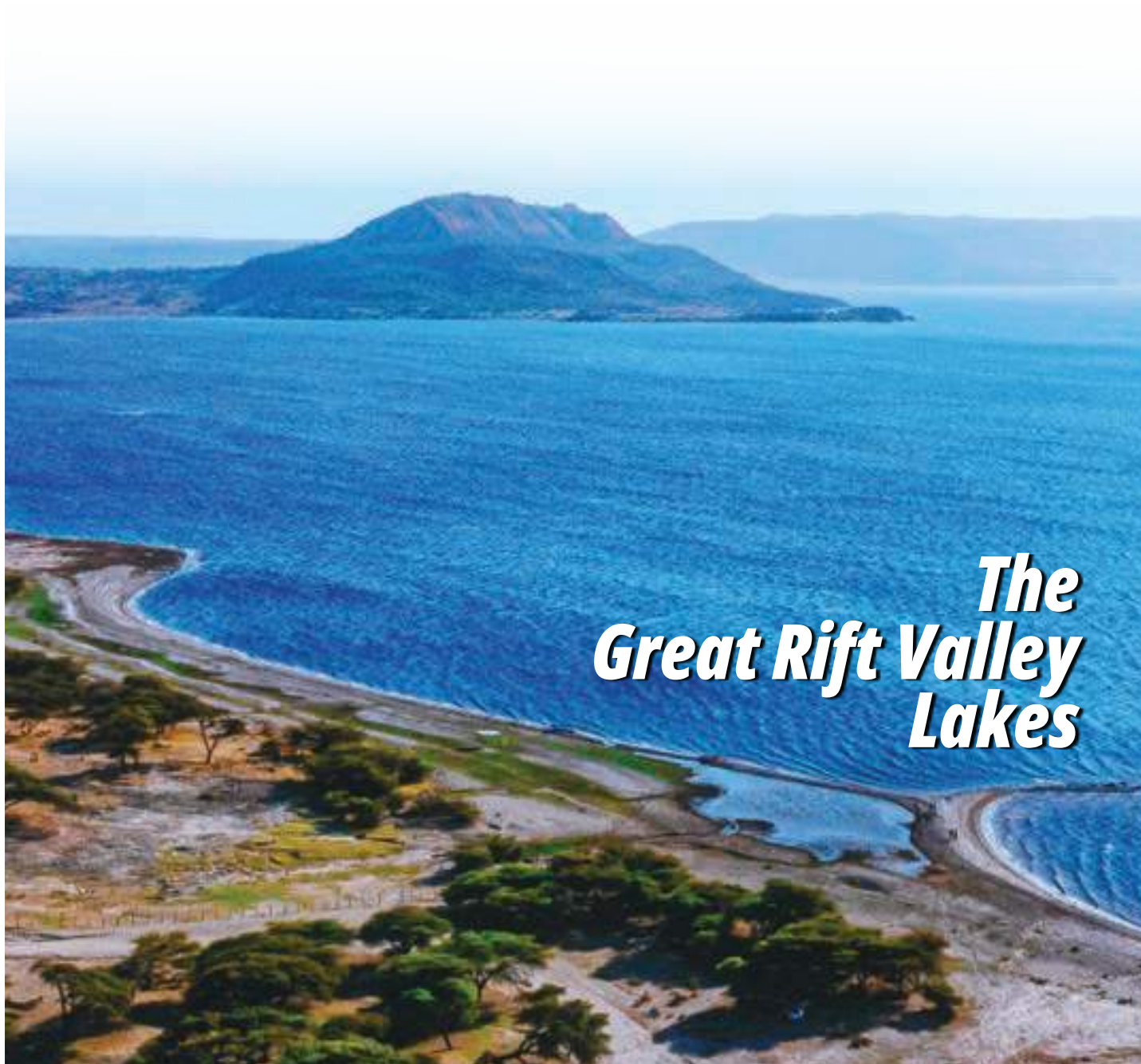


VISIT  
**OROMIA**

— TRAVEL | ADVENTURE | CULTURE —




***The  
Great Rift Valley  
Lakes***





# CHITU

Chitu is a small lake merely a kilometer or so from Lake Shalla, and is known for its massive flocks of flamingos. Pictured are flamingos feeding on the algae that grows in alkaline lakes of the Great Rift Valley.  Ashenafi Yemane

# ABOUT US

The Visit Oromia magazine is a quarterly publication that focuses on tourism and travel opportunities and destinations in the Oromia National Regional State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The magazine is published by the Oromia Tourism Commission (OTC) which manages the Visit Oromia brand and other associated initiatives. The magazine has both digital and print editions. The digital edition of the magazine can be downloaded at [www.visitoromia.org](http://www.visitoromia.org), while the print edition can be secured at several places including the OTC's headquarters in the Bole Alem Cinema area of Finfinnee. The Visit Oromia magazine is produced in association with Lafto Partners Trading PLC., a publishing company based in Finfinnee. If you have comments or suggestions, or would like to enquire about advertising or sponsorship opportunities, please contact us at the following addresses.

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Cover Photo:  
Lake Abijata in the  
Great Rift Valley.  
Ashenafi Yemane

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LAND OF DIVERSE BEAUTY

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**OROMIA**

TOURISM COMMISSION

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### THE GREAT RIFT VALLEY LAKES REGION

The Great Rift Valley is a fascinating stretch of lowlands, lakes, and unusual geology that has given rise to numerous natural, historical, and cultural peculiarities. The part of the rift home to Oromia's largest lakes is a breezy valley punctuated with the occasional mountains and the mighty Awash river. We take a deep dive into what the valley offers the traveler and the experience of its small colorful towns from Modjo to Shashemene.

### PILGRIM Epiphany on the Lake

The biggest of the Great Rift Valley Lakes in Oromia, Lake Dambal hosts a beautiful Cuuphaa (Epiphany) celebration on boats and canoes. Priests carry the Tabots on small canoes rowed by young sailors to a peninsula where the people of the town of Batu receive them with jubilation.

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**AMBASSADOR  
NASISE CHALLI**

Minister of the Ethiopian  
Ministry of Tourism



**Dear readers,**

It is with great pleasure that I present to you this issue of the Oromia Tourism Commission's Visit Oromia magazine. The Commission has been working very hard on this publication for many months now and I'd like to congratulate them on a job well done. Focusing on the Great Rift Valley Lakes region, this issue is a stellar piece of work and shows the commitment and capacity of the team that pulled it off.

Our country, Ethiopia, is endowed with innumerable tourism destinations across its vast area. From historical destinations to cultural and natural heritages, Ethiopia is a land that truly has it all. But the marketing of many of these destinations has not been on par with what the rest of the world has been doing. This is my ministry's major target going forward and it is something we are working on as part of our long term plans.

Ethiopia is a land of unbelievable diversity. Despite being one of the highest countries in the world, it is also home to the hottest place on Earth found at more than 127 meters below sea level. It also gives rise to and is criss-crossed by some of Africa's mightiest rivers. All of this diversity has resulted in immense beauty all around. From the way the rivers carve up valleys, to the amount of bird life Ethiopian lakes are home to, from the way its people have adapted to the different climates, to the traditional food and drinks they consume across the country, Ethiopia is home to fascinating destinations, experiences, and activities.

This issue of Visit Oromia magazine looks at the Great Rift Valley lying inside our federation's largest region, Oromia. The valley is something that endows our country with some of its most striking features such as the hottest place on Earth, located in Dallol in the Afar region and the multiple eclectic lakes that this magazine tells the story of in Oromia. And I'm very excited these stories are being shared with you, dear readers.

I hope reading this magazine inspires you to travel across the country and discover the hidden gems this famous valley dubbed "the Biggest Scar on Earth" contains.

Finally, I'd like to wish you a good time reading the magazine and safe travels across my beloved Ethiopia.

**Nasise Chali**  
Minister, Ministry of Tourism



AKKAM

**ADDEE****LELISE DHUGAA**

Commissioner of the  
Oromia Tourism Commission

**Dear readers,**

After months of planning and painstaking work, we are delighted to be presenting you this third issue of our long-awaited Visit Oromia magazine.

The idea for this magazine came about as soon as the Oromia Tourism Commission itself was incorporated, with me as its first Commissioner. Back then, we saw a clear need in Ethiopia for the type of high quality publication that the travel and tourism sector around the world was used to. This affected Oromia significantly more as the already existing publication around tourism and travel didn't include much of what our beautiful Land of Diversity has to offer – whatever little content there was, Oromia was severely underrepresented in it.

It was with this and other considerations in mind that work started on our first ever travel magazine. The first issue focused on the Karrayyu Oromo people, documenting their fascinating and beautifully traditional life along the northern part of the Great Rift Valley in Oromia. This issue, the third in the series and the first produced in collaboration with a professional publishing company, is something we have also been working on for many months. We incorporated all of the learnings from our first successful attempt and worked even harder to give you, our dear readers, a magazine that you not only want to read and peruse through, but one you will want to keep as a souvenir.

We say that confidently because of the work we did to make this issue an experience in great storytelling. Among the stories we tell in this issue are those from the amazingly diverse Great Rift Valley Lakes region. The region extends from Lake Basaka in the land of the Karrayyu to Bishan Gurracha close to the beautiful city of Hawassa in Sidama.

The Great Rift Valley is a dip in the geography of Ethiopia and Oromia that makes for some very interesting landscapes and bodies of water. It is inhabited by different people groups with different cultures and ways of life suited to the valley. Stories abound here, and we have sent some of the best photographers and writers to bring them to you. Our editors have done a great job of crafting these stories into eclectic pieces that do the Rift Valley justice.

I hope you'll love these stories and see the Great Rift Valley Lakes region for the amazing destinations that they are. I hope these stories speak to you and nudge you to give the towns, lakes, mountains, springs, and the amazing people of the valley a visit or two as they have done for me.

Finally, I'd like to invite you to take a look at the various small tips strewn throughout the pages of the magazine and see if some of them might be to your liking.

**Lelise Dhugaa**

The Commissioner of the Oromia Tourism Commission

# A NEW AGE OF TOURISM

## EDITORIAL

**E**vents ushered in by the Covid-19 outbreak in December of 2019 have changed our world significantly for better or worse. The outbreak decimated economies, buried industries, and left a crisis the magnitude of which the world has only known in world wars in its wake. One of the hardest hit industries over the past three years of the pandemic has been travel and tourism. As countries put up travel restrictions visitor numbers dwindled, and some of the most popular destinations in the world saw almost zero visitors for many months on end.

Ethiopia was not spared in the scourge of the pandemic and as visitors stopped coming, the tourism, travel, and hospitality sectors were severely affected. Our problems didn't stop with the pandemic though. Security issues and conflicts that broke out in subsequent years further crippled Ethiopia's tourism industry. It would not be a stretch to say that the past few years have been the most difficult for Ethiopia's tourism industry in recent decades. We believe this has exposed some of the problems our industry here faces and hints at opportunities

we can all hop on as the pandemic comes under control and the security situation across the country improves.

A major issue the pandemic has exposed is how significantly underutilized many of our resources have been. This is especially true for Oromia which boasts some of the most diverse destinations in Ethiopia and yet is merely seen as a supply stop before traveling to destinations that number less than half a dozen. In a global tourism industry that is quickly coalescing around experiences and multiple-destination trips, focusing on a very few destinations making it difficult for tourists to justify travel to the country has not been the wisest decision.

Our organization, the Oromia Tourism Commission (OTC), was established to ensure the region and the country can offer a lot more in terms of experiences and destinations, and to help promote that to the world of travelers. Ethiopia needs to utilize all of its tourism resources. From its historical and natural destinations to its varied cultural experiences, the country is vast for the traveler.

*A flock of flamingos on Lake Chitu feed on algae as the sun goes down behind the hills.*  
Ashenafi Yemane

“

*Oromia alone is home to hundreds of destinations that are punctuated by the significantly diverse landscape and climate across its area the size of Poland.*

Oromia alone is home to hundreds of destinations that are punctuated by the significantly diverse landscape and climate across its area the size of Poland. From the lush highland rainforests in the west harboring some of the earliest coffee varieties and the central plains where the capital Finfinnee is found to the Great Rift Valley which is home to some of the strangest geology and the historically bustling east and south, Oromia is truly a traveler's dream.

This leads us to another of our take-aways from the past few years. Oromia's destinations, and this rings true for much of Ethiopia, need to be promoted to everyone and not just the few that can afford to go on expensive itineraries. The highland rainforest of Yayo in Ilubabor is the last place on Earth that still has ancient, wild varieties of coffee. This is a destination that coffee lovers from across the world would like to pay a visit to. To those that love coffee and those that work in the coffee industry, the destinations in the west and southwest are some of the most significant evidences of how and why this drink is so popular today, and how it can be sustainably grown for posterity.

To those interested in governance and indigenous states, the Borana, Guji and Karrayyu areas of Oromia are some of the best places to get started as a millennia-old system of democratic governance is still going strong today. But the list does not stop here. There are many more destinations catering to all sorts of people, age groups, and niches. Our country needs to capitalize on selling these destinations and further strengthen the nascent tourism industry to help not only in generating revenue and creating sustainable jobs, but also building the country's image abroad.

The lessons from the past few years are clear to many now, and Oromia is open for business to those wishing to come and discover this land of diverse beauty. The highlands, forests, lowlands, and cities of Oromia await with open arms and the ever nice weather. You are all welcome, and there is something for all of you to see here

Aanaa Dhufuu!

# WANCHI

## BECOMES WORLD'S BEST



A view of Lake Wanchi from the rim of its crater  
 Ashenafi Yemane

# WHAT'S NEW

### WANCHI BECOMES WORLD'S BEST

The WTO has named Wenchi among the world's best tourism villages at its annual event held in Madrid. The village in south-western Oromia which features a pristine crater lake at altitudes of more than 3000m ASL and some of the most gorgeous scenery has been a go-to weekend destination for residents of Ethiopia's capital only about 130kms away. Wenchi can be reached via the main road to Waliso and a 38km gravel road to the town of Haro - Lake.

### OROMIA CULTURE WEEK BRIGHTENS SHASHEMENE

Under the slogan "Cultural Development for Tourism", the inaugural Oromia Culture Week was held to much fanfare between the 27th and 29th of April, 2022. The celebrations were attended by cultural delegations from all over Oromia and beyond with Afar, Gambella, and Harari a few among the many regions that sent entourages. Many events took place in the host city of Shasheme, West Arsi's capital city, with plans for further mobilization around the Culture Week in the years to come.

### RWANDA PLACED AS 6TH SAFEST COUNTRY TO VISIT FOR LONE TOURISTS

Euronews.travel has reported that a recent survey found Rwanda as the sixth safest country globally and most safe continentally for lone travelers. Rwanda's heavy investment in security has meant a low level of crime in the country which is good news for

all tourists alike. But be sure to check the travel guidelines for Rwanda, since pandemic curtailments for entering and moving around are likely to be enforced once you get there.

### OTC PARTNERS UP WITH AFAR

An OTC delegation spearheaded by commissioner Lelise Dhuga has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Afar state tourism bureau for the purposes of collaborating on bordering areas to realize their full touristic potential. The agreement was signed as the OTC delegation was visiting the Awash national park and its environs. The Awash national park is located on the bordering areas of north eastern Oromia and southern Afar.

### AERIAL RESILIENCE: BOEING 777 MAX RETURNS TO THE SKIES

Ethiopian Airlines has resumed flights with the Boeing 777 Max for the first time since March of 2019. The airline's leadership has commented that safety remains 'a topmost priority' and the aircraft was only returned to service after careful revaluation and re-accreditation by international bodies. The then CEO of Ethiopian Airlines, Tewolde Gebremariam and higher government officials were aboard the maiden flight which took off on the 1st of February, 2022.

### DUBAI MAKES A COMEBACK FROM PANDEMIC SOMBER

2021 was a good year for Dubai as it saw 'over 7 million tourists' as reported by Hospitality News Middle East marking a notable



recovery in tourism flow to Dubai. These numbers account for almost three-fourths of the pre-pandemic levels. Dubai has for constant years been regarded a favorite for tourists seeking an international escape, regardless of its steep price tag.

## UGANDA EYES NEW MARKETING FOR TOURISM

Culture and by a greater depth human interactions-communication are at the center of Uganda's new marketing strategy to bounce back in pandemic-recovery plans for tourism. The usual images of natural wildlife and safaris are making way for a less-popularized side of tourism to Uganda, people of diverse backgrounds coming together for metropolitan activities, cultural events and outdoor excursions.

## GOOGLE ARTS AND CULTURE NOW HAS AN OROMIA SECTION

A Google Arts and Culture project documenting the cultural outfits and items of the Oromo has been inaugurated as part of a pilot program in the region. The project includes cultural outfits, cuisine, music, ceremonies, and many other heritages of the Oromo documented through stunning photography and storytelling and can be accessed on the Google Arts and Culture non-commercial platform. The platform works with artists and institutions around the world with a mission to preserve and make the world's culture and arts accessible to everyone.

## BORANA RECOVERS AFTER DROUGHT,

## PARK THRIVING

The Borana zone is quickly recovering from a drought that had devastated livestock and wildlife in the zone over several months. The recovery process was accelerated by a good round of seasonal rainfall and has been quite dramatic in how it has transformed the arid environment into a green oasis. In good news for lovers of wildlife, the Grévy's and Plain zebra species that had suffered heavily in the drought have been noted to be recovering in numbers with sights of herds grazing in the wildernesses of Yabello and Sarite becoming more common by the day.

## ETHIOPIA DESIGNATES TOURISM AS AN ECONOMIC PILLAR

In a first for the country, Ethiopia has designated tourism as one of its major economic pillars. The designation implies a recognition of tourism's potential for economic development as the country builds on the momentum of efforts made to promote inbound tourism over the past several years. Following this designation, the Ministry of Tourism was established as a standalone bureau and is currently restructuring to better lead the nation's efforts to revitalize the sector post-Covid-19.

## BOKOJI GREAT RUN

The most famous African town in athletics, Bokoji, has just held its very own edition of the Great Run races. The Bokoji Great Run was raced at altitudes of more than 2800 meters ASL, with participants coming from all over the world enjoying the challenge of running where champions train. The inaugural race is expected to increase interest in sports tourism to Bokoji and the Arsi highlands which have borne some of the most successful Olympians ever.

## ILLU COMMEMORATES VICTORY OF SAMBE

The first celebrations commemorating the Victory of Sambe in Ilu Aba Bora were held in the historic town of Gore. The Victory of Sambe was a battle during the 2nd Italian invasion of Ethiopia between Italian forces and southwestern and western Oromo states in which the Italian army was defeated at the hills of Sambe close to the town of Gore. The celebrations are expected to bring to attention many of Ilu Aba Bora's historical, natural, and cultural heritages for further development as tourism attractions.

## LAKE HABAS, SHALLO HOT SPRING ATTRACT TOURISTS

Efforts are underway to develop the massive tourism potentials of the shores of Lake Habas close to the town of Bishan Gurracha

in West Arsi zone of Oromia. The hot springs of Shallo nearby amplify the value proposition for the Lake Habas destination and the beach is quickly becoming a hotspot for campers and hikers alike.

## BATU TO GET A CITY BRAND

One of the most popular towns in the Great Rift Valley, Batu is soon to get its own city brand. Lying in the valley at elevations of around 1600 meters ASL on the shores of Lake Dambal, Batu is a town with massive potentials of becoming a go-to destination for anyone looking to vacation comfortably close to the capital, Finfinnee. The proposed city branding project will help Batu market itself more effectively.

## BIKING ENTHUSIASTS TRAVERSE THE GREAT RIFT VALLEY

A biking adventure across towns and villages of the Great Rift Valley called Ride the Rift organized by four local tour operators took place last February. The biking enthusiasts followed the rugged terrain where the valley rises to meet the Arsi highlands on their multiple day outing, a proof of concept for the biking potentials of the greater valley which features a diverse landscape of flat lands, hills, and rough terrain. were gifted to former French Julius Grévy in 1890.

