



Advice and information for visitors and volunteers at the Nicolas Robinson School in Mekele, Tigray, Ethiopia

Before the visit

Vaccination and health issues in Mekele

For UK visitors, please also look at www.masta.org

The following information is advice based on our experience, only and you should always contact your own doctor/health specialist/travel clinic

Recommendation for immunisations:

Make certain you are up to date with the following:

Polio

Typhoid

Tetanus,

Hepatitis A&C

Meningitis

Yellow Fever – I recommend a certificate (valid for 10 years) as if there is an outbreak somewhere else in Africa they may demand to see your certificate on entry to Ethiopia.

Rabies – This is optional. There are a lot of dogs around in Mekele, most of them pretty docile and sleepy, but you could get unlucky. Taking a course of rabies injections is not cheap, but could buy you time to get to a hospital and if you have already had this injection, it reduces the severity of the reaction to the course needed after you have been bitten.

Malaria – In Mekele and Addis Ababa and Lalibela, the cities are above 2,000 metres and so there is not a need to take malaria tablets (so far).

If you are spending any other time during your visit away from the highland regions, then you might consider taking the tablets.

In terms of the drugs to use for malaria prevention, our favourite is Malarone. It seems to be effective, has less stomach reactions than some of the other drugs and only needs to be taken as one tablet, once per day. It is the most expensive of the different options, though.

Water

Generally assume that the water in Mekele is NOT safe to drink from the tap. Especially in the better hotels (Planet, Axum) the water is probably well enough treated and would be fine for cleaning teeth, but do not drink it un-boiled. The Mekele water is very hard.

Food

In the better hotels we have had no problem in eating salads, but be careful, especially when you are new in town and not used to the bugs! There are a lot of juice bars in town now and we have never had any problems in drinking mango juice (it is fresh and served without ice) or mango and Avocado spritz.

Otherwise, be careful, follow the normally rules of eating cooked foods – usually the unhealthier the safer!

Handwashing

We suspect that most of the stomach bugs come from carelessness/complacency on handwashing. We have to remember that the children who come up to you and shake hands or want to touch you, come from environments where they do not have access to soap and water. Before touching ANYTHING that you will eat, with your hands, ensure that you have had a good hand wash with soap and water or an antiseptic gel/wet wipes

Please never, ever touch your eyes or mouth area unless you know your hands are disinfected!



Most people who visit Ethiopia have nothing more serious than D&V, but it can last for a couple of days and whilst good for any weight loss regime, is a pretty miserable and depressing way of achieving it!

Eyes

Mekele, especially in the months of October to June, is very dry and dusty. In November to March it is also quite windy. It is a good idea to wear sunglasses, and the more wrap-around the better, to stop dust getting in the eyes and risk the start of eye infections

Visas

For most nationalities, getting a visa is now very easy with the new evisa process

Apply on: <https://www.evisa.gov.et/#/home>

If you are likely to stay more than 1 month at the school we may need to apply for a business visa and we should discuss this as a separate issue.

Travel arrangements

Flights – international

We recommend that you travel with Ethiopian airways: <https://www.ethiopianairlines.com/AA/EN/#>

If you do this there are 2 main advantages:

1. You can book your flight and baggage all the way to Mekele (MQX).
2. Internal flights in Ethiopia will be 50-70% cheaper than if you had booked with another airline.

Please note that you must have an Ethiopian airlines ticket number. If a flight is a code share, say with Lufthansa or United Airlines and you book it through the other airline, it will not qualify. Ethiopian airlines is part of Star Alliance.

Flights – local

Flights from Addis Ababa (ADD) to Mekele (MQX) take 1-1.5 hours and run several times per day.

Transit in Addis Ababa

If you have booked a connecting flight to Mekele then the following advice applies.

Transfer in Addis takes a bit of time but isn't too bad. 2hours should be enough time. When you arrive, you follow the signs to the domestic terminal, these take you to a small waiting area from which a bus picks you up and drops you at the domestic terminal. When you enter the domestic terminal building there is a small counter where you can get your visa document or show your evisa. If you buy a visa on arrival, it costs 50 USD for a 1-month visa. Once you have your visa, you need to have your passport checked and stamped. This is where they ask where you are staying and you have to give the hotel name and city. After that you can move to the transfer area, where you wait for your connecting flight.

If they allow you to do it (it differs every time and depends on who is standing there checking), do not pass the customs counter row (into the baggage reclaim area) but turn back to where you entered and turn right up the stairs into the waiting area. If they don't allow you, you'll have to do another loop going into the baggage reclaim area and from there into check-in and through the hand luggage check. Usually you will be lucky, but sometimes they send people the long way.

