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Go to Ethiopia for Ancient History, Jazz, and a Capital City on the Rise

by Alex Postman March 28, 2017



Photo by Raymond Meier

Bet Giyorgis, in Lalibela, is one of the 11 churches carved out of the hillside.

Head from the cradle of civilization to the new cultural hot spots of Addis Ababa.

As a history nerd and seeker who has read my fair share of Peter Matthiessen, I've found my peak travel moments have tended to occur on the crowded ghats of [Varanasi](#) alongside bathing sadhus or among the daveners by Jerusalem's Wailing Wall. There's something about seeing ancient ritual enacted in the present that is both disorienting and oddly reassuring in this increasingly deracinated world. Which is why Ethiopia found its way onto my Pinterest board.

Home to a 1,700-year-old Christian civilization, the country has long drawn pilgrims to its high-altitude rock churches and the palaces of royals who claimed to be descended from Israel's King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. But years of conflict—the toppling of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 by the

Marxist Derg, which ruled until 1991, and wars against Somalia and Eritrea—made Ethiopia a no-go until pretty recently. Today, the Chinese are investing in new highways and finishing an airline terminal and monorail in Addis, seat of the African Union, where the vibe is decidedly Make Ethiopia Great Again.

Despite all the new high rises going up in the capital, the city's charisma lies in the relics of its near past. It could be 1953 at [Tomoca Coffee](#), where beans are ground in vintage machines ([coffee](#) originated in Ethiopia, and the Italians—who occupied the country for a spell in the 1930s—introduced the macchiato); or 1969 in the mod lobby of the [Hilton Addis Ababa](#), where the city's elite used to weekend by Addis's best pool—still a great spot for a drink. Hit the National Museum of Ethiopia to see the 3.2-million-year-old bones of the hominid Lucy, dug up in the north; and the chaotic Merkato, Africa's largest outdoor market. Save time to dip into Addis's arts and music scenes, sparked, in part, by young expats who've moved back since the Derg (see below); base yourself at the [Sheraton Addis](#) and you might encounter some of these

characters in its clubby cocktail lounge, Stanley's.

Most visitors kick off their history crawl in Aksum, the fourth-century capital widely believed to be home to the Ark of the Covenant (said to contain Moses's tablets), but the Ark itself is off limits. Instead, fly an hour from Addis to Lalibela, to wander among 12th-century churches carved out of red rock and watch pilgrims in white *gabi* scarves arriving for worship at sunrise. Later, things get secular at a local *tej bet*, where you can swig honey wine out of carafes and dance *eskista*, which involves a lot of shimmying. Your base for the night: the traditionally thatched and spacious huts at the [Tukul Village Hotel](#).

A short flight takes you to the city of Gondar, where you'll explore crumbling castles of 17th-century emperors. Try *injera*, the national staple (a teff flatbread used to eat stewed meat and vegetables), and a traditional coffee ceremony at the [Four Sisters](#) before driving three hours past villages of wattle-and-daub huts to Simien Mountains National Park, which blankets a massif that tops out at 15,000 feet. (Be sure to book the minimalist-chic [Limalimo Lodge](#), with staggering valley views.) Spend the next day hiking among bands of Gelada monkeys and rare Walia ibex. Then puddle jump to Bahir Dar on Lake Tana, where a boat will take you around brightly painted monasteries, some dating from the 14th century, that dot the lake's islands. (The [Kuriftu Resort](#) has one of the few spas outside of Addis.) End with an afternoon walk beside the Blue Nile Falls, a tributary of the iconic river, whose force after the summer rains may trigger one last religious experience.



Photo by Raymond Meier

A café in Gondar, a former capital of Ethiopia.

Insider's Addis

New York-based abstract artist Julie Mehretu sounds off on her hometown.

Eat

On a clear day, one of my favorite spots is [Dashen](#), where you can have a leisurely lunch of the best Ethiopian food (don't miss the *kitfo*, or spiced ground beef) and beer under umbrellas in a setting from another time—a converted house and garden. The Black Rose, a flavorful hideaway in the second floor of a building in the lively Bole neighborhood, is all jazz, cocktails, and beautiful people. Everyone should experience a real *siga bet* (raw meat house). Yilma is the best, where chunks of fresh raw meat are dipped in *awaze*, spiced butter. It's unbelievably delicious.

See

There are fantastic cultural spaces all over the city, from the established [Gebre Kristos Museum of Modern Art](#) to the new [Addis Fine Art](#) gallery in Bole, for voices like photographer Michael Tsegaye and painter Merikokeb Berhanu. If you're lucky, you might happen upon a work of conceptual artist Berhanu Ashagrie, whose work challenges and marks the frenetic speed in which new development is erasing and devouring precious parts of old Addis Ababa.

Shop

Ethiopia is known for its traditional textiles and scarves and [Muya Abyssinian Crafts](#) is a gem. Both for the products—luscious cottons traditionally woven in magnificent color—and philosophy: Weavers are paid living and sustainable wages. One also can't miss Merkato, Africa's biggest open air market, a shopper's paradise with spices, cloth, cookware, carvings, baskets, bags, clothing, food, and animals—it's all there.



Getty
A January celebration of Epiphany in Addis Ababa.

Follow the Music

Tom Freston, media entrepreneur and MTV co-founder, on Addis Ababa's hopping jazz scene.

In the fading days of Emperor Haile Selassie's rule, the 1960's and early '70s, Addis Ababa was known as "Swinging Addis," grooving with a red-hot music scene of "Ethio-jazz." This new hybrid blended local tonalities with American jazz. Its seductive rhythms made for an exotic, hypnotic sound, but it all came to a dead stop in 1974 with the coup that installed the communist, fun-hating Derg. The musicians scattered