## HOOVES TRIUMPH OVER SANDAFA

Sandafa hosted the first-ever edition of the horse riding tournament, a pioneering feat in Oromia on the 6th of February, 2021. Eye-catching sports using horses were on display for the attendees, among whom present were the Minister of Culture and Sports, Qajela Mardasa. Horse riding has been an ancient art amongst the Oromo for long periods of their history and such a cultural manifestation has shown the deep connection between Horse riding and Oromo cultural being and as such a demand for regard by all concerned bodies. preserve and make the world's culture and arts accessible to everyone.



An Oromo horseman rears on his horse at the inaugural Sandafa Traditional Horse Festival.

Arganne Markos

# THE FLYING DUTCHMAN IN OROMIA

The Adventure of Ballooning

*“The gentle breeze fills you with the essence of the morning and you start looking around at a view you have only ever dreamed of.”*

The Zemen Bank branded hot air balloon operated by Abyssinia Ballooning  
Arganne Markos



FIRA  
CORNER

**B**allooning has an adrenaline rush of its own. It happens about a minute after you've taken off. Excited about having left the ground, you have turned your attention to the vessel that's carrying you and a few other people into the air. The massive balloon (Bram said it held ten million liters of air) covers much of your view when you look up. The burners that pump hot air into the balloon are quite loud, but you've liked them since you realized they were the only things keeping you warm in the chilly Finfinnee morning. After your first excitement at actually having left the ground, you look around to marvel at the balloon and the burners and the stoic Dutchman pulling valves left and right. Then you look down and you see that you are at least 100 meters above, looking down at houses the way eagles and crows do.

You're a little bit afraid at first, of course, but it only takes you just a few moments of gliding up smoothly for the excitement and adrenaline to kick in. The gentle breeze fills you with the essence of the morning and you start looking around a view you have only ever dreamed of. Diminutive houses are scattered more regularly than you'd see

if you were down on the ground. Holes dug out for various reasons look like they're the work of committed mice, and the trails map out intention. The Menagesha mountain looks mysterious clouded in the early morning mist and the twilight. One of the mountains to the east looks like it's on fire. The twilight is getting lighter and the sun awaits until its blue planet revolves around a few degrees to light us all up. Bram says the sun rises very quickly here compared to his native Holland, and so it does. As it breaks over the mountain that held her off for a few minutes, the sun lights the whole of the surrounding area in beautiful golden lights, and up there about a hundred meters above ground, we take it all in. We are over a forest now and we see a deer running across a field and into the trees. Bram starts lowering our aircraft so we can see even more of the forest. Stealthily gliding across the trees, we spot a wild animal here and there, and lots of Hyena holes. As we take in the view, Bram reminds us about the landing position and does a very clear demonstration with his knees bent and his back straight holding onto ropes that go across the inside of the basket. He speaks very clearly.

Bram van Loosbroek has lived in Ethiopia for the past 10 years, leaving for a few months every year to work at his other ballooning company in the south of the Netherlands which he co-owns with his brother. He lives and works out of a residence in the Megenna area of Finfinnee. We saw his office,



Bram Van Loosbroek, the founder and pilot of Abyssinia Ballooning photographed after a balloon ride Arganne Markos



one large room with two desks and comfortable chairs for guests, when we went there to talk to him about ballooning. It is filled with fliers, brochures and souvenirs from all over Ethiopia. The desks and chairs are carved out of solid wood and depict some very traditional Ethiopian scenes. He invited us to take a seat and had tea and coffee brought.

When Bram wanted to start a ballooning company in Ethiopia, nothing like it had even been considered in the rule books. It certainly wasn't an ideal environment, but he was able to get some assistance from the Dutch government and helped the various authorities in Ethiopia to develop rules and standards to govern ballooning. Soon after, he had a British-made balloon imported into the country and was making regular excursions for individual aviators and companies that wanted to gift their best-performing employees an experience they would never forget. There were times when the bureaucracy almost drowned his Abyssinia Ballooning, but he trudged on. Passing on a portion of the financial weight onto his company in the Netherlands, Bram kept ballooning across the Ethiopian highlands even when times weren't so good.

These highlands, Bram says, have quite a lot of places where balloons can take off, glide over and land. For ballooning, wind and turbulence are very important factors. Here in the tropics, the sun rises and sets very quickly and it is this abrupt change that makes the air turbulent. In Bram's native, the Netherlands, the sun rises quite slowly giving the air time to calm down. This allows one to schedule balloon flights both in the early mornings and evenings. In Ethiopia, the best time to go ballooning is to start right before the sun rises and land before it is too hot. This was why Bram reminded us again to be at our pick up point at 5:05 AM sharp. The next morning, he was driving us in his minibus to the take-off point right outside of Finfinnee, close to the Menagesha mountain.

Bram does not waste a single minute. After giving us a short instruction on what his crew of 8 men were going to do to fill the balloon (cold air is pumped into it using two powerful fans), he went on to supervise the filling process. With cups of coffee or tea and cookies in our hands, we stood in the morning cold, with some people back in the minibus trying to warm themselves up. When the instruction was given to us, we all climbed into the massive basket one by one and it was lift-off time.

Once we were clear of the trees, Bram did some maneuvering and used the ropes that open flaps in the balloon to let air escape and take us down. When it was time, we all braced for the landing and the balloon hit the ground twice before it stopped. A flurry of activities took place soon after with Bram making sure the balloon fell gently to the ground and not more than 5 minutes after we had landed, his crew had located us and were running towards the massive piece of canvas covering a quarter of a farm.

The minibus from the morning was standing a few hundred meters away, and the Dutchman had already signaled to us to follow him there. The efficiency was quite astounding, to say the least. We had only landed about ten minutes ago, and then we were standing around a minibus with Bram giving a speech about the tradition of drinking Champagne after ballooning. Once he was done with the speech, he pulled out a large bottle of the festive drink and poured each one of us a glass. We toasted the balloon and the couple that was engaged up in the air, and took swigs of the fizzy wine. Bram then proceeded to make us counts and countesses in his power as an aviator and we climbed into the minibus calmly like the royals we had just become and drove back to the capital for a royal breakfast at an amazing French restaurant called Louvre.

It was a wonderful Sunday morning to be a royal.

To book your balloon flight, contact Abyssinia Ballooning at +251-92-684-5086  
yeshi@abyssiniaballooning.com  
www.abyssiniaballooning.com/flightschedule

*The hot air balloon glides across the skies of Holeta and its surroundings*

Aziz Ahmed



*Balloon flights take place in the twilight of early morning*

Aziz Ahmed

**“These highlands have quite a lot of places where balloons can take off, glide over and land.”**



*The Pilot Bram Van Loosbroek operates his balloon with calm concentration* Arganne Markos



# MARQAA

SUBTLE FLAVORS FROM THE  
HIGHLANDS OF OROMIA



*Oromia's lowlands  
lead not just Ethiopia, but even  
Africa in terms of the number of  
cattle.*

**M**ost Oromos live in the highlands of Oromia consisting of much of Wollega, Illubabor, Jimma, Shewa, Arsi, Bale, and Hararghe. The Oromos in these highlands practice a sedentary lifestyle growing cereals such as wheat, sorghum, corn, teff, and, of course, barley. Now, barley is by no means anything special as it is grown all over the world, but the relative resilience of the grain compared even to wheat and its unmatched flavor has made it a favorite of the Oromian highlands. Barley dishes also happen to pair very well with dairy which is another major product of these highlands. Granted, Oromia's lowlands lead not just Ethiopia, but even Africa in terms of the number of cattle, its highlands are also powerhouses of dairy production. And all of this comes together in one simple dish that has conquered all of Oromia and beyond over the past several decades.

Marqaa has a few different names across Oromia, and the dish does vary a little bit in the way it is made and/or assembled. But the basics hold true everywhere. Marqaa is a porridge made from finely ground barley flour eaten with melted and clarified butter made the Oromo way.

Let's start with the porridge. Barley is first ground and depending on the area, some other ingredients are added but are never allowed to overwhelm the barley-ness of the flour. Water is added to Okkotee (a narrow necked pot made out of clay) and boiled. The Okkotee rests on three separate Sunsumaa (stands made out of clay) between which is the fire - a sort of open air oven on its own. Once the water has boiled, the barley flour is added to it. It is first battered and once it is thick enough, mashed. This mashing is what gives Marqaa its distinctive smooth and soft texture. The porridge is mashed while on the fire at first and once it has really thickened, it is taken off the fire and mashed again. It is then returned to the top of the three Sunsumaa and cooked a bit before it is taken off and mashed again. This can go on for hours depending on the amount of Marqaa being made. Regardless, the Marqaa is only done once it has attained the distinctive texture it is known for.

*A beautifully decorated Qorii  
along with the Fal'aana - spoon  
made out of animal horn  
Arganne Markos*

SAGALEE





A woman prepares the flour for the Marqaa by sifting it



The woman mashes the Marqaa inside the Okkotee vessel while it cooks

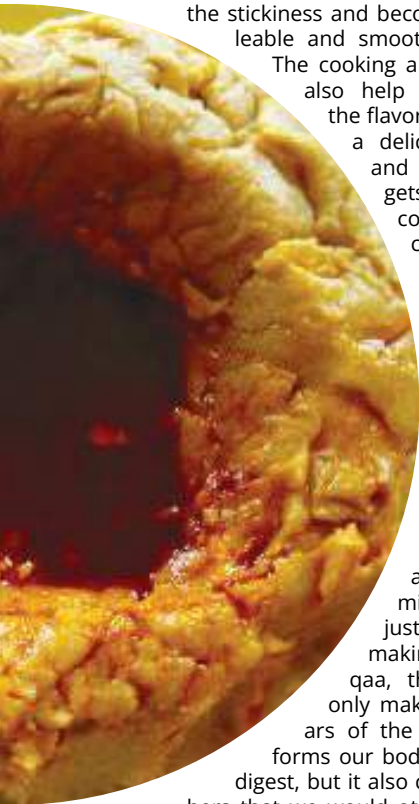


The woman serves the Marqaa in a Qorii to be eaten with traditional utensils

Before it cooks properly, the Marqaa is sticky and gooey. After it has been mashed and cooked for a long time, the Marqaa loses the stickiness and becomes a malleable and smooth porridge.

The cooking and mashing also help to develop the flavor. Barley has a delicious flavor and one that gets better with cooking. You can see this by just frying some barley grain on an open fire and eating it. In fact, the most common traditional snack across Oromia, Akaayi, is just that. In the making of Marqaa, the fire not only makes the sugars of the barley into forms our body can easily digest, but it also cooks the fibers that we would otherwise not digest and persuade them to release delicious flavors. The end product is one of the simplest dishes with some of the most subtle flavors you will always remember once you've tasted it.

A top-down view of the Marqaa dish with the Dhadhaa - buttery sauce in the center



The second ingredient in assembling a proper Marqaa meal is the Dhadhaa - clarified butter with some more ingredients. Dhadhaa is rendered out of milk through a process that takes a few days to a few weeks. Once the cow has been milked, the milk is then stored in a large container called Guchuma. It should be noted that all Oromo milk containers are made out of grass and/or wood that has been treated with butter and other animal products for a long time which imbues them with a very distinctive flavor that is very hard to replicate. Once the milk has been stored for a few days in one of those containers, it turns into yogurt. This yogurt is then churned in another vessel for quite a long time until it has an even consistency. The next process is called Raasuu and it means rocking the milk in a constant motion for hours while checking if the butter has coalesced into tiny balls after which a sort of round motion is done to collect it all together. The butter that is obtained through this process is very high in fat and is already flavorful. But it is further clarified before it can be used in food. The clarification process is quite straightforward. The butter is put in a clay pot and cooked with a lot of spices and herbs such as dried basil and rosemary. Once most of the impurities have been removed, the butter is then cooled down. This clarified butter is more than clarified and the aroma of it is an intoxicatingly delicious smell that wafts throughout the Oromo home. The making and clarification of the butter is only done once every few weeks or months though since Dhadhaa doesn't spoil for months or even years.

The final ingredient can be optional, but usually isn't. This is the Barbaree. The Barbaree is a mixture of chili, garlic, ginger and an assortment of other herbs and spices that is then ground together with some salt. The fi-

**“ This clarified butter is more than clarified and the aroma of it is an intoxicatingly delicious smell that wafts throughout the Oromo home. ”**

nal powder is deep maroon in color. It is very hot (but can be made to be less so) and has an unmistakably complex aroma.

Once all three components are ready, the Marqaa is assembled in a Qorii. The hot porridge is first ladled into the Qorii and made to assume its shape. Then, a large hole is gouged out in its center into which the Dhadhaa and Barbaree are placed. The Dhadhaa melts from the heat of the porridge and the Barbaree dissolves giving this quite literally central sauce a reddish color.

After assembly, the Marqaa is eaten using Fal'aana (spoons made out of horns) or steel spoons by gouging out a large bite and dipping it into the Dhadhaa while still hot. The Qorii is always shared and many people can eat out of it at the same time.

Marqaa is a very common communal meal that is eaten across Oromia and beyond. It puts together the best of the highlands of Oromia and the final product is something roundly enjoyed.

# ABBAA JIFAR II

## THE ROYAL'S ADVENTURES ACROSS OROMIA

“*Jimma became the strongest state in all of southwestern Ethiopia.*”



A portrait of the most famous royal from Jimma, Abbaa Jifar II.

# TRAVEL IN HISTORY

The Kingdom of Jimma was one of the richest and most developed states in all of the horn region. During the reign of its most famous royal, Abbaa Jifaar Abbaa Gomol aka Abbaa Jifaar II, Jimmaa survived internal strife among the Gibe Kingdoms and invasions from nearby states, to become the strongest kingdom and the most lucrative trading hub in all of southwestern Ethiopia. After a series of wars of conquest and politicking that included diplomatic relationships with foreigners, Jimma soon became a thriving market and the most powerful Muslim state in the region. As such, Islamic schools were established across the kingdom and its most popular Mootii Abbaa Jifar II was known for providing refuge to Islamic scholars all over the horn of Africa.

The Kingdom of Jimma was centered around today's metropolis of Jimma. As is true today, the Jimma of the late 19th century was also a leading producer of coffee, exporting the green gold across Ethiopia and beyond to Arabia. With the revenue from coffee and the southwestern trade, the Kingdom financed the construction of an opulent palace and the expansion of centers of Islamic learning. The palace constructed in the then village of Jiren is today found right outside of the city of Jimma and is mostly intact. It is one of the most impressive buildings in the country and is a testament to how well the people of Jimma learned to bend wood to their will.

A much less talked about story from Jimma, though, is one in which the Mootii (king) made

an epic journey from his palace to the capital Finfinnee for a task he was assigned by the then imperial government. There was no rail connection between Jimma and Finfinnee, nor was there a paved road for horse-drawn carriages. The Mootii would be traveling on horseback and so would many of his envoys. The journey would take weeks, and they'd be camping everyday somewhere new, somewhere, perhaps, the Mootii doesn't know, and as it would turn out, places he'd give brand new names to.

In this journey, the Mootii would name no less than 18 towns and villages. Baddaa Buna (highlands of coffee), a small village right outside Jimma, he named due to its coffee forests. Asandabo, a major district town today, was named after a banquet thrown for people who help with farming (Dabo) by a man named Hasan that the Mootii witnessed. He named Sokorru after a thorny bush the entourage encountered on the road and so they went on.

A few weeks of travel later, Abbaa Jifar's entourage arrived in a small village two days' walk from the mighty Gibe river. The village was known to mark the halfway point between the capital of the Jimma Kingdom and Finfinnee. The Mootii camped there, and on departing named the village Walqixxee, which means halfway in Afaan Oromoo. Settled by both the Oromo and Gurage people, the village kept the name and today is the capital and biggest city in the Gurage zone. There's even a university by that name there,

solidifying the Mootii's legacy.

The entourage kept on traveling and the Mootii kept on giving villages new names. After Waliso, the entourage reached a small, chilly town the Mootii named Diilallaa - meaning cold.

Many days of travel later, the entourage was approaching Finfinnee. When the Mootii reached a village about two day's walk away from the capital, it is said that he celebrated the achievement and gave a speech to his entourage in which he said "sabbata keessan jabeeffadhaa - tighten the sashes around your waists". The Sabbata is a thin piece of cloth that Oromo women tie around their waist somewhat tightly to support their backs while they do household chores. The tightening of this Sabbata is a literal and metaphorical action taken to get ready for a difficult task and in the case of the Mootii of Jimma, the last two days of travel into the capital, Finfinnee. Once the entourage had rested and was about to leave, the Mootii bestowed the name Sabbata upon the village.

Today, the town of Sabbata is one of the bigger towns surrounding the capital and serves as a gateway to the southeast including the towns of Walqixxee and Jimmaa. It is an important town, as the Mootii would be pleased to learn, and is one of the fastest growing urban areas in the country.

The Mootii's stories of travel do not end here though. He was known for his excellent diplomatic overtures to independent states across eastern Africa such as Zanzibar where he sent emissaries to. Hajj pilgrims from Jimma also needn't worry back then as the Mootii had a large 6-storey house built in Mecca for guests to stay in.

Stories of travel abound in the Oromia of the 19th and early 20th centuries. From the traders selling coffee and ivory to the noblemen visiting cities and villages, travel has a deep history in Oromia. But this one particular trip by one of the most revered kings of the Jimmaa kingdom provides irrefutable evidence in the form of towns and villages that bear the name they were given through one journey a century ago all the way into the 21st century.



A photograph of the Mootii Jimma (King of Jimma) Aba Jifar II



*Once the entourage had rested and was about to leave, the Mootii bestowed the name Sabbata on the village.*


The Jimma Abbaa Jifar  
Palace on the outskirts of  
the city of Jimmaa

📍 Soko et



# EPIPHANY ON THE LAKE

*A fleet of canoes and boats carrying the Tabot sail to the Bochessa peninsula with the two islands of Gellila and Debre Sina in the background*

 Arganne Markos

PILGRIM





Located 170 kilometers from Finfinnee, Lake Dambal is one of the larger lakes in the Ethiopian part of the Great Rift Valley. Measuring at more than 440 square kilometers, the lake features 5 distinct islands with Tulluu Guddoo - Big Hill in Afaan Oromoo, Galila and Fundurroo (Dabra Sina) as its major attractions. Our destination is the small island of Galila which is home to the St. Teklehaimanot Orthodox Christian church and one of the sites of the epiphany celebration.

**G**etting to Galila meant traveling to Batu, a small town on the outskirts of Lake Dambal that is known for its many resorts along the lake and a comfortable climate for vacations. We arrived on the eve of Epiphany, and Batu welcomed us with a cacophony of music blaring from the shops and street stands up and down the road. Clothes stores displayed their best wares next to brightly painted cafes and fruit shops with counters piled high with bananas, papayas, mangoes, and avocados. As we stepped off our bus that Tuesday afternoon, the town smelled of arrittii and frankincense.

The town was already in a buzz and the atmosphere was electric. Fresh cut grass littered the doorsteps of every store, hotel and cafe. Street vendors hawked flags, etc. and kids ran barefoot all over town.

The townspeople were rushing here and there, getting ready to celebrate the yearly Epiphany holiday in the (Orthodox) Christian tradition. The town certainly seemed ready for something special, but the particular celebration we were there for takes place a few minutes out of town and we had to get lunch before we found ourselves a bus to take us to the shores of Lake Dambal. Our bus drove close to the edge of the lake

and stopped some distance away by a quaint swamp, home to a large flock of ducks the size of lambs. Once we got off the bus, we started walking to the shore, feeling the light lake breeze on our faces as the sunlit water came slowly into view. Waiting for us by a concrete pier was a long, oddly shaped boat with two young men on it. We were directed to board it and one by one, with some assistance from the seemingly weightless young men deftly hopping from seat to seat, we boarded.

*One of the young men with a gleaming badge proclaiming him as captain of our vessel started the boat's Yamaha engines.*

For some in our group, this was their first ever time on a boat. They looked worried. Once everyone had settled down, one of the young men with a gleaming badge proclaiming him as captain of our vessel started the boat's Yamaha engines. With a well-experienced hand, our captain did some clever maneuvering to point the boat away from the pier and at the waiting open water. Once

we were clear of the concrete steps, the captain revved up the engines and off the sturdy, iron boat went.

