



Snapshot Ethiopia

Political change is once again in the Ethiopian air. The May 2005 elections showed substantial cracks in public support for Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party, which has had a stranglehold on Ethiopian government since 1991. Although Zenawi still maintains power, he must now face a country divided. Election results show a rift between rural areas that back the EPRDF, and the urban areas that back opposition parties like the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). Zenawi's strict postelection reprisals on opposition party politicians and members of the public protesting the election results, due to EU reported election irregularities, sent shock waves through the country (see p40). These controversial elections and the subsequent fallout will likely continue to be the hot topic among Ethiopians until they next head to the polls in 2010.

Unless you've had your head in the proverbial sand, you'll have heard of the continuing border squabbles between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Oh, you've just come from the Sahara and have actually had your head in the sand? Well, there have been no military clashes since 2000, but the continued failure to officially demarcate the border means tensions are still high. In late 2005 large military movements on both sides of the border caused international concern and the UN mission observing the no-man's-land between the nations almost pulled out before tempers finally cooled. Despite the borderland in question being barren and holding no economic, religious or historical value, many Ethiopians are passionate about getting back the land awarded to Eritrea by the 2002 border commission. Much of the anti-Eritrea sentiment is fuelled by the economic hardship faced by Ethiopia since the 1998–2000 war (see p39).

Ethiopia's inconsistent economy suffers from two major and persistent weaknesses: food insecurity and a near total dependency on coffee for foreign-exchange earnings. Agriculture provides the livelihood for 85% of Ethiopians, but drought, pests and severe soil erosion due to deforestation (see p67) continue to keep agricultural yields erratic and low. Horticulture, namely the production of fresh flowers, may soon blossom (excuse the pun). It's already a US\$360-million industry in Kenya and with Kenya losing its favourable developing nation trade status with the EU in 2007, Ethiopia may take over the reigns.

Tourism is also thought to have great growth potential for Ethiopia's economy and foreign investment is now being encouraged. However, hyped media reports of famines, tensions with Eritrea and the fallout from the last election continue to hinder growth in this sector.

When Ethiopians aren't discussing politics, money or religion, they'll more than likely be talking about sports. This is one subject of conversation that you should definitely feel free to jump into. They're most passionate about running (p47), and so they should be! Their men and women are completely dominating the middle distance races these days. Like mobile phones, satellite TVs have proliferated in urban Ethiopian society of late and spawned a legion of mad Manchester United and Arsenal football fans. They must love one or the other – loving an Italian team isn't an option!

FAST FACTS

- Population: 73 million
- Life expectancy: 48.83 years
- GDP per capita: US\$800
- Biggest annual exports: coffee (US\$335 million) and *chat* (US\$99 million)
- Inflation: 6%
- Average number of plaits in the Tigrayan *shoruba* hairstyle: 38
- Average time taken for coffee ceremony: 28.3 minutes
- Number of world records broken by Ethiopian runners: 31
- 24,748 days: length of time Italy took to return Aksum's obelisk.
- US\$7.7 million: Italy's cost of returning the obelisk (inflation's a bitch!)

History

From the ancient Aksumite civilisation's obelisks and the fascinating architectural wonders of medieval Lalibela to the castles of Gondar and the communist monuments of the Derg, Ethiopia wears its history on its sleeve. And what a history it is.

CRADLE OF HUMANITY?

In palaeoanthropology, where years are measured in tenths of millions, 40 years is less than a blink of an eye. However, 40 years worth of palaeoanthropological study can rock the very foundations of human history.

After Richard Leakey's discovery of skull 1470 near Kenya's Lake Turkana in 1972, which proved *Homo habilis* (the direct ancestor of *Homo sapiens*) had lived alongside *Australopithecus africanus* and therefore couldn't have evolved from them, the search was on for a new species that had branched into the genera *Homo* and *Australopithecus*, a species that would likely be Darwin's 'missing link'.

On 30 November 1974 Lucy was discovered in a dried-up lake near Hadar in Ethiopia's northeast. She was a new species, *A. afarensis*, and she miraculously walked on two legs 3.2 million years ago. Lucy's bipedal (upright walking) anatomy also shattered previous theories that hypothesised our ancestors only started walking upright after evolving larger brains. Lucy, the oldest and most complete hominid ever found, was famous and Ethiopia was tipped to claim the prize as the cradle of humanity.

After further finds in Ethiopia, like the 1992 discovery of the 4.4-million-year-old *A. ramidus*, whose foot bones hinted at bipedism, the ink on Ethiopia's claim was almost dry. However recent CT scans on a six-million-year-old hominid skeleton (*Orrorin tugenensis*) found in Kenya in 2001, and computer aided reconstruction of a six- to seven-million-year-old skull (*Sahelanthropus tchadensis*) in Chad seem to suggest that Lucy and *A. ramidus* may not be part of the direct line of human evolution, but rather a lateral branch of it. This is undoubtedly highly controversial – visit Lucy in Addis Ababa's National Museum (p85) and show her some support!

Regardless of what still lies beneath the soil of Ethiopia, Kenya or Chad, it's clear to the palaeoanthropologists of today that human life as we know it started in this region of Africa. Although, 40 more years of palaeoanthropology may turn things upside down, again. All it takes is the blink of an eye.

LAND OF PUNT

Though this period is shrouded in darkness, Ethiopia and Eritrea are believed to have formed part of the ancient Land of Punt (p296), an area that attracted the trading ships of the Egyptian Pharaohs for millennia.

Many valuable commodities such as gold, myrrh, ivory and slaves issued from the interior of the region and were exported from the coast.

It's thought the northern coastal region saw much migration from surrounding areas, and by 2000 BC it had established strong contacts with the inhabitants of southern Arabia.

Lucy was named after the Beatles' song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. It was playing in the archaeologists' camp when she was discovered.

PRE-AKSUMITE CIVILISATION

The cultural significance of the southern Arabian and the East African cultures mixing was enormous. One consequence was the emergence of a number of Afro-Asiatic languages, including Ge'ez which laid the foundation for modern Amharic (much like Latin did for Italian). Amazingly, Ge'ez script is still read by many Christian priests in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Most significant was the rise of a remarkable civilisation in Africa's Horn in 1500 BC. The fact that the influence of southern Arabia was so clear (the Sabaeen script and in the worship of Sabaeen gods), that the civilisation appeared to mushroom overnight and was very localised, and that it benefited from specialist crafts, skills and technologies previously unknown in the area, led many scholars to believe that the civilisation was spawned by Arabian settlers and not Africans.

However, scholars of late argue with great conviction that this civilisation was indeed African and while undoubtedly influenced by Sabaeen ideas, it developed from within from local effort and initiative. If proved correct, histories of the Horn will have to be completely rewritten.

Whatever the origin, the civilisation was a very important one. The most famous relic of the times is the extraordinary stone 'temple' of Yeha (p143).

KINGDOM OF AKSUM

The Aksumite kingdom, which grew to rank among the most powerful kingdoms of the ancient world, was the next civilisation to rise in present-day Ethiopia. The first written evidence of its existence (*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written by a Greek-speaking Egyptian sailor) was from the 1st century AD, but by this point its realm of influence was wide, suggesting it rose to prominence much earlier. New archaeological evidence hints it may have emerged as early as 400 BC.

Aksum, its capital, is thought to have owed its importance to its position, lying at an important commercial crossroads. To the northwest lay Egypt, and to the west, near the present-day Sudanese border, were the rich, gold-producing lowlands. To the northeast, in present-day Eritrea, was the Aksumite port of Adulis, positioned at the crux of an extensive trading route. Exports included frankincense, grain, animal skins, rhino horn, apes and particularly ivory (tens of thousands of elephants were reported to roam the region). Imports of dyed cloaks, cheap unlined coats, glassware, and iron for making spears, swords and axes flowed in from Egypt, Arabia and India. Syrian and Italian wine and olive oil (then considered a luxury) were also imported, as was much gold and silver plate for the king. The flourishing trade allowed the Aksumite kingdom to thrive.

Aksum also benefited from its well-watered agricultural lands, which were further exploited by the use of well-designed dams, wells and reservoirs.

During its heyday between the 3rd and 6th centuries, the Aksumite kingdom stretched into large parts of southern Arabia, and west into the Sudanese Nile Valley. Aksumite society was rich, well organised, and technically and artistically advanced. During this era, an unparalleled coinage in bronze, silver and gold was produced and extraordinary

According to the Greek poet Homer (800 BC), the Greek gods, including Zeus himself, visited Ethiopia. Homer refers to the people as 'blameless Ethiopians'.

TIMELINE 3.2 million years ago

Lucy collapses and awaits discovery and fame 3.2 million years down the line

3500–2000 BC

As part of the Land of the Punt, natural resources and slaves are reaped from Ethiopia's interior and shipped abroad

1500–400 BC

An Arabian-influenced civilisation rises in northern Ethiopia; the country's first capital, Yeha, is founded

400 BC–AD 200

The great Aksumite kingdom is formed and thrives on Red Sea trade and rich natural resources

monuments were built, all of which are visible in Aksum today (see p131). The kingdom also exerted the greatest influence of all on the future of Ethiopia: it introduced Christianity.

THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY

The Ethiopian church claims that Christianity first reached Aksum at the time of the apostles. According to the Byzantine ecclesiastical historian Rufinus, it arrived on Ethiopian shores by accident rather than by design, when a Christian merchant from Syria, returning from a long voyage to India with his two young students, stopped for water on Africa's coast.

What's certain is that Christianity didn't become the state religion until around the beginning of the 4th century. King Ezana's stone inscription (p139) makes reference to Christ, and his famous coins bear the Christian Cross – the world's first to do so.

The end of the 5th century AD brought the famous Nine Saints, a group of Greek-speaking missionaries who established well-known monasteries in the north of the country, including Debre Damo (p144). At this time, the Bible was first translated from Greek into Ge'ez.

Christianity shaped not just Ethiopia's spiritual and intellectual life, but also its cultural and social life, including its art and literature. Today almost half of Ethiopia's population is Orthodox Christian.

THE COMING OF ISLAM & THE DEMISE OF AKSUM

According to Muslim tradition, the Prophet Mohammed was nursed by an Ethiopian woman. Later, the Muslim Hadith (collection of traditions about Mohammed's life) recounts that Mohammed sent some of his followers to Negash in AD 615, to avoid persecution in Arabia.

The refugees were shown hospitality and, it's said, Aksum's Christian King Armah liked them so much that he hoped they'd stay. However, when things calmed in Arabia, most refugees returned. However, Negash continued to be a crucial pilgrimage point for Ethiopia's Muslims (see p147).

Good relations between the two religions continued until at least King Armah's death. Thereafter, as the Arabs and Islam rose to prominence on the opposite side of the Red Sea, trade slowly shifted away from Christian Aksum and it eventually became isolated. The economy slumped, coins ceased to be minted and hard times set in. Aksum's commercial domination of the region was over (see the boxed text, p132).

After Aksum's decline around 700 AD, Ethiopia endured what is commonly known as its 'dark age'. Compared with the archaeological bounties left behind by the Aksumite kingdom and the architectural wonders of the Zagwe four centuries later in Lalibela, this period is almost completely devoid of history.

THE ZAGWE DYNASTY

The 12th century witnessed a new capital (Adafa) rise in the mountains of Lasta, not far from present day Lalibela. It was established under a new power: the Zagwe dynasty.

Although the Zagwe dynasty reigned from around AD 1137 to 1270, and left the astonishing rock-hewn churches of Lalibela for you to see today (see p155), this period is still shrouded in mystery. Seemingly, no

Those intrigued by the ancient civilisation of Aksum should pick up Professor David W Phillipson's *Ancient Ethiopia*. It's excellent and is an easy read.

Ethiopia was named by the Greeks, who saw the country as a far-off realm, populated by remarkable people and extraordinary animals. It means 'Land of the Burnt Faces'.

ITINERANT COURTS

During the Ethiopian Middle Ages, the business of most monarchs consisted of waging wars, collecting taxes and inspecting the royal domains.

Obligated to travel continuously throughout their far-flung empire, the kings led a perpetually nomadic existence. And with the rulers went their armies, courtiers and servants; the judges, prison officers and priests; the merchants, prostitutes and a whole entourage of artisans: butchers and bakers, chefs, tailors and blacksmiths. The camps could spread over 20km; for transportation up to 100,000 mules were required.

The retinue was so vast that it rapidly exhausted the resources of the location. Four months was usually the maximum possible length of stay, and 10 years had to pass before the spot could be revisited.

The peasantry were said to dread the royal visits as they dreaded the swarms of locusts. In both cases, everything that lay in the path of the intruders was consumed.

stones were inscribed, no chronicles written, no coins minted, and no accounts of the dynasty by foreign travellers have survived.

It's not certain what brought the Zagwe dynasty to an end; it was likely a combination of infighting within the ruling dynasty and local opposition from the clergy. In 1270 the dynasty was overthrown by Yekuno Amlak; political power shifted south to the historical province of Shoa.

THE ETHIOPIAN MIDDLE AGES

Yekuno Amlak, claiming to be a descendant of King Solomon and Queen Sheba, established the 'Solomonic dynasty' that would reign for the next 500 years. His rule would also ring in the start of what's known as the Ethiopian Middle Ages, a period more documented than any other in the nation's past.

With its all-powerful monarchy and influential clergy, the Middle Ages were a continuation of the past. However, unlike the past, the kingdom's capitals were itinerant and were little more than vast, moving military camps. There was no longer minted money and trade was conducted by barter with pieces of iron, cloth or salt.

Culturally, the period was important for the significant output of Ge'ez literature, including the nation's epic, the *Kebra Negast* (p56). It was also at this time that contacts with European Christendom began to increase. With the rising threat of well-equipped Muslim armies in the East, Europe was seen as a Christian superpower.

Europe, for its part, dreamed of winning back Jerusalem from the 'Saracens', and realised the important strategic position occupied by Ethiopia. At the time, it was almost the only Christian kingdom outside Europe. Ethiopia even became a candidate for the location of legendary Prester John, an immensely wealthy and powerful Christian monarch believed to reign in a far-off land in the East. It was hoped that one day, he'd join Europe's kings in a mighty crusade against the infidel.

In the early 15th century, the first European embassy arrived in Ethiopia, sent by the famous French aristocrat Duc de Berry. Ethiopians in their turn began to travel to Europe, particularly to Rome, where many joined churches already established there.

Check out J Spencer Trimmingham's *Islam in Ethiopia* for an insight into Ethiopia's second religion.

200–500

The Aksumite kingdom reaches its apogee; magnificent monuments are raised and tremendous tombs are sunk

300–325

Aksum's Great Stele collapses; the catastrophic event signals the end of paganism and the birth of Christianity in Ethiopia

615

Prophet Mohammed's daughter and successor flee persecution in Arabia and eventually introduce Islam to Ethiopia at Negash

640–750

The Aksumites lose their hold on Red Sea trade and the kingdom collapses

THE MUSLIM–CHRISTIAN WARS

The first decades of the 16th century were plagued by some of the most costly, bloody and wasteful fighting in Ethiopian history, in which the entire empire and its culture came close to being wiped out.

From the 13th century, relations with the Muslim Ethiopian emirates of Ifat and Adal were showing signs of strain. With the increasing competition for control of the valuable trade routes connecting the Ethiopian highlands with the Red Sea, tension was growing.

In the 1490s animosities came to a head. After establishing himself at the port of Zeila in present-day Somalia, a skilled and charismatic Muslim named Mahfuz declared a jihad against Christian Ethiopia and made 25 annual raids into the highlands of Shoa. Emperor Lebna Dengel finally halted Mahfuz's incursions, but not before he had carried off huge numbers of Ethiopian slaves and cattle.

An even more legendary figure was Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi, nicknamed 'Ahmed Gagn the Left-Handed'. After overthrowing Sultan Abu Bakr of Harar, Ahmed declared his intention to continue the jihad of Mahfuz. Carrying out several raids into Ethiopian territory, he managed in March 1529 to defeat Emperor Lebna Dengel himself.

Ahmed then embarked on the conquest of all of Christian Ethiopia. Well supplied with firearms from Ottoman Zeila and southern Arabia (which he pragmatically exchanged for captured Christian slaves), the Muslim leader had, by 1532, overrun almost all of eastern and southern Ethiopia.

In 1535 the Emperor Lebna Dengel appealed in desperation to the Portuguese, who were already active in the region. In 1541 an army of 400 well-armed musketeers arrived in Massawa (in present-day Eritrea), led by Dom Christovão da Gama, son of the famous mariner Vasco da Gama. They met Ahmed near Lake Tana, where he quickly routed them before lopping off the young and foolhardy head of Dom Christovão.

In 1543 the new Ethiopian emperor, Galawdewos, and his amassed army joined ranks with the surviving Portuguese force and met Ahmed at Wayna Daga in the west. This time, the Christians' huge numbers proved too powerful and Ahmed was killed, and his followers fled. However, Muslim raids led by Ahmed's wife and nephew continued in the years following. In infuriation, and without the back-up of his main army, Galawdewos attacked the rich trading Muslim city of Harar in 1559. He met the same fate as Dom Christovão, and his head was paraded around Harar on a stick.

The Muslim–Christian wars were terribly costly. Thousands of people lost their lives, the Christian monarchy was nearly wiped out, and the once mighty Muslim state of Adal lay in ruins. Many of the most beautiful churches and monasteries in Ethiopia, along with their precious manuscripts, church relics and regalia, lay in ashes.

