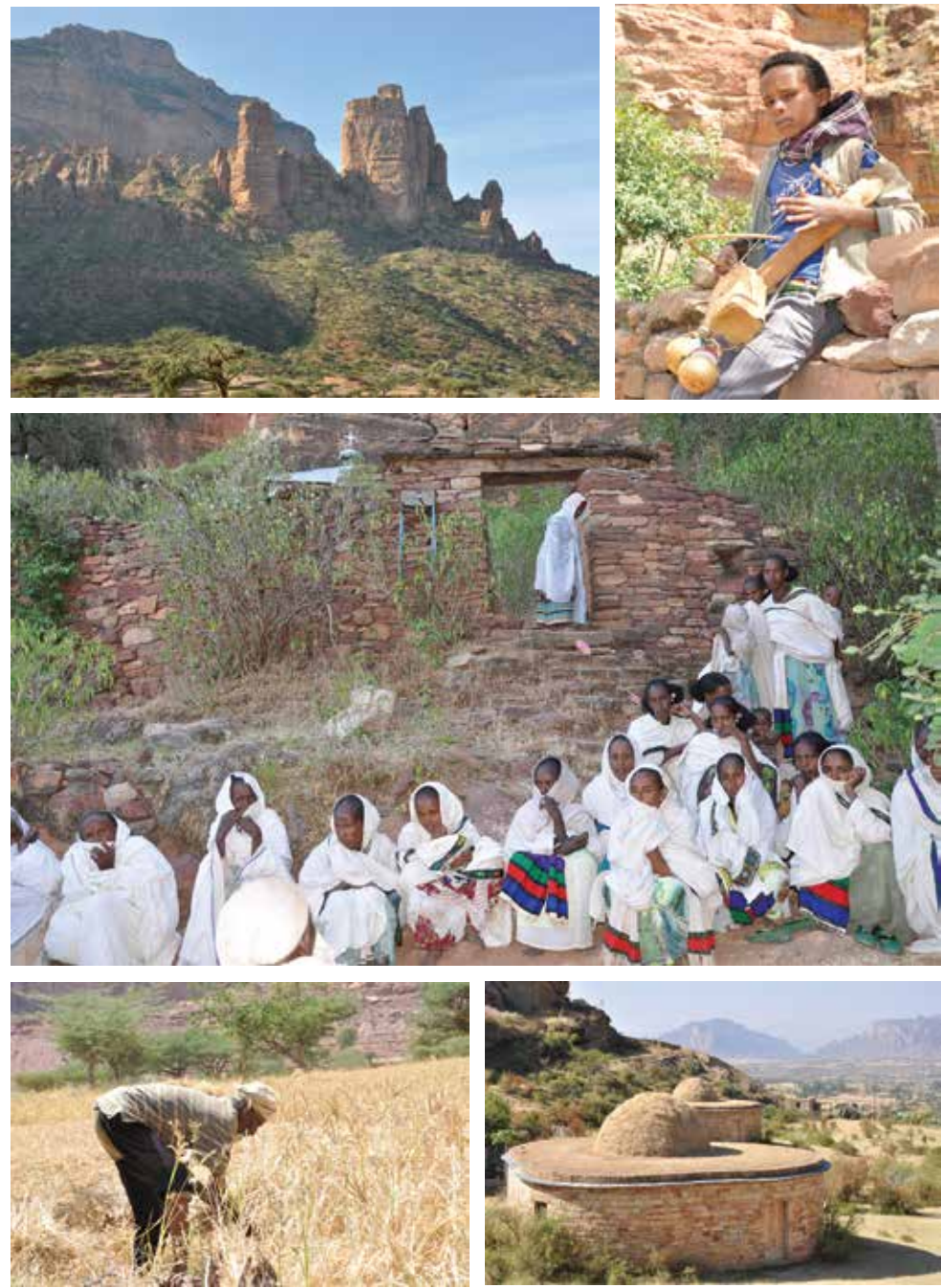


Tigrai's Open Air Museum: Wukro-Gheralta Region & the Rock-Hewn Churches

Tigrai is Ethiopia's northern most state, bordering on Eritrea to the north and Sudan to the west. Tigrai is known as "the cradle of Ethiopian civilization" and the country's "architectural workshop" with a rich cultural and religious heritage dating back to the time of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and to at least the first millennium BC. A visit to Ethiopia is not complete without stopping in Tigrai to explore the rock-hewn churches, ancient monasteries, underground palaces, imperial tombs, countless stone inscriptions, and unique pre-Christian obelisks. The region's 120+ rock-hewn churches, most concentrated in the Wukro-Gheralta corridor, constitute the core of Tigrai's open air museum.

Arriving visitors are awe-struck by the stratified mountains and sharp peaks of the Gheralta Mountains - which literally means "up and down" - that rise from the sandy, rolling semi-desert of the Hawzien plain. The orange hues of the rock, brightly colored flowers, and exotic trees seem to be plucked from a child's fairytale. En route to visit the churches, you step out of the 4x4 vehicle to take in the spectacular panorama of rock formations, neatly tended farms, and village bungalows. Your guide dispatches a young messenger boy who runs ahead to locate the priest and bring news of your arrival. And this is all before you see the rock hewn churches themselves.

Most of the rock-hewn masterpieces are "semi-monolithic", either carved out of existing caves or out of the cliffs and still attached to their host rock. Their entrances are hidden in the mountains in order to protect, oral history says, Christian worshippers from Muslim raiders. Until the mid-20th century, these Ethiopian Orthodox churches were largely unknown outside Tigrai.



