



FESTIVALS & ACTIVITIES

The Horn is much more than a region characterised by political instability. Visitors are often overwhelmed by the sense of devotion that emanates from the incredibly colourful festivals that are held throughout the region. For outdoorsy types, a startling variety of adventure options beckons. Hiking, diving and snorkelling are all readily available, with the added appeal of fantastic settings that are a tonic to any city-weary soul. The region is also a nature-lover's dream, with a sensational variety of habitats and endemic species. You'd be hard pressed to find a better combination of nature and culture. The best part is, there'll be no crowds to hinder the experience.

Hiking

Few people in the Horn rate walking as a favourite pastime. From hauling firewood to trailing camels, the economic realities mean walking is simply a fact of life for locals. And with a landscape that covers all the geological highs and lows – from mist-shrouded Ethiopian mountains to the skin-searing Danakil Depression – you'll do well to join them.





1 Bale Mountains National Park

Ranging in altitude from 1500m to 4377m, a multiday trek in the Bale Mountains National Park (p179) offers a chance to spot a mountain nyala in a wooded valley one day, and an Ethiopian wolf atop a high plateau the next.

2 Dodola Horse Trekking

Ideal for those without tents and camping equipment, a trek from Dodola (p178) in southern Ethiopia utilises sturdy little ponies, a string of simple mountain lodges and the lofty spine of the Bale Mountains. A memorable experience.

3 Tsada Amba

The church of Tsada Amba (p336) is perched dramatically atop a narrow ridge. The 1000m ascent to get there is worth every bead of sweat. You'll be rewarded with sweeping views all around and treated to a foot massage by a monk.

4 Goda Mountains

Waterfalls, forests, canyons, scenic vistas – what the little-known Goda Mountains (p293) lack in size is more than made up for in diversity, with walks of various lengths and difficulties. Your guides will be knowledgeable Afar nomads.



5 Lac Assal

Africa's lowest point, Djibouti's Lac Assal (p291) offers an unforgiving yet eerie environment for hikers in search of a surreal buzz. Few experiences can compare with scrunching on white expanses of salt in the company of Afar nomads. Just don't forget your sunglasses.

6 Simien Mountains

Staring over a precipice in the Simien Mountains (p126) and seeing, far, far below, on a tiny escarpment, a minuscule village completely isolated from the rest of the world, will make you grateful to be alive.

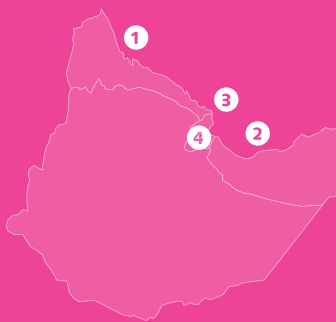
7 Mesket Escarpment

Peering over the vertigo ledges of the Mesket Escarpment (p163) as you walk from village to village, then stopping for tea in an old farmer's house, is a real highlight of Ethiopia.



Diving & Snorkelling

Diving and snorkelling in the Horn are still largely unhyped, and that's why they're so attractive. No doubt you'll impress your friends when you get home with stories of close encounters with whale sharks in Djibouti, gorgeous reefs replete with tropical fish off the Eritrean coast, and literally untouched dive sites in Somaliland. Go diving and feel like a pioneer!





1 Dahlak Islands

Absolutely no crowds and only one dive boat – yours – this is diving in the Dahlak Islands (p349). This pristine archipelago offers splendid dive sites and multihued fish life – not to mention a sense of the unknown. Snorkelling is equally amazing, with shallow and comfortably warm waters year-round.

2 Berbera & Zeila

For a truly special experience, Somaliland is hard to beat. Where else in the world can you still dive uncharted territory? The diving business is still nascent, but diving is available along the sandy shores near Berbera (p280), while Zeila beckons pioneer divers.

3 Les Sept Frères Archipelago

Les Sept Frères Archipelago (p292) is one of the most charismatic dive areas in the southern Red Sea. With its high-voltage drift dives and dense concentration of pelagic species, this archipelago offers the full slate to seasoned divers.

4 Whale-Shark Spotting

Don't know what a *Rhincodon typus* is? It's time to get an education in the Bay of Ghoubbet (p292). Expect your flippers to be blown off by an interaction with one of Mother Nature's most impressive creatures – the whale shark.

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Festivals

The people of the Horn are of many different religions, but they're all united by the devotion shown during religious festivals. Whether it's Christian pilgrims prostrating themselves in prayer, villagers in Eritrea or Somaliland breaking the Ramadan fast or Hamer boys jumping bulls in southern Ethiopia, it's all there to renew your own faith in travel.





1 Timkat

Join the thousands of white-robed faithful in Gondar as they sing and dance behind a solemn procession of regalia-draped priests during Ethiopia's most colourful festival, Timkat (p248), the feast of the Epiphany and the baptism of Christ.

