

Trek
in
Ethiopia

I. Simien Mountain Circuit

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This is a short account of a trek in the Simien Mountains in Ethiopia I did in December 2006. The trek is 9-10 days in length altogether, with most of the days being quite easy and only one day being somewhat demanding.

The Simien mountains are in Northern Ethiopia. They consist of a 3500m high plateau about 70km by 40km with an 2 km high escarpment on the northern edge. Deep canyons cut into this plateau. The Simien Mountains are home to 3 endemic mammals; The Gelada Baboon, The Walia Ibex and The elusive Simien Fox. They have a rich Bird life and unique Flora. The trek passes through Highland villages where life goes on as it has over the last Millennium. Most of the villages are Orthodox Ethiopian Christians, but a few are Muslim.

The best time to do the trek is probably in October and November after the rainy season when the vegetation is at its greenest and the flowers are in full show. By late December most of the flowers are spent and the landscape is drying out and the visibility is getting hazy. This aridness increases until the onset of the rains in June. During the rains the mornings may be dry but the afternoons are invariably wet. Many river crossings on the trek are impassable during the rainy season.

For any walk in the Simien Mountains National Park or its periphery area a permit, camping fee and armed Scout is obligatory and they are provided by the Park Authorities in Debarq. The Scouts know the way but do not speak English. A mule and Muleteer is not essential but



The Gelada Baboons, *Theropithecus gelada*, spend the night sheltering on the safety of the steep cliffs. By day they leave this sanctuary and come onto the high plateaus in large troupes to browse on vegetation. They are excitable and gregarious animals. In the background are the characteristic giant Lobelia plants some in flower with a large obelisk like flower stalk.

Simien Mts Circuit



This Red Hot Poker, *Kniphofia foliosa*, is one of 2 species which are abundant at around 3000 metres



One of the Stars of the Simien Mountains is the Gelada Baboon, *Theropithecus gelada*. These sociable animals sleep on the steep cliffs of the escarpment. By day the Baboons roam the high plateau to eat vegetation.



The unique Giant Lobelia, *Lobelia rynchopetulum*, is found across on the high plateaus above 3500 metres

advised as they take the burden, leaving you to enjoy the surroundings. Guides are also not essential but are advised to translate with locals and inform you about the environs. Finally, if you want someone to purchase all the food and cook it then cooks are available, but this will invariably entail more mules and muleteers and additional complications. All guides, muleteers and cooks are arranged at the National Park office in Debarq. We only took a scout and a muleteer with a mule for a party of 2.

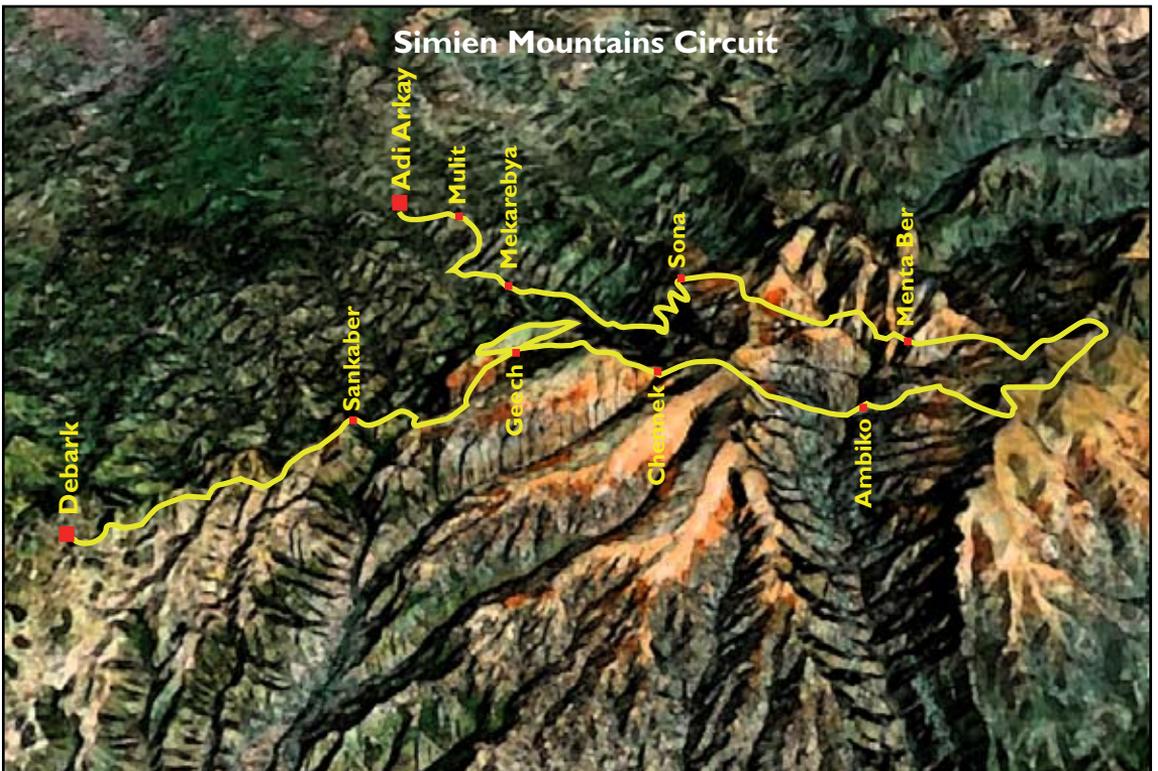
Some foods are available in Gondor and there is a very limited selection in Debarq. In addition some foodstuffs like eggs,

