

# Eastern Ethiopia



A trip to eastern Ethiopia is a journey that tickles the heart, boggles the mind and challenges the soul – no less than that. In stark contrast to the green, densely populated, Christian highlands, the east is largely arid, wild, low-lying and Muslim. In it lies eastern Ethiopia's *pièce de résistance*: the old walled city of Harar, which seems straight out of a story from the *Arabian Nights*. This gem of a place is shrouded with a palpable historical aura that will appeal to culture vultures. And after nightfall, the hard-to-believe ritual feeding of the Harar hyenas will leave you gasping in awe.

True, if you're an outdoor enthusiast, you might find eastern Ethiopia is a bit low on active pursuits. There is potential, but it's still largely undeveloped. But the Awash National Park, with its outstanding birdlife, offers ample compensation. Be sure to squeeze it into your itinerary.

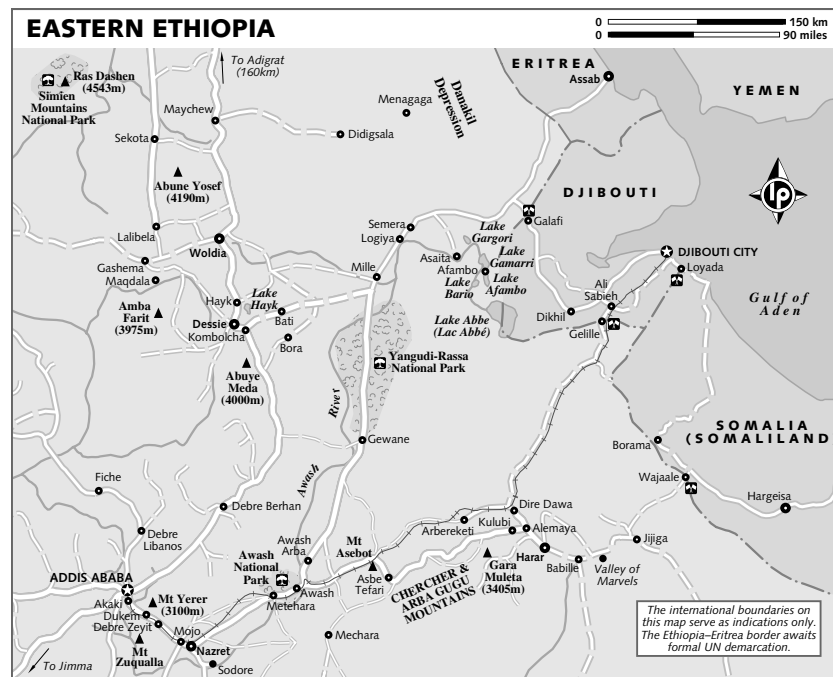
For wannabe National Geographic wanderers, the seemingly endless ribbon of bitumen leading northeast to Asaita offers opportunities for remote exploration. Follow Wilfred Thesiger's steps and head to the mesmerisingly desolate area known as the southern Danakil region, which is home to the fascinating Afar people and remains adamantly off the beaten track.

But if all you want is to please your palate, the east could also prove your Shangri-la: it is known as the home of the best coffee in the world – we agree. Or you could unleash your inner rebel and dare to try chewing *chat*, the mildly intoxicating stimulant.

So go ahead, dive in!

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Lap up lake vistas in **Debre Zeyit** (p214), where mighty mother nature lashes an astounding landscape
- Pant up **Mt Zuqualla** (p216) and confess your sins at the poignant monastery of Mt Zuqualla Maryam
- Hear yourself scream: 'Look! Barbets!' in the **Awash National Park** (p217)
- Get up close and very personal with a dozen hyenas in **Harar** (p226)
- Spend a couple of days getting blissfully lost in Harar's entrancing history while exploring the magical jumble of alleyways and shrines of the **old walled city** (p229)
- Share a smile and a bunch of *chat* with Afar people, Ethiopia's most fear-inspiring ethnic group, in **Asaita** (p222)



## Climate

The lowlands around Asaita and Awash are baking hot (up to 45°C) from May to September and receive little rain. They are also prone to severe droughts. The climate in Debre Zeyit and Nazret is similar to the conditions that prevail in Addis Ababa. The highlands around Dire Dawa, Harar and Jijiga are hot and dry. The main rains fall from July to September.

## National Parks

While you can easily dismiss the Yangudi-Rassa National Park, where the wildlife is as abundant as in Manhattan, make sure you don't skip Awash National Park. The park has enough species of birds to keep twitchers happy, and a fair share of other wildlife.

## Getting There & Away

**Ethiopian Airlines** ([www.flyethiopian.com](http://www.flyethiopian.com)) connects Addis Ababa with Dire Dawa and Jijiga. Most people who enter eastern Ethiopia overland travel by bus or by train from Djibouti City and disembark in Dire Dawa.

It's also possible to travel from Hargeisa (Somaliland) to Jijiga by bus. For more information see p275.

## Getting Around

Good sealed roads connect the main cities, including Asaita to the far northeast. Most cities in this part of Ethiopia are well served by public transport, except for the long stretch from Awash to Asaita where buses are infrequent. To visit Awash National Park, you will have to travel by private or rented 4WD.

# ADDIS ABABA TO AWASH

The long stretch of road between Addis Ababa and Awash is a gentle introduction to eastern Ethiopia. Most foreign visitors rush straight through without stopping, which is a bit of a shame. Although there's nothing really jaw-dropping (be patient!), there are enough attractions and notable towns to keep you busy for a few days. Get your bearings and enjoy!

## DEBRE ZEYIT ደብረረይት

pop 107,000 / elev 1920m

Lakes, lakes, lakes. Debre Zeyit is all about lakes. The town, known in the local Oromo language as Bishoftu, is strung with a dishvelled necklace of crater lakes, which have been a longtime playground for weekend Addis Ababans. However, most travellers pass through Debre Zeyit, lured by more magnetic destinations such as Awash National Park or Harar. It's a shame because they miss out on these superb lakes. Sure, it ain't the Bahamas but the countrified town of Debre Zeyit is a tasty hors d'oeuvre before tackling the rougher expanses of far eastern Ethiopia.

### Information

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 8-11am & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) Changes cash only (euros and US dollars).

**Construction & Business Bank** (☎ 8-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) On the road to lake Hora. Changes cash only (euros and US dollars).

**Post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Off the road to Lake Hora.

### Tele Center – Almaz Information Technology

**Service** (per hr Birr21; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) Internet. On the road to Lake Hora.

**Telecommunications** (☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30-noon Sat) Next to the post office.

### Sights

#### LAKE BISHOFTU ቢሻፍቲ ሐይቅ

Lake Bishoftu is the most central lake, south of the main Addis Ababa–Nazret road. The area is almost totally denuded of trees, but the lake still attracts good birdlife. The best way to appreciate the lake is probably from Hotel Bishoftu, drink in hand. The view overlooking the crater rim is breathtaking.

#### LAKE HORA ሆራ ሐይቅ

Lake Hora lies 1.5km north of the centre of Debre Zeyit; follow the signposts to the Hora Recreation Center. The lake is attractively set and its birdlife is outstanding. Storks, pelicans, shovellers and grebes, as well as brightly coloured kingfishers, are among the species seen here.

Along the shore, the **Hora Recreation Center** (admission Birr4) has opened. At the weekend it

can get a bit noisy, but it's easy enough to escape the crowds: just follow the footpath around the lake as it winds through the forested slopes of the crater. A circumnavigation of the lake takes around 1½ hours. You should go accompanied, as hassle (and even theft) has been a problem.

There are plans to build a luxury hotel here.

### OTHER LAKES

If you feel lake addicted after visiting Lake Bishoftu and Lake Hora, and need another lake fix, follow the road to the north. Walk past the Defence Engineering College and the Agriculture Research Centre until you reach a fork. Take the right fork and follow the dirt road until you reach the Galileo Centre. Continue straight on for about 400m, until a dirt road to your left leads down to the shore of the scenic and peaceful **Lake Bishoftu Guda**.

To get to the milky-looking **Lake Kiroftu**, backtrack to the Galileo Centre and take the road on the left leading to the Kiroftu Resort & Spa. Lake Kiroftu is known particularly for its tilapia (freshwater fish) and its varied birdlife.

There are other lakes dotted around Debre Zeyit, including the **Cuban Lakes**, but they lie much further away and are not easily accessible unless you have private transport.

### Sleeping

**Hotel Bishoftu** (☎ 0114 338299; fax 0114 339655; s/d Birr50/70) All's shipshape at the welcoming Bishoftu. The adjoining rooms are set around a sun-dappled courtyard, and the restaurant overlooks the lime-green waters of Lake Bishoftu. It's in a quiet street off the main drag.

**Kiroftu Resort & Spa** (☎ 0911 248213, in Addis Ababa 011-6636557; s/d Birr300/500; ☎) Need an escape hatch? Travel no further. This ambitious outfit, opened in 2006, fits the bill with 18 spacious, comfy cottage-style units with thatched roofs, wooden beds, spick-and-span bathrooms, a sauna, a pool and spectacular lake views thrown in for good measure. It's about 4km north of the centre, perched above Lake Kiroftu.

**Babugaya Hotel** (☎ 0114 331155; r Birr50) This family-run place has a low-key, easy-going appeal and the well-tended garden encourages light-hearted chatter. The six rooms are in good nick although the fixtures in the

bathrooms leave something to be desired. One thing is for sure: the views over Lake Bishoftu Guda are jaw-dropping. It's in the same area as the Kiroftu, just after the Galileo Centre (look for the brown and black metal portal with the letters AA on it).

**Ethiopian Air Force Officers' Club** (☎ 0114 338035; s/d Birr200/400; ☎) If spending some time with army officials is your idea of a nice retreat, you can bunk down in this characterless yet airy complex. The general feel is a bit faded but the killer here is the Olympic-sized pool (Birr15).

**Seven E Hotel** (☎ 0114 339888; d Birr25-35) Although décor is not its strong point, this nonetheless good-value option is an acceptable crash pad if the other ones are full. Its best feature is the refreshing garden compound. It's just off the main road from the Shell station.