Other transport

It is possible to travel by bus (Selam bus is the best long-distance coach service), but it is a 13 hour journey, uncomfortable and the locals who use the service close the curtains on the windows and watch Ethiopian language movies, so you will not get to see the countryside. We do not recommend it.



Hiring a 4 WD with driver costs about USD 170-200 per day. If you are arranging trips our touring then this is worthwhile.

Hotels in Mekele

There are now many hotels in Mekele, but the supply has not raised the quality standard, so far. We regularly use these hotels as they are within walking distance (10-15 minutes walk) of the school. We can help you make the bookings.

Planet – This is the best quality hotel. We have negotiated a Rainbows4children discount rate of 15% for our guests and we can organise this for you when we book. A simple double room costs about \$65-70 per night per room, B&B.

GG – This is a simple hotel. It serves meals but service and quality is generally low. The rooms are clean but the plumbing is unreliable. Prices for rooms start at about \$15 per room.

Amiable - This is a simple hotel. It serves meals but service and quality is generally low. The rooms are clean but the plumbing is unreliable. Prices for rooms start at about \$15 per room.

Others - These hotels are the most practical for the school for different budgets but there are new hotels being opened all the time and we can keep you updated on the choice.

Telephone and SIM cards

Bring an old phone with you and you can use it with a locally purchased Ethiopian SIM cards. We have a few SIM cards at the school which can be borrowed, but **MUST** be returned, as Ethiopians can only purchase a few cards per person, so we use up their allowances quickly. You can purchase cards from small shops, hotels etc to load up the SIM cards with credit, instructions are on the cards [Recharge phone: *805*code#]. The costs of calls is very low, and so 50 birr (\$1.70) will probably be enough for a 2 week stay unless you are planning to make international calls. For friends and relatives to call you, it will be a lot cheaper to an Ethiopian mobile than to your home mobile with added roaming charges. Not every phone company is partnered with Ethio telecom, so your home phone may not work in Ethiopia, For example Salt (previously Orange) does not work in Ethiopia but Swisscom does.

Working at the school

Requirements (child safety)

For all our volunteers we have a few requirements that we ask them to fulfil for everyone's protection.

1. Sign our child protection policy. As you are working in an environment with vulnerable people (children and people with disability) we ask you to sign this document.
2. Provide a declaration from your relevant authorities that you do not have a criminal record of have committed any offence which renders you unsuitable for working with children.
3. Sign our contract, which outlines the responsibilities of the volunteer, the school and Rainbows4children.

Occupation at the school

Main areas of support in which visitors are involved are:

- Development of English reading and speaking skills of students and teachers
- Development of laboratory practical and organizational skills of science teachers and lab technicians
- Improvement of the learning environment by training teachers in the use of collaborative learning techniques.
- Development of management and leadership skills of the school staff, especially the management team
- Engagement in extra-curricular activities, such as discussion groups, clubs, art and sports activities, as well as developing the health program.

We have opportunities for many other skills, including music, sport, kindergarten teaching and health experts and the details of programmes can be discussed with Rainbows4children.

School location



Shows airport and some hotels



Shows walking routes to school from Planet and GG hotels



Travel in Ethiopia – supplementary

Many of our visitors take advantage of their time in Ethiopia to travel. It is a beautiful and historic country and it is highly recommended to do this. Here are 2 possible itineraries, depending on time available. We can help you arrange others, with or without a guide, depending on available budget.

Route 1

Saturday morning, arrive in Mekele (MQX), drop bags at Planet Hotel and then travel to Gheralta for the weekend, with light baggage.

Sunday evening return to Mekele

Mon/Tues/Wed Mekele and Nicolas Robinson School

Thurs travel to Lalibela

Friday Lalibela and surrounds

Saturday - Lalibela (LLI) to Addis Ababa (ADD)

Route 2

Day 1 Drive to Gheralta lodge. About a two hour drive from Mekele. We will see Abreha Atseba Church on the way. This church is famous for its architectural features. The interior of the church has some fine examples of paintings and some wonderful carved pillars. It is thought by many to be one of the finest rock hewn churches in Tigray. Then drive to the lodge. Lunch is at the lodge. Relax in the the lodge or visit churches.

o/n and supper at the Gheralta Lodge

Day 2 Explore the Gheralta area.

