

Simien Mountains & Northern Highlights



Highlights

Discover the best of Ethiopia, trekking in the Simien Mountains the castles of Gonder and the incredible rock hewn churches of Lalibella.

Northern Ethiopia is justly famous for its concentration of historic cultural sites and incredible scenery. A unique blend of Christian and African culture and a rich history has left Ethiopia with ancient churches and medieval castles with a distinctly African flavour. The Simien Mountains sit amidst this backdrop offering one of the finest ridge treks in the world.

Exploring all of Ethiopia's sites would take some time, but this tour picks out the highlights for those who are just as interested in the trekking as they are the cultural heritage. You'll trek for 5 days through the Simien Mountains National Park along a dramatic ridge with common sightings of unique gelada baboons and walia ibex. You'll explore the medieval churches of Gonder and the incredible rock hewn churches of Lalibella.

Is it for me?

Travelling in Ethiopia is by no means easy, but it is vastly rewarding. The challenges are the lack of luxuries (a hot shower in Ethiopia is a rare thing, even in upmarket hotels), the unique cuisine and hassle from hawkers. Having said that it also happens to host one of the most unique cultures in the world with a rich cultural heritage and some of the best trekking in the world. You can't have everything.

As long as you don't come expecting to be cosseted and you have travelled previously to places like SE Asia, India and Africa then you'll know what to expect. The trek itself is challenging but by no means technical or unaccessible. The biggest challenge is the altitude. You'll start the trek at 3,000m and spend the entirety of the trek between 3000m and 4500m. Altitude problems are rare, but some of the climbs particularly on the first few days are a lot tougher than they would be at lower altitudes. You'll be well looked after by your guide, cook and scout.

Hotels in Ethiopia are not up to the standards you would expect elsewhere and it is often difficult to find a hot shower. We've tried to pick out small hotels with character where possible, but it is important you come with an open mind.

In summary, if you've travelled a bit and like walking then this trip is suitable for you – as long as you come with the right attitude!

Accommodation

On the trek you'll be camping in modern two man tents. Apart from the trek meals are usually not included (except where accommodation is on a bed and breakfast basis), this gives you the opportunity to select your own restaurants, always one of the joys of travelling.

When not on trek, you'll be staying in mid range comfortable hotels. Ethiopia is not known for its hotels, all but the Addis Hilton suffer from unreliable hot water and power cuts and the cult of the boutique hotel hasn't quite arrived here yet!;

RAS Hotel (Addis): Reasonable, well located mid-range hotel in Addis. Nice street-side bar to enjoy a beer and

Prices from

1,153 GBP (10 days) per person

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watch the world go by. Plenty of restaurants in walking distance.

Taitu Hotel (Addis): The oldest hotel in Ethiopia. A rambling building with some lovely rooms and some a little more tired. It is well located in the centre of town. This is usually a safe bet.

Fasil Hotel (Gondar): A brand new hotel in an excellent location right next to the Royal Enclosure. Has clean, modern rooms.

Lodge Du Chateau (Gondar): Another rare gem for Ethiopia. This charming small guesthouse has simple rooms set around a garden courtyard with a charming seating area / restaurant on a raised platform with fantastic views. Very relaxed atmosphere, perfect for sitting back with a book and a bottle of Dashen Beer.

Recommended

Jerusalem Hotel (Lalibella): Very friendly staff, large comfortable, clean rooms, good location. Lacking slightly in charm, but the rooms make up for it.

Mountain View Hotel (Lalibella): The closest thing we've found to a boutique hotel in Ethiopia. This is brand spanking new, with lots of polished marble and granite and stunning views. To top it off it only costs marginally more than the mid range hotels. Only drawback is the slightly out of town location. Recommended

Itinerary

D1: Arrival and Addis Ababa guided tour

You'll be met at the airport and transferred to your central hotel. After a rest and refresh at the hotel your guide will take you around the highlights of Addis, you'll get a chance to drink some of the best coffee in the world in the Piazza (old town), explore the National Museum and Archeological Museum (home to the 3.5million year old remains of Lucy) and explore the largest open air market in Africa. Lunch and dinner at own cost. Overnight at central mid-range hotel

D2: Gonder Castles and Churches

You'll be picked up early from your hotel and transferred to the airport for the internal flight to Gonder. After pick up in Gonder and transfer to your hotel your guide will show you the highlights of Gonder, a small but relaxed town. You'll visit the medieval Royal Enclosure set in its beautiful gardens, the nearby Fasilides Bath and the fascinating Debre Berhan Selassie Church. Overnight in central mid range hotel. Breakfast, lunch and dinner at own expense.