2 Meskel

In the 4th century, Queen Eleni dreamed the smoke of a great fire would lead her to the True Cross. Today her miraculous discovery is colourfully commemorated during Meskel (p249), with cross-topped bonfires, festivities and elaborately dressed clergy filling the streets of Aksum.

3 Bull-Jumping Ceremony

Head to the Lower Omo Valley to witness a young man run across the backs of cattle to be initiated into the responsibilities of manhood, while, in a show of solidarity and stoic allegiance, women volunteer to be whipped with slender canes that leave lifelong scars (p203).



4 Leddet (Christmas)

Being in Ethiopia for Leddet (Christmas; p248) is a dramatic throwback to a time when Christmas still had real meaning. Leddet isn't like Christmas at home; it's marked by an intense spiritual fervour, especially in Addis Ababa. There's no mad rush for last-minute presents and certainly no Santas in silly costumes.

5 Fasika (Easter)

Stay up on the night of Easter Saturday mesmerised by the scenes surrounding you in Lalibela (p156). Hundreds of white robed pilgrims crowd the courtyards of the churches and pray under the moonlight. It's the most exotic thing you'll ever see.



Nature & Wildlife

The Horn of Africa may well be famous for its wealth of colourful festivals and historical sights, but it's also brimming with natural and ecological wonders – from powerfully majestic landscapes to pristine archipelagos. Don't forget the incredible abundance and variety of wildlife – with 862 species of birds and rare mammals, the Horn could be dubbed the 'Costa Rica of Africa'.



1 Birdwatching

For sheer diversity Ethiopia is one of the best places in the world to see incredible exotic and endemic birds. Look for everything from the never-seen-alive Nechisar nightjar around Nechisar National Park (p191), to the wonderfully photogenic blue-breasted bee-eater near Mendefera in Eritrea.

2 Ethiopian Wolf

Amongst the world's beautiful creatures, few are as easily spotted as the Ethiopian wolf – the world's rarest canid. To come nose to snout with one of the remaining 550 wolves, head to the Simien Mountains (p126) or Bale Mountains National Park (p179).

3 Irta'ale & Danakil

The Danakil (p154) offers experiences fit for an adventurer. Load up your camels and scrunch across sheets of salt, shield your nose from the incredible sulphurous stink as you scramble up Irta'ale Volcano (p155) or just stare straight ahead into the desert voids.

4 Gelada Baboons

Head to the Simien Mountains (p126) and get up close and very personal with a gelada baboon (*Theropithecus gelada*), one of Ethiopia's most fascinating endemic mammals. It's the only primate that feeds on grass.

5 Lac Abbé

Lac Abbé (p292) is famous for its extraordinary lunar landscape which is populated by large, spike-like calcareous chimneys. Hot springs dot the landscape, and fumaroles can also be found. This is what probably what hell looks like.

Destination Ethiopia & Eritrea

Sitting at one of Africa's great crossroads, in a reputedly unstable region, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somaliland occupy a huge chunk of the Horn of Africa. They comprise an incredible variety of cultures and landscapes, from the Abyssinian highlands and the lofty peaks of the Simiens to scorching lowlands and the lowest point in Africa – the Danakil Depression and Lac Assal.

These four countries each have a very strong temperament. At times, these tough characters don't really gel together. Like four brothers living under the same roof, they often quarrel. Currently, the most intense wrangle involves Ethiopia and Eritrea. You'll quickly realise how bitter is the feud between these two countries. The case in point? A border squabble. There have been no military clashes since 2000, but the continued failure to officially demarcate (and recognise) the border means tensions are still high. The UN mission observing the no-man's-land between the two nations finally pulled out in 2008, arguing that it couldn't really fulfil its mission because of supply restrictions imposed by Eritrea. Despite the borderland in question being barren and holding no economic, religious or historical value (look up on Google Earth the town of Badme, and you'll see what we mean), many Ethiopians are passionate about getting back the land awarded to Eritrea by the 2002 border agreement. Much of the anti-Eritrea sentiment is fuelled by the economic hardship faced by Ethiopia since the 1998–2000 war.

For the tenacious Eritrean leaders, the enforcement of the UN Boundary Commission is a very important issue, and they have made it known that they will not compromise. They want the decision of the UN to be acknowledged by the Ethiopians, hence the stalemate. The situation is totally frozen and, at the time of writing, there was no hope of getting out of this quagmire. Eritrea now gets the worst reports from international agencies, such as Human Rights Watch and the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, and is considered by these organisations as one of the most closed countries in the world, playing in the same league as North Korea, Myanmar and Turkmenistan. Ask (discreetly) young Eritreans in Asmara how they envisage their future. Chances are they'll say they want to flee their country, which they are not allowed to do) because they have no future in what they perceive is a giant jail, according to research conducted by Human Rights Watch.