Accommodation

The best point of departure for undertaking the Wukro-Gheralta rock hewn church route is in the town of Hawzien. Hawzien is within a half-hour drive of most churches on the route, and accommodations, restaurants, and services are available. On the outskirts of Hawzien, Gheralta Lodge (www.gheraltalodge.tigray.com) offers a small and comfortable family-style resort of international tourist standards. The lodge also works with the local Gheralta guide association to provide trainings and coordinate visits. Korkor Lodge and Resort (www.korkorlodge.com), near Megab Village, is newly established and offers similar standards. Saba Kuriftu Lodge and Resort has various accommodations under construction, which are scheduled to be opened in Wukro, Megab village, and near Mariam Korkor rock-hewn church, in 2016. For budget travelers, a number of accommodation options and camp sites are available along the route in Wukro, Degum village, Megab village, and Hawzien.

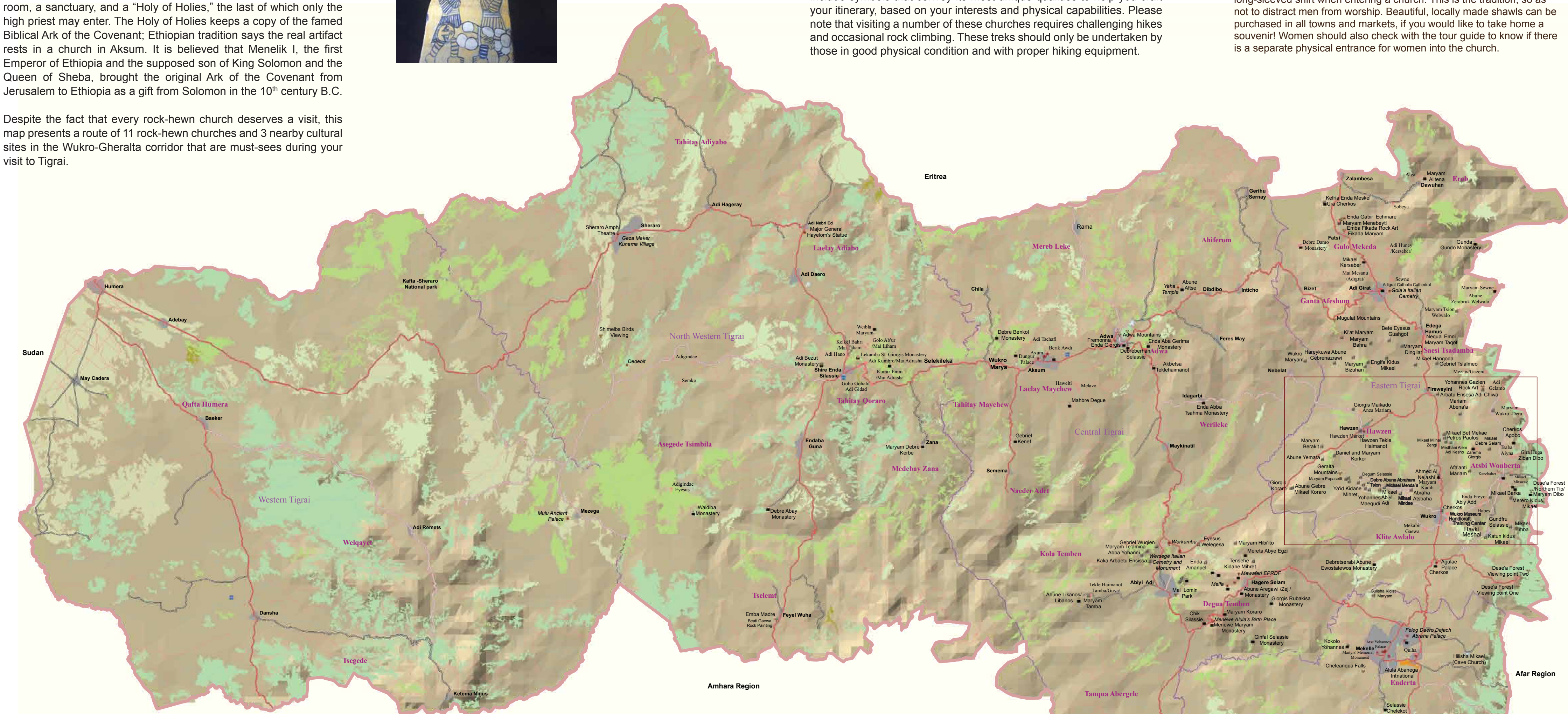
In addition, if you would like to extend your time in Tigrai to see other churches and want the chance to stay with local communities, seven community-based guest houses are located north of the Gheralta region and are integrated into trekking programs of Tesfa Community Treks (community-tourism-ethiopia.org/tigray/). Stays at these guest houses can be easily combined with your stay in the Gheralta region.

For information about accommodation, contact the Tigrai Culture & Tourism Bureau at (www.tigraitourism.com)/+251-344401031).

Still today, little is known of their actual origins. Ethiopian tradition maintains the rock-hewn churches were created in the 4th century by two brother kings, Abreha and Atseba, at the time the powerful Aksumite empire accepted Christianity. Oral history holds that the churches were built in a very short span of time, with the angels taking over construction at night. Scholars, however, believe the churches date from between the 9th and 15th century, many most likely from the 12th century. The churches in the Wukro-Gheralta corridor are thought to be older than the more famous counterparts near Lalibela. These fully-functioning churches house detailed carvings and stone work, elaborate paintings depicting Biblical and Ethiopian Orthodox stories, and still-used artifacts, all offering a remarkable story – one steeped in centuries of tradition and faith.

Most churches consist of three rooms: an ante chamber or chanting room, a sanctuary, and a "Holy of Holies," the last of which only the high priest may enter. The Holy of Holies keeps a copy of the famed Biblical Ark of the Covenant; Ethiopian tradition says the real artifact rests in a church in Aksum. It is believed that Menelik I, the first Emperor of Ethiopia and the supposed son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, brought the original Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia as a gift from Solomon in the 10th century B.C.