OROMO MIGRATIONS & THE JESUITS

A new threat to the Ethiopian empire arose in the mid-16th century, filling the power vacuum left behind by the weakened Muslims. The nomadic pastoralists and warrior horsemen of the Oromos (known to the Amharas as Gallas, a pejorative term) began a great migration northwards from what's now Kenya.

For the next 200 years intermittent armed conflict raged between the empire and the Oromos. For the empire, the Oromo expansion meant loss of territory and vital tax revenue. The Oromos also challenged the old Muslim state; the old city walls seen in Harar today (see p226) were built in response to Oromo conflicts.

Early in the 17th century the Oromo threat led several Ethiopian emperors to seek an alliance with the Portuguese-backed Jesuits. Two emperors, Za-Dengel and Susenyos, even went as far as conversion to Catholicism. However, imposing Catholicism on their population provoked widespread rebellion. Za-Dengel was overthrown and, in 1629, Susenyos' draconian measures to convert his people incited civil war.

As many as 32,000 peasants are thought to have lost their lives in the bloodshed that followed, most at the hands of Susenyos' army. Eventually Susenyos backed down and the Orthodox faith was reestablished.

Susenyos' son and successor, Fasiladas, expelled the meddling Jesuits and forbade all foreigners to set foot in his empire. For nearly 130 years only one European, a French doctor Charles Poncet, was allowed to enter Ethiopia. He famously wrote about Emperor Iyasu's grandeur in *A Voyage to Ethiopia* (translation).

Though the Jesuits' interference had caused great suffering and bloodshed in Ethiopia, they left behind one useful legacy: books. Pero Pais wrote the first serious history of the country. Other writings included detailed accounts of Ethiopia's cultural, economic and social life.

With the rising Ottoman hold in the east, and the Oromo entrenchment in the south, the political authority of Shoa had become increasingly circumscribed. It was time to relocate the centre of power – again.

THE RISE & FALL OF GONDER

In 1636, following the old tradition of his forefathers, Emperor Fasiladas decided to found a new capital. However Gonder was different from its predecessors: it was to be the first permanent capital since Lalibela. Fasiladas' plan worked and Gonder flourished for well over a century.

By 17th century's close, Gonder boasted magnificent palaces, beautiful gardens and extensive plantations. It was also the site of sumptuous feasts and extravagant court pageantry, attracting visitors from around the world. Its thriving market even drew rich Muslim merchants from across the country.

Under the ample patronage of church and state, the arts and crafts flourished. Impressive churches were built, among them the famous Debre Berhan Selassie, which can be seen to this day (see p122). Outside Gonder, building projects included some remarkable churches at Lake Tana's historic monasteries (p115).

But not all was sweet in Gonder's court, and between 1706 and 1721 everyone from royal bodyguards, the clergy and nobles to ordinary citizens tried their hand at conspiracy. Assassination, plotting and intrigue became the order of the day, and the ensuing chaos reads like something out of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. No less than three monarchs held power during this turbulent period, at least one meeting a sticky, poisonous end. Emperor Bakaffa's reign (1721–30) briefly restored stability, during

Mahfuz timed his annual raids to take advantage of Christian Ethiopia's weakened state during their 55-day-long fast before Fasika (Orthodox Easter).

'Not all was sweet in Gonder's court... everyone from royal bodyguards... to ordinary citizens tried their hand at conspiracy.'

1137–1270

The Zagwe dynasty rises from Ethiopia's 'dark ages' and produces the astounding rock-hewn churches of Lalibela

1270

Yekuno Amlak establishes the 'Solomonic dynasty' and Ethiopia enters its well-documented Middle Ages

1490

Mahfuz declares jihad on Christian Ethiopia and starts the bloody Muslim–Christian wars, the most costly in the country's history

1543

Emperor Galawdewos, with help from the Portugal, finally defeats and kills Muslim raider Ahmend Gagn the Left-Handed

which time new palaces and churches were built, and literature and the arts once again thrived.

However, by the time of Iyasu II's death in 1755, the Gonder kingdom was back in turmoil. The provinces started to rebel. Ethnic rivalries surfaced and came to head in a power struggle between the Oromo people, who'd become increasingly absorbed into the court, and the Tigrayan ruler, Ras Mikael Sehul. Assassination and murder again followed and central government fell apart.

Between 1784 and 1855 the emperors were little more than puppets in the hands of rival feudal lords and their powerful provincial armies. The country disintegrated and civil war became the norm. After Gonder's renaissance, Ethiopia had stepped right back into the dark ages. Thankfully, much of Gonder's architectural grandeur survived and remains intact (see p118).

Ethiopian historians later referred to the time after Iyasu II's death as the period of the *masafent* (judges), after the reference in the Book of Judges 21:25 when 'every man did that which was right in his own eyes'.

EMPEROR TEWODROS

After the fallout of Gonder, Ethiopia existed only as a cluster of separate and feuding fiefdoms. That was until the mid-19th century, when a unique man dreamt of unity.

Kassa Haylu, raised in a monastery and the son of a western chief, had first been a *shifita* (bandit) after his claim to his deceased father's fief was denied. However, he eventually became a Robin Hood figure, looting the rich to give to the poor. This gained him large numbers of followers and he began to defeat the rival princes, one after another, until in 1855 he had himself crowned Emperor Tewodros.

The new monarch soon began to show himself not just as a capable leader and strong ruler but as a unifier, innovator and reformer as well. He chose Maqdala, a natural fortress south of Lalibela, as his base and there he began to formulate mighty plans. He established a national army, an arms factory and a great road network, as well as implementing a major programme of land reform, promoting Amharic (the vernacular) in place of the classical written language, Ge'ez, and even attempting to abolish the slave trade.

But these reforms met with deep resentment and opposition from the land-holding clergy, the rival lords and even the common faithful. Tewodros' response, however, was ruthless and sometimes brutal. Like a tragic Shakespearean hero, the emperor suffered from an intense pride, a fanatical belief in his cause and an inflated sense of destiny. This would eventually be his downfall.

Frustrated by failed attempts to enlist European, and particularly British, support for his modernising programmes, Tewodros impetuously imprisoned some Britons attending his court. Initially successful in extracting concessions, Tewodros overplayed his hand, and it badly miscarried. In 1868 large, heavily armed British forces, backed by rival Ethiopian lords, inflicted appalling casualties on Tewodros' men, many of them armed with little more than shields and spears.

Refusing to surrender, Tewodros played the tragic hero to the last and penned a final dramatic and bitter avowal before biting down on a pistol and pulling the trigger. The little that survived the British looting is still visible in Maqdala (p166).

Tewodros' defeat gravely weakened Ethiopia. This did not escape the watchful eyes of colonial powers, now hungry for expansion.

EMPEROR YOHANNES

In the aftermath of Tewodros' death, there arose another battle for succession. Using his weaponry gained from the British in exchange for his support of their Maqdala expedition, Kassa Mercha of Tigray rose to the fore. In 1871, at the battle of Assam, he defeated the newly crowned Emperor Tekla Giorgis.

After proclaiming himself Emperor Yohannes the following year, Kassa reigned for the next 17 years. In contrast to Tewodros, Yohannes staunchly supported the church and recognised the independence of local lords. With the latter, he struck a bargain: in exchange for keeping their kingdoms, they were obliged to recognise the emperor's overall power, and to pay taxes to his state. In this way, Yohannes secured the religious, political and financial backing of his subjects.

Yohannes also proved himself a skilful soldier. In 1875, after the Egyptians had advanced into Ethiopia from the coastal area, Yohannes drew them into battle and resoundingly routed them at Gundat and then again at Gura in 1876. His victories not only ended any Egyptian designs on the territory, but brought much captured weaponry, turning his army into the first well-equipped force in Ethiopian history.

But soon another power threatened: the Italians. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 greatly increased the strategic value of the Red Sea, which again became a passageway to the East and beyond.

In 1885 the Italians arrived in Massawa (in present-day Eritrea), and soon blockaded arms to Yohannes. The failure of the British to impede the arrival of the Italians made Yohannes furious. He accused them of contravening the 1884 Hewett Treaty. Though protesting otherwise, Britain privately welcomed the Italians, both to counter French influence on the Somali coast (in present-day Djibouti), and to deter any Turkish ambitions.

Meanwhile, the Mahadists (or Dervishes) were raising their heads in the west. Dislodging the Egyptians and British, they overran Sudan before arriving in Ethiopia and eventually sacking Gonder in 1888.

Yohannes rushed to meet the Dervishes at Qallabat in 1889 but, at the close of yet another victory, he fell, mortally wounded by a sniper's bullet.

EMPEROR MENELIK

Menelik, King of Shoa since 1865, had long aspired to the imperial throne. Confined at Maqdala for 10 years by Tewodros, he was yet reportedly much influenced by his captor, and also dreamt of Ethiopia's unification and modernisation.

After his escape from Maqdala and his ascendancy in Shoa, Menelik concentrated on consolidating his own power, and embarked on an aggressive, ruthless and sometimes brutal campaign of expansion. He

'But soon another power threatened: the Italians.'

'Kassa Haylu... became a Robin Hood figure, looting the rich to give to the poor.'

1550

The Oromo migrations from the south start and plunge the country into 200 more years of intermittent armed conflict

1629

Emperor Susenyos incites civil war by trying to force Catholicism on his people

1636

Emperor Fasiladas founds Gonder, the first permanent capital since Lalibela; he also expels all Jesuits from the empire

1706–21

Conspiracy abounds in Gonder and successive emperors are assassinated

Donald N Levine's imaginative *Wax & Gold* provides outstanding insight into Amharic culture, though chapter six is rather far-fetched!

occupied territories across the south, forcing various ethnic groups under his empire's yoke.

Relations with the Italians were at first good; Menelik had been seen as a potential ally against Yohannes. On Yohannes' death, the Italians recognised Menelik's claim to the throne and, in 1889, the Treaty of Wechale was signed. In exchange for granting Italy the region that was later to become Eritrea, the Italians recognised Menelik's sovereignty and gave him the right to import arms freely through Ethiopian ports.

However, a dispute over a discrepancy in the purportedly identical Amharic and Italian texts – the famous Article 17 – led to disagreement. According to the Italian version, Ethiopia was obliged to approach other foreign powers through Italy, which essentially reduced Ethiopia to a lowly Italian protectorate. Relations rapidly began to sour.

In the meantime, the Italians continued their expansion in their newly created colony of Eritrea. Soon, they were spilling into territory well beyond the confines agreed to in both treaties.

Despite the Italians' attempts to court Tigray's local chiefs, the latter chose to assist Menelik. Nevertheless, the Italians managed to defeat Ras Mangasha and his Tigrayan forces and occupied Mekele in 1895.

Provoked at last into marching north with his forces, Menelik shocked the international world by resoundingly defeating the Italians at Adwa (see the boxed text, p143). It was one of the biggest and most significant battles in African history – numbering among the very few occasions when a colonial power was defeated by a native force. To the rest of Africa, Ethiopia became a beacon of independence in a continent almost entirely enslaved by colonialism.

Menelik then set his sights on modernisation. He abandoned the Shoa capital of Ankober and soon founded Addis Ababa. During his reign, electricity and telephones were introduced, bridges, roads, schools and hospitals built, banks and industrial enterprises established.

The greatest technological achievement of the time was undoubtedly the construction of Ethiopia's railway, which eventually linked Addis Ababa to Djibouti in 1915 (see the boxed text, p220).

IYASU

Menelik managed to die a natural death in 1913. Iyasu, his raffish young grandson and nominated heir, proved to be very much a product of the 20th century. Continuing with Menelik's reforms, he also showed a 'modern' secularist, nonsectarian attitude.

The young prince built mosques as well as churches, took several Muslim as well as Christian wives, and supported the empire's peripheral populations, which had for years suffered at the oppressive hands of Amharic settlers and governors.

Iyasu and his councillors pushed through a few reforms, including improving the system of land tenure and taxation, but they faced ever-deepening opposition from the church and nobility.

Finally, after also upsetting the allied powers with his dealings with Germany, Austria and the Ottoman Empire, a pretext for his removal was found. Accused by the nobles of 'abjuring the Christian faith', the prince was deposed in 1921. Zewditu, Menelik's daughter, was proclaimed

empress, and Ras Tafari (the son of Ras Makonnen, Menelik's cousin) was proclaimed the prince regent.

RAS TAFARI

Prince Ras Tafari boasted more experience and greater maturity than Iyasu, particularly in the field of foreign affairs. In an attempt to improve the country's international image, he succeeded in abolishing the Ethiopian slave trade.

In 1923 Tafari pulled off a major diplomatic coup by getting Ethiopia granted entry into the League of Nations. Membership firmly placed Ethiopia on the international political map, and also gave it some recourse against the grasping designs of its European, colonial neighbours.

Continuing the tradition begun by Menelik, Tafari was an advocate of reform. A modern printing press was established as well as several secondary schools and an air force. In the meantime, Tafari was steadily outmanoeuvring his rivals. In 1930 the last rebellious noble was defeated and killed in battle. A few days later the sick empress also died. Ras Tafari assumed the throne.

EMPEROR HAILE SELASSIE

On 2 November 1930 Tafari was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie. The extravagant spectacle was attended by representatives from across the globe and proved a terrific public relations exercise. It even led indirectly to the establishment of a new faith (see the boxed text, p174).

The following year, Ethiopia's first written constitution was introduced. It granted the emperor virtually absolute power, his body was even declared sacred. The two-house parliament consisted of a senate, which was nominated by the emperor from among his nobles; and a chamber of deputies, which was elected from the landholders. It was thus little more than a chamber for self-interested debate.

Ever since the day of his regency, the emperor had been bringing the country under centralised rule. For the first time, the Ethiopian state was unambiguously unified.

ITALIAN OCCUPATION

By the early 20th century Ethiopia was the only state in Africa to have survived Europe's colonial scramble. However, Ethiopia's position between the two Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia made her an enticing morsel. Any Italian attempt to link its two colonies would require expansion into Ethiopia. When Mussolini seized power, the inevitable happened.

From 1933, in an effort to undermine the Ethiopian state, Italian agents, well heeled with funds, were dispatched to subvert the local chiefs, as well as to stir up ethnic tensions. Britain and France, nervous of pushing Mussolini further into Hitler's camp, refrained from protests and turned a blind eye.

In 1934 a minor skirmish known as the Wal Wal incident took place between Italian and Ethiopian forces. Italy had found its pretext. Though the export of arms was banned to both countries, in Italy's case (itself a major arms manufacturer), the embargo was meaningless.

The 2nd edition of Bahru Zewde's widely acclaimed *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991* contains two particularly readable sections: Harold G Marcus' *Ethiopia* and Richard Pankhurst's *The Ethiopians*.

The Emperor by Ryszard Kapuscinski offers bizarre insights into Haile Selassie's imperial court through interviews with servants and close associates of the emperor. Some historians question its authenticity though.

1755

Emperor Iyasu II dies and the central government in Gondar quickly collapses; Ethiopia slips back into the dark ages

1855

Kassa Haylu outsteals, outwits and outmanoeuvres his rivals to become Emperor Tewodros; he unites a feuding Ethiopia

1872

After helping the British dispose of Tewodros, Kassa Mercha wins the battle of succession and rises as Emperor Yohannes

1875–76

Yohannes routes invading Egyptian forces at Gundat and Gura, thus ending their Ethiopian ambitions

Italian Invasion

On 3 October 1935 the invasion began. Italians, overwhelmingly superior in both ground and air forces, invaded Ethiopia from Eritrea. First the northern town of Aksum fell, then Mekele.

The League of Nations issued sanctions against Italy, but they proved to be little more than a slap on the wrist. If, as should have happened, the Suez Canal had been closed to the Italians, or an oil embargo put in place, the Italian advance – as Mussolini was later to admit – would have been halted within weeks. The lives of tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children would have been spared.

Campaigning

Terrified that the international community would come to its senses and impose more serious embargoes, and keen to keep Italian morale high, Il Duce pressed for a swift campaign.

Impatient with progress made, he soon replaced De Bono, his first general. Pietro Badoglio, his replacement, was authorised ‘to use all means of war – I say all – both from the air and from the ground’. Implicit in the instructions was the use of mustard gas, which contravened the 1926 Geneva Convention. Also in contravention was Italy’s repeated bombing of civilian targets, including Red Cross hospitals.

Despite overwhelming odds, the Ethiopians succeeded in launching a major counterattack, known as the Christmas Offensive, at the Italian position at Mekele at the end of 1935.

However, the Italians were soon on the offensive again. Backed by hundreds of planes, cannons and weapons of every type, the Italian armies swept across the country. In May 1936 Mussolini triumphantly declared: ‘Ethiopia is Italian’.

Meanwhile, Emperor Haile Selassie had fled Ethiopia (some Ethiopians never forgave him for it) to present Ethiopia’s cause to the world. On 30 June 1936 he made his famous speech to the League of Nations in Geneva. The league staggeringly responded by lifting the sanctions against Italy later that year. Only the USSR, USA, Haiti, Mexico and New Zealand refused to recognise Italy’s conquest.

Occupation & Resistance

Soon Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia were merged to become the colonial territory of ‘Africa Orientale Italiana’ (Italian East Africa).

Hoping to create an important economic base, Italy invested heavily in their new colony. From 1936 as many as 60,000 Italian workers poured in to work on Ethiopia’s infrastructure.

