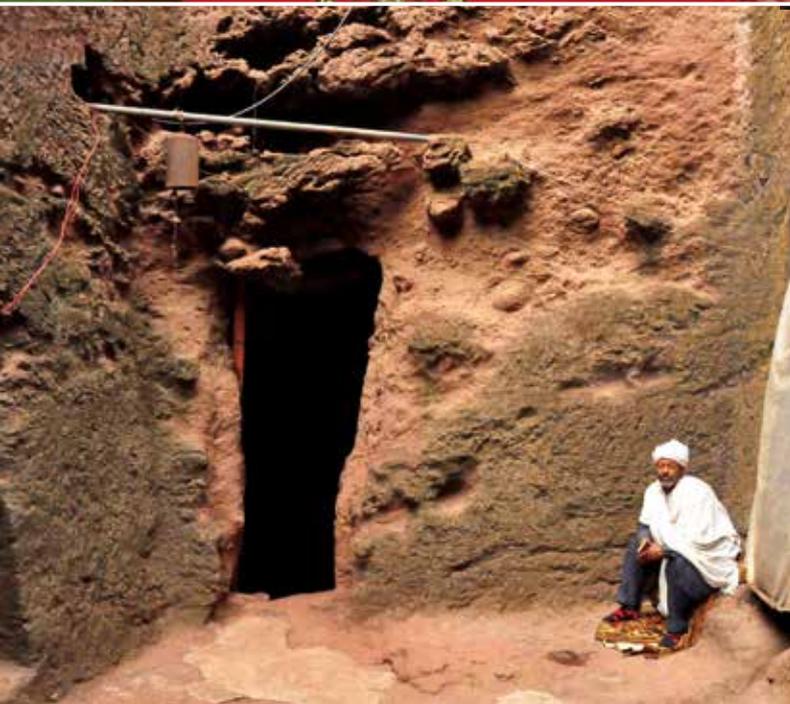
**GONDAR** Debre Berhan Selassie church – a name that means “Mountain of the Enlightened Trinity” – sits upon a hilltop and watches over the 17<sup>th</sup>-century fortress town of Gondar. From the outside, its humble stonewall appearance barely draws any attention, but once you step through the arched entrance, the walls and ceiling are animated with biblical frescoes, the holy trinity and depictions of hell. More than 100 painted angelic faces oversee the congregation from the ceiling of what has become one of Ethiopia’s most admired ecclesiastic artworks. The church is one of many strewn buildings that make up Gondar’s UNESCO World Heritage Site. Looking as though it was plucked from medieval England, the seven-hectare royal enclosure of Fasil Ghebbi is often referred to as Africa’s Camelot and was built by a succession of kings between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The result is an intricate complex of castles, churches, a library, chancellery and banqueting hall built in Hindu-, Arab- and Baroque-inspired **architecture**.

**AXUM** Next was the biblical kingdom of Axum – a place that has written itself into history books. **It’s famed** for being the oldest continually inhabited city south of the Sahara, for its engraved 4<sup>th</sup> century **granite “stelae” (obelisks)** that mark tombs and for the fact that religious texts declare it to be the home of the Queen of Sheba. **Its real gem however, is the unobtrusive Chapel of the Tablet.** Cast in the shadow of the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, **its small size and lack of outward opulence belie its status as one of the world’s most heavily guarded holy sites.** **The chapel is said to enclose the Ark of the Covenant – the gold-laden acacia wood chest that enclosed the 10 Commandments that God bestowed on Moses.** It is only gazed on by its celibate, anointed guardian, who has vowed life-long **service to its protection;** and because no one but him can see it, proving its authenticity is impossible. **Still, many pilgrimage here each year to glimpse its hiding place.**

**LALIBELA** From Axum, it was a 390km journey north to Lalibela and its 11 monolithic Coptic churches that have been chiselled from ground level down, into red volcanic rock, and hollowed from the outside in. From a distance, the churches are concealed from eyesight, which is exactly what King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela wanted of this 13<sup>th</sup> century church complex – to become a safe place for worship during a time when it was dangerous to travel to the Holy Land... the New Jerusalem. It took thousands of labourers a little over 23 years to complete and the faithful you meet here will tell you that Lalibela’s labourers were divinely aided by angels at night. Morning prayers and hymns echo off the walls of this UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is a living temple to Christianity. White-cloaked believers, aided by wooden prayer sticks that are often mistaken for walking sticks, rise from and disappear into the ground. They descend into the shadows near one church and rise out of a tunnel to be anointed by sunlight next to another. The steps have been polished smooth by centuries of bare feet. In some places, the open-air corridors that connect each church are only wide enough to let through a single person – which