Despite the fact that every rock-hewn church deserves a visit, this map presents a route of 11 rock-hewn churches and 3 nearby cultural sites in the Wukro-Gheralta corridor that are must-sees during your visit to Tigrai.



Entry Fees & Tipping

Each church is independently overseen by a priest and deacons of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, and only the high priest is able to open the church to visitors. Within the Orthodox Church, priests marry and have families, and most hold dual roles as farmers. When visitors arrive at the trailhead or nearby village, it is common to ask a village youth to run ahead to find the priest and request that he go to the church to open up it for the visitors. The priests rely on funds generated from tourism to help provide for their families; therefore, a modest entry fee is required for each tourist at each rock hewn church. If a priest has gone out of his way to open up for you, it is polite to leave a tip. Also allow room in your budget to tip messengers who notify the priests of your approach, scouts who help you with challenging hikes, and drivers. Bring lots of small bills, as the priests and locals will not have change.

Creating Your Experience

The churches highlighted on the reverse side of this map were chosen to create a well-rounded, coordinated, itinerary within a geographically focused area. Each rock-hewn church selected is distinctive and offers a slightly differentiated experience. The descriptions of each church include symbols that convey its most unique qualities to help you craft your itinerary, based on your interests and physical capabilities. Please note that visiting a number of these churches requires challenging hikes and occasional rock climbing. These treks should only be undertaken by those in good physical condition and with proper hiking equipment.

Suggested Length of Stay

This route of 11 churches and 3 cultural sites within the Wukro-Gheralta region, as described, can be completed in its entirety in roughly six to eight days, though at a more leisurely pace it may take up to 10 days. Visiting two churches in one day is the recommended maximum. It is possible to visit up to three in one day if this includes one or more of the easily accessible churches or cultural sites, as noted in the descriptions. For those who only wish to visit churches with very specific attributes, a shorter itinerary may be crafted.

Responsible Tourism at the Tigrai Rock-Hewn Churches

Approximately 43 percent of the population in Ethiopia is Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, and the rock-hewn churches in Tigrai remain highly active as a place of worship for villagers. Ethiopians are a warm and welcoming people and will likely make you feel very much at home. Here are some tips for ensuring a pleasant, stress-free, and respectful visit:

- Shoes should always be removed before entering a church, but keep backpacks and other items with you.
- Women should keep their shoulders covered by wearing a shawl or long-sleeved shirt when entering a church. This is the tradition, so as not to distract men from worship. Beautiful, locally made shawls can be purchased in all towns and markets, if you would like to take home a souvenir! Women should also check with the tour guide to know if there is a separate physical entrance for women into the church.

- Avoid the urge to touch carved walls, paintings, and artifacts, as this contributes to deterioration. Many of the churches are made from sandstone, which wears away easily, and damage to many of their precious artifacts is, sadly, apparent.
- Flash photography is not permitted inside the churches because it causes deterioration of the paintings over time. Always ask the priest or others facilitating your experience if it's OK before taking a photo.
- If visiting during a mass, follow the instructions of your guide and be respectful of local traditions. You will likely be offered prayer sticks, which are a sort of crutch for you to lean on during the mass.
- Learn a few words in Tigrinya, in order to express your greetings and gratitude.
- Provide church entry fees with grace and offer tips when the priest and/or locals have gone out of their way to help you.
- If you are invited by the nearby villagers or the congregation to join them for a meal after visiting a church, accept at least a small amount to be polite. At meals, utensils are not used. Always eat with only your right hand, as the left hand is considered unclean. Within Ethiopian culture, it is not uncommon for a host to handfeed a guest a bite or two throughout the meal, so accept this offer to be polite if you can. Always carry bottled water for yourself. If homemade beer is offered but you feel more comfortable drinking bottled water, simply do not accept a cup or pass your cup to the guide. They will be more than happy to drink up without you!
- Smoking is not allowed within the grounds of any church.
- The land surrounding the rock hewn churches is pristine, and appreciating it on your way to the church sites is nearly as breathtaking as visiting the churches themselves. In order to maintain this incredible experience for others and to respect the surrounding communities, follow the "leave no trace" policy. Take all trash back to where it can be disposed of properly, and do not take anything from the natural or built environments.
- Be courteous, patient, and calm at all times, remembering that you are participating in a completely un-manufactured experience – the most authentic and rewarding of travel experiences! Please be understanding if there are times when you must wait for the priest to meet you at the church. The wait will be worth your while, especially with the ample incredible views to enjoy while you wait.

Additional Travel Tips:

- Review your itinerary and major site visits with your guide before beginning the route to ensure you are prepared for each day's activities.
- If you plan to visit churches that require hiking, bring appropriate shoes such as hiking boots or sturdy tennis shoes.
- While mosquitos and other pests are rarely a problem in the Gheralta region, make sure your vaccinations are up to date. Carry bug spray and sunscreen with you at all times.
- Do not drink tap water. Bottled water is widely available for purchase in all towns and villages and is very affordable.
- While days are generally very warm, mornings and evenings can be chilly. Bring layers!
- For hikes, carry a small day-pack with you, with a supply of bottled water and some snacks.
- Bring all medications and vitamins you may need with you to the Gheralta region, as it is not likely you will be able to find equivalents in the area. Carry a small first-aid kit in your day-pack.
- Electricity is 220V, and you will need 2 prong adapters.
- Credit cards are rarely accepted. Plan to exchange foreign cash for Ethiopian birr prior to going to Gheralta. Only purchase as much birr as you believe you will use. Exchange centers, even at the airport in Addis Ababa, rarely exchange birr for international currency.
- Use common travel sense – avoid large crowds and extremely isolated areas while by yourself. Do not carry more money on you than you will need in a day.
- Be aware the Wukro-Gheralta region is developing, and not all restroom and accommodation options are up to international tourism standards. Do your research on accommodations that will meet your required level of comfort. There are no services at the rock-hewn churches, so plan accordingly for meals, restroom breaks, and periods of rest.
- The months of June - September are the height of the rainy season. For the best rock-hewn church experience, avoid visiting during this time.