We sailed comfortably in an easterly direction, cutting through gentle waves and scaring off a few flocks of birds. The lake was quite smooth and we were soon in view of Galila. As we approached, our captain and a fixer gave us the history of the island, the church and people residing there.

Galila and the other islands of Lake Dambal have a medieval era connection with the Tabote-Tsiyon – the original Ark of the Covenant passed down to Moses from God himself that is said to be housed at the St. Zion Church in Axum today. It is said that during the 10th century when a rebellious queen by the name of Yodit waged a devastating war against Aksum, the Tabote-Tsiyon was transported by priests to Lake Dambal, over its waters to the island of Tulluu Guddoo, and housed there for 72 years until the queen was defeated in battle and her rebellion quashed.

Today, the St. Teklehaimanot Orthodox Christian church is the residence of one Mama Kushe – one of the last remaining residents of Galila from the Zay community. The Zay are a unique ethnolinguistic people



Two men play the clerical drum at the Cuuphaa celebrations on the island of Galila

Arganne Markos

whose language features elements from the Guraghe, Amharic and Afaan Oromoo languages. The Zay are mostly Orthodox Christians themselves, and the church on Galila's summit serves anyone who ventures onto the island. Like many other visitors, it was the Tabot (Ark of the Covenant) residing in the holy of holies within the small church that we were there to accompany on its way to the site of the Ketera.

Once we reached the island, we disembarked, and with assurances from the young captain that he would be waiting for us when we returned, we started our trek up the slope to St. Teklehaimanot. Crowds of women and children with white shawls covering their heads accompanied us as we walked further inland. Once the sound of the motorboats had subsided, Galila welcomed us with a fast and powerful drum piece announcing the merriment of the day. We shuffled past an old lady sitting by the door of an old house. This was Mama Kushe, we were told, and we greeted her as we passed and continued on to the dancing women and men. Wrapped in a white shawl, a man in the center of the group was carrying a large drum and beating it while gyrating constantly. We couldn't know how he was standing upright let alone keep to the rhythm of the drumming. The drumming was powerful though, and it got everyone in the group into a state of trance of sorts. They clapped their hands along with the drumming, and it was not an easy rhythm to follow for those unfamiliar with ecclesiastical music of the Orthodox Christian church. The group went on climbing rocky paths on its way to the church and we followed, timidly putting our hands together in a poor imitation of the passionate clapping our leaders were engaged in.

Once we made a right turn after a particularly large boulder, we saw the church. It was tiny and colorfully painted and already had dozens of people covered in the white shawls doing some dancing of their own. As the group we were following approached the gates of the little church, the dancing got even more powerful with the singers basically shouting at the top of their voice to be heard over the thunderous drum beat.

On reaching the gate, everyone did the ceremonial greeting according to Orthodox Christian customs and we entered. Inside in addition to everyone else that had made it there before us, were also the priests dressed in lavish ceremonial outfits. Red gowns with intricate designs in gold covered them from neck to toe and they also had cylindrical hats to match. Once everyone had made it into the church grounds, the priest started leading them in prayers and then singing.

Orthodox Christian songs draw from a deep



The laity look on as the small fleet of the faithful makes its way to the Bochessa Peninsula  
 Abenezer Yonas

**The priest sang some of the most popular songs in recent years and switched languages to sing in Afaan Oromoo, in the same musical tradition.**

tradition of music that determines what kinds of styles, musical instruments and lyrics are allowed in all church music. Youth from Sunday school sang some of the most popular songs in recent years and switched languages to sing in Afaan Oromoo in the same musical tradition. People sang along and this kept on for several minutes before it suddenly stopped and commotion could be seen at the door of the little church.

People knew what it meant. The Tabot was about to emerge on the head of one of the priests. As a replica of the Old Testament's Ark which was the sovereign representative of God's will, the Tabot is revered and worshipped. People rarely get a chance to get so close to it and it is considered a very powerful spiritual experience to be able to do so. Before the Tabot, another priest decked out in the most lavish church outfit walked out with a small plate full of smoking frankincense hanging from a long chain in his hand. This was the censer. He waved it back and forth like a pendulum, making sure the smoke reached everywhere around. Right behind him was the priest carrying the Tabot and on seeing this scene, everyone bowed down or fell to their knees in worship.



A priest swings the censer to make sure the aroma reaches everyone around  
 Abenezer Yonas



Young deacons of the Orthodox church are dressed in their clerical regalia for epiphany (Cuuphaa) accompanying the head priest carrying the Tabot

Arganne Markos

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*Everyone pooled into the small and big boats and canoes they could find and in a very short amount of time, we were all waterborne.*

The Tabot started its slow journey down to the shore with people rushing to lay a red carpet before the small group. Priests bearing sistrums made beautiful rhythmic sounds that created a sensation of their own along with the sweet smelling frankincense. Behind them were the hundreds of people all dancing in groups to thunderous beats from the now several booming drums keeping everyone in pace. The music did not stop even when the Tabot had reached the shore. The canoes stirred and were moved closer to the sandy beach once the Tabot had stopped. The priest carrying the Tabot and another with the sistrum in hand climbed into the little vessel captained by a small wide eyed boy. This was the most unusual part of this celebration. It now meant that the people who see the Tabot off to the place it stays the night at, the Ketera spot, have to accompany it on boats, creating a fleet of the faithful.

The music never stopped.

And a fleet of the faithful was what transpired. Everyone pooled into the small and big boats and canoes they could find and in a very short amount of time, we were all waterborne. Our boat was also filled with people who danced to the drum rhythm of an enthusiastic player on another boat. In the middle of this fleet was a group of about four small canoes, each with a single person row-

ing. In each sat priests carrying frankincense, sistrums and one had the Tabot covered in the most beautiful of clothes. These were the most colorful boats owing to what the priests were wearing and the ceremonial umbrellas they carried. Compared to the motorboats most people had boarded, the canoes were rowing much slower. But they determined the pace. As the fleet sailed further out, the motorboats would doubleback to fall in line.

The music kept playing, with the faithful balancing on the rocky boats to keep to the rhythm.

In the distance we could see another fleet. Smaller than ours, but definitely another fleet of the faithful as we could see the colorful canoes surrounded by the bigger motorboats. As they came towards us and we sailed towards them, the music intensified. When the two fleets met, the music had crescendoed and had become a deafening, but joyous expression of the spiritual meaning for the Tabots of St. Teklehaimanot and the Virgin Mary to be meeting. The crescendo went on for several minutes with motorboats speeding their way around the fleet and making the water move to their rhythm.

The two fleets became one and the journey resumed towards the Bochessa Peninsula, where the two Tabots would meet up with a





*This is too good to miss.*

third Tabot already waiting there.

The Bochessa Peninsula is a small piece of land that juts out into Lake Dambal. It has served as the site of Ketera since ancient times and is one of the most popular places to celebrate the holiday of Epiphany in and around the town of Batu. On approach to the epiphany, people waiting for our fleet started dancing and singing fiercely. Women ululated and men sang some of the most popular traditional songs of the area. When it was time to disembark, the Tabots again commanded the veneration of the people who bowed, with some kneeling and the ululation intensified.

Once on solid ground, the Tabots moved to where they would spend the night at, but not in a hurry. People dressed in white and colors were dancing in different groups. Some were singing spiritual hymns, others stuck to their traditional songs with guys putting on a mock stick fight. Following the Tabot, kids dressed in church regalia were singing songs in unison - probably Sunday school pupils. As the evening went on, the music did not relent.

This was just the eve but no one was holding back, and many of us promised we would try to make it back next year. This is too good to miss.

## FACTS ABOUT LAKE DAMBAL

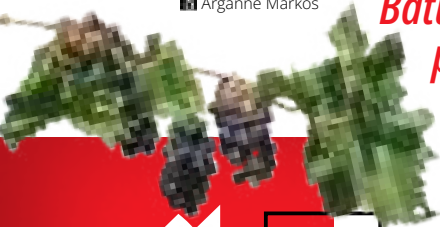
- Formed by tectonic forces that created the Great Rift Valley itself
  - Home to several varieties of tasty fish
  - Dotted with five islands
  - Covers an area of 440 square kilometers
  - Has an average depth of 9m
  - Fed by Meki River and the Katar River of the highlands of Arsi
- WHAT TO DO**
- Fishing
  - Swimming
  - Camping on Islands
- WHAT TO SEE**
- Ancient Monasteries
  - Culture of the Zay Community
  - View of the Escarpments of the Great Rift Valley
  - Mount Chilalo
  - Various Birds
  - Hippopotamus

# A SLICE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

## THE CASTEL WINERY

“Home to the largest wine-farm in the country, the town of Batu has become the epicenter of wine production in the country today.”

Bunches of Grapes at the Castel Winery vineyard  
 Arganne Markos



FARM & FRESH



The modern history of wine in Ethiopia starts with the founding of two family wineries, the precursors to today's Awash Wine, in 1936. A Greek family established the first winery in the Lideta neighborhood of the capital, bringing a small drop of the Mediterranean to the country.

This family-owned winery was soon joined by another one in Mekanisa (Bakkanisa), Finfinnee, this one owned by an Italian family. In 1974, following a landmark ruling by the military government, these Greek and Italian owned wineries were nationalized into one entity, Awash Wine. In 2000 the French wine giant Castel Group inaugurated Castel Winery in Batu becoming the last entrant into the Ethiopian wine scene.

Home to the largest wine-farm in the country, the town of Batu has become the epicenter of wine production in the country today. Located in East Shoa zone of Oromia and very much at the center of the Great Rift Valley, Batu has long been a favorite spot for agriculture and agro processing, and it is on the outskirts of this pretty town that Castel Winery has set up Ethiopia's largest and most advanced wine making operation making some of the tastiest bottles of Vino around.

A young woman holds a glass of wine at the Castel Winery wine tasting facility

Brothers Picture

Wine is made from all sorts of fermented fruits, but the drink we all know as “wine” is usually made from grapes. Scientifically named *Vitis vinifera*, there are thousands of different varieties under this species of grapes. If you have ever looked at the label on a wine bottle, then you'll have seen some of these names: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, etc., are the different grape varieties from which wine is made. These different varieties give rise to different types of characteristics within the wine, which is why they are printed on the label so people know which wines to buy based on their preferences. But not all of these varieties can grow at any one place, and in fact a major consideration in choosing where to grow grapes for wine is something called 'terroir' - a loose term that encompasses many of the different characteristics of a certain area in terms of how it might affect the growth of grapes. Terroir determines where the best Chardonnay can grow and which areas are better suited to make full-bodied wines.

Terroir is also how the Great Rift Valley wins in wine. The Great Rift Valley, especially the part of the valley above a certain elevation like Batu, is quite ideal for growing the right kinds of grapes for excellent wine. Evidence of this is the fact that the two major vineyards in Ethiopia are both found in the valley, one in Batu and the other at Merti close to the town of Matahara about 200 kilometers north-east of Batu along the valley. What the Great Rift Valley offers to winegrowers is a relatively constant weather that is not too hot or cold or arid. The valley has enough sources of water, but does not have soil that is too dense and fertile. When the soil





**Recently opened for tours, the Castel Winery vineyard is a beautiful farm.**

A view of the vineyard at Castel Winery's farm in Batu

Brothers Picture



A signage at the gates of the Castel Winery vineyard

Arganne Markos



Grape plants with ripe bunches of Grapes hanging from them at the Castel Winery vineyard

Arganne Markos

is dense and fertile, the grapes grow vigorously, but are not well developed enough for good wine. As such these parts of the Great Rift Valley where water can be accessed easily such as Merti (which lies next to the mighty Awash) and Batu which has Lake Dambal in its backyard are already cementing themselves as major wine producing regions and the momentum is only building.

The vineyard owned by Castel Winery in Batu is about 200 hectares in size. Irrigated by Lake Dambal, the farm grows the Syrah, Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon varieties of the grape. Once the grapes are ripe, they are picked and made into the famed wines of the Great Rift Valley that are consumed across the country.

Recently opened for tours, the Castel Winery vineyard is a beautiful place. Row after row of grape plants (about 1600 per hectare) flutter in the farm. The gentle breeze of the valley along with the well irrigated loam soil band together to make the grapes take on as much of their terroir as possible and develop into fruits with as much flavor and body as possible. The sun is ever strong there and, in a way, the farm feels somewhat Mediterranean. Plenty of water, well-drained soil, and grapes with French names are very Mediterranean after all.

And the wines? Well, the Castel Winery boasts about the many awards its wines have amassed, both in local and international competitions. The popularity of its two lines of wines - the Acacia and Rift Valley brands - seems to support its claims. Without a doubt the wines from Batu are really good.

Wine sommeliers from across the world have praised these wines from an as yet unknown wine growing region. Expats in the capital including those from countries such as Italy and France where wine is massively produced and consumed, seem to like Castel's wines and it has become a very popular potion in restaurants and bars across the country.

But if you really wanted to know how good Batu's wines are, you should pay the small valley town and its vineyard a visit and see how these grapes are grown. Once you have seen the distinctive leaves and hanging grapefruits of the world of wine, you should then head to the Castel Winery's Bel Air Wine Bar and taste the final concoction for yourself.

Wine production in Batu is only a drop of what the Great Rift Valley offers, but it is a drop that's emblematic. The award winning wines in bottles shipped across the country and the state-of-the-art winery that makes them are emblematic of the potential the valley has to produce drinks on par with what is produced across the famous wine growing regions of the Mediterranean itself.

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**The gentle breeze of the valley along with the well irrigated loam soil band together to make the grapes take on as much of their terroir as possible.**



Dark purple bunches of Grapes hang off plants at the Castel Winery vineyard

Arganne Markos

*A view of Lake Abijata as seen from its eastern shore. Notice the effect of the alkaline water on the rocks*

 Ashenafi Yemane

# THE GREAT RIFT LAKE



# THE FT VALLEY LAKES



*The Great Rift Valley is often called the "biggest scar on Earth"*

**A** peer of the few geographic formations clearly visible from space, the Great Rift Valley is often called the "biggest scar on Earth". It's an apt name as the Great Rift Valley is a "scar" formed by the rifting of continental plates away from each other, extending all the way from Lebanon in the middle east to Mozambique in southeastern Africa. Recent advancements in geology have meant that the Valley is now considered a series of distinct valleys that share an origin and not one massive dip, but its allure has only climbed.

These interconnected valleys from the one which separates the mountains of Galilee and the Golan heights to that which splits Ethiopia in two all share some fundamental similarities - a set of flavors of the Great Rift Valley. They're all warm places with higher levels of geological activity than their rather muted surroundings. And in the case of Ethiopia, this is even more pronounced in

contrast to the geologically stable and cool highlands that are home to much of the population.

The Great Rift Valley begins in a very dramatic form in Ethiopia in the form of the Afar triangle to the north. Featuring extreme and otherworldly places such as the bubbling lava lake of Erta Ale and the neon green painted landscape of Dallol, the hottest place on Earth, the Great Rift Valley makes its intention known - that it plans to be stranger, wilder and more exotic than anywhere around. South of Afar, the Great Rift Valley continues, splitting Oromia and its gargantuan mountains in two. The strangeness continues down south where the valley stretches into Kenya via Lake Turkana. In total, the Great Rift Valley boasts 15 lakes in Ethiopia the biggest of which is Lake Abaya close to the town of Arba Minch followed by Lake Dambal right next to the town of Batu.

*A flock of pelicans feeding and grooming themselves at a swamp on the shores of Lake Abijata*  
 Ashenafi Yemane





A map of the many rifts that make up the Great Rift Valley in Africa and the Middle East

Our small team consisting of some journalists and photographers was slated to leave the capital Finfinnee for a tour of the Great Rift Valley in Oromia. In the chilly early morning, we were speeding past fields of wheat, tilled for the upcoming planting season.

In Oromia the Great Rift Valley introduces heat, water, and an arid landscape to the muted landscape of the highlands manifesting in the exotic landscapes of Merti, Batu and the twin lakes of Abijata and Shalla. Our trip would cover many of those places and more.

Ethiopia has many peaks notable for their height as measured from sea level. Anyone seeing these massive mountains is usually not as impressed given much of Ethiopia already is at more than 2000 meters above sea level and the immediate surroundings of these peaks usually lie at elevations of close to or above 3000 meters above sea level.

But this changes when you get to the mountains of the Great Rift Valley - those hills you see when you travel through the valley, the many hundreds of them that only locals know the names of. Because of their location in the low Great Rift Valley itself, they haven't commanded the attention of mountaineers or that of the wider public, but to the locals and to anyone that actually goes there to see them, these mountains are formations to behold. Rising thousands of meters above their surrounding areas - a feat the highland mountains of Ras Dashen and Tullu Dimtu

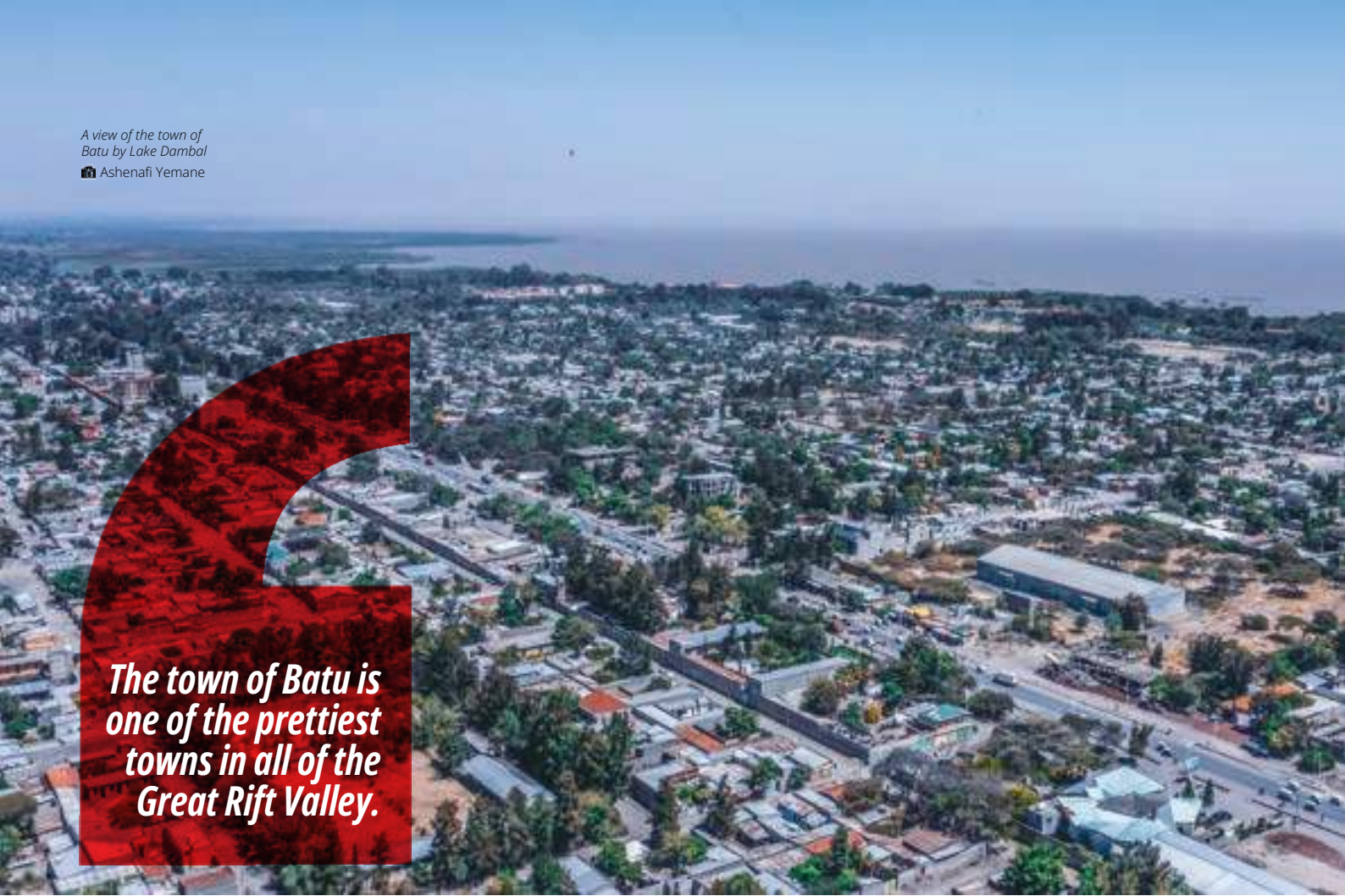
can only dream of - these hills in the valley challenge our perception of size. Some of them, like the Fantalle mountain that is so revered by the Karrayyu Oromo people, anchor a whole culture around them. It's not just Fantalle though. The famed mountain of Chuqala is also located in a strip of valley that extends into the Great Rift Valley. No wonder it looks bigger than anything anyone can ever see to those that have seen it up close from the town of Adulala or the city of Bishoftu.

