



## Afar Desert Tour - 4 Days

### Itinerary

#### Day 1

Catch the 7:45 am flight from Addis Ababa 500 km north to Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray National State. Be met at the airport and driven through Mekelle to the tour office. Complete paperwork.

Set off in a 4WD vehicle by mid-morning. In the first hour descend over 1 km from Mekelle at 2,350 m down to 1,300 m. In another 45 minutes wind down another 500 m through scrub-covered mountains then hills and past the occasional frozen waves of hardened lava. The road is recently laid asphalt.

Rendezvous with the rest of your convoy over a vegetarian lunch.

Drive a couple of hours through an increasingly barren landscape. Leave the asphalt to go off-road across a desolately flat and featureless waste of sand and random clusters of balloon plants where nothing should be able to grow. The need to maintain some momentum in case we hit patches of soft, axle-deep, sand results in a thrilling blat across the sand with vehicles line abreast to avoid each other's dust cloud.

Past the sand plain discover what the guides proudly call 'the worst road in the world' (video clip). It takes 2 hours to slowly grind 12 km across fields of recent, jagged-edged lava rock. This rock is too young to have been weathered so the edges are razor sharp. This can be a hazard for sandal wearers and tyre rubber. This rock is 'young' in the geological sense. It could be a century old here. Its hard to be certain.

The terrain is bleak with hues of grey, brown and infrequent splashes of miraculous green. Scanning the horizon, see the classic silhouettes of volcanic cones on the distant skyline. In another direction see the sculptured white horses of ancient lava waves make jagged outlines in the endless azure.

By late afternoon reach the base camp for the Mt Erta Ale ("Errrta Alay") climb. This is a series of traditional huts built of dry stone walls and thatched rooves. There is no sleeping here. Rest or walk about until a vegetarian dinner just before sunset.

Walk by torchlight about 3.5 hours up a steady incline. The path winds around boulders and cracked lava towards the fiery glow of Mt Erta Ale in whose crater hides the only permanently liquid lava lake in the world.

Sleep under the stars on a foam mattress with a blanket or sleeping bag supplied with your own bed sheet for the duration of the tour.

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## Day 2

Get in position pre-dawn for the best photos of the lava lake simmering and splashing great globs of orange and red liquid rock as the light brightens with the sunrise.

Descend from the crater for 2.5 hours in bright morning sunshine for breakfast about 9:30 am. It is in the mid-30s C and the day is heating up.

Drive to Lake Afrera in the convoy of airconditioned 4WDs. This whole area is at, or below, sea level and is a centre of commercial salt production.

Refresh after last night's climb by floating in the salty waters of Lake Afrera then rinse off in a 40 C hot spring of crystal clear water. The hot spring is cooler than the air.

A vegetarian lunch of pasta or rice with vegetables is washed down with cold soft drinks or beer.

After lunch drive 4 hours to the friendly small town of Abala for a smorgasbord meal of traditional dishes. Sleep on a mattress on the floor in a communal sleeping area. The squat toilet is kept reasonably clean.

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## Day 3

After breakfast drive about 60 km northeast to Lake Assale (also known as Lake Karum). Stop for lunch at Berhale. See the local Afar tribespeople cutting slabs of rock salt and loading their camel caravans in a trade largely unchanged for millennia. It takes the caravans of up to 50 camels one week to reach

Mekelle's markets which are 200 km west in the mountains – and about 2,300 m higher.

Visit some fascinating geological formations, see a hole in the salt crust revealing the waters of the lake beneath, much like a fishing hole cut through ice.

Walk out hundreds of metres in ankle deep tepid salt water and enjoy the stunning sunset on Lake Assale.

After dinner sleep under the Milky Way on a traditional bed frame made of wood and latticed leather strapping holding you about 50 cm above the ground. Bring a roll of toilet paper and take a walk to find a private place for nature's calls. This is an adventure that is not for everyone. There are no hotels here.

Surprisingly, mosquitoes and insects are generally absent. There is not enough of anything in this desert to sustain them. After 4 days in the Afar Desert you will hug the first tree trunk and kiss the first green leaf you see. Rain and fire-places might never feel the same again.

There are scorpions and snakes in this desert so wearers of open-toed footwear please beware.

This undiscovered desert of deserts is a place for lovers of deserts.

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## Day 4

After breakfast drive about 50 km to Dallol geothermal field. The bubbling and steaming hot water brings a rich mineral mix up from deep down in the earth. This is deposited in multi-

coloured mounds and ponds. It is like another planet with hues of yellow, green, blue, orange and red.

After lunch drive about 200 km back to Mekelle and the end of the tour. Catch the 7 pm flight back to Addis Ababa.

Please note that at peak season, to avoid too many vehicles in one convoy, the order of this itinerary can be rearranged but all the same places of interest are visited.

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