The problem is that the situation is worsening and is now disseminating into the whole of the Horn of Africa. The Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict has become a focal point on which everything revolves in East Africa. In this respect, Eritrea looks like the maverick. It's accused by the US government and the African Union of helping the Islamic Courts Union (who are suspected, according to US diplomatic sources, of supporting al-Qaeda) in Somalia, not so much out of sheer empathy with the organisation, but to weaken the Ethiopians. As if this wasn't enough, in 2008 Eritrea started a quarrel with its oh-so-gentle neighbour to the south, Djibouti, for reasons that are still not clear, and the border between the two countries is closed.

Fortunately, amid this seemingly chronic instability, there are two success stories. First of all, Djibouti. This may be one of the tiniest, youngest and least-known nations in Africa, but it could also be the most talented, the most adroit and the most opportunistic. While its larger, more power-

FAST FACTS: ETHIOPIA

Area: 1,098,000 sq km

Population: 85 million

Life expectancy: 48.83 years

GDP per capita: US\$800

Biggest annual exports: coffee (US\$500 million) and chat (US\$100 million)

Average size of first lip plate worn by a Mursi girl: 4cm

Average size of lip plate for a Mursi adult woman: 11 cm

Highest Point: Ras Dashen (4543m)

Lowest Point Danakil Depression (-120m)

Number of train derailments between Dire Dawa and Djibouti: one per week

ful neighbours are embroiled in a never-ending border dispute, Djibouti stands out as a haven of stability and neutrality, despite the current tension with Eritrea. The French and American military presence certainly helps, as does the support of Dubai, which funds the development of the port – now one of the biggest in East Africa. The geographical position of the country, and its strategic value as a port and military base, is as important as ever. Djibouti plays the French and American cards simultaneously, while maintaining good relations with Ethiopia and Somaliland. Small in size, big in ambitions. Djibouti clearly aims at becoming the Dubai of East Africa, and it could well succeed.

Another success story is Somaliland. This separatist territory has nothing to do with the rest of Somalia. Thanks mainly to the predominance of a single clan (the Isaq), it has remained largely peaceful and stable since 1991, despite the odd terrorist attack. It has great oil and gas potential and voted for complete independence in 1997 before holding free presidential elections in 2003 and 2009. It has all the attributes of a ‘normal’ state: a parliament, free press, a currency, a flag...but nobody knows (or probably cares). Somaliland is still treated as a pariah by the international community and is not recognised as a separate state in the outside world, except by a few countries, including Ethiopia, which has a Liaison Office in Hargeisa. The main reason why the rest of the world is reluctant to accept Somaliland’s independence is that the UN still hopes for an agreement covering all of Somalia, which they believe would avoid a potential ‘Balkanisation’ of the Horn. To Somalilanders, this sounds profoundly unfair. Unlike the rest of Somalia, they have managed to establish law and order in their country – no mean feat in the dispute-torn Horn!

At least Ethiopia and Somaliland are currently BFF (best friends forever). The Ethiopians see the port of Berbera as a convenient plan B, in case the situation with Djibouti deteriorates, and the Somalilanders are happy to see that Ethiopian diplomats support their efforts to gain international recognition.

From a travelling perspective, all these border issues are definitely a pain in the neck, and they bring lots of negative media coverage. It’s a shame, because these four countries do need more tourists to foster internal growth. And for travellers, the situation in these four countries was perfectly safe at the time of writing.

Getting Started

There's no denying it: travelling in Ethiopia is not easy. The roads, though improving, still batter your bottom for hours on end and hotels (both budget and midrange) have been known to host a flea or two. Taking internal flights can add years to your posterior's life, but they can't save you from everything.

Surprisingly to some, Eritrea is an easier country to get around because the roads are in better shape and the distances between major sights and towns are much shorter than in Ethiopia. Neither country is perfect, though. Eritrea has its fair share of bureaucratic hurdles for travellers, including mandatory travel permits to get around outside the capital, and a currency declaration form.

Even more surprisingly, Somaliland is not *that* synonymous with tough travel. Sure, you'll have to hire an armed soldier to get around, but this quirky country doesn't pose many problems to seasoned travellers. And Djibouti? After having crisscrossed this tiny country – the most developed of the lot – all we can say is that it's a breeze to navigate but it'll blow your budget.

Wherever you choose to go, it'll be a memorable odyssey. Guaranteed.