An interesting thing to note is that many of Ethiopia's cities, including the capital, are surprisingly close to the Great Rift Valley. Some, like Adama, are in fact very much inside the valley itself. Traveling from the capital, the visitor is greeted by the relatively uniform landscape of the Shoan highlands. If it was in the rainy season, everything as far as the eye can see would have been green and fields of wheat, teff, and barley would cover much of the land. In the dry season, this same land takes on the golden hue of the dried and harvested grasses that feed the nation. The sun is strong and it can be a bit windy, but not much is remarkable about it, and this is its major draw as one of the most comfortable lands to live on.



*Many of Ethiopia's cities are surprisingly close to the Great Rift Valley.*





*The town of Batu is  
one of the prettiest  
towns in all of the  
Great Rift Valley.*

**B**ut a few tens of kilometers after that, you will start passing some immense mountains. This is not so much from the size of the mountains themselves, but an indicator that you are descending down into the valley. The Great Rift Valley starts at about 40 kilometers after leaving the city and it is a gentle descent that you wouldn't notice if it wasn't for the weather turning a bit warm. Soon enough though, you'll see a camel or two or even a caravan passing by, announcing that you have now completely left the comfortable highland plains most Ethiopians occupy and are now in the land where the Earth itself is just as interesting as what people have done with it.

The town of Modjo is where the worlds of the plains and the valley meet - usually on market days where people like the Karrayyu Oromo bring their camels while others sell wheat and barley. Located 25 kilometers from Bishoftu, Modjo is also where the major highway in Ethiopia branches towards the cities of Adama and Hawassa, as good a point as any to start off our descent into the Great Rift Valley.

It was a quiet Friday morning when we got to

Modjo and we needed to replenish ourselves as leaving the capital early had meant we still hadn't had any breakfast. Some of Modjo's biggest appeals happen to be its no nonsense eateries that cater to frequent travelers, truckers mostly, but traders and businessmen too. Restaurants in Modjo are heavy on the meat side with condiments from both sides of the rift valley accompanying each dish. The town has been feeding those that weather long journeys for a long time, and still does the job exceptionally well today. Breakfasted and caffeinated, we set out on the journey into the interior of the valley.

After Modjo, you are faced with the decision of which part of the Great Rift Valley to visit. To the east is the city of Adama, Ethiopia's second largest and the town usually associated with the valley itself. To the south are a series of towns with Meki and Batu being the two biggest. This southern route also ends with the cities of Shashemene and Hawassa, only the latter of which is part of the Great Rift Valley. The eastern route does lead to the amazing city of Adama, a grown up town that knows how to take care of guests, and the land of the Karrayyu such as Mount Fantalle, the town of Matahara



A little boy shows off the small Qoroso fish he caught at Lake Dambal  
Abenezer Yonas





and the Awash National Park. But 6 of the 7 Great Rift Valley Lakes in Oromia are south of Modjo and that was the route we took on that early Friday morning.

Qoqa is the first proper Rift Valley town with its shops exploding with the colors of the valley's bounty. It is busy and fast and sunny. It is also quite small and is massively affected by the ebbs and flows of one of Oromia's gifts to the Great Rift Valley - the river Awash. The river irrigates farmland around the small town where papayas, mangoes, and bananas are grown. Awash, with the help of a dam built in 1960, also creates Lake Qoqa, an artificial lake bigger than both lakes Hawassa and Basaka.

The story of the town of Qoqa is closely associated with the construction of the Qoqa Hydroelectric Power Plant. Generating close to 180MW of power, Ethiopia's first power plant is also where the country got its first real taste at large-scale irrigation with the Wanji Sugar Factory and its many thousands of hectares of sugarcane farms. In terms of fishing, Lake Qoqa is one of the more productive lakes in the country and is a primary source of sea food to residents of the capital.

While not associated with the expansive Lake Dambal the way its twin city Batu is, Meqi is just as much a part of that story and it was where we headed to after Qoqa. The ever so generous Awash river branches

off on its approach to the town of Qoqa giving rise to the Meqi river that this town is named after. The river cuts Meqi into two while meandering on its way to the lake just a few kilometers southeast of the town. Driving through Meqi, you can see it is one of the bigger towns in the valley. It also boasts a very visible religious diversity across its skyline. Minarets from Mosques, the domes of Orthodox and Catholic Christian churches and the ever distinctive steep roof of evangelical ones give Meqi a distinctively ecclesiastical skyline that feels at home in the valley. We enjoyed a shortstop in Meqi where we got to taste more of that rift valley bounty and soon were on our way out along the shores of Dambal.

“

*Meqi  
is as much a  
part of the  
story of Lake  
Dambal.*




A Pod of Pelicans at the Abijatta lake in the Great Rift Valley Abenezzer Yonas





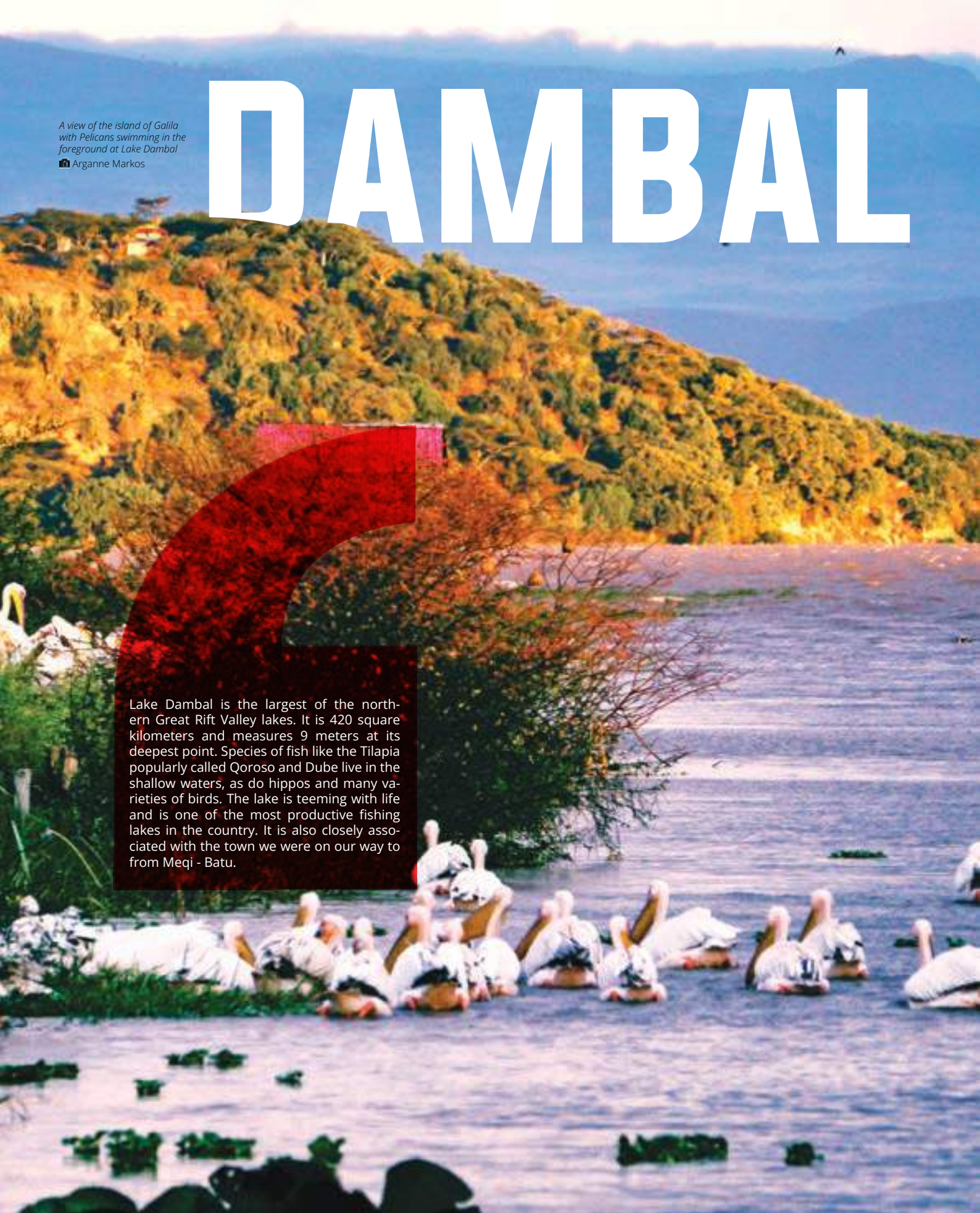
## ***The town of Batu***

is a beautiful aggregation of wide streets, small enterprises, and bustling commerce that makes it one of the preeminent destinations in the Great Rift Valley  Ashenafi Yemane


*A view of the island of Galila with Pelicans swimming in the foreground at Lake Dambal*  
📍 Arganne Markos

# DAMBAL

Lake Dambal is the largest of the northern Great Rift Valley lakes. It is 420 square kilometers and measures 9 meters at its deepest point. Species of fish like the Tilapia popularly called Qoroso and Dube live in the shallow waters, as do hippos and many varieties of birds. The lake is teeming with life and is one of the most productive fishing lakes in the country. It is also closely associated with the town we were on our way to from Meqi - Batu.





A view of the island of Galila at Lake Dambal  Abenezer Yonas


The town of Batu is, perhaps, one of the prettiest towns in all of the Great Rift Valley. Found at the southwestern edge of Lake Dambal, the town boasts wide sidewalks with beautiful neem and jacaranda trees. Lying at an elevation of about 1650 meters above sea level, Batu has a reasonably warm climate that is never too hot thanks to the sea breeze from Lake Dambal. It is here that most people go to enjoy the beautiful Lake Dambal. Walking across streets in Batu we felt relaxed. Stands serving fried fish and fried bread abound, and we got to taste more of that Great Rift Valley bounty. The shades of the larger trees are also used as coffee shops where you can sip at freshly brewed coffee while the smell of frankincense fills the air. And in true fashion of the valley, the vendors also serve their coffee with milk, something common in these parts. Strolling through the town, it doesn't take much before you spot a street leading to the lake. Some of these streets pass by renowned resorts and others are quite inconspicuous until you reach a canopy of trees and see the vast Lake Dambal spread before you.

*The stories of Dambal and the stories of many of the Great Rift Valley lakes are more connected than they seem at first.*

We found Batu to be a perfect getaway destination. You're never that far away from the lake anywhere in the town. Batu boasts some great dining options and is also really easy to get to now that the highway from Modjo is officially open. But there was a lot more of the valley for us to see, and so we kept driving past Batu and Adami Tullu on our way to the next destination.

The stories of Dambal and the stories of many of the Great Rift Valley lakes are more connected than they seem at first. The Awash river branches off giving rise to the Meqi river which feeds into Lake Dambal. At the southwestern edge of Dambal, right by the town of Batu, the river Bulbula flows out. Bulbula is quite a mighty river if only its story didn't end when it joins Lake Abijata just 40kms away. But before it reaches its final destination, Bulbula passes through its eponymous town, a place known for serving as a convenient stop to buy water and other necessities one requires on the way to Shashemene.



A view of the swampy area by the Bochessa Peninsula at Lake Dambal  Arganne Markos

*A view of the shores of Lake Abijata  
and the ever present acacia trees*  
📍 Ashenafi Yemane

# ABIJATA

Following the main road out of Bulbula for a few kilometers, you find signs installed by the side of the road advertising resorts and lodges. These are mostly found on the left though since most of these establishments are built by the shores of Lake Langano. To the right are the two lakes of Abijata and Shalla. These twin lakes can be accessed via dirt roads that lead past small villages into the interior of the Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park they're part of.

They say Abijata is an alkaline lake and you really don't have to get that close to see there's something different about it. Boulders polished to a uniform texture meet you on your approach to the shore. You can see marks from when the lake used to submerge the boulders in the form of white lines, the type of lines freshwater lakes don't make.

The closer you get, the better you see what the lake's alkaline water does to the surrounding geology. Unlike other lakes, there's not much vegetation on the shore, except a few patches of grass growing in small walled off ponds close by. As you walk along the shore stepping in the unbelievably fine sand, you are greeted by the chirping of birds that have made the lake their home. Despite the alkalinity, Abijata is home to several species of birds and especially the Flamingos thrive eating the algae growing in the lake's corrosive waters.

As visitors though, the incredible silence of the shore only broken by the singing of birds or the small waves washing across soft sand was what captivated us. Spending a few minutes there makes you feel like you can spend days on end here, undistrubed and at peace.

# SHALLA

Once back on the main road after Lake Abijata, we drove for a few minutes past small huts and shops selling water. Another right turn onto a dirt road had us speeding through quaint rift valley villages with their characteristic Lafto (acacia) trees. The dirt road leading down was quite nice and soon enough we could see it.

Ethiopia's deepest lake and one of its most saline - the magnificent Lake Shalla was spread below as far as the eye could see. At a maximum depth of an unimaginable 277 meters, Shalla is many times deeper than every other lake in Ethiopia. The strange geology and geography that gave rise to the Shalla is not the type you can just explain away by saying valley equals lowland. But you really don't have to try that hard either as evidence abounds to the strange origins of the lake.

As you get close to the shore which resembles Abijata in many ways including the fine sand along its shore, you see steam rising. Small streams coming from somewhere behind some ditches by the lake are smoking. Following the streams you find an expansive and muddy hot spring where energy within the earth boils the water creating an ever larger pond of scalding water. You can buy some eggs or corn to cook in these waters if you want to, but the best part of the hot springs is sitting by some boulders (carefully, of course) and enjoying the wave of steam rising from the surface. Shalla is exciting. You can feel its depth by just looking at the surface and the evidence of energy from within the earth only adds to its allure. Once we were all steamed up, we hit the dirt paths again back to the main road.

Lake Langano at sunrise  
📷 Arganne Markos

# LANGANO





The most popular Great Rift Valley lake was our destination next. Langano has been synonymous with vacationing for quite a long time thanks to the many resorts and lodges built there a long time ago. And unlike Shalla or Abijata, there aren't one or two dirt roads leading to the lake, but at least half a dozen. Every resort or lodge has its own 4 or 5 kilometer long dirt road to the shore making this one of the most accessible lakes.

When we approached Langano, we did so via the old Bekele Molla Hotel which was quite in disrepair but features one of the best beaches of the lake. On approaching the shore, we saw large trees whose canopies have created a nice shade for people to lounge under

after they go into the water. The beaches are on the western side of the lake, so the sun rises above the waters in the morning creating a spectacular golden sunrise that is unbeatable. Walking on the beach, inches deep into the soft sand is an experience on par with more renowned seashores of much bigger seas.

The warm air of the valley and the breeze coming from the lake create what your body can only interpret as vacation weather. Langano takes this to another level with its many resorts where modern amenities are not only present but significantly add to the experience of enjoying the lake, and enjoy we did!



# LAKE LANGANO ACTIVITIES



The beautiful beaches of Lake Langano Ephream Sileshi



Sand bathing by the shores of Lake Langano Mule Abitew



Jet Skiing at Lake Langano Arganne Markos



Camping by the shores of Lake Langano Mule Abitew



Lounging under the shade by the shores of Lake Langano Arganne Markos

Outside of Oromia, the Great Rift Valley continues into the Sidama and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regions. While many of its most striking features come from the fact that it cuts the highlands of Oromia in two, the valley still makes a point of being the most interesting geography in the south.

Immediately after the three lakes of Abijata, Shalla, and Langano is Lake Hawassa. This lake is among the smallest in the valley, but is definitely a significant one in terms of what it has done for the city. Hawassa is literally and practically synonymous with its lake dubbed "Fiqir Hayq" - the lake of love by its locals. The capital of the Sidama regional state is fiercely proud of the lake its residents go to on Sunday afternoons for recreation and the delicious fried fish sold by the shores. In the town of Bishan Gurracha on the Oromia side, the lake features a captivating sunset that makes silhouettes out of large Sholla trees and the increasingly striking skyline of Hawassa.

## *Following the Great Rift Valley from the town of Modjo through Meqi and Batu, you get a sense of what it means among the towering highlands of Oromia.*

The story of the Great Rift Valley continues south of Hawassa too with lakes that are even bigger such as the Abaya in SNNP, the biggest among the Great Rift Valley lakes of Ethiopia, and Turkana in Kenya.

Following the Great Rift Valley from the town of Modjo through Meqi and Batu to the capital of Sidama, you get a sense of what the valley means among the towering highlands of Oromia. A trip such as this is a chance to learn about geology and how it affects us. It is a study in how geography determines our ways of life. The valley bisects some of the mightiest mountains in all of Africa in two and introduces land formations that allow for bodies of water and climate not possible in the highlands. It is arid, but hosts massive lakes and mighty rivers. It is sunny, but is never overwhelmingly hot as it is a valley for the highlands and even at its lowest point, does not dip below uncomfortable levels in Oromia. The stories of the Great Rift Valley do not start or stop in Oromia. It's too big a feature for that. But, perhaps, it is in Oromia where it complements the land around it so well, becoming a valley of bounty and recreation.



*A view of the eastern shore of Lake Hawassa and the eponymous city* 📍 Ashenafi Yemane



*A view of the hot spring by the shores of Lake Shalla. Little streams drain the scalding hot water into the lake.* 📍 Ashenafi Yemane




*An Ostrich at the Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park*





## ***The Shalla Hot Spring***

is a geological marvel gushing out a sizable stream of scalding water into the immensely deep Lake Shalla. Located right by the lake, the hot spring is a great stop to enjoy some steaming water and its purported medicinal benefits  Ashenafi Yemane

# THE FLAMINGOS OF CHITU

## THE PINK IN THE VALLEY

**O**ne of the most spectacular sights of the natural world is found in a watery wilderness of the Great Rift Valley in Oromia. The valley is home to several lakes and attracts large flocks of birds that come seeking the bountiful waters. It is here that some of the largest flocks of Flamingos congregate, coming from as far away in Tanzania in search of the alkaline lakes they are uniquely attracted to. The Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park fulfills these conditions and it is here that the most dramatic of these spectacles can be viewed.

The park is named after the name of two of its lakes. Lake Abijata is an alkaline lake that is connected to Lake Dambal via the Bulbula river and is named after an Oromo elder that lived in the area called Abbaa Jattaa. Lake Shalla is Ethiopia's deepest lake at more than 277 meters and its name comes from the Oromo word for Flamingo - Shaaloo, despite the lake not being a preferred destination for the birds. In fact, the lake that sees some of

the most spectacular displays of avian life is a third, much smaller lake called Chitu found to the southwest of Shalla.

Now, the question should be why Flamingos love these lakes with their harsh alkaline water. Fish cannot survive in these waters and so it is quite puzzling why so many birds would come to feed here. The answer lies in the pink color of the Flamingos. The Flamingos get their characteristic pink color from the carotenoid pigments of the algae that they feed on. And it is these algae that prefer these alkaline waters. The word Flamingo means "flame colored" and was even used as the glyph for the color red in ancient Egypt hieroglyphics. Flamingos aren't always pink though, and are actually hatched gray. The more they eat these algae and grow older, the more pink they get.

