

The Magic People of Omo Valley Itinerary

Summary

Day 1: Depart Europe/USA/China etc on Ethiopian Airlines

Day 2: Arrive, transfer to Sheraton/Hilton. (If arrival is on a flight from UK or China, we will need to book the night before to ensure immediate check in.) Rest up till lunch time, then city tour, Mount Entoto, museums etc.

Day 3: Drive to Arba Minch via Butajira, Hossanna and Sodo. Paradise Lodge.

Day 4: Drive via Konso to Jinka. Eco Omo Resort

Day 5: Visit Mago Park and Mursi Villages. Eco Omo Resort.

Day 6: Drive to Turmi via Key Afar and Dimeke. Buska Lodge.

Day 7: Visit the villages of the Karo people. Busksa Lodge

Day 8: Cross the Omo River and visit Nyangatom villages. Buska Lodge.

Day 9: Visit Hamer villages around Turmi. Buska Lodge.

Day 10: Return to Arba Minch via Erbore. Paradise Lodge.

Day 11: Visit Dorze and continue to Lake Awassa. Haile Resort.

Day 12: Drive back to Addis Ababa, city visits, shopping day room, transfer to airport at about 2300.

Day 13: Early morning departure, approx 0115.

Introduction

When visiting the Omo, taking in at least one market is important so when planning your arrival date, you should take note of the market days mentioned at the end of the itinerary. Changes can be made in the order of sites visited - for example, on Day 4 we could go to Turmi, and do the trip in reverse. (Dimeka and Key Afar are particularly interesting.)

Also, visitors who would like to see the "singing wells" of the Borana, rather than returning to Arba Minch on Day 10, could travel from Turmi to Aloya, spend a night there and continue to Yabello the following day. From Yabello you could also within one day visit the singing wells at Dublock and the salt crater (Chew Bait) at El Sod. Return to Addis Ababa would be up the main road through Awassa.

You need a 4x4 to see the Omo (although roads generally have much improved), and it is our policy to put a maximum of 4 passengers in each vehicle, making 5 with the driver. One person would sit next to the driver, and three in the seat behind the driver. Ideally, there should only be 3 passengers, so that everyone has a window seat.

We generally recommend taking a guide to the Omo, who would be able to explain fully the cultures and customs of the peoples you will be visiting. We do have driver/guides, but these are rarely as knowledgeable as dedicated guides, and have less time for interaction as they are responsible for their vehicles. An

experienced Omo guide will be able to engage knowledgeable, local guides, who can provide fresh insights about the community you are visiting.

It is now mandatory to hire local guides in most of the locations to be visited - young people have established local guides' associations, as a way of ensuring that tourism creates local job opportunities. The quality of these local guides (and their command of English) can vary, some are very good, others less so.

We can supply a cook and cooking equipment for any nights spent camping. We can either supply a cook from Addis Ababa, or can hire local cooks at each location. If it is the latter, do not expect haute cuisine!

If we plan on camping, we supply a pick-up or a 4x4 truck to carry tents and camping and cooking equipment, the cook and camp assistants. With this extra vehicle visitors will arrive at camp to find the tents set up, cold or hot drinks ready and food being prepared.

We can provide different levels of camping, from small dome tents with camping mats, to larger stand up tents, with camp beds, and can also supply generators and freezers. We would always supply shower and toilet tents, and other hand washing facilities. With a higher standard of camping accommodation and service, we deploy additional staff.

Road journeys can be cut if visitors fly to Arba Minch, though there is little time saved as the flights arrive in the afternoon. There are now scheduled Ethiopian Airline three times a week, on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. (There are no longer flights to Jinka, since Ethiopian Airlines stopped using Dash 6 Aircraft.)

It is also possible to arrange private charters, to Jinka, Omo Rate, Murule and Tulgit (on the west bank). In either case, the vehicles will still need to be hired from and to Addis Ababa, as vehicles are not stationed in the Omo. (It is possible to hire 4x4s in Arba Minch, but only older models, 15-20 years old.)

This itinerary is only one possibility, for the more adventurous we could cross the Omo River and camp on the other side.

From August to November one can access more remote villages by boat, which means taking fly tents and setting up mobile camps, this could be a 3-5 day trip.

We could drive through Jimma to access the west bank of the Omo, which is less ethnically diverse but also less affected by tourism.

This journey takes 2 days, for those with the resources but little time, we can send vehicles ahead and charter into Tulgit, right among the Suri (Surma) people.

It must be said that those hoping to see the *donga* or stick fighting practised by the Suri will be disappointed. In the last year or so *donga* has been characterized as a Harmful Traditional Practise, and there are moves to discourage it, local police will not allow tourists to attend *donga* .

The building of a bridge over the Omo River at Omo Rate has faced many problems and delays. Last year the structure which had been put up collapsed into the river. It is impossible to say when the bridge will be built, the earliest would be late 2014. There is a barge for transporting people and vehicles across the river at Omo Rate.

