

Treasures of an ancient land

A trip to Ethiopia yielded all kinds of riches, not least an outstanding guide, as traveller Marion Toms tells **Amy Dixon**

Marion Toms is a veteran of the guided tour, having travelled on around 30 over the last 10 years. Last November she went on the 15-day Discover Ethiopia tour with Exodus, which goes north in a loop from Addis Ababa, up to Axum, and then south to the Rift Valley.

What was the group like?

There were 17 of us and there was a good mix of gender, marital status, and nationalities. One of the nice things about Exodus trips is that they often have a lot of single people, which makes for good mixing.

What was your guide like?

The quality of guides is very important, I think, on group holidays. Exodus uses lots of local guides on its tours, and our Ethiopian guide Gebré, was excellent. He was very knowledgeable about religion and history, which were vital factors on this tour, and was also able to talk all about the farming areas we passed through, because he comes from a rural background. He is the only guide I've met who knew about wild flowers as well as birds, and carries a guide book with him to pass around. He also cared about people and sorted out any issues calmly.

Any surprises?

Ethiopia is mountainous and much greener than I had anticipated; the stereotype picture you may have of it is of a dry desert, but the part we visited wasn't like that. The Simien mountains and the Rift Valley have fantastic scenery and lovely flowers, scattered with wattle and daub hamlets.

What were the highlights?

There were so many but the rock churches at Lalibela, which were built as part of an intended new Jerusalem in the 13th century, are remarkable.

The tops of the 11 churches are at ground level, and are hewn out of rock to a depth of 100 feet, which means you go down steps to get to the floor of the church. You'd imagine it would have taken centuries to carve them out, but it's soft volcanic rock and they say it took around 24 years.

I didn't know anything about Ethiopian history before I went, but we learned so much – and it was fascinating. They have a very distinctive form of Christianity, strongly linked with Judaism.

As with many ancient cultures, fact and legend are intertwined, but the basis of their religion is that Queen of Sheba had an affair with Solomon and produced a child, who became the first emperor in the Solomonic line. This line is then believed to have continued all the way to Haile Selassie, who was deposed in the 1970s. We also visited Axum, where they believe they have the genuine Arc of the Covenant – but nobody ever sees it except the highest priest in the land.

We visited an impressive medieval castle at Gondar, and the source of the Blue Nile at Bahir Dar, although the famous falls there are a shadow of their former selves due to a dam project. We also had an excellent walking day in the mountains.

In Lalibela,

I chose not to go on a mule ride to a hilltop monastery, and went to a festival in the town where we were able to observe some religious ceremonies. We watched the priests in their white robes intoning in an old

Ethiopian language, playing drums, singing and shaking incense. They also carry a *chera* – basically a horse's tail on a stick, to flick the flies away. The ceremony was far removed from any form of worship I'd seen elsewhere.

What wildlife did you spot?

We saw lots of pelicans at close range, as well as vultures, parrots and osprey. Then, on the way to Wendo Genet, a town in the Rift valley with hot springs, we saw five hippos in a river. The trip was a good mixture of heritage and culture, with incredible terrain and wildlife.

What was the travelling like?

We took internal flights and went by bus, which could be slow because although the roads

were Tarmacked, people would be driving goats along, or women would be sitting having a get-together of some sort. But there was always plenty to see.

The only uncomfortable part was a 10-hour journey on a bumpy dirt road to the Simien mountains, but the views were spectacular. And you get glimpses of what life is like for people in the highlands: they have lots of water, but primitive agricultural systems – they were ploughing and threshing the wheat with oxen. It's labour-intensive but the land is in pretty good order.

And were the hotels good?

The slightly disconcerting thing about the hotels is that in the Seventies they were run by the communist party. So five or six of them have the same décor – you wake up and you are not sure quite which place you are in! But an **Exodus** holiday isn't about luxury accommodation, it's for people who are more interested in what the country

has to offer. In practice this meant lots of wake-up calls at 6.30am so that we could set off early to make the most of the day before it got too hot in the middle of the day.

Any trouble?

When we trekked in the Simien mountains we were joined by three security guards with guns, which made us aware that there were dangers. But we didn't ever feel unsafe – people were welcoming and eager to meet us. The Foreign Office tells people not to go near the border with Eritrea, but we were a good day's drive away from there.

