

Tour Report

Ethiopia – A Unique Wonder

10 -24 November 2019

Gelada



Walia ibex



Great white pelican



Ethiopian wolf



Compiled by Ben Cherry

Tour Leader: Ben Cherry with 8 participants

Day 1: Depart UK

Monday 10 November 2019

Day 2: Arrive Addis Ababa

Tuesday 11 November 2019

Weather: sunny

Flying out on the overnight flight from London to Addis Ababa, I met the guests as they exited the airport alongside our local guide, Kibrom, and we headed to the Jupiter Hotel to allow everyone to relax and freshen up ahead of our afternoon tour of the city's cultural highlights. After a few hours we then headed to Lucy's restaurant for lunch for a first taste of Ethiopian food. Afterwards we headed to the national museum and Addis University to get a rounded understanding of Ethiopia's history, guided by Kibrom, who gave us some fantastic insights.

Day 3: Travelling to Simien Lodge, Simien Mountains

Wednesday 12 November 2019

Weather: sunny

Up bright and early we had a short morning flight to Gondar where we enjoyed freshly brewed Ethiopian coffee on a rooftop in central Gondar, before heading off in 4x4s to Debarq and the Simien Mountains. The group enjoyed *shiro* and *injira* bread for lunch in Debarq as we checked everyone into the national park and picked up our scouts. Leaving Debarq we came across vervet monkey, lanner falcon, lammergeier, kestrels, black chat and wheatear as well as a bachelor group of gelada just outside Simien Lodge. The group enjoyed the sunset from one of the many spectacular viewpoints around the lodge.

Day 4: Full Day Exploring Simien Mountains

Thursday 13 November 2019

Weather: sunny

After a good night's rest, and a chance to adapt to the colder evening temperatures and the altitude change, we headed out fuelled by a hearty breakfast to find a troop of geladas. We sat amongst them for two or so hours, watching their behaviour and giving the group opportunity to photograph different aspects of gelada life. I made my way around the group offering photographic advice to whoever was enjoying experimenting photographically, as well as soaking up the experience. At 11am we met up with American researchers who are studying the geladas and gave us an insight into their behaviour. We then returned to the lodge for lunch. Laying out some bones, we waited and were quickly rewarded with circling lammergeier, white backed vulture, tawny eagle and thick-billed ravens. As we meandered back towards the lodge we found another group of geladas to spend the rest of the afternoon with. Before our evening meal the researchers gave a presentation to our group about their work and offered up further gelada insights.

Day 5: Full Day Exploring Simien Mountains

Friday 14 November 2019

Weather: sunny

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Driving to Debark, which took about three hours or so, we made a few stops on the way to take in the views as we explored more of the Simiens. Above Debark campsite we came across four rare walia ibex amongst the stunning high-altitude vista. It was a real treat to witness them. Our picnic location was surrounded by circling thick-billed ravens and lammergeiers, the group had a chance to soak up the dramatic 1,500m drop below. Starting our slow journey back we stopped at Jinbar waterfall, and those guests who were comfortable with a short cliffside walk had a chance to witness one of the tallest waterfalls in Africa. In the late afternoon we discovered a group of geladas and sat amongst them as they slowly made their way down cliff faces for their evening sanctuary.

Day 6: Gondar Experience

Saturday 15 November 2019

Weather: sunny

A prompt morning getaway meant that we had descended to Gondar Hills Resort in time for lunch. Meandering down to the city we explored in and around Fasilides' Castle and Fasilides' Bath, learning about Gondar's history. We also saw the enchanting Debre Birhan Selassie Church, which gave us a taster of the cultural experiences still to come in Lalibela. For dinner we ate at the Four Sisters restaurant, which offers a wide range of delicious Ethiopian food.

Day 7: Exploring Lalibela

Sunday 16 November 2019

Weather: Sunny during the day; rain in the evening

We had a direct flight to Lalibela this morning, followed by a coaster bus transfer to our hotel. After lunch at the hotel we had a tour round six of the rock-hewn churches, with Kibrom giving us a valuable insight into their history and uniqueness. These UNESCO sites were truly something to behold and, amongst the tourists, are dedicated priests and pilgrims coming from all across Ethiopia to pray here. Dinner was at the hotel. Lammergeier and other birds of prey soared past our balconies throughout the day.

Day 8: Full Day in Lalibela

Monday 17 November 2019

Weather: Sunny, clouding over in the afternoon

An early getaway got us to Yemrehanna Kristos Church in a cave one and a half hours by coaster bus. The half-an-hour walk uphill and early start was worth it as we had the church to ourselves, which was a memorable experience. This gave the group time and space to set up photographs and have a more relaxed experience.

On our return journey to Lalibela we stopped at a settlement and had a fantastic experience gaining an insight into countryside life. The guests loved this genuine experience as it was reciprocated by our hosts who enjoyed the novelty of it.