# WILDLIFE

*Flamingos feeding in Lake Chitu. The pink color is a result of the algae they eat.*


 Ashenafi Yemane





*Flamingos feeding while cows graze by the shores of Lake Chitu in the Spring (Birraa)* 📷 Arganne Markos




An aerial photograph of a dark, alkaline lake. A large, semi-transparent red arrow points from the right side of the frame towards the lake. The surrounding landscape is a mix of brown, grey, and green, indicating a dry, mineral-rich environment. The water in the lake is very dark, almost black, and has a grainy texture.

*Fish cannot survive in these waters and so it is quite puzzling why so many birds would come to feed here.*

Standing at a little less than a meter, the lesser Flamingo travels thousands of kilometers in search of these alkaline waters. After they find the lakes, they'd still need something to protect their bodies from the corrosive waters, and this is where their tough leg skins come into play. Their legs are also long, raising their body above the waters while they feed on the lakes' bounty.

Flamingos are extremely social birds, forming some of the largest avian flocks in the world. These massive flocks help to protect Flamingos from predators and use scarce nesting sites more efficiently. Flamingo colonies do everything together from eating and sleeping to mating, which they announce by doing a special kind of dance together.



An aerial photograph of Lake Chittu, showing a large, dark body of water surrounded by a light-colored, sandy or silty shoreline. A massive flock of flamingos is scattered across the water, appearing as small white and pink specks. The background shows some sparse, dry vegetation on the land.

*Flamingos in Lake Chittu  
as seen from above*

■ Ashenafi Yemane

**B**ut their social nature does not stop there. Flamingos, much like humans, are romantic birds and make friends for life. Choosing a mate among Flamingos is a process that includes quite elaborate courtship behavior with synchronized dancing and all. Once the courtship is successful, the Flamingos mate. Once the female Flamingo has laid an egg, both parties contribute to building a nest and protecting the egg.

Despite the massive flocks, Flamingos are vocal birds and identify one another based on the sounds they make. This is how parents recognize their chick and it is something to behold to hear a large flock of Flamingos calling out to each other.

At the smaller Lake Chitu, all of this is on display. Not only are the flocks of Flamingos there massive, but the lake also happens to have large cliffs all around it from which one can get a top-down view of how this marvel of nature plays out. The daily life of Flamingos is as meditative to watch as it is fascinating. From high up, you can see the flocks feeding while also marching together in synchronicity. And once in a while, a bird or two will tuck one of their legs under their torso standing on the other leg. Why they do this isn't very clear, but maybe it is something you'll need to try and figure out as you follow them from atop Lake Chitu.

# SHASHEMENE

## THE SOUTH GATE

*“I could see why everyone speaks of Shashemene in the tones they do, with reverence and perhaps a bit of deference.”*

It was barely past 5:00 when I left my hotel room and headed out into the chilly Shashemene morning. The sun wouldn't come up for at least another hour, but this didn't seem to have registered with the many small shops gearing up to serve fresh coffee, tea, and fried bread to travelers. Hoping to catch an early bus to the capital, I had chosen a hotel close to the bus station – an establishment that had seen better days, but still has decent rooms and service by the grand name of Sikkoo Mandoo – the moieties the Arsi Oromo of Shashemene and its environs belonged to – and it was proving very convenient when after 2 minutes or so of walking in between streets temporarily serving as kitchen to boil water for tea and coffee, I arrived at the main station from which mainly minibuses, but also standard sized buses were dispatched to all different parts of the country. The conductors for the buses were yelling the names of places that I only thought existed on maps and travel to which I only ever considered in the most abstract of forms. Small towns in the deep south of Ethiopia, cities on the border between Kenya and Ethiopia – places the names of which you're bound to have heard, but might not have considered how you'd get there if you needed to travel there. “Sodo! Sodo! Sodo!” yells one, “Yabello, Yabello” yells another, “Arba Minch! Arba Minch!”, “Dilla, Dilla” yells one guy standing between two minibuses and the people follow the yelling and they get into the minibuses and the minibuses fill up and leave and more minibuses come in and people head to those ones and on and on. I could see why everyone speaks of Shashemene in the tones they do, with reverence and perhaps a bit of deference. South Ethio-



A statue of Shaashee, the Arsi Oromo lady who founded the town of Shashemene

Arganne Markos

CITY  
WATCH

pia starts here and Shashemene connects it all to the rest of the country. I finally trudged along the crowds on hearing the capital's name called, got into the minibus commandeered by its conductor and via the newly built Modjo-Hawassa highway, I was home in less than 3 hours. But I had seen enough of Shashemene to be curious for real now. I had a measure of how significant this city was and I knew I had to go back and visit it from page one.

My second visit to Shashemene wasn't rushed. I didn't have to stay at a hotel close to the bus station, and I didn't have to try and figure out the city in the twilight. I had all the sunlight that I needed to see what Shashe, as it is endearingly called, is all about. This time, I arrived in the morning having spent some time in the other Great Rift Valley towns and was not at all surprised to find that Shashe was a morning city. Everyone and everything was busy by 7:30 – something not even the gargantuan capital, Finfinnee, can boast. Shoe Shines had already greeted their second and third customers, small coffee stands were already on their second kettle of the brown elixir which people in Shashe normally have with some milk and Bajajs had ferried a few round trips of commuters.

They say food is the best way to get to know a place, and so it was for me and my partner that Saturday morning in Shashemene. We were in a relatively newer part of the town and it didn't take long for us to see a row of large restaurants and cafes which had all hung pictures of appealing breakfast on their windows. We chose one on the 1st floor of a large building, as much for the view as for the several patrons already seated there. We thought it must be really good if it gets this busy so early in the morning. And it was. There was only one waiter serving those out on the terrace, no less than 10 tables. He was flying from table to table and back to the kitchen trying to get everyone's orders out in time. We ordered Chechebsa, a delicacy all over Oromia and coffee with milk to go with it. While the food was being prepared, we got to see Shashemene in action down below.

Lively would be how I would describe the whole of Shashemene. At some places, the city is really laid back and people sit and sip their coffee comfortably. At others, every-

thing moves so fast that for some it might look like something bad had happened. In general though, Shashemene is a very industrious city where business is king. From its mechanics to the shoeshines, from the Bajaj drivers to its cafes, Shashemene is a city built on serving.

Our Chechebsa came and we were taken aback at the quantity of it at first. The word Chechebsa means 'cut into little pieces' in Afaan Oromoo. It is a traditional Oromo breakfast made with pieces of a thin freshly baked bread mashed with butter. Recently, this breakfast has become extremely popular across the country including the capital Finfinnee where even the fanciest hotels serve it. Here in Shashemene, Chechebsa is on the menu of almost all eateries, and ours had brought us a bowl full of it. The accompanying coffee with milk (ordering a Macchiato would also get you the same result around, I noticed) was delicious. Not surprising though as both ingredients, i.e. the coffee and milk, would be fresh and tasty as well. We dug in, crushing the little pieces of buttered and spiced up bread with our teeth and sending them down with shots of the generous amount of coffee. It was rich and the crunchiness makes it the perfect breakfast as it goes so well with hot drinks too.

A little over halfway in, neither of us could eat anymore. Our bellies were full and we needed whatever space we had left for some snacks later on. When the bill came was when we realized we weren't in the depressingly expensive capital anymore. The total for two bowls of Chechebsa, coffee

and some water to go couldn't buy you the one plate in Finfinnee. We thanked our ever busy waiter, and went out to explore the gargantuan capital of West Arsi.

Since we were so close already, our first stop was the village where most Rastafarians live - Melka Oda. Meaning the "River of the Sycamore Tree", this neighborhood not only had a large presence of Rastafarians, but many of their esteemed institutions including the 12 Tribes of Israel compound and the Tabernacle (a church) the community worships at. Our first stop was the 12 Tribes of Israel compound where we were greeted by the overseer there who met us at the gate leading into the large compound. On entering it, the walls to our right are covered with a distinctive style of art of the Rastafarian community interspersed with quotes from the likes of Bob Marley and Marcus Garvey. The big house in the middle was a whole big canvas itself with colors, figures, and quotes covering much of its visible surface. While showing us around this fascinating compound, the overseer told us about the story of the first Rastafarians that came to settle here back during the imperial era. It is a fascinating tale

*I arrived in the morning and was not at all surprised that Shashe was a morning city.*

of black consciousness, British imperialism and a version of Pan-Africanism the then imperial Ethiopia promoted. Soon after, we also got to see the church, which was filled with drums of all kinds.

The highlight of our visit to the church came when the guide there decided to beat the drum in tune with our heartbeats - a lovely gesture that gave us a little insight into Reggae music.



A group of Arsi Oromo women dressed in traditional outfits photographed in Shashemene ■ Arganne Markos

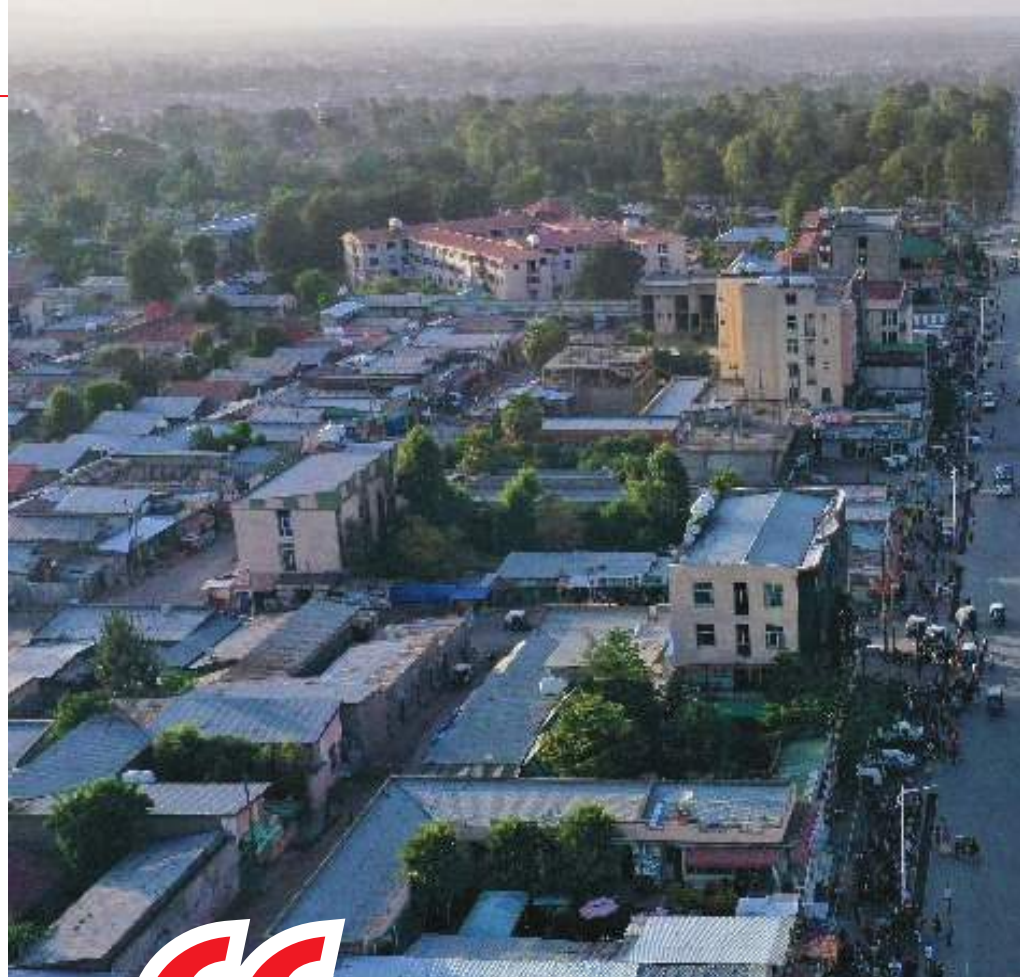
After saying goodbye to the Rastafarians of Shashemene, we went looking for the story of Shashe herself, the woman that made a city.

More than a hundred years ago, historians recount, there was a woman named Shashe. An Arsi Oromo trader whose little shop in the middle of this part of Arsi was where people went for their daily dose of Farsoo - the local beer. It was said that travelers would make appointments to meet there, saying "Mana Shaashee" - Shashe's House. This morphed into the name Shashemene when more people settled around. The city is today one of the largest in the whole of Ethiopia, and the most important town for much of its southern parts. The city administration and cultural groups have erected two statues of Shashe in the city she founded. Dressed in the cultural outfits of the Arsi Oromo and holding her Siinqee - an embellished stick presented to a woman on her wedding day - Shashe stands proud, overlooking what was once the fields her patrons strutted across to get to her little watering hole.

We walked through the hustle and bustle of the city to get to one of those statues. It was found in a small fenced off recreational area that served as an outdoor restaurant. Itittuu (the local yogurt) was served here as well as, of course, coffee. The women inside shared with us stories of her. The conversation took a turn into the traditions of the Siinqee, and how it was associated with power among Oromos across Oromia. Dressed in their magnificent traditional clothes, the women suggested if we would like to be blessed in the traditions of the Arsi Oromo, we gladly said yes and the blessings started. The women stood in opposite rows and raised their Siinqees above their heads and pointed them towards the opposite row. They then asked us to walk under this canopy of embellished sticks. As we did so, they blessed us with wet grass. It was a beautiful ceremony, however impromptu, and when we walked out of the little green area back into the busy city, the feeling of elation was still with us.

Our next stop would have us see what many dub "Shashemene's Mercato", in reference to the massive open air market in Finfinnee. Travel in Shashemene is efficient and cheap mostly because of the ubiquitous 3-wheeled scooters, named Bajajs that charge you 20-50 birr per trip depending on how far the destination is. They are small enough to always find a way through and fast enough on the straights that getting anywhere within the city is never a worry. We took one of those Bajajs and headed to the busiest part of town that late Saturday morning.

You know when you've reached Aposto. The pace changes. The noise goes up several

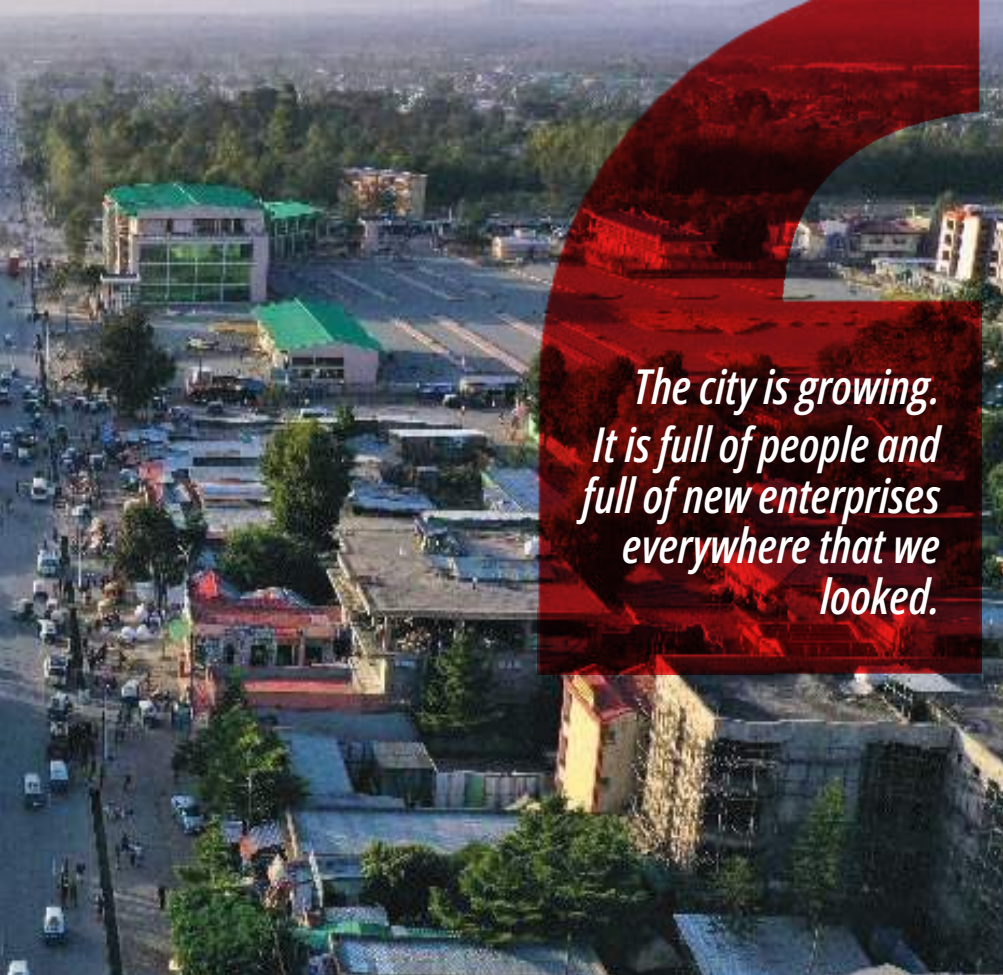


*More than a hundred years ago, historians recount, there was a woman named Shashe, an Arsi Oromo trader who had a little shop in these parts.*

decibels and the architecture resembles that of many colonial marketplaces in the horn region. Shashemene's business district is the engine that drives commerce within the city and with other towns and villages across southern Oromia. The small ground level or one/two storey concrete buildings that dominate Aposto make grids that don't always line up. Shops open quite early in the morning with traders raising the rolling garage-like doors up into their pouches and intentionally spilling some of their merchandise out into the street. Like most markets in Ethiopian towns, Aposto is also sectioned into different parts that sell one particular type of merchandise. There are parts that sell apparel and those that trade in cereals. There are parts that sell household utensils and

parts for fruits and vegetables. But it is not just the shops in the colonial buildings that make Aposto such a bustling market, but also the thousands of traders that sell their goods out on the street. From items such as phone cases to souvenirs, from bananas to samosas (locally called sambusa), the streets of Aposto are filled with hawkers and traders selling anything and everything one might go to the market for. While it serves as the major market for a large part of Ethiopia including much of the south, Aposto is also where residents of Shashemene come to get goods at discount retail prices. We walked along the streets, nodding at merchants offering their goods and others inviting us in to take a look at their products.

Cars honk at each other, looking to offload their goods and carry merchandise meant for other towns out as soon as they can. The outskirts of Aposto cater to servicing cars, and are home to some of the most renowned mechanic shops around. This is where trucks that haul the merchandise traded in Aposto are serviced. Aposto is a world unto itself. It's an immensely significant part of town that makes Shashemene a powerhouse of commerce for hundreds of kilometers around. A stroll around this busy part of town is interesting not just for the colors and the smells and the sounds, but also



*The city is growing.  
It is full of people and  
full of new enterprises  
everywhere that we  
looked.*

*Views of Shashemene in the afternoon*  
Ashenafi Yemane



*A horse-drawn cart is loaded with firewood past a large Harbuu tree on the outskirts of Shashemene*  
Arganne Markos

for all the different types of people its commerce invites in. People from as far away as Guji and Borana, Wolaytta Soddo and Arba Minch and much of Arsi and Bale come to Aposto to sell their produce and truck home goods to sell there. This is also where the other towns of the Great Rift Valley as well as the capital get fresh produce from southern Ethiopia trucked to them from.

We exited Aposto on an old Bajaj and went looking for lunch. Another of Shashemene's allures is the sheer number of convenient eateries you find regardless of which part of town you are in. This time we opted for a kind of restaurant we have been seeing all morning. These restaurants have fairly large well kept gardens and convenient outdoor seating. There aren't that many places in the capital due to exorbitant land prices cramming everything into large multi-storey buildings, but in Shashemene they seem to be a common variety. The place we chose, DH Green Park Hotel, had a luxuriously large green area with comfortable seats under shades. We ordered meaty dishes, and waited enjoying one of those non-alcoholic malt drinks that have taken over in the breezy air of Shashemene. Our lunch arrived soon. It was buttery minced meat with lamb cooked in generous amounts of spices and vegetables along with the broth. It was delicious and filling. As is the custom, we ordered coffee from the girl dressed in the traditional Arsi Oromo outfit after lunch and went off to explore more of Shashemene once we emptied the little cups.