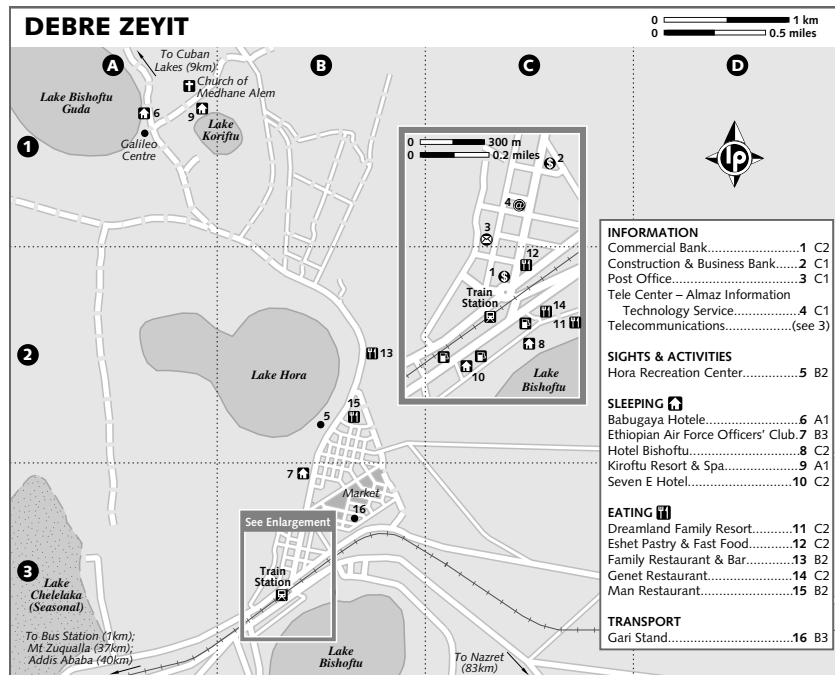
### Eating

**Eshet Pastry & Fast Food** (pastries Birr2-5; ☎ 6am-9.30pm) With loud TV, smiling waitresses, thick pineapple juices (Birr4), strong *macchiatos* (Birr2) and shady terrace, this lively den is a perfect spot to soak up the atmosphere. You can't miss it; it's near the main square, on the road to Lake Hora.

**Genet Restaurant** (☎ 0114 640542; mains Birr8-15) Just down the road from Hotel Bishoftu, this modest but pleasant and popular eatery serves good Ethiopian staples at puny prices. The menu is not translated in English; just ask for *tibs* (sliced lamb, pan fried in butter, garlic, onion and sometimes tomato) or *misto* (a combination of various types of meat served with *injera*, a large Ethiopian version of a pancake/plate) and you should depart happy and buzzing.

**Dreamland Family Resort** (☎ 0114 339498; mains Birr15-25) The selling point of this restaurant is its unbeatable position, with such a breathtaking view over the lime-green waters of Lake Bishoftu that it's hard to tear yourself away. The garden is really enchanting, with lots of greenery. Foodwise it dishes up the usual suspects at reasonable prices.

**Family Restaurant & Bar** (☎ 0114 338066; mains Birr25-45; ☎ weekend) Surprise: this place is modelled on an American bar and serves Tex-Mex grub. It may push the budget but where else could you grab invigorating nachos, tacos and guacamole cheeseburgers? It's next to the Defence Engineering College.



**Man Restaurant** (☎ 0114 339858; mains Birr8-15) About 300m past the junction for the Recreation Centre, on the main road. Choice is limited (pastries, chicken dishes and spaghetti) but there's a tacky mural to keep you smiling ('Donuts are fancy', whatever that might mean). Grab a seat in the leafy compound.

### Getting There & Around

Buses and minibuses leave every 15 minutes for Addis Ababa (Birr4, one hour) and Nazret (Birr8, one hour).

A *gari* (horse-drawn cart) is a great way to visit the lakes. They can be hired at the market, about 800m from the main roundabout. Expect to pay around Birr30/60 per half/full day. Hops about the town in a local minibus cost Birr0.90.

### MT ZUQUALLA ተቋላላ

Debre Zeyit also makes a good base from which to explore the extinct volcanic cone of Mt Zuqualla. Though only rising to just over 600m, the mountain dominates the landscape for miles around. On a clear day, the views from the top are stunning. You can see the Rift Valley to the east and the lakes to the south; Addis Ababa and the Entoto Mountains are just discernible to the northwest.

The crater, measuring 2km across and over 60m deep, contains a lake that has long been held holy by the monks of the nearby monastery.

The **monastery of Mt Zuqualla Maryam** (admission Birr50) is traditionally thought to have been founded by St Gebre Manfus Kiddus (see the boxed text, p49) in the 12th or 13th century. The site may actually date to the 4th century, when a hermit community may have been established here by St Mercurios.

In March and October large festivities are held at the monastery, and pilgrims come from miles around to attend them. Try to have your visit coincide with the festivities.

You're welcome to spend the night at the monastery, but don't expect the Ritz. The 'guesthouse' more closely resembles a stable spread with straw. You can also camp in the church compound. Any gifts are greatly appreciated by the monks. Bring your own food.

### Getting There & Away

The nearest village to Mt Zuqualla is Maryam Wember, which lies at the foot of the mountain, around 25km southwest of Debre Zeyit.

Usually one to two 4WD vehicles travel daily to Maryam Wember (Birr10, up to two hours) from Debre Zeyit (more on market day on Thursday). From Maryam Wember, it's a 12km walk (three hours up and 2½ hours down).

If you're not watching the pennies, your best bet is to rent a 4WD in Addis Ababa (see p282).

### NAZRET ናዝራት

pop 224,000 / elev 1712m

Great churches, ancient monasteries and sacred relics? You'd be forgiven for thinking that Nazret has it all. But its name, derived from Christ's birthplace in Israel, is a misnomer, and you certainly won't wax mystical in this large, commercial and bustling town, lying just 100km from the capital. Its attractions are much more secular: it flaunts good accommodation options, so if you want to break up your journey, this is a convenient stopover. It's also a popular weekend retreat for frazzled Addis Ababans in search of tranquillity.

### Information

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 0221 111952; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) On the main roundabout.

**Millenium Internet Cafe** (per hr Birr15; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm) Opposite Frank Hotel, in a shopping centre.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Safari Lodge Adama** (☎ 0221 122011; r Mon-Fri Birr250, Sat & Sun Birr281; 📺) Surprise! The hippest venture in town is not beyond your financial reach. All the perks of a mellow retreat: ideal location, restaurant, Jacuzzi, swimming pool and well-designed gardens where you can flake out. And did we mention the two well-stocked bars? Just one grumble – although it's off the main road, the traffic noise is still audible.

**Bekele Molla Hotel** (☎ 0221 112312; d Birr70-116) On the eastern approach to town, the Bekele Molla surprises guests with well-furnished bungalows, prim bathrooms and plenty of verdant surrounds to mooch around in. Some rooms are also housed in a yellowish building that resembles an elementary

school. The dining room boasts unusually bright splashes of colours.

**Palace Hotel** (☎ 0221 113800; s Birr75-115, d Birr105-150) 'Palace' may be stretching it a tad but it's brilliant value and ideally positioned, opposite the bus station. Rooms are nothing fancy but are well scrubbed and serviceable. Plus, there's a large garden to unwind in.

**Pan-Afric Hotel** (☎ 0221 122720; fax 0221 126888; Addis Ababa Rd; d Birr75-85) The closest thing Debre Zeyit has to a business hotel, with well-looked-after rooms equipped with satellite TV and prudish bathrooms. If you find that the carpets show signs of wear and tear, focus your attention on the cheesy bunches of fake flowers. Aim for one of the brighter and quieter rooms at the rear.

**Adama Makonnen Hotel** (☎ 0221 110880; Addis Ababa Rd; s/d Birr95/140) Almost next door to the Pan-Afric, on the main Addis Ababa road. This concrete blob is certainly not a paean to futuristic architecture but at least it's functional, well maintained and tidy. Some rooms are more luminous than others, so ask to see a few.

**Frank Hotel** (☎ 0221 112196; Addis Ababa Rd; mains Birr10-20) Not far from the main square, the Frank is indisputably the most popular eatery in town – it can be a squeeze finding a table come dinnertime. It's a little time-warpish (neon lighting, reddish tablecloth) and the *faranji* (Western foreigner) food is certainly not gourmet but we can't fault the *chicken cutlete* (chicken wing) and service is as smooth as its papaya juice. Ignore the hotel section – it's shabby.

**Sunrise Bakery** (pastries Birr3-5) Hmm, those damn little 'corrasants' (croissants), eye-catchingly displayed, continue to torment us! Spellchecking aside, this snappy place is ideal to recharge the batteries, sip a *macchiato* (Birr2) and watch the world go by. It's a 200m jog away from the main square, to the north.

**BM Pastry** (Addis Ababa Rd) The day we dropped by, the large dining room was chock-full with a rambunctious young crowd watching English-league football on a large TV screen. It's a good stop any time of the day for a cup of coffee or a snack.

### Getting There & Away

At least 20 buses leave daily for Addis Ababa (Birr11, 2½ hours). One bus and frequent minibuses leave daily for Awash

(Birr15, 2½ hours). For Debre Zeyit (Birr8, one hour), it's best to go to Mojo first and change, as buses leave there every 15 minutes (Birr4, 15 minutes).

When heading south for Bale Mountains National Park, go to Asela (Birr7, two hours) first and change. For Ziway and the Rift Valley lakes, go to Mojo (Birr4, 15 minutes) and change.

### AWASH NATIONAL PARK አዋሽ-ብሔራዊ ጋርክ

Easily accessible from Addis Ababa, **Awash National Park** (admission per person per 48hr Birr50, per vehicle up to 5 seats Birr10; ☎ 6am-6pm) is one of eastern Ethiopia's star attractions and one of Ethiopia's most visited parks. But don't expect Kenyan-style safaris; if you come here to experience the thrill of staring slack-jawed at lions crunching through bones, you'll be seriously disappointed. This park is much lower-key. Nevertheless, for those with patience and some time, it offers quite good wildlife viewing and outstanding birdlife viewing. It also contains an interesting range of volcanic landscapes.

The park takes its name from the Awash River, the longest river in Ethiopia. The river marks the park's southern boundary, then veers north before disappearing into the remote and desolate confines of the Danakil region. The salt lake, Lake Abbe (Lac Abbé) on the Ethiopia-Djibouti border, is the river's last gesture.

### Wildlife

#### BIRDS

Twitchers, rejoice! The park lies on an important migratory route between the north and the south and is littered with an astonishing amount of birdlife. More than 400 bird species have been recorded in the park, among them six endemics: the banded barbet, golden-backed woodpecker, white-winged cliff chat, white-tailed starling, thick-billed raven and wattled ibis among others.

Two especially good spots to observe birds are around Filwoha Hot Springs, and around the camping grounds near Awash River, where doves, barbets and hoopoes are all seen.

Near the river itself, kingfishers and bee-eaters are found. On the plains, bustards are quite easily spotted, and sometimes secretary birds and ostriches. Among the many raptors

are tawny and fish eagles, dark chanting goshawks and pygmy and lanner falcons.