Returning to Lalibela we had a buffet lunch at a nearby restaurant followed by a traditional coffee ceremony outside the churches. Some of the guests decided to have the afternoon off, while the rest of us visited the remaining churches in Lalibela. We enjoyed a more relaxed experience than the afternoon before, with some great photographic opportunities. For dinner we headed to

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Ababa Ben, a wacky restaurant set up by a retired Scottish teacher. Some of us then went through photography techniques later that evening.

Day 9: Fly to Awassa

Tuesday 18 November 2019

Weather: sunny

Today we flew from Lalibela to Addis, where we had a four-hour layover. I gave some guests photography lessons as we waited. Our connecting flight arrived in Hawassa about 4pm. After a short drive to the hotel, we organised an evening boat ride, on which we saw hippos, local fisherman against the setting sun and pelicans gorging on fish in quiet corners of the lake, as African fish eagles circled above.

Day 10: Drive to Bale Mountains

Wednesday 19 November 2019

Weather: sunny initially but rained from midday onwards

In the morning we very briefly took in the fish market at Awassa, where marabou storks walk amongst fishermen, as people feed scraps to pelicans patiently waiting nearby. Nearby we then found black colobus monkeys in a neighbouring arboretum. They let us get amazingly close, which provided superb opportunities to photograph them, while silvery cheeked hornbills squawked in the trees above. We then continued our long drive to the Bale Lodge, stopping at the park headquarters (with a packed lunch made by the hotel) to try to see some endemic antelope; we briefly saw mountain nyala, olive baboons and warthog. The heavens opened and it rained for much of the rest of the drive, and we finally arrived at the lodge about 6pm. Guests then settled into their rooms before returning to the main building for dinner.

Day 11: Full Day in Bale National Park

Thursday 20 November 2019

This morning we drove up to the Sanetti Plateau, spotting bale monkeys and black colobus monkeys en route. Other endemics recorded included blue-winged geese, white-collared pigeon, black-headed siskin, spot-breasted plover and ruddy shelduck. I spotted two Ethiopian wolves which all the guests were able to see and photograph before returning to the lodge for a late lunch. It rained for the rest of the afternoon so we used this as downtime before heading out on a night drive, though unfortunately the weather was against us.

Day 12: Full Day in Bale National Park

Friday 21 November 2019

Weather: rained for much of the day

During a full day up on the plateau we met up with two members of EWCP (Ethiopian wolf Conservation Programme) who walked around with us on the plateau, helping us to spot and shadow two wolves I spotted. We found out that the population has fallen by an estimated 75% in under a year. This is due to canine distemper and rabies being spread by domestic dogs coming up to the plateau with herders who are illegally grazing livestock in the area. We had a packed lunch on the plateau, where Mustafa, a community outreach officer, gave us an eye-opening insight into the Ethiopian wolf population and situation.

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We returned to the lodge mid-afternoon to relax after our high-altitude (4,000m) exertions. Returning in the mid-afternoon our group also saw agar buzzard, steppe eagle, giant molerat and crested lark.

Day 13: Full Day in Bale National Park

Saturday 22 November 2019

Weather: intermittent rain

We had an early start for a dawn chorus walk around the lodge, with Kibrom offering expert birding knowledge. Species we heard or saw included Abyssinian black-headed oriole, perfect sunbird, mountain thrush, pin-tailed whydah, streaky seedeater, Swainson's sparrow, Abyssinian slaty flycatcher and rufous-breasted sparrowhawk. Mid-morning many members of the group braved a tricky pathway to reach a nearby waterfall. We had lunch at the lodge, and many of the group went to watch some honey collecting: a man climbed a tree to a manmade hive, smoking out the bees and collecting fresh honeycomb for the guests to try. They also used their images from this event to create a photostory. That evening Guy, the lodge manager, gave the guests a talk on Ethiopian history before dinner.

Day 14: Drive back to Addis Ababa & depart

Sunday 23 November 2019

Weather: sunny

Leaving at 7.30am we drove all day, back to Addis, with various brief stops along the way and a packed lunch made by the lodge. We had a final evening meal at a restaurant close to the airport where we watched traditional dance and music before heading to the airport. We caught our flights back to the UK, arriving early the following day.

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Checklist



	Common Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14
	MAMMALS													
1	Walia ibex			✓										
2	Gelada		✓	✓	✓									
3	Ethiopian wolf										✓	✓		
4	Giant molerat										✓	✓		
5	Mountain nyala									✓	✓			
6	Starck's hare										✓	✓		
7	Bale monkey										✓			
8	Vervet monkey		✓						✓	✓				
9	Black colobus monkey								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Menelik's bushbuck									✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Warthog									✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Olive baboons									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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