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AA Quality Assured
PAGE 123
Accommodation Guide

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Hiking heaven's edge

While on his quest to see Ethiopia's bleeding-heart monkeys, KEITH BAIN also lost his own heart to the Simien Mountains – one of the world's most astonishing landscapes



The gelada monkeys of the Simien Mountains are a big tourist drawcard

PHOTO: STEFAN CRUYSBERGHS, WWW.SCIP.BE

Along the road out of Debark, where we'd picked up permits and enlisted our rifle-toting tracker, people from the surrounding countryside were streaming into town. Young men played foosball at tables next to the road, small boys half-wrestled half-begged their goats to follow them, and a man carried a length of wood three times his own height over one shoulder.

It was market day in this somewhat dishevelled northern Ethiopian town, so everyone had something to sell. Some carried sacks of barley or teff, others herded sheep or carried live chickens, horses and donkeys dawdled across the road, goats amassed, and farmers ignorant of vehicular traffic waded into the street to greet one another and gossip.

As we walked, it wasn't long before the mayhem and Saturday bustle had shrunk behind us. Tamrat, my guide, suddenly veered off the road on to a footpath that led between the huts and trees and dipped down into an undulating valley surrounded by steep cereal fields and bright green pastures. As we passed tiny farming hamlets, child shepherds waved and smiled, sometimes abandoning their flocks to follow us for a while, shyly astonished by my mop of blonde hair. Bolder boys would coming running towards us and then scream and dance at the thrill of shaking my hand.

Eventually, we reached the northern escarpment and I saw at once what all the fuss was about. Here was a place that could only have been created by titans. With its jagged peaks and steep cliffs towering as much as 1 500m above deep valleys, the Simien Massif is a high plateau of soaring monuments that average 3 050m above sea level.

A multitude of peaks rise more than 4 000m – the highest, Ras Dashen at 4 550m, is the fifth-highest mountain in Africa, and Mount Bwahit (4 437m) and Kidis Yared (4 453m) aren't too far behind. These mountains are bound by plunging valleys, and from the northern cliff wall that extends for about 35 km, there's a succession of unimaginably huge vistas across the rugged canyon-like lowland below.

From its deep ravines and gorges grew time-sculpted rock edifices – stupendous pinnacles and spires, high turrets and pyramids. And high above were ridges shaped like human jawbones, studded with gigantic incisors, canines and molars – everything here is built on a staggering scale.

I stood there, on the edge of infinity, staring in awe while my tracker searched for a spot to wee, and Tamrat found a shaded seat under a tree. I scoped the scene, feeling as though I was floating midway between heaven and earth, peering into the abyss of time itself.



The town of Debark is a hub of activity during the weekend market

Half a dozen lammergeiers – 'bone-breaker' vultures – circled above my head, twisting on the overhead thermals like lethargic fighter jets. And down below, in the wide bowels of the rocky canyon, sheltered by the sheer mountain walls and beautiful Afromontane forest, were scattered villages surrounded by pastureland and patchwork fields of wheat, barley and teff, cultivated by people whose only transport in and out is their own two legs.

Our walk, traversing high plateaus and steep bits of hillside surrounded by giant heath trees and Saint John's wort, giant lobelias and Abyssinian wild rose bushes, and clusters of silver everlasting flowers. Fresh, dizzying views awaited us around every corner and occasionally we would glimpse dainty, sure-footed klipspringers bouncing over the rocks, watch colobus monkeys swinging in the treetops, or meet villagers who'd greet us with cheerful 'Salaams'.

The campsites were simple, some with basic facilities, but after an exhausting day's hike, where we slept didn't seem to matter – hot showers and proper beds aren't what I was there for.

I was there for the monkeys.

'The geladas are clever,' Tamrat told me, prompting me to move closer while he stood his ground. 'They can tell tourists apart from the locals.'