The Ethiopian Calendar & Events

Visiting Ethiopia is like stepping back in time – literally! Passage of time is based on the old Coptic calendar, instead of the Gregorian calendar. This means the Ethiopian calendar is 7.5 years behind what international travelers to Ethiopia are used to. The months are also measured slightly differently, with 12 months having exactly 30 days, and the left over 5 or 6 days are tacked on at the end for a short 13th month. (A leap day is added every 4 years.) Time is also expressed differently. Sunrise is expressed as 12 o'clock in the morning and sunset is expressed as 12 o'clock in the evening. It is important when coordinating schedules to confirm the appointed dates and times are expressed according to international norms.

Important Cultural Events

If visiting on festival days, tourists have the opportunity to take part in celebrations at specific rock-hewn churches. Each year, thousands of Ethiopian Orthodox pilgrims make the journey to worship on these days, and costumes, special services, and traditions can be enjoyed. If you are visiting the Wukro-Gheralta rock-hewn churches at the right time, ask your guide if you can schedule a visit to any of the following churches on the festival dates (expressed by the international calendar):

Abraha We Atseba, October 14th

Abune Yemata (Guh), February 8th

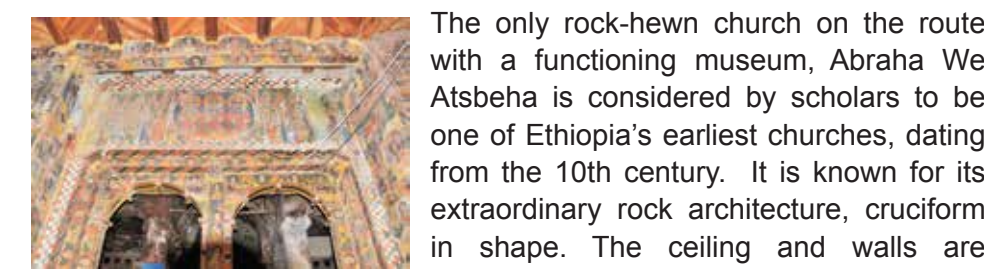
Debre Abune Abraham Tsion, November 30th

Tourist Map of Tigray Region



Highlights of the WUKRO-GHERALTA REGION

Abraha We Atsbeha (1)



The only rock-hewn church on the route with a functioning museum, Abraha We Atsbeha is considered by scholars to be one of Ethiopia's earliest churches, dating from the 10th century. It is known for its extraordinary rock architecture, cruciform in shape. The ceiling and walls are decorated with intricate patterns and bas-reliefs, and more than a dozen rock columns divide the interior of the church into several bays and aisles. Brightly colored murals painted on cotton adorn the walls. One of its most interesting artifacts is a holy stone. Worshippers pass this heavy stone around their heads three times, and if they do so successfully, it is said they are pure. If they are unable to complete the feat, their sins need to be forgiven. The museum displays a number of ancient books, clothing of past monks and priests, and what are believed to be the 4th century golden shoes of King Atsbeha. The church is located 15km from Wukro, and a short staircase provides easy access.



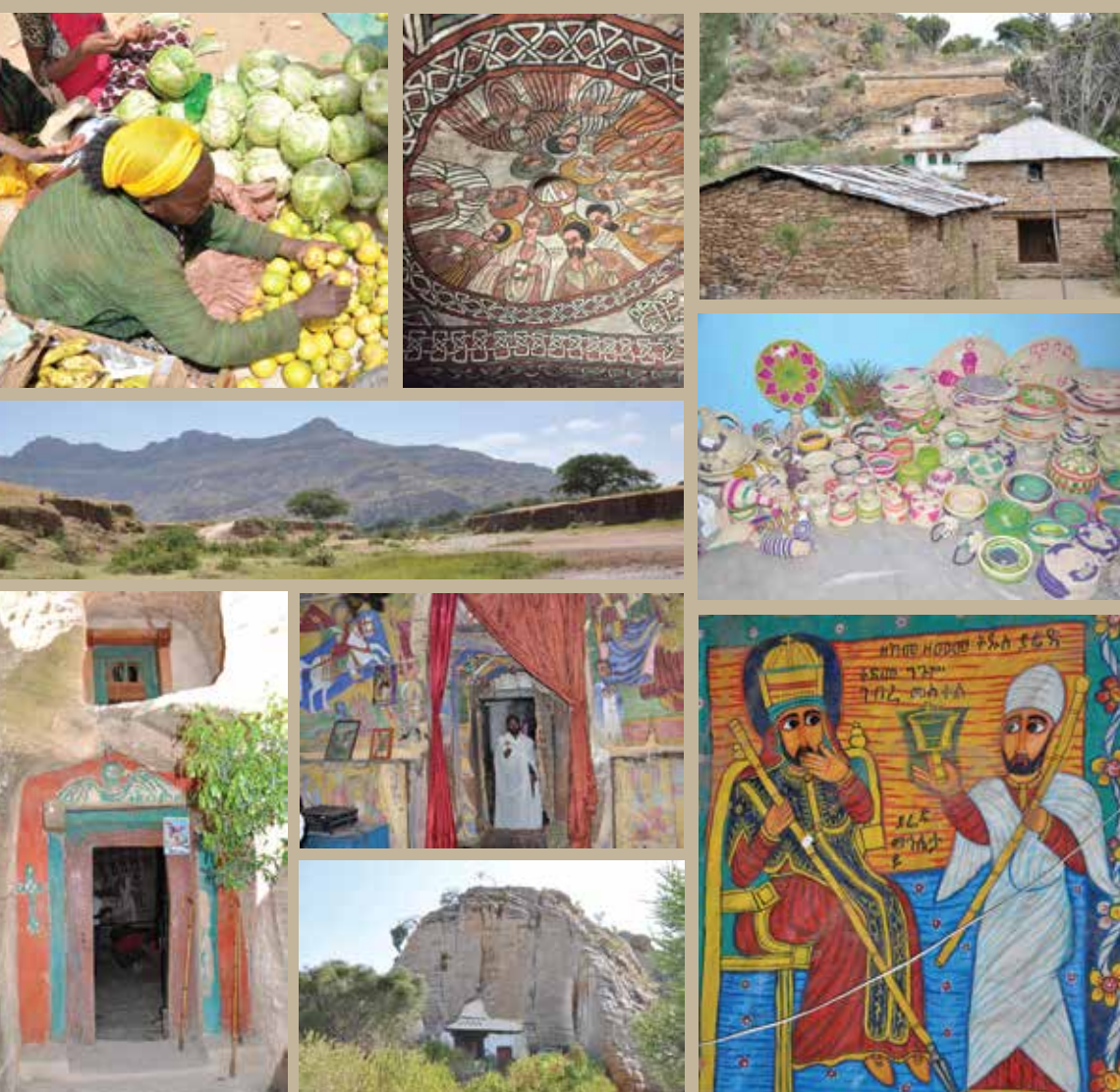
Photos courtesy of Tommas Cebretsidik +251914730808