Ethiopia kept up a spirited resistance to Italian rule throughout its brief duration. Italy’s response was famously brutal. Mussolini personally ordered all rebels to be shot, and insurgencies were put down using large-scale bombing, poison gas and machine-gunning from the air.

Ethiopian resistance reached a peak in February 1937 with an assassination attempt on the much-hated Italian viceroy, Graziani. In reprisal, the Fascists spent three days shooting, beheading or disembowelling several thousand innocent people in the capital. Addis Ababa’s poignant Yekatit 12 monument (p87) stands in honour of those slaughtered.

The ‘patriot’s movement’ (the resistance fighters) was mainly based in the historical provinces of Shoa, Gonder and Gojam, but drew support from all parts of the country; many fighters were women. Small underground movements worked in Addis Ababa and other towns; its members were known as *wist arbagna* (insider patriots).

Graziani’s response was simple: ‘Eliminate them, eliminate them, eliminate them’ (a statement that uncannily echoes Kurtz’ ‘Exterminate all the brutes’ in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*). But Ethiopian resolve stiffened and resistance grew. Although in control of major towns, Italy never succeeded in conquering the whole country.

The outbreak of WWII, particularly Italy’s declaration of war against Britain in 1940, dramatically changed the course of events. Britain at last reversed its policy of tacit support of Italy’s East African expansion and initially offered Ethiopia assistance on the Sudan–Ethiopia border. Later, in early 1941, Britain launched three major attacks.

Though not then widely recognised, the Ethiopian patriots played a major role before, during and after the liberation campaign, which ended on 5 May 1941 when the emperor and his men entered Addis Ababa.

POSTLIBERATION ETHIOPIA & THE DERG

The British, who’d entered Ethiopia as liberators, initially seemed to have simply replaced Italy as occupiers. However, Anglo-Ethiopian treaties in 1942 and 1944 eventually marked Ethiopia’s resumption of independence.

The 1940s and ’50s saw much postwar reconstruction, including (with US assistance) the establishment of a new government bank, a national currency, and the country’s first national airline, Ethiopian Airlines.

New schools were developed and, in 1950, the country’s first institution of higher education was established: the University College of Addis Ababa (now Addis Ababa University).

In 1955 the Revised Ethiopian Constitution was introduced. Although for the first time the legislature included an elected chamber of deputies, the government remained autocratic and the emperor continued to hold all power.

Ethiopia’s long-standing independence, untarnished but for the brief Italian occupation, also gave it a new-found diplomatic authority vis-à-vis other African states. In 1962 Addis Ababa became the headquarters of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and, in 1958, of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA).

Discontent

Despite modernisation, the pace of development was slow and dissatisfaction with it, and with the emperor’s autocratic rule, began to grow. Finally, taking advantage of a state visit to Brazil in December 1960, the emperor’s imperial bodyguard staged a coup d’état. Though put down by the army and air force, it signalled the beginning of the end of imperial rule in Ethiopia.

Discontent simmered among the students too, who protested in particular against land tenure, corruption and the appalling famine of 1972–74 in which an estimated 200,000 peasants died.

‘The outbreak of WWII, particularly Italy’s declaration of war against Britain, dramatically changed the course of events.’

It wasn’t until 1996 that the Italian Ministry of Defence finally admitted to the use of mustard gas in this war.

1889

Yohannes’ successor, Emperor Menelik, grants Italy the region that later becomes Eritrea in exchange for the right to import arms

1896

Tired of Italy’s expanding ways, Emperor Menelik stuns the world by thrashing the Italian army in the Battle of Adwa

1915

The Djibouti–Addis Ababa rail line is completed, expanding Ethiopian trade and ushering in rapid development of Addis Ababa

1930

After years of careful posturing, Ras Tafari is crowned as Emperor Haile Selassie and dubbed the Chosen One of God

The emperor, now an old man in his eighties, seemed more preoccupied with foreign affairs than with internal ones. Additionally, his government was slow and half-hearted in its attempts at reform.

Meanwhile, international relations had also been deteriorating. In 1962 Ethiopia abrogated the UN-sponsored federation with Eritrea and unilaterally annexed the Eritrean state.

Then war broke out in 1964 with Somalia over joint claims to Ethiopia's Somali-inhabited region of the Ogaden Desert.

The 1974 Revolution & the Emperor's Fall

By 1973 an increasingly powerful and radical military group had emerged. Known as the Derg (Committee), they used the media with consummate skill to undermine the authority of the emperor himself. They famously flashed striking footage of starvation from Jonathan Dimbleby's well-known BBC TV report on the Wolo famine in between clips of sumptuous palace banquets.

The result was an unprecedented wave of teacher, student and taxi strikes in Addis Ababa. Even army mutinies began to be reported. At crisis point, the prime minister and his cabinet resigned and a new one was appointed with the mandate to carry out far-reaching constitutional reforms. But it was too late.

On 12 September 1974 the emperor was deposed, unceremoniously bundled into the back of a Volkswagen, and driven away to prison. Ministers, nobles and close confidants of the emperor were also arrested by the Derg. The absolute power of the emperor and the divine right of rule of the century-old imperial dynasty were finished forever.

The Derg soon dissolved parliament and established the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) to rule the country.

However, bitter clashes of ideology soon splintered the Derg, culminating in the famous Death of the Sixty on 23 November 1974 when 57 high-ranking civilian and military officials were executed.

Emerging from the chaos was Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam who rode the wave of popular opposition to Selassie's regime, as well as the Marxist-Leninist ideology of left-wing students.

And what happened to the emperor? It's thought he was murdered by Mengistu himself in August 1975. Evidence for the crime? The ring of Solomon, rumoured to have been plucked from the murdered emperor's hand, was spotted on Mengistu's middle finger.

The Socialist Experiment

On 20 December 1974 a socialist state was declared. Under the adage *Ityopya Tikdem* or 'Ethiopia First', banks, businesses and factories were nationalised as was the rural and urban land. Over 30,000 peasant associations were also set up. Raising the status of Ethiopian peasants, the campaign was initially much praised internationally, particularly by Unesco.

In the meantime, the external threats posed by Somalia and secessionist Eritrea were increasing. In July 1977 Somalia invaded Ethiopia. Thanks to the intervention of the Soviet Union, which flooded socialist Ethiopia with Soviet state-of-the-art weaponry, Somalia was beaten back. In Eritrea, however, the secessionists continued to thwart Ethiopian offensives.

Internal political debate also degenerated into violence. In 1977 the Red Terror campaign was launched to suppress all political opponents. At a conservative estimate, 100,000 people were killed and several thousand more fled abroad.

The Demise of the Derg

Red Terror only cemented the stance of those opposing the Derg. Numerous armed liberation movements arose, including those of the Afar, Oromo, Somali and particularly Tigrayan peoples. For years, with limited weaponry, they fought the military might of the Soviet-backed Derg.

In 1984–85 another appalling famine followed a drought, in which hundreds of thousands more people died. Failed government resettlement campaigns, communal farms and 'villageisation' programmes aggravated the disaster in many areas, while Mengistu's disinclination to help the province of Tigray – the worst affected region and home to the powerful Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – caused thousands more to die.

The various opposition groups eventually united to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which in 1989 began its historic military campaign towards Addis Ababa.

Doubly confronted by the EPRDF in Ethiopia and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in Eritrea; with the fall of his allies in Eastern Europe; and with his state in financial ruin as well as his own military authority in doubt, Mengistu's time was up and he fled the country on 21 May 1991. Seven days later, the EPRDF entered Addis Ababa and the Derg were done.

Mengistu received asylum in Zimbabwe, where he remains to this day.

THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY (1991–95)

After the war of liberation, Ethiopia and Eritrea's leaders showed a similar determination and zeal to rebuild their countries.

In July 1991 a transitional charter was endorsed, which gave the EPRDF-dominated legislature a four-year, interim rule under the executive of the TPLF leader, Meles Zenawi. First and foremost, Mengistu's failed socialist policies were abandoned, and de facto independence was granted to Eritrea.

In 1992 extensive economic reforms began and in 1995 the country was divided into new linguistic-ethnic based regions.

In August 1995 the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was proclaimed, a series of elections followed, and the constitution of the second republic was inaugurated. Meles Zenawi formed a new government. Soon the leaderships of both Ethiopia and Eritrea were hailed, in US President Clinton's words, as belonging to a 'new generation of African leaders'.

THE ETHIOPIA–ERITREA WAR

Despite being friends and having fought against the Derg side by side for over a decade, Meles Zenawi and Eritrea's President Isaias soon clashed. Amazingly, all it took for the relationship to sour was Eritrea's introduction of the nakfa currency to replace the Ethiopian birr in November 1997. Heated disputes over Eritrea's exchange-rate system followed as did bickering over bilateral trade relations.

In 1992 the body of Haile Selassie was finally discovered. It had been unceremoniously buried beneath Mengistu's old presidential office toilet.

When the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) rolled into Addis Ababa they were navigating with photocopies of the Addis Ababa map found in Lonely Planet's *Africa on a Shoestring*.

'The absolute power of the emperor and the divine right of rule of the imperial dynasty were finished forever.'

1935

Italy invades Ethiopia; illegal use of mustard gas and bombing of civilian targets kills 275,000 Ethiopians; Italy loses 4350 men

1941

British and Ethiopian forces liberate Ethiopia from Italian occupation

1962

Haile Selassie unilaterally annexes Eritrea; separatist Eritreans launch a bitter guerrilla war

1974

On 12 September, Haile Selassie is unceremoniously deposed as emperor; the Derg declare a socialist state on 20 December

OLD DOGS & NEW TRICKS

After fighting for freedom, Ethiopia's leaders emerged well schooled in the art of warfare, but less well versed in the skills of modern government. After deciding that you can teach old dogs new tricks, 20 senior government officials enrolled for an MBA at the well-known British distance-learning institution, the Open University.

As they sat for the final exams, a certain Meles Zenawi was gripped by nerves. On spying the 'no smoking' sign in the examination room, he exclaimed, 'I've spent the last 17 years fighting a civil war but I've never been so frightened as I am now. There's no way I'll sit the exam without a fag!'

Declaring the newly learnt philosophy of 'participative decision making', the prime minister insisted on a vote and smoking was permitted during the exam.

Fourteen of the 20 government officials graduated, and Meles – demonstrating true leadership by example – took third place out of 1400 worldwide candidates in one exam.

In May 1998 Eritrea upped the stakes by occupying the border town of Badme. Just when it seemed things couldn't get worse, Eritrea bombed a school in Mekele in June, killing 55 people, many of whom were children. Ethiopia followed suit by bombing military installations outside Asmara, only to have Eritrea cluster-bomb civilians in Adigrat.

In February 1999 a full-scale military conflict broke out that left tens of thousands dead on both sides before it finally ceased for good in mid-2000. During this time there were fruitless peace settlements proposed by the OAU, as well as mass exportations of Eritreans from Ethiopia and Ethiopians from Eritrea.

Although Ethiopia had agreed to peace earlier, it wasn't until Ethiopia recaptured all territory and went on to occupy parts of central and western Eritrea that Eritrea finally agreed to a ceasefire. This settlement included the installation of an OAU-UN buffer zone on Eritrean soil.

In December 2000 a formal peace settlement was signed in Algiers. In April 2001 a 25km-deep demilitarised strip, which ran the length of the internationally recognised border on the Eritrean side, was set up under supervision of the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE).

ETHIOPIA TODAY

Today, Ethiopia is again at a poignant period in its long history. The 15 May 2005 elections have cast doubts on Ethiopia's democracy and the world's eyes are once again hoping they're not seeing a democratic freedom fighter turning into a dictator grasping for lifelong rule.

While the election run-up and the voting polls were witness to few irregularities, there were numerous reports by EU observers about questionable vote counting at the constituency level and the announcing of the results by state-run media.

Despite pre-election polls showing that it would be the tightest race in Ethiopian history, the EPRDF officially claimed victory over the CUD on 16 May, before any results could have possibly been calculated. Election results then trickled out over the next four months, thanks to controversial repeat elections in 32 constituencies. In the end, the 'official' results showed the EPRDF won 327 of the 548 seats to maintain their majority.

Despite EPRDF losing 209 of the 536 seats they had held since the 2000 election, including all 23 in Addis Ababa, these results (and news of election irregularities) were not well taken, especially in the capital.

The initial government-released results in June led to mass protests in Addis Ababa, where government troops arrested thousands of opposition party members and killed 22 unarmed civilians. Similar protests and mass strikes occurred in early November, which resulted in troops killing 46 civilians and arresting thousands more. Leaders of the CUD, as well as owners of private newspapers, were also arrested and charged with inciting the riots. The government's actions were condemned by the EU and many Western governments.

If internal political turmoil wasn't enough, relations with Eritrea also heated up in late 2005. Stating unhappiness with the UN for refusing to force Ethiopia to accept the Boundary Commission's 2002 decision to award Badme to them, Eritrea suddenly refused to allow UNMEE helicopters to observe their troop movements. Ethiopia responded to this news by amassing its forces along the border. With fear of impending war, there was talk of the UNMEE pulling out of the demilitarised strip between the two countries.

However, at the time of writing, tensions had eased slightly and the UN had just extended the UNMEE's stay. The border still has yet to be officially demarcated.

Although only published locally, *Eritrea's War* by Paul Henze delves into the 1998–2000 Ethiopia–Eritrea War.

1991

The Derg are defeated by the rebel EPRDF and Ethiopia's experiment with communism ends

1995

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is proclaimed and the first fair elections are held

1998

Likened to two bald men fighting over a comb, Ethiopia and Eritrea's leaders go to war over a sliver of barren wasteland

2005

After controversial 15 May elections, mass protests turn deadly when government troops fire on unarmed demonstrators

The Culture

Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten.

Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 1776–88

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Religion and an intense pride in their country's past resonate loudly within most Ethiopians. To them, Ethiopia has stood out from all African nations and proved itself to be a unique world of its own – home to its own culture, language, script, calendar and history. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims alike revel in the fact that Ethiopia was the only nation on the continent to successfully fight off colonisation.

It must be said that some of the younger Ethiopians who've grown up in the midst of high-profile international aid efforts lack the patriotism seen in older generations. Their Ethiopian pride and self-reliance has been undermined, albeit unintentionally.

The highlands have been dominated by a distinctive form of Christianity since the 4th century. Although undeniably devout and keen to dispense centuries worth of Orthodox legends and tales dating back to Aksum and the Ark of the Covenant, Christians nonetheless still cling to a surprising amount of magic and superstition.

Belief in *zar* (spirits or genies) and *buda* (the evil eye with the power to turn people into mischievous hyenas by night) is rife and as such even Christians adorn their children, from baptism, with charms or talismans around their necks to deter such spirits and terrible diseases.

Yet, this apparent religious contradiction is quite natural to Ethiopians. In a historically isolated area where rhetoric and reasoning have become highly valued and practiced, where eloquent communication and sophisticated wordplay are considered an art form and where the ability to argue a case in point while effectively sitting on the fence is now aspired to, ambiguity and complexity are as much a part of the highland peoples' psyche as it is a part of their religion.

LIFESTYLE

Other than religion, which undoubtedly plays the biggest role in all Ethiopians' daily life, it's agriculture and pastoralism that fills the days of well over 80% of the country's population. Everyone is involved, right down to stick- and stone-wielding four-year-old children who are handed the incredible responsibility to tend and herd the family's livestock.

With almost everyone toiling out in the fields, it's not surprising that only 38.5% (World Bank figures) of the population is literate. Since young children are needed to help with the family plots and animals, only 52% of children attend primary school. Older children are in even more demand in the workforce, which means secondary schools sadly only see only 12% of kids. If all children under 16 were forced to attend school, Ethiopia's workforce would be ravaged and almost half of the country's entire population would be attending classes.

Families are incredibly close and most Ethiopians live with their parents until marriage. After marriage, the couple usually join the household

of the husband's parents. After a couple of years, they will request a plot of land from the village on which to build their own house.

Divorce is relatively easy in Ethiopia and marriage can be dissolved at the request of either party (adultery is usually given as justification). In theory, each partner retains the property he or she brought into the marriage, though sometimes allowances are made for the 'wronged' partner.

Although women continue to lag behind men economically, they are highly respected in Ethiopian society. The same can't be said for gays and lesbians. Homosexuality is severely condemned – traditionally, religiously and legally – and remains a topic of absolute taboo.

Social Graces

Mixed in with religion and survival, numerous social graces also play a large part in people's daily lives. For example, a nod or head bow accompanying greetings shows special respect, thanks or appreciation. Deference is also shown by supporting the right arm (near the elbow) with the left hand during shaking. When Ethiopians enter a room they try and shake hands with everyone (including children). If hands are dirty or wet, limp wrists are offered. They also believe it's polite to kiss babies or young children, even if you've just met them.

Kissing on the cheek is also very common among friends and relatives of either sex, but in Ethiopia, three kisses are given (right, left, right). The cheek is touched rather than kissed, though kissing noises are made. 'Long-lost' friends may kiss up to five times.

Names are also important in Ethiopia, and the exchange of first names (surnames are rarely used) is the first important stage in forming a friendship. To address someone formally, they add the following prefixes to first names: *Ato* for men, *Weizero* for married women and *Weizerit* for unmarried women.

When receiving a gift, Ethiopians extend both hands as using only one is seen as showing reluctance or ingratitude.