Obviously the situation is something all travellers should check before going, but we never felt threatened.

Overall verdict?

It's probably the best tour I've done because it was such a good mix of culture, flora and fauna, and ran so smoothly, which I'm sure, in great part, was down to Gebré, our guide.

Way to go

Exodus offers a 15-day Discover Ethiopia tour, with departures from September 20, 2010.

From £1,999pp, including flights. (0845 863 9600; www.exodus.co.uk)

Captain's Choice

offers a 19-day Remote Africa tour, departing November 6, 2010, that includes a trip to Addis Ababa and Lalibela in Ethiopia. **From**

£13,495, including flights. (020 8877 1463; www.captainschoice.co.uk)

Voyages Jules Verne

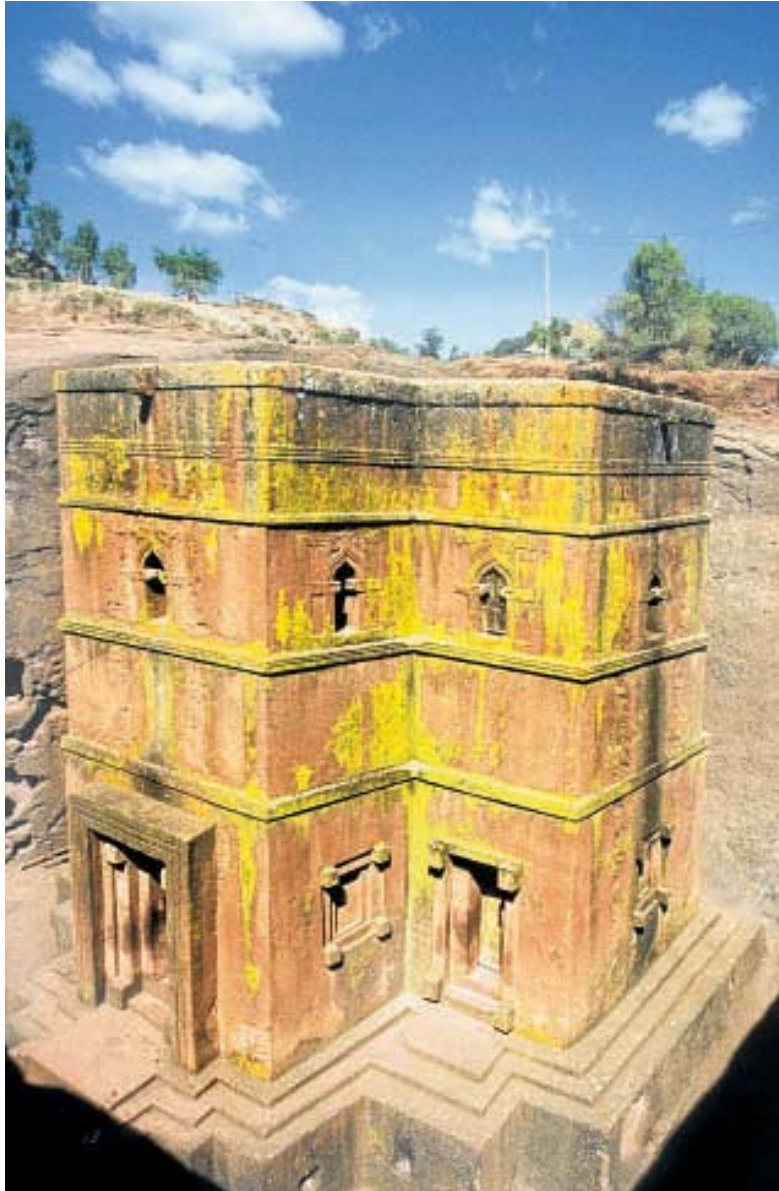
offers a 12-night Abyssinia & the Blue Nile tour, with departures from October 1, 2010.

From £2,097pp, including flights. (0845 166 7003; www.vjv.co.uk)

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The trip was a great mix of culture, incredible scenery and wildlife





Prize sights :
 clockwise from above,
 Beta Giorgis Church
 and priests reading
 from bibles, Lalibela;
 sacred artefacts at
 Axum; the Blue Nile
 Falls at Bahir Dar;
 children from the
 Simien mountains