### MAMMALS

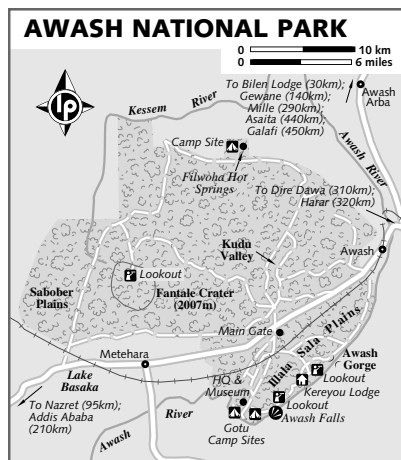
In the south of the park lies the grassy Illala Sala Plains, which attracts most of the larger mammals. The beautiful beisa oryx is easily seen here (in particular between the park gate and Kereyu Lodge), as are Soemmering's gazelles. Salt's dik-diks prefer the acacia bushes.

In the bushland areas, particularly in the rocky valleys to the north, around the park headquarters and in the area known as 'Kudu Valley', greater and lesser kudus, defassa waterbucks (though few in numbers now) and warthogs can be seen. Anubis and hamadryas baboons are found in the east side of the park as well as around the Filwoha Hot Springs and Fantale Crater.

The colobus monkey is found in the riverine forest. Leopards, lions, black-backed and golden jackals, caracals, servals and wildcats are also found in the park, but thank your lucky stars if you manage to spot one of them – they are seen pretty rarely. Striped and spotted hyenas are often heard at night. The nocturnal aardwolf is also present.

### Orientation & Information

The park covers an area of 756 sq km and mostly lies at around 1000m above sea level. The exception is the dormant volcano of Fantale, which at 2007m dominates the centre of the park.



The main gate is around 14km after the town of Metehara, 16km before Awash, if you're coming from Addis Ababa. The park headquarters lies 10km southeast of the main gate.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Walking is 'discouraged' (not allowed) in the park. The official explanation is because of the carnivores that inhabit the area but, in reality, robbery from local tribespeople poses the greater risk. Even if you're with a vehicle, armed scouts (from Birr50 for the whole day) are recommended. They can also act as guides.

If you're planning to travel in the northern region of the park (including the Filwoha Hot Springs), the scouts are compulsory. Tribal conflicts between the Kereyu, Afar and Itu pastoralist tribes are still common.

Be aware that many of the locals are sensitive about cameras, and may become very aggressive if you take photos without permission. See p266 for tips for photographers in Ethiopia.

An armed scout is a good idea if you leave the campsite during the day, as well as providing extra security during the night (Birr50 per night). Leaving the vehicle to take photos or approach birds is permitted, but it is better to do so with a scout.

Malaria here is a major problem; make sure that you take adequate precautions (see p373). You'll also need to bring all drinking water with you.

Watch out for both the baboons and the grivet monkeys, which have become adept camp pillagers.

### Sights

To see the greatest number of animals, come first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. At noon, many animals retire to the shade of the trees.

In the same complex as the park headquarters is a small **museum** (☎ 6am-6pm) filled with the usual stuffed animals, plus some mildly interesting 'interpretative materials' on the area's flora, fauna and people, and some useful animal locator maps. Nearby, there's a viewpoint over the **Awash Falls**, which are a good spot for bird-spotting. In season, when there's enough water, you can have a dip in the falls.

### FANTALE CRATER ቀንታሌ

Towards the west of the park lies Fantale Crater. With its terrific vistas, total quiet and cool air, it is a great place for a picnic. At the top the 360-degree view is phenomenal and the elliptical caldera, which measures an enormous 3.5km in diameter, is an eerie sight. The local Kereyu people can be seen grazing their animals and growing crops far below.

The crater rim lies around 25km from headquarters; it's a two-hour drive as the dirt road is very steep and rough in parts – it's motorable by 4WD only. Hamadryas baboons are easily seen.

### FILWOHA HOT SPRINGS ቀሌ ውሃ

Fancy a dip? Head to the Filwoha Hot Springs, in the far north of the park, around 40km from the park headquarters. You can swim in the turquoise-blue pools. They're not as refreshing as they look: temperatures touch 36°C! In the cooler areas of the springs, as well as in the Awash River, crocodiles are found (but they are not present in the hotter areas). Hippos also haunt the Awash River, though they are shy.

Around the springs, look out for the doum palms, much appreciated by the local Afar people (who use them to make mats as well as a kind of wine). After 5pm, the area comes alive with birds. Lions can sometimes be heard at night. Waterbucks and hamadryas baboons are also seen here.

You'll need a 4WD to get to the springs.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Camping** (Birr20) The shady sites along the Awash River in the area known as 'Gotu', 400m south of the park headquarters, are attractive. Of the six spots, the Gumarre (Hippo) site is considered the most engaging. At night you can often hear the noises of hippos, hyenas and jackals, which come to the river to drink. Crocodiles are also seen here, sunbathing on the banks of the river. Bring everything you need because there are no facilities. Another option is the area around the Filwoha Hot Springs in the northern extreme of the park, with its shady fig trees. Note that camping outside these two areas is forbidden.

**Kereyu Lodge** (caravan s/d Birr150/200) This 'lodge' is a (sad) joke and, at this price, a rip-off. The setting is absolutely sublime – it is perched on the edge of a plummeting gorge,

12km from the park gate – but facilities are rudimentary. This is more a decrepit caravan site than a lodge, with a row of 16 neglected caravans with cold 'showers' (in fact buckets). However, the restaurant (boasts Birr15 to Birr20) has a terrace that boasts phenomenal views over the gorge and the Arba River. After some early-morning wildlife viewing, it's a fabulous place for a coffee, a goulash or a surprisingly well-crafted shish kebab while ogling the fabulous chasm below your feet.

### Getting There & Around

Walking is not allowed in the park, nor are bikes or motorcycles. Most visitors hire vehicles or come with a tour, both from Addis Ababa (see p282).

A 4WD is necessary for the Fantale Crater and the Filwoha Hot Springs, or during the rainy season (July to September).

### AWASH አዋሽ

pop 5886 / elev 900m

Halfway between Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, Awash is a good place to get out of the bus and stretch. Though Awash won't win the award of tourist destination of the year, this haphazard town will hold your attention for a short stroll. Wax nostalgic at the derelict railway station – the railway is still its *raison d'être* – and spend a night at the historic hotel nearby. If you're in town when the old Djibouti-Addis Ababa train pulls in, it's definitely worth a peek.

On Monday there is a very colourful market that attracts both Kereyu and Afar people. Look out for the Kereyu women in skins and sandals and with braided hair. The men prefer a carefully shaped Afro, often ornamented with combs. Animal fat (like a kind of Ethiopian Brylcreem!) is used to give it a chic gloss and to keep it in condition.

Around 600m behind the station lies the giddy-deep Awash Gorge, also worth a small detour to soak up the vertigo-inducing views.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Buffet d'Aouache** (☎ 0222 240008; d with shared bathroom Birr20-50, 'presidentielles' r Birr100) There's something delightfully timeless about this zany old relic of French railway days (1904). It's utterly without frills but it's high on atmosphere, with whitewashed walls, birds

### THE TRIUMPH OF MAN OVER TOPOGRAPHY

In the 1890s a man had a dream: to build a railway that would link Ethiopia with French Somaliland (present-day Djibouti) 800km to the east. Carved through some of the most inhospitable terrain in Ethiopia, the railway was planned to end forever the old isolation of the Ethiopian highlands.

Each kilometre of line demanded no less than 70 tonnes of rails, sleepers and telegraph poles, as well as massive quantities of cement, sand and water, and food and provisions for an army of workers. To keep the costs down, a narrow gauge of just 1m was used.

To cross the difficult terrain, several viaducts and 22 tunnels (one nearly 100m long) had to be built. In the meantime the local Afars, whose territory the 'iron monster' was penetrating, ran horrific raids on the line at every opportunity, stealing building materials and killing workers. It took no less than 20 years to complete.

Since the Eritrean–Ethiopian border dispute of the late 1990s, the railway has carried a significant part of the country's imports and exports to and from the Red Sea port of Djibouti City. However, its importance is fading these days because of the development of lorry transport, which is considered much more reliable, and the lack of maintenance.

Still, this bone-shaking iron horse will appeal to train enthusiasts. Indeed, it's exactly this uniquely ramshackle quality that is the main source of its charm – perversely!

humming in the rambling garden and a bougainvillea-draped courtyard. The rooms with shared bathrooms are pretty spare; better treat yourself to a generous-sized 'presidentielle' room, equipped with fan and a giant bath on legs. Meals come in for warm praise (mains Birr12 to Birr30), and Greek, Italian or French-style dishes can be ordered in advance.

**Genet Hotel** (☎ 0222 240040; d with shared bathroom Birr40–80, d Birr120) At the eastern end of town, a stone's throw from the bus station. The Genet features a decent restaurant and four different types of rooms arranged around an airy courtyard where goats and other farmyard animals can be seen pottering about. May we suggest you opt for the more expensive, but salubrious, rooms?

**Awash Meridian** (☎ 0222 240051; d with shared bathroom Birr15–30, d Birr80) Almost a carbon copy of the Genet. Steer clear of the cheaper rooms; rather, hole up in the more expensive ones, with fan, mosquito net and private bathroom. There's an on-site restaurant.

### Getting There & Away

One bus leaves daily for Gewane (Birr17, two hours), three buses go weekly to Logiya (Birr43, eight hours) via Mille (Birr35, seven hours), and two buses leave daily for Nazret (Birr11, three hours).

For Dire Dawa (Birr 43, nine hours), try to find a seat on one of the 10 buses that pass through Awash from Addis Ababa and Nazret.

## AWASH TO ASAITA

If you're looking for thunderous waterfalls, great rivers and verdant meadows, you've come to the wrong place. The endless road north to Asaita is more like an American highway in Arizona. Think severely parched terrain, vacuous plains, ferocious sun, negligible shade, barren scenery that can send the perpetually curious into a free-fall of boredom, and a fistful of unassuming towns. Be prepared for an almost meditative drive that needs a damn-good supply of Amharic pop cassettes.

But this remote part of Ethiopia is definitely not to be sneezed at. Crossing this dry-as-a-bone expanse is a fascinating experience. The journey might be low on highlights, but is strong on atmosphere, as it takes you through the heart of Afar country. The hauntingly bleak landscape has a peculiar appeal. It's a bit like penetrating a forgotten world.