While this etiquette isn't likely second nature to you, learning it will help you slip a little more comfortably into the daily nature of life in Ethiopia.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Ethiopian Christian names usually combine a religious name with a secular name.

Common male secular names include Hagos (Joy), Mebratu (The Light) and Desta (literally 'Pleasure'; it's also a woman's name). For women, names include Ababa (Flower), Zawditu (The Crown) and Terunesh (You're Wonderful).

Some Ethiopian names have particular meanings. Names like Mitiku or Mitke (Substitute) and Kassa (Compensation) are given to children after the death of a brother or sister. Masresha, roughly meaning 'Distraction', is given after a family misfortune. Bayable means 'If He Hadn't Denied It', and is given to a bastard-child whose father refuses to acknowledge it. Tesfaye (meaning 'My Hope') is often given to a child by a poor or single mother who looks forward to her child's future success in life. Other names can mean 'That's the Last!' or 'No More!' after a long string of children.

Many Christian names are compounds made up of two names. Wolde means 'Son of', Gebre 'Servant of', Haile 'Power of', Tekle 'Plant of', Habte 'Gift of'; so that Gebre-Yesus means 'Son of Jesus', Habte-Mikael 'Gift of Michael', etc.

If you're a male, you'd better like your Christian name. Why? Because it will be the surname of all your children!

In the past, the causes of famine have had less to do with environmental factors – Ethiopia has abundant natural resources – and more to do with economic mismanagement and inequitable and oppressive government.

GOVERNMENT

Government consists of a federation of regional states that are governed by two assemblies: the 548-member Council of Peoples' Representatives (CPR), which is the legislative arm of the federation, and the smaller 108-member Federal Council (FC), which serves as the senate, with a merely supervisory role. The president has a mainly ceremonial role. The prime minister is the head of state and appoints the 18-member cabinet.

Under the new republic's principle of 'ethnic federalism', the old provinces were divided into 11 new regions, including the city-state of Harar and the metropolitan regions of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. Each has its own autonomous council and holds its own elections. The regions are demarked largely along linguistic lines, and five of Ethiopia's largest ethnic groups (the Oromo, Amhara, Tigrayan, Somali and Afar) now have their own regional states.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL: CULTURE

The mixing of vastly different cultures can be easier said than done. To help things along, we've compiled some tips.

- Ethiopians are conservative in their dress and it's appreciated if visitors follow suit. Ethiopian women traditionally never expose their shoulders, knees, cleavage or waist in public.
- Couples (even married ones) shouldn't display affection in public.
- Never take a photo if permission is declined (see the boxed text on p266 for more information).
- Making rude noises of any sort is considered the height of bad manners by most Ethiopians. If you do breach this strict rule of social conduct, a quick *yikerta* (excuse me) is probably the best way out!
- Punctuality is important as tardiness is seen as a sign of disrespect.
- Support local businesses, initiative and skills by shopping at local markets, buying authentic crafts and giving to local charities. Don't give directly to begging children (see p258).
- Resist the temptation to buy any genuinely old artefacts, such as manuscripts, scrolls and Bibles, sold in shops and by hawkers around the country. Ethiopia has already lost a vast amount of its heritage.
- For tips on preserving Ethiopia's environment while travelling, see the boxed text on p67.
- Remember that some Africans see Westerners as arrogant and proud; a smile works wonders.

Church Etiquette

Churches in Ethiopia are very hallowed places. The following tips should be followed when visiting them.

- Always remove shoes before entering a church.
- Try and wear clothing that covers all parts of the body.
- Never try to enter the inner Holy of Holies, which is reserved strictly for the priests.
- Avoid smoking, eating or drinking in a church, or talking or laughing loudly.
- Be sensitive when taking photos.
- Resist the temptation to photograph old manuscripts in sunlight, even if the priests offer to move the manuscripts into the sun for you. Sunlight can cause great damage.
- During prayer time, try not to stray into the areas reserved for the opposite sex.
- A contribution to the upkeep of the church is greatly appreciated after a visit.

ETHIOPIAN HAIRSTYLES

Hairstyles in all societies form an important part of tribal identification. Reflecting the large number of ethnic groups, Ethiopian hairstyles are particularly diverse and colourful. Hair is cut, shaved, trimmed, plaited, braided, sculpted with clay, rubbed with mud, put in buns and tied in countless different fashions. In the Omo Valley, hairstyles are sometimes so elaborate and valued that special wooden headrests are used as pillows to preserve them.

In rural areas, the heads of children are often shaved to discourage lice. Sometimes a single topknot or tail plait is left so that 'God should have a handle with which to lift them unto Heaven', should he decide to call them!

POPULATION

Ethiopia's population just squeezed past the 73-million mark, an astounding figure considering the population was just 15 million in 1935. If the 2.5% growth rate continues, Ethiopia will be bursting with almost 120 million people in 2025. AIDS, which affects 12.6% of the urban population, will inevitably slow this future growth.

Though a trend of urbanisation is starting to emerge, 84% of the people still live in rural areas.

Although 83 languages and 200 dialects are spoken in Ethiopia, the population can be broken down into eight broad groups, which are detailed in the following pages. For details about the Lower Omo Valley's unique peoples, see p206.

The Oromo

Although most of the Oromo in the past were nomadic pastoralists, it was skilled Oromo warrior horsemen that put fear into Ethiopians when they migrated north from present-day Kenya in the mid-16th century. It was the Oromo who inspired Harar's leaders to build a wall around the city and even led Ethiopian emperors to accept Catholicism just in order to gain Portugal's military support.

Today, most are sedentary, making a living as farmers or cattle breeders. The Oromo are Muslim, Christian and animist in religion, and are known for their egalitarian society, which is based on the *gada* (age-group system). A man's life is divided into age-sets of eight years. In the fourth set (between the ages of 24 and 32), men assume the right to govern their people.

They are the largest ethnic group in the country, making up 40% of its population. Over 85% of the massive 350,000-sq-km Oromia region's population are Oromo. Many Oromo resent the Tigray-led national government and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) continues to lobby for separation from Ethiopia.

The Amharas

As great warriors, skilful governors and astute administrators, the Amhara have dominated the country's history, politics and society since 1270, and have imposed their own language and culture on the country. In the past this was much resented by other tribal groups, who saw it as little more than a kind of colonialism.

Amhara tend to be devoutly Christian, although there are some Muslim Amhara. They're also fanatical about their land and 90% of them are traditional tillers of the soil: they produce some of the nation's best *tef* (endemic cereal grain used for the national staple, *injera*).

Making up 21% of Ethiopia's population, they're the second-largest ethnic group. Over 90% of Amharaland region's people are Amhara.

Every Ethiopian emperor (bar one) since Yekuno Amlak established the Solomonic Dynasty in 1270 has been Amhara. Yohannes (r 1872–89), who was Tigrayan, is the only exception.

The Tigrayans

Much like the Amharas, the Tigrayans are fiercely independent and zealously attached to their land. They disdain all manual labour with the single exception of agriculture – DIY is a notion completely lost on the average Tigrayan!

Most live in the Tigray region, where both Christianity and Islam were introduced to Ethiopia. Amazingly 95% of Tigrayans are Orthodox Christian, and most devoutly so. Tigrayans are Ethiopia's third-largest ethnic group, comprising 11% of the population.

As a result of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) playing the major roll in the bringing down the Derg (see p39), many Tigrayans play a major roll in Ethiopia's government, including Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. This has caused resentment among other groups.

The Sidama

The Sidama, a heterogeneous people, originate from the southwest, and can be divided into five different groups: the Sidama proper, the Derasa, Hadiya, Kambata and Alaba. Most Sidama are farmers who cultivate cereals, tobacco, *enset* (false-banana tree found in much of southern Ethiopia, used to produce a breadlike staple also known as *enset*) and coffee. The majority are animists and many ancient beliefs persist, including a belief in the reverence of spirits. Pythons are believed to be reincarnations of ancestors and are sometime kept as house pets. The Sidama social organisation, like the Oromo's *gada* system, is based on an age-group system.

The Sidama comprise about 9% of Ethiopia's population and most live in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's region.

The Somali

The arid lowlands of the southeast dictate a nomadic or seminomadic existence for the Somali. Somali society is 99% Muslim, strongly hierarchical, tightly knit and based on the clan system, which requires intense loyalty from its members. In the harsh environment in which they live, ferocious competition for the scant resources leads to frequent and sometimes violent disputes (thanks to an abundant supply of AK-47s) over grazing grounds and sources of water.

The Somali make up 95% of the Somali region's people, and 6% of Ethiopia's population.

The Afar

The Afar, formerly also known as the Danakils, inhabit the famous region of Dankalia, which stretches across Ethiopia's east, Djibouti's west and into Eritrea's southeast. It's considered one of earth's most inhospitable environments. Rightly or wrongly, they've proudly latched onto Wilfred Thesiger's portrayal of themselves as famously belligerent and proud. Thesiger talked about them winning social prestige in the past for murdering and castrating members of an opposing tribe.

The Afar comprise 4% of Ethiopia's population.

The Gurage

Semitic in origin, the Gurage practise herding or farming, and the *enset* plant is their favoured crop. Known as great workers, clever improvisers (even counterfeiter!) and skilled craftspeople, the Gurage will apply themselves to any task. Many work as seasonal labourers for the highlanders. Their faith is Christian, Muslim or animist, depending on the area from which they originate.

AIDS IN ETHIOPIA

There's no denying that AIDS is a serious problem in Ethiopia, though infection rates have thankfully slowed fractionally in urban areas over the past few years. Addis Ababa has the country's highest rate of AIDS, with 14.6% of its population infected. Percentage-wise there are fewer infected in rural areas, but the rates of infection are sadly increasing. Currently the worst affected rural regions are Gambela and Amhara, with 8.0% and 6.1% of their respective populations infected.

AIDS is now the single greatest threat to economic development in Ethiopia. The government continues to use hard-hitting warnings on TV and radio, as well as the ubiquitous posters around the country.

They comprise only 2% of Ethiopia's population, but make up more than 10% of the population in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's region.

The Harari

Also Semitic in origin are the Harari people (sometimes known as Adare), who have long inhabited the walled Muslim city of Harar. The people are particularly known for their distinct two-storey houses, known as *gegar* (see the boxed text, p231), and for the very colourful traditional costumes still worn by many Harari women today. In the past, the Harari were known as great craftspeople for their weavings, baskets and bookbindings. They're also renowned Islamic scholars.

SPORT

Running

The popularity of running took off in the 1960s when the marathon runner Abebe Bikila won gold medals at the Tokyo and Rome Olympics (famously running barefoot at the latter). Things were taken to another level by Haile Gebreselassie, one of the world's greatest distance runners of all time. Since 1992 he's managed to win two Olympic golds, eight World Championships and set at least 19 world records over distances between 3000m and 25km. The 25km record was his most recent, set on 16 March 2006.

At Helsinki's 2005 World Championships the 5000m and 10,000m distances were dominated by Ethiopia, winning nine of the 12 possible medals. The women took six of six! Tirunesh Dibaba was top of the heap, winning gold in both women's events. Kenenisa Bekele (current world-record holder in the 5000m and 10,000m) took home the gold in the 10,000m.

The annual 10km Great Ethiopian Run (p90) attracts over 20,000 participants and is the largest mass participation run in Africa.

Football

Ethiopians do love their football (soccer). Throughout the country you'll see children chasing footballs – constructed of everything from plastic bags to rubber bands – through clouds of dust to the cheers of all.

Adults and kids alike have a passion for the English Premiership, with urban crowds piling around TVs to watch their two favourites, Manchester United and Arsenal.

There are 15 formal football teams in Addis Ababa alone, and another 29 across the country. See p103 for information on attending football games at Addis Ababa's national stadium.

Other Sports

Ethiopia also boast its own indigenous sports. *Genna* is a variety of hockey without boundaries, traditionally played at Leddet (p261). *Gugs* – a physical (and sometimes fairly violent) game of tag on horseback – is also most commonly seen at festivals, including Ethiopian New Year and Meskel (p261). In the past, the games prepared young warriors for war. Addis Ababa's Jan Meda Sports Ground (p103) is the best place to catch both *genna* and *gugs*.

Although entirely un-Ethiopian, table tennis and table football enjoy fanatical support. Even in the most obscure towns, tables line the dusty streets and are always in use. Don't step in unless you're pretty good and don't mind losing some money!

Carambula, which is cueless version of pool (introduced by Italians) is also very popular.

MULTICULTURALISM

Ethiopia's mix of cultures has been pretty stable over the past few centuries, with only the expulsion of Eritrean citizens after the recent Ethiopia-Eritrea War and influxes of Sudanese refugees into the western lowlands shifting the status quo.

Despite the nation's regions being divided along ethnic lines in 1995, there's still some resentment, particularly among the Oromo, that the minority Tigrayan and Amhara people maintain control of the national government.

Many travellers also notice that some Ethiopian highlanders, regardless of their ethnic background, seem to show a slight distain for Ethiopians from the lowlands.

MEDIA

Ethiopian TV, Radio Ethiopia and the country's most widely circulated newspapers, the *Addis Zemen* and the *Ethiopian Herald*, are state controlled. You'll even notice that the Ministry of Information shares a building with Ethiopian TV!

After the May 2005 elections, the EU had harsh criticism of the state-owned media for regularly releasing unofficial results that highlighted the government's victories and virtually ignoring the victories of opposition parties. They blasted Radio Ethiopia and Ethiopian TV for 'completely ignoring' the press conferences and important statements given by opposition parties, information that CNN and BBC thought newsworthy.

When government forces opened fire on unarmed protesters in June and November 2005, state-owned media also severely underreported civilian casualties.

Private media in Ethiopia have a short string and government censorship is still present. In 1992 a Press Law came into effect and since then numerous journalists have been arrested without trial for publishing critical articles of the government. The editor of *Agere* died untried in prison in February 1998. Several owners of private media were arrested and their newspapers shut down during the postelectoral violence in 2005.

RELIGION

Faith is an extremely important part of an Ethiopian's life. Orthodox Christians bring religion into everyday conversation just as much as their Muslim counterparts. Although Orthodox only slightly outnumber Muslims (45% to 35%), Christianity has traditionally dominated the country's

KNOW YOUR ETHIOPIAN SAINTS

There's hardly an Ethiopian church not adorned with colourful, vibrant and sometimes very beautiful murals. In most cases the paintings follow a set pattern, depicting again and again the key personalities of Ethiopia's peculiar pantheon of saints. Here's a quick key:

Abuna Aregawi One day, while wandering at the foot of a cliff, Abuna Aregawi spotted a large plateau high above him. Deciding it was the ideal spot for a nice, quiet hermit's life, he prayed to God for assistance. Immediately, a large python stretched down from above and lifted him onto the plateau. The famous monastery of Debre Damo was then founded. The saint is usually depicted riding up the snake – much like a game of snakes and ladders, only in reverse.

Abuna Samuel He lived near the Takezze River, where he preached and performed many miracles, accompanied by a devoted lion. He is usually depicted astride his lion.

Belai the Cannibal Although not a saint, he's a favourite theme in religious art. Devouring anyone who approached him including his own family, Belai yet took pity one day on a leper begging for water in the Virgin's name. After Belai died – some 72 human meals later – Satan claimed his soul. St Mikael, the judge, balanced Belai's victims on one side, the water on the other. However, the Virgin cast her shadow on the side of the scales containing the water, and caused them to tip. Belai's soul was saved.

Equestrian Saints They are usually depicted on the north wall of the Holy of Holies and may include Fasiladas, Claudius, Mercurius, Menas, Theodorus and George.

Mary Very popular and little known outside Ethiopia are the numerous and charming legends and miracles concerning Mary, as well as the childhood of Jesus and the flight to Egypt. A tree is often depicted hiding the holy family – and the donkey – from Herod's soldiers during the flight to Egypt; the soldiers are confused by the sound of the donkey braying. Sometimes a furious Mary is shown scolding Jesus, who's managed to break a clay water jug. He later redeems himself a bit by fixing it.

St Eostateos Also known as St Thaddeus, he's said to have arrived in Ethiopia borne up the Nile from Egypt on three large stones. Apparently water continued to obey him: whenever the saint chose to cross a river or a lake, the waters parted conveniently before him.

St Gabriel God's messenger is usually represented cooling the flames of a fiery furnace or cauldron containing three youths condemned by Nebuchadnezzar: Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego.

St Gebre Kristos This Ethiopian prince sacrificed all his belongings to lead a life of chastity, and ended up a leprous beggar. He's usually depicted outside his palace, where only his dogs now recognise him.

St Gebre Manfus Kiddus One day, while preaching peace to the wild animals in the desert, this saint came across a bird dying of thirst. Lifting it, he allowed the bird to drink the water from his eye. Usually depicted clad in furs and girded with a hempen rope. Leopards and lions lie at his feet, and the bird flaps near his head.

St George The patron saint of Ethiopia features in almost every church. He's depicted either as the king of saints, with St Bula – who at first refused to recognise his kingship – looking on petulantly in the background, or as the great dragon slayer on his horse. In Ethiopia, the archetypal damsel in distress has a name: she's known as Brutawit, the girl from Beirut.

St Mikael The judge of souls and the leader of the celestial army, St Mikael evicted Lucifer from heaven. In most churches, the portals to the Holy of Holies are guarded by a glowering Mikael, accompanied by Gabriel and Raphael, fiercely brandishing their swords.

