



Western Ethiopia

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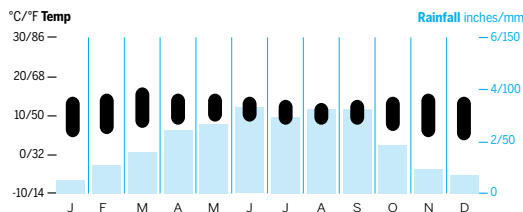
Why Go?

Western Ethiopia is undisturbed and seldom visited, and while its towns are nothing special, it's one of the most beautiful regions in Ethiopia. Rainforests and coffee plantations share the landscape with savannah grasslands, wildlife-rich swamps and high plateaus carpeted in fields of *tef* (an indigenous grass cultivated as a cereal, the base for making *injera*).

As impressive as the scenery is, it's the ethnic diversity that's the real attraction: white-robed highlanders flock to churches while, on the South Sudan border, ritually scarred Nuer people stride across the grasslands with their long-horned cattle. The Anuak people of the Gambela region believe that to continue travelling west is to fall off the edge of the world – they are wrong on this score: the world doesn't end in western Ethiopia, it just feels that way.

When to Go

Jimma



Jan-Mar Huge numbers of antelope move through Gambela National Park.

Oct-Nov Meskel flowers bloom: the countryside glows green and yellow.

Nov-Jan Ethiopia's coffee harvest takes over much of Western Ethiopia.

i Getting There & Away

It's possible to fly from Addis to Gambela or Jimma, while the paved road extends ever further westwards with each passing year. If you're coming from the south, distances are long but access has improved since the completion of two road bridges over the Omo River.

AIR

Ethiopian Airlines (www.ethiopianairlines.com) connects Addis Ababa with both Gambela and Jimma three times a week.

BUS

Most areas of Western Ethiopia are covered by regular bus services. During the wet season, however, roads and schedules can fall by the wayside. Along the main paved roads, buses travel between Addis and Nekemte or Jimma, also serving the many towns en route.

It's possible to reach Jimma from Sodo in the south, and Nekemte from the Addis Ababa–Bahir Dar road in the north by public transport, thus letting you connect western Ethiopia with both southern and northern Ethiopia without backtracking to Addis.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The road network in Ethiopia's west is rapidly improving and, like elsewhere in Ethiopia, Chinese-led construction crews are in the process of upgrading many roads across the region. It may still be a few years away before they join all of the dots, but plans to provide paved roads all the way from Addis to Gambela are progressing nicely.

THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS

Carpeted in lush forests, dense patchworks of cultivation, shady coffee plantations and deep river valleys, the Western Highlands seem like an Ethiopian Arcadia.

Addis Alem

POP 18,000 / ELEV 2360M

This unremarkable agricultural town 55km west of Addis Ababa was to be the site of Emperor Menelik II's future capital – Addis Alem (**አዲስ አለም**) literally means 'New World' in Amharic. The emperor had sent engineers and builders to start construction here when Addis Ababa was crippled by late-19th-century firewood shortages. The introduction of eucalyptus trees ended up saving the new flower (Addis Ababa) and

killed the new world. Since then, Addis Alem has settled back into provincial obscurity, although it does have a fine little museum.

St Maryam Church (**ቅድስት ማርያም ቤተክርስቲያን**; Birr100; ☀8am–5.30pm) is Addis Alem's most interesting building. It stands out for its lavish decoration: the basilica's exterior, as well as the *maqdas* (inner sanctuary), is entirely covered with murals. Next door the local **museum** (**ሙዝየም**; Birr50; ☀9am–noon & 1–3pm) displays some surprising finds for such a nondescript regional town: crowns and clothing belonging to Menelik and Haile Selassie, as well as relics from the Battle of Adwa and a gold inlaid box that local legend says once contained the Ark of the Covenant. The site sits atop a rocky hill 600m south of the main road.

Numerous depart-when-full buses pass Addis Alem heading east to Addis Ababa (Birr24, 1½ hours) and west to Ambo (Birr38, two hours).

Ambo

POP 94,342 / ELEV 2101M

The claim to fame of Ambo (**አምቦ**) is its mineral water, bottled here and sold throughout Ethiopia. The water is so fizzy that it continues to sparkle even after it's left overnight in a glass! You can't visit the factory, but you can take a dip in the famous **thermal pool** (**የአምቦ ፍሬውሃ**; Mon–Thu Birr20, Fri–Sun Birr30; ☀6am–6pm) run by Ambo Ethiopia Hotel. Despite the murky green colour, the pool is cleaned weekly. The town also offers an interesting Saturday **market** where you can find brightly coloured Ambo baskets.

Sleeping

Ambo's accommodation choices are singularly unexciting, but at least you have a handful of options to choose from, unlike many western Ethiopian towns.

Ambo Ethiopia Hotel

RESORT \$

(☎) 011 236 2002; per tent Birr120, s/d Birr175/275) Set around flowering gardens, this colonial place has bundles of old-world charm. Though it shows its age in places, notably in the rooms, it's still quite comfortable and some rooms have satellite TV. The classic dining hall (mains Birr50 to Birr90), which alone makes a stay worthwhile, serves Western and Ethiopian selections. It's 150m west of the bus station. Guests have free use of the town's thermal pool.