

ACCOMMODATION

Anyone who visited Ethiopia a couple of decades ago will recall joyous nights sleeping in rural hotels that were nothing but stables for animals and urban hotels that were essentially just brothels. No matter where you stayed, fleas were a constant companion. Fortunately, Ethiopian accommodation has come-on in leaps and bounds. Fleas, sheep and prostitutes are now the exception rather than the rule.

Camping

Tents are useful in Ethiopia for trekking and the exploration of remote areas. If you're just planning a short trek, tents can be hired from Addis Ababa's tour operators or from other business centers.

Campsites have been set up in some of the national parks and in the Omo Valley, but most lack facilities and consist of little more than a clearing beside a river. It's always essential to treat drinking water at the sites.

There are increasing numbers of upmarket hotels now allowing camping on their grounds, though prices are close to what you'd pay for nice budget accommodation. All camping fees in this book are per person unless stated otherwise.

In Ethiopia, hotels will play home to everyone who's not camping. Even in the capital, there are no hostels, home stays or rental accommodation available to travelers.

Pricing invariably leads to resentment from many travelers as countless hotels (many openly)

charge substantially higher rates for faranjis (foreigners, especially Western ones). Although you make take offence to a hotel owner calling you a rich faranji, remember prices are still dirt-cheap and you'll always be given priority, as well as the best rooms, facilities and service.

Charging same-sex couples more for rooms than mixed couples is also pervasive but less justifiable. Some hotels (particularly government owned ones) charge a 10% service charge and 15% tax on top of room prices. We've incorporated these extra charges into the room prices listed.

In Ethiopia, a room with a double bed is confusingly called a 'single", and a room with twin beds a "double". Single travelers are often forced to pay the same as a couple. In our reviews we've used the Western interpretation of singles, doubles and twins, although singles are listed only where the room price is different from that for a couple.

Reservations are wise in Addis Ababa, Awassa, Bishoftu, Gonder, Aksum and Lalibela when one wants to book in advance. While there are no left-luggage facilities in Addis Ababa, most hotels will hold your belongings for no extra charge. More expensive hotels sometimes quote their rates in US dollars, but all accept payment in birr. We have quoted prices in the currency the hotel uses.

BOOKS

Though very many books are available on the History and Culture of the nation, decent Ethiopian-themed books are provided below.

Graham Hancock, the author of the Sign and the seal, spent 10 years attempting to solve one of the greatest mysteries of all time: the bizarre "disappearance" of the Ark of Covenant. Though Hancock's research and conclusions raised an eyebrow or two among historians, this detective story is very readable and gives a good overview of Ethiopia's history and culture no matter how tenuous the facts may be!

Evelyn Waugh's Remote people, though rather dated now, include some wry impressions of

Ethiopia in the 1930. Waugh in Abyssinia is based on the author's time as correspondent covering the Italian Ethiopian conflict in the 1930. Both books provide invaluable information though they may not be easily found.

The charming *A cure for serpents* by the Duke of Pirajno recounts the duke's time as a doctor in the Horn and is beautifully and engagingly written. Episodes include encounters with famous courtesans, noble chieftains and giant elephants.

The newly reprinted (locally) *Ethiopian journeys*, by the well-respected American writer Paul Henze, charts travels during the emperor's time.

In search of King Solomon's Mines entertainingly takes the reader through Debre Damo, Lalibela, Gonder and other exotic Ethiopian locations on author Tahir Shah's quest to find the mythical mines of Solomon. In typical Shah fashion it's full of magic and bizarre encounters.

Thomas Pakenham's fascination with the historical anecdotes revolving around Ethiopia's *ambas* (flat-topped mountains) is the basis of *The Mountains of Rasselas*, an engaging and nicely illustrated coffee-table book on Ethiopia's history.

BUSINESS HOURS

In general, banks, post offices and telecommunications offices are all open the core hours of 8:30am to 11:00am and 1:30pm to 3:30pm on weekdays and from 8:30am to 11:00am Saturday. However, many open earlier, close later or stay open for lunch.

Most government offices are open from around 8:30am to 12:30pm (to 11:30am Friday) and 1:30pm to 5:30pm Monday to Friday. Private organizations and NGOs open from 8:00am to 1:00pm and 2:00pm to 5pm weekdays.

Shops usually operate half an hour later.

Outside Addis Ababa, restaurants typically open around 7am or 8am and close around 9.30pm or 10.30.

The restaurant reviews in this guide don't provide business hours unless they differ from the standards given above.

Cafes are typically open daily from 6am or 7am through to 8pm or 9am, while tej beats (honey-wine bars) usually run daily from 10am to 10pm. Bars open from 6pm to midnight.

Internet cafes are typically open from 8am to 8pm Monday to Saturday. Some have limited hour on Sunday.

CLIMATE CHARTS

Compared to countries in the horn, Ethiopia's climate on the whole is very mild. Average daily temperatures on the wide-ranging highlands are below 20

°

C.

It's only the lowland fringes in the east, south and west where daytime temperature can soar past 30

°

C.