WHEN TO GO Ethiopia

There's some truth in the Ethiopian Tourism Commission slogan '13 Months of Sunshine'. Although the famed historical circuit and the rest of the highlands receive rain between mid-March and September, most days during this period still see their fair share of sunshine. The far east region and the

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A small torch (headlamps are best) for finding your shoes during power failures. Oh, and it's helpful for exploring amazing rock-hewn churches too!
- Batteries (torch and camera)
- Reading the medical checklist (p368) and updating your vaccinations (see p368)
- Sunblock, sunglasses and a hat
- Walking shoes if you plan to hike
- A folding umbrella for the sun (like most Ethiopians use) or for occasional downpours
- Flip-flops for those toe-curling bathrooms
- A warm sweater for chilly highland evenings
- Mosquito repellent
- Flea powder for cheap hotel beds and for socks when visiting remote churches
- Women's hygiene items
- High-energy bars (for vegetarians or travellers who don't take to local food)
- A water bottle and water-purification materials, needed for trekking and useful in reducing plastic waste while travelling
- Binoculars to spot that walia ibex dancing on a distant Simien slope
- Earplugs in case you don't agree with the bus driver's music selection
- A sink plug – water is very precious
- Checking visa requirements (p256, p361, p295 & p282).

northern highlands see even more sun, with significant rain only falling in July and August.

Early October, just after the rains, is a particularly good time to visit. The country is wonderfully green, the wildflowers are stunning and there are fewer visitors. Trekking during this time is especially sublime, though it's pretty amazing throughout the entire dry season (October to mid-March).

If you're planning a trip to visit the people of the Lower Omo Valley, you should avoid travelling in April, May or October, when rain makes most roads impassable.

Finally, you'd do well to plan your trip to coincide with one of Ethiopia's very colourful festivals (p248), particularly Timkat or Meskel. Be aware, however, that domestic flights and hotels often fill up far in advance of Ethiopian festivals and European Christmas.

Eritrea

Although it is possible to visit Eritrea at any time of year, the ideal time climate-wise is September to October and January to April. If you are able to, avoid travelling in Eritrea between June and August, when it's the rainy season in the highlands and western lowlands, and hot and torrid in the eastern lowlands.

With many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Eritrea, it's worth planning your trip to coincide with their religious festivals (see p358). Like in Ethiopia, Timkat and Meskel are particularly special.

Djibouti & Somaliland

The ideal time to visit Djibouti and Somaliland is in the cooler season, which runs from mid-October to mid-April. During this period, temperatures average 25°C.

COSTS & MONEY

Ethiopia

For most day-to-day expenses, Ethiopia is very cheap. Travellers who are willing to battle fleas in their nether regions and eat nothing but simple Ethiopian food can easily survive and get around on US\$10 to US\$15 per day (particularly outside the capital). The cheapest hotels are around US\$4 and the most inexpensive meals cost around US\$1.

Travellers keen on cleanliness, but still on a budget, can get by on US\$15 to US\$20 per day.

On top of this are guides' fees and admissions at the national parks and historic sites, as well as one-off transportation costs such as boat trips. Even with these extra costs, budget travellers who share some expenses and ride public transport shouldn't need more than US\$20 to US\$25 per day in Ethiopia.

Those staying in midrange hotels and eating at hotel restaurants can expect to pay around US\$50 per day. This should cover admissions, guides and similar costs, but not internal flights or private transportation.

The cost of internal flights has seriously increased over recent years, but it's not beyond most budgets (from US\$110 to US\$200 one-way) and it's fairly good value considering some flights save a few days of bus travel! For 4WD rental, you'll have to cough up from US\$120 to US \$180 per day – ouch!

Eritrea

Travel in Eritrea is affordable, at least by Western standards. At the budget level, plan on US\$20 to US\$25 per day in the capital for a decent room, meals

See the Ethiopia (p245) and Eritrea (p356) climate charts for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Steaming *macchiato*
US\$0.20

100km by bus US\$1.50-3

Minibus across town
US\$0.20

Internet per hr US\$1-2

Tip for helpful priest
US\$0.75-1

See also Lonely Planet
Index (inside front cover)

TOP 10

• Addis Ababa ETHIOPIA

ORTHODOX CHURCHES

Ethiopian Orthodox churches are everywhere, rising from Addis Ababa's skyline and dotting desolate and dramatic cliffs. Here's some you'll never forget.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 Bet Giyorgis (p161) | 6 Abuna Yemata Guh (p149) |
| 2 Old St Mary of Zion (p135) | 7 Bet Medhane Alem (p158) |
| 3 Debre Berhan Selassie (p122) | 8 Narga Selassie (p116) |
| 4 Yemrehanna Kristos (p164) | 9 Bet Amanuel (p160) |
| 5 Abuna Aregawi (p145) | 10 Holy Trinity Cathedral (p92) |

FAVOURITE FESTIVALS

Ethiopia and Eritrea have a phenomenal mix of vibrant festivals, both Orthodox Christian and Islamic. For additional information, see p248.

