TOUR CODE

ET2

ADVENTURESABROAD

ETHIOPIA

Historic North & the Omo Valley

22 days

Updated 06/01/2013

Day 1 ***Arrival in Ethiopia***

Arrive in Addis Ababa, (2450 m / 8,038 ft) Ethiopia's capital city.

THIS IS A TRIP FOR THE ADVENTUROUS. The itinerary has been designed to be as comfortable as possible, but this part of the world is still undeveloped. Accommodation is basic in some places and some road journeys are long, dusty, and rough. This trip is suitable for hardy travellers who do not expect "creature comforts" or things to work smoothly everywhere. Despite the often-rustic conditions, delays, and bumpy roads, this will be a fascinating journey, full of epic moments for the experienced traveller who possesses a sense of humour, flexibility, and a true spirit for adventure.

Overnight in Addis Ababa. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 ***Addis Ababa: City Tour***

This morning we tour Addis Ababa, with a visit to Ethiopia's National and Ethnographic Museum. One of its most famous residents is Lucy, a proto-human skull discovered in Ethiopia in 1974 and believed to be 3.5 million years old. The Ethnographic Museum, on the university campus of Addis Ababa, displays many items important to daily life in rural Ethiopia. A brief section also pertains to the life of the late Haile Selassie, Ethiopia's last emperor, crowned in 1930.

We also see St George's Cathedral and then drive up Mount Entoto for a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside.

NOTE: Our September departure is set to coincide with Meskel, celebrated in this country for over 1,600 years. The word actually means "cross" and the feast commemorates the discovery of the Cross upon which Jesus was crucified by the Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great. The original event took place on 19 March, AD 326, but the feast is now celebrated in late September. In Addis celebrations start in the early afternoon, when a huge procession bearing flaming torches approaches Meskel Square from various directions. The marchers include priests in their brightly hued vestments, students, brass bands, contingents of the armed forces, and bedecked floats carrying huge lit crosses. They circle the demera and fling their torches upon it, while singing a special Meskel song. Thousands gather at the square to join in and welcome the season of flowers and golden sunshine called 'Tseday.' As evening darkens the flames glow brighter. It is not until dawn that the burning pyramid consumes itself and the big tree at the centre finally falls. During the celebrations each house is stocked with tella, the local beer, and strangers are made welcome.

Overnight in Addis Ababa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 ***Addis Ababa - Bahr Dar: Tis Abay (Blue Nile Falls)***

Today we fly to Bahr Dar, situated on the shore of Lake Tana in northwestern Ethiopia. Bahar Dar is a small town set on the southeastern shore of Lake Tana (Ethiopia's largest lake), where local fishermen still use papyrus boats, and just

30 km (19 miles) from the spectacular Tissisat Falls.

This afternoon we have an excursion to Tis Abay (Blue Nile Falls), a cascade 45 m (150 feet) high. The locals call it Tisissat, which means "Water that Smokes". The area is also home to a great variety of birds and plants.

Return to Bahr Dar.

Overnight in Bahr Dar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Bahr Dar - Gondar*

Today we cross Lake Tana by boat and connect with our land transport at Gorgora and continue by road to Gondar, the former capital of Ethiopia (1818 m / 6,000 ft). This "City of Castles" is one of Ethiopia's most interesting. Set in a beautiful landscape, Gondar is situated at the base of the Simien Mountains. The city's unique imperial precinct contains a dozen castles built by various emperors over a 236-year period.

Overnight in Gondar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Gondar: Town Tour*

Today we will acquaint ourselves with the city of Gondar, touring the castle of Emperor Fasiledes, founder of the former capital. The two-story castle with its domed towers was said to be "one of the most marvelous of buildings" by a visiting Yemeni envoy. We will also see the Bathing Palace, once surrounded by a moat of water. Today the moat is only filled with water during Epiphany for an annual baptism celebration. We will also visit the monasteries of Qusquam and Debre Berhan Selassie. The latter has not only many detailed 16th century frescoes, but also one of Ethiopia's most photographed ceilings, painted with angels' faces. We will also make a short trip outside Gondar to the tiny village of Wolleka, where there once lived a large community of Falashas (Jewish Ethiopians). Although most departed in 1991, their Christian neighbours still make the figurines of black and red pottery for which the Falasha were so famous.

