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# THE WEEK

28 APRIL 2012 | ISSUE 866 | £2.75

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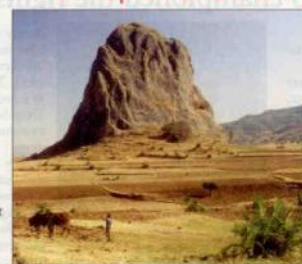
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### This week's dream: Ethiopia's ancient Christian heartland

Tigray, in northern Ethiopia, is "big-sky country", says William MacNamara in the Financial Times. Reminiscent of a John Wayne movie, it is a semi-arid "region of buttes and columns of rock rising hundreds of feet from the valley floor". But its most striking features are man-made: churches carved into rock up to 1,600 years ago. Tourists have long travelled to see the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, 150 miles south, but Tigray is only now overcoming its reputation as the centre of the famines of the 1980s. "It is a destination that offers a rare balance of historical, spiritual and outdoors adventures (often all in one excursion)."

The greatest of Tigray's churches lie three hours' drive east of Axum, a city of 60,000 people that was the capital of the Axumite Empire during the first millennium AD. Ezana, the Axumite king, converted to Christianity in the 4th century, and Axum remains the holiest city of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The faithful maintain that the Ark of the Covenant resides there, smuggled in by the son of King



Tigray: reminiscent of a John Wayne movie

they are colourful and flat, "like Mexican folk art", and the faces of Jesus and the saints are African – familiar, "and yet fascinatingly different". *Journeys by Design* (01273-623799; www.journeysbydesign.com) has a 10-night trip, incl. the rock churches of Tigray, from £3,990pp, incl. flights.

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba; and all the churches are ordered around a replica of it. There are 100 or so of these sanctuaries carved out of the rock high up in the mountains. No one knows when they were built (perhaps the 4th century), nor why; but this "mystery" only seems to enhance their power.

The path up to St Mary Korkor demands "rock-climbing skills" in places, but that doesn't deter the locals: even old ladies scale the crags to get to mass. A whitewashed door in the cliff face leads directly into the gloom of the nave, its domed ceiling supported by 11 pillars. There are frescoes on every surface.

#### Hotel of the week



#### Casa Gangotena, Quito, Ecuador

Located on the splendid Plaza San Francisco in Quito's "rapidly gentrifying" old town, the Casa Gangotena is a great base from which to explore the Ecuadorian capital, says Condé Nast Traveller. A 1920s mansion, it opened in October after a \$10m conversion. The 31 bedrooms are "light and spacious"; some have views of the plaza from their bathtubs. The restaurant has a global menu (and serves superb breakfast omelettes), and there's a "cosy" bar offering "delicious" local snacks. The rooftop terrace affords "spectacular" views across the city – the world's highest capital, at 9,200ft above sea level.

Doubles from \$457.  
Contact: 00 593 2 400 8000;  
www.casagangotena.com

#### Getting the flavour of...

##### Two old Japanese towns

In Japan's towns and cities, you'll find plenty of grand historic buildings, but most ordinary residential areas were altered beyond recognition during the 20th century. Deep in the country's Central Alps, however, two 19th century settlements are perfectly preserved, says Lyn Hughes in Wanderlust. Magome and Tsumago were post towns on the Nakasendo Highway, a narrow trail that was once the principal route linking Kyoto to Tokyo. They're "tourist honeypots", but "beautiful" nonetheless, with their ancient wooden houses and cobbled streets. The two-hour hike through the forest between them is delightful (ring the bells provided to scare away bears). It's worth staying a night: in the moonlight, you can almost "reach out and touch" the past. *Audley Travel* (01993-838000; www.audleytravel.com) has an 11-night trip from £2,560pp incl. flights.

##### France's capital of gastronomy

"Lyon is said to be a dull city, but only by those who have never visited," says Anthony Perregine in The Sunday Times. A wealthy centre of silk production in the 16th century, it has the finest Renaissance centre in France – a perfectly preserved panoply of "town-houses, galleries, courtyards and loggias" beside the River Saône. Between the Saône and the Rhône (they both run through the city), the newer town is "grandly classical",

with stately squares and "endless" theatres, parks and museums (don't miss the Institut Lumière, covering the invention of cinema in Lyon). But perhaps most exciting is the food: this is "the capital of French gastronomy", Michelin-star-spangled but also home to many great local *bouchons* – inns serving the city's meaty cuisine. *The Hotel des Célestins* (00 33 (0) 4 72 56 08 98; www.hotelcelestins.com) is "central".

##### The Lake District on horseback

Famously strong and gentle, heavy horse breeds such as the Shire and Clydesdale used to be seen as draft animals. But go on a trek through the Lake District organised by Cumbrian Heavy Horses (CHH), and you'll find they're wonderful for riding, too, says Abigail Flanagan in The Guardian – able to carry you along paths too treacherous for most other breeds. One of the UK's only two specialist heavy-horse riding centres (there's another in Cornwall), CHH offers six-day, 100-mile circuits of the area, with accommodation in chaler cabins, a camping barn, and an 18th century farmhouse once owned by the city's author Beatrix Potter. The journey begins with a trot along the vast Silecroft Beach and climbs to Hardknott Pass, with its "immense" view across Harter and Birker Fells to the Isle of Man. From £1,500pp full board. 01229-77764; www.cumbrianheavyhorses.com

#### Last-minute offers from top travel companies

##### Horsing around in Cornwall

A night's stay at the boutique Llawroc Hotel, Gorran Haven, with an hour's riding tour and dinner, from £220 per room b&ch. 01726-843461; www.thellawroc-hotel.co.uk

##### Maldives in May

An action-packed 7-night beach break at Olhuveli Beach & Spa Resort from £1,469pp all-in incl. Gatwick flights. 0871-230-2555; www.thompson.co.uk. Depart 20 May.

##### Family break in New York

A 3-night break at the Holiday Inn Midtown (for 2 adults and 2 children under 12 sharing a room) from £629pp incl. flights. 0845-319 4266; www.touramericadirect.co.uk. Depart 6 June.

##### Boozy Aberdeen

Attend the Great Grampian Beer Festival during a 3-night stay at the Aberdeen Douglas hotel, from £189pp b&ch incl. Luton flights. 0800-408 5620; www.directline-citybreaks.co.uk. Depart 31 May.

For The Week's own insider tips and exclusive offers, please visit [www.theweektravel.com](http://www.theweektravel.com).

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