

**SURVIVOR:** Janelle Hampton of Dallas took this picture of an old barn at Grand Teton National Park, Wyo. Submit your photos at [dallasnews.com/travel](http://dallasnews.com/travel).



**ENVIRONMENT:** Michigan state parks' restrooms go green. **3H**  
**ITALY:** Food, Ferraris and fun in Emilia-Romagna region. **6H**

TEXAS

## Round Top state of mind

Seasonal antiques festival is one part of the area's allure

By JANIS TURK  
Special Contributor

**ROUND TOP, Texas** — If the state map had a star on it marking the "Antique Capital of Texas," it probably would rest on a tiny black dot in Fayette County, a pretty little place called Round Top (population 77).

But ask any woman within a 200-mile radius of this east-central Texas whistle-stop, and she'll tell you that she's been there or knows someone who has. And if you haven't been, it's a safe bet that you've seen it on Bob Phillips' *Texas Country Reporter* or read about it in *Newsweek*.

Why all this fuss over a postage stamp of a place? Because twice a year the town and its surrounds swell with throngs of tourists eager to shop at the hottest retail venue in the Lone Star State: the Round Top Antiques Fair, or "Great America Country Show," as it's sometimes called. For the past 41 years, this has been the place to find everything anyone could want — from fine art to fashion, antiques to junk, kitsch to rare collectibles and everything in between.



JANIS TURK/Special Contributor  
**Handmade items** are sold in Round Top's shops.

Located on the old La Bahia Road between LaGrange and Brenham, about 220 miles south of Dallas, Round Top is home to the fair, which next takes place Oct. 1-4. There is also an antiques show in winter and summer, the next taking place in January. It's estimated that 40,000 to 50,000 people attend (it's like First Monday Trade Days in Canton on steroids).

But those aren't the only times to shop Round Top. Pre- and post-fair events are scheduled in the days and weeks surrounding fair dates, and there are great finds in the galleries and shops year-round.

"If you build it, they will come" must have been the maxim of antiques fair founder and local icon Emma Lee Turney, and come guests do, shopping at an estimated 35 show locations, from tents to card tables and barns to big buildings scattered around the hills, linking the towns of Round Top, Warrenton, Carmine and Shelby. The fair or show doesn't take place in one location — it's all over the place.

### Music and more

But there's more to this hamlet than antiques and flea markets. For starters, there's music.

Round Top also is the permanent home of the James Dick Foundation for the Performing Arts International Festival Institute of Round Top.

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AFRICA



PHOTOS BY ERIK HEINRICH/Special Contributor

An Ethiopian Orthodox priest holding two processional crosses leads the prayer at a rock-hewn church in Lalibela.

# EXOTIC, ELUSIVE ETHIOPIA

Ancient faith, unique cultures coexist in land of wild beauty

By ERIK HEINRICH  
Special Contributor

**LOWER OMO VALLEY, Ethiopia** — "Remember, take only what you need," says Johnny, our driver from Addis Ababa whose real name is Yohanes Tsegaye.

As soon as I step out of the Toyota Land Cruiser, parked in the shade of flat-topped acacia, all hell breaks loose. A crowd of Mursi — a tribe best known for the giant lip plates worn by its women — comes charging at me from the village compound.

The Mursi are in a frenzy, not because they want to welcome me to their homes. Instead, they are after lucrative photo fees demanded of picture-taking tourists who have trekked to the village of Hail Wuha, on the edge of an escarpment in one of the most isolated and inaccessible regions of Africa.

"You! You! You!" they yell at me.

I am surrounded by Mursi who appear as a blur of floppy lip plates, painted faces, naked breasts and animal skins.

They tug at my clothing, reminding me that this is not an out-of-body experience. Some of the women have large plates stretching their lips to fantastic proportions, and those without plates wear headdresses with dangling cattle horns.

Thanks to its location in Ethiopia's southern lowlands near the borders of Sudan and Kenya, the Lower Omo Valley, named after the majestic Omo River running through it, has perhaps Africa's highest concentration of strangely beautiful microcultures, including Bume, Karo and Konso and Hamar.

When I first saw Hamar women at a market in Turmi, I was struck by their fine features, milk-chocolate skin and tight ringlet hairdos covered in a shiny

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**Boys line up** for the camera with the majestic Omo River in the background.

By MARK SISSONS  
Special Contributor

**AXUM, Ethiopia** — Indiana Jones would have loved Axum, I think as I enter the grounds of the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion. This is where some Christians believe the biblical Ark of the Covenant has resided in a series of chapels for nearly 3,000 years.