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Clockwise from top left: Babogaya Lake near to Debre Zeyit is an ancient volcano filled with water; ruins in the fortified city of Fasil Ghebbi in Gondar; the Church of Saint George in Lalibela; the open-air street market at Lideta district in Addis Ababa; Lalibela is home to a number of Coptic churches chiselled into volcanic rock; the church of Our Lady Mary of Zion is the most sacred place for all Orthodox Ethiopians in Axum.



makes it hard to imagine what it must be like when more than 100 000 pilgrims gather here in early January to celebrate Genna (Ethiopian Christmas). The rock that encircles the churches is pocked with carved out caves that once sheltered pilgrims. A skeleton lies in one cave – a reminder of the feat it takes to climb the Lasta Mountains, some 2 600m above sea level, on foot.

**BISHOFTU** An hour's flight took us back south to Addis for the short, 65km drive to the resort region of Bishoftu. Ethiopia is known as a somewhat arid and utterly landlocked country, but it is not without water. While there are 15 crater depressions in the region, only seven are filled with water. The lakes are best savoured from beneath a palm-frond gazebo near the poolside overlooking the glistening water. Jacaranda flowers float at the water's edge, wooden rowboats knock against each other, donkeys come to drink, while darters dry their wings. Lake Babogaya is popular for fishing, paddling a boat amid the scenic backdrop of the volcanic Mount Yerer and bird watching – cormorants, hamerkops, herons, pied kingfishers, storks and African Fish Eagles are found here. Hora, the largest of the lakes, offers water sports and is known for the annual Irrecha thanksgiving ceremony (held by the Oromo people who gather on the eastern lakeshore in spring, after the rainy season, to ask for a fruitful harvest).

**ADDIS ABABA** We returned to the nation's capital to end our Ethiopian sojourn; it's a city that at 2 400m above sea level is Africa's highest capital. With more than 70% of the African continent's mountains stretching across Ethiopia, the country is aptly nicknamed The Roof of Africa. It's hard to catch one's breath in Addis – not just because of the altitude, but for the busy haze of colourful abayas, dizzying minibus taxis and construction that are all evidence of one of the continent's and world's fastest growing economies. Such strong growth must be spurred on Arabica coffee from the many informal coffee roasting stations that lean against street corners. According to legend, it was a young Ethiopian goatherd called Kaldi who discovered coffee some 1 000 years ago, making Ethiopia the birthplace of the world's favourite caffeine beverage. The five most popular Arabica varieties – Yirgacheffe, Wollega, Sidamo, Harrar and Jimma – grow in the country's highlands. In Addis, one can also visit the National Museum of Ethiopia and see a replica of Lucy, a 3,2 million-year-old Australopithecus afarensis fossil found in the Great Rift Valley in 1974. Shop at street-side markets for Coptic crosses shaped from metal, and scenes from scriptures painted on wooden slabs and scarves, before watching the sun fall behind the horizon from Entoto Hill.

**Clockwise from top left: Lalibela remains a place of pilgrimage and devotion; Fasiladas' Bath near the city of Gondar, is the site of an annual ceremony called Timket during which it is blessed and then opened for bathing; Lalibela's churches; each of Lalibela's 11 monolithic churches represent a unique artistic achievement in their execution, size and variety; the writer's journey in northern Ethiopia.**



## THE ESSENTIALS

**WHEN TO GO** Ethiopia can be visited year-round. Peak season is from October to January and the shoulder season stretches until May. The rainy season washes over the central region and northern highlands in July and August.

**HEALTH AND SAFETY** While no compulsory injections are required, areas below 2 000m below seal level (especially in the southern Rift Valley and Omo region) carry the risk of malaria. It's not found in Addis Ababa, Gondar, Lalibela or Bishoftu. Bottled or filtered water is advisable.