Gheralta Churches, many from the 13th, 14th and 15th century, are living churches still supported by the local communities and are undiscovered jewels of Ethiopia, rarely included on the main tourist route. One of the best kept secrets of Tigray. Not as imposing architecturally as the Rock hewn Churches of Lalibela, their positions, often hugging the tops of mountainous outcrops, towering nearly 2500 metres above the plains more than make up for this. In the main, the more remote examples are little visited by comparison with those at Lalibela and have an aura of their own, Maryam Korkhor and the nearby smaller church of Daniel Korkor or to Abuna Abraham Debre Tsion and Yohannis Maikudi. The choice depends very much on fitness and personal viewpoint. Abuna Yemata is another possibility but requires significant skill at climbing and a head for heights. There are some books at your lodge illustrating the various options.

Day 3 March 29th Drive about 5 hours to Axum. On the way we will see Yeha. Yeha is the site of the first known Capital of the Ethiopians and is thought to be the birthplace of the country's earliest civilisation dating from the early 5th Century. There are interesting temple ruins dating from 5th Century B.C. The ancient local church in Yeha has some fascinating old artefacts that the local priest will show you on request.

Then drive through the valley and mountains of the battlefields of Adua, where the famous battle of 1896 occurred, where we will have lunch in Adua. Then drive on to Axum, an elevation of 2130m.

Day 4. Axum: the stellae park, the tombs of Kaleb and Gebremeskel, Church of St Mary Tsion, Erzana's stone in the small park and the new museum. You can walk up to the quarry to see where the stellae were hewn and visit the ruin known as Queen of Sheba's Palace.

Day 5. Fly to Lalibela on the mid-morning flight. Flight is about 40 minutes. Met at airport by hotel bus. Then explore the Lalibela Churches in the Town. The city is located at about 2,600 meters above sea level. The visit to Lalibela is dedicated to visiting the churches. There is also a small but interesting museum. Lalibela contains 11 monolithic churches that were built in the twelfth century and are carved out of the pink tufa volcanic rock; they have been classified as one of the wonders of the world. Each church has a unique architectural style; all are superbly carved and most of them are decorated with well-preserved paintings. The entire city is described by some as a sculpture dedicated to the glory of God.

You need a torch and to wear socks when visiting the church as you will need to remove your shoes. Churches fall into two main sites.

The Northern group consisting of:

Bet Meskel, Bet Danaghel, Bet Golgotha, Bet Michael & Selassie Chapel (this is rarely open to the public), Bet Giorgis



Eastern group consisting of:

Bet Amanuel, Bet Merkorios, Bet Abba Libanos, Bet Gabriel-Rufael.

Day 6

Generally explore the town completing your visit to the churches if not finished yesterday. Trek out on foot or by mule to Ashotan monastery situated at 3500m Wonderful views over the town. You may use a mule if you wish it takes about 2 and a half hours. You could continue on to Nakuta La'ab and see another church with interesting artefacts. This means about 5 or 6 hours walking in total.

Day 7. Fly to Gondar, transfer to Hotel. Gondar was the first capital city of the Gondarian period of the empire, which began in 1632 with the reign of Fasilidas. In the city, there are a dozen castles built by various emperors over the course of 236 years. The city can seem more European than African to some people and also has Islamic influences. Also visit the Baths of Fasilidas where the famous Timkat ceremony occurs. Also visit the church of Debre Berhan Selassie. The interior is famous for beautiful wall murals depicting scenes from the bible and the wonderful ceiling of angels.

Day 8. After breakfast at hotel a morning drive of 105k to Debarq. Register at park headquarters for the Simien National Park. Your drive is about 105k and takes you across the Dabat Plain. You will get your first view of the Simien Mountain Range. It is an interesting journey and as you climb higher you may need to wear a fleece. Finally on entering the National park it is about 45 minute drive to the Simien lodge. Settle into lodge. It is cold at night.

Day 9 Explore the Park. It is a drive of two hours to Chenek campsite where there are panoramic views. Can do some walking and try to find the endemic wallia. A park scout accompanies visitors.

Day 10 Return to Gondar, about a three hour drive. On the way back can stop just outside the town at the Felasha village and visit an interesting women's centre with crafts on display.

Day 11 Morning flight to Addis Ababa. If time, visit the national museum or go up to Entoto to see the view and church and small museum. Mercato is the largest market in Africa, but do not take valuables there.

Other options –

Weekend excursions or long weekends can be taken to Gheralta, about 1.5-2 hours drive from Mekele, also Axum is about 5 hour drive from Mekele. These are more economic to do when you can fill a car. 4WD with drivers can be hired for about US\$ 150-200 per day, depending on the season.

There are occasional flights to Axum or Lalibela, but this depends on the season and are not operated daily.

For desert lovers who don't mind the camping experience and some challenging walking, trips to the Danakil can also be organised.