This means quicker access to the Omo National Park, and means it is possible to visit the east bank, then cross to the Omo Park, and from there proceed to Kibish to the Suri (Surma) people.

From Kibish we would go to Tum, Mizan Teferi, Jimma and Addis Ababa, or charter out of Tulgit. (This year the road between Omo Rate and Mue - the HQ of the Omo National Park - and from Mue to Maji, has been regraded)

Going back to trips to the east bank, for those with more time we could spend a day on the way or on the way back relaxing at Lake Langano, there are now two eco lodges there on the east bank, Bishangari and Wenney Lodge. On the west bank there is Sabana Lodge resort, with very good food. We can discuss various possibilities with you to come up with the itinerary that best suits your needs and interests.

Lodges have been opened at Turmi, which can be used as bases to access the Karo, Bume, Galeb etc, and the Eco Omo Lodge and other hotels in Jinka can be used as a base to access the Mago National Park, and the Mursi villages. There is also a lodge at Murule, and the upmarket Lumale Tented Camp just north of Dus. (Using Lumale, and its boat, allows access to more remote communities.) It is no longer necessary to camp while visiting the east bank of the Omo.

Visitors should not expect the same accommodation and service standards as lodges they may have experienced elsewhere in East Africa, or in Southern Africa.

The Omo Valley has a different rainy season from northern Ethiopia, with the main rains being from mid March to mid June, and shorter rains around November.

However, in recent years there has been unseasonal rain and even flooding at times when rain was not expected. Generally, the whole area is crisscrossed by a myriad of seasonal rivers. If there is unseasonable rain, river beds can quickly fill up, making detours unavoidable.

Visitors who want to take photos of the ethnic groups in the Omo are expected to pay for each photograph.

ITINERARY

Day 1: Depart Europe/USA/China etc.

Day 2: Arrive Addis Ababa and transfer to the Sheraton/Hilton Hotel (or any other hotel of your choice), where we can have a couple of hours rest before lunch.

After lunch, we start our city tour. First we drive north up to Mount Entoto. In 1881 Emperor Menelik II made his permanent camp there, after remains of an old town (believed to have been the capital of 16th century monarch Lebna Dengel) were discovered, which Menelik took was a divine and auspicious sign.

Addis Ababa at between 2300 - 2500 meters is the third highest capital in the world and Entoto is a few hundred meters higher - as we drive up the hill there is an appreciable drop in temperature and the air is filled with the scent of the Eucalyptus trees which line the road.

From the top, there is a panoramic view of the capital and surrounding countryside. Our guide will point out the city's major landmarks. Entoto is an important watershed; to the north, water flows to the Blue Nile and the Mediterranean Sea, to the south, to the Awash River and on to Djibouti.

Entoto was soon abandoned as a site for the capital - it was cold, difficult to provision and there was a shortage of wood. Empress Taytu was said to have led the move down to the plain of Finfine, and to have named the new capital Addis Ababa, or New Flower. However, two important structures remain within the old imperial compound on Entoto, the churches of Mariam and the Archangel Raguel. It was in the church of Mariam that Menelik was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia in 1889, and in the small museum in the compound there are various clothes, court and household implements and weapons dating from the period. The church of Raguel is unusual in that it is octagonal, rather than round. There is a first story balustrade around which Menelik liked to stroll.

Leaving the churches we descend to Addis Ababa, stopping off at the National Archaeological Museum. Here visitors can see exhibits ranging from the 3.5 million-year-old bones of Lucy, from the Axumite and Gondarene periods through to the period of the monarchs Tewodros and Menelik II.

This completes our city tour and we return to our hotel.

Day 3: An early start around 7.30 and we then head down the western side of the Rift Valley passing through Butajira, Hossana and Sodo.

It's a long day's drive, about 9 hours with lunch and coffee stops, but it is on a good asphalt road. The scenery is very attractive. There are interesting places to be visited en route - the Neolithic site and museum at Melka Kunture, the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Tiya, and the rock hewn church at Adadi Mariam, contemporaneous with the churches of Lalibela - but visiting them would mean an overnight at Hossana or Sodo, neither of them worth an overnight.

After Sodo we skirt the western shores of Lakes Abaya and Chamo, the southernmost of Ethiopia's Rift Valley Lakes, before arriving in Arba Minch, or "40 springs", and check into Paradise Lodge. The Lodge is situated on a hill overlooking the narrow stretch of forested land, known locally as "the bridge of heaven", which separates the two lakes. Philip Briggs in the Bradt Guide described it as one of the best views in Africa. o/n Paradise Lodge.

NB There are two routes to Arba Minch from Addis Ababa, the one described above, and the slightly longer and busier route through Shashamene and past the Rift Valley Lakes of Langano, Shalla, Abiata and Zwai. There are more attractive places to overnight on this route.

