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

Tigrai is Ethiopia’s northernmost state, bordering on Eritrea to the north and Sudan to the west. It is a land of fertile plains, valleys and mountains, with an ancient and cultural heritage stretching back to the time of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and is at least the first inhabited E. Africa. It is a land of natural beauty, quite deprived of tourism and only seems to have limited tourism potential. Tigrai is a region that has long remained relatively untouched, having been isolated by war and political instability in the past. However, in recent years, the Tigrai region has begun to attract more visitors, particularly those interested in history, culture, and natural beauty. The region is home to a number of important cultural sites, including the rock-hewn churches of Gheralta, which are said to be some of the best-preserved examples of their kind in Ethiopia.

Tigrai also offers a variety of opportunities for outdoor activities, including hiking, trekking, and wildlife watching. The region is home to a number of national parks and reserves, including the Abha Wildlife Sanctuary, which is home to a number of endangered species, including the Ethiopian Wolf and the Black Rhino.

Getting to the Gheralta Region

There are many ways to reach Wukro in Tigrai to start your rock-hewn churches adventure. From Addis Ababa, it is recommended to take a flight to Mekelle (5-6 hours) from Addis Ababa, or you may then take a public minibus to Wukro (1 hour) from Mekelle. Alternatively, a car and driver can be hired through travel agencies if you are planning a tour. boxer (Askia Menelik II) from the royal palace at Mekele is a historical landmark. The palace was once the residence of Ethiopia’s Emperors and is now a museum, providing insight into the country’s rich history. If you are hiring a car and driver, it is recommended to book in advance to ensure availability.

Hiring a Guide or Tour Operator

When visiting the rock-hewn churches and surrounding attractions in Tigrai, it is highly recommended to hire a guide. Hiring a guide is not only helpful for navigating the area and understanding the history and significance of the sites, but it also ensures that you are complying with local laws and regulations, which can vary depending on the region. It is also recommended to hire a guide from a reputable company, ensuring that you are supporting local businesses and promoting sustainable tourism.

Tourist Map of Tigrai Region

Legend

- Aquifer
- Abbeys and churches
- Burial mound
- Church
- Church monument
- Historical site
- Landmark
- Monastery
- National Park
- River
- Town
- Well
- Watering point
- Zonal boundary

Tourist Map of Tigrai Region

Suggested Length of Stay

This is one of Ethiopia’s culturally rich regions, with more than 500 rock-hewn churches and monasteries spread across the region. The churches are not only a testament to the religious and cultural heritage of the region, but they also offer a glimpse into the daily life of the people who lived and worked in the area. The most popular churches are the Gheralta Monastery, Abraha We Atsbeha Church, and the Abbeys and Churches of Tigrai, which are located in the town of Abraha We Atsbeha, Mekelle, and Tigrai, respectively.

The land surrounding the rock hewn churches is pristine, and there are no crowds or traffic. The churches are not accessible by road, and it is recommended to hire a guide to ensure safe and comfortable travel. The months of June - September are the height of the rainy season, and it is recommended to avoid this period if possible. Instead, it is recommended to visit during the dry season, which runs from October to April.

Avoid the urge to touch sacred paintings, and be respectful of the local culture and customs. It is important to understand that traditions can be enjoyed. If you are visiting the Wukro-Gheralta region, it is recommended to visit at least one of the rock-hewn churches, as they are some of the best-preserved examples of their kind in Ethiopia.

Additional Travel Tips

- Wear your shoes and keep your fine shoes at home. This is a remote and rural area, and it is not recommended to wear fine shoes. It is recommended to wear comfortable and sturdy shoes, as the terrain can be uneven and rocky.
- Bring your own water, as there may be limited access to water sources. It is recommended to bring at least 5 liters of water per day.
- Bring your own food, as there may be limited access to food sources. It is recommended to bring snacks and meals, as well as a cooking kit, to ensure a comfortable and safe travel experience.
- Be respectful of the local culture and customs. It is recommended to dress modestly and avoid wearing revealing clothing.
- Be aware of your surroundings. It is recommended to be aware of your surroundings at all times, as the area can be remote and there may be limited access to emergency services.

The Epidemiological Calendar & Events

Visiting Ethiopia is like stepping back in time – literally! Passage of time is not always measured in terms of calendar years, but in terms of the Ethiopian calendar. Instead of counting the years since the birth of Christ, the Ethiopian calendar uses the year of the Incarnation as its reference point. The current year in Ethiopia is 2021, corresponding to the year 1372 in the Gregorian calendar.