Yes, the very same box made of wood and gold containing the Ten Commandments that blasted Lindy's Nazi rivals into oblivion when they dared to pry it open in the climax of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Capital of sub-Saharan Africa's oldest empire, Axum is the epicenter of this mystical country's pious and austere brand of Orthodox Christianity. True believers make pilgrimages to this ancient city, set amid the soaring hills and deep chasms of Ethiopia's arid northern highlands.

Clusters of white shrouded figures stand motionless and eerily silent under trees in the church's compound, waiting for the procession of deacons and bishops to emerge from the church and circle its sacred ground three times, as it has done every day for centuries.

As I approach the ark's reputed resting place, I half expect the heavens to open and a lightning bolt to strike me down. In hoping to glimpse its keeper, the only mortal allowed to lay eyes upon it (not even the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is granted that privilege). Keepers are virgin monks chosen to protect this holiest of Christian relics for their entire lives, never setting

foot outside the chapel grounds.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the only one in the world that still claims to possess the ark, which it says was stolen by traveling companions of Prince Menelik, the illegitimate son of the Queen of Sheba and Israel's King Solomon, when the founder of Ethiopia was returning home to Axum from visiting his father. (An archaeological site purporting to be the Queen of Sheba's palace lies on the outskirts of Axum.)

Most scholars dismiss this story as fiction. But as I wait for the ark's elusive keeper to appear, I wonder if there isn't some historical truth to it. What else, my guide had asked rhetorically, could explain the Park of the Stelae I had just visited in the center of town, than the invocation of the ark's supernatural powers?

The largest of these obelisks, elaborately carved obelisks stood an astounding 110 feet tall, making it the largest single piece of quarried stone ever erected in the ancient world. It collapsed upon completion over 1,000 years ago. The only obelisk still upright, a granite needle soaring well over 70 feet, remains as a singular monument to Axum's past and, perhaps, divine intervention.

During the past few days I have been to the medieval city of Gondar, Africa's Camelot, to wander among its fairy tale castles built by the great Emperor Fasildas in the 17th century. I have journeyed into the spectacular Simien Mountains to savor astonishing vistas punctuated by gorges, chasms, precipices and

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# Cultural encounters in Ethiopia

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mixture of cow's butter and ochre. The result is stunning, especially in combination with cowry-shell necklaces and dazzling bead sashes.

Few outsiders venture this far into the Ethiopian bush because you can't do it alone. I went with Toronto-based Africa Adventure and Study Tours Inc., which hired experienced guides and a couple of four-wheel drives to cover this rugged, red-soil terrain of acacia and scrub forest.

Touring the Lower Omo is certainly for the adventurous, but those who make the effort are rewarded with beautiful scenery and tribal encounters that at times make you feel as if you have returned to the dawn of human existence.

Back at the village of Hail Wulu, the Mursi refuse to accept less than 2 birr per photo, per person — about a dollar for a group shot of three — which strikes me as unusually regulated. Are they working with talent agents?

## The highlands

It's easy to be mesmerized by Ethiopia's wild and exotic south, but the country's northern highlands also have much to offer. Instead of primitive cultures and remote national parks inhabited by colonies of baboons and colobus monkeys, Ethiopia's highland plateau is the center of an ancient civilization.

Over two millennia, its kings and emperors created palaces, monasteries and giant stela that impress visitors to this day. Many of the sites can be found in and around Lake Tana, Gondar and Axum.

The top attraction in Ethiopia's north, however, is the village of Lalibela, whose monolithic churches carved from rose-colored volcanic tuff in the late 12th century are little known in the outside world. They rival the ancient Nabatean city of Petra in Jordan and the temple of Karnak in Egypt with one important difference: You don't have to fight crowds.

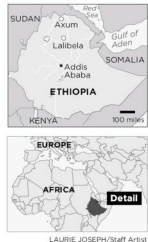
The biggest of these churches, Bet Medhane Alem, or Saviour of the World, is roughly one-third the size of the Parthenon. Inside, I find myself alone with a priest clutching an 800-year-old processional cross. This national treasure, believed to have healing powers, once belonged to King Lalibela, who is credited with building the 11 spectacular churches of this mountain-state village.

The priest shows me biblical texts written on goat-skin parchment. I'm awestruck by the detail and color of the illuminated pages. There are images of Christ, the Virgin Mary and martyred saints as old as the Lalibela Cross. I realize that Bet Medhane Alem is a living museum where visitors come into direct contact with Ethiopia's history. Anywhere else in the world,



**The 17th century** African castles of Gondar have led people to call the city "Africa's Camelot."

Photos by MARK SISSONS/Special Contributor



**Left:** A basket weaver works near Axum's Park of the Stelae in Ethiopia.

**Below:** Medieval Christian art adorns most Ethiopian Orthodox churches and monasteries.

these ancient relics would be strictly off-limits to the public.