The majority of rains traditionally fall between mid-March and early October, with the central and western highlands receiving up to 1600mm annually. The far east and northern highlands only receive significant rainfall in July and August (400mm to 1000mm).

The far south breaks the trend, receiving most of its rain in April, May and October.

More information on weather patterns can be found in the climate section of each destination chapter.

FOOD

Eating out in Ethiopia is ridiculously cheap, with local meals in remote areas costing less than 1 USD. In large regional cities a local meal will ding you 1.50 USD, while a Western meal will rob you of 2 to 3 USD. If you pull out all the stops and dine on succulent braised lamb with caramelized onions, lentils, lemon and raisin orange couscous in Addis Ababa's best restaurant, you'll be out about 10 USD. If cafes are more known for their pastries and cakes, they'll fall under Eating. Conversely, if it's their coffee or juices that shine, you'll find them under Drinking.

GAY & LESEBIAN TRAVELLERS

In Ethiopia and Eritrea, homosexuality is severely condemned-traditionally, religiously and legally-and remains a topic of absolute taboo. Don't underestimate the strength of felling. Reports of gays being beaten up aren't uncommon and during the course of researching this travel advisory, a rumour was circulating that a US diplomat was murdered for being gay. In Amharic, the word bushti (homosexual) is a very offensive insult, implying immorality and depravity.

One traveler wrote to us to report expulsion from a hotel and serious threats just for coming under suspicion.

If a hotel only offers double beds, rather than twins, you and your companion will pay more or may even be refused occupancy.

Women may have an easier time; even the idea of a lesbian relationship is beyond the idea of a lesbian relationship is beyond the permitted imaginings of many Ethiopians! Behave discreetly, and you will be assumed to be just friends.

Note that the Ethiopian penal code officially prohibits homosexual acts, with penalties of between 10 days ‘and 10 years” imprisonment for various “crimes”. Although gay locals obviously exist, they behave with extreme discretion and caution. Gay travelers are advised to do likewise.

Information on homosexuality in the Horn is hard to come by, even in the well-known gay publications. Try the **international Lesbian & Gay Association** (ILGA; www.ilga.org) for more information.

INSURANCE

A travel-insurance policy for all medical problems is essential for travel in Ethiopia, while one to cover theft and loss really is helpful but not vital. Vehicle insurance is covered on almost all occasions.

World wide cover to travelers from over 40 countries is available online at www.lonelyplanet.com/bookings

INTERNET ACCESS

An internet café in Ethiopia is like a pimple on your wedding day – always found where everyone looks and never where nobody can see. In Addis Ababa, pretty easy to spot in major towns and nonexistent in places that see few tourists. Most are open with limited hours on Sunday.

However, just because internet cafes exist that doesn't mean internet exists all the time and everywhere, and connections in Ethiopia are among the worst in the continent. It can easily take an hour to download one simple, two line e-mail. And that's in Addis! To avoid intense frustration it's better to assume that while in Ethiopia you will not be able to get online. When it does work, costs range from birr 0.20 to birr 0.30 laptops, a number or up market hotels in Addis now supposedly offer Wi-Fi access. We say "supposedly" because we never actually managed to get it to work.

LEGAL MATTERS

Remember that when in Ethiopia you're subject to Ethiopian laws. If you're arrested, you must (in theory) be brought to court within 48 hours. You have the right to talk to someone from your embassy, as well as a lawyer. For the most part, police in Ethiopia will show you as much respect as you show them. If confronted by the police, always remain cool, smile and be polite. Compared to some other African nations, police here rarely, if ever, ask for bribes (we've yet to experience it).

ALCOHOL

Alcohol cannot be served to anyone under 18 years of age in Ethiopia. Disturbance caused by those under the influence of alcohol is punishable by three month's to one year's imprisonment. Driving while under the influence is also illegal and attracts a fine.

Drugs

Penalties for possession, use or trafficking of illegal drugs (including hashish) are strictly enforced in Ethiopia. Convicted offenders can expect both fines and long jail sentences.

Consumption of the mildly stimulating leaf chat is permitted in Ethiopia.

MAPS

For simply travelling around the country on public transport, the maps in this magazine should suffice. For those of you venturing off into the nether regions with 4WDs, a more detailed map is essential. Since trekking without a guide is illegal in the Bale and Semien Mountains, additional maps aren't necessary, though topographic maps can help you plan your routes with more precision. In Ethiopia, the map produced by the defunct Ethiopian Tourism commission (1987; 1:2,000,000) isn't bad and can be picked up in some Addis Ababa hotels or in the gift shop next to the Tourist information centre in Addis for birr 60.

A more accurate map (although it lacks distance labels between cities) of the same scale is available from the Ethiopia Mapping Authority in Addis Ababa.

Of the maps currently available outside the country, the best is that (1998; 1:2,000,000). It's much more up to date than both maps available in Ethiopia.

The cartographic map of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti (1996; 1:2,500,000) comes second and isn't a bad choice for the region.