DAY 3: Gondar – Simien Mountains (Sankaber Camp 3,200m)

4-5hrs driving, 7km 2/3 hours walking

You'll be picked up from your hotel in Gondar around 7.30am for the 2 ½ hr drive to Debarq in a 4x4. The road is rough and very dusty, but if you haven't left the built up areas in Ethiopia yet, it is a real eye opener into the life of the rural majority. At Debarq you will sign in at the park headquarters, pick up your guide and scout and head up into the mountains (by 4x4). The road continues all the way to the first camp at Sankaber, but you'll be dropped off on the way for a leisurely three hour acclimatisation hike. The stunning views hit you as soon as you get out of the vehicle as you walk along the ridge. There will be time to stop for a picnic lunch and after a short but demanding climb (at this altitude) to Sankaber you'll be met as every day on this trek with a tray of fresh coffee, tea and snacks. (L,D)

DAY 4: Sankaber (3,200m) – Geech Camp (3,600m)

Walking 7-8hrs / 15km

After a hearty breakfast, you'll set off trekking along the ridge with stunning views over the foothills 800m below. For the first two hours the trail passes through low bush of Giant Heather, soda apple, Abyssinian rose, St John's Wort and Globe thistle. The highlight of the trek from Sankaber to Geech is Genbar Falls, an incredible 500m sheer drop. From the viewpoint opposite, you can watch the falcons, augur buzzard and lammergeier bearded vulture soar on the thermals below. From the Genbar falls, the trail passes drier dustier land, broken by lunch at a somewhat less intimidating and more peaceful waterfall. Klipspringer and bush buck may be seen in the steep rocky and wooded slopes, whilst troops of Gelada Baboons roam the dusty fields for roots. Just before you reach Geech camp site, there is a wonderful opportunity to visit one of the traditional village houses for home roasted coffee and injirra. Geech Camp itself is set on a grassy plateau with stunning sunset views. (B,L,D)

DAY 5: Geech (3,600m) – Imet Gogo (3,926m) – Siha Gorge – Kedar Dit – Geech (3,600m)

Walking 5-6 hrs / 13km

After breakfast you'll trek for 2 hours along the grass plateau past countless bizarre oversized Giant Lobelia plants. The destination is Imet Gogo, an incredible rocky promontory that grants 360 degree views over the Simien Range. At an altitude of 3,926m you can see West back along the ridge towards Sankaber and Geech and South East across a deep gully towards the tomorrow's ridge walk to Inatye and Cheneck Camp. The views here are arguably the best in the Simien Mountains and the drop is terrifying. From Imet Gogo, you'll return to camp via the Siha Gorge for lunch. Afternoon at leisure before heading out for a short optional sunset trek to KedarDit (3760m). Overnight at Geech Camp again. (B,L,D)

DAY 6: Geech (3600m) – Innatye (4070m) - Cheneck (3,600m)

Walking 7 hours / 15km

Today is the longest and arguably most spectacular passing close to the ridge most of its length. After breakfast you will head back on the path towards Imet Gogo before detouring SE towards Inatye. The path drops into a forest of Giant Hazel before following the ridge on open grassland. The climb to Inatye (4,070m) rewards with stunning views. Inatye roughly translates as "mamma mia" and the terrifying vertical drop here justly warrants the name! After a picnic lunch the path follows mostly downhill through open grassland and giant lobelia towards Cheneck with a number of stunning viewpoints along the way. Cheneck camp is superb for wildlife with both Gelada Baboons and Wallia Ibex common here. (B,L,D)

DAY 7: Chennek (3600m) – Mount Buahit (4430m) – Chennek (3600m)

Walking 5 hours / 830m elevation gain and descent / 10km distance covered

After an early breakfast, you will head SE out of Chennek to climb Buahit Peak at 4430m. The path follows a small stream for an hour or two up to Buahit Pass. At the pass the views open up to the North East towards Lori and Sona Villages. This is a fantastic place to spot the Wallia Ibex. From here it is another hour or two's scramble up a rocky slope to Buahit Peak. It is hard work at the altitude but the views from the top and the wildlife on the way are more than worth it. After a quick lunch in Chennek, you'll be driven back to Gonder (B,L)

DAY 8 Lalibella

Early morning transfer to Gonder airport. You'll be picked up at Lalibella Airport and transferred to your central hotel. Lalibella is world famous for its monolithic rock hewn churches. Carved by hand out of solid rock in the 12th and 13th Centuries and awash with the chanting of monks, this is a deeply spiritual place and quite rightly a UNESCO World Heritage site. You'll get to visit most of the Central churches that Lalibella is so famous for including the Northern Group (containing the Lalibella Cross), The Western Group (Bete Giyorgis) and the Eastern Group. Overnight in a central mid range hotel. Meals at own expense.

DAY 9 Lalibella

Tour remote church clusters in Lalibella, you can choose to walk or ride a rented mule up to Asheton Maryam Church, situated at about 3100 meters. Here you are rewarded with spectacular views of Lalibella town and surrounding valleys. Overnight in a central mid range hotel. Meals at own expense.

DAY 10 Return

You'll be transferred back to Lalibella airport for your return flight to Addis. On request, we can arrange for you to spend the day at an Addis hotel making use of the swimming pool, or if you choose you can head into town.

Details

Getting there

Getting to Ethiopia

Ethiopia's national airline, Ethiopian Airlines is arguably one of the best in Africa. International services are reliable with good seat pitch, whilst domestic flights are serviced by a brand new fleet of twin props. Ethiopian flies direct from London, Frankfurt, Paris and Rome in Europe. The flight takes around 8 hours. Great deals can be had if you book your international flight direct with Ethiopian with your domestic Ethiopian flights – you will need to call them to get these fairs.