**COSTS** While accommodation, park fees, public transport, local food and coffee are inexpensive, car hire, private guides and organised tours can be pricey. Budget around R650, or \$45, per day if you're travelling independently. South Africans, residents of the European Union and 12 other countries are issued a tourist visa on arrival (\$50).

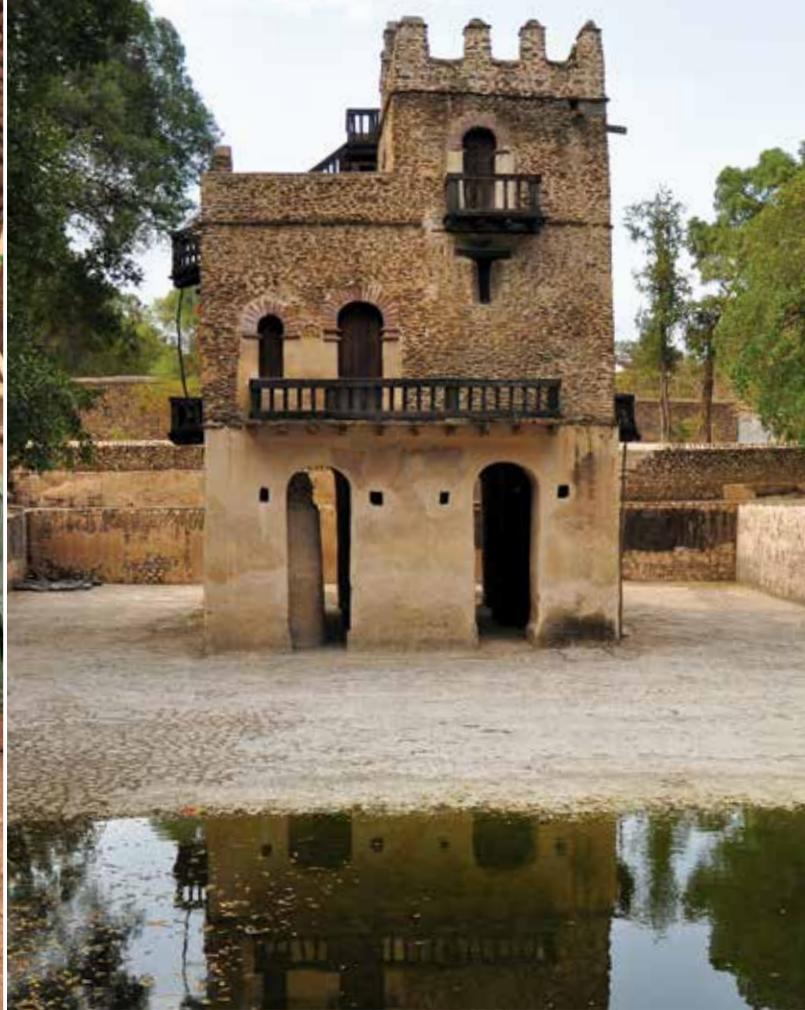
**GETTING AROUND** Daily flights to remote parts of the country save time. Use tuk-tuks, blue-and-white minibuses or local busses in towns. An organised 4x4 expedition is an easier way to travel between mountainous cities and within national parks. Skybus or Selam overland coach services are recommended.

**FOOD** Orthodox Ethiopians eat vegan on Wednesdays, Fridays and religious holidays, which has popularised *Bayenetu* – a gluten-free platter of *injera*, made of fermented teff flour, laden with a rainbow of *Shiro* (chickpea paste) and *Wats* (vegetarian sauces and stews) that is eaten communally. Meat lovers can order *tibs* (marinated meat). After washing your hands over a metal bowl at your table, remember to eat with your right hand. International cuisine is widely available at most hotels and restaurants, though it's more expensive.



## GETTING THERE

••• **FLY** direct to Addis Ababa from Johannesburg with SAA code-share partner, and Star Alliance member, Ethiopian Airlines. Visit [flysaa.com](http://flysaa.com)



BISHOFTU IS A REGION FAMED FOR THE TRANQUILITY OF ITS VOLCANIC CRATER LAKES