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1 Leddet, 6-7 January | 6 Kiddus Yohannes, 11 September |
| 2 Timkat, 19 January | 7 Meskel, 27 September |
| 3 Mawlid an-Nabi, March | 8 Eid al-Fitr, September/October |
| 4 Good Friday, March/April | 9 Festival of Maryam Zion, 30 November |
| 5 Fasika, March/April | 10 Kulubi Gabriel, 28 December |

ECOFRIENDLY HIDEAWAYS

Though the concept of ecotourism is still not widely recognised, there's a growing number of ecolodges and ecofriendly ventures in the Horn, especially in Ethiopia. Rejuvenate mind and body in one of those lovely places to stay.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1 Gheralta Lodge (p151) | 7 Bilen Lodge (p213) |
| 2 Wenney Eco-Lodge (p172) | 8 Campement Touristique de la Forêt du Day (p293) |
| 3 Dinsho Lodge (p183) | 9 Campement Touristique de Bankoualé (p293) |
| 4 Mekonen Lodge (p194) | 10 Campement Touristique d'Asbole (p293) |
| 5 Strawberry Fields Eco Lodge (p196) | |
| 6 Salayish Lodge & Park (p208) | |

in restaurants and public transport. Outside Asmara, you can get by on US\$15 per day. Midrange travellers seeking some mod cons should plan on US\$35 to US\$50 in the capital, depending on the type of room you want.

The cost of renting a 4WD, which you might need to go to a number of places of interest, is around US\$130 per day. If you're solo, this will blow your budget. Your best bet is to join a group or other travellers and share costs.

Djibouti & Somaliland

Djibouti easily wins the award of 'most expensive destination in the Horn', with prices that will make you feel you're closer to the Champs-Élysées than the Red Sea. Lodgings and transport are particularly expensive.

Good news if you're heading to Somaliland: it's relatively cheap. One downside: there's a number of mandatory add-ons (an armed soldier, a rental car) which, at the end of the day, make the trip not so cheap.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

We encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

In the four countries covered in this guidebook, most tourist development so far is refreshingly small-scale and owned by locals. If you stay in guesthouses or medium-sized hotels, your cash will be going directly to the owners (and their families). Most of the food you'll eat in the Horn is locally grown.

Tourism in these countries is such a fledgling industry that the concept of ecotourism hasn't really taken off, except in Ethiopia at a pinch (see opposite for a selection of ecofriendly accommodation options). But most of the travel companies have a vested interest in carrying out their business sustainably; they all employ local guides who'll be happy to help you get a cultural immersion, such as in Southern Ethiopia or in Djibouti. See also the GreenDex of sustainable tourism listings on p403.

Bear in mind that people in this region are conservative in dress, and often religion, and it's appreciated if visitors follow suit, especially when visiting churches (churches in Ethiopia and Eritrea are very hallowed places) and mosques. Traditionally women never expose their shoulders, knees, cleavage or waist in public, and couples shouldn't display affection in public. Always remove your shoes before entering a church or a mosque. Never take a photo if permission is declined.

If you're invited to a house or a monastery it's thoughtful to give a gift in return. A contribution to the upkeep of the church is greatly appreciated after a visit.

You can support local businesses and skills by shopping at local markets and giving money or goods to local charities. Don't give directly to begging children.

Resist the temptation to buy any genuinely old artefacts such as manuscripts and scrolls sold in shops around Ethiopia. The country has already lost a vast amount of its heritage (see p253).

See also p244 for tips on how to minimise your impact on the environment.

A word about plastic bottles: don't crush them – they're a valuable commodity for children.

BORDER-CROSSING INFORMATION

To/From	From/To	Border Crossing Notes
Eritrea	Djibouti	The border is currently closed between Eritrea and Djibouti (see p296 and p363); use San'a (Yemen) as a transit hub
Eritrea	Ethiopia	All borders are currently closed between Eritrea and Ethiopia; use Cairo (Egypt), San'a (Yemen) or Nairobi (Kenya) as transit hubs
Ethiopia	Djibouti	There are two border crossings: Gellille and Galafi (see p262 and p296)
Ethiopia	Somaliland	The border crossing is at Wajaale (see p263 and p283)
Somaliland	Djibouti	The border crossing is at Loyaada (see p283 and p297)

Note that no visas are obtainable at borders. See country Directories in the respective country chapters for visa information.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Michela Wrong's *I Didn't Do it for You* is a compelling and at times comedic account of Eritrea's contemporary history; it helps to understand the national psyche and the failure of democracy.

In *Eating the Flowers of Paradise*, Kevin Rushby travels the old trade route from Ethiopia's highlands to Yemen. By chewing *chat* (a mildly intoxicating leaf that's consumed primarily in eastern Ethiopia; it's illegal in Eritrea) at every invitation, Kevin gives a dangerously funny look into this unique drug's culture.