### THE ROAD NORTH TO ASAITA

From the junction with the Addis Ababa–Dire Dawa road, you'll first cross **Awash Arba**, about 14km to the north, then the featureless town of **Gewane**. It doesn't warrant a lengthy stop but you'll be overwhelmed by the stark allure of the dramatic volcano that lords over the surrounding plains. After Gewane, the country resembles Djibouti more and more: arid and desolate.

The road passes through the **Yangudi-Rassa National Park** but, frankly, don't expect much wildlife; there is probably less here than in any national park in Ethiopia. If you're lucky, you might spot ostriches, bustards and Soemmering's gazelles.

About 150km north of Gewane, the town of **Mille** won't leave you awestruck but makes a convenient stop if you feel the urge to quaff a lukewarm soda and recharge the batteries. Around Mille, look out for the little domed Afar huts, made from the interwoven leaves of the doum palm, which are light and easy to transport. As for the rolled-up objects sold along the roadside, they are mattresses made from local rushes. About 10km south of town lies the junction with the road that heads west to Bati and Dessie.

Continuing north the road takes you through **Logiya**, a surprisingly bustling town where Ethiopian truck drivers usually overnight. Don't expect airs and graces: it's a rough-and-ready town, with a herd of seedy hotels, brothels and restaurants lining the main drag. About 8km northeast of Logiya, it's a shock to come suddenly upon **Semera**, the new regional capital of Afar. With its quirky mix of barracks, modern apartment blocks and soulless administrative buildings, it looks like a microscopic version of Brasília emerging incongruously in the middle of the desert – except that it's a completely botched attempt at creating a new town. Should you want to explore the lakes around Asaita (see p222), you'll have to stop here to hire a compulsory guide and get a permission paper at the **tourist office** (☎ 0336 660488; ☎ 8–11.30am & 3–5pm Mon–Fri), near the Justice building. For some places, you'll also have to hire an armed policeman (Birr100 per day). Disputes over land ownership in the region sometimes result in violence between the different clans.

About 10km north of Semera along the main road, an easy-to-miss asphalt road branches off to the right and leads to Asaita.

### Sleeping & Eating

If you need to break your journey, the choice of reliable accommodation is very limited. Most hotels are spartan and cater primarily to Ethiopian truck drivers on their way to and from Djibouti port. Foodwise, if you find yourself missing *haute cuisine*, remember what you're here for: adventure, darlings. The following places are your best bets.

**Bilen Lodge** (in Addis Ababa ☎ 0111 508869; Bilen; tukul's/d US\$40/50) If you're in the mood for hush and seclusion, nothing can beat this hideaway on the edge of Awash National Park. The 16 traditional-style huts are perched on a mound and boast private bathrooms and electricity. Add US\$25 per person per day for full board. Various activities can be organised in the vicinity, ranging from a visit to Afar villages to wildlife-watching excursions. You'll need a private vehicle to get here. It's 52km past Awash Arba. Drive 40km to the north from Awash Arba, then take a track on the left for another 12km; it's signposted. Reservations are necessary. Contact the Village Ethiopia agency (p283) in Addis Ababa.

**Parki Hotelli** (☎ 0332 230113; Mille; r with shared bathroom Birr45) A ramshackle building with cell-like, ultrabasic rooms with fan and shared bathrooms that, er, seem to see the occasional mop. There's an on-site 'restaurant' serving cheap fare.

**Nazret Hotel** (☎ 0332 500222; Logiya; r with shared bathroom Birr20) This is usually where UN officials bunk down when in town, which is enough to recommend this place on the main street. Ask for the more recent rooms in the second compound at the back. The beds are as lumpy as Thanksgiving's mashed potatoes but a fan and a mosquito net are *de rigueur*. The ablution block is in decent shape. The food is pretty varied (read: pasta, rice and *tibs*) and you'll sample your meal sitting in front of faded posters featuring Sydney's Opera House. Isn't it cute?

There are also several shops selling basic supplies in most towns.

### Getting There & Away

From Awash, with your own wheels, follow the Dire Dawa road for about 5km then turn left at a well-signposted junction. This is not the road less travelled: countless Ethiopian trucks ply this route to and from Djibouti, so be vigilant. The road is in excellent condition.

Bus services are fairly infrequent and not really reliable on this long stretch. One bus departs Awash daily for Gewane (Birr17, two to three hours). Buses run three times weekly from Awash to Logiya (Birr43, eight hours) via Mille. From Logiya or Semera to Asaita, services are more frequent; there

### OGLING THE AFARS

On the journey north, look out for Afar men striding along in simple cotton *shirits* (sarongs), with their famous *jile* (the curved knives described by the writer Wilfred Thesiger) hanging at their side. Many also carry gourds which act as water bottles.

Many Afars still lead a nomadic existence, and when the herds are moved in search of new pasture, the huts in which the Afars live are simply packed onto the backs of camels and carted away. Look out for the wooden boughs used for the armature, which resemble great ribs curving upwards from the camels' backs. In the relatively fertile plains around the river, some Afars have turned to cultivation, growing tobacco, cotton, maize and dates. Interclan rivalry is still alive; conflict occasionally breaks out.

are several daily departures in the morning (Birr12, about two hours).

From Awash to Logiya, your best bet is probably to hitch a lift with one of the many trucks travelling that way. In Awash, ask around at the petrol stations. The ride should set you back about Birr40.

From Mille, there's at least one daily bus to Dessie (Birr20, four hours). From there you can catch a bus to Addis Ababa (see p166).

There's no public transport to Galafi (the Djibouti border) or to Djibouti City, but it's quite easy to hitch a lift (front seats only) with one of the legions of trucks that overnight in Logiya. The prices we were quoted ranged from Birr150 to Birr200 to Djibouti City (about eight hours).

### ASAITA አሳይታ

pop 14,392 / elev 300m

Gosh, it's a gruelling ride to get to Asaita, a cul-de-sac, end-of-the-world town about 70km east of Logiya. Here you'll instantly feel a 'last frontier' ambience and an overpowering sense of exoticism and adventure. At the heart of Afar territory, Asaita prides itself on being the bastion of Afar identity and culture.

Come prepared. The heat is unbearable for nine months of the year. At first glance, the town is not especially alluring, with no obvious attractions, but it will grow on you sooner than you'd think, with its chirpy,

coloured façades, its buzzing atmosphere in the evening and its magnificent, proud Afar inhabitants. It's also a convenient base from which to explore the 30 salt lakes in the area, the volcanic springs and the Danakil Depression.

Tuesday is Asaita's market day – a must if you're in town.

### Information

Note that to visit the surrounding attractions (including the lakes), you'll need to get a permission paper as well as hiring a compulsory guide in Semera (see p220).

**Commercial Bank** (☎) 7-11.30am & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 7-11.30am Sat) Changes cash (euros and US dollars).

### Sights

Do you *really* want to get back to nature? Then the **salt lakes** that are scattered around Asaita are your promised land. This area remains one of the most inhospitable corners of the Horn, appearing much the same as when explorer Wilfred Thesiger first laid eyes upon it in the 1920s. The scenery, straight out of Dante's *Inferno*, can't be more forbidding. There's a stark, desolate, almost surreal beauty. For serious adventurers, this little-explored territory is something of a holy grail. Birdlife is another attraction: storks, flamingos, ibises, vultures and raptors can be seen. The journey to the lakes also takes you through very remote Afar country. With their dagger slung around their waist in a long thin leather pouch, or their rifle poised over the shoulder, the Afar people, almost the only ones capable of surviving in these harsh conditions, have acquired the patina of myth. They have long fascinated European travellers and explorers, including Thesiger himself, whose account of the Afar peoples (then known as the Danakils; see p46) encountered along the way has become something of an epic. It greatly fuelled the Afars' already legendary reputation for ferocity.

For those with time and stamina, this remote region can be explored on foot. You'll need to hire an Afar guide (see p220). Several agencies based in Addis Ababa also organise tours in the area (see p282).

Note that it takes time to reach the lakes and sometimes access is limited because of security concerns. A minimum of three days is usually required. Check the situation when you get there.

Lakes in the region that can usually be visited include **Lake Gamarri** (around 30km from Asaita – known for its hundreds of flamingos); **Lake Afambo** and **Lake Bario** (both near the town of Afambo); and **Lake Abbe**, on the border with Djibouti. Lake Abbe can also be approached from the Djibouti side.

### Sleeping & Eating

You won't face a dilemma in Asaita.

**Basha Hotel** (☎ 0336 550119; d with shared bathroom Birr20) The best option by far is this hotel, a coin's toss from the Commercial Bank (there's no sign, so ask around). The hutlike entrance is a bit off-putting, but the swing-a-cat-sized rooms at the rear are set around a pretty courtyard and boast immaculate sheets, surprisingly back-friendly beds, working (though rattling) fans and tolerable shared toilets. The last room at the back is the best, with sweeping views over the Awash River. At night, you can hear the hyenas, and the camels in the camps of the Afar nomads below. Omelettes, *tibs* and fresh yogurt are available in the modest restaurant at the front.

**Lem Hotel** (☎ 0336 550050; r with shared bathroom Birr20) If the Basha is full, this place makes an acceptable plan B, but the bar at the front is noisy.

### Getting There & Away

Buses and minibuses leave from the main square. At least five minibuses leave each day for Logiya (Birr10, two hours). There are also regular services to Semera (Birr12, 2½ hours). One bus leaves daily for Dessie (Birr33, eight hours).

For Djibouti, you'll have to take a bus back to Logiya. From there, try to hitch a lift (front seats only) on the steady stream of trucks travelling from Addis Ababa to Djibouti.

At the time of writing there were no 4WDs available for hire in Asaita, and no contract taxis.

## AWASH TO JIJIGA

This is what you were looking for. Here's the menu: cities filled with character and mystery, majestic landscapes that capture the mind, and a pervading sense of exploration. If one place had to be singled out, it would be Harar, the jewel in the

crown. As you travel further east towards the Somali border, the sense of adventure is even more pronounced. Nature-lovers, city types and budding adventurers will all have their slice of heaven in this corner of Ethiopia.

### THE ROAD TO DIRE DAWA

Going east, the landscape seems to get drier and drier, the temperature hotter and hotter. It's not too long, though, before the road once again starts to snake upwards from the arid lowlands.

This is the heart of Oromo country. The men gathered under ancient trees are attending the village assembly. Around the Chercher Mountains, the first signs of *chat* cultivation appear; look for the little bushes with shiny, dark-green leaves planted in neat rows.