Important Cultural Events

There are a number of cultural events and festivals that take place throughout the year in Tigrai. These events are not only a celebration of the region’s rich cultural heritage, but they also offer an opportunity for visitors to experience local traditions and customs. Some of the most important events include the Christmas Festival, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s most important festival, which is celebrated on January 7th; the Nativity Festival, which marks the birth of Jesus Christ; and the Good Friday, which commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Visit Tigrai today and experience a journey back in time, as you explore the ancient rock-hewn churches and monasteries that have stood the test of time. With stunning landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and a unique and authentic travel experience, Tigrai is a destination not to be missed.

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Highlights of the WUKRO-GHERALTA REGION

Abraha We Asehlu (1)

The only rock-hewn church on the route, Abraha We Asehlu was built in the 4th century. It is of rock-cut architecture, cruciform in plan and centrally placed. An entrance leads into a peristyle with a pair of columns in the middle forming an archway. The nave, with its square nave, is covered with a barrel vault, and the apse is octagonal.

Degum Selassie (2)

Degum Selassie is located right off the highway, situated on the south side of Degum village, which is known for its unique period of rock-cut architecture, as well as its naive carvings and sandstone sculptures. The church is partially ruined and has an octagonal shape.

Gisorgi Maikado (6)

Just before you reach Degum, the road winds its way through the greenery of a wide valley, ending on the road overlooking the Hawzien plain. 7.00 km from the town, you turn onto the road towards the Hawzien plain and the ancient church of Degum. The church has a domed ceiling and a free-standing pillar carved with intricate designs. The church is one of the most beautifully preserved rock-cut churches in the region.

Abune Yemata (Guh) (3)

Abune Yemata Gih is considered by scholars to be one of Ethiopia's earliest churches, dating from the 4th century. Atsbeha is considered by scholars to be one of Ethiopia's earliest churches, dating from the 4th century. The church is located on a cliff overlooking the surrounding landscape.

Abune Yemata (Guh) provides the most challenging and rewarding hike for adventure lovers. A trail leads west out of Tigrai town to the north side of the church, which is perched high among rock pillars. After the initial climb, you will be rewarded with breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape.

Tigrai Regional State

The only site offering in a single area three 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 three centuries old. The rock church is magnificent and is notable for its extensive and well-preserved wall frescoes, which are thought to date from the 15th century. Byzantine art is among the most notable. It is believed that at least three artists worked together on the church.

Marium Papaselli (7)

Maraam Papaselli is a magnificent church located on the windows, featuring frescoes and sandstone sculptures. The church is located on a hilltop overlooking the surrounding landscape.

Delve Tion Abune Abraham (8)

The mountainous region of Gheralta is dotted with rock-cut churches, among the most notable being Delve Tion Abune Abraham. The church is cruciform in shape and is built into the rock, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling make Wukro Cherkos a marvel of construction. The church is one of the largest and most complex rock-cut churches in the region.

Tourist Map

Tigray Regional State

Highlights of the Wukro-Gheralta Region

Yohannes Macqudi (5)

Yohannes Macqudi is considered one of the most famous Ethiopian artists of the 19th century. Yohannes Macqudi is considered one of the most famous Ethiopian artists of the 19th century. He is known for his paintings of religious themes and landscapes, and for his use of bright colors and bold forms.

Daniel and Maryam Kerker (9)

Located south of Hawzien, Maryam Kerker is one of the most famous rock-cut churches in the region. The church is cruciform in shape and is built into the rock, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling.

Abune Gobes Mikael Kerker (10)

Abune Gobes Mikael Kerker is located south of Hawzien, Maryam Kerker, and is one of the largest rock-cut churches in the region. The church is cruciform in shape and is built into the rock, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling.

Hawzen Market (12)

A visit to the Hawzien region is not complete without a visit to the Hawzien market. The market is located in the heart of Hawzien, and is the oldest and largest market in the region. The market is known for its vibrant colors and bustling atmosphere.

Wukro Cherkos (11)

Wukro Cherkos is cruciform in shape and is built into the rock, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. The church is one of the largest and most complex rock-cut churches in the region. The church is cruciform in shape and is built into the rock, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling.

Wukro Museum (13)

Opened in October 2012, the Wukro Museum is dedicated to the history and culture of the region. The museum is located in the center of Wukro, and is home to a wide range of artifacts and exhibits.

Handcraft Training Center (14)

The Handcraft Training Center in Wukro is a workshop dedicated to the production of handcrafts and souvenirs. The center is located in the center of Wukro, and is home to a wide range of workshops and training programs.

Legend

- Town
- Village
- Nature
- Heritage
- Mosque
- Training Center
- Handicraft
- Other Road

Tigrinya.

If you are planning to visit any archaeological sites on your trip to Ethiopia, it is recommended as the first stop in preparing yourself for the visit. Good luck, and enjoy your trip!