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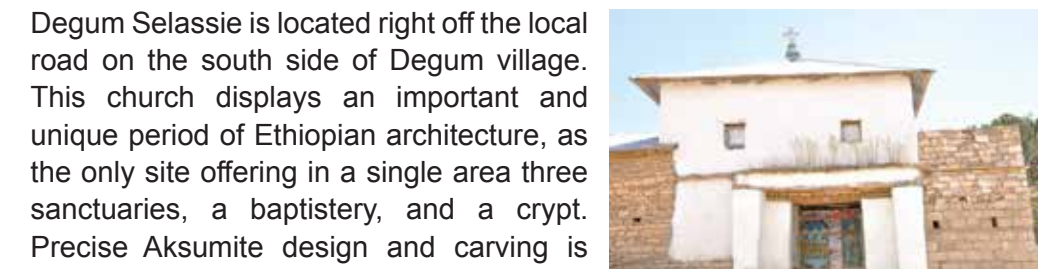


TOURIST MAP

Tigray Regional State Highlights of the Wukro-Gheralta Region



Degum Selassie (2)



Degum Selassie is located right off the local road on the south side of Degum village. This church displays an important and unique period of Ethiopian architecture, as the only site offering in a single area three sanctuaries, a baptistery, and a crypt. Precise Aksumite design and carving is apparent throughout. Journey into the (empty) crypt, which is a rock-hewn duplicate of the tombs built in underground Aksum. The design of the baptistery is similar to that of the Mediterranean baptisteries built from the 4th century onward, but scholars estimate the church is dated between the 7th and 10th centuries. Aksumite ceramics have been collected at the site of Degum Selassie and are now on display in Addis Ababa. With the Gheralta mountains as a dramatic backdrop, Degum Selassie is often a launch point for those interested in trekking, and a camp site and services are located within the village.



Abune Yemata (Guh) (3)



Abune Yemata (Guh) provides the most challenging and rewarding hike for adventure travelers. Located 5km west of Megab, this church is perched high among rock pillars. After the initial trek past ancient olive trees, small farmsteads, and up into mountains, visitors climb a 5 meter vertical rock wall barefoot, using only hand and foot holds. Guides and scouts from the nearby community provide invaluable encouragement and physical support. The remainder of the ascent involves a short walk along narrow rock ledges and additional climbs (though not on completely vertical rock faces). For visitors who want to visit the church but are not quite up to the challenge of free-form rock climbing, guides can provide ropes and harnesses if planned in advance. Completely worth the trip, the view from the top is astounding, as is the reality of a still-functioning church in this challenging location. The interior of the church, reached via a small opening in the rock, is magnificent and is notable for its extensive and well-preserved wall and ceiling frescoes, which are thought to date from the 15th century. Ruth Plant, author of *Architecture of the Tigre, Ethiopia*, describes them as "the most sophisticated frescoes found in Tigray." It is surprising that such great works of art existed for centuries in such unusual place, which seems closer to the moon than to the earth - a refuge from the rigorous of life on the plains below. Visiting this church should only be attempted by those in excellent physical condition and without significant fear of heights.



Tekle Haimanot Hawzien (4)



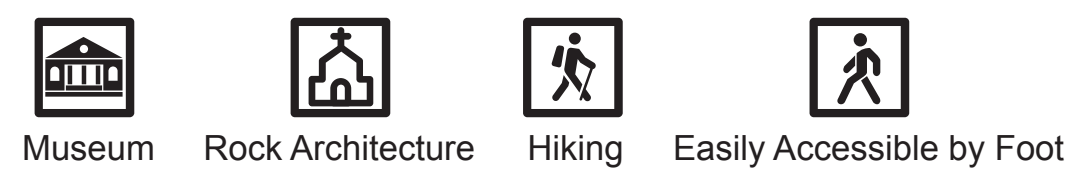
One of the most easily accessible rock-hewn churches, Tekle Haimanot Hawzien is located on the outskirts of the town of Hawzien, very close to Gheralta Lodge. The church is named for an Ethiopian monk and saint, Tekle Haimanot, who is a popular figure in Ethiopian lore. It is said that he stood and prayed for so long that one of his legs fell off but he still continued to pray. This church is a combination of rock-hewn and stone built, and the sanctuary holds six free-standing pillars and six pillars merged into the rock. The walls and doors feature patterns of rectangular cuts and other designs. Newer brightly colored paintings adorn the sanctuary, and though not historical, they and the crisscross pattern of the wooden ceiling are pleasing to the eye. Though visitors can only look from afar, the Holy of Holies has finely carved windows and its domed ceiling is carved with crosses. Visitors may also see the separate rock prayer room. A new Ethiopian Orthodox church has been built next door to meet the needs of the large congregation. Tekle Haimanot Hawzien is the most viable option for those wishing to attend a mass at one of the rock-hewn churches.