Day 4: We drive south to Konso, whose people are known for their intricately terraced hillsides, fine woven materials and the carved totems with which they decorate their graves, and after our visit turn towards Jinka. Konso is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. (Market days in Konso are Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays). We pass the Weyto river where we will see a great variety of pelicans and other aquatic birds. On Thursdays there is a very attractive market at Key Afer, frequented by the Bena and Ari people. In Jinka itself the markets are on Saturdays and Tuesdays. This afternoon or on the following day we could visit the museum in Jinka, which along with various artifacts has a lot of ethnographical information about the people of the Omo. We will spend the night at the Eco Omo Lodge.

Day 5: We leave Jinka and drive to the Mago National Park. The park has a variety of mammals and birds, but the animals tend to stay away from the roads and sightings cannot be guaranteed. In the park we might see the following animals: elephant, buffalo, Grant's Gazelle, Topi and Burchill's Zebra, but only if we do camping.

The main attraction in Mago are the Mursi people, so we drive to Shembel, the nearest Mursi village and if we want to go further, up the escarpment to the Mursi villages there. The Mursi go in for body scarification and (among the women) the wearing of lip plates. We return to Jinka for another night in the Eco Omo Lodge.

Day 6: We retrace our steps towards Key Afar (market on Thursdays, the people of Key Afar are mainly Ari and Bena), and then drive south towards Dimeke (market on Tuesdays and Saturdays), and Turmi, where we will stay at the Buska or Turmi Lodge.

We will use Turmi as our base for visiting other ethnic groups.

Day 7: We drive to Murule, and visit the Dus, Korcho and Dassenech villages of the Karo people. Among the people living along the Omo, the Karo excel in face and body painting. Lodge in Turmi.

Day 8: We head towards the Omo River, to Omo Rate, passing Kangate and the villages of the Bume people, going on to visit the Galeb villages. We will cross the river in a local boat and visit villages on the other side. Lodge in Turmi.

Day 9: Today we visit the Hamar villages around Turmi. The Hamar are a fine looking people, both men and women take great pride in their appearance, shaving and colouring their hair, oiling their bodies and decorating themselves with beads and bracelets worn around arms and legs. If this day is a Saturday or a Tuesday, we would visit the market at Dimeke, which is one of the most colourful and interesting in the area. (Market days in Turmi are on Mondays). During the time we spend in Turmi, we will check whether there is a bull jumping ceremony in the vicinity. This is a rite of passage ceremony for young men, marking their transition to adulthood. We will also check for Evangadi, or Hamar dancing ceremonies. Lodge in Turmi.

Day 10: Today we set off on the return journey to Arba Minch, passing the northern end of Chew Bahir, and through Erbore (market day Saturday) and Tsemay. We will arrive at Arba Minch in the late afternoon. o/n Paradise Lodge.

Day 11: Leaving after breakfast, some 40 km north of Arba Minch we will make a short detour to Chench, the home of the Dorze people, known for their bamboo, bee-hive shaped houses and their fine quality cotton "shamma". (Market day Thursday afternoon.) We may take lunch in Sodo, and arrive at our destination, Hawassa, at the Haile Resort, situated on the lake. The owner is the famous athlete, Haile Gebre Selassie. Hawassa is a boom town, and for those interested, has a lively night life. (Slightly further on, and additional 2 hours' drive, but very quiet and relaxing, is Bishangari Lodge, on the eastern shores of Lake Langano).

Day 12: For those interested in bird pictures, we can take an early morning visit to the fish market in Awassa, and get really close to pelicans, storks and other birds very much used to human company. After breakfast we set off back to Addis Ababa, arriving in time for some souvenir shopping. We will have a farewell dinner at the Yod Abyssinia (or another traditional restaurant), where

we will have national food and see national dancing from Ethiopia's different regions.

For those leaving after midnight on Day 13, we can arrange day rooms.

Leave for the airport around 2200 for departure after midnight on Day 13.

Market days in Omo Valley

Monday: Turmi, Konso, Kako

Tuesday: Dimeka, Jinka

Wednesday: Konso

Thursday: Chench (afternoon), Konso, Key Afer

Saturday: Dimeka, Erboke, Yabello, Jinka, Key Afer

Sunday: Weito

There are daily markets in Jinka and Omorate, but the markets in Omo Rate are not so interesting.

Rough guide to driving times - if there has been rain, it can take longer

Addis Ababa - Arba Minch, 9-10 hours, 8-9 hours through Butajira

Arba Minch - Konso, 1-2 hours

Konso - Jinka, 3-4 hours

Konso - Turmi via Weyto, 3 - 4 hours.

Turmi - Dimeke (27 km) 40 mins

Turmi - Omo Rate (87 km) 1 1/2 hours

Omo Rate - Murulle (72 km) 2 hours

Murulle - Mago (75 km) 7-8 hours

Jinka - Yabello 6 hours

Arba Minch - Hawassa, 4 hours

For access to the west bank

Addis Ababa - Bonga, 8 hours.

Bonga - Tulgit, 9 hours.