Part personal crusade, part celebration of all that is Ethiopia, *The Chains of Heaven* chronicles Philip Marsden's return to Ethiopia, a land that changed his life when he first visited in the early 1980s.

In *The Prester Quest*, Nicholas Jubber entertainingly voyages from Venice to Ethiopia on his quest to deliver – albeit 824 years late – Pope Alexander III's famed letter to Prester John, the mythical Christian king of the East.

Sheba: Through the Desert in Search of the Legendary Queen by Nicholas Clapp successfully blends personal travel accounts with thorough academic research to shed light on one of history's most famous and least understood characters.

By following the footsteps of 19th-century French literary legend Arthur Rimbaud through Egypt, Ethiopia, Djibouti and elsewhere, Charles Nicholl's *Somebody Else* isn't only an award-winning biography, but an interesting piece of travel literature too.

Wilfred Thesiger's classic *Life of My Choice* includes reminiscences of the author's childhood and early adult years in Ethiopia, including the coronation of Haile Selassie and Thesiger's renowned six-month journey through the Danakil in 1933.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Abyssinia Gateway (www.abyssiniacybergateway.net) Provides an exhaustive list of helpful and historical links for Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland and Somalia.

All Africa (www.allafrica.com) This site collates daily news and helpfully sorts it into country profiles.

Asmera (www.asmera.nl) A comprehensive site on Eritrea with lots of tourist information, compiled by an individual.

CyberEthiopia (www.cyberethiopia.com) Like an Ethiopian Yahoo!, CyberEthiopia has quite useful information categorised into different sections.

Eriview (www.eriview.com) A good introduction to Eritrea's culture and history, as well as useful travel information.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Includes summarised information on travelling to Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, the Thorn Tree bulletin board, travel news and helpful web links.

Somaliland Government (www.somalilandgov.com) Official site of the Somaliland government, with useful external links.

Visit Somaliland (www.visitsomaliland.org) Has useful general info about travelling in Somaliland.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

ETHIOPIA'S HISTORICAL CIRCUIT

Three to Five Weeks by Road (10 to 20 Days by Plane) / Addis Ababa to Addis Ababa

After a few days revelling in the chaos of **Addis Ababa** (p82), head north to bustling palm-fringed **Bahir Dar** (p111) for a day. Spend the next day at **Lake Tana** (p114) exploring some of the lake's centuries-old island monasteries.

Next, wander the extensive ruins of crenulated 17th-century castles in **Gonder** (p118). Looming 100km to the north, the **Simien Mountains** (p126) are home to easily visible wildlife, and days of East Africa's best trekking.

Take the long road north to **Aksum** (p131), where pre-Christian tombs underlie splendid 1800-year-old stelae (obelisks). After two days, wrangle up a 4WD and venture to the 3000-year-old ruins of Ethiopia's first capital, **Yeha** (p144), and to the cliff-top monastery of **Debre Damo** (p145).

If you didn't get your fill of heights at Debre Damo, head south and search out Tigray's precarious and stunning **rock-hewn churches** (p147).

After a short stop south in **Mekele** (p152) to view its moving museums, visit **Lalibela** (p156). Its 11 astounding rock-hewn churches and myriad of tunnels have poignantly frozen 12th- and 13th-century Ethiopia in stone. After three or so days here, it's back to Addis Ababa.



The historical sights along this loop north of Addis Ababa are monumental in both scale and detail. The journey, although spectacularly scenic, is monumental in itself, covering at least 2500km.

FROM HIGH TO LOW: ESSENTIAL ERITREA Ten Days to Two Weeks / Asmara to Massawa

A great trip for any first-time visitor to Eritrea, taking in the country's (accessible) star attractions. It's a busy but satisfying 800km journey that combines various landscapes, atmospheres and climates.

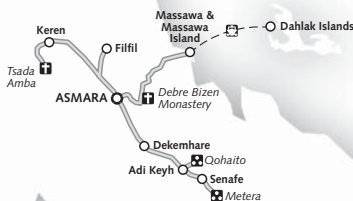
Start by spending two full days in fascinating **Asmara** (p316), visiting its mind-blowing collection of colonial-era architectural wonders and tantalising pastry shops. Beeline for the **National Museum** (p323) in preparation for Eritrea's archaeological sites and take a day trip to the **Debre Bizen Monastery** (p332), which offers breathtaking views, or enjoy the hush and greenery near **Filfil** (p332).

