

THE SPEAR'S 500

TRAVEL GUIDE 2017

INCLUDING AVIATION AND YACHTS



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VIVA VELAA!

Elizabeth Hurley's love letter to her
favourite private island and her take
on nearby Cheval Blanc Randheli

QUEEN OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

William Cash takes a spring break
at Cyprus's Anassa resort

JANINE DI GIOVANNI • JASON COWLEY • RORY ROSS



A BLESSING IN THE SKIES...

Caroline Phillips sets off on a path to the Asheton Maryam Monastery on one of Africa's highest mountains, and finds the uplifting experience just divine



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Hundreds of people are weeping and wailing for those recently deceased. They're shrouded in white shawls over their heads, and their bodies are draped in white cloth, like exotic ghosts. They're sitting on the ground paying their respects. This is a regular Ethiopian Orthodox Christian practice. Meanwhile, an eagle soars above in a cobalt sky.

We walk inside the nearby subterranean medieval church. Here a holy priest in a red cloak with gold thread rubs his bronze processional cross over a villager's body to heal her. Another holds a ceremonial umbrella of red, blue and gold. A deacon is spreading holy ash on supplicants' foreheads, streaking them with grey. It's 6am and these are the locals in private worship in Lalibela, the 'Jerusalem of Ethiopia'.

There are drums beating, musicians chanting, and others jangling bronze 'system' instruments, moving their arms to symbolise the flagellation of Christ. Some worshippers are standing to pray, leaning on their wooden staffs; others are huddled on the red-stone ground, which is covered in rugs. It's a hauntingly biblical and beautiful sight.

Our guide, Abebe Assefa, beckons for us to leave these touching scenes, which have been re-enacted for centuries. We're actually going on a hike (organised by the luxury-tour operator Kibrán Tours). Some

people undertake overnight treks in the region, rugged ones with heavy-duty climbs. After all, there's Abuna Yosef waiting to be scaled — at nearly 4,300 metres it's one of Africa's highest peaks, and its slopes boast wild baboons — and there's also the Meket Plateau for the adventurous. But we're starting with a day's trek, a medium challenge. We're hiking to the Asheton Maryam Monastery, 3,150 metres up Abuna Yosef: two miles as the crow flies, but 600 steep metres above Lalibela.

As we start to clamber up the nearly vertical hill nearby, we encounter traffic jams: goatherds and farmers coming down to the weekly market. Some of them have walked 25 miles to get here. 'Selam,' they say ('Hello'), smiling, as they pass. Sometimes our way is obstructed by donkeys walking in the opposite direction. 'Mule ride to top?' a local asks. We demur. Apparently, even these sturdy creatures cannot manage certain sections of our proposed ascent.

Soon we forsake beneath us the spectacular twelfth-century rock-hewn underground churches of Lalibela with their turbaned priests and hundreds of pilgrims. We leave behind us places of worship such as Bét Giyorgis (St George's), a beautiful building that's sculpted in the shape of a Greek cross and dug out of the ground. All churches that — legend has it — were built, in part, at night by celestial workforces. It's a notion that's hard to disbelieve.



As we haul ourselves up the rocky face of the hillside, we become slightly breathless from the altitude. 'I've carried clients when they've got tired,' Abebe, 29, explains. A toothless woman (she must be seventy-something, and the average life expectancy here is 62) sits surveying the view over the mountains and valleys. We gaze with her at hills covered with bright yellow flowers. 'The Meskel flower,' Abebe reveals, pointing. 'They appear only in the rainy season.'

We wander on, past fields of fluorescent green and others of wheat, barley and chickpeas — all worked by cows yoked with traditional wooden ploughs. Past acres of peas and beans. Past mud and thatched houses (animals downstairs, people upstairs) where villagers are burning cow dung for fuel, its smell pungent in the air. Otherwise, the mountain air is as clear as eucalyptus. And peaceful. That is, apart from the ringing sound of kids asking, 'Hello, *selam*, you got birr [the local currency]?'

After 90 minutes of rigorous hiking through scenery to rival that in heaven, we sit, exhilarated, under a tree. We shelter under it from a brief sprinkling of warm rain and eat our picnic of papaya and hard-boiled eggs. Soon ten locals join us, opening their bags and setting up on the earth a "market" of pottery figurines and pocket-size traditional African houses. 'Want buy?' they say. We shake our heads but offer them gifts instead, Western luxuries or things we think they may find useful.

A woman in ragged clothes scrutinises a make-up compact we give her. She looks baffled.

'She wants to know,' Abebe translates, "'Is this paint?'"

He then reveals that the villagers don't use make-up. 'And these packets?' he asks, quizzically.

I explain about condoms, he translates, and they look bewildered.

'The children can blow them up as balloons,' I add. This hits the spot and they run off laughing.

'What are these?' he asks, turning his attention to another box.

'Well, they're for women when they have, you know...' I gesture shyly to my genital region. The locals investigate the box of tampons with great curiosity. Their eyes widen as they take them out and open them. Somewhere in an Ethiopian village, right now, they're being used as paintbrushes.

Soon it's time to move on. There are some more mules waiting nearby for those who don't want to scale the final ascent. Some Americans hop on board. But we set off happily again on foot. This time, we spy hyraxes, vultures and aloe plants. And eucalyptus woods. After 40 minutes, we reach the monastery. The local priests believe they're closer to God and heaven here — and it's easy to see why. The mountain scenery beats that in Adam and Eve's garden.

The monastery's construction is believed to span King Lalibela and King Na'akueto La'ab's (twelfth- to thirteenth-century) reigns; it's even claimed that the latter lies buried in the chapel. It is carved out of a cleft in the cliff-face. 'Semi-monolithic, which means partly built into the cave,' Abebe divulges. 'It was built in 1137. Please take your shoes off to enter.' Inside, the dark chapel is heady with the woody scent of incense.

We sit on a bench carved from rock and covered with a rug, as we're transported to centuries past. A priest in a white turban lights the cotton string wick of a hand-made beeswax candle. It casts a mystical glow as he shows us some treasures.

'This is the Lalibela Cross, that's an Axum one. Thirteenth-century, bronze,' Abebe reveals. Then the priest takes out a holy book painted in natural pigments (vegetable dyes of coffee and the like) on a 'parchment' of goatskin. 'Thirteenth-century,' he says, cheerily prodding the pictures with his finger and smiling beatifically.

The priest then blesses a man who, for this purpose, has fasted from the evening before. And, with the priest's blessing on us, too — despite our fed tummies — we leave and begin our slippery descent to Lalibela.

How long does the hike take and when to go? Well, we left the UK in 2016, on a swanky and newly launched Ethiopian Airlines Airbus A350, the first to fly in African skies, and found ourselves travelling in the thirteenth month of 2008. That's September, according to the Ethiopian calendar. It was the sunny end of the rainy season — and our steady clamber took six hours in total, including our stops.

Some choose to hike further towards heaven after the monastery, to reach the mountain's summit and look down, like soaring eagles, on the Monastery of Asheton Maryam. Apparently, it's a strenuous, narrow and vertically challenging climb. We didn't do it. But at least we got some celestial Brownie points. I forgot to say: we negotiated a narrow path with a steep, vertiginous drop near the monastery. And we beat the mule train. *J*

FROM FAR LEFT:
ST GEORGE'S
CHURCH (TOP
AND BOTTOM);
THE MOUNTAINS
IN THE DISTANCE;
THE CHURCH; A
ROOM IN BALE
MOUNTAIN LODGE

DESTINATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

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After 90
minutes of
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