Erta Ale and Dallol are among the most bizarre and fascinating places on the planet. Visiting the Danakil Depression and exploring the alien volcanic landscape of this remote corner of Ethiopia is a truly unique experience that will leave you in awe. Many describe this adventure as akin to visiting another world...

**Erta Ale** is a continually active volcano located 790 km from Addis Ababa in the Danakil Depression – one of the hottest deserts on Earth. The summit caldera contains two “craters”. The northern crater has variable lava lakes and lava flows. The southern crater has a permanent lava lake that is 120 m in diameter. The surface of the lava lake is constantly bubbling and forming lava-fountains. The lava lake is usually at a level of 10-30 m below the edge of the crater (the point at which we view the lake).

**Dallol** is a volcanic crater located in the north of the Danakil Depression at -130m below sea level. The volcanic area consists of a bizarre landscape of yellow and green acid ponds (pH-values less than 1), spectacular salt and sulphur terraces and iron oxide, sulphur and salt desert plains. Fumaroles and geothermal springs vent gases and hydrothermal fluids enriched with salt that recrystallises on the ground, forming a landscape of magnificent concretions of orange, yellow and white coloured travertines. In a few places, brine is released with a temperature of (+ 100 ° C.), and there are several geysers, and spluttering and gurgling vents. At the salt plains, spectacular salt formations that appear like flowers can be observed. The salt formations disappear each year during the rainy season, and are formed afresh during the following dry months.

**COST:** US$3,850 per person for 9 days / 8 nights (all inclusive from start point to end point) (equivalent to approximately UK£2,850 or €3,400 at time of publication)

**START POINT:** Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

**END POINT:** Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

**DATES:** For upcoming dates, please email us.

**GROUP SIZE:** 6–10

**BESPOKE TOUR:** If you do not wish to join a group tour, we can customise a private trip to suit your dates and interests. Please email us for details.

Email sales@redfernadventures.com for more information and to make bookings.

**Optional pre- or post-expedition extensions** We can customise add on itineraries to visit Awash Saba, Axum, Bahir Dar, Gondar, Harar, Lalibela and the Simien Mountains (see below).

**Getting there:** Regular flights are available to Addis Ababa from cities across Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North America.
ADDIS ABABA (START POINT AND END POINT)

SIMPLIFIED ITINERARY
Vehicle Transfer

Mekele → Lake Afdera

MAP USED WITH PERMISSION AND PROVIDED BY Google Earth
Day 1: We meet in Addis Ababa (either pick up from airport or pick up from your hotel) and catch a domestic flight to Mekele (also spelt Mek'ele and Makale) in the Tigrayan Highlands, around 780 km north of the Ethiopian capital. After lunch, we undertake a city tour and visit a beautiful local market to experience local cultures. Overnight in a local hotel (temperatures are comfortably temperate at 2,100m altitude). Dinner in a local restaurant.

Day 2: After an early breakfast, we transfer into 4x4 vehicles and drive down from the edge of the Rift Valley to its floor towards the heart of the Danakil desert. After a few hours driving, the landscape becomes increasingly dry and inhospitable. It is uninhabited except for small communities of Afar people. We reach Dodom, a village at the base of Erta Ale.

At Dodom, we relax for a few hours and enjoy a hot dinner cooked by our crew, then as the sun sets, we begin a 9 km trek across a landscape of solidified lava to Erta Ale (the walk usually takes 3-4 hours). At Erta Ale, we spend the evening watching the dramatic action of the boiling lava, and can descend into Erta Ale's caldera to observe the bubbling lava lake from the crater rim. We remain at a safe distance, but can capture spectacular photographs. We then set up camp away from the crater edge at a safe distance away from the volcano.

Day 3: With a base diameter of 30 km and caldera of 1 km² at the summit, Erta Ale contains one of only a few permanent lava lakes that occur on Earth. Visiting the lava lake is ranked as one of the most incredible volcano experiences anywhere in the world.

