

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 VALLEY



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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

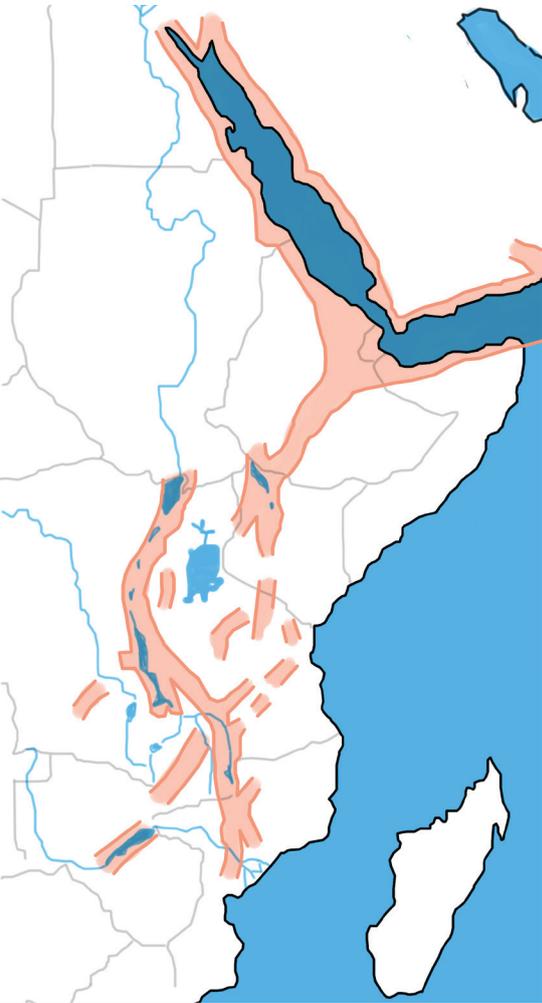
contrast to the geologically stable and cool highlands that are home to much of the population.

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.

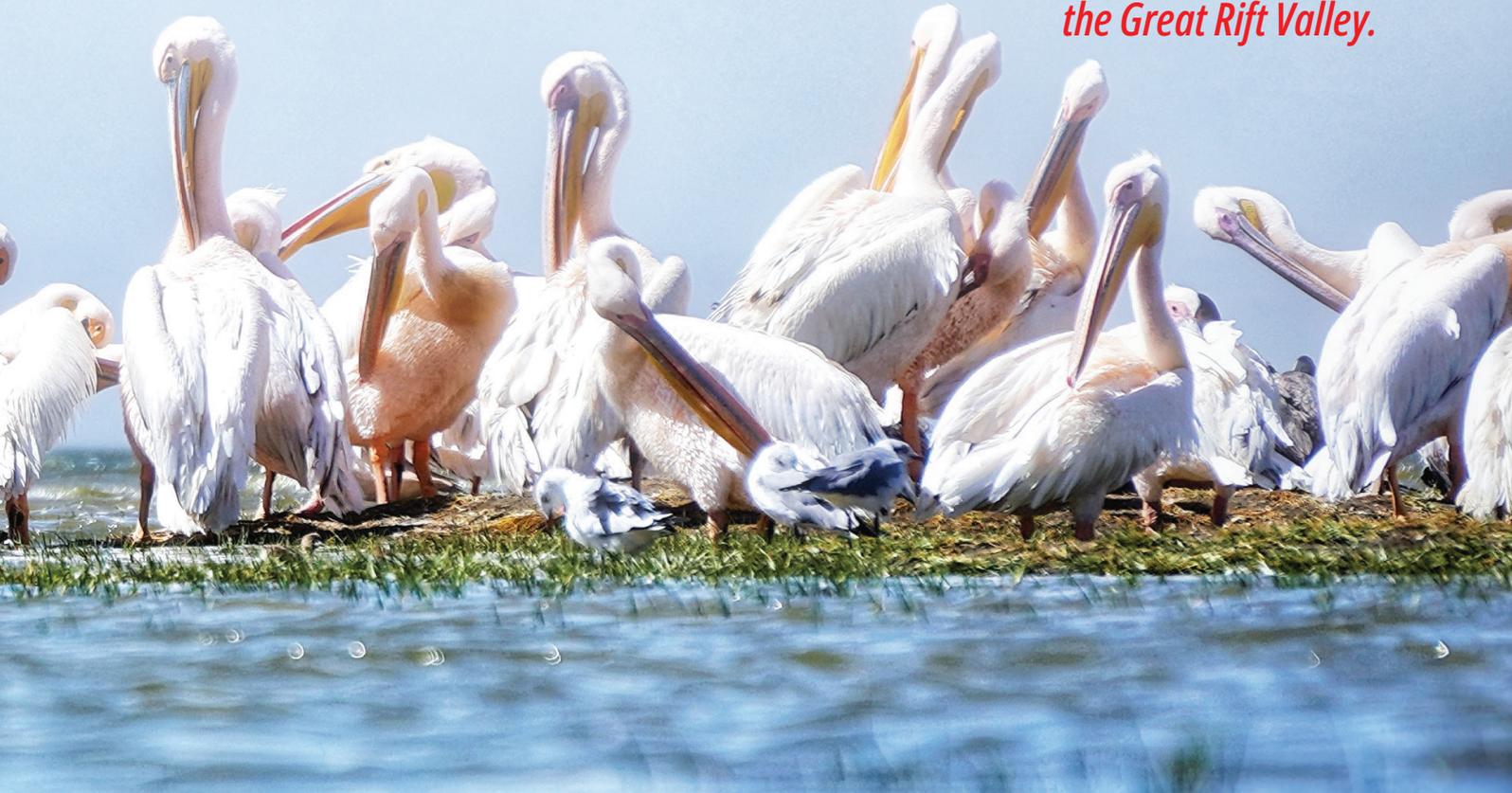
But this changes when you get to the mountains of the Great Rift Valley - those hills you see when you travel through the valley, the many hundreds of them that only locals know the names of. Because of their location in the low Great Rift Valley itself, they haven't commanded the attention of mountaineers 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.