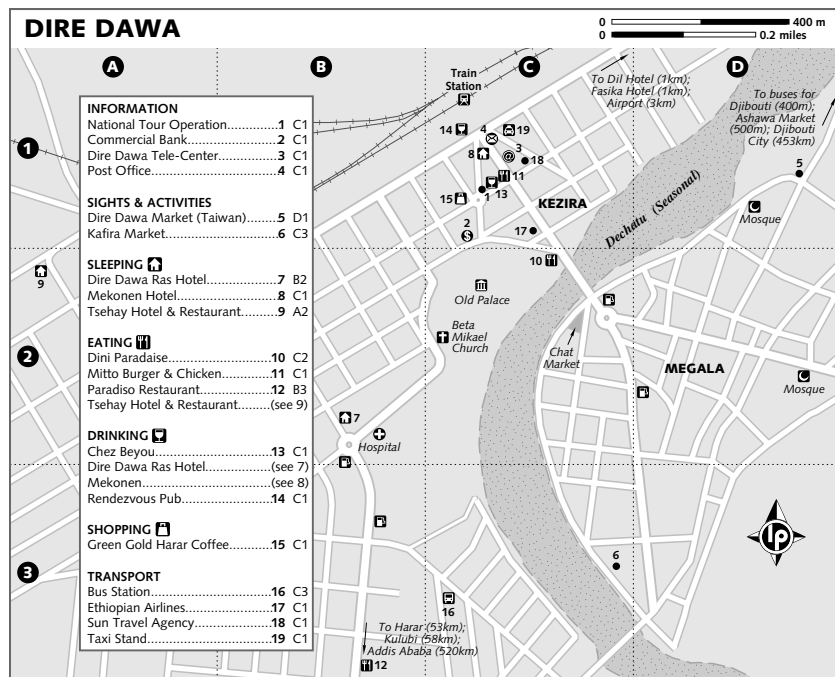
What majesty! As scenic drives go, this road is awesome. As the road begins to climb, you're taken through some very beautiful scenery with stunning views; the last 120km or so of road before the turn-off to Dire Dawa (at Alemaya) is one of the prettiest in Ethiopia. At sunset, eye-popping hues saturate the landscape and ignite the imagination of photographers. Other highlights include the markets along this route – they are among the most colourful in the country. Don't miss them. The Thursday market at **Asbe Tefari** is probably the most eye-catching. Saturday is market day for many villages in the region – if you can travel east on this day, do. Many women don their best finery: very colourful skirts, headbands, waistband and beads. Unforgettable!

### DIRE DAWA ድሬደዋ

pop 260,000 / elev 1200m

The second-most populous town in Ethiopia, Dire Dawa never fails to elicit strong reactions. Some travellers rave about its remarkably spacious and orderly layout (a rarity in Ethiopia, as you'll soon realise), its tree-lined streets, neat squares and colonial buildings, while others think it's the definition of utilitarian and self-contained.

Sure, it does lack the charisma of nearby Harar, and in the eyes of most visitors it will always play second fiddle to Harar, but you'll soon discover that it has its fair share of beguiling sights and some inviting



quarters. So rather than dismiss it, pack an open mind and investigate the possibilities.

## History

The great Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway was supposed to pass through Harar, but with ever-burgeoning costs, the project was falling into difficulties. Then a momentous decision was taken: to bypass the great Chercher Mountains and keep to the lowlands. Instead of passing through the old commercial town of Harar, the railway would pass through a new town, which Menelik chose to call New Harar. In 1902 Dire Dawa – as it was known locally – was born.

## Orientation

Despite it being a fairly sprawling town, your chances of getting lost in Dire Dawa are virtually nonexistent. It's simply laid out and is a breeze to navigate. The town is made up of two distinct settlements, divided by the Dechatu wadi (seasonal river). Lying to the north and west of the Dechatu is the 'new town' known as Kezira. On the southern and eastern side of the wadi is the 'old town'

known as Megala, which, with its Arab-looking houses, has a distinctly Muslim feel.

## Information

**Commercial Bank** (Kezira; ☎ 7.30–11am & 2.30–5.30pm Mon–Fri, 7.30–10.30am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

**Dire Dawa Tele-Center** (☎ 0251 120908; Kezira; per hr Birr18; ☎ 7am–9pm) Diagonally opposite Mitto Burger & Chicken. An Internet café that also doubles as a telephone centre.

**National Tour Operation** (NTO; ☎ 0251 111119; Kezira; ☎ 2–5pm Mon–Fri) Serves as a tourist office.

**Post office** (Kezira; ☎ 8am–noon & 3–6pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon Sat) Opposite the railway station.

## Sights

Dire Dawa's main highlights are its thriving markets. With its Babel-like ambience, the enormous **Kafira Market**, in Megala, is the most striking one. Delving into the organised chaos of its narrow lanes is an assault on the senses. This market attracts people from miles around, including Afar herders, Somali pastoralists and Oromo farmers; sometimes, around dawn, large camel

## A NOMAD'S TOOTHBRUSH

If you have lost your latest model electric toothbrush, don't panic! We have the solution – a very organic and natural one, indeed. On the roadside, look out for little boys selling 'local Colgate', the regional version of a toothbrush. It is cut from the evergreen shrub *Salvadora persica*.

With a bit of chewing, the very fibrous and spongy wood forms into long, strong 'bristles'. And contained in the wood are chloride, various antibacterial agents and vitamin C. In other words, the little twigs are a kind of toothbrush-toothpaste neatly packaged as one!

caravans march in from the Somali desert. A large variety of spices are sold here. There is also a thriving contraband market; merchandise is brought in from Djibouti either by night caravans across the remote frontiers, or carefully concealed in trucks. The best time to go is around 10am. It has some distinct 'Moorish-style' architectural features; look out for the striking horseshoe arches that serve as entrances.

**Ashawa Market**, on the outskirts of town, sells everything from beard trimmers to 'designer watches' and baby powder. The nearby **Dire Dawa Market** (also known as Taiwan), as its name suggests, specialises in cheap electronic goods. Both are worth a peek.

Foreign influence is still in evidence. Look for Arab, French and Italian styles in some of the architecture and design.

## Sleeping

**Mekonen Hotel** (☎ 0251 113348; Kezira; r with shared bathroom Birr40) A good deal that won't hurt the hip pocket. This faded glory is housed in an old Italian colonial building opposite the train station. Most rooms (especially room 2) have plenty of space to really strew your stuff around, and some have balconies overlooking the square. Shared bathrooms (with cold showers) are a tad scummy but still do the trick. The proximity of cafés and restaurants is another bonus.

**Tsehay Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 0251 110023; Kezira; r Birr60) The Tsehay is a bit of a trek from the centre but features cleanish rooms set in pleasant, hedged gardens. When we dropped by, plumbing seemed on the brink

of agony but was still functional. Best asset is the restaurant.

**Fasika Hotel** (☎ 0251 111260; Kezira; r Birr100) Off the airport road (follow the sign), this is one of the best midrange places, with neat common areas, a façade dripping with bougainvillea, quiet gardens and simple yet serviceable rooms.

**Dil Hotel** (☎ 0251 114181; Kezira; r Birr150–250) Remember the boarding school when you were young? Well, this sharp-edged, concrete lump lying 1.3km from the train station by the airport road was probably designed by the same architect. Not really the best place to curl up with your beloved, but the bathrooms are the most sparkling in town and rooms are well equipped.

**Dire Dawa Ras Hotel** (☎ 0251 113225; Kezira; r Birr88–220; ☎) If you're into design history, this government-run hotel is definitely worth a peek. It was built in 1964 and nothing seems to have changed since then. The outdoor pool is a (sad) joke, but the large garden (full of birds) is a great spot to chill out.

## Eating & Drinking

**Paradiso Restaurant** (☎ 0251 113780; Kezira; mains Birr15–20) Haven't had a slap-up meal for a while? Don't look past Paradiso, the most respected restaurant in town. The menu roves from palatable Italian dishes to more traditional gut-busters, such as *kitfo* (minced beef or lamb like the French steak tartare, usually served warmed – but not cooked – in butter, *berbere* and sometimes thyme) and *tibs*. Add in friendly staff, wallet-friendly prices and an enticing setting – an old-world mansion and a veranda – and you have a winner.

**Tsehay Hotel & Restaurant** (Kezira; mains Birr11–22) The hotel is thoroughly undistinguished,

## GENUFLECT AT KULUBI GABRIEL

Every year in December, tens of thousands of pilgrims converge on the little town of Kulubi and its cathedral, Saint Gabriel, perched on a hill above town. Pilgrims come to express thanks after the fulfilment of a wish, or in the hope of a miraculous cure. If you're in the area during the festival, it's well worth a stop.

Frequent minibuses and Peugeot contract taxis connect Kulubi with Dire Dawa (Birr10, 1½ to two hours).

but the food shines out at this sprightly outfit. Besides tummy-filling pasta, aim safely for Ethiopian delicacies such as the palate-blistering *kwanta firfir* (strips of beef rubbed in chilli, butter, salt and *berbere* then usually hung up and dried; served with torn-up *injera*), *zilzil tibs* (strips of beef, fried and served slightly crunchy with *awazi* sauce), or the delicious vegetarian combo on Wednesday and Friday. The menu is in Amharic only, which is not a bad sign (use p72 to decipher). The leafy garden is an added bonus. The waiters are pretty in turquoise and inky blue, too.

**Mitto Burger & Chicken** (☎ 0251 111206; Kezira; mains Birr10-25) With its wrought-iron chairs with tacky upholstery, (loud) satellite TV tuned to CNN, blondwood fittings and a nifty mezzanine for a little flirting, this is the closest thing Dire Dawa has to a snug fast-food joint. If you're pining for Western snacks, including pasta and burgers, this is the place to go. Its mango juice, served with a slice of lemon, kicks like a mule.

**Dini Paradise** (Kezira; mains Birr5-10) Set in a large garden dripping with bougainvillea, Dini Paradise (no typo) is a great place to escape the heat and dust of the town, relax over a cup of coffee or dig into inexpensive munchies.

**Rendezvous Pub** (Kezira) For a tippie, this rough-and-ready pub near the train station is worth a try.

**Mekonen** (Kezira) The shady terrace of the Mekonen is an excellent vantage point from where, drink in hand, you can watch the world go by.

**Chez Beyou** (Kezira) After a glass of whisky? Head to this tiny bar, almost next door to Mitto Burger.

**Dire Dawa Ras Hotel** (Kezira) The garden of this hotel is a pleasant place for a drink in the evening.

## Shopping

**Green Gold Harar Coffee** (☎ 0251 101860; Kezira; ☎ 7.30am-noon & 3-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Are you a caffeine-addict? This is the place to stock up. It sells 1kg packets of excellent-quality Ethiopian coffee for Birr25.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Ethiopian Airlines** (☎ 0251 113069; Kezira) flies between Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa at least

once daily (Birr883 one way). It also operates four weekly flights to Jijiga (Birr480 one way).