We awake early to enjoy the sunrise over Erta Ale's lava lake, and after breakfast, we explore the fumarole areas nearby. Depending upon volcanic activity, we may be able to trek to the northern crater. There are sometimes small lava flows in the northern crater and occasionally spurts of glowing lava flakes fire from a vent. Our extremely experienced guides will assess the status of activity, and if safe, we can approach the incandescent zone.
Visit: www.redfernadventures.com for further information or email sales@redfernadventures.com to register your interest.
We spend all of today exploring the unearthly scenery around the lava lake, and have the chance to capture amazing photographs of the boiling lava in daylight and at night. Lava activity varies over the course of several hours, so observations during the course of one full day are strongly recommended to increase the likelihood of us witness spectacular activity. At sunset, we return to the caldera to capture iconic photographs of the fading blue sky and the glowing red of the lava. We camp once more at a safe distance from the crate edge and enjoy a hot meal cooked by our expedition chef.

**Day 4:** If desired, we can awake again at dawn to observe the lava lake one last time, and then begin the descent back to Dodom, where we meet our drivers and 4x4 vehicles. Breakfast is served in Dodom and afterwards we drive to Lake Afdera (both the name of a lake and a village). The drive takes us through changing landscapes of solidified lava flows, rock and sand. At Lake Afdera village, we explore the village and visit the salt mines of the Afar people who extract salt from the lake shores. As the sun sets, we can swim in the ultra-saline lake, floating on the surface with extra buoyancy, and then can enjoy the natural hot springs nearby. We set up camp and enjoy a hot dinner cooked by our expedition chef. The starscape at Lake Afdera is usually incredible, and we camp beneath a million stars that light up the night sky and brighten our dreams.

**Day 5:** In the morning, we explore the shores of the lake and can capture beautiful photographs in the glow of the warm morning light. The Afar people organise their lives around avoiding the harsh midday high temperatures, and so they are most active during the morning hours. During this morning walk, we see the Afar people at work in the process of extracting salt. They pumps water from the lake into artificial depressions and allow it to evaporate and create a salt crust before extracting it in mounds.

After breakfast, we dismantle our camp and journey to Hamedela (also called Ahmed Ela or Hamed Ela), a town of approximately 500 Afar people. The journey takes roughly 5 hours on an asphalt road (220 km), with stopovers for stretching leg, photographing beautiful scenery, having a coffee with the locals and lunch in a small town along the way.
After lunch, we reach Hamedela where further communities of salt miners live. We set up camp with the help of the locals, and then explore Hamedela and meet the community. Usually there are excellent opportunities to photograph caravans of camels travelling to and from the high plateau. Usually, there are very long caravans with hundreds of camels, one tied to the next, and loaded with salt. Often we have a beautiful view of sunset behind the camel caravans as they depart in the cool hours of the late afternoon and evening. Many say that this sunset image of the camel caravans departing is one of the most enduring and memorable moments of visiting the Danakil Depression. We set up camp and enjoy a hot dinner cooked by our expedition chef.

**Day 6:**

Breakfast is served at 6.00 am and we start out early to drive the short distance (approx 30 min) to Dallol (meaning *a colourful place* in the Afar language) via Asebo (meaning *the salt desert*). Dallol (-130 m below sea level) is the deepest place in Africa and is arguably the hottest place in the world. Dallol was once the bed of an ancient body of saltwater, and we discover a bizarre and vast salt plain from which local Afar people extract Amole, salt bars that has been used as currency in Ethiopia for at least 1,600 years.

We drive in our 4x4 vehicles for about an hour further to the salt mine area and witness the miners cutting bricks of salt and loading them onto the backs of their camels. Vast chains of camels up to 50 strong trailing off to the horizon are a frequent sight as the miners carry their salt bricks away to trade and sell. After observing the salt extraction process, we visit Lake Assale filled with saline water.

Beyond the salt plains, we reach the geothermal landscape of Dallol, with its bizarre scenes of yellow and green pools, canyons of salt, fairy chimneys and geysers. This unearthly volcano area has a negative altitude of -89 m. We spend the afternoon exploring and photographing the strange deep green acid lakes, rock labyrinths, shredded, sharp, laminated salt towers, brine flows and multi-coloured concretions. The scenes are indescribable and alien, and it truly feels as though we have landed on another planet.