This selective paranoia – a survival response to conflict with farmers whose fields they sometimes raid – meant that I was able to get within metres of a group of maybe 300 gelada monkeys that had amassed to graze in a clearing near the cliff edge. Also known as bleeding-heart monkeys because of the red mammary sacs on the females' chests, the geladas are unique among primates because they eat grass blades and seeds, and forage for roots and bulbs.

They're crazily entertaining, too, with a vocabulary of nearly 30 different calls and an incredible social structure that's kept primatologists busy for decades. The alpha males, especially, were a sight to behold – resembling disco-era pimps, draped in shaggy coats that billowed in the breeze like a lion's mane, they're adorable enough to be one of the main reasons people visit the Simiens. Which is why I stood happily among them for an entire hour as they studiously picked ticks from each other.

Eventually, I tore myself away from the fascinating monkeys and was once more following close on Tamrat's heels – this time skipping along a narrow footpath towards the meadows and forest glades in the canyon far below.

It was here that I was shown into a small house built of eucalyptus branches and mud. Seated on goatskins in the dim light, I watched as our hostess, a slender woman with high cheekbones and an astonishing smile, built a small fire for the ritual of washing, roasting and grinding coffee that had been grown on the nearby slopes. Then she boiled the grinds three times, producing three successive rounds of delicious coffee that we sipped between handfuls of dark, chunky bread known as *dabo*.

Hours later we re-emerge on to the escarpment and from the famous Imet Gogo observation point, followed the precipitous cliff paths towards Chennek.

The alpha males were a sight to behold – resembling disco-era pimps, draped in shaggy coats





At Chennek, there were geladas and lammergeiers and more swoonworthy views from multiple angles. Despite our long, surgical scans for Ethiopian wolves, though, we saw no signs of the world's rarest, and most endangered, African canid.

Instead, Tamrat tapped me on the shoulder and pointed far and high into the distance. All I could see was rock and cloud, but he handed me a tiny pair of binoculars and patiently guided my eyes towards the most impressive pair of horns I'd ever seen. And attached to them, camouflaged against the rocks, a walia ibex, the large cliff-climbing species of mountain goat that lives nowhere else on earth, another endangered animal that calls Ethiopia home.

'You must have superpowers to see that far,' I said to Tamrat, squinting to see if I could make out the ibex without the binoculars.

'No,' he said, 'I have only experience.' And he stared into the surrounding mountains as though he were seeing them for the very first time.

GOOD TO **KNOW**

When to go

You can trek the Simiens year-round, although September through November is best – after the summer rains have fallen.

Getting There

Ethiopian Airlines (*ethiopianairlines.com*) flies to Addis Ababa from Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. From Addis, the airline flies to the historic cities of Aksum and Gondar – Debark is a two-hour drive from either.

Visas

Bring $50 (R660) cash for an on-arrival visa in Addis.

Park arrangements

Hikes of various kinds can be arranged through tour agents in Gondar, Aksum, Debark or any tourist town in the north – any hotel will be able to assist. The Simien Mountains National Park *(simienpark.org)* is headquartered in Debark, where you will register, purchase permits and meet your trekking guide from the Walia Local Guides Association. You can also leave preparations to your tour/trekking company – they might also hire mules to carry you when the altitude proves too much.

Camping Treks from Debark to Chennek and back typically require at least six days. The Park's nine campsites are each located between 15 and 25 km apart, so there's around five to eight hours of hiking each day; side hikes are also possible. Camp amenities vary – most have a toilet and water source, though a couple lack water and/or ablutions.

Where to stay

If you'd like to rest well with a proper bed and beautiful surrounds, before and/or after your hike, consider staying at Simien Lodge (apparently it's the highest lodge in Africa; *simiens.com*) or – better still – Limalimo *(limalimolodge.com)*, a luxurious eco-lodge that opened last year on the edge of the escarpment in a newly revealed part of the park.



Ethiopia is a land of breathtaking vistas, and beautiful, friendly people

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