**Sun Travel Agency** (☎ 0251 114059; Kezira) is an agent for Djibouti Airlines. Flights depart four times weekly for Djibouti City and cost Birr780 one way, plus US\$20 for departure tax.

## BUS

Four buses run daily to Addis Ababa (Birr54, 12 hours) via Awash (Birr43, nine hours), Nazret (Birr43, 10 hours) and Debre Zeyit (Birr46, 11 hours). Minibuses run every 15 minutes to Harar (Birr10, one hour); around five to 10 Peugeot contract taxis run daily to Kulubi (Birr10).

For Djibouti, a company runs daily buses from Dire Dawa to Djibouti City via Gelille (see p274 for more details).

## TRAIN

Trains head east from here for Djibouti City. There are three weekly departures (see p274). Tickets can be bought at the train station.

In principle, the train also runs to Addis Ababa but this leg was indefinitely out of service at the time of research.

## Getting Around

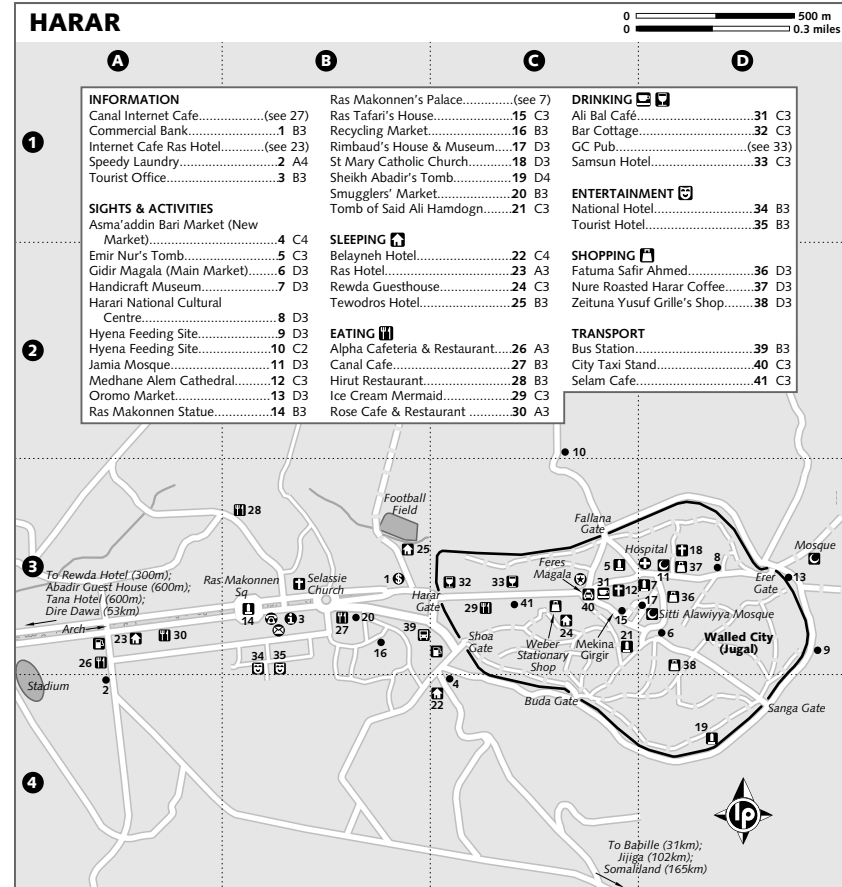
A contract taxi to or from the airport should set you back around Birr40.

## HARAR ሐረር

pop 91,000 / elev 1856m

Harar is a place apart. Off the southern edge of the Chercher Mountains, this sensational city will shake up and blast your senses. With its 368 alleyways squeezed into just 1 sq km, its countless mosques and shrines, its coffee scents meandering through the streets, its animated markets, its superb architecture, its charming people and its uniquely unforgettable ambience, the old walled city will make you feel like you're floating through another time and space. As if it wasn't enough, an otherworldly ritual takes place every night outside the walls: men feed hyenas. Don't be confused: it's not a touristy show, it's a tradition.

A bit like Zanzibar, Harar is a place that appeals to both spiritual seekers and hedonists. Despite its shortcomings (read: poverty and minor hassles), you'll fall



in love with this gem of a city – at least we did.

## History

Harar is steeped in history. Situated just a few hundred kilometres east of the staunchly Christian highlands, Harar, like an exotic bird, might have been blown off course, either from across the waters of the Red Sea or from the northern deserts of Muslim North Africa.

For centuries, as a crossroads for every conceivable commerce, the town boomed, great dynasties of rich and powerful merchants grew up and the arts flourished. Harar became a kind of commercial meeting point of Africa, India and the Middle

East. Right up until 1850, it was home to the most important market in the Horn.

Harar also spearheaded Islam's penetration into the Horn. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Harar become known as an important centre of Islamic scholarship. It still holds very special significance for Ethiopia's Muslim population. For years, the city was closed to Christians. In 1854 Richard Burton, the famous British explorer, was the first non-Muslim to penetrate the city. Later the bustling commercial town attracted many foreign merchants from India, Armenia, England and France. The famous French poet Arthur Rimbaud (p229) spent some of his last years here. In 1887 the city surrendered to the Emperor Menelik, who



## CHAT, ANYONE?

Some travellers love it, others loathe it. To be frank, we loathe it, as the unpleasant bitterness and texture of *Catha edulis Forskal* (*chat*) continues to haunt us. A natural and mildly intoxicating stimulant, *chat* has been consumed for centuries in many eastern and southern African countries as well as on the Arab peninsula. Good news: it is legal in Ethiopia. An evergreen shrub averaging around 2m in height, it is found on warm, humid slopes between 1500m and 2800m and is actively cultivated in Yemen (where it's known as *qat*), Kenya (where it's called *miraa*) and Ethiopia. Some of the best *chat* is cultivated around Harar and it's exported the same day or so by truck or by plane to Djibouti and Somaliland.

It's an important pastime in eastern Ethiopia, but not on the same scale as, say, Somalia or Djibouti where chewing *qat* has become a national addiction, with serious socioeconomic consequences. For more information, read *Eating the Flowers of Paradise*, by Kevin Rushby, who followed the ancient route of *qat*.

During your stay in eastern Ethiopia, it's not a bad idea to give it a go. Don't expect to be stoned, however, and take anti-diarrhoeal tablets, just in case. At least you'll impress the locals and, more importantly, your friends when you're back home. But if you just want to get tipsy, believe us: nothing beats a good Harari beer.

sought to expand and unify his highland empire.

Harar's economic fortunes suffered a serious blow at the end of the 19th century when the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway was diverted to Dire Dawa. To this day, the city retains a somewhat isolated, inward-looking feel. The Hararis have their own ethnic identity, language and culture.

With the new government and the new federal constitution of 1995, Harar won a new victory: a kind of independence, with legal recognition as a city-state within the Federal Republic of Ethiopia.

## Orientation

Fear not: you can't get lost. Harar's old walled town is so compact you'll eventually come to a major street or wall that will lead you back to Harar Gate, the main gate. There are six gates in total. Streets lead from each gate and converge in the centre at a bustling square, known as Feres Magala (Horse Market). Radiating out from the square are a maze of little alleyways and passages. The main thoroughfare in the walled city runs from Harar Gate to Feres Megala.

New town sprawls west of Harar Gate.

## Information

**Canal Internet Cafe** (new town; per hr Birr21; ☎ 8.30am–noon & 2.30–8pm) Above Canal Cafe.

**Commercial Bank** (new town; ☎ 8–11.30am & 1.30–4.30pm Mon–Fri, 8–11am Sat) Near Harar Gate. Changes cash (euros and US dollars) and travellers cheques.

**Internet Cafe Ras Hotel** (new town; per hr Birr24;

☎ 8am–noon & 2.30–8pm) In the Ras Hotel.

**Speedy Laundry** (new town; ☎ 8am–noon & 1–6pm Mon–Sat)

**Tourist office** (☎ 0256 661763; new town; ☎ 8am–noon & 2–5.30pm Mon–Fri) Housed in the Harari People National Regional State Trade & Industry building. Mildly useful. Some English is spoken.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Water shortages are a major problem in Harar and can affect the city for two or three days at a time. Try not to waste it. A new project to pipe water from Dire Dawa is underway, but it will take until 2009 to complete it. Power cuts are also a problem; city quarters are supplied by rota and do without one day a week.

Some travellers have written to complain of hassle from children in the walled city. Hiring a guide is the best deterrent (see following). Watch your wallet in the market areas.

## GUIDES

For your first foray into Harar, it's quite a good idea to hire a guide and take a turn round the town's main attractions. Guides also know the location of less-visited corners and the best Harari houses and arts and crafts shops. Hiring a guide also deters other would-be guides. Later, you can return to wander unaccompanied.

Currently five official guides work in Harar (and many more unofficial ones). If

you're in doubt ask to see ID. There's no official price, but Birr100/200 per half/full day is fair. One guide that can be particularly recommended is Abdul. If he is not available, he will direct you to other competent guides.

## Sights

You can see the major attractions in a day (and a night), but two days is better.

## INSIDE THE WALLED CITY

Harar's old walled town is a fascinating place that begs exploration. The thick, 5m-high walls around town, which stand to this day, were erected in the 16th century by an emir, in response to the migrations northwards of the Oromo. Within the walls the city is a maze of narrow, twisting alleys and lanes, replete with historic buildings, including 82 small mosques, numerous shrines and tombs, as well as traditional Harari houses.

The magnificent Adare (Harari) women, known for their very colourful traditional costumes, add to the appeal. Their dresses – usually black, yellow, red or purple – are worn over velvet trousers. Many also wear orange headscarves. Sometimes they carry huge bundles of cloth or baskets on their heads. You should be sensitive when trying to photograph these women. See p266 for tips.

## Gates

There are six gates in total; two were added by the Emperor Menelik in 1889 to the four

original ones (which date from the 16th century). An exploration of the old walled town (known locally as Jugal) begins at the main gate. This is known as the **Harar Gate** or Duke's Gate, after the first Duke of Harar, Ras Makonnen. The nearby **Shoa Gate** (also known as Asmae Diin Bari in Harari) is particularly well preserved and boasts superb mosaics. It's also worth taking your weary bones to the **Buda Gate**, which is in good shape as well.

To the north, the **Fallana Gate** is said to be the one Richard Burton entered disguised as an Arab merchant.