Getting around Ethiopia

Because of the state of the roads, the distances involved and the quality of the alternative (flying) most short term visitors use internal flights in Ethiopia. There are reliable daily flights between most of the stops on the Northern Circuit (Addis, Gondar, Lalibella, Axum, Bahir Dar).

If you have more time, or delight in the joys of overland travel, there are loads of options on the road. Local bus services are super cheap, regular and exceedingly uncomfortable. They'll certainly give you a story to tell. Alternatively Skybus offer a reliable upmarket coach service from Addis Abbaba to Gonder, Jimma, Bahir Dar, Awassa, Harrer and Dire Dawa. Schedules and prices are available at <http://www.skybusethiopia.com/site/schedule.html>

Price includes

All guides and transfers and accommodation as detailed in the itinerary

Entrance fees to museums and national parks and attractions

Meals where stated (e.g. on trek)

International flights and domestic flights are not included. We do not include the domestic flights as you will get a better deal booking them with your international flights through Ethiopian Airlines direct. In order to get the best rates call Ethiopian.

Most meals outside the trek are not included. Generally speaking eating out in Ethiopia is very cheap.

Tips are not included.

When is best

The Ethiopian Tourist Board proudly promotes their slogan "13 months of sunshine" to anyone who will listen, but they are not far off the mark. The rainy season in the North is in July and August, but whilst that might stop you attempting a multi day trek in the Simien Mountains, it won't really affect you if you are planning on touring the Northern Historical route. The best time to visit the North is in Autumn, after the rains when the mountains are full of lush green and the views are unimpeded by haze.

Available

Jan—Dec

Typical Duration

9 days

Comfort level

Down to earth (hostels, camping, huts)

Experience required

A reasonable level of fitness and interest is all that is needed

Travellers should bring

This list covers equipment and clothing recommended for a Simien Mountain trek. Your main bags will be carried by a mule. At all times you will only be walking with a day-pack. Day-pack large enough to carry spare clothes, waterproofs, camera, lunch, drink, etc. Main bag should be a large kit bag or ideally a rucksack which is easier to load on mules to carry. This should weigh less than 14 kg. A light kit-bag is useful for storing any gear not needed on the mountain section. Your total baggage allowance on most airlines is 20 kg. If you need more specific advice please don't hesitate to contact us. Sleeping bag: A good 4 season bag. Temperatures can be below freezing overnight. A quality liner is useful for extra warmth and upgrades a 3 season to a 4 season bag. Water bottle: Bottled mineral water will be provided for the trek. It is useful to have your own water bottles to decant into. Torch: Spare bulbs, batteries. Head torch useful but not essential. Small spare torch. Walking pole/s: Highly recommended by some, awkward for others - try one out first. Camera: Plenty of memory space or film. Spare camera batteries and cleaning kit, dust proof camera bag. The following list of clothing is provided as a guideline only. But your clothing should allow you the flexibility to cope with the range of weather conditions you may encounter on this trip. Clothing: underwear, light cotton/polycotton for general wear, and insulating next-to-skin ("thermal") vest and long johns for the cold or wet days on the trek. Socks suitable for walking and general wear. T-shirts, long sleeved shirt, sweatshirt, trousers/skirt for general wear. Walking shirt. Warm pullover/jersey, warm fleece or down jacket. Walking trousers, skirt or breeches. Walking shorts. Track suit (for evenings in camp, and as an extra layer when cold). Thick jacket (fleece, fibre-pile, or pile and pertex mix). Waterproof and windproof jacket/cagoule and over trousers. Walking boots - well broken in. Sandals/flip-flops. Sunglasses, sun hat, (packable/collapsible), warm hat. Other kit: Towel, toilet kit, spare specs, personal first aid kit (e.g. sticking plasters, lint, antiseptic cream, aspirins/paracetamol, antihistamine, malaria pills and any special personal medication). Sun cream, insect repellent, lip salve, wet wipes, sewing kit. Binoculars for bird/animal spotting, mountain map. A wristwatch with an alarm function is useful for early starts. Use strong plastic bags inside your rucksack to keep out rain and dust. Documents: Passport, passport photocopy (main page only), travellers cheques, insurance certificate, etc all in a secure money belt/pouch. Wallet for day to day use. Diary, notebook.

Reviews (2)

Reviews of this experience

“ Just to let you know we had a most successful trip. All went like clockwork. Your itinerary was excellent. All the personnel– guides, cooks, drivers etc could not have been more helpful. Many thanks for all your help and for opening up such a fascinating and complex country to us. ”

Mark Shepherd reviewing Simien Mountains & Northern Highlights

“ It was a great trip - 5/5 overall and one that I would recommend to everyone. One improvement you could make, would be not to use the Ankober hotel in Addis - it was very average! (Gondor hotel was very good and Mountain View was excellent - 20 mins walk from the churches which we didn't mind but truly the best view I have ever seen in a hotel)

We had a great time and would strongly recommend the trip. ”

sarah green reviewing Simien Mountains & Northern Highlights