MONEY

Ethiopia's currency is the birr. It's divided into 100 cents in 1, 5, 10, 25, 50, and 50 cent coins, and there are 1, 5, 10, 50, and 100 birr notes. Despite a weekly auction determining exchange rates, the birr is one of Africa's most stable currencies. At least that was still the case at the time of research, but there was much talk of devaluing the birr, which could lead to large fluctuations against hard currencies.

According to National Bank of Ethiopia regulations, all bills in Ethiopia must be paid in birr. But this isn't enforced and Ethiopian Airlines, most major hotels, most travel agencies and even the Department of Immigration accept (and sometimes demand!) US currency.

One regulation that's strictly enforced is the conversion of birr to US dollars or euros; this transaction can only be done for people holding onward air tickets from Ethiopia. This means people leaving overland must budget accordingly. There are black-market traders around the borders, but rates are poor and it's risky.

ATMS,VISA CARDS

Except in few private banks currently under formation almost all banks in the country accept international Visa cards. At present the service is expanding to regional towns apart from major cities.

CASH

As with African countries the US dollar is the preferred foreign currency in Ethiopia and although the euro is growing in popularity, not all banks will accept it; therefore you should still pack a wedge of green backs. You'll have no trouble exchanging US cash wherever there are forex facilities.

While more banks in Ethiopia change cash than travellers cheques, you will usually end up getting slightly worse rates for cash.

Credit Cards

Credit cards (Visa and Master card) are increasingly useful in Addis Ababa but remain completely Useless (with the exception of some Ethiopian Airlines offices) outside it. The travel agencies, airline offices and major hotels that do accept card typically ding you 3-5% extra for the privilege of plastic. Cash advances are possible at a couple of banks in the capital and in larger cities.

Tipping

Tips (gursha in Amharic) are considered a part of everyday life in Ethiopia, and help supplement often very low wages. The maxim' little but of ten's is a good one, and even very small tips are greatly appreciated. It's a great mistake to over tip: it unfairly raises the expectations of locals, undermines the social traditions and may spoil the trips of future travelers.

Local guides can start to select only those tourists who look lucrative, and can react very aggressively if their expectations aren't met.

If a professional person helps you (or someone drawing a regular wage), it's probably better to show your appreciation in other ways: shaking hands, exchanging names, or an invitation to have a coffee and pastry are all local ways of expressing gratitude.

Furnishing yourself with a good wad of small notes- birr 1 and birr5- is a very good idea. You'll need these for tips, taking photographs etc. You should budget around birr 50 for tips per week.

Travellers Cheques

Travelers cheques remain more useful in Ethiopia than most other countries, and banks in Addis Ababa and the larger towns (but not smaller ones) will exchange them. Like cash, traveler's cheques are best carried in US dollars.

Note that most banks ask to see your passport and the cheque's proof- of-purchase receipt (which most travelers-cheque companies advise you to leave at home!)

TELEPHONE

Ethiopia's telecommunication industry is entirely government-run. The industry is in desperate need of privatization as currently making a phone call is certain to turn you grey and, just like with the internet (run by the same company), it's best to assume that you won't be calling home very much.

Countless shops operate as “telecentres” and can normally/sometimes/ once in awhile connect you to the big wide world for birr 15 to birr 25 per minute. Some hotels offer phone service, but they are usually at least 20% more expensive.

When calling abroad from Ethiopia, use followed by the appropriate country code. Collect calls are only available at the telecommunications offices and can be made to the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Germany and France; you still have to pay a “report charge” of birr 5 to 8, plus a birr 10 (refundable) deposit.

Cheap local calls can also be made from telecommunications offices, telecentres and public phone boxes. Most boxes take both coins and cards (sold at the telecommunications offices in denominations of birr 10, 15, 25, birr 50 and birr 100).

Note: all Ethiopian numbers were changed in 2005 to have 10 digits. The old six-digit numbers now trail a new four-digit area code that must always precede the old number, no matter where you’re calling from. Important telephone numbers and Ethiopia’s country code can be found at ethio telecom offices.

Mobile Phones

The speed with which Ethiopia’s mobile phone network has expanded would make Starbucks blush. However, like all other aspects of Ethiopian telecommunications, the service can hardly be described as reliable. Whether you’re using your home phone on a roaming plan or a locally bought phone and SIM card, expect days to go by when, despite having a reception, it’s impossible to actually make a call- and as for sending a text message...

Time

Ethiopia is three hours ahead of GMT/UTC.

Time expressed so sanely in Ethiopia that it blows most travelers' minds! At sunrise it's 12 o'clock (6am our time) and after one hour of sunshine it's 1 o'clock. After two hours of sunshine? Yes, 2 o'clock. T
The sun sets at 6pm (12 o'clock our time) and after one hour of darkness it's... 1 o'clock! Instead of using 'am' or 'pm', Ethiopians use 'in the morning' 'in the evening' and 'at night' to indicate the period of day.

The system is used widely, though the 24-hour is used occasionally in business. Be careful to ask if a time quoted is according to the Ethiopian or 'European' clock (be Ethiopian/faranji akotater no?)- is that Ethipoian /foreigner's time?).

For the purposes of this book, all times quoted are by the European clock.