St Raphael He apparently once rescued an Egyptian church from the tail of a thrashing whale beached on the land. He's usually depicted killing the hapless whale with his spear.

St Tekla Haimanot The saint prayed for seven years standing on just one leg, until the other finally withered and fell off! Throughout, a bird brought him just one seed a year for sustenance. For his devotion, God awarded him no fewer than three sets of wings. The saint is normally depicted in his bishop's attire, surrounded by bells; sometimes the detached leg is shown flapping off to heaven, or else brandished by an angel.

St Yared Ethiopia's patron saint of music is sometimes shown standing before his king with an orchestra of monks along with their sistra (sophisticated rattles, thought to be directly descended from an ancient Egyptian instrument used to worship Isis), drums and prayer sticks. In the background, little birds in trees learn the magic of music.

Want to woo the locals and have some serious fun streetside? Hone your table-tennis and table-football skills before arriving!

past. The vast majority of highlanders are Orthodox and the religion continues to heavily influence the highlands' political, social and cultural scene. Most Muslims inhabit the eastern, southern and western lowlands, but there are also significant populations in the country's predominantly Christian towns, including Addis Ababa.

THE TABOT & THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

According to Ethiopian tradition, the Ark of the Covenant was carried off from Jerusalem and brought to Ethiopia in the 1st millennium BC by Menelik. It's now believed to sit in Aksum's St Mary of Zion church compound (see p135).

Today, every other Ethiopian church has a replica of the Ark (or more precisely the Tablets of Law that are housed in the Ark) known as the *tabot*. Kept safe in the *maqdas* (Holy of Holies or inner sanctuary) it's the church's single most important element, and gives the building its sanctity (rather as the tabernacle does in the Roman Catholic church).

During important religious festivals, the *tabot* is carried in solemn processions, accompanied by singing, dancing, the beating of staffs or prayer sticks, the rattling of the *sistrum* (a sophisticated rattle, thought to be directly descended from an ancient Egyptian instrument used to worship Isis) and the beating of drums. It's a scene that could have come straight out of the Old Testament.

They carried the Ark of God on a new cart...David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

2 Sam. vi. 3-5

Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity

The official religion of the imperial court right up until Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974, this church continues to carry great clout among the Ethiopian people and is regarded as the great guardian and repository of ancient Ethiopian traditions, directly inherited from Aksum (p27).

Ethiopia was the second country (after Armenia) to adopt Christianity as its state religion and it's been a truly unifying factor over the centuries. By the same measure, it's also legitimised the oppression of the people by its rulers.

Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is thought to have its roots in Judaism. This explains the food restrictions, including the way animals are slaughtered. Even the traditional round church layout is considered Hebrew in origin. Ancient Semitic and pagan elements also persist.

Circumcision is generally practised on boys, marriage is celebrated in the presence of a priest, and confession is usually only made during a grave illness.

Islam

Ethiopia's connection with Islam is as distinguished as its connection with Christianity. Though bloody religious wars were fought in Ethiopia in the past, Ethiopia's Christian and Muslim inhabitants coexist in harmony. Fundamentalism is rare in Ethiopia, and it's uncommon to see women wearing the *hijab* (veil), though the majority wear either headscarves or *shalmas* (a gauze-thin length of fabric draped around the head, shoulders and torso).

Negash, in Tigray, where Islam was introduced in 615 AD and the shrine of Sheikh Hussein in the Bale region are both greatly venerated and attract national and international pilgrims.

The famous walled city of Harar is also an important Islamic centre in its own right and is home to an astonishing number of shrines and mosques. In the past, it was renowned as a centre of learning.

Traditional African Beliefs

Traditional African beliefs are still practiced by an estimated 11% of Ethiopia's population, particularly in the lowland areas of the west and south. These range from the Konso's totemism (see the boxed text, p203)

to animism (associated with trees, springs, mountains and stones etc), in which animals are ritually slaughtered and then consumed by the people. Elements of ancestor worship are still found among the Afar (p46). The Oromo (p45) traditionally believe in a supreme celestial deity known as Wak, whose eye is the sun.

The Falashas

Falashas (Ethiopian Jews) have inhabited Ethiopia since pre-Christian times. Despite actively engaging in wars over the years to defend their independence and freedom, few now remain: war, some persecution (though much less than seen elsewhere) and emigration in the latter part of the 20th century have greatly reduced their numbers.

Tiny populations of Falashas remain north of Lake Tana in the northwest; their beliefs combine a fascinating mixture of Judaism, indigenous beliefs and Christianity.

WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA

Legally, women in Ethiopia enjoy a relatively equitable position compared to some African countries. They can own property, vote and are represented in government, though there are still some cases where women's rights are impeded. One high profile and extremely important example of such is female genital cutting (see the boxed text, below).

If you want to learn more about women in Ethiopia or get in touch with them, contact the excellent Addis Ababa-based **Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association** (EWLA; Map pp80-1; ☎ 0116 612511; ewla@ethionet.et), which campaigns for women and their rights.

For information about travelling in Ethiopia as a woman, see p270.

A SCREAM SO STRONG IT WOULD SHAKE THE EARTH

The practice of female genital mutilation, or female genital cutting as it's now officially known, is particularly rampant in the eastern part of Africa's Horn as well as in other parts of Africa and Asia. It's believed two million women are cut each year worldwide; in other words 6000 women every day.

Modern sociologists believe it's just the 'natural continuation of the ancient patriarchal repression of female sexuality'. Past examples include Romans using genital rings, Crusaders using chastity belts and 19th-century doctors in Europe and America operating on female genitalia to cure antisocial conditions like nymphomania, insanity and depression. However, nowhere else has female genital cutting taken more hold than in Africa.

Reasons given in the Horn for mutilation vary from hygiene and aesthetics to superstitions that uncult women can't conceive. Others believe that the strict following of traditional beliefs is crucial to maintaining social cohesion and a sense of belonging, much like male circumcision is to Jews. Some also say that it prevents female promiscuity.

In theory there are three types of mutilation. 'Circumcision' (the name often given confusingly to all forms of mutilation) involves the removing of the clitoris' hood or prepuce. 'Excision' makes up 80% of the cases and involves the removal of some or all of the clitoris and all or part of the inner genitals (labia minora). 'Infibulation' is the severest form and requires the removal of the clitoris, the inner genitals and most or all of the outer genitals (labia majora). The two sides of the vulva are then stitched together with catgut, thread, reed or thorns. A tiny opening is preserved for the passage of urine by inserting a small object, like a twig. The girl's legs are then bound together and she's kept immobile for up to 40 days to allow the formation of scar tissue.

There's no doubt that female genital mutilation brings enormous physical pain and suffering. An estimated 15% of girls die postoperatively. Those who survive suffer countless ongoing complications and pain, as well as untold psychological suffering. As one doctor put it, 'These women are holding back a scream so strong, it would shake the earth.'

PROSTITUTION IN ETHIOPIA

The social stigma attached to prostitution in the West is lacking in Ethiopia. Many prostitutes are students trying to make ends meet. Others are widows, divorcees or refugees, all with little or no hope of finding other forms of employment. With no social security system either, it's often their only means of survival. Though not exactly a respected profession, prostitution is considered a perfectly viable means of making a living for these women. Some very beautiful or accomplished prostitutes even become well-known figures in society.

Visiting a prostitute is considered a fairly normal part of a young boy's adolescence and bachelor life, at least in the cities. Once married, it's considered shameful, however, and married men who can afford it often keep permanent mistresses or girlfriends instead.

Men should be warned that outside Addis Ababa almost 100% of women in bars are prostitutes. AIDS rates among prostitutes is thought to be reaching 50%.

ARTS

The church, traditionally enjoying almost as much authority as the state, is responsible both for inspiring Ethiopia's art forms and stifling them with its great conservatism and rigorous adherence to convention.

Long neglected and ignored, the cultural contributions of Ethiopia's other ethnic groups are only now receiving due credit and attention.

Music

Whether it's the solemn sounds of drums resonating from a church, the hilarious ad-libbing of an *azmari* (see the boxed text, opposite) or Ethiopian pop blaring in a bus, Ethiopian music is as interesting as it's unavoidable.

Ethiopian music CDs are available throughout the country. Music stalls are everywhere – keep an ear out. Older cassette versions are usually only found in Addis Ababa.

CHURCH MUSIC

Yared the Deacon is traditionally credited with inventing church music, with the introduction in the 6th century of a system of musical notation.

Church music known as *aquaquam* resonates with the use of a drum, in particular the *kabaro*, as well as the *tsinatseil* (sistrum; a sophisticated rattle, thought to be directly descended from an ancient Egyptian instrument used to worship Isis). Percussion instruments are primarily used since their function is to mark the beat for chanting and dancing. The *maquamia* (prayer stick) also plays an essential role in church ceremonies and, with hand-clapping, is used to mark time. Very occasionally a *meleket* (trumpet) is used, such as to lead processions.

You'll get plenty of opportunities to hear church music in Ethiopia. In the solemn and sacred atmosphere of the old churches, with the colour of the priestly robes, and the heady perfume of incense, it can be quite mesmerising.

SECULAR MUSIC

Strongly influenced by church music, secular music usually combines song and dance, emphasises rhythm, and often blends both African and Asian elements. The Amharas' and Tigrayans' highland music, as well as that of the peoples living near the Sudanese border, is much influenced by Arab music, and is very strident and emotive.

Wind as well as percussion instruments are used. The *begenna* is a type of harp similar to that played by the ancient Greeks and Romans. The most popular instrument in Ethiopia is the *krar*, a five- or six-stringed

lyre, which is often heard at weddings, or to attract customers to traditional pubs or bars.

In the highlands, particularly the Simien and Bale Mountains, shepherd boys can be found with reed flutes. The *washint* is about 50cm long, with four holes, and makes a bubbling sound that is said to imitate running water. It's supposed to keep the herds close by and calm the animals.

Modern composers and performers include Tesfaye Lemma, Mulatu Astatike and Tefera Abunewold.

SONG

Traditionally passed down from generation to generation, every ethnic group has their own repertoire of songs, from *musho* (household songs) and *lekso* (laments for the dead) to war songs, hunting songs and lullabies for the cradle and caravan.

Ethiopian male singing in the highlands is often in falsetto. The most characteristic element of female singing is the high-pitched trilling. The tremulous and vibrating ululations can be heard on solemn, religious occasions.

Modern, traditional singers to look out for include Habtemikael Demisie, Yirga Dubale, Tadesse Alemu and the female singer Maritu Legeese.

MODERN MUSIC

Ethiopian modern music is diverse and affected by outside influences, and ranges from classical Amharic to jazz and pop. Modern classical singers and musicians include the late Assefa Abate, Kassa Tessema and the female vocalist Asnakech Worku. The latter two are known for their singing and *krar* playing. Girma Achanmyeleh, who studied in England, is known for his piano playing. The composer Mulatu Astatike is well known for his jazz.

Amharic popular music boasts a great following with the young. Unlike many other African countries, it's generally much preferred to Western music, and can be heard in all the larger town's bars and discos. For visitors, it can take a little time to get used to, particularly when played at full volume through unsympathetic speakers on buses.

The most famous Ethiopian pop singers have huge followings both in Ethiopia and among the expat populations abroad. Many record and live or spend time in America. Among the best known (and those to listen out for) are Ephrem Tamiru, Tsehaye Yohannes, Berhane Haile, Argaw

MINSTRELS & MASENKOS

An ancient entertainment that continues to this day is that provided by the singing *azmari* (wandering minstrel) and his *masenko* (single-stringed fiddle). In the past, the *azmari* accompanied caravans of highland traders to make the journey more amusing.

At court, resident *azmaris*, like the European jesters, were permitted great freedom of expression as long as their verses were witty, eloquent and clever.

During the Italian occupation, the *azmaris* kept up morale with their stirring renditions of Ethiopian victories and resistance. So successfully, in fact, that many were executed by the Italians.

Today, *azmaris* can be found at weddings and special occasions furnishing eulogies or poetic ballads in honour of their hosts.

In certain bars (*azmari beats*) of the larger towns, some *azmaris* have become celebrities in their own right. They prance around grass-covered floors and sing about everything from history and sex, to your funny haircut. Although you won't understand a word (it's all in Amharic), you'll end up laughing; the locals' laughter is simply that contagious. And remember these two things: it's all done in good fun and hair always grows back!

OUR TOP FIVE MODERN MUSIC CD PICKS

- *Gigi* by Ejigaheyehe Shibabaw
- *Ebo* by Aster Aweke
- *Zeritu* by Zeritu Kebede
- *Yasstesseriya* by Tewodros Kassahun
- *Zion Roots* by Abyssinia Infinite

Bedasso and Ali Bira, as well as the old-timers Tilahun Gessesse and Mohammed Ahmud. Blasting onto the scene of late is Tewodros Kassahun (known as ‘Teddy Afro’).

Female artists more than hold their own and Gonder-born, American-based Aster Aweke has produced 20 albums since the late 1970s. She’s popularly known as Africa’s Aretha Franklin. Her early works are only found in cassette form in Addis Ababa. Hot on Aster’s tail for international fame is Ejigaheyehe Shibabaw (known as ‘Gigi’), who rose to prominence after her 1997 album *Tsehay*. Her singing was heard in the Hollywood movie *Beyond Borders*. Recently bursting onto the female singing scene (and our particular favourite) is Zeritu Kebede (also known as ‘Baby’).

Some albums are available for download at www.emusic.com. Francis Falceto, an Ethiopian music expert, compiles popular Ethiopian contemporary music into great CDs known as ‘Ethiopiquest’. Twenty-one volumes have been produced to date; pick them up from www.budamusique.com or download tracks at www.emusic.com.

Dance

Dance forms an extremely important part of the lives of most Ethiopians, and almost every ethnic group has its own distinct variety. Although the *iskista* (below) movement is the best known, there are myriad others.

Dance traditionally serves a variety of important social purposes: from celebrating religious festivities (such as the *shibsheba* or priestly dance), to celebrating social occasions such as weddings and funerals and, in the past, to motivating warriors before departing for battle.

Still found in rural areas are dances in praise of nature, such as after a good harvest or when new sources of water are discovered, and dances that allow the young ‘warriors’ to show off their agility and athleticism. Look out for the *fukara* (‘boasting’ dance), which is often performed at public festivals. A leftover from less peaceful times, it involves a man holding a spear, stick or rifle horizontally above his shoulders while moving his head from side to side and shouting defiantly at the ‘enemy’.

Among the tribes of the Omo Valley in the south, many dances incorporate jumping and leaping up and down, a little like the dances of Kenya’s Maasai. All dancing is in essence a social, communal activity,

DANCING THE ISKISTA

When dancing the famous *iskista*, the shoulders are juddered up and down, backwards and forwards, in a careful rhythm, while the hips and legs are kept motionless. Sometimes the motion is accompanied by a sharp intake of breath, making a sound like the word ‘iskista’, or alternatively by a *zefen*, a loud, high-pitched and strident folk song. If you’re not in practice, the dance is a greedy chiropractor’s dream!

and you’ll often be expected to join in. If you do give it a go, you’ll win a lot of friends! Declining to dance can infer a slight.

Literature

Inscriptions in Ge’ez (the ancestor of modern Amharic) date from Aksumite times. It was during this early period that the Bible was translated from Greek into Ge’ez.

The year 1270 is considered to mark the golden age of Ge’ez literature, in which many works were translated from Arabic, as well as much original writing produced. It’s thought that in the early 14th century the *Kebrā Negast* (p56) was written.

During the 16th-century Muslim–Christian wars, book production ground to a halt and copious amounts of literature were destroyed. By the 17th century Ge’ez was in decline as a literary language and had long ceased to serve as the vernacular.

Amharic, now Ethiopia’s official language was the Amharas’ language. It was Emperor Tewodros who encouraged the local language in an attempt to promote national unity. In a continuation of the trend begun in the 14th century, Tewodros and other emperors right up to Haile Selassie funded writers whose compositions and poetic laudatory songs were written to praise the ruler’s qualities and munificence.

ORAL LITERATURE – TALES TALL & TRUE

Every time an old person passes away, it’s as if a whole library were lost.

Ethiopian-Somali saying

In the West, culture is usually defined in terms of grandiose monuments, works of art and sophisticated customs. In some countries, however, and particularly where the climate dictates a nomadic existence for its people, culture manifests itself not in enduring buildings and great writings, but in the spoken word, passed down from generation to generation.

Many languages in Africa are in the process of disappearing along with the cultures that support them. And while vast amounts of time, effort and money continue to be invested in excavating tangible evidence of past civilisations, the intangible evidence – the oral patrimony, which is just as important and certainly as fragile – is allowed to disappear forever.

The oral tradition of many African societies is rich, and particularly so in Ethiopia. Here, literally thousands of proverbs, maxims and tales are in circulation, having been told and retold for centuries by nomads, cattle herders and traders.

Among the nomadic people of East Africa, the tale serves as a kind of bedtime story. After the heat and work of the day, when the animals have been fed, watered and safely penned, families gather around the fire outside the tent. Storytellers are usually the older members of the family; among the Ethiopian Somalis, it’s the grandmother who plays the part of narrator.

The tales are told to teach as well as to entertain. Children are taught not only morals and the difference between right and wrong, but useful lessons about the world they live in, and about human nature. The stories teach children to listen, to concentrate and to make judgements based on the dialogue of the characters, as the story unfolds. It encourages them to think and to analyse, and it develops their power of memory.