The city is growing. It is full of people and full of new enterprises everywhere we looked. The fact that it is only about 30 kilometers away from Hawassa, the capital of Sidama, just gives it an added value proposition. There are five roads leading into Shashemene, and four of those are extremely important routes for much of southern and southeastern Ethiopia. In addition to the many bustling centers such as Aposto and 01, these major roads into the city have also created their own little commercial neighborhoods where goods coming via those roads are sold at. The city also hosts a slew of international standard hotels and resorts for meetings and luxury stays. It really is a city that has it all.

A tour through Shashemene assures you of one major thing about the city – that it is a place where the fundamentals work. Its economy is solid, an alluring facet that is drawing in many new residents. Its people are friendly and industrious and its establishments dispense some of the best services. Shashemene seems to be living up to its foundational story of a place where everyone gets together, and for a traveler, this is as good as it gets.

# THE ARSI OROMO

WALKESSA



**T**he Arsi are one of the largest Oromo groups inhabiting much of central, south central and eastern Oromia. The Arsi Oromo are members of the Barentu moiety and live as part of the Sikkoo-Mandoo Gadaa federation.

## THE ARSI HEROES

The Arsi Oromo had made names for themselves even before Menelik's armies started making moves against them. The Arsi Oromo defended their land against imperial aggression for more than 6 years, severely weakening Menelik's armies. Heroes such as Lenjiso Digga made sure everyone far and wide knew the Arsi were not to be taken lightly, defeating Menelik's armies several times across the highlands of south central Oromia.

## THE LAND OF THE ARSI

The Arsi Oromo primarily live in the three zones of Arsi, West Arsi, and Bale. The Arsi Oromo occupy lands such as large parts of the Great Rift Valley, the Arsi and Bale mountains and plains, where rivers such as Wabe, Weyib, and Genale rise from. These lands are also home to most of Oromia's highest mountains.

## THE PEOPLE OF THE SIKKOO-MANDOO

The Arsi Gadaa system is the Sikkoo-Mandoo Gadaa federation meeting under the Odaa Robaa in Bale. The system was severely weakened after the imperial wars against the Arsi Oromo, but has been revived recently and is a major part of Arsi Oromo traditional celebrations today.

## THE ELDERS OF PEACE

Jaarsummaa is one of the most advanced and effective conflict resolution and criminal justice systems ever devised. The system relies on a group of elders whose power means that no party can move against anyone while a case is being handled by them. The Jaarsummaa system to date handles some of the heaviest cases and is credited with a high level of security in all of the Arsi lands

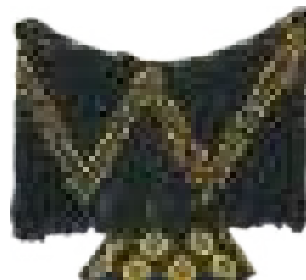


Sehin Tewahebe

## SIINQEE

The Siinqee is a system symbolized by an embellished stick that empowers women in the Gadaa system. Arsi Oromo women take Siinqee very seriously and bestow the honor upon a newlywed, inducting her into their sisterhood.





Abinet Teshome



Abinet Teshome



Abinet Teshome

### MARRIAGE AMONG THE ARSI

Among the Arsi marriages are ways of connecting clans (gosa) together and, thus, are taken very seriously by families. One notable way of marrying among the Arsi is for the man to offer his sister or someone close to him (as long as she is part of his gosa) to the gosa of the girl he wants to marry. This exchange style marriage has been going out of favor lately, but was a very popular method just a few decades ago.

### THE MAKING OF AN ARSI OROMO

If someone wants to become an Arsi, to be a member of an Arsi gosa, then he is taken in by a family in a ceremony where the patriarch of that family suckles the person while undergoing a ritual blessing. Once this ceremony is over, the person becomes an Arsi Oromo.

### THE LAND OF CEREALS AND DAIRY

The Arsi Oromo have a very rich culinary culture that includes cereals, dairy, and meat. Some of the most popular dishes in Arsi are the Marqaa, Caccabsaa, Cukkoo, Marmaree, etc. The Arsi are also dairy lovers and even have songs about their beloved cows.





Arganne Markos

### THE TIRRII

Music in Arsi is usually a communal affair where a group of men sing one line and a group of women follow with the next line. This same musical style is accompanied by the Tirrii dance which is done in two rows of men and women.

### ARSI AND BALE

While some people do refer to themselves as Bale, most agree that the Arsi and Bale Oromo are part of the same group of Oromos. The Arsi and Bale Oromos share a Gadaa, an Odaa in the Odaa Robaa and most of their customs and traditions.



### WOMEN'S BLESSING

Among the Arsi Oromo, the blessing of mothers, and of Siinqee women is considered sacred. As such, during ceremonies women of the Siinqee sisterhood stand facing each other in two rows and hold their Siinqee sticks above their heads creating a canopy of sorts. People walk under this canopy holding grass while the women bless them. Severely weakened after the imperial wars against the Arsi Oromo, but has been revived recently and is

a major part of Arsi Oromo traditional celebrations today.

Abinet Teshome





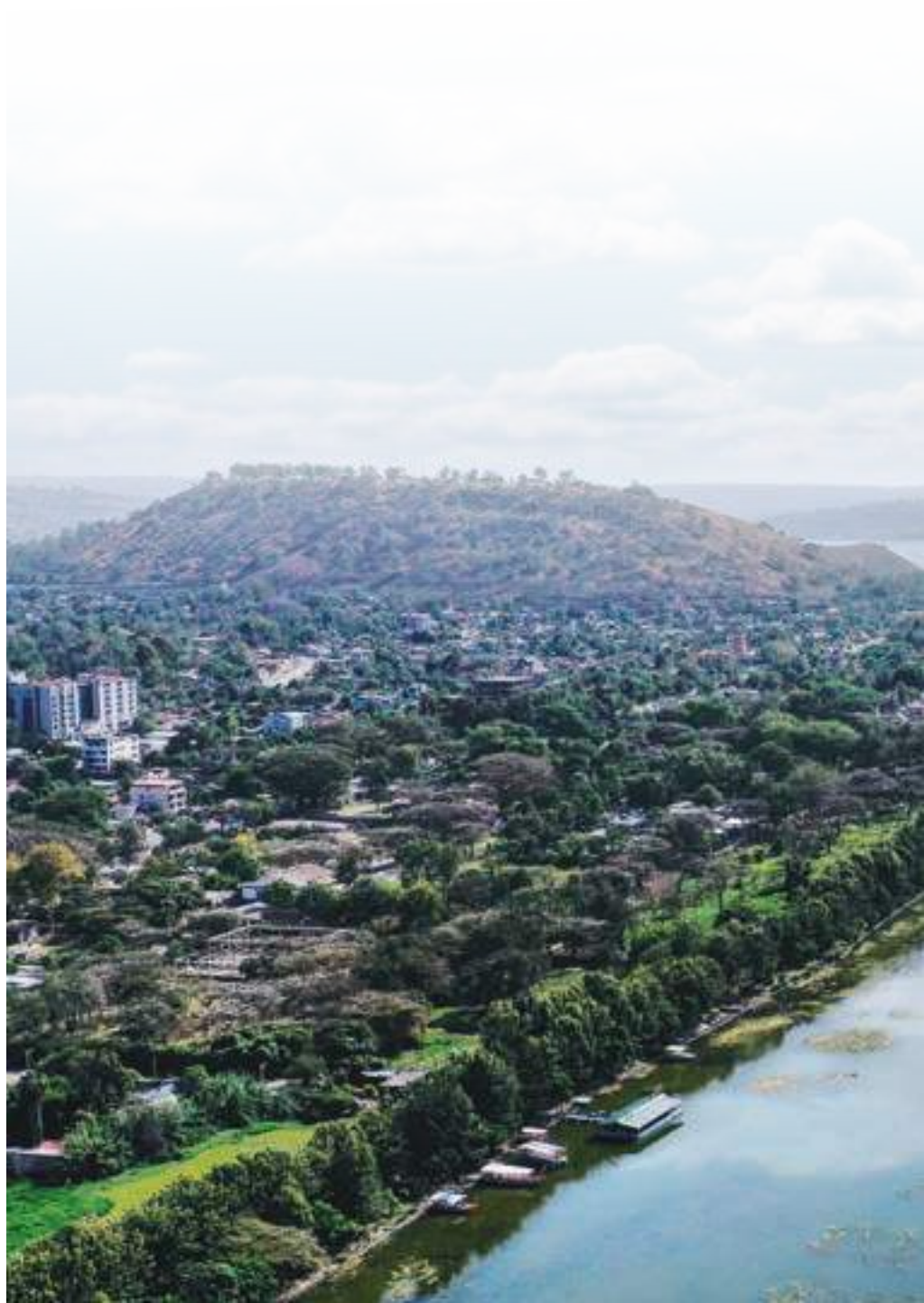
# HAWASSA

## PEARL OF THE SOUTH

*The city of Hawassa and Lake Hawassa with Mount Tabor in the background*

 Ashenafi Yemane

OLLA



**T**hey say travel is an antidote for the gloomy skies and muddy waters, it is one that grants comfort for those who are willing to sail off into the unknown. For such spoken words of wisdom, I responded with an affirmation and it was that affirmation that took me along to Hawassa. Whether you're driving or flying to Hawassa, convenience is the rule of the game and it shouldn't consume more than 5 hours of your time to get to the city. I'd recommend driving down to Hawassa if you don't want to overlook the graces of the Ethiopian south. The paved roads are all tarmac through Oromia and uniform into the seat of the Sidama National Regional Government of Hawassa, Shashamane is placed in the close environs of Hawassa and stop by to have lunch with a side of juice that bustles with natural flavors.

My sun-baked self made it to Hawassa at around 3 pm, after which I insisted to my fellow travelers that we should make haste to the hotel and unpack before rebooting [through a shower and snack] to set off on

foot into the city. Blessed by all the meticulous planning that went on beforehand, we didn't have to gallivant about in search of accommodation. Ker-Awud International Hotel, located opposite the street from the Sidama heroes' museum was our destination. The concierge was extremely accommodating of our needs and even showed us the rooms before the group could make a decision as to what fits their budget or not. I paid my due for a single standard room which I found to be more spacious than I was expecting, it would be criminal of me not to mention that the room came with one amazing perk, the balcony. Full homage to it, I was able to set my vision, uninterrupted, upon Lake Hawassa and for inexplicable reasons, I felt one and whole with the waters, it offered an ironically distant yet close peace. I could have sworn to paused on that balcony for what seemed like an awfully long time, even though it wouldn't have been in the excess of a minute or so. I grounded myself back to the hindrances of time and how the group agreed to meet up in 30 minutes for a meal downstairs.



# M

y Afro pick was struggling against time as much as it was with the premature Afro I was attempting to grow, my phone rang in the midst of all this. It was my uncle, he implored me to come downstairs as everybody else had already re-grouped in the lobby. People had started eating by the time I got there, I frisked through the menu before choosing a mundane sandwich. I ripped through that sandwich like I was in a competition and put out a loud request to the entire group that we should leave right that very moment.

So we started walking in a slightly scorching sun that I underestimated for that hour of the day. My uncle, who had already been to the city before, suggested we go for a hike on Tabor mountain. When I asked him what it had to offer, he replied that the view atop was impeccable. We brazed through an hour of intense sun to make it to the mountain and this was before our ascent to the top even began. The climb was filled with family banter and occasional complaints of 'where is this top?'. We would run into three little boys who were intrigued by the phones we had and in a reserved but also demanding manner as if we could take their photos. We did and they caught a momentary glimpse of their photos before laughing and running back to the shade of the tree they left initially.

I remember my uncle recalling how their innocence reminded him of his childhood days of rearing cattle with his brothers. So it was a hike that was meaningful for both of us, for me, it was an experience I had not lived hitherto as life in the capital renders not much besides ruckus, long queues and congestion so I was living this again but for my uncle he was reliving his memories in brief pauses of silence he took from encouraging to push on with the climb.

I feel most triumphant at the top for the worth of the hike paid off in laying my eyes on the entire city of Hawassa in rotating view. The lake, growing metropolitanism and subsequently parts of the city resisting the waves of that modernization in green splendor. It was as if the clouds were narrating this story of many worlds, Hawassa's story, and I was hearing faint murmurs of it. I carried that with me as we demounted back to the city. The Hike has most of us feeling hungry again so we descended upon Time Cafe, a famous gathering spot for youngins and old folks alike in Hawassa, and for good reason which I was going to find out, it was really busy. Orders were flying left and right to a symphony of unfiltered chatter from the clientele. The Beef and Cheese Club Sandwich comes highly underrated, I'm yet to find a place in

“*The Hike has most of us feeling hungry again so we descended upon Time Cafe, a famous gathering spot for youngins and old folks alike in Hawassa.*”

*The iconic statue of Sidama heroes erected at the city center in Hawassa*  
Arganne Markos

the capital that serves this combination with the same taste and consistency the staff at Time Cafe did. If you ever find yourself in Hawassa, please make sure to have a bite of this earthly delicacy, you shan't be displeased.

The few hours of activities we went along with created an imposing sense of fatigue so I went straight to bed as soon as we got back to the hotel. We were going to spend one more day in Hawassa before returning in the late hours of the afternoon and hence I didn't want to sleep in the next day. The early mornings of the next day were preoccupied by a complimentary breakfast buffet which I didn't hesitate to take advantage of. Following a full night's sleep and contented breakfast, I, in solitude, set to check out the museum staring the hotel from the side, the Sidama Cultural Center from across the street. It was a quiet park with a very courteous guard at the gate. I asked if I could look around and he responded affirmatively. The compound is flanked by life-size

Statuary tributes to Sidama heroes said to have exhibited valor in the historical resistance of the Sidama

people. At the end of the row of statues is an auditorium which I was told hosted different events of significance. Humbled by the amicable character of the guard, I thanked him for his generosity to which he retorted, 'you don't need to thank me for doing my job.' Taken aback by this candid statement, I just shook my head with a smile and walked out the gates.

The rest of the family was in the middle of being allocated different bajaj's , a local version of the Indian tuktuk, to what would be a drive to Fikir Hayik, roughly translated as Lake of Love. We grabbed ourselves seats by the shore of the lake and ordered fried fish, as was tradition there. The fried fish with local 'datta' was exquisite beyond measure and we weren't the only ones eyeing the meal as Marabou Storks, called Aba Koda by the locals, limped to our table before doing a formidably calm walk across the table before returning to the waters. It was such a stunning intimacy of proximity with an animal whose appearance isn't so pleasing to one's sight.

As we were going back to our hotel, I caught a gaze of a momentous statue in the distance and asked the driver what it was, he told me it was the statue of Woldeamanuel Dubale Hankarso and even offered me a detour to see the statue up close. I snapped at the opportunity and within 10 minutes, found myself at the feet of the stowering dedication to WoldeAmanuel Dubale Hankarso. On the

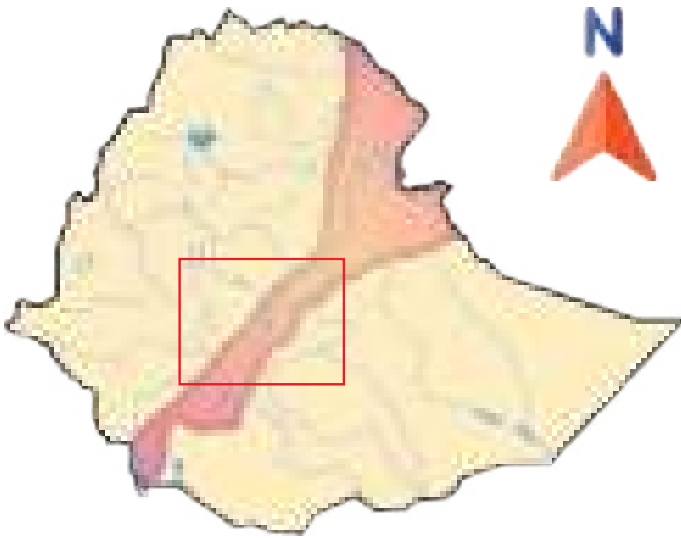
sides are inscribed his life story and endeavors [in multiple languages] towards the Sidama struggle of self-determination. The face is sculpted in a daunting stern, as if they were trying to convey that Woldeamanuel had known he did his due and done, the men, women and children of Sidama proud. Seeing the statue was a lasting gesture of farewell to the city that showed me compassion and beauty, unreserved.

I embarked upon that bajaj for a final ride to the hotel, but also a final ride across Hawassa, vowing to myself that I was to come back, a vow I shall keep.