## Medhane Alem Cathedral

Lying off the main square, the rather unimpressive Medhane Alem Cathedral was originally an Egyptian mosque, but Haile Selassie 'converted it' in the 1940s.

## Rimbaud's House

Near the middle of the walled city, Rimbaud's House is (yet another) building in which the poet is said to have lived. It was thoughtfully restored with the support of the Italian and French embassies. Although Rimbaud did live in the city, it is not thought to have been here. However, the building houses a new **museum** (admission Birr10; ☎ 8am–12.30pm & 2–5pm Mon–Sat) dedicated to the poet, with a series of illustrated panels (mainly in French) about his life. On the 1st floor, don't miss the excellent turn-of-the-20th-century photographs of Harar – a fantastic step back in time. Another

## ARTHUR RIMBAUD – A MULTIFACETED GENIUS

In 1875 an unhappy young man made a decision. Discouraged both by the reception of his poetry in Paris and by increasing financial worries, Arthur Rimbaud, the great French poet, came to a bitter conclusion: to turn his back on poetry forever. He was just 21 years old.

In 1876 Rimbaud set out to see the world. In the winter of 1879, in the service of a coffee trader in Aden (Yemen), Rimbaud achieved a different kind of fame. He became the first white man to travel into the Ogaden region of southeastern Ethiopia. In October 1885 he decided to risk all his savings on a venture to run guns to King Menelik of Shoa.

While in Ethiopia, Rimbaud lived like a local in a small house in Harar. His interest in the Ethiopian culture, languages and people made him popular with the locals, and his plain-speaking and integrity won the trust of the chiefs and the governor of Harar.

In 1891 Rimbaud developed a tumour on his right knee. Leaving Harar in early April, he endured the week's journey to the coast on a stretcher. Treatment at Aden was not a success, and Rimbaud continued onto Marseilles, where his right leg was amputated.

By the time of his return, Rimbaud's poetry was becoming increasingly known in France. But he was indifferent to his fame. He died later that year at the young age of 37.

Rimbaud's poetry has won a huge popular following for its daring imagery and beautiful and evocative language. *Somebody Else*, by Charles Nicholl, is a remarkable biography of Rimbaud's life.

room holds changing exhibitions (often old photographs or paintings), and there's a small selection of traditional Adare arts and crafts. From the rooftop, there's a good view over Harar to the blue Chercher Mountains. A guide can give a 30-minute tour (he will expect a tip afterwards).

### Ras Tafari's House

Within pouncing distance of Rimbaud's House is the conspicuous Ras Tafari's House. The building has now been taken over by a local family including a holy man-cum-herbal healer. A sign declares that the sheikh can cure anything from STDs to diabetes, mental illness and cancer! Past patients – apparently testifying to his success – return to look after the holy man, cooking and cleaning for him for the rest of their lives.

The house was built by an Indian trader and many of its features, such as the Hindu figures on the door, are Oriental. Haile Selassie spent his honeymoon here, hence the house bears his pre-coronation name.

### Ras Makonnen's Palace

Don't expect a fairy-tale castle! This 'palace' on the main drag is a sharp-edged, charmless, whitish building but it houses a **Handicraft Museum** (admission Birr3; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) on the 1st floor – nothing flash but it's worth popping your head in. You can also climb to the top floor and soak up the views.

### Jamia Mosque

The Jamia Mosque located just south of the central square is Harar's great mosque. The mosque was originally built in the 16th century, though according to local tradition, a mosque has stood on the site since the 12th century, long before the foundation of Harar. These days it has a modernish appearance but remains an appealing sight in its own right.

### Gidir Magala

Down from Mekina Girgir you'll stumble upon the arcades of the Gidir Magala, the main market (previously known as the Muslim market); it's definitely worth a stroll. It also serves as the city's meat market – consider yourself warned if you're squeamish. On Mondays, Oromo and some Somali people come in from the surrounding

areas (it is the most busy from 2.30pm to 5.30pm).

### St Mary Catholic Church

Almost opposite Jamia Mosque, St Mary Catholic Church is a haven of peace and a good spot if you need to unwind. It's a Catholic mission dating from the late 19th century. The woodcarved door is particularly attractive.

### Mekina Girgir

Leading southeast from Feres Magala, there is a narrow street called Mekina Girgir (Machine Rd). Ambling down this atmosphere-laden lane you'll quickly understand why it was given this name: it's jam-packed with tailors' workshops, hence the name, in reference to the sewing machines. If you were thinking of a wedding suit, this is the place!

### Traditional Adare Houses

Visiting a traditional Adare house is a must (see opposite), but you'll probably need a guide to find one. The easiest house to find, not far from the Erer Gate (known locally as Argobari), houses the **Harari National Cultural Centre** (admission Birr10; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri). This typical Adare house contains examples of traditional arts and crafts.

Several Adare houses also double as family-run souvenir shops (see p233). If you don't buy anything, it's customary to tip the owner for the tour.

### Shrines & Tombs

Shrines devoted to local holy men or religious leaders are even more numerous: over 300 inside and outside the walls – no-one has yet managed to count them. Many are very peaceful, beautiful and well-kept places open to both sexes and all religions.

Southwest of Gidir Magala is the **Tomb of Said Ali Hamdogn**, a former religious leader of the town. The tomb looks a little like a miniature mosque without the minaret. Local legend has it that below his tomb there lies a well that can sustain the whole city in times of siege. The sheikh who lives here will probably show you some fragile ancient Islamic manuscripts. He expects a tip.

Another tomb that can be visited is **Sheikh Abadir's Tomb**, near the southeastern point of the old town. The sheikh was one of the most important preachers of Islam in the

region and his tomb still attracts worshippers seeking solutions to daily struggles: financial concerns, illnesses, family crises and infertility. If their prayers are answered, many devotees return to make gifts to the shrine: usually rugs or expensive sandalwood. The tomb has become an important centre of pilgrimage, especially for those who cannot afford a trip to Mecca.

**Emir Nur's Tomb**, north of central square, is devoted to the ruler who built the city's walls. It resembles a spiky beehive.

### OUTSIDE THE WALLS

#### Hyena Feeding

Are you ready for the thrill of a lifetime? Possibly Harar's greatest attraction is the hyena men of Harar. As night falls (from around 7pm), the last remaining hyena men (about four) set themselves up just outside the city walls. Sometimes the hyena men risk feeding the animals from their own mouths – you can have a go at this, too, if you like! We didn't... The hyena men know the animals as individuals and call them by the names they have given them.

Though the tradition of feeding spotted hyenas like this has existed for no more than 35 years, the ritual is less of a tourist show than some travellers imagine. The Hararis have long had a strange relationship with the hyena, and some rituals remarkably similar to this one have existed for at least 700 to 800 years.

If you want to see the feeding, just let your guide know. One feeding takes place

near Sanga Gate in the east of the old town. The other one takes place about 200m north of Fallana Gate. Be sure to establish the fee in advance; in principle, you'll be charged about Birr50 for the 'show', more if you have a video camera (usually Birr100). If there are a few of you (say five) Birr25 is sufficient. Usually you can expect to see between 15 and 20 hyenas. Be there from around 7pm to 8pm to be sure of seeing the spectacle (though it can go on to 9pm). If you just turn up, you'll still be expected to contribute something.

Some guides recommend hiring a taxi to provide a kind of floodlight for the show (and to assist taking photos).

#### Other Attractions

No visit to Harar would be complete without wading through the shambolic markets that sprawl outside Harar Gate and Shoa Gate. At first sight this minicity appears to be an impenetrable latticework of tiny streets and alleys; on closer inspection it reveals a careful organisation with different sections. It's a great place to ramble. You could start with the **Smugglers' Market**, southeast of Canal Cafe; it's chock-full with goods from Asia. The adjoining **Recycling Market** is a stunner: witness the workmanship and watch men beating metal into every single useful utensil or spare part. Then elbow your way through the **Asma'addin Bari Market** (New Market; also known as the Christian Market), near Shoa Gate. Look out for the *etan* (incense) from Jijiga; it's sold for the famous coffee ceremonies (see p70). The odoriferous spice market is filled with bark,

### ADARE HOUSES

A distinct architectural feature in Harar, the *gegar* (traditional Adare house) is a rectangular, two-storey structure with a flat roof. The house is carefully constructed to remain cool whatever the outside temperature: clay reinforced with wooden beams is whitewashed. Sometimes bright green, blue or ochre murals adorn the façades. A small courtyard conceals the interior of the house from curious passers-by.

The upstairs room used to serve as a storeroom; today it acts as a bedroom. The main living room consists of five raised platforms of different levels, which are covered in well-made rugs, cushions and stools. Guests and members of the household sit on the platform befitting their status.

The walls are usually painted bright red or ochre, said to symbolise the blood that every Harari was prepared to shed during the resistance against Menelik. Hung on the walls are woven cloths or carpets. Eleven niches are carved into the wall. In these, cups, pots and plates made by the Adare women themselves are proudly displayed.

After marriage, newlyweds retire to a tiny, windowless, cell-like room that lies to the side of the living quarters. They remain there for one whole week, during which time they are passed food and water through a hatch by relatives.

roots and twigs used in the preparation of traditional medicine. Make sure you save energy for the no-less-animated **Oromo Market**, off Erer Gate. With its heaps of vegetables, it's exotic and colourful by the bucketload.

After all this sightseeing, you might need a stimulant to keep your spirits high. What about chewing a leaf (or two) of *chat*? *Chat* markets can be found around most of the city gates, except the Buda Gate, as well as to the south of Feres Magala.

In the centre of Ras Makonnen Sq stands an Italianate equestrian **statue** of the *ras* (duke), cast in bronze by the well-known Amhara artist Afewerk Tekle.

## Sleeping

Most commendable places are outside the walled town.

**Tewodros Hotel** (☎ 0256 660217; new town d Birr50-70) Room with a hyena view... No joke – you won't believe your eyes! At night, from the windows of rooms 15, 16, 117 and 18 (if not renumbered by the time you pop in), you can watch hyenas rummaging in a garbage dump behind the hotel. It's your very own hyena show and a memorable experience. Oh, and the rooms are well kept and serviceable; some have hot showers. Ship out if offered the grotty rooms downstairs at Birr25. The hotel is just a wee walk from Harar Gate.

**Rewda Guesthouse** (☎ 0256 662211; old town; r with shared bathroom incl breakfast Birr200-300) Enter here at your own risk: you may never feel like leaving again! This cocoonlike guesthouse occupies an old Harari house at the absolute heart of the old town (ask somebody to show you the way at Weber Stationary shop, as it's tucked away in a side street). Rest your head in one of the two well-kept rooms, and marvel at the thoughtfully decorated common areas. Throw in the warm welcome of Rewda, your congenial host, and you have a winner. Reservations are crucial.