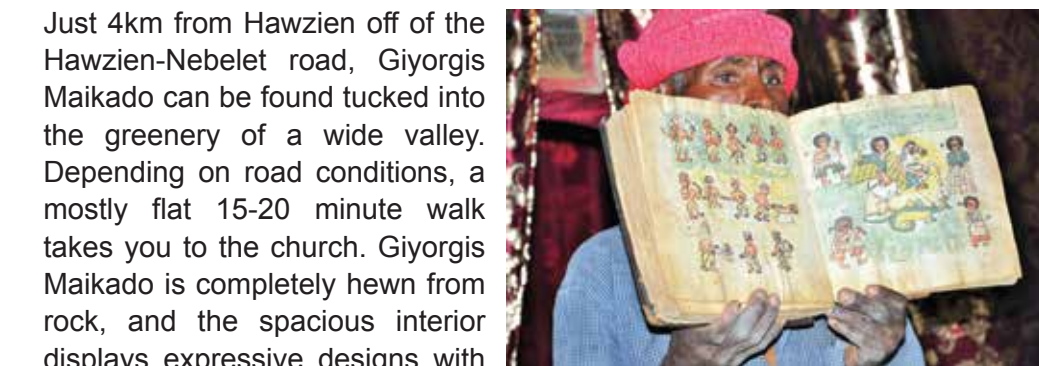
Yohannes Maequddi (5)



Nearby to Debre Abune Abraham TSION is Yohannes Maequddi, located on top of a neighboring mountain in the Gheralta range. Entry requires a steep, roughly 40-minute hike that offers rewarding views. The church is rectangular in shape but blends in almost completely with the surrounding rock. Inside, six free-standing pillars curve to meet each other and support a ceiling carved with geometric designs. The most unique features of this church are the well-preserved paintings done in earth tones, different in style to any others found in Gheralta and thought to be at least 300 years old. The atmosphere in the church has been described by many as "intense."



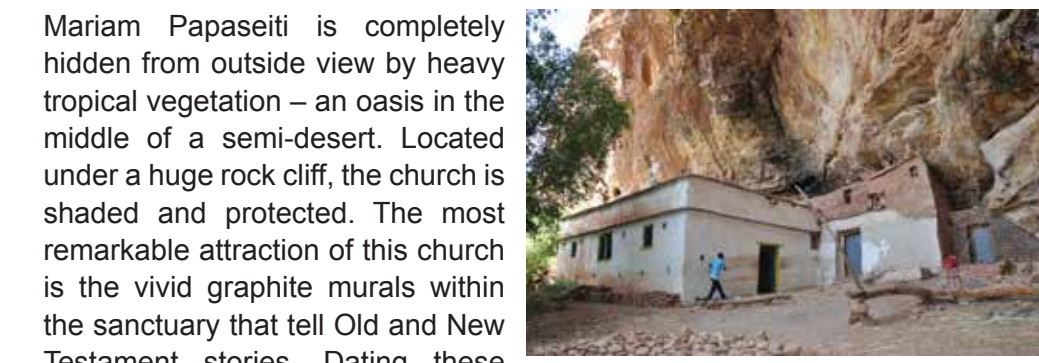
Giyorgis Maikado (6)



Just 4km from Hawzien off of the Hawzien-Nebelet road, Giyorgis Maikado can be found tucked into the greenery of a wide valley. Depending on road conditions, a mostly flat 15-20 minute walk takes you to the church. Giyorgis Maikado is completely hewn from rock, and the spacious interior displays expressive designs with four free-standing pillars and six additional pillars merged with the walls. The pillars create magnificent archways leading back to the separate curtained space for the Holy of Holies. The walls surrounding the Holy of Holies have an intricate pattern of rectangle and cross-shaped cuts, and the ceiling above is carved to look like a barrel. This church is rich in artifacts, including a colorful book of the life of St. George, the patron saint of Ethiopia.



Mariam Papaseiti (7)



Mariam Papaseiti is completely hidden from outside view by heavy tropical vegetation - an oasis in the middle of a semi-desert. Located under a huge rock cliff, the church is shaded and protected. The most remarkable attraction of this church is the vivid graphite murals within the sanctuary that tell Old and New Testament stories. Dating these paintings is, for once, somewhat easy. They include portraits of the donors, Basahy Denegeze and his wife Emebiet Hirut. Denegeze was the governor of the area during the reign of Ras Wolda Sellassie (1788 - 1866). To reach the church, visitors traverse gentle farmland and pass a tree so massive that it looks as if it has been growing since the beginning of life itself! However, be aware - during the rainy season, the main access road is washed out and sand makes it impassable at times. If visiting during the rainy season or soon afterwards, the walk (though absolutely beautiful) might be over 3km each way. Mariam Papaseiti is located near Degum village.



Debre Tsion Abune Abraham (8)



The mountain crag which supports Debre Abune Abraham TSION is located just 1km from Degum. The strenuous one-hour hike leading to the church is completely worth it, as at the top you will find a phenomenal view and one of the most architecturally outstanding churches, completely hewn from rock. Debre Abune Abraham TSION (a.k.a. Debre Tsion) is thought to be from the 14th century and features the tallest rock pillars of all the churches. You will also find decorated cupolas, carved crosses in the walls and ceilings, and a surrounding ambulatory - or outer hallway - within the church. Precious artifacts such as a large 15th century ceremonial fan with wooden framework makes the visit to this church special. Each of its 34 panels is finely painted with figures of Apostles. Visitors can also see the bed and tomb of the church's namesake, monk Abune Abraham. This church is famous among locals as being the church visited by former U.S. president George W. Bush, in 2014.