But 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.

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*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





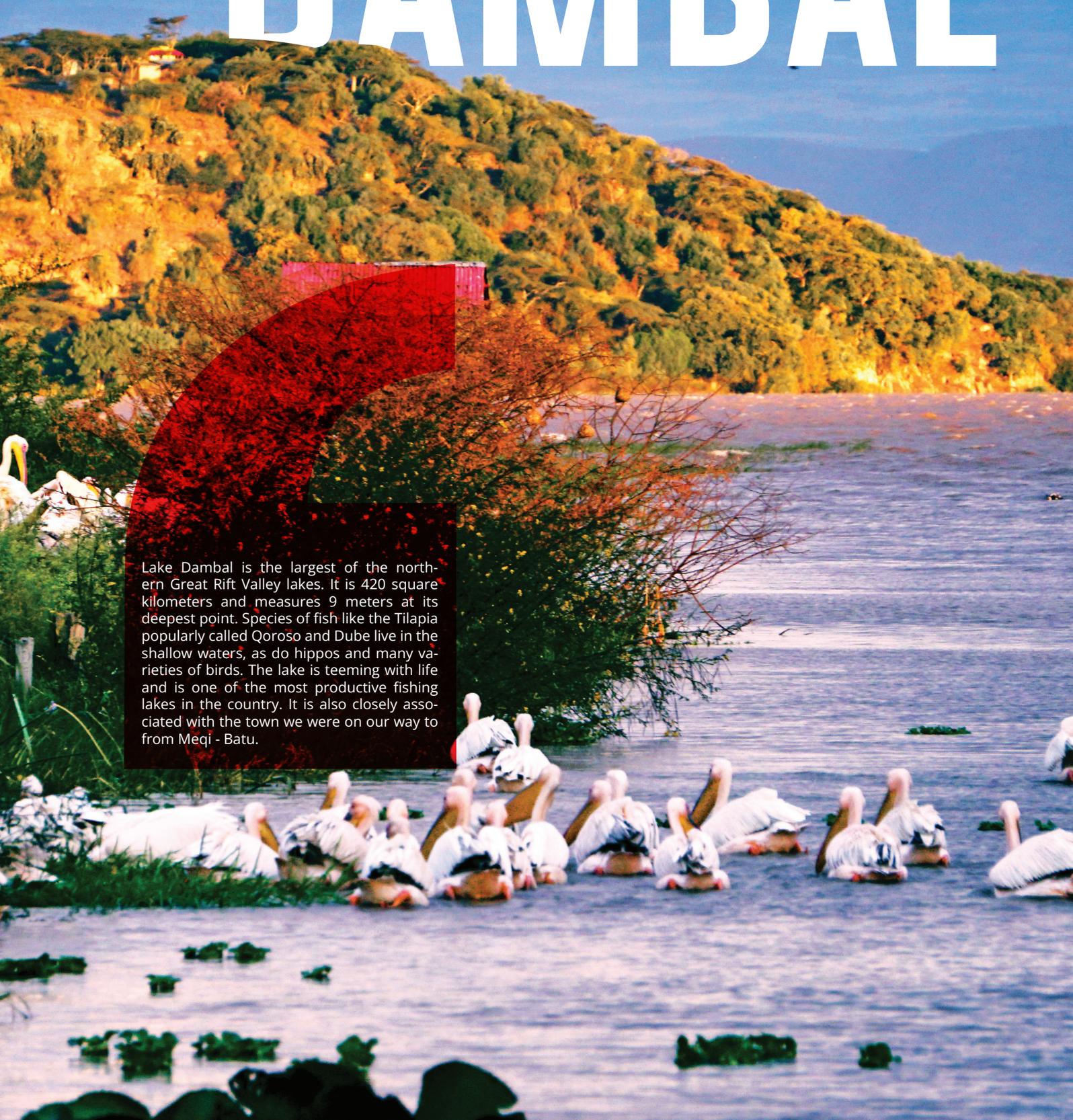
The town of Batu

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](#)

DAMBAL

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

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

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

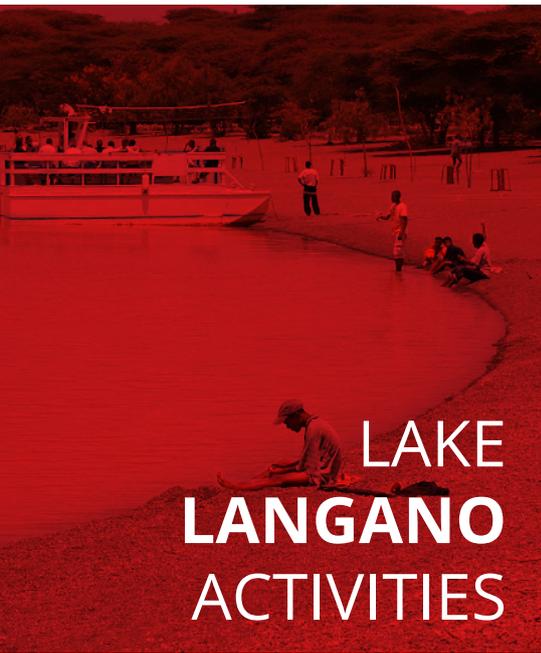


The most popular Great Rift Valley lake was our destination next. Langano has been synonymous with vacationing for quite a long