

The Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela



Background

King Lalibela (1181 to 1221 AD), the ruler of Ethiopia's Zagwe Dynasty, responded to the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187 AD in a most fascinating way. He had eleven churches cut out of solid volcanic rock and called them the New Jerusalem. Pious legends are all we have concerning the creation of the churches, but it is said that the angels dictated the plan to the king and then assisted in their construction, which took 24 years. They are the only churches in the world to have been built from top to bottom.



In an era without hydraulic cutting instruments, every inch of these churches was hewn by hand. Tradition states that the laborers who carved them performed this arduous work in penitential fashion as an act of humility. Four of the eleven churches are free-standing monoliths (each carved from a single rock), and seven are cut into red basalt cliffs. Like the Jerusalem of old, the site draws as many as 100,000 visitors each year, mostly native Ethiopian pilgrims who sometimes travel on foot for days or weeks to arrive in the remote region.

Fascinating Details

A **small stream**, appropriately called the River Jordan, bisects the triangular-shaped, fifteen-acre property; the churches are divided into two clusters - five north, five south - with one church situated 900 feet apart from the others to the west.

The most famous of the eleven churches, **St. George Church** (top left), was created in the form of a Greek Cross and excavated some forty feet down into the rock; it sits in an 82-foot **square trench**, accessed by a **tunnel** cut through the rock; there is no evidence or record of where such an enormous amount of stone was taken once it was removed from the site.



The **churches' interiors** are all negative space - stone was cut away to create vaulted ceilings, columns, beams, and arches, and many of the walls are decorated with frescoes. Slits and open windows in each structure provide light for worshippers, and elaborate drainage and underground tunnel systems connect the entire compound.



The largest church is 109 feet long, 77 feet wide, and 35 feet deep; the churches are used to this day as **places of worship** (Ethiopian Coptic liturgy); the local town with a population of approximately 9,000 inhabitants is home to **nearly 1000 priests!**

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