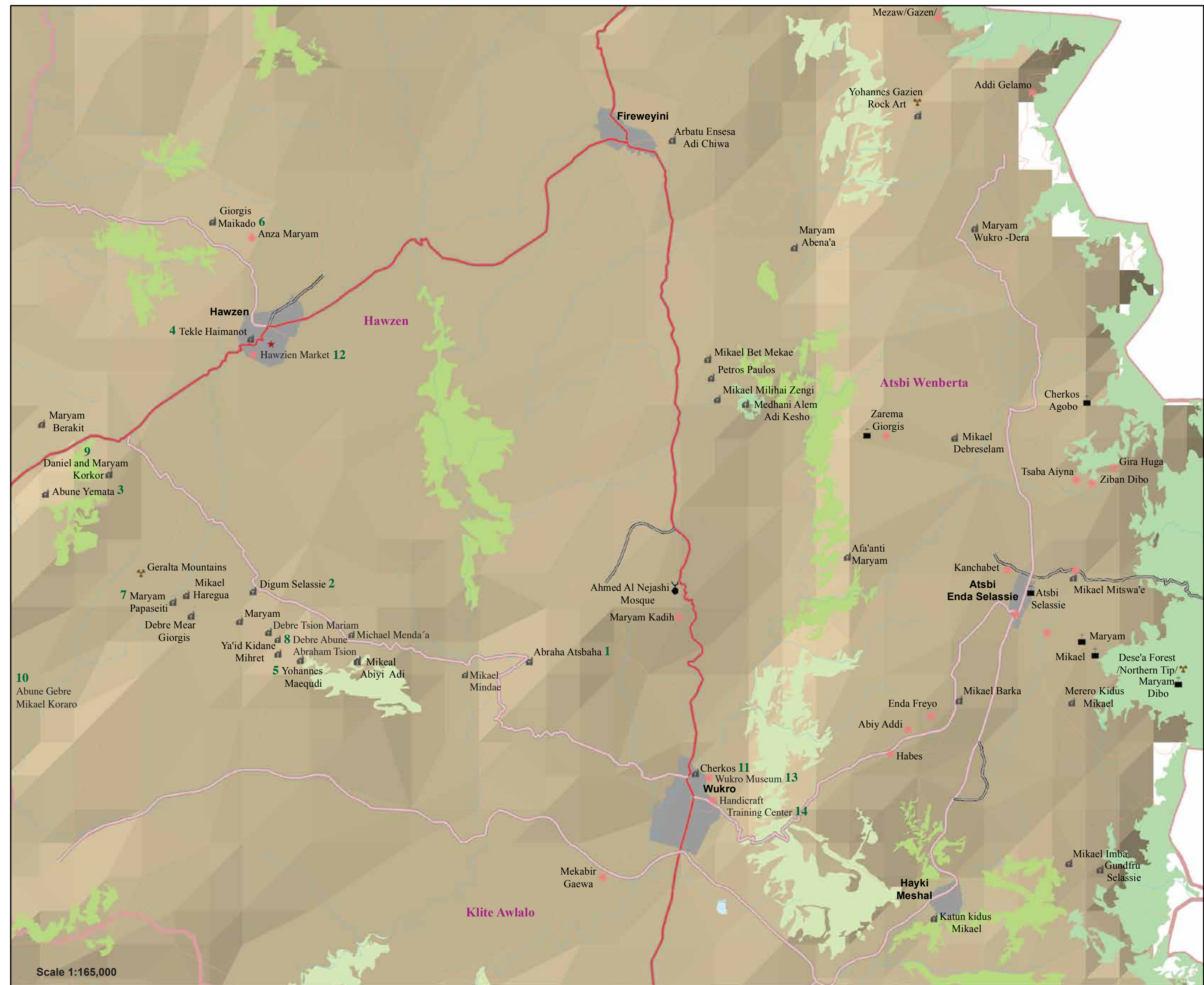
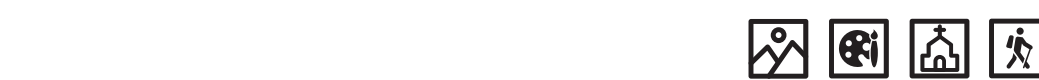


Daniel and Maryam Korkor (9)



Located 8km south of Hawzien, Mariam Korkor is one of the most well-known churches in the Gheralta area. A strenuous one-hour hike brings you to one of the largest and most complex rock-hewn churches in Tigray. The six huge pillars are cruciform in shape and become the platforms for meticulously carved and designed bas-relief arches, some similar to those at Abraha Atsbeha. The church is rich in 17th century murals depicting Biblical stories, though the wear on the sandstone has put them in danger. Paintings of Archangel Raphael and the Virgin Mary with a circle around her abdomen (indicating pregnancy, common to 17th century Byzantine art) are among the most notable. It is believed that at least three painters worked within Mariam Korkor. The church also has an impressive collection of manuscripts and silver crosses.

A short walk on to a rock ledge facing east is the entrance to Abba Daniel Korkor, a small church with only two rooms. The church is no longer in use for regular services but is worth a visit to see the domed anteroom, decorated with primitive paintings. The passage from Mariam Korkor to Daniel Korkor provides exceptional views of the mountains of Gheralta and the Hawzien plain.