*Daa'e  
Boshu*

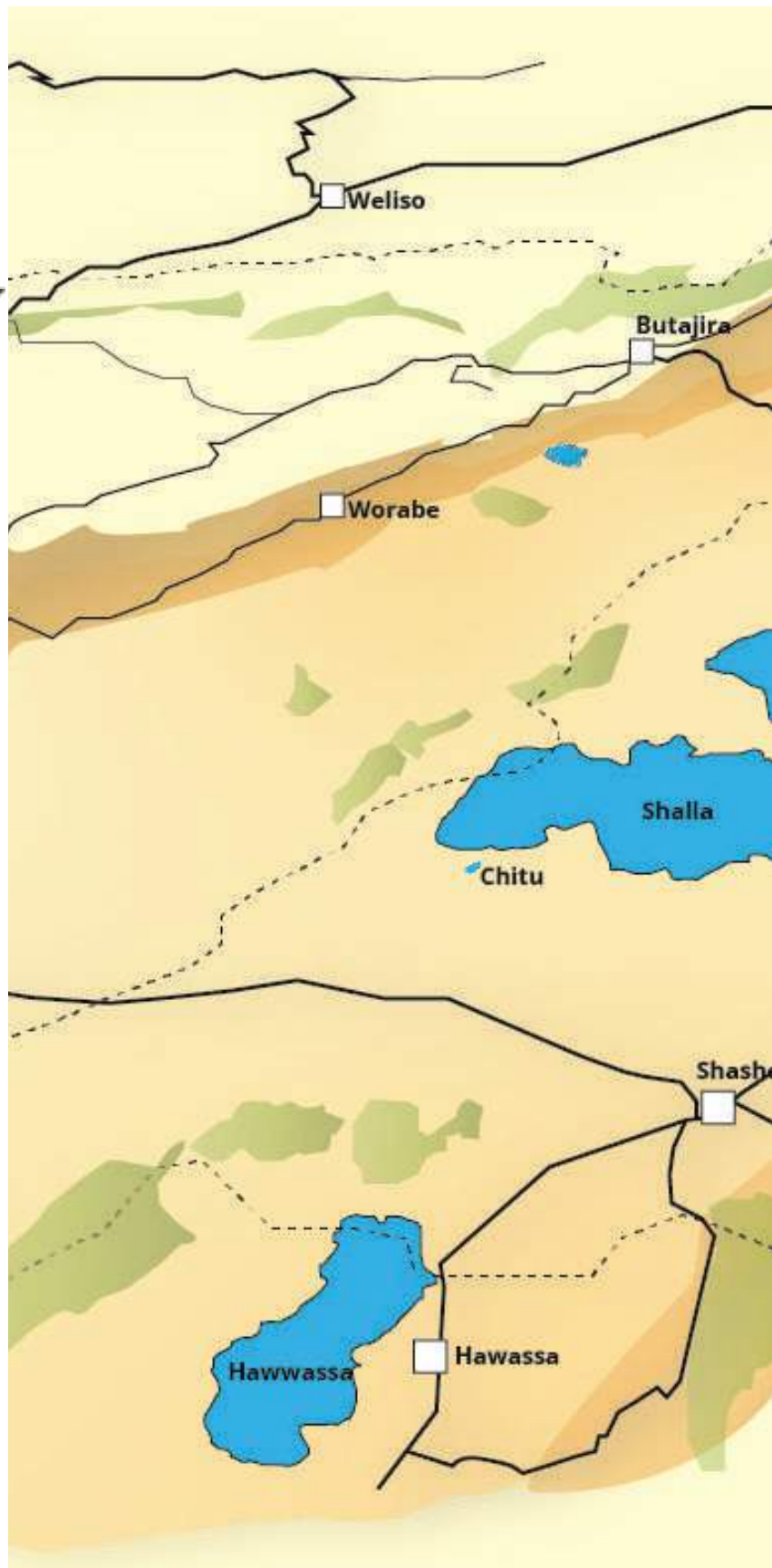


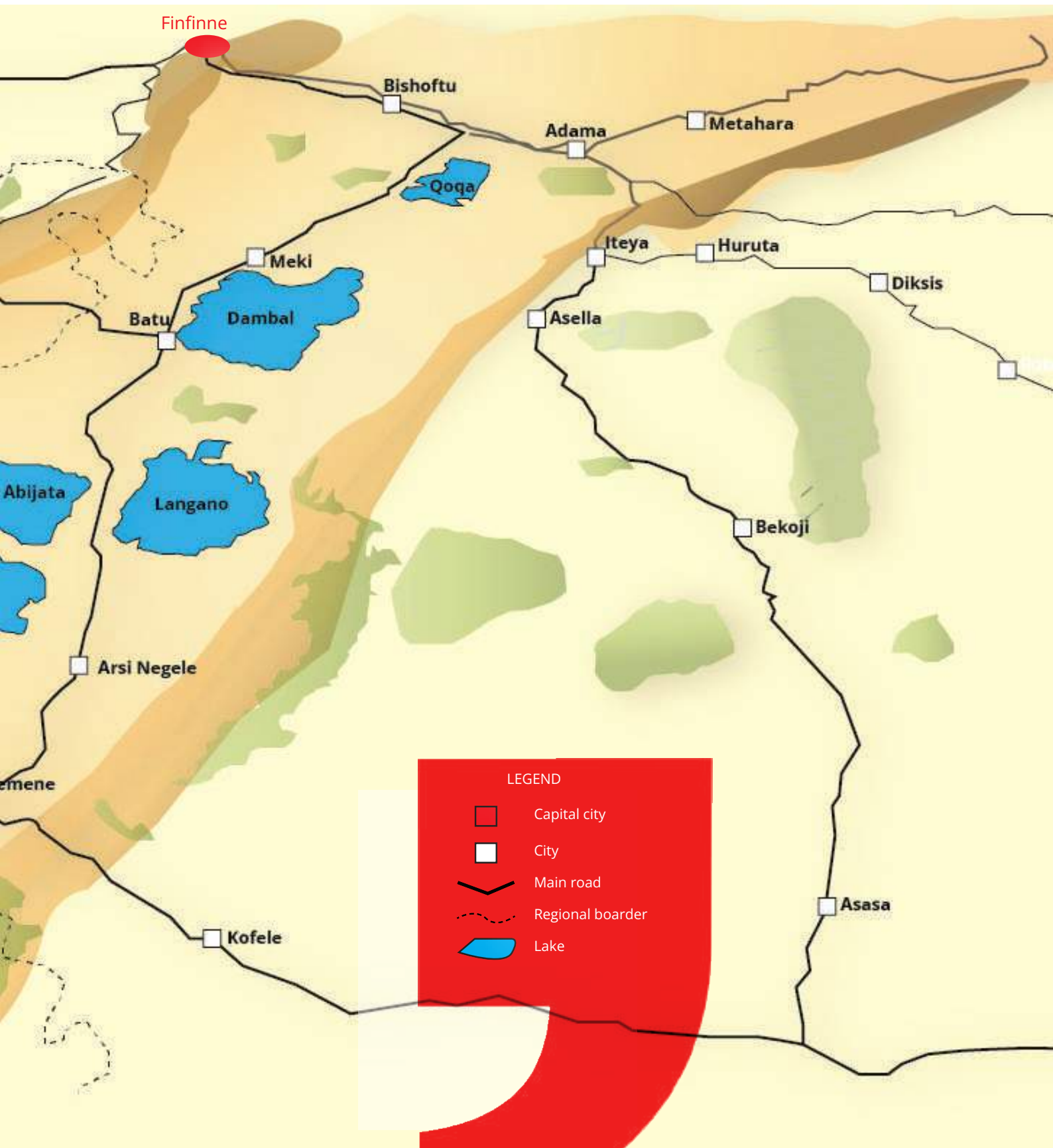
A beautiful Hawassa street with palm trees and the Sidama regional flag 🏠 Arganne Markos



*A map of the Great Rift Valley in Oromia*

# KARTA





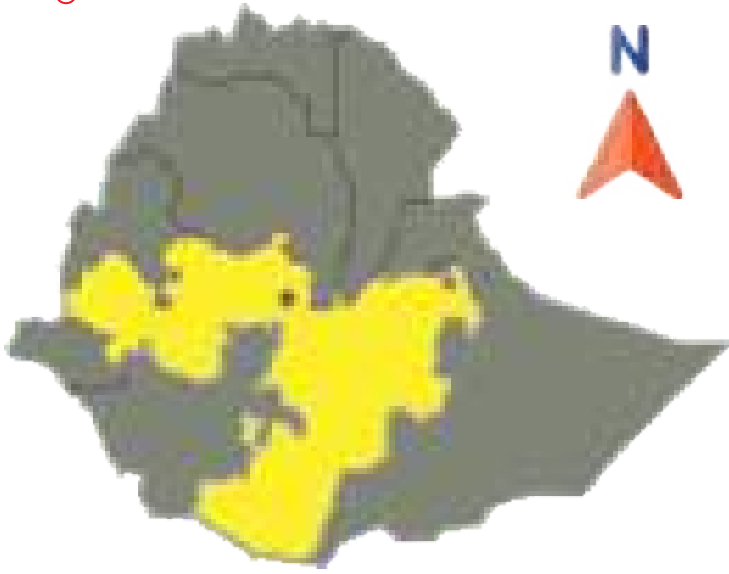
*The beautiful beaches of Lake Habas (the Oromia side of Lake Hawassa in Sidama region) close to the town of Bishan Gurracha features acacia trees and pristine white sand.*

Brothers Picture









A map of Oromia and some of its many tourism destinations

# TOURIST MAP

**03. Shajjha Bukt Carving**  
The Shajjha Bukt carvings are a collection of ancient rock art located in the Shajjha Bukt area of the Oromia region.

**04. Lephia Water Fall**  
Lephia Water Fall is a beautiful waterfall located in the Lephia area of the Oromia region.

**05. Antefano**  
Antefano is a small town located in the Oromia region, known for its traditional architecture and culture.

**06. Odu Naba Cultural Center**  
The Odu Naba Cultural Center is a hub for traditional Oromia culture, offering a variety of performances and exhibitions.

**07. Huluko Caves and Waterfall**  
The Huluko Caves and Waterfall are a natural wonder located in the Huluko area of the Oromia region.

**08. Arara Forest**  
Arara Forest is a large forest area located in the Arara region of the Oromia region.

**09. Yerer Mountains**  
The Yerer Mountains are a range of mountains located in the Yerer area of the Oromia region.

**10. Karsuchi Natural Forest**  
Karsuchi Natural Forest is a protected area located in the Karsuchi area of the Oromia region.

**11. British Consulate**  
The British Consulate is a historical building located in the Oromia region.

**12. Yaya Forest**  
Yaya Forest is a forest area located in the Yaya region of the Oromia region.

**13. Hara Aba Eliba National Hunting Center**  
The Hara Aba Eliba National Hunting Center is a hunting area located in the Hara Aba Eliba area of the Oromia region.

**14. Dabawlellem Monastery and Church**  
The Dabawlellem Monastery and Church is a religious site located in the Dabawlellem area of the Oromia region.

**15. Chilina Gopi Forest**  
Chilina Gopi Forest is a forest area located in the Chilina Gopi area of the Oromia region.

**16. Dandil Lake**  
Dandil Lake is a lake located in the Dandil area of the Oromia region.

**17. Gund Goya Gode Site**  
The Gund Goya Gode Site is an archaeological site located in the Gund Goya Gode area of the Oromia region.

**18. Boka Dilo**  
Boka Dilo is a town located in the Oromia region, known for its traditional architecture and culture.

**19. Dengawet Waterfall**  
Dengawet Waterfall is a waterfall located in the Dengawet area of the Oromia region.

**20. Mukkar Forest**  
Mukkar Forest is a forest area located in the Mukkar area of the Oromia region.

**21. Odu Naba**  
Odu Naba is a town located in the Oromia region, known for its traditional architecture and culture.

**22. Coffee Arabica Origin**  
The Coffee Arabica Origin is a site of historical significance located in the Oromia region.

**23. Lake Fincha**  
Lake Fincha is a lake located in the Fincha area of the Oromia region.

**24. Chomomphoos Archeological Site**  
The Chomomphoos Archeological Site is an archaeological site located in the Chomomphoos area of the Oromia region.

**25. Odu Buluk**  
Odu Buluk is a town located in the Oromia region, known for its traditional architecture and culture.

**26. Odu Bull**  
Odu Bull is a town located in the Oromia region, known for its traditional architecture and culture.

**27. Anger Forest**  
Anger Forest is a forest area located in the Anger area of the Oromia region.

**28. Alot Forest**  
Alot Forest is a forest area located in the Alot area of the Oromia region.

**29. Abet Jifar Palace**  
The Abet Jifar Palace is a historical building located in the Abet Jifar area of the Oromia region.

**30. Marka Karkara Prehistoric Site**  
The Marka Karkara Prehistoric Site is an archaeological site located in the Marka Karkara area of the Oromia region.

**31. Marka Karkara Prehistoric Site**  
The Marka Karkara Prehistoric Site is an archaeological site located in the Marka Karkara area of the Oromia region.

**32. Sor Waterfall**  
Sor Waterfall is a waterfall located in the Sor area of the Oromia region.

**33. Marka Walabu Historical Site**  
The Marka Walabu Historical Site is an archaeological site located in the Marka Walabu area of the Oromia region.

**34. Odu Naba**  
Odu Naba is a town located in the Oromia region, known for its traditional architecture and culture.

**35. Sira Gorge**  
Sira Gorge is a gorge located in the Sira area of the Oromia region.

**36. Chelbana Waterfall**  
Chelbana Waterfall is a waterfall located in the Chelbana area of the Oromia region.

**37. Gila Gorge**  
Gila Gorge is a gorge located in the Gila area of the Oromia region.

**38. White Sheela Gorge**  
White Sheela Gorge is a gorge located in the White Sheela area of the Oromia region.

**39. Bore-Unger Forest**  
Bore-Unger Forest is a forest area located in the Bore-Unger area of the Oromia region.

**40. Blue Nile Gorge**  
Blue Nile Gorge is a gorge located in the Blue Nile area of the Oromia region.

**41. Hemagcha Forest**  
Hemagcha Forest is a forest area located in the Hemagcha area of the Oromia region.

**42. Lake Wanchi**  
Lake Wanchi is a lake located in the Wanchi area of the Oromia region.

**43. Sole Cave**  
Sole Cave is a cave located in the Sole area of the Oromia region.

**44. Borena National Park**  
Borena National Park is a national park located in the Borena area of the Oromia region.

**45. Lake Zway/Lake Dembid**  
Lake Zway/Lake Dembid is a lake located in the Zway/Dembid area of the Oromia region.

**46. Oromo Caves**  
The Oromo Caves are a collection of caves located in the Oromia region.

**47. Hararic Ruins**  
The Hararic Ruins are the remains of an ancient city located in the Harar area of the Oromia region.

**48. Kambabo Mountains**  
The Kambabo Mountains are a range of mountains located in the Kambabo area of the Oromia region.

**49. Lega Odu Archeological Site**  
The Lega Odu Archeological Site is an archaeological site located in the Lega Odu area of the Oromia region.

**50. Mt. Tulu Wengel 3000m**  
Mt. Tulu Wengel is a mountain peak located in the Tulu Wengel area of the Oromia region.

**51. Mt. Baka 4200m**  
Mt. Baka is a mountain peak located in the Baka area of the Oromia region.

**52. Mt. Gona Muleta Water 3200m**  
Mt. Gona Muleta Water is a water source located in the Gona Muleta area of the Oromia region.

**53. Sobole Valley of Hararic**  
The Sobole Valley of Hararic is a valley located in the Sobole area of the Oromia region.

**54. Oromo Cultural Center**  
The Oromo Cultural Center is a hub for traditional Oromia culture, offering a variety of performances and exhibitions.

**55. Asaba Mountain**  
Asaba Mountain is a mountain peak located in the Asaba area of the Oromia region.

**56. Adala Shashis Gold Mining**  
Adala Shashis Gold Mining is a gold mining area located in the Adala Shashis area of the Oromia region.

**57. Mount Fendita**  
Mount Fendita is a mountain peak located in the Fendita area of the Oromia region.

**58. Mount Chukilo**  
Mount Chukilo is a mountain peak located in the Chukilo area of the Oromia region.

**59. Dimer Cave**  
Dimer Cave is a cave located in the Dimer area of the Oromia region.

**60. Mount Chikilo**  
Mount Chikilo is a mountain peak located in the Chikilo area of the Oromia region.

**61. Soli Dawa Cave**  
Soli Dawa Cave is a cave located in the Soli Dawa area of the Oromia region.

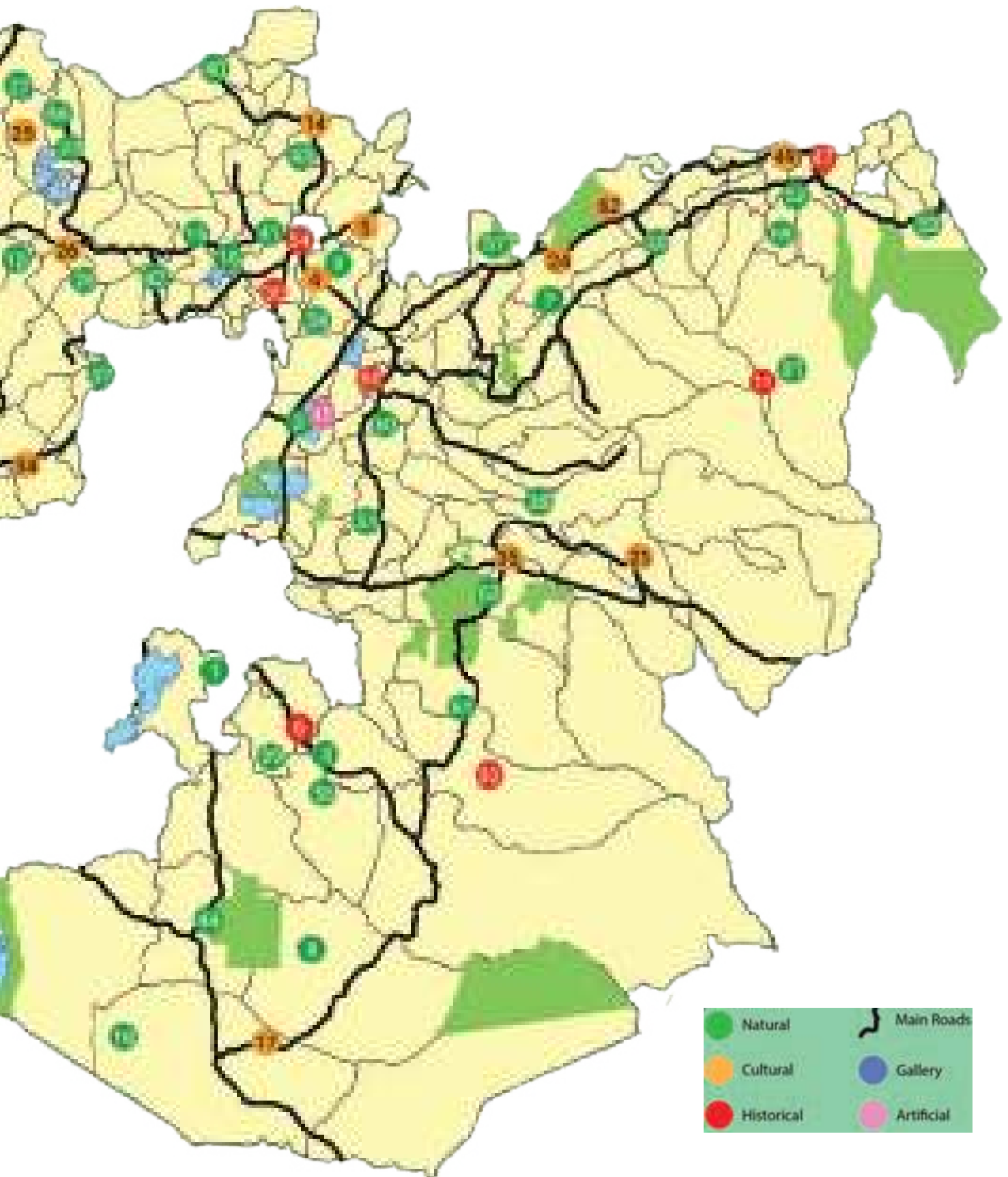
**62. Abu Monastery**  
Abu Monastery is a religious site located in the Abu area of the Oromia region.

**63. Tulu Dima Mountain/Forest**  
Tulu Dima Mountain/Forest is a mountain peak and forest area located in the Tulu Dima area of the Oromia region.

**64. Dilessa Gorge**  
Dilessa Gorge is a gorge located in the Dilessa area of the Oromia region.

**65. Chelbana Gorge**  
Chelbana Gorge is a gorge located in the Chelbana area of the Oromia region.

**66. Amerli Lake**  
Amerli Lake is a lake located in the Amerli area of the Oromia region.



# A GENESIS OF CREATION

## THE OROMO STORY

Dhabasa Guyo as quoted by Gammachu Magarsa (Ph.D.) in the Journal of Oromo Studies issue of 2005



*Waaqa creates  
because creating is His job;  
it is because He creates that He  
is recognized as Waaqa.*

THE  
OROMO

**N**ations across the world have differing accounts of how they came to be; For the Greeks, a void was re-made by an egg that birthed Uranus (the sky) and Gaia (the earth), these two would effect into existence children, who also bestowed upon them grandchildren, from which Zeus, in turn, ordered his sons to make mankind, an experience which caused agony and hope to be released into the world as well; The Mayans used to narrate that an empty world was remade with life after the two gods, the sky and sea gods, discussed amongst themselves upon realizing the embryo for greatness, the void held. And the Yoruba of Nigeria mythologize, the chief deity, Oluron reigned with celestial beings called orishas by his side, and amongst those orishas, the curious one, Obatala was delegated to create land, water, and clay life, which eventually became the ancestors.

The above myths and most of their other counterparts share in original a state of nothingness that would become something, with divine intercession. People look to the past for meaning and in search of that 'first past', invoke sagas essentially attempting to answer one of the most, if not the most pressing question(s) of life, 'where did we come from?'. Such mythoi implant an (alleged) comprehension of national genesis for purposes of belongingness and cohesion. For without a beginning, man can not think of a continuance and ultimately an end. In association with such patterns of human understanding,

the Oromo of Ethiopia are also storytellers of their genesis. While much research remains to be done in unraveling Oromo creation mythology and cosmology we can still follow the threads of the story of the Oromo from selected studies conducted to date.

The Oromo were largely believers of the Waaqqeffana faith before the mass conversations to Christianity and Islam. Despite being dwarfed by the modern Abrahamic religions in terms of number of believers, Waaqqeffannaa still holds much significance in the way of language, norms, and ethos. And it is within Waaqqeffana that the Oromo genesis is brought to center-stage. Waaqqeffana essentialized the relationship between Waaqa (Supreme deity) and Waaqqeffata (believer) in conceptualizing creation, life, and death. Yoseph Mulugeta Baba (Ph.D.), published philosopher and historiographer on Oromo studies, theorizes three notions of Uumaa (the universe), Waaqa (the undifferentiated being), and Safuu (privileges and responsibilities of beings) in deciphering what he calls, the 'Dhugaa Ganama' approximated as the primordial truth in English. He recounts that, within Uumma, the totality of the animate, inanimate, and spirits exist. And all such entities were created by Waaqa, also referred to as Waaqa Gurrachaa, approximated as the Mysterious (Black) Creator, denoting the unknown and mysticality, which he distinguishes from waaqa, as the small case denotes the skies. Waaqa is said to be with neither a beginning nor an end and continues in perpetu-

*A group of Borana Oromo men walk towards a Baallii celebration in which power is passed on to the next leaders in the Gadaa system*

 Soko et

al quiddity. The important link connecting all creations with Waaqa is the 'Ayyaanaa', a defining, spiritual quintessence of all creations, that determines who one is and how lives are lived. As such, it is Safuu that dictates the relationship between Waaqa's creations on earth, a norm of existing without detriment to the other's existence.