Next, push onto **Keren** (p333), whose attractive architecture, active markets and cheerful ambience deserves a day or two. Keren is the obvious launching pad for the fantastic ascent to the church of **Tsada Amba** (p336), which is dramatically perched on a narrow ledge. Back to Asmara, and it's time to head south. You might make a half-day stop in **Dekemhare** (p337) to recharge the batteries before spending the night in **Adi Keyh** (p337). The next day, explore the poignant ruins of **Qohaito** (p337) and expand your knowledge of Eritrea's mysterious past.

From Qohaito it's a short hop to **Senafe** (p339), where you can immerse yourself in the nearby ancient ruins of **Metera** (p340), one of Eritrea's most significant archaeological sites.

Having sampled the highlands' delights, head north to Asmara before proceeding east. Take the big plunge to **Massawa** (p342), on the coast, and mosey around Zanzibar-esque **Massawa Island** (p345).

Fancy a dip? Massawa is a jumping-off point for the pristine **Dahlak Islands** (p348), which are blessed with good diving and snorkelling opportunities. When you've run out of sunscreen, it's time to return to the highlands!



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

LAKES, MOUNTAINS & MURSI: SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

Two and a Half to Five Weeks /
Addis Ababa to Omo Valley

Do what few others do in Ethiopia and point the compass south. En route from Addis Ababa to **Lake Ziway** (p171), and its hippos, birdlife and island monasteries, stop at **Tiya** (p170), a World Heritage Site and one of southern Ethiopia's most important stelae fields. More impressive birdlife is found just south at **Lake Langano** (p172) and **Lake Abiata-Shala National Park** (p172).

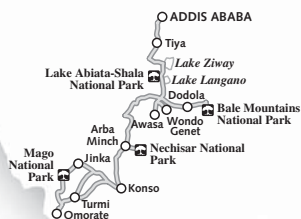
Next it's a night lakeside at **Awasa** (p176) or up in the lush hills at **Wondo Genet** (p175), before travelling east to **Dodola** (p178) for some multiday mountain horse treks, or further east to the bounty of **Bale Mountains National Park** (p179). Treks here offer unparalleled viewing of the endangered Ethiopian wolf and mountain nyala, and countless rare bird species.

Backtrack west through Shashemene before looping south to the southern Rift Valley lakes and **Arba Minch** (p189), where gargantuan crocodiles, zebras and the odd Abyssinian lion roam nearby **Nechisar National Park** (p191).

Slip south and visit intriguing **Konso villages** (p196) around **Konso** (p195), at the gateway to the cultural riches of the **Lower Omo Valley** (p194).

Cruise on the back of a truck into Hamar-and-bull-jumping territory at **Turmi** (p199) and into Galeb territory at **Omorate** (p202), which sits on the banks of the mighty Omo River itself. It's north from here for a respite from remoteness in **Jinka** (p197). Those with 4WDs can also descend into **Mago National Park** (p198), the home of the famed Mursi lip-stretchers.

This journey south from Addis Ababa offers some of Africa's most interesting peoples and Ethiopia's best wildlife. This 1500km foray is a tough slog, and takes almost twice as long using public transport.

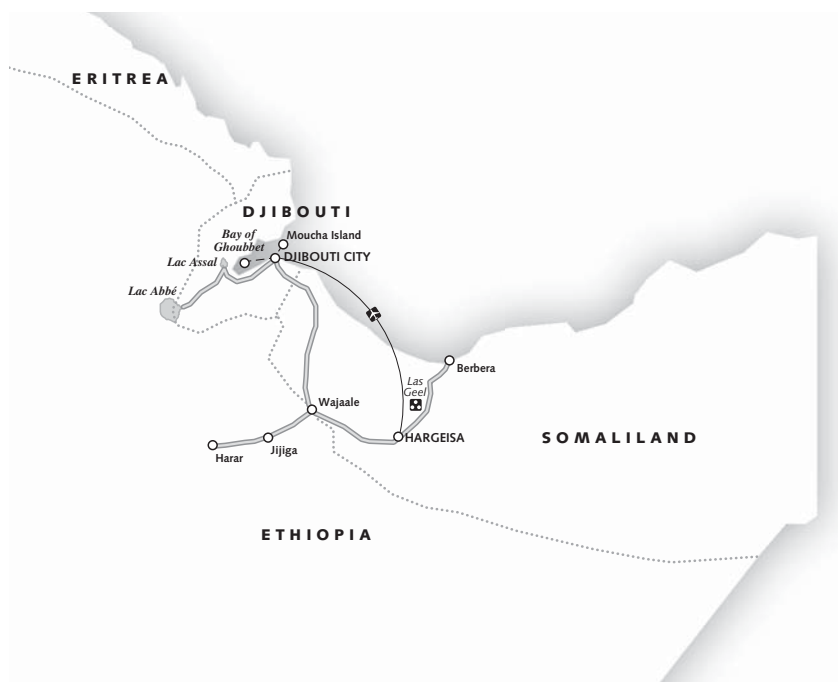


This is an unconventional trip you'll never forget, offering plenty of different experiences, from walking through one of most desolate areas on earth and swimming alongside whale sharks to marvelling at rock paintings in the desert and attending a hyena show.