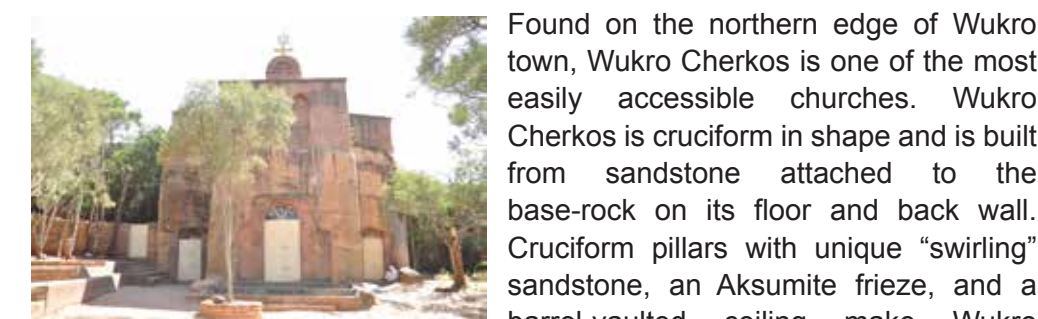


Abune Gebre Mikael Koraro (10)



Abune Gebre Mikael Koraro is located 23km from Megab on local roads, or 15 miles from Abune Yemata (Guh). Reaching the church entrance requires a sometimes difficult 1-hour hike and climb among the rocks. The fantastic surrounding landscape is punctuated by the pillars of Abune Yemata (Guh), visible in the distance. Once at the summit, you will find one of the best-preserved and visually stunning churches in the Gheralta region. The cruciform shape is hewn beautifully into a dome-like rock. The most unique feature of this church are the vibrant frescoes done in blue and yellow. Carefully carved columns, pillars, and cupolas provide an appealing canvas to present the paintings.

Wukro Cherkos (11)



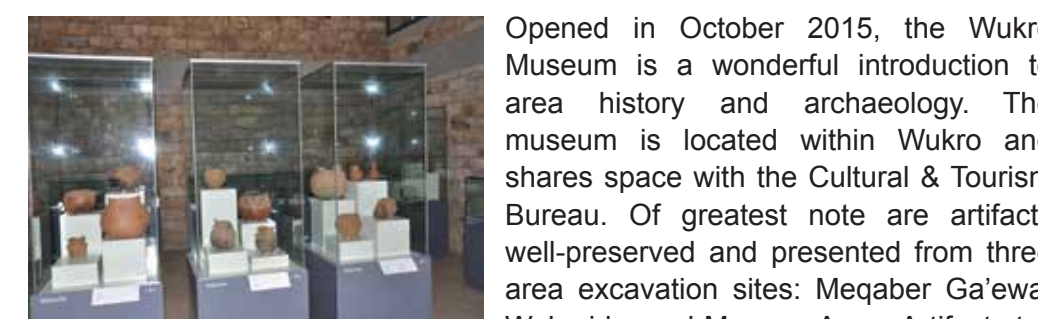
Found on the northern edge of Wukro town, Wukro Cherkos is one of the most easily accessible churches. Wukro Cherkos is cruciform in shape and is built from sandstone attached to the base-rock on its floor and back wall. Cruciform pillars with unique "swirling" sandstone, an Aksumite frieze, and a barrel-vaulted ceiling make Wukro Cherkos stand out among the other rock-hewn churches. However, there are blackened areas on some portions of the ceiling, remnants of a past fire. If you are lucky, you may visit while the seasonal church school is in session, where you can hear children learning the chants and songs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The age of the church is not known, but the presence of a sandstone slab with Aksumite inscriptions in the vicinity of the church have led Ethiopians to believe it may have been carved during the 4th century.



Hawzien Market (12)

A visit to the Gheralta region is not complete without a visit to the vibrant and colorful Hawzien market. The largest market in the area, this is the best place to buy authentic and high-quality souvenirs to remember your trip. Cultural commodities such as pottery, woven baskets and platters, clothing, and spices are available. You can also purchase honey - for which Tigray is known - and the freshest fruits and vegetables. A true representation of Gheralta life, the market is only open on Wednesdays, and villagers come from the surrounding countryside to buy and sell goods. If you miss the Hawzien market, Degum and Megab villages both have small markets on Saturdays.

Wukro Museum (13)



Opened in October 2015, the Wukro Museum is a wonderful introduction to area history and archaeology. The museum is located within Wukro and shares space with the Cultural & Tourism Bureau. Of greatest note are artifacts well-preserved and presented from three area excavation sites: Meqaber Ga'ewa, Wakarida, and Maryam Anza. Artifacts tell the story of advanced early civilizations and impressive feats of engineering and artistic ability. For example, the libation altar of the Almaqah Temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa is almost wholly intact and is dated from the 8th-7th centuries B.C. Detailed descriptions and information cards are available in both English and Tigrinya. If you are planning to visit any archaeological sites on your trip to Tigray, the Wukro Museum is recommended as the first stop in order to gain historical context, as interpretation at the sites themselves is scarce. The museum has been built tastefully in the style of a traditional cultural house, with an open-air patio in the middle.



Handicraft Training Center (14)

The Handicraft Training Center in Wukro is operated in conjunction with the Tigray Culture & Tourism Bureau and offers lessons seasonally to locals who want to learn traditional Ethiopian crafts, including pottery, weaving, and leather-working. The center holds exhibitions where members can sell their work. Check in with the Wukro branch of the Tourism Bureau (+251- 344430340), located within the Wukro Museum, to find out the current schedule of classes. If you visit at the right time, you can see the training sessions in progress. Due to highly successful exhibitions, a full-time store is scheduled to be opened in late 2015 to regularly sell items made at the training center. The building that houses the training center can also be appreciated for its Italian architecture, left over from the period of Italian occupation in Ethiopia from 1933 - 1941.

Legend							
	Airport		Archaeological Site		Enderta		Wereda Name
	Built Church		Rock Hewn Church		Closed Shrubland		Crop Land
	Heritage		Dam		Lake		Open Shrubland
	Mosque		Nature		Reverine Tree		Woodland
	Allweather Road		Zonal Boundary of Tigray		Regional Boundary		
	Asphalt Road						
	Dryweather Road						
	Other Road						
	River						