No one knows why Lalibela, a kind of city of God in the middle of the Ethiopian wilderness, was built, but there are theories. According to one, King Lalibela embarked on his construction project after visiting Jerusalem, where he was so impressed by what he saw that he vowed to build a holy city in his native Africa.

Like Jerusalem, Lalibela is rocky and arid, with groves of gnarled olive trees in an otherwise barren landscape. It is walking in the pages of the New Testament.

For all of Lalibela's

treasures and architectural grandeur, I was most struck by the lichen-spotted Bet Giorgis, or Church of St. George. It is carved in the shape of a Greek cross downward into a volcanic slope, creating the illusion of

having sunk into the ground under its own weight.

It also has what may be the finest exterior detailing of any church in Lalibela, and a striking corded dug around the outer walls.

A couple of days later, I am similarly impressed by the mountain-top Debre Damo monastery, home to Ethiopia's oldest church, established by Syrian missionaries in the fifth century.

It's less the church, however, and more the 80-foot climb up an ox-hide cord dangling from the monastery's eagle-nest entrance that captures my interest.

Our guide climbs the mountain wall effortlessly. For me it's harder, partly because I choose to climb in bare feet. By the time I reach the timber and stone gate, I'm winded. "For you, it was like 100 feet," our laughing guide says.

Maybe, but the trip down will be easier.

*Erik Heinrich is a freelance writer in Canada.*

# Is the holiest of relics really here?

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pinnacles. I have seen Lake Tana, Ethiopia's immense inland sea and source of the Blue Nile.

I have visited its second-holiest city, Lalibela. And I have seen its islands, home to isolated straw-roofed monasteries hundreds of years old that guard the remains of ancient Ethiopian emperors and some of the Ethiopian Church's greatest treasures.

Those include replicas of the Tablets of Law, onto which the biblical Ten Commandments were inscribed.

But all I really want to do is ask the keeper of the Ark whether or not it's all true. That the existence of this most holy of relics isn't just religious wishful thinking.

As the afternoon light begins to fade and the keeper hasn't yet appeared, I

reluctantly prepare to leave the church compound. What naive presumption drove me to think that the one man on Earth entrusted with literally protecting the word of God would condescend to show himself just for me?

And then he appears, a bearded, almost spectral figure swathed in black, peering from behind the chapel's heavy wooden door. Our silent encounter has lasted only seconds.

I freeze, and we lock eyes, the virgin monk and the spiritual voyeur. Then, as I raise my camera to snap proof of life, he retreats behind the chapel's heavy wooden door. Our silent encounter has lasted only seconds.

Indy would have pursued him, I'm sure. But for me, it's enough. After all, I have just looked into the eyes of eternity.

*Mark Sissons is a freelance writer in Canada.*



**This enormous obelisk** collapsed upon completion more than 1,000 years ago in Axum's Park of the Stelae in Ethiopia.

## When you go

### Getting there

Ethiopian Airlines (www.ethiopianairlines.com) offers direct flights from Washington, D.C., to Addis Ababa several times per week. It's rated one of the best airlines in Africa and has a good safety record. British Airways and KLM also offer direct flights from European hubs.

### Getting around

Due to the long distances and the generally poor road conditions in northern Ethiopia, flying among the main historical sites of Axum, Gondar, Bahir Dar (Lake Tana) and Lalibela is advised. Ethiopian Airlines has frequent daily connections.

### Tours

■ **Dinknesh Ethiopia Tours** (www.ethiopiatur.com) offers multiday itineraries, including the historical route by air and by surface. Dinknesh is represented in North America by the Fazendin Portfolio (303-993-7906; www.fazendinportfolio.com).

■ **Ethiopian Airlines Journeys** has a seven-day fall "Queen of Sheba Tour." Price of \$3,355 includes international and domestic airfare, lodging, meals, guides and ground transport. Contact: 1-866-599-3797; www.seyoqin.ethiopia.com.

■ Toronto-based AAST Inc. specializes in adventure travel to Africa and Asia. The next Ethiopia trip will be Nov. 4-22. The itinerary will include Addis Ababa, Lalibela and Axum. Cost: \$4,750 per person, double occupancy; includes lodging, meals, guide, entrance fees and ground transportation. Single supplement is \$550. International and domestic airfare is additional. Contact: 416-522-6508; www.aast.ca.

### Where to stay

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, offers a wide range of accommodations, from simple guesthouses to the posh Sheraton and Hilton. In the northern highlands, your options are fewer. Writer Mark Sissons stayed in the Ghion chain of mid-range, government-run hotels (www.ghionhotel.com.et), which were dated but comfortable.

### Suggested reading

*The Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant* by Graham Hancock (Touchstone, \$17) and *The Chans of Heaven: An Ethiopian Romance* by Philip Marsden (Harper Collins, about \$30)

### Resource

Ethiopian tourism: http://tourismethiopia.org