

Ethiopia

Remember when you were a child tucked up in bed and your parents, opening a book, read aloud the words 'Once upon a time'? Within moments you were transported to a magical world where castles were made of crystal, monks from Syria climbed serpents' tails to build invisible monasteries, deserts were made of gold, women wore plates for jewellery, emperors turned solid rock into beautiful churches, wild and dangerous hyenas begged for titbits from the hands of men, a queen known only as Sheba seduced a king named Solomon and the words of God were hidden in a secret ark for the world to ponder. Well, that fairy tale has a name – its name is Ethiopia and it's every bit as fantastical as the wildest bedtime story.

Of course, as for any brave knight heading forth into a fairy tale, there is a certain amount of challenge involved in a journey through Ethiopia. Though the nation is anything but the desert wasteland of perpetual famine and war that the media likes to portray, Ethiopia is monetarily poor – making travel here testing, awe-inspiring and heartbreaking. You don't explore Ethiopia for a relaxing getaway; you venture here to be moved. And moved you shall be.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,098,000 sq km
- **ATMs** Addis Ababa and large towns in the north; Visa cards only
- **Borders** Kenya, Sudan, Djibouti, Somaliland, Eritrea (closed)
- **Budget** US\$10 to US\$30 per day
- **Capital** Addis Ababa
- **Languages** Amharic, Tigrinya, Oromo
- **Money** Birr; US\$1 = Birr12.62, €1 = Birr18.02
- **Population** 85 million
- **Seasons** Wet (mid-March to early October), hot in lowlands (June to September)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 251; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +3
- **Visa** One-month visa US\$20 at airport; Ethiopian embassies charge more



HOW MUCH?

- **Steaming macchiato** US\$0.20
- **100km by bus** US\$1.50 to US\$3
- **Minibus across town** US\$0.20
- **Internet per hour** US\$1 to US\$2
- **Tip for helpful priest** US\$0.75 to \$US1

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.55
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$0.45
- **Bottle of Bedele beer** US\$0.45
- **Souvenir T-Shirt** US\$3 to US\$6
- **Roasted barley** US\$0.15

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Lalibela** (p692) Immerse yourself in Christianity in its most raw and powerful form in this mind-blowing maze of rock-hewn churches.
- **Aksum** (p690) Search for hidden treasure in the dank gloom of ancient tombs and ponder the mysteries of the stelae of Aksum.
- **Simien Mountains** (p690) Lace up your boots and hike through this sublime national park, home to magnificent wildlife and unparalleled panoramas of endless Abyssinian abysses.
- **Harar** (p694) Explore the labyrinth of alleyways and shrines in Harar's old walled city.
- **Lower Omo Valley** (p695) Explore 'Africa's last great wilderness' and visit possibly the continent's most diverse and fascinating peoples.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Ethiopia's climate is typically very mild, with temperatures on the wide-ranging highlands averaging below 20°C. Only on the lowland fringes of western, eastern and southern Ethiopia can temperatures soar past 30°C.

The rains traditionally fall from mid-March to early October, making the rest of the year prime time to visit. Directly after the rains the highlands are wonderfully green, covered with wildflowers and sublime for hiking.

ITINERARIES

- **Two Weeks** Those simply filling the gap between Sudan and Kenya could blaze through in two weeks, though you'd be missing the opportunity of a lifetime. Africa's real-life Camelot, Gonder (p688), is first, before Bahir Dar (p687) and the island monasteries of Lake Tana (p687). Next is Addis Ababa (p681) for splendid dining and museum action. Break the long haul south to Kenya at Awasa (p695).
- **One Month** Complete the north's historical circuit: after Addis Ababa (p681), loop north through Bahir Dar (p687), Lake Tana (p687) and Gonder (p688) before hiking the glorious Simien Mountains (p690). The tombs and stelae of Aksum (p690) are next before the mesmerising rock-hewn churches of Lalibela (p692).
- **Two Months** Mix Harar (p694) in eastern Ethiopia and the wildlife and tribes of the Lower Omo Valley (p695) with the one-month itinerary above.

HISTORY

Ethiopia's human history dates back at least 4.4 million years, landing it squarely in East Africa's heralded cradle of humanity. Recorded history dates to 1500 BC, when a civilisation with Sabaean influences briefly blossomed at Yeha.

Kingdom of Aksum

This kingdom, ranking among the ancient world's most powerful, rose shortly after 400 BC. Its capital, Aksum, sat in a fertile area lying at an important commercial crossroads between Egypt, Sudan's gold fields and the Red Sea. At its height the kingdom extended well into Arabia.

Aksum flourished on trade, exporting frankincense, grain, skins, apes and, particularly, ivory. In turn, exotic imports returned from Egypt, Arabia and India. Aksumite architecture was incredible, and Aksum's impressive monuments still stand today (see p690).

The 4th century AD brought Christianity, which enveloped Aksum and shaped Ethiopia's future spiritual, cultural and intellectual life.

Aksum flourished until the 7th century, when its trading empire was fatally isolated by