BREAK THE MOULD

Ten Days / Harar to Djibouti via Somaliland

This itinerary will appeal to hardcore overlanders who are after something really different. Warm up in **Harar** (p218), famous for its nose-to-snout encounters with hyena and its magical jumble of old alleyways. Then bus it to **Jijiga** (p225), where you can already feel the flavour of neighbouring Somaliland. The next morning, take the rickety old bus that plies the route from Jijiga to **Wajaale** (p262), at the border with Somaliland. Cross one of the weirdest borders in the world and take a taxi to **Hargeisa** (p275), where it's highly possible you'll enjoy the smug feeling of being the only foreigner wandering the streets. Pay a visit to the camel market (and put in a bid if you dare). Need some cultural sustenance? Speculate on Somalia's mysterious past at the fantastic archaeological site of **Las Geel** (p278), replete with exceptionally well-preserved rock paintings. Beach lovers should journey on to the port town of **Berbera** (p280), with its unparalleled white beach. Work on your suntan, scoff on grilled fish and recharge the batteries – you'll need it for the strenuous ride from Hargeisa to **Djibouti City** (p287). Too taxing for you? You can also fly from Hargeisa to Djibouti (about 40 minutes). Allow at least two days to soak up Djibouti City's atmosphere, treat yourself to a comfy room, enjoy the mischievous nightlife and make the most of its gastronomic potential – you've earned it. Then spend the day on a powder-soft beach on **Moucha Island** (p291). Too gentle for you? Strap on your snorkelling gear and get up close and *very* personal with whale sharks in the **Bay of Ghoubbet** (p292). If you're an incorrigible landlubber, explore the apocalyptic wasteland of **Lac Assal** (p291) or **Lac Abbé** (p292).



TAILORED TRIPS

MONASTERY FRENZY

Ethiopian Orthodox monasteries hold some of the region's greatest treasures, including brilliant illuminated manuscripts, precious crosses and vibrant murals. In most cases the monks are happy to show them off.

Unfortunately women are forbidden to visit several monasteries.

Surrounded by cliffs, atop an *amba* (flat-topped mountain), is the celebrated **Debre Damo** (p145). If you like heights, getting here is half the fun.

The **monasteries of Lake Tana** (p115) are some of the most historic in Ethiopia. Of them, Kebran Gabriel, Ura Kidane Meret, Dega Estefanos and Narga Selassie are the most atmospheric. Although there's little to see now, Lake Tana's Tana Cherkos monastery was rumoured to house the Ark of the Covenant for over 800 years.

Debre TSION (p171), an island monastery on Lake Ziway, is also thought to have housed the Ark in the 9th century.

Other monasteries of note in Ethiopia are **Abba Pentalewon** (p139) and **Abba Liqanos** (p139) near Aksum, **Abba Garima** (p144) near Adwa, **Ashetan Maryam** (p164) near Lalibela and **Mt Zuqualla Maryam** (p209) near Debre Zeyit.

In Eritrea, **Debre Bizen** (p332) is renowned for containing over 1000 manuscripts and other church relics. **Debre Libanos** (p340), which sits in a rather stunning location, houses Eritrea's oldest church; inquire in Asmara if it's still off-limits to travellers.



BIRDWATCHING BONANZA

If you're a passionate twitcher then this circuit might take your fancy.

Spend a couple of days touring the northern Rift Valley lakes. Explore the shores of **Lake Ziway** (p171) for marsh species, then go to **Lake Langano** (p172), the home of over 300 species. Nearby is **Lake Abiata-Shala National Park** (p172), which hosts abundant acacia-related bird species and water birds. Stop at **Wondo Genet** (p175) to check out the forests, which host several endemics.

Then head east to the **Bale Mountains** (p179), where 16 of Ethiopia's 21 endemics are found. Next, forge east to the **Sof Omar Caves** (p184) and search for Salvadori's seedeater or serin. Then descend to the hot southern lowlands. Between Dollo-Mena and **Negele Borena** (p185), look out for the Degodi lark, Prince Ruspoli's turaco and the Sidamo long-clawed lark.

At the **Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary** (p187), take in two of the world's most range-restricted species, the Stresemann's bush crow and white-tailed swallow.

If you want to live on in history as the first person to see a Nechisar nightjar alive, visit the **Nechisar National Park** (p191). Then take the long road back north towards Addis Ababa and complete your birdwatching bonanza at **Awash National Park** (p210), where six endemics live, including the white-winged cliff chat and the goldenbacked or Abyssinian woodpecker.



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