time thanks to the many resorts and lodges built there a long time ago. And unlike Shalla or Abijata, there aren't one or two dirt roads leading to the lake, but at least half 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.

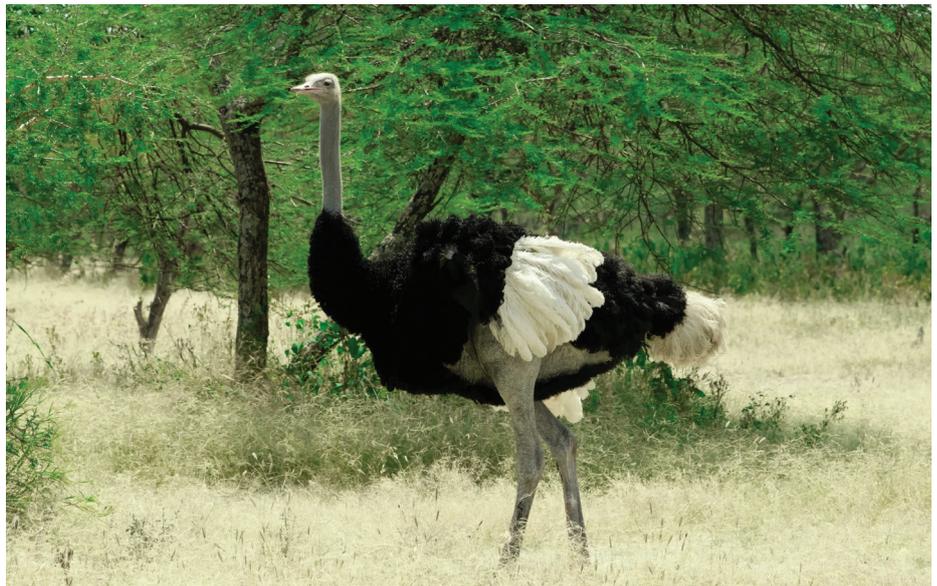
Following the Great Rift Valley from the town of Modjo through Meqi and Batu to the capital of Sidama, you get a sense of what the valley means among the towering highlands of Oromia. A trip such as this is a chance to learn about geology and how it affects us. It is a study in how geography determines 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](#)