

Tigray Rock Hewn Churches

Distinctive features of Tigray are its rock-hewn churches. Similar in design to those of Lalibella, but many are considered to be older- perhaps dating from the sixth century. Designs are partly inspired by classical architecture, they are often located at the top of cliffs or steep hills, for security. For the adventurous - Tigray's ancient Debre Damo monastery is accessible by climbing a rope 25 meters up a sheer cliff.

These churches are found in four or five direction -- Gheralta, TakaTesfay, Atsbi and Tembien -- with Wukro sometimes included. Regarded by many experts as the finest church in Tigray, Abreha we Atsbeha lies about halfway between Dugem and Wukro. It is the site of a major annual pilgrimage (14 October) every year. The beautifully carved roof is supported by several decorated arches. The church's claims to antiquity are emphasized by its many treasures, among them a prayer cross that is said to have belonged to Abba Salama, the first Bishop of Ethiopia.

In 1868 the British expedition led by Napier passed through the small Tigrean village of Wukro where they were shown an astonishing church carved into a rocky outcrop. For several decades after this it was assumed by the outside world that this church was the only one of its sort in Tigray. It was not until 35 years ago that the sheer number of rock-hewn churches was discovered to exist in Tigray.

Little is known about the age of the churches. However, there is a general consensus that the churches predate those at Lalibela, though few churches in Tigray are as immediately impressive as the ones in Lalibela. Nevertheless, you cannot help but feel a sense of wonder as you enter each church, not only for the craftsmanship, but also for the antiquity and the air of sanctity it has absorbed over centuries of uninterrupted use.