**Belayneh Hotel** (☎ 0256 662030; fax 0256 666222; new town; s/d Birr115/138) Popular place with tour groups, near the bus station. A little mundane, it offers sizable rooms equipped with bathrooms that won't have you squirming. If you can snaffle a room with a view of the Christian market, how can you possibly complain? Steer clear of the restaurant – the fodder is as bland as the dining room.

**Tana Hotel** (☎ 0256 668482; new town; r Birr50) This outfit west of the new town is a good

example of resurrection, with spotless, bright rooms with clean bathrooms (hot showers) and satellite TV. There's a bar and restaurant specialising in Ethiopian dishes (raw meat, anyone?). Brilliant value.

**Rewda Hotel** (☎ 0256 669777; new town; s with shared bathroom Birr70, d Birr120-150) This recent pile won't win any style awards but features well-organised rooms. For budgeteers, the singles are pokey but will do for a night's kip. Feeling peckish? There's a pastry shop on the ground floor.

**Abadir Guest House** (☎ 0256 660721; new town; r with shared bathroom Birr50-70, r Birr80) Family-run Abadir is nothing fancy but is good value if you're not too choosy.

**Ras Hotel** (☎ 0256 660027; new town; s/d Birr125/163; ☒) The government-run Ras is a cross between a boarding school and a psychiatric institution. Think Soviet-style décor, overpriced rooms, bare corridors and dour staff. Nab a table on the terrace and keep up your spirits with a Harar beer at hand.

## Eating

**Hirut Restaurant** (☎ 0256 660419; new town; mains Birr15-25) A cheery, authentic place to savour Ethiopian dishes as well as pasta and various grills. Sink your teeth into a superfilling *kwanta firfir* and knock it all down with a bottle of Gouder wine, if you're game. The dining room is cosy but the shady terrace is a sure winner. Service was a tad amateurish the day we popped in.

**Rose Cafe & Restaurant** (new town; mains Birr10-15) The closest thing Harar has to a hip café. Chow down on various snacks, including pasta and burgers, or start the day with an omelette or scrambled eggs. It also has bait for the sweet-toothed. The wait-staff in pink complete this very rosy picture.

**Rewda Café** (new town) Drool over the devilish display of cakes and pastries in this sleek venture. It's also a good for breakfast, with a choice of eggs, omelettes and sandwiches.

**Canal Cafe** (new town) Near Harar Gate, this is another treasure-trove for carb-lovers, although the setting is more down-at-heel.

**Alpha Cafeteria & Restaurant** (new town; mains Birr10-20; ☒ lunch) The best place for a cheap stodge, behind the Shell petrol station. Try its Harari soup.

**Ice Cream Mermaid** (old town) A peaceful refuge from the crowded strip nearby, this hole-in-the-wall place concocts some flavoursome

ice creams as well as filling cakes. If you need a vitamin fix, it has refreshing fruit juices.

## Drinking

If you're pining for a good, fresh beer, Harar is seventh heaven. There's a smattering of buzzing watering holes around town. Among the brands to try are the light Harar beer, Hakim stout and Hakim, a kind of lager. Sofi is nonalcoholic, designed for Harar's Muslims. And of course, you'll keep everlasting memories of the Harari coffee, hailed as one of the best in the world; to buy, see Shopping, below.

**Ali Bal Cafe** (Feres Magala, old town) Slap bang in the heart of the old town, this is a good place to mull over a coffee or sugar-cane juice and watch life go by.

**Samsun Hotel** (old town) Don't be confused by the name, it's under the right heading here. Identity crisis aside, this publike venue is popular at weekends with an eclectic crowd gulping down glasses of beer. It's just past Harar Gate.

**GC Pub** (old town) Almost next door to Samsun Hotel, this pub-cum-bar works to the same formula of booze, reggae beats, a touch of sleaziness and tight-packed bodies at weekends. Dive in!

**Bar Cottage** (old town) Still haven't tried *tej* (honey wine)? It's time to get a hands-on education in this traditionally decked out, dimly lit den. It's a bit nibbled around the edges but after a few drinks you'll call this place home. It's best at weekends.

## Entertainment

**National Hotel** (new town) Hallelujah! Live music Thursday to Sunday from around 9.30pm to 2am or 3am. The music is a mixture of Ethiopian/Middle Eastern pop, with some traditional tunes thrown in. When not playing, there's football on big-screen TV – much less exotic.

**Tourist Hotel** (new town) Another bar-cum-club venue, a few doors from the National Hotel. A bit brash, but take a bold approach and you should do all right.

## Shopping

**Nure Roasted Harar Coffee** (☎ 0256 663136; ☒ Mon-Sat) Just thinking about the scents wafting from this place makes us swoon. One step inside, and you're hooked forever. It sells 1kg packets of excellent coffee for Birr45 –

the best souvenir! There's tours of the roasting and grinding machines in the back.

In some of the Adare houses in the old town, the ever-enterprising Adares have set up souvenir shops displaying beautifully made baskets, and silver and amber jewellery. The house of Fatuma Safir Ahmed, just north of the main market, is one. Another is Zeituna Yusuf Grille's shop, south of the market; it's as good as an antique shop. Amber necklaces and baskets are on sale, but bring your sharpest bargaining skills! Because these shops are family-run, they may not always be 'open'. Knock on the doors.

## Getting There & Around

All transport leaves from the bus station near Harar Gate. Minibuses leave every 15 minutes for Dire Dawa (Birr10, one hour). Around seven buses leave for Jijiga (Birr13, 2½ to three hours) via Babilie (Birr8, 45 minutes). Two buses leave daily for Addis Ababa (Birr55, one day). Tickets for the capital should be bought from 10am the previous day at the bus station. There are also several minibuses a day to Addis Ababa (Birr100, nine to 10 hours). They don't leave from the bus station but pick passengers up at their hotel (ask the reception to book the ticket for you). Minibus tickets can also be bought at the Selam Cafe in the old town.

Shared/contract taxis cost Birr1/5 for a short hop about town.

## HARAR TO JIJIGA

When visiting Jijiga, getting there is half the fun. The stunning 102km stretch of gravel road is one of the most scenic in eastern Ethiopia, with superb volcanic rock formations, contoured terrain and a strangely seductive, end-of-the-world atmosphere. You'll first pass through the blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of **Babilie**, renowned for its elephant sanctuary, but don't expect to get up close and personal with some proboscideans. Unfortunately, the elephants have gone and you're unlikely to see any wildlife.

About 4km from Babilie, the road passes through the Dakhata Valley, now better known as the **Valley of Marvels**. Here, tall rocks have been sculpted into strange shapes by the elements. Some are topped by precariously balanced boulders, including one that's formed like an arch – a very strange vista indeed. The valley stretches for some 13km.

## JIJIGA ታጅጋ

pop 60,000 / elev 1696m

Feeling adventurous? It's time to explore one of the least-visited corners of the country. Hop on a local bus from Harar and prepare yourself for a taste of mysterious Ethiopia. True, there is little to see and less to do in Jijiga, the capital of the Somali region, but its real highlights are its proud people, who are unaccustomed to travellers but are always helpful and kind (in a blunt way). This is the heart of Somali territory, and it won't take long to feel that the atmosphere is noticeably different from the rest of the country. Here you can already feel the flavour of neighbouring Somalia (sorry: Somaliland). Business, including contraband, is unexpectedly brisk, signs are written in Somali, women are veiled and Arab-style mosques dominate the skyline. There's an edgy roughness to it, but fear not, gone is the rather sullen, oppressed atmosphere that prevailed several years ago. However, it's always wise to check the situation in Harar.

### Information

There's a smattering of Internet outlets in the vicinity of Adom Hotel, but connections were very slow when we visited. There's also a post office and a telecom office.

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 8-11am & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) Changes euros, US dollars and travellers cheques.

### Sights

The large **market** is definitely worth exploring. You can sometimes find intricately woven mats as well as silver jewellery and yellow amber necklaces. Most of it is little more than heaps of contraband 'junk'. The **camel and live-stock market** is also very interesting.

### Sleeping & Eating

Being an important administrative and commercial centre, Jijiga boasts a flurry of places to stay. Sure, it's more brash than glam but it's OK for a night's snooze.

**Bade Hotel** (☎ 0257 752841; fax 0257 752218; s/d Birr100/120) The neat, bricklike façade of this professionally run outfit promises great things but we found the rooms fairly unspectacular for the price and the beds a bit too unkind to our creaky joints. It's in a side street running parallel to the main Harar road.

**Adom Hotel** (☎ 0257 753077; r Birr80) Modest but clean rooms set round a courtyard. It

### NEXT STOP: HARGEISA, SOMALILAND

We did it, and we won't forget it. If you want to impress your peers, go to the bus station in Jijiga and hop on a bus to Wajaale, at the border with Somaliland. Every morning a handful of rattling buses and minibuses trundle along the gravel road from Jijiga to the border. It takes about 1½ to two hours depending on the number of punctures (two, the day we were here) and costs Birr15. Be prepared to be the focus of attention: foreigners still very rarely cover this route using public transport. Fewer things will get your heart pumping faster than crossing this border and entering virtually unchartered territory.

To avoid any incident, seek local advice on the situation before setting off, both in Harar and Jijiga. For more information on Somaliland, use Lonely Planet's *Africa on a Shoestring*. See also p275.

lies 100m off the main road; take the first left after the Shell station if coming from Addis Ababa.

**Alem Ayu Hotel** (☎ 0257 752814; s/d Birr30/50) A reliable pick, on the main road, about 500m west from the bus station. The beds can be a bit spongy but the rooms fit the bill for an overnight stop.

**Djibouti Restaurant** (mains Birr15-20) If your stomach is in knots, this no-frills eatery tosses up decent fare. Tuck into chicken with rice while watching Al-Jazeera. It's signposted.

**Rugsan House of Sweets** (mains Birr5) A sure fix for blood-sugar lows, a skip and a jump from the Commercial Bank. The incongruous mural featuring the Eiffel Tower at the entrance is amusing. It also sells provisions.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

**Ethiopian Airlines** (☎ 0257 752030) flies four times a week to Addis Ababa via Dire Dawa (Birr1250 one way). The airport is 3km out of town.

#### BUS

Around seven buses leave daily for Harar (Birr13, 2½ to three hours). One leaves for Addis Ababa (Birr70, 1½ days); book tickets the day before (after 1pm).

Jijiga is the gateway to Somaliland. See p275 for details.

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