Overnight in Gondar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Gondar - Simien Mountains*

Today we travel by road into the Simien Mountains and the Simien Eco Lodge. The highest point, Ras Dashen (4620 m / 15,246 ft above sea level), is Africa's fourth highest peak. Numerous large rivers, including the Blue Nile, drain the highlands from east to west, towards the Nile Basin. From north to south, it's the Omo River, flowing into Lake Turkana. Our overnight location approaches 2800 m / 9,000 ft; not terribly high, but you will notice the thinness of the air and cold at night.

The Simiens stretch for over 40 kilometres with an almost two mile drop into the valley below. Our lodge is near Debarak, an area that is home to endemic animals such as Gelada baboons. Visitors are encouraged to explore the area on foot and learn about various ongoing eco-projects that preserve the fauna and flora and foster the economic development in the region as a whole.

Overnight in Simien National Park. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Simien Mountains - Axum*

Today we continue our journey north towards Axum (2202 m / 7,226 ft). This afternoon you may want to walk through part of the town or relax at our hotel, located on a hillside above Axum.

Axum (Aksum) was the centre of the (eventual) Christian marine trading power the Aksumite Kingdom, which predated the earliest mentions in Roman era writings (around the time of the birth of Jesus) in good correlation to the expansion of Rome into northern Africa, and later when it developed into the Christian kingdom, was a quasi-ally of Byzantium against the Persian Empire. The historical record is unclear; primary sources are limited mainly to ancient church records.

Overnight in Axum. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Axum: Area Tour*

Today we explore the wonders of ancient Axum, beginning with the Stelae Park. Carved completely from blocks of granite, these stelae are truly impressive. Although never erected, the largest stelae -- now broken into several pieces -- measures over 30 m (100 feet) long and dates from Ethiopia's pre-Christian era.

Our tour continues to the Archaeological Museum, and to St Mary of Zion Church. We will see the ruins of the original 4th century church, and view an amazing collection of church relics including crosses and ancient crowns. It is here that we will also see the building that houses Ethiopia's most sacred religious artifact, the supposed Ark of the Covenant.

We will wander through King Ezana's Park. Of particular interest is a tablet inscribed in three languages: Ge'ez, Sabean, and Greek. We will also visit the tomb of King Basen, who ruled Axum at the time of Christ's birth. This afternoon we will visit two sites located outside the modern town of Axum: the Palace of the Queen of Sheba, and King Kaleb's Palace. Both enjoy commanding views of the countryside -- lands that were once part of the powerful Axumite Kingdom.

On our late November departures, we watch the Hidar Zion Day processions and celebrations. This festival is attended by tens of thousands of people from all over Ethiopia, making it one of the most joyous annual pilgrimages in Axum, the "sacred city of the Ethiopians."

Overnight in Axum. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Axum - Mekelle*

Today we travel to Mekelle, the capital of the province of Tigre, a dry, rocky region.

Upon arrival in Mekelle, we can view the city's new war memorial, a towering monument reminding us of the many who lost their lives fighting a bitter struggle for a more democratic Ethiopia. According to local historians, Mekelle was founded in the 13th century. Its heyday came later during the late nineteenth century, after Yohannes IV was crowned as King of Kings of Ethiopia, and chose Mekelle as the capital of his realm.

Overnight in Mekelle. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Mekelle - Lalibela*

Today, as we travel from one valley to the next, we shall see a great variety of crops growing. Sugarcane, bananas, citrus fruits, wheat, barley, potatoes, and plenty of teff grow on the dry terraced mountainsides and valley floors. Teff, a short-stalked grain, produces the smallest grain in the world. Ethiopians mill it into flour used to make injera, the national bread.