Tales also serve the adult population. Sometimes they are employed to clarify a situation, to offer advice tactfully to a friend, or to alert someone diplomatically to trouble or to wrongdoing. Like poetry, the tale can express a complex idea or situation economically and simply. The tale has also been used to attack latently corrupt leaders or governments without fear of libel or persecution.

In Ethiopia, there’s said to be a tale for every situation. You’ll be surprised how often the locals resort to proverbs, maxims or stories during the course of normal conversation. It’s said that the first Ethiopian-Somali proverb of all is: ‘While a man may tell fibs, he may never tell false proverbs.’

KEBRA NEGAST

Written during the 14th century by an unknown author(s), the *Kebra Negast* (Glory of Kings) is considered Ethiopia's great national epic. Like the Quran to Muslims or the Old Testament to Jews, it's a repository of Ethiopian national, religious and cultural sentiment.

It's notoriously shrouded in mystery, perhaps deliberately so. Some controversially suggest it may even represent a massive propaganda stunt to legitimise the rule of the so-called 'Solomonic kings', who came to power in the 13th century and who, the book claims, were direct descendants of the kings of Israel.

Its most important legend is that of Solomon and Sheba (see the boxed text, p139).

Under the Derg (p37), both writing and writers were suppressed. Be'alu Girma is a well-known example of one of the many artists who disappeared during their reign.

POETRY

Written in Amharic as well as other Ethiopian languages, poetry, along with dance and music, is used on many religious and social occasions, such as weddings or funerals. Rhymed verse is almost always chanted or sung in consonance with the rhythm of music.

Poetry places great stress on meaning, metaphor and allusion. In Ge'ez poetry, the religious allusions demand an in-depth knowledge of Ethiopian religious legends and the Bible.

FOLK LITERATURE

Perhaps the source of the greatest originality and creativity is the vast folk literature of Ethiopia, most of it in oral form and existing in all languages and dialects. It encompasses everything from proverbs, tales and riddles to magic spells and prophetic statements.

Architecture

Ethiopia boasts some remarkable historical architecture. Though some monuments, such as the castles of Gondar, show foreign influence, earlier building styles, such as those developed during the Aksumite period, are believed to be wholly indigenous, and are of a high technical standard.

ASKUMITE ARCHITECTURE

The 'Aksumite style' of stone masonry is Ethiopia's most famous building style. Walls were constructed with field stones set in mortar, along with sometimes finely dressed corner stones. In between came alternating layers of stone and timber, recessed then projected, and with protruding ends of round timber beams, known as 'monkey heads'. The latter are even symbolically carved into Aksum's great obelisks (see p134), which may just be the nation's greatest architectural achievements. The Aksumites were undoubtedly master masons.

The best examples of Aksumite buildings are seen at Debre Damo and the church of Yemrehanna Kristos (p163).

The Aksumite style is additionally seen in Lalibela's rock-hewn churches, as well as in modern design today. Keep an eye out for the ancient motifs in new hotel and restaurant designs.

ROCK-HEWN ARCHITECTURE

Ethiopia's rock-hewing tradition probably predates Christianity and has resulted in nearly 400 churches across the country. The art form reached

its apogee in the 12th and 13th centuries in Lalibela, where the Zagwe dynasty produced 11 churches that continue to astound. They're considered among the world's finest early Christian architecture.

The churches are unique in that many stand completely free from the rock, unlike similar structures in Jordan and Egypt. The buildings show extraordinary technical skill in the use of line, proportion and decoration, and in the remarkable variety of styles.

The rock-hewn churches of the Tigray region, though less famous and spectacular, are no less remarkable.

GONDER ARCHITECTURE

The town of Gondar and its imperial enclosure represent another peak in Ethiopian architectural achievement. Although Portuguese, Moorish and Indian influences are all evident, the castles are nevertheless a peculiarly Ethiopian synthesis. Some have windows decorated with red volcanic tuff, and barrel- or egg-shaped domes.

Painting

Ethiopian painting is largely limited to religious subjects, particularly the life of Christ and the saints. Every church in Ethiopia is decorated with abundant and colourful murals, frescos or paintings.

Much Ethiopian painting is characterised by a naive realism. Everything is expressed with vigour and directness using bold colour, strong line and stylised proportions and perspective. Like the stained-glass windows in European Gothic churches, the paintings served a very important purpose: to instruct, inspire and instil awe in the illiterate and uneducated.

Though some modern artists (particularly painters of religious and some secular work) continue in the old tradition (or incorporate ancient motifs such as that of the Aksumite stelae), many artists have developed their own style. Borrowing freely from the past, but no longer constrained by it, modern Ethiopian painting shows greater originality of expression and is now a flourishing medium.

Until recently, the artist was considered a mere craftsman, but as Western influence has spread the artist has attained a more professional standing, and works of art can be found for sale not only in modern art galleries, and cultural institute exhibitions, but also in hotels and restaurants.

Among the young painters to look out for are Behailu Bezabeh, an acute observer of everyday life in the capital; Daniel Taye, who is known for his darker more disturbing images; Geta Makonnen, whose artwork addresses social issues; the sculptor Bekele Makonnen, with his thought-provoking installations revolving around moral and social values; and Tigist Hailegabreal, a versatile young woman artist who's concerned with women's issues such as prostitution and violence against women.

ETHIOPIAN HOUSES

Ethiopian houses are famously diverse; each ethnic group has developed its own design according to its own lifestyle and own resources.

In general, the round *tukul* (hut) forms the basis of most designs. Circular structures and conical thatched roofs better resist the wind and heavy rain. Windows and chimneys are usually absent. The smoke, which escapes through the thatch, fumigates the building, protecting it against insect infestations such as termites.

Sometimes the huts are shared: the right side for the family, the left for the animals. Livestock are not only protected from predators but in some regions they also provide central heating!

The vast stained-glass window in Addis Ababa's Africa Hall (p87) is the work of one of Africa's best-known painters, Afewerk Tekle (see the boxed text, below).

Arts & Crafts

Ethiopia boasts a particularly rich tradition of arts and crafts. This is partly due to the wide range of raw materials available, from gold to good hardwood and fine highland wool. Additionally, the number and diversity of the country's ethnic groups (64 according to some reckonings), and the differing needs arising from the different environments, has ensured this.

Traditional arts and crafts include basketware (Harar is considered the centre), paintings, musical instruments, pottery, hornwork, leatherwork and woodcarving. The best woodwork traditionally comes from Jimma in western Ethiopia, where forests of tropical and temperate hardwoods once flourished. The Gurage and Sidamo also work wood.

Other crafts include metalwork (materials range from gold and silver to brass, copper and iron, and products include the famous and diverse Ethiopian crosses) as well as weaving. The Konso are known for their woollen products; the Gurage and Dorze for their cotton products, which include the famous *kemis* (traditional women's dresses) and *shamma* (togas) of the highlander men. Special skills are particularly required for making the ornate and beautifully coloured *tibeb* (borders) of the women's *natala* (shawls). Debre Berhan is considered the capital of rug making.

Remember if you're buying authentic crafts, ensure that they aren't made from indigenous woods or wildlife products. For more information, see the boxed text on p256.

Theatre

Ethiopia boasts one of Africa's most ancient, prolific and flourishing theatrical traditions. Because theatre is written mainly in Amharic, however, it's practically unknown outside the country. Having largely resisted European influence, it's also preserved its own very local flavour and outlook.

Ethiopian theatrical conventions include minimal drama, sparse characterisation (with actors often serving as symbols) and plenty of extended speeches. Verse form is still often used and rhetoric remains a very important element of Ethiopian plays. Audiences tend to be participatory. Modern playwrights include Ayalneh Mulatu.

AFEWERK TEKLE

Born in 1932, Afewerk Tekle is one of Ethiopia's most distinguished and colourful artistic figures. Educated at the Slade School of Art in London, he later toured and studied in continental Europe before returning to work under the patronage of Emperor Haile Selassie. A painter as well as a sculptor and designer, he's also a master fencer, dancer and toastmaster.

Proud to have 'survived three regimes' (when friends and peers did not), his life has hardly been without incident. In almost cinematic style, a 'friendly' fencing match turned into an attempt on his life, and a tussle over a woman led to his challenging his rival to a duel at dawn. In the royal court of the emperor, he once only just survived an assassination attempt by poisoned cocktail.

The artist famously makes his own terms and conditions: if he doesn't like the purchaser he won't sell, and his best-known paintings must be returned to Ethiopia within a lifetime. He's even turned down over US\$12 million for the work considered his masterpiece, *The Meskel Flower*.

ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

Without doubt, illuminated manuscripts represent one of Ethiopia's greatest artistic achievements. The best quality manuscripts were created by monks and priests in the 14th and 15th centuries. The kings, the court and the largest and wealthiest churches and monasteries were the main patrons. The manuscripts were characterised by beautifully shaped letters, attention to minute detail, and elaborate ornamentation. Pictures included in the text brought it to life and made it more comprehensible for the uneducated or illiterate.

Bindings consisted of thick wooden boards often covered with tooled leather. The volume was then placed into a case with straps made of rough hides so that it could be slung over a shoulder.

On the blank pages at the beginning or at the end of the volume, look out for the formulae *fatina bere* (literally 'trial of the pen') or *bere' sanay* (literally 'a fine pen'), as the scribes tried out their reeds. Some are also dated and contain a short blessing for the owner as well as the scribe.

Sadly, due to the Muslim and the Dervish raids of the early 16th and late 19th centuries respectively, few manuscripts date prior to the 14th century. Modern times have seen huge numbers being pillaged by soldiers, travellers and explorers.

Don't miss your chance to see what treasures remain – church priests are usually only too happy to show you.

There are usually a few productions put on each week in Addis Ababa (see p102 for venues).

Cinema

Ethiopia, which was never colonised, missed out on the 'benefit' of colonial support for setting up a film industry enjoyed by other African countries in the mid-1950s and '60s.

Solomon Bekele was one of the pioneers of Ethiopian cinema and is best known for his Amharic feature film *Aster*. Ethiopia's most famous English-speaking film-maker is Haile Gerima, whose latest film *Adwa* (released in early 2000) deals with a recurring theme, the Ethiopian defeat of the Italians at Adwa (see p143).

Environment

The farmer who eats his chickens as well as all their eggs will have a bleak future.

Tigrayan proverb

THE LAND

With a land area of 1,098,000 sq km, Ethiopia measures five times the size of Britain or about twice the size of Texas. Ethiopia's topography is remarkably diverse, ranging from 20 mountains peaking above 4000m to one of the lowest points on the Earth's surface: the infamous Danakil Depression, which lies almost 120m below sea level.

Two principal geographical zones can be found in the country: the cool highlands and the hot lowlands that surround them.

Ethiopia's main topographical feature is the vast central plateau (the Ethiopian highlands) with an average elevation between 1800m and 2400m. It's here that the country's major peaks are found including Ras Dasha at 4543m (4620m according to some estimates and maps), Ethiopia's highest mountain and Africa's tenth.

The mountains are also the source of four large river systems, the most famous of which is the Blue Nile. Starting from Lake Tana and joined later by the White Nile in Sudan, it nurtures the Egypt's fertile Nile Valley. The other principal rivers are the Awash, the Omo and the Wabe Shebele.

Southern Ethiopia is bisected diagonally by the Rift Valley. Averaging around 50km wide, it runs all the way to Mozambique. The valley floor has several lakes, including the well-known chain south of Addis Ababa.

The northern end of the East African Rift Valley opens into the Danakil Depression, one of the hottest places on Earth.

WILDLIFE

Like its geography, Ethiopia's ecosystems are diverse, from high Afro-alpine vegetation to desert and semidesert scrubland. Filling in this spectrum's gap are six more unique ecosystems: dry evergreen montane forest and grassland; small-leaved deciduous forests; broad-leaved deciduous forests; moist evergreen forests; lowland semi-evergreen forests; and wetlands.

The massive Ethiopian central plateau is home to several of these ecosystems and a distinctive assemblage of plants and animals. Isolated for millions of years within this 'fortress environment' and unable to cross the inhospitable terrain surrounding it, much highland wildlife evolved on its own. Many species are found nowhere else in the world.

Animals

Simply because it lacks large crowds of cavorting elephants, giraffes and rhinos, Ethiopia is mistakenly written off by many ignorant Westerners as simply a historical destination. What they don't know is that Ethiopia

currently hosts 277 mammal species, 200 reptile species, 148 fish species and 63 amphibian species. And that's not even including the birds!

To date, 862 species have been recorded (compared with just 250 in the UK). Of Africa's 10 endemic mainland bird families, eight are represented in Ethiopia; only rockfowl and sugarbirds are absent. Families that are particularly well represented are falcons, francolins, bustards and larks.

More noteworthy is the fact that of all the species in Ethiopia, 31 mammals, 21 birds, nine reptiles, four fish and 24 amphibians are endemic (found only in Ethiopia). The biggest kicker of all is the realisation that you have a pretty good chance of spotting some of the rarest species, including the Ethiopian wolf, which is planet's rarest canid (dog family member).

The Afro-alpine habitat, within the Bale and Simien Mountains National Parks, boasts the largest number of endemic mammals and hosts mountain nyala, walia ibex, Ethiopian wolves, gelada baboons, Menelik's bushbuck and giant molerats. Incredibly 16 of Ethiopia's endemic birds are also found in these lofty confines (see the boxed text on p62 for the lowdown on Ethiopia's endemic birdlife and birding itineraries).

At the opposite end of the elevation spectrum, the lowly confines of the desert and semidesert scrublands host the endangered African wild ass and Grevy's zebra, as well as the Soemmering's gazelle and beisa oryx. Birds include the ostrich, secretary bird, Arabian, Kori and Heuglin's bustards, Abyssinian roller, red-cheeked cordon bleu and crested francolin.

The wide-ranging but sporadic deciduous forests play home to greater and lesser kudus, hartebeests, gazelles, De Brazza's monkeys and small populations of elands, buffaloes and elephants. Limited numbers of Grevy's zebras and beisa oryx also inhabit these areas. Birdlife includes the white-bellied go-away bird, superb starling, red-billed quelea, helmeted guinea fowl, secretary bird, Ruppell's long-tailed starling, gambaga flycatcher, red-cheeked cordon bleu, bush petronia and black-faced firefinch.

Wandering the evergreen forests in the southwestern and western parts of the country are bushpigs, forest hogs, Menelik's bushbucks and more De Brazza's monkeys. Around Gambela, in the lowland semi-evergreen forest, are rare populations of elephants, giraffes, lions and the hard-to-spot white-eared kob, a beautiful golden antelope found in larger numbers in southern Sudan. The colourful birdlife includes the

Endemic Mammals of Ethiopia, by Jill Last and published by the defunct Ethiopian Tourism Commission, gives decent descriptions of the appearance and behaviour of Ethiopia's mammals. It's usually available in Addis Ababa.

A Guide to Endemic Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea by Jose Luis Vivero Pol is an excellent companion for birders.

THE BLEEDING HEART BABOON

The gelada baboon (*Theropithecus gelada*) is one of Ethiopia's most fascinating endemic mammals. In fact not a baboon at all, it makes up its own genus of monkey.

Of all the nonhuman primates, it's by far the most dexterous. It also lives in the largest social groups (up to 800 have been recorded), and is the only primate that feeds on grass and has its 'mating skin' on its chest and not on its bottom – a convenient adaptation, given that it spends most of its time sitting!

The gelada also has the most complex system of communication of any nonhuman primate and the most sophisticated social system: the females decide who's boss, the young males form bachelor groups, and the older males perform a kind of grandfather role looking after the young.

Although the males sport magnificent leonine manes, their most striking physical feature is the bare patch of skin on their chest. This has given rise to their other popular name: the 'bleeding heart baboon'. The colour of the patch indicates the sexual condition not just of the male (his virility), but also his female harem (their fertility), like a kind of communal sexual barometer.

Although its population is shrinking, the gelada population is the healthiest of Ethiopia's endemic mammals. Its current population is thought to number between 40,000 and 50,000. See also the boxed text, p128.

FUNNY FROGS

During a scientific expedition to the Harena Forest in the Bale Mountains a few years ago, biologists discovered four entirely new frog species in the space of just three weeks. Many of the frogs appear to have made peculiar adaptations to their environment. One species swallows snails whole, another has forgotten how to hop and a third has lost its ears!

ETHIOPIA'S ENDEMIC BIRDS

There's no denying that the diversity and beauty of Ethiopia's astounding 862 recorded bird species could convert even the most die-hard nonbirder into a habitual and excited twitcher. Besides the relative ease of spotting over a hundred bird species in a few weeks, it's the endemic bird species that really set Ethiopia apart.

An amazing 21 species are found nowhere else in the world. Thirteen more are semi-endemic, shared only with Eritrea.

The best time to visit Ethiopia for birding is between November and February, when some 200 species of Palearctic migrants from Europe and Asia join the already abundant African resident and intra-African migrant populations. The most likely time to spot birds is from dawn to 11am and from 5pm to dusk, although birds can be seen throughout the day.

The Birding Circuit

If you're a passionate birder then the circuit suggested here could suit your fancy. If you don't have 10 days to two weeks or a 4WD, then you can pick and choose your spots from the itinerary.