These building blocks are major tenets of Oromo theological rationale and worldview, fundamentally so for creational comprehension, Waaqa is causation for all life. Dereje Hinew of Wallagaa University elucidates on how Waqaa affected the origin of life as per the Oromo worldview view:



*Water holds an essential place in the oral tradition of Oromo origination, water is said to be the source from which all life came out. The name, 'Walaabuu' infers the primordial water of which Waaqa created all forms of life, including human beings. Dereje Hinew incites a local saying amidst the Oromo that goes, 'Umeen Walaabuu Baate' meaning life came from Walaabuu. And as such, it is from Walaabuu that*

*Waqaa created the first Oromo, 'Horro'. Horro is the primeval ancestor of all Oromos, his priorship in terms of creation also names him 'Gurraacha Yaayyaa', connoting mysterious purity. Horro was upon neither male nor female until Waqaa's gaze made him into two: Horro becomes the first male and Hawwaan the first female. And so stipulates, the creation myth of the Oromo.*



From such a mythical interpretation, Oromos define most things in the world. Walaabuu seems to bestow divine and universal explanation, in contrast to the oft-done practice of affiliating it to a specific locality within Oromia. Walaabuu is an abstract of significance for the Oromo worldview. Creation is accorded in such a manner and life continues accordingly. The Oromo is a product of Waqaa's work and possesses Ayyaanaa, a manifestation of Waqaa in all creatures, and must abide by Safuu as long as he or she lives. The Oromo supplicates to Waqaa in time of needs with the opening 'Yaa Waqaa Gurra- chaa...' and Waqaa does for thee, as he is giving. And finally, death calls upon the living, it serves as a passage to where it is called, 'Iddo Dhugaa' or place of truth to rejoin all those who departed before.

Concluded is the story of life, or as the Oromo would say, Kanuma.

 Soko et

# K O R A

## A STORY OF THE CLIMB



A horse in a relatively light tack meant for galloping  
Arganne Markos



*In olden times, horses gave Oromo horsemen a clear advantage in the battlefield, something that was decisively proven at the Battle of Adwa.*

**F**rom Wollega to the West to Shoa and Arsi in the Center and Hararghe to the East, Oromia's highlands are among the most densely populated areas in all of the horn. These highlands are characterized by their fertile plains where cereals like barley, wheat, and teff are extensively grown. These plains also have a large number of dense settlements such as villages and towns that each have their own markets where agricultural goods are traded between those that live in the higher plains and those that live in the lower plains where fruits and vegetables are grown a lot more extensively. Tying all these together, the most recognizable symbols of the highlands of Oromia are its horses which connect villages, empower families, and even enliven celebrations.

To the Oromos of the highlands of Oromia, horses are, arguably, their most important animals. Horses make a family in the countryside mobile, allowing members to go farther in search of goods to buy and buyers for their produce. In olden times, horses gave Oromo horsemen a clear advantage in the battlefield, something that was decisively proven at the Battle of Adwa where battalions of Oromo horsemen broke through Italian offensive lines to deal Italy an historic defeat. The bond between horses and horsemen is a deep one among the Oromo and nothing illustrates this better than the intricate designs of the Kora - the Oromo saddle.

**Kora** - that which is used to climb - is an Afan Oromoo word that describes a diverse set of tack put on horses to help both the horse and the rider have more comfortable rides. Consisting of the saddle, stirrups, harnesses and other components, the Kora is elaborately designed to go with the horse and the rider it is being made for. The stirrups and gags are made out of iron, while the body of the Kora is made out of wood and covered with leather.

There are many types of Kora fashioned for horses across Oromia. Some Kora are so big that even those that don't know how to ride a horse can just hold on to the pommel area and keep riding without needing much else to stay on the horse. Some, though, are quite minimal to allow for more agility and speed during games the Oromo play during celebrations such as Cuuphaa.

Some of the best artisans in villages and towns across Oromia are the ones tasked with fashioning excellent Kora out of wood, leather, and iron. From the Gilaaazi - the thin piece of leather laid down on the horse's back before the other pieces are added on, to the pommel that is carved out of wood with a hole in the middle for people's hands to hold on to that is then covered in leather and decorative fabric, the artisans sew, carve, and hammer the Kora into a work of art.

IN  
DESIGN



The final pieces on the Kora are always the decorations that include bunches of colored strings that are supposed to dangle by the sides of the horse while stitched fabrics with pictures of lions, leopards, and even saints are used to cover the larger Kora body.

The Kora is distinctive from afar and people can tell who is riding a horse by just looking at the colors and patterns on the Kora. The Kora is also modular and adaptable enough to allow for more components such as a pair of leather bags that can be used to hold cereals, fruits and even fresh corn on the cob. Since most of the population of these highlands are farmers, many of the adaptations came out of the need to make life easier for the farmer. Even today, the Kora keeps adapting with new decorative elements such as special types of fabrics and machine sewing taking over. The Oromo admiration for the horse is not something that is likely to wane anytime soon and it is expected that the Kora will keep evolving to join the brave new world.



Aron Simeneh & Berhanu Beyen

*Top:*  
A Kora made out of wood, leather, and cotton fabric

*Left Grid:*  
Different parts of a horse's tack according to the Oromo tradition of horse riding

# GUUTU ABERA

INNOVATING IN OROMO STORYTELLING

IMLAA



*Gutu Abera poses dressed in the cultural attire of the Karrayyu Oromo*



In early September 2021, a music video titled “Hawanawa - Gutu Abera” was published on a YouTube channel named “Vision Entertainment”. In just a few days of its release the music video had been watched by more than a million people, an impressive feat anywhere, but made even more impressive by the fact that the music is in Afaan Oromoo which is spoken in Ethiopia where internet penetration isn’t so high and data prices are. The fact that this feat was achieved by someone relatively unknown in both the Oromo and Ethiopian music spaces just adds on to what a phenomenon it was.

The music video features Gutu Abera, a 29 year old born in the small town of Mandi in Wollega singing his heart out to a “bareedduu Shawaa” - the Shewa beauty. Crafted in the style of music that was popularized in the 1960s when American pop was just taking the world by storm, Hawanawa features young men and women in big afros, form fitting trousers, and colorful tops dancing in styles that evoke bougie, but also many of the traditional Oromo dances such as Ragadaa and Shaggooyee. As Gutu later told the BBC, the large soundstage the music features came from the fact that every sound included was recorded live and not synthesized using a computer. The music has character because of this, and Gutu sings in his baritone over full, organic sounding instruments in a melody that mixes the lullabies of the Shewan highlands with a more modern chorus.

The music was loved by many millions. It played in taxis, events, restaurants, on tv, over radio, all day every day for many, many days. It was a sensational piece of work and it catapulted Gutu into one of the premier Afaan Oromoo artists of his age, a crowded field as it is. The channel that publishes this seminal piece of work, Vision Entertainment, has been racking up millions of views on many other incredible music videos coming out of the burgeoning Oromo musical scene. But Gutu’s work, the philosophy behind it and the music videos that came after are quite groundbreaking in their way.

When he was 14 years old, Gutu moved to Norway where his parents lived as refugees. In the southwestern city of Bergen, Gutu started life anew. His love for music that started long before his move to Norway, took over his life quickly and he started singing at different venues where he met a slew of talented artists. In 2018 Gutu was interviewed by the BBC on his work to restart the famed Gadaa Band. Many of his performances were covers of songs by famous Oromo artists such as Ali Birra, and he played a lot of those to some distinguished audiences such as the royal family of Norway and at some of the most popular festivals in the Scandinavian

country. But Gutu had a lot more planned in his career and in early 2021, he started working with the Tamil-Norwegian artist Mira Thiruchelvam to produce his first ever song. He wrote the lyrics and melody of what would be one of Ethiopia’s biggest hits for 2021, produced it with the help of Mira, and had it published on Vision Entertainment and waited for what the reaction would be.

The unique way he approached Oromo music, the way he held onto traditional Oromo poetry, while letting in all of that percussion and strings into the track won him accolades from all over the world. This spurred him on, for Gutu was not close to being done exploring this new style of his.



*Don’t look back, says Gutu, for there is no point in living where progress is not a possibility.*

His next track, Amma Mee had a video style similar to Hawanawa directed by Gutu and Mira. But it marked a clear transition into the types of ideas Gutu would be exploring with his music. While Hawanawa was filled with happy, colorfully dressed young men and women dancing to the chorus of a man singing his heart out to the Shewan beauty, Amma Mee had a lot more symbolism hid-

den in every shot. The message, while with a clear romantic theme, is about dreams, specifically the dreams of musicians and the role music plays in our lives. How some of us, especially the likes of talented musicians like Gutu, feel it is the best way to express who they are. Amma Mee is still a very happy tune and is filled with the now characteristic Gutu-Mira soundstage of percussion, strings, and saxophones.

In mid-March Gutu released Deemii on his own YouTube channel. Deemii is a ballad and a very powerful one at that. Shot in the beautiful lowlands of the beautiful Karrayyu Oromo people, the music video features less crowded scenes where man (and indeed woman) meets nature. This goes very well with the message of the song which is about the challenges one faces in life when trying to move forward.

Gutu says to go, to move forward, to cross the Awash and to climb the Tullu Dimtu. To go to Kemise and Raya for one’s love, Gutu says, is inevitable. Progress is inevitable. And if it is inevitable, we might as well align our hearts with it. Don’t look back, says Gutu, for there is no point in living where progress is not a possibility.

It is deep, but it is made even deeper by the fact that it was shot in Karrayyu, where the local Oromo people are known for their semi-pastoralism in which movement is life. When times are bad, they go forward to where there is water. In this acacia-filled environment, he juxtaposes Arsi Oromo women doing their canopy of blessings using their Siinqee to bless the one that progresses. It all becomes a story of progress told the Oromo way and Gutu tells it expertly.



Gutu Abera as photographed inside the cafeteria of the Oromia Tourism Commission

📷 Ebise Guta

# USEFUL PHRASES

## DAYS OF THE WEEK

ENGLISH	AFAAN OROMO
Monday	Wiixata
Tuesday	Kibxata
Wednesday	Roobii
Thursday	Kamisa
Friday	Jimaata
Saturday	Sanbata
Sunday	Dilbata

## NUMBERS

ENGLISH	AFAAN OROMO
Zero	Duwwaa
One	Tokko
Two	Lama
Three	Sadii
Four	Afur
Five	Shan
Six	Jaha
Seven	Torba
Eight	Saddeet
Nine	Sagal
Ten	Kudhan
Eleven	Kudha tokko
Twelve	Kudha lama
Twenty	Digdama
Twenty one	Digdamii tokko
Thirty	Soddoma
Fourty	Afurtama
Fifty	Shantama
Sixty	Jahaatama
Seventy	Torbaatama
Eighty	Saddeettama
Ninety	Sagaltama
Hundred	Dhibba

## SHOPPING TERMS

ENGLISH	AFAAN OROMO
Excuse me, I'm looking for this?	Dhiifama, isa kana barbaadeen ture?
Can I try this on?	Isa kana yaalu?
How much is it?	Gatiin isaa meeqa?
How much/many?	Meeqa?

## GREETINGS

ENGLISH	AFAAN OROMO
Good morning?	Akkam bulte/tan?
Good afternoon /evening?	Akkam oolte/tan?
How are you?	Akkam jirta/tu?
I am fine.	Nagaadha / Fayyaadha.
Thanks to God.	Waaqayyoof haa galatu.

## INTRODUCING ONESELF

ENGLISH	AFAAN OROMO
My name is...	Maqaan koo... jedhama
I am from...	...irraan dhufe
I am from...	Biyyi koo...



<b>HOTELS</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>AFAAN OROMO</b>
	How many beds are in the room?	Kutaa ciisichaa keessa siree meeqatu jira?
	Does the room have a bathroom?	Kutaan kun bakka dhiqannaa qaba?
	What floor am I on?	Darbii meeqaffaarran jira?
	Where is the elevator?	Liiftiin eessa jira?
	How do I access the Internet?	Intarneetii akkamitti argachu danda'a?

<b>TRANSPORTATION</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>AFAAN OROMO</b>
	Where is the bus stop?	Iddoo baasiin itti dhaabbatu eessa?
	Where can I find a taxi?	Taaksii eessa argadha?
	I would like to go to...	Gara...deemu nan barbaada

<b>FOODS</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>AFAAN OROMO</b>
	Breakfast	Ciree
	Lunch	Laaqana
	Dinner	Irbaata
	Enjoy your meal	Nyaata gaarii
	How much is the bill for the food?	Gatiin nyaataa meeqadha?

<b>THANKS GIVING</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>AFAAN OROMO</b>
	Galatoomi / Galatoomaa	Thank you
	Guddaa galatoomi	Thank you so much
	Galata koo fudhadhu	Please accept my deepest thanks



<b>EXPRESSING FEELINGS</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>AFAAN OROMO</b>
	I felt happy	Ani gammadeera
	I feel sad	Ani gaddeera
	I am so happy	Ani baay'ee gammadeera

## LEARN AFAAN OROMOO LETTERS (QUBEE AFAAN OROMOO)

LETTER (QUBEE)	SOUND (SAGALEE)
A	short 'ah' sound opening mouth
B	sounds as 'ba'
C	hard, glottalized tch sound
D	stressed 'da' sound
E	sounds as 'ie'
F	unstressed, sounds as 'fa'
G	unstressed, sounds as 'ga'
H	unstressed, sounds as 'ha'
I	short i sound
J	unstressed, 'ja' sound
K	unstressed, sounds as 'ka'
L	unstressed, sounds as 'la'
M	unstressed, sounds as 'ma'
N	sounds as 'na'
O	O sound
P	unstressed, sounds as 'pa'
Q	hard, glottalized k sound, sounds as 'qa'
R	slightly rolling, soft r, sounds as 'ra'
S	unstressed s sound, sounds as 'sa'
T	unstressed, sounds as 'ta'
U	uu sound
V	unstressed, sounds as 'va'
W	unstressed, soft w sound, sounds as 'wa'
X	hard, glottalized t, sounds as 'ta'
Y	unstressed y which sounds as 'ya'
Z	unstressed, sounds as 'za'
Ch	slightly stressed 'cha'
Dh	glottalized d produced with the tongue curled back
Ph	glottalized p as in pope (said without breathing)
Sh	unstressed 'sha' sound
Ny	like the Spanish ñ, sounds as (gnia')
Ts	stressed sound as tsa
Zh	stressed sound as zha

Dh, Ch, Ph, Sh, Ts, Zh & Ny count as single consonants though they are written as two letters.

Vowels may be repeated to make the sound long, while consonants may be repeated to make the sound strong (stressed). For example, to say the Oromo word annan ("milk") one must hold the first n sound slightly longer than the second, as in the English word "pen-knife". A doubled vowel makes the vowel long and can often change the meaning of the word, as in lafa ("ground") and lafaaa ("soft").

## LIST OF HOTELS

LOCATION	NAME	PHONE NUMBER
Adama	Haile Resort - Adama Executive Hotel	+251-96-837-3737 +251-22-112-0300
Ambo	AnaToli Hotel	+251-91-765-1477
Arsi Negele	Fasika Hotel	+251-46-116-2903
Assela	Derartu Hotel Soljam Hotel	+251-22-331-28-28 +251-22-331-29-30
Batu	Haile Resort - Batu Castel Bel-Air Wine Bar & Restaurant	+251-93-030-4040 +251-91-149-0494
Bishoftu	Kuriftu Resort Pyramid Hotel Liesak Resort Adulala Resort	+251-91-109-1185 +251-11-433-1555 +251-93-385-8584 +251-91-149-1050
Fiche	Girum Hotel	+251-93-036-4698
Finfinne Cultural Restaurants	Kaku Mame Harmee Restaurant Akkoo Coffee	+251-91-323-9448 +251-91-172-2572 +251-90-543-4343
Finfinne Hotels	Ethiopian Airlines Skylight Hotel Hyatt Regency - Addis Ababa Elilly Hotel Kena Hotel Ramada Hotel	+251-11-681-8181 +251-11-517-1234 +251-92-272-8318 +251-11-668-6701 +251-11-639-3939
Goba	Wabe Shebelle Hotel	+251-22-661-00-41
Harara	Sumey Hotel - Harar Ras Hotel	+251-93-340-4668 +251-25-666-0027
Jimma	Boni International Hotel Central Jimma Hotel Awetu Grand Hotel	+251-47-211-5065 +251-47-111-8282 +251-47-211-6667
Metu	Ilu Star Hotel	+251-91-159-1565
Nekemte	Milkomi Hotel	+251-91-927-4188
Shashemene	Grand Royal Hotel Jalo Hotel	+251-91-028-9083 +251-94-270-0000
Weliso	Negash Lodge	+251-11-341-0002

# Where to Camp

**THIS MONTH**



## **GELILA ISLAND (LAKE DAMBAL)**

*Gelila is a beautiful island that hosts a small church and is perfect for camping with the beautiful trees making a canopy to sleep under.*



## **HARENNA FOREST ( BALE MOUNTAINS NP)**

*The Harena Forest in the Bale mountains is a magical woodland of trees covered with moss and the many beautiful wildlife.*



## **WANCHI CRATER LAKE**

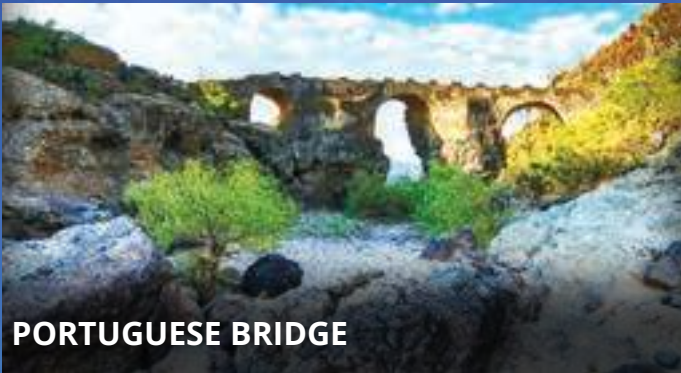
*Wanchi is a name synonymous with camping and rightly so as the crater lake and its environs are some of the most beautiful destinations anywhere.*





# Where to Hike

## NEAR FINFINNE



### PORTUGUESE BRIDGE

*The Portuguese Bridge is located about 100KM to the north of Finfinnee and overlooks the massive Jemma river gorge. A hiking trip here is popular for the historical and natural sights one gets to see while enjoying the easy to challenging foot walk by the sides of the gorge*



### SUBA MENAGESHA PARK

*The beautiful forest at Suba is a perfect hiking destination for those wishing a quiet walk through tall woods accompanied by the chirping of birds. With several marked trails in the forest, Suba is an ideal spot for those looking for a one-day hike.*



### MOUNT CHUKALA

*Mount Chukala is a prominent mountain that is reputed for the challenging hiking trails that lead to the quaint lake and small church at the top.*



### GULELE BOTANICAL GARDEN

*The Gulele Botanical Garden is a nice wooded area for picnics and hiking trips located very close to Finfinnee.*



### MOUNT ERER

*One of the mountains keeping the capital company, Erer is a majestic rise that invites one for an adventurous hike across its wooded contours.*

*A top view of the small Lake Chitu so beloved by  
Flamingos with just a sliver of Lake Shalla to the top right*

📍 Ashenafi Yemane







# VISITOROMIA



[www.visitoromia.org](http://www.visitoromia.org)

# VISITORS MAKE THE GREAT WALLS

ISSUE 03