We may also explore a new hydrothermal site with bubbling vents and a few geysers spouting lemon yellow fluid. We return back to Lake Asale under the warm glow of the setting sun and

**ITINERARY CONTINUED...**
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then drive back to Hamedela, often passing lines of caravan camels. We set up camp and enjoy a hot dinner cooked by our expedition chef.

**Day 7:** After breakfast we break camp and start the drive to Wukiro, a town on the Tigrayan Highlands. On arriving, we can visit the rock-hewn church of Wukiro Cherkos (one of the finest works in Ethiopia from the 4th century). The church is chiselled into the face of a vertical sandstone cliff. After lunch, we check into a local hotel (back at the lush, temperate altitude of 2,100m), and can relax, recovering from our desert adventures. Dinner in a local restaurant.

**Day 8:** After breakfast, we drive northward and stop at a small village which serves as a base for a three hour round trek to Gheralta, known for its tall sand cliffs into which many churches have been chiselled during the last 1,000 years or more. We can climb to the very top of the cliff to visit either Abbune Yemata or Maryam Kurkur (one of the most inaccessible churches of the world built in 4th century), but if climbing is not desired, we can visit more accessible locations close to the base of the cliff. We enjoy a picnic lunch at viewpoints with some of the most spectacular scenery in Ethiopia. After lunch, we continue the return journey, and if time allows, we can also visit the fascinating ancient churches of Abreha and Atsbeha before reaching the town of Wukiro.

Anyone wishing to undertake add on extension trips to Axum, Lalibela, and Gondar will leave the group at Wukiro. For everyone else, we continue our journey and drive 45 km further to reach Mekele for transfer by domestic flight back to Addis Ababa.

Depending upon the flight schedule, we either fly from Mekele to Addis Ababa tonight (at 8.00 pm), or alternatively early tomorrow morning, and so we either overnight in a hotel in Mekele or Addis Ababa accordingly, and have dinner in a local restaurant.

**Day 9:** This morning, we visit the National Museum of Ethiopia, home to the remains of Lucy (the most ancient hominid yet discovered. Lucy was found in the Danakil Depression not far from where we have travelled. The museum also houses the remains of many other ancient hominids. We can also visit the Ethnographic Museum (located in the old palace of Haileselasie and main campus of Addis Ababa University), Entoto Mountain (for views over Addis Ababa city) and
the Entoto Maryam Museum (with royal garments, coins, drums and the royal crown used by Menelik II). For those interested, we can also choose to visit several ancient churches, the very old palace of Menelik II and Merkato (the largest open air market in Africa). There are many interesting monuments and historic sites that can be visited along the way, and opportunities to go souvenir shopping in the diverse and interesting markets of Addis Ababa.

In the late afternoon, we enjoy a farewell dinner with a traditional buffet with local drinks and accompanied by a live cultural dance show featuring dancers from various different ethnic groups of Ethiopia. We then transfer to Bole international airport for departing evening flights, or transfer for drop off at your hotel in Addis Ababa if you are staying longer in Ethiopia or departing tomorrow.
ADD ON TRIP OPTIONS

Awash Saba: A National Park home to a dormant volcano, mammals and predators.

Axum: an ancient city home to obelisks, stelae, temples and palaces, and the final resting place of the Ark of Covenant.

Bahir Dar: one of Africa's most spectacular waterfalls - a cascade of the Blue Nile.

Gondar: Visit extremely well preserved castles from the 17th Century.

Harar: A medieval walled city and the cradle of Islam in Ethiopia.

Lalibela: home to an incredible cruciform church carved into the bedrock.

Simien Mountains: rugged and spectacular mountain scenery with a chance to see diverse wildlife, including the gelada baboon and Walia ibex.

Email sales@redfernadventures.com for more information and to discuss add on trip options.

LALIBELA CRUCIFORM CHURCHES

BAHIR DAR & TISSISSAT FALLS