Start off by spending a couple of days touring the northern Rift Valley lakes. Explore the shores of Lake Ziway (p171) for marsh species, before continuing on to Lake Langano (p172), where over 300 species have been spotted. Nearby is Lake Abiata-Shala National Park (p173), which hosts abundant acacia-related bird species.

Stop at Wondo Genet (p175) to check out the forests, which host several endemics like the yellow-fronted parrot and the white-backed tit.

From there head east and spend two days in the Bale Mountains (p181), where no less than 16 of Ethiopia's 21 endemics are found. Next head east to Sof Omar (p191) and search for Salvadori's seedeater or serin. Then double back towards the Bale Mountains before crossing the Sanetti Plateau (where you have a good chance to spot the Simien wolf) and descending into the heat of the southern lowlands. The long and bumpy ride between Dola-Mena (p192) and Negele Borena (p192) is rich in birdlife and there are several endemics visible, like the Degodi lark, Prince Ruspoli's turaco and the Sidamo long-clawed lark.

Head west to the Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary (p193) and take in two of the world's most range-restricted species, the Stresemann's bush crow and white-tailed swallow.

If you have a few days to kill and want to live on in infamy as the first person to see a Nechisar nightjar alive, head west from Yabelo and then north at Konso to visit Nechisar National Park (p199). If not, take the long road back north towards Addis Ababa and complete your bird-watching bonanza at Awash National Park (p217), where six endemics live, including the white-winged cliff chat, the banded barbet and the goldenbacked or Abyssinian woodpecker.

Endemics of Ethiopia

- Abyssinian catbird (*Parophasma galinieri*) – juniper forests within the Bale Mountains (p181).
- Abyssinian longclaw (*Macronyx flavicollis*) – Afro-alpine grassland in the Bale Mountains (p181).
- Abyssinian slaty flycatcher (*Dioptornis chocolatinus*) – highland woodlands bracketing the southern Rift Valley.
- Ankober seedeater or serin (*Serinus ankoberensis*) – around Ankober (p167) and in Simien Mountains (p125).
- Black-headed siskin (*Serinus nigriceps*) – Afro-alpine grassland and heather forests in the Bale Mountains (p181).
- Blue-winged goose (*Cyanochen cyanopterus*) – Gefersa Reservoir (p237) and Sanetti Plateau in the Bale Mountains (p181).

- Degodi lark (*Mirafraga degodiensis*) – around Negele Borena (p192).
- Erlanger's Lark (*Calandrella erlangeri*) – common in the highlands.
- Ethiopian cliff swallow (*Hirundo*) – Lake Langano (p172).
- Harwood's francolin (*Francolinus harwoodi*) – in the Jemma Valley, northeast of Debre Libanos.
- Nechisar nightjar (*Caprimulgus nechisarensis*) – Nechisar National Park (p199).
- Prince Ruspoli's turaco (*Tauraco ruspolii*) – around Negele Borena (p192).
- Salvadori's seedeater or serin (*Serinus xantholaema*) – Sof Omar (p191) and around Negele Borena (p192).
- Sidamo long-clawed lark (*Heteromirafraga sidamoensis*) – near Negele Borena (p192).
- Spot-breasted plover (*Vanellus melanocephalus*) – found near rivers and streams in the Bale Mountains (p181).
- Stresemann's or Abyssinian bush crow (*Zavattariornis stresemanni*) – Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary (p193).
- White-cheeked turaco (*Tauraco leucolophus*) – common in highlands.
- White-tailed swallow (*Hirundo megaensis*) – Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary (p193).
- White-throated seedeater (*Serinus xanthopygius*) – around Ankober (p167) and the Blue Nile Falls (p118).
- Yellow-fronted parrot (*Poicephalus flavifrons*) – Wondo Genet (p175), Menagesha Forest (p237) and Bale Mountains (p181).
- Yellow-throated seedeater or serin (*Serinus flavigula*) – Awash National Park (p217) and near Ankober (p167).

Semi-Endemics of Ethiopia & Eritrea

- Abyssinian woodpecker (*Dendropicus abyssinicus*) – Awash National Park (p217); rare but widespread.
- Banded barbet (*Lybius undatus*) – Awash National Park (p217) and in southern Rift Valley.
- Black-winged lovebird (*Agapornis swinderiana*) – common in highland woodlands.
- Brown sawwing (*Psalidoprocne oleagina*) – Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary (p193).
- Ethiopian cisticola (*Cisticola lugubris*) – common in montane grasslands.
- Rouget's rail (*Rougetius rougetii*) – associated with marshes and river systems in highlands. Common in Bale Mountains (p181).
- Rüpell's black chat (*Myrmecocichla melaena*) – common in rock highlands of Tigray (p147).
- Thick-billed raven (*Corvus crassirostris*) – common in highlands.
- Wattled Ibis (*Bostrychia carunculata*) – common in highlands.
- White-backed black tit (*Parus leuconotus*) – Wondo Genet (p175) and Bale Mountains (p181). Also in Addis Ababa (p76).
- White-billed starling (*Onychognathus albirostris*) – in and around Lalibela (p155).
- White-collared pigeon (*Columba albitorques*) – common in highlands, including Addis Ababa (p76).
- White-winged cliff chat (*Myrmecocichla semirufa*) – common in rock highlands of Tigray (p147) and Awash National Park (p217).

The Nechisar nightjar (*Caprimulgus solala*) was discovered from a mere wing found squashed on the road near Nechisar National Park in 1990. None have been seen since – sad but true. ‘Solala’ in its scientific name means ‘single winged’.

Abyssinian black-headed oriole, Abyssinian hill babbler, white-cheeked turaco, scaly throated honeyguide, scaly francolin, emerald cuckoo and the yellow-billed coucal.

Hippos and crocodiles are also found around Gambela in the wetlands along the Baro River. They also populate some of the Rift Valley lakes in the south – Lake Chamo is famous for its massive crocodiles. Rouget’s rails and white-winged flufftails are found in the wetland swamps, while the Senegal thick-knee and red-throated bee-eater live in riverbank habitats.

The odd leopard, gazelle, jackal and hyena still roam the dry evergreen montane forest and grassland found in Ethiopia’s north, northwest, central and southern highlands. Birds of note include black-winged lovebirds, half-collared kingfishers and several endemic species (for more information, see p62).

ENDANGERED SPECIES

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) lists seven species in Ethiopia as critically endangered; one is Ethiopia’s endemic walia ibex. Amazingly, you have a pretty good chance of spotting this rare animal in the Simien Mountains National Park.

A further 19 species in Ethiopia are listed as endangered by IUCN. These include the endemic mountain nyala and Ethiopian wolf, both easily viewed in Bale Mountains National Park. Nechisar National Park holds the endangered African hunting dog and what’s likely Ethiopia’s rarest endemic bird, the Nechisar nightjar. Both are notoriously hard to view.

Vulnerable bird species are Prince Ruspoli’s turaco (see below), Salvadori’s serin, Stresemann’s bush crow, the Sidamo long-clawed lark, the Degodi lark, the Ankober serin and the white-tailed swallow. For more information, see p62.

Plants

Ethiopia’s flora is no less exceptional for the same reason. Ethiopia is classed as one of world’s 12 Vavilov centres for crop plant diversity, and is thought to possess extremely valuable pools of crop plant genes. Between 600 and 1400 plants species are thought to be endemic; an enormous 10% to 20% of it’s flora.

THE STRANGE CASE OF THE VANISHING TURACO

In a remote patch in the deep south of Ethiopia lives one of the country’s rarest, most beautiful and most enigmatic birds – the Prince Ruspoli’s turaco, first introduced to the world in the early 1890s. It was ‘collected’ by an Italian prince (who gave his name to the bird) as he explored the dense juniper forests of southern Ethiopia.

Unfortunately, the intrepid prince failed to make a record of his find, and when he was killed shortly afterwards near Lake Abaya following ‘an encounter with an elephant’, all hope of locating the species seemed to die with him.

In subsequent years, other explorers searched in vain for the bird. None were successful until the turaco finally reappeared in the 1940s. Just three specimens were obtained, then the turaco disappeared again. It wasn’t until the early 1970s that the bird was rediscovered.

Today, recent sightings in the Arero forest, east of Yabelo, around the Genale River off the Dola-Mena-Negele Borena road, suggest that the bird may not, after all, be as elusive as it would have us believe.

SPOT THE ENDEMIC FLORA

Ethiopia has more unique species of flora than any other country in Africa. In September and October, look out particularly for the famous yellow daisy known as the Meskel flower, which carpets the highlands; it belongs to the Bidens family, six members of which are endemic.

In towns and villages, the endemic yellow-flowered *Solanecio gigas* is commonly employed as a hedge. Around Addis Ababa, the tall endemic *Erythrina brucei* tree can be seen. In the highlands, such as in the Bale Mountain and Simien Mountain National Parks, the indigenous Abyssinian rose is quite commonly found. Also in the Bale Mountains, look out for the endemic species of globe thistle (*Echinops longisetus*).

The small-leaved deciduous forests can be found all over the country apart from the western regions, at an altitude of between 900m and 1900m. Vegetation consists of drought-tolerant shrubs and trees with either leathery persistent leaves or small deciduous ones. Trees include various types of acacia. Herbs include *Acalypha* and *Aerva*.

The western and northwestern areas of Ethiopia host the broad-leaved deciduous forests, while tall and medium-sized trees and understorey shrubs of the moist evergreen forests also occupy the west as well as the nation’s southwest. Even further west are the lowland semi-evergreen forests around Gambela. Vegetation there consists of semi-evergreen trees and shrub species as well as grasses.

Covering much of the highlands, and the north, northwest, central and southern parts of the country, is the dry evergreen montane forest and grassland. This habitat is home to a large number of endemic plants. Tree species include various types of acacia, olive and euphorbia. Africa’s only rose, the *Rosa abyssinica*, is here.

Within the Afro-alpine vegetation habitat, you’ll see the endemic giant lobelia (*Lobelia rhynchopetalum*), an endemic species of globe thistle as well as the so-called ‘soft thistle’. Heather grows into large trees of up to 10m. On the high plateaus at around 4000m are many varieties of gentian.

Look out for fig and tamarind trees along the Baro River in the west as well as along river banks or *wadis* (seasonal rivers) in the highlands and the northwest.

The Dankalia region, Omo delta and Ogaden Desert contain highly drought-resistant plants such as small trees, shrubs and grasses, including acacia. Succulent species include euphorbia and aloe. The region is classified as desert and semidesert scrubland.

NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES

There are nine national parks and three wildlife sanctuaries in Ethiopia. They range from the unvisited Kuni-Muktar Wildlife Sanctuary to the famed Simien Mountains National Park, a Unesco World Heritage site.

Most parks were delineated in the 1960s and 1970s during the time of Emperor Haile Selassie to protect endangered or endemic animals. In the process, land was forcefully taken from the peasants, a measure much resented by locals. When the Derg government fell in 1991, there was a brief period of anarchy, when park property was looted and wildlife killed.

Park borders continue to overlap with local communities, and conflicts over conservation continue, despite wildlife authorities trying to encourage locals’ participation in the conservation of wildlife. For instance, trees in Lake Abiata-Shala National Park continue to fall victim to the needs of its growing human population. The opposite is true in Nechisar

TOP PARKS & SANCTUARIES

Park	Features	Activities	Best time to visit
Southern Ethiopia			
Bale Mountains National Park (p181)	steep ridges, alpine plateaus; Ethiopian wolves, mountain nyala and 16 endemic birds	trekking, bird-watching	Oct-Jan
Lake Abiata-Shala National Park (p173)	crater lakes, hot springs; red-billed hornbills, Didric's cuckoos, Abyssinian rollers, superb starlings	bird-watching, walking	Nov-Dec
Mago National Park (p210)	savannah, open woodland; elephants, hartebeest, buffaloes, many birds	visiting Mursi tribes, wildlife drives	Jun-Sep & Jan-Feb
Nechisar National Park (p199)	savannah, acacia woodland; Burchell's zebras, Swayne's hartebeest, crocodiles, greater kudu, 320 bird species	wildlife drives, boat trips	Nov-Feb
Omo National Park (p211)	savannah, open woodland; elephants, buffaloes, lions	visiting Mursi, Dizi & Surma tribes	Jun-Sep & Jan-Feb
Senkele Wildlife Sanctuary (p176)	open acacia woodland; Swayne's hartebeest, Bohor reedbucks, spotted hyena, greater spotted eagles	wildlife drives	Nov-Feb
Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary (p193)	acacia woodland, savannah grasses; Stresemann's bush crows, white-tailed swallows, Swayne's hartebeest, gerenuks	bird-watching, wildlife drive	year-round
Northern Ethiopia			
Simien Mountains National Park (p125)	dramatic volcanic escarpments and plateaus; walia ibexes, gelada baboons, Simien wolves, lammergeyers	trekking, bird-watching, wildlife viewing	Oct-Jan
Eastern Ethiopia			
Awash National Park (p217)	semiarid woodland; beisa oryxes, Soemmering's gazelles, kudu, 6 endemic bird species	bird-watching, wildlife viewing	Oct-Feb
Western Ethiopia			
Gambela National Park (p250)	semiarid woodland, deciduous forests; savannah Nile lechwe, white-eared kobs, elephants	rugged wildlife drives/treks	Dec-Mar

National Park, where lengthy negotiations have led to the park finally being settlement-free.

Nechisar and Omo National Parks, long neglected by the government, are now run by a nonprofit organisation which has successfully rehabilitated parks in other African countries. The African elephant, black rhinoceros, giraffe and other exterminated species will probably be reintroduced.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Despite civil wars taking their toll on the environment, Ethiopia's demographic pressures have been the main culprit. About 95% of its original forest is believed to have been lost to agriculture and human settlement.

Ethiopia's population has almost quintupled in the last 70 years and continues to grow at 2.5%; the pressures for living space, firewood, building materials, agricultural land, livestock grazing and food will only further reduce natural resources, and wipe out larger areas of wildlife habitat.

The deforestation has resulted in soil erosion, an extremely serious threat to Ethiopia as it exacerbates the threat of famine. Although hunting and poaching over the centuries has decimated the country's once large herds of elephant and rhino, deforestation has also played a role.

Wildlife and forests were both victims of the most recent civil war, where whole forests were torched by the Derg to smoke out rebel forces. Additionally, large armies, hungry and with inadequate provisions, turned their sights on the land's natural resources and much wildlife was wiped out.

Up until recently, armed conflict between tribes in the Omo and Mago National Parks continued to impede wildlife conservation efforts.

Today, things are more under control. Hunting is managed by the government and may even provide the most realistic and pragmatic means of ensuring the future survival of Ethiopia's large mammals. Poaching, however, continues to pose a serious threat to some animals.

In late 2005 a new conservation action plan and a new wildlife proclamation were accepted by the government and sent to parliament for approval. Besides bringing stricter environmental regulations, these new programmes are designed to unite the government's previously unrelated portfolios of wildlife, biodiversity and environmental protection.

For more on wildlife conservation, contact the **Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Department** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0115 504020; Ras Desta Damtew St, Addis Ababa).

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL: ENVIRONMENT

Although there are a few sustainable ecotourism projects popping up across Ethiopia, the concept is still not widely known. Some effort on your part is a good step in the right direction.

- Water is an extremely precious and scarce resource in some parts of Ethiopia (including Gonder, Aksum and Lalibela). Try not to waste it by letting taps and showers run unnecessarily.
- If you're buying authentic crafts, ensure that they aren't made from indigenous woods or wildlife products.
- Be sensitive to wildlife.
- If a campfire is necessary, ensure the wood used is eucalyptus and be sensitive to the fire's location as it can disturb wildlife.
- Never litter.
- Always crush your water bottles after use to minimise waste. Better yet, take a water bottle and chemically treat local water. **Pristine** (www.pristine.ca) or Katadyn MicroPur MP1 water treatment tablets are good choices.
- Avoid driving off-road as it can harm or disturb animals and nesting birds.

Advice on responsible travel from a cultural standpoint is available on p44. For tips on responsible trekking, see p255.

An excellent organisation in the UK that can provide more information for concerned travellers is London-based **Tourism Concern** (www.tourismconcern.org.uk).

Food & Drink

Ethiopia's food is much like Ethiopia, completely different from the rest of Africa. Plates, bowls and even utensils are replaced by *injera*, a unique pancake of countrywide proportions. Atop its rubbery confines can sit anything from spicy meat stews to colourful dollops of boiled veg and cubes of raw beef.

Whether it's the spices joyfully bringing a tear to your eye or the slightly sour taste of the clammy *injera* sending your tongue into convulsions, one thing's for sure, Ethiopian fare provokes a strong reaction in all.

Ethiopian cooking is quite varied and complex, so it's worth experimenting to find something that tickles your tongue in the right way – prices are so cheap, you can afford to make the odd mistake.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Popular breakfast dishes include *enkulal tibs* (scrambled eggs made with a combination of green and red peppers, tomatoes and sometimes onions, served with bread), *ful* (chickpea and butter purée) and *yinjera fir fir* (torn-up *injera* mixed with butter and *berbere*, a red powder containing as many as 16 spices or more).

At lunch and dinner the much heralded Ethiopian staples of *wat*, *kitfo* and *tere sega* come out to play with the ever-present *injera*.

Injera

You'll never forget your first *injera* experience.