Lalibela is the site of eleven rock-hewn churches dating from the 11th century. Each of the churches is architecturally unique and several are decorated with colourful, well-preserved paintings.

Overnight in Lalibela. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Lalibela*

Our January departure coincides with the Timkat Festival in Lalibela, the biggest celebration of the year in Ethiopia, marking the Epiphany every year on the 19th of January. Timkat is celebrated all over Ethiopia, but nowhere is it quite as spectacular as in Lalibela. The festival begins with Timkat Eve and dramatic processions through a night of fasting. Crowds of revelers, all dressed in white, sing and dance in the streets to the beating of drums. Priests, decked out in jewel encrusted velvet and satin robes, carry a replica of Arc of the Covenant known as a talbot in a grand procession through the streets.

On all departures we will visit both the western and eastern group of churches where we will spend time wandering through parts of the village.

Overnight in Lalibela. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Lalibela - Addis Ababa*

Today we fly from Lalibela back to Addis Ababa.

Overnight in Addis Ababa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Addis Ababa - Arba Minch*

This morning we begin our journey southwards to Arba Minch, the "town of many springs". The passes through a mountainous region and highland plateau covered with banana plantations and bamboo. Arba Minch is situated by lakes Chamo and Abaya, the most southerly of Ethiopia's Rift Valley lakes.

En route we stop at the UNESCO site of Tiya, which features a large collection of stelae. Originally forty-six stelae were erected in the cemetery here between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. Archaeological excavations show that the site contains graves. The stelae have carvings representing swords and various enigmatic signs quite unlike those of other regions. The tradition of erecting megalithic monuments is very ancient in Ethiopia; some date from before our era.

Overnight in Arba Minch (900m / 2,970 ft). Swaynes Hotel. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Arba Minch Area*

Today we visit the Dorze tribe, famed for their bee hive shaped houses and their weaving skills. Weaving is a primary profession for many Dorze. They are also farmers, who prevent soil erosion by ingenious terracing of the mountainsides. Around their huts they have their own little garden with vegetables, spices, tobacco and enset (false-banana or musa ensete).

This afternoon we take a refreshing boat trip on Lake Chamo, home to huge crocodiles, hippos and a variety of birdlife.

Overnight in Arba Minch. Swaynes Hotel. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Arba Minch - Jinka*

We continue our experience with tribal life with a visit to the Konso. A pagan society, the Konso erect eerie wooden totems replete with phallic symbols over the graves of the dead and have numerous cults based around the breeding and veneration of serpents. The cornerstone of Konso culture, however, is a highly specialized and successful agricultural economy that, through terracing buttressed with stone, enable these people to extract a productive living from the not-very-fertile hills and valleys that surround them. An excellent day to meet the people, take photographs with them and learn of a culture that has had very little outside influence.

Later afternoon arrival in Jinka, set at the foot of Mago National Park (440m / 1,450 ft).

The Omo Valley (average elevation 200-400m / 600-1,320 ft) is a virgin environment where tribal traditions have remained unchanged. The women still dress in elaborately decorated skins and the men celebrate adulthood with special coloured hair buns. There is a fascinating mix of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, from the Bume and Karo to the Bena, Mursi, and Hamar, coexisting in a harsh land that is all but forgotten by the rest of the world.

Overnight in Jinka. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Jinka - Mago National Park - Jinka*

Day excursion to Mago National Park to visit a Mursi village. The insertion of wooden and terracotta discs into the ear lobes is a widespread custom. Mursi women also progressively split and stretch their lower lips to make room for similar discs. Though these lip plates may appear bizarre to outsiders, the Mursi regard them as signs of beauty. Generally, the larger the lip plate the more desirable the wearer. At certain seasons, visitors may be lucky to chance on colourful and dramatic traditional ceremonies. Periodically young men of the Mursi and Surma tribes engage in ritual stick fighting. These duels are conducted with the utmost vigour since the winners are much admired by nubile girls. These are people who farm the land and breed livestock; they live in almost complete isolation from the rest of the world. We have an interesting day here seeing how the lifestyle of bygone days is still being lived.