It's the national staple and the base of almost every meal. It is spread out like a large, thin pancake, and food is simply heaped on top of it. An American tourist once famously mistook it for the tablecloth. Occasionally, *injera* is served rolled up beside the food or on a separate plate, looking much like a hot towel on an airplane.

Slightly bitter, it goes well with spicy food. Like bread, it's filling; and like a pancake, it's good for wrapping around small pieces of food and mopping up juices. It's also easier to manipulate than rice and doesn't fall apart like bread – quite a clever invention, really.

Although *injera* may look like old grey kitchen flannel, grades and nuances do exist. With a bit of time and perseverance, you may even become a connoisseur.

Low-quality *injera* is traditionally dark, coarse and sometimes very thick, and is made from millet or even sorghum. Good-quality *injera* is pale (the paler the better), regular in thickness, smooth (free of husks) and *always* made with the indigenous Ethiopian cereal *tef*. Because *tef* grows only in the highlands, the best *injera* is traditionally found there, and highlanders tend to be rather snooty about lesser lowland versions.

Wat

The favourite companion of *injera*, *wat* is Ethiopia's version of stew.

In the highlands, *bege* (lamb) is the most common constituent of *wat*. *Bure* (beef) is encountered in the large towns, and *figel* (goat) most often in the arid lowlands. Chicken is the king of the *wat* and *doro wat* is practically the national dish. Ethiopian Christians as well as Muslims avoid pork. On fasting days various vegetarian versions of *wat* are available.

Kai wat is a stew of meat boiled in a spicy (thanks to oodles of *berbere*) red sauce. *Kai* sauce is also used for *minchet abesh*, which is a

thick minced-meat stew topped with a hard-boiled egg – it's one of our favourites, particularly with *aib* (like dry cottage cheese).

If you want something much milder, ask for *alicha wat* (it's a yellowish colour).

Kitfo

Kitfo is a big treat for the ordinary Ethiopian. The leanest meat is reserved for this dish, which is then minced and warmed in a pan with a little butter, *berbere* and sometimes *tosin* (thyme). It can be bland and disgusting, or tasty and divine. If you're ravenous after a hard day's travelling, it's just the ticket, as it's very filling. A tip? Ask for a heap of *berbere* on the side.

Traditionally, it's served just *leb leb* (warmed not cooked), though you can ask for it to be *betam leb leb* (literally 'very warmed', ie cooked!). A *kitfo special* is served with *aib* and *gomen* (minced spinach).

In the Gurage region (where it's something of a speciality) it's often served with *enset* (*kotcho*; false-banana 'bread'). *Kitfo beats* (restaurants specialising in *kitfo*) are found in the larger towns.

Tere Sega

Considered something of a luxury in Ethiopia, *tere sega* (raw meat) is traditionally served by the wealthy at weddings and other special occasions.

Some restaurants also specialise in it. Not unlike butcher shops in appearance, these places feature carcasses hanging near the entrance and men in bloodied overalls brandishing carving knives. The restaurants aren't as gruesome as they sound: the carcass is to demonstrate that the meat is fresh, and the men in overalls to guarantee you get the piece you fancy – two assurances you don't always get in the West.

A plate and a sharp knife serve as utensils, and *awazi* (a kind of mustard and chilli sauce) and *berbere* as accompaniments. Served with some local red wine, and enjoyed with Ethiopian friends, it's a ritual not to be missed – at least not for red-blooded meat eaters. It's sometimes called *gored gored*.

DRINKS

Ethiopia has a well-founded claim to be the original home of coffee (see the boxed text, p243), and coffee continues to be ubiquitous across the country. As a result of Italian influence, *macchiato* (espresso with a dash of milk), cappuccino and a kind of café latte known as a *buna bewetet* (coffee with milk) are also available in many of the towns. Sometimes the herb rue (known locally as *t'ena adam*, or health of Adam) is served with coffee, as is butter. In the western highlands, a layered drink of coffee and

If you become a massive fan of *kitfo* or *tere sega*, best get tested for tape worms (see p375) when you get home. Hopefully there'll be no pain to go with your tasty gain.

Contrary to the myth started by 18th-century Scottish explorer James Bruce, Ethiopians don't carve meat from living animals. Whether it occurred in ancient times, remains uncertain.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

With raw meat being a staple in Ethiopia, what dishes could possibly constitute a radical departure for those wishing to truly travel their tastebuds?

High on the yuck factor would have to be *trippa wat* (tripe stew), which still curls our toes and shakes our stomachs. And if an unleavened bread that's been buried in an underground pit and allowed to ferment for at least a month suits your fancy, order some *enset* with your *kitfo*. *Enset* is made from the false banana plant and closely resembles a fibrous carpet liner.

Fermentation of an entirely different sort can lead you down a very different path. If you're not catching an early bus the next morning, try the local *araki*, a grain spirit that will make you positively gasp. The Ethiopians believe it's good for high blood pressure! *Dagem araki* is twice-filtered and is finer. It's usually found in local hole-in-the-wall bars.

If you want to save yourself some embarrassment (unlike us), never inhale as you're placing *injera* laden with *berbere* into your mouth.

tea is also popular. If you want milk with coffee, ask for *betinnish wetet* (with a little milk).

In lowland Muslim areas, *shai* (tea) is preferred to coffee, and is offered black, sometimes spiced with cloves or ginger.

Most cafés also dabble in fresh juice, though it's usually dosed with sugar. If you don't want sugar in your juice or in your tea or coffee, make it clear when you order. Ask for the drink *yale sukkar* (without sugar). Bottled water is always available, as is the local favourite Ambo, a natural sparkling mineral water from western Ethiopia.

One drink not to be missed is *tej*, a delicious – and sometimes pretty powerful – local 'wine' or mead made from honey, and fermented using a local shrub known as *gesho*. *Tej* used to be the drink of the Ethiopian kings and comes in many varieties. It's served in little flasks known as *birille*.

There are several breweries in Ethiopia that pump out decent beers like Harar, Bati, Meta, Bedele, Dashen and Castel. Everyone has a different favourite, so explore at will!

Though no cause for huge celebration, local wine isn't at all bad, particularly the red Gouder. Of the whites, the dry Awash Crystal is about the best bet. Unless you're an aficionado of sweet red, avoid Axumite. Outside Addis Ababa, wine is usually only found in midrange hotels' restaurants.

CELEBRATIONS

Food plays a major role in religious festivals of both Muslims and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast between sunrise and sunset, while Ethiopian Orthodox abstain from eating any animal products in the 55 days leading up to Ethiopian Easter.

Orthodox Ethiopians also abstain from animal products each Wednesday and Friday. There are a very large number of Orthodox feast days, of which 33 honour the Virgin Mary alone.

While it has no religious connotations, Ethiopians have even taken to celebrating the serving of coffee (see the boxed text, below).

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Outside Addis Ababa and major towns, there isn't a plethora of eating options. You're usually constrained to small local restaurants that serve one pasta dish and a limited selection of Ethiopian food. If there's no menu, use the Eat Your Words section (p72) to inquire what's available. In

If looking for quality *tej*, ask a local. They'll know who makes it with pure honey and who cheats by adding sugar.

THE COFFEE CEREMONY

The coffee ceremony typifies Ethiopian hospitality. An invitation to attend a ceremony is a mark of friendship or respect, though it's not an event for those in a hurry.

When you're replete after a meal, the ceremony begins. Freshly cut grass is scattered on the ground 'to bring in the freshness and fragrance of nature'. Nearby, there's an incense burner smoking with *etan* (gum). The 'host' sits on a stool before a tiny charcoal stove.

First of all coffee beans are roasted in a pan. As the smoke rises, it's considered polite to draw it towards you, inhale it deeply and express great pleasure at the delicious aroma by saying *betam tiru no* (lovely!). Next the beans are ground up with a pestle and mortar before being brewed up.

When it's finally ready, the coffee is served in tiny china cups with at least three spoonfuls of sugar. At least three cups must be accepted. The third in particular is considered to bestow a blessing – it's the *berekha* (blessing) cup. Sometimes popcorn is passed around. It should be accepted with two hands extended and cupped together.

Enjoy!

ETHIOPIA'S TOP FIVE RESTAURANTS

- Serenade (p99) – although up a dark alley, it is a vibrant and flavourful place. Heaven for vegetarians.
- Habesha Restaurant (p95) – serving is an art form at this quality Ethiopian eatery.
- Shangri-la Restaurant (p96) – sit by the fire and cosy up to your *tere sega* (raw meat).
- Ristorante Castelli (p97) – in a country where almost every restaurant serves spaghetti, Castelli's is the first prince of pasta.
- Bahir Dar Hotel (p114) – although entirely outgunned by Addis Ababa's options, it's a genuine, low-key place to enjoy a local meal beneath the stars.

larger towns, local restaurants and hotels both offer numerous Ethiopian meals. The hotels' menus also throw some Western meals into the mix.

Kitfo beats are specialist restaurants in larger towns that primarily serve *kitfo*. Similarly *tej beats* are bars that focus on serving *tej*.

Unlike Addis Ababa, where restaurant hours vary widely, most restaurants elsewhere are open daily from around 7.30am to 10pm. *Tej beats* tend to open later (around 10am), but also close about 10pm.

Quick Eats

Cafés and pastry/cake shops (*keak beats*) both make perfect spots for quick snacks, breakfasts and caffeine top-ups. Fresh juices are usually available at each too.

Outside town, roadside snacks such as *kolo* (roasted barley), *bekolo* (popcorn) and fresh fruit make great in-between-meal fillers.

VEGETARIAN & VEGANS

On Wednesday and Friday, vegetarians breathe easy as these are the traditional fasting days, when no animal products should be eaten. Ethiopian fasting food most commonly includes *messer* (lentil curry), *gomen* (collard greens) and *kai iser* (beetroot).

Apart from fasting days, Ethiopians are rapacious carnivores and vegetarians are often conspicuous by their complete absence. If you're vegetarian or vegan, the best plan is to order alternative dishes in advance. If not, some dishes such as *shiro* (chickpea purée) are quite quickly prepared. Note that fancier hotels tend to offer fasting food seven days a week.

If you're concerned about available vegetarian food, you may even want to consider travelling during a fasting period, such as the one before Fasika (p261).

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Eating from individual plates strikes most Ethiopians as hilarious, as well as rather bizarre and wasteful. In Ethiopia, food is always shared from a single plate without the use of cutlery.

In many cases, with a simple *Enebla!* (Please join us!), people invite those around them (even strangers) to join them at their restaurant table. For those invited, it's polite to accept a morsel of the food to show appreciation.

In households and many of the restaurants, a jug of water and basin are brought out to wash the guests' outstretched hands before the meal. Guests remain seated throughout (though it's polite to make a gesture of getting up if the person serving is older).

DO'S & DON'TS**Do**

- Bring a small gift if you've been invited to someone's home for a meal. Pastries or flowers are good choices in urban areas, while sugar, coffee and fruit are perfect in rural areas.
- Use just your right hand for eating. The left (as in Muslim countries) is reserved for personal hygiene only. Keep it firmly tucked under the table.
- Take from your side of the tray only; reaching is considered impolite.
- Leave some leftovers on the plate after a meal. Failing to do so is sometimes seen as inviting famine.
- Feel free to pick your teeth after a meal. Toothpicks are usually supplied in restaurants.

Don't

- Be embarrassed or alarmed at the tradition of *gursha*, when someone (usually the host) picks the tastiest morsel and feeds it directly into your mouth. The trick is to take it without letting your mouth come into contact with the person's fingers, or allowing the food to fall. It's a mark of great friendship or affection, and is usually given at least twice (once is considered unlucky). Refusing to take *gursha* is a terrible slight to the person offering it!
- Put food back onto the food plate – even by the side. It's better to discard it onto the table or floor, or keep it in your napkin.
- Touch your mouth or lick your fingers.
- Fill your mouth too full. It's considered impolite.

When eating with locals, try not to guzzle. Greed is considered rather uncivilised. The tastiest morsels will often be laid in front of you; it's polite to accept them or, equally, to divide them among your fellow diners. The meat dishes such as *doro wat* are usually the last thing locals eat off the *injera*, so don't hone in on it immediately!

When attracting someone's attention, such as a waiter or porter, it's polite to call *yikerta* (excuse me) or to simply clap your hands. Whistling or snapping your fingers, by contrast, is considered rude. Don't be offended if waiters snatch away your plates the moment you've finished; it's considered impolite to leave dirty dishes in front of customers.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Want to get your fill of *ful*? Tell your *kekel* from your *kai wat*? Do yourself a favour and learn a little of the local lingo. For pronunciation guidelines see p378.

Useful Phrases**breakfast****lunch****dinner****Is there a cheap (restaurant) near here?****I want to eat... food.****Ethiopian****Arab****Italian****Western***kurs**mësa**ërat**ëzzih akababi, rëkash (mëgëb bet) alleu?**yeu... mëgëb ëfeullëfallö**itëyopiya**arab**talyan**faranji*

If you already know your *kekel* from your *kai wat* and want to learn more Amharic, pick up Lonely Planets' *Amharic Phrasebook*.

I'm vegetarian/I don't eat meat. Can I have it mild?*sëga albeullam
alëcha yimë'tallëny?***Do you have...****bread/bread rolls****round bread****chips****salad****sandwich****soup****yoghurt***... alle?**dabbo**ambasha**yeu dënëch tëbs**seulata**sandwich* (usually spicy meat between plain bread)*meureuk* (usually a spicy lamb or beef broth)*ërgo***water****water (boiled)****water (sterilised)****sparkling mineral water****bottled 'flat' water****soda/soft drink****juice****milk****tea****coffee****strong/weak****with/without****honey****sugar****beer***wuha**yeu feula wuha**yeu teutara wuha**ambo wuha**highland wuha**leuslassa**chëmaki**weuteut**shai**buna**wëufam/keuchën**beu/yaleu**mar**sëkwar**bira***Food Glossary**

Most of the following are served with good-old *injera*.

NONVEGETARIAN*alicha wat*

mild stew (meat and vegetarian options)

asa wat

freshwater fish served as a hot stew

bege

lamb

*beyainatu*literally 'of every type' – a small portion of all dishes on the menu; also known by its Italian name *secondo misto**bistecca ai ferri*

grilled steak

bure

beef

*derek tibs*meat (usually lamb) fried and served *derek* ('dry' – without sauce)*doro*

chicken

*doro wat*chicken drumstick or wing accompanied by a hard-boiled egg served in a hot sauce of butter, onion, chilli, cardamom and *berbere**dulet*

minced tripe, liver and lean beef fried in butter, onions, chilli, cardamom and pepper (often eaten for breakfast)

fatira

savoury pastries

figel

goat

*kai wat*lamb, goat or beef cooked in a hot *berbere* sauce*kekel*

boiled meat

*kitfo*minced beef or lamb like the French steak tartare, usually served warmed (but not cooked) in butter, *berbere* and sometimes thyme*kwalima*

sausage served on ceremonial occasions

*kwanta fir fir*strips of beef rubbed in chilli, butter, salt and *berbere* then usually hung up and dried; served with torn-up *injera**mahabaroui*

a mixture of dishes including half a roast chicken

<i>melasena senber tibs</i>	beef tongue and tripe fried with <i>berbere</i> and onion
<i>minchet abesh</i>	minced beef or lamb in a hot <i>berbere</i> sauce
<i>scaloppina</i>	escalope
<i>tere sega</i>	raw meat served with a couple of spicy accompaniments (occasionally called <i>gored gored</i>)
<i>tibs</i>	sliced lamb, pan fried in butter, garlic, onion and sometimes tomato
<i>tibs sheukla</i>	<i>tibs</i> served sizzling in a clay pot above hot coals
<i>trippa</i>	tripe
<i>wat</i>	stew
<i>zilzil tibs</i>	strips of beef, fried and served slightly crunchy with <i>awazi</i> sauce

VEGETARIAN

<i>aib</i>	like dry cottage cheese
<i>atkilt-b-dabbo</i>	<i>vegetables with bread</i>
<i>awazi</i>	a kind of mustard and chilli sauce
<i>bekolo</i>	popcorn
<i>berbere</i>	as many as 16 spices or more go into making the famous red powder that is responsible for giving much Ethiopian food its kick; most women prepare their own special recipe, often passed down from mother to daughter over generations, and proudly adhered to
<i>dabbo fir fir</i>	torn up bits of bread mixed with butter and <i>berbere</i>
<i>enkulal tibs</i>	literally 'egg <i>tibs</i> ', a kind of Ethiopian scrambled eggs made with a combination of green and red peppers, tomatoes and sometimes onions, served with <i>dabbo</i> (bread) – great for breakfast
<i>enset</i>	false-banana 'bread'; a staple food (also called <i>kotcho</i>)
<i>ful</i>	chickpea and butter purée eaten for breakfast
<i>genfo</i>	barley or wheat porridge served with butter and <i>berbere</i>
<i>gomen</i>	minced spinach
<i>injera</i>	large Ethiopian version of a pancake/plate
<i>kai iser</i>	beetroot
<i>kolo</i>	roasted barley
<i>messer</i>	a kind of lentil curry made with onions, chillies and various spices
<i>shiro</i>	chickpea or bean purée lightly spiced, served on fasting days
<i>sils</i>	hot tomato and onion sauce eaten for breakfast
<i>ye som megeb</i>	a selection of different vegetable dishes, served on fasting days
<i>yinjera fir fir</i>	torn-up bits of <i>injera</i> mixed with butter and <i>berbere</i>