The Omo Valley, part of the "Great African Rift", is located in the southwestern corner of Ethiopia and shares its borders with Kenya and Sudan. Many anthropologists consider it to be the birthplace of mankind; the entire region has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1980.

Overnight in Jinka. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Jinka - Dimeka - Turmi*

We drive towards Turmi across various villages browsing the different ethnic tribes all with their own unique culture and lifestyle. We visit Dimeka's colourful market and encounter the local people. The Omo Valley is so special because

nowhere else in the world are there so many ethnic groups inhabiting such a small area. During the next couple of days you'll encounter numerous peoples, all of whom have their own languages and, for the most part, have few interactions with each other.

Our destination today is Buska Lodge, named after Buska Mountain where the lodge is located, just outside the town of Turmi on the banks of the Keske River.

Overnight in Turmi. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Turmi Area*

Today's excursion involves encounters with various peoples, most notably the Karo. The most striking thing about Karo people's symbolic and ornamental expressions is the painted body and face decorations. This is an elaborate process, which ranges from fine and elaborate details to rough, but striking paintings traced with the palms or fingers. The most beautiful expression is in the facial and chest paintings that combine white (chalk), black (charcoal), yellow, ochre, and red earth. They often imitate the spotted plumage of a guinea fowl. Karo woman scarify their chests to beautify themselves .The complete scarification of a man's chest indicates that he has killed an enemy or a dangerous animal. The scars are cut with a knife or razor blade and ash is rubbed in to produce a raised effect. The wearing of a grey and ochre clay hair bun also indicates the killing of an enemy or a dangerous animal.

We also visit Dus, a typical settlement with open public meeting grounds and dancing place. The people living here have shelters called shuppa, where they pass the hottest hours of the day playing a Karo board game called Warre.

We return to Buska Lodge.

Overnight in Turmi. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 19 *Turmi - Arba Minch*

The road crosses soft rolling hills with dark red soil and plentiful crops and woods. We encounter the Konso, excellent farmers. These are pagan people, who erect totems on the tombs of their dead. Toward the Rift Valley, we may be lucky enough to see Beisa oryx, dik-dik, and lesser kudu. We can also keep an eye out for lesser bustards, secretary birds, and ostriches.

Overnight at Arba Minch. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Arba Minch - Awassa (Yirgalem)*

We travel through the Great Rift Valley, a 6000 km fault line that runs from Syria, under the Red Sea, across southern Ethiopia all the way to Mozambique. We pass Shashemene, the unofficial Ethiopian capital of the Rastafarian community. Our route passes all major lakes that dot the Rift Valley, a fertile land planted with bananas, cereals and tobacco, first inhabited by the Oromo people and then the Sidamo.

We arrive into Awassa, located on the edge of Lake Awassa. The lake is surrounded by mountains and populated by countless species of bird. There is a beautiful track running along the lakeside, perfect for a walk. After a short stay we drive to Yirgalem and the Aregash Ecological Lodge.

Overnight at Yirgalem. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Yirgalem - Addis Ababa*

This morning you have the opportunity for walking in the forest and relaxing at the lodge, nestled between coffee fields and lush vegetation.

We then depart Aregash for Lake Langano, a holiday resort with a splendid beach dotted with acacia trees. After a break for lunch at a local lodge, we continue by road to Addis via Debre Ziet Crater lakes.

Overnight in Addis Ababa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 22 *Depart*

Departure from Addis Ababa.

BON VOYAGE!! Meal plan: Breakfast.