chickens and even sheep are available from various villages. It is probably best to bring dehydrated meals for dinner and porridge for breakfast and supplement supplies from Gondor. Petrol and Kerosene are available in Gondor and scarce in Debarq.

All accommodation on the trek is in tents. The National Park authorities try to discourage camping outside the designated campsites. Some of the campsites towards the end are nothing but a field with a dubious water supply, where a filter and/or purification tablets are essential. The campsites in the first half have good water and pit toilets. There is a simple hotel in Debarq, but nothing usable at Adi Arkay.



The immense promontory of Imet Gogo is one of the prime viewpoints in the Simien Mountains. Here seen from Sona campsite it rises almost sheer for 2000 metres from the valley below.



The 10 day Simien Mountains Circuit starts in the town of Debarq. It then follows the top of a huge escarpment for 5 days before dropping into a deep valley at Ambiko. From Ambiko it climbs Ras Dashen, the highest mountain in Ethiopia and the 7 highest in Africa, before passing through Highland villages for 2 days. The route then drops into lowland valleys, peppered with canyons and towers, for a further 3 days before it concludes at Adi Arkay. The above map show the 10 stages as described in the text below.



This trek through The Simien Mountains goes through a number of pastoral and arable areas where annual tasks are still performed as they were through the centuries. Here corn is being threshed by horses walking over it.



The high lobelia covered plateaus around the mountain of Ras Dashen are quite remote from the surrounding villages yet provide good grazing. Consequently the herds remain up here and are looked after by young shepherds who live in caves for months at a time.



The Gelada, or bleeding heart, Baboons are so called because they have a large heart shaped patch of reddish skin on their chests. The adult males (as seen here) each have a small harem of 3-5 females however several harems may travel and feed together.



The Gelada Baboons are quite tame and humans can get quite close before they move off. They males usually remain between the perceived danger and the females. They spend large parts of the day grooming each other, especially in the mornings.



Below the 1000m high upper escarpment is a wide shelf. This shelf in turn plunges another 1000m. Here is a view of the shelf below the promontories of Imet Gogo and Saha as seen from the campsite below Sona as it plunges a further 1000m into the Ansiya Wenz valley in the middle of the picture.



A sunset view looking west along the escarpment top from Geech Camp. Here it is easy to see the flat top of the mountains and the steep escarpment to the north of this high plateau. The total escarpment is about 2000m high and is about 50km in length.

Ethiopia: The Simien Mountain Circuit

Day	Start	Finish	Km	Up	Down	Time	General
1	Debark	Sankaber	22 km	1050	670	8 hrs	Leave Debark and head east for 2 km. Leave the road and follow a pastoral path through villages for 3 hours to ascend to the same road. Cross the road and pass south of Buyit Ras through more villages for an hour before meeting the escarpment and baboons. Follow the lofty path along the escarpment edge for 3 hours with stunning views until you reach Sankaber camp.
2	Sankaber	Geech	13 km	790	430	6 hrs	Leave Sankaber and follow the undulating escarpment past viewpoints for 1½ hours to Deche Nedala and a view over a 600m waterfall. Climb through giant heather to the road. Follow it for 2 km then head down to the Jinbar Wenz stream. Cross the stream before climbing through fields to the traditional village of Geech. ½ hour after Geech village is the camp amongst the first Lobelia.
3	Geech	Geech	13 km	590	590	7 hrs	An optional, but recommended, day spent exploring the plateau around Geech. Firstly walk 2 hours to Imet Gogo, arguably the best viewpoint in the Simiens. Then follow the escarpment east to Saha, another viewpoint. Continue east across the lobelia-covered plateau, where Baboons are common, before reaching the third promontory of Kedadit. Then descend for ½ hour to reach the camp.
4	Geech	Chennek	14 km	750	740	6 hrs	Head towards Imet Gogo again but after 1 hour veer SE to the head of the Jinbar Wenz valley where there is a huge view into the chasm. Climb up to the promontories of Shayno Sefer and then Inatye for more escarpment edge views. From Inatye head down the path along the jagged edge for 2 hours to reach the road and the camp of Chennek. The rare Walia Ibex are often seen here.
5	Chennek	Ambiko	16 km	920	1370	7 hrs	Leave Chennek and head up the escarpment edge for 2 hours to Bwahit Pass. Keep an eye out for Ibex who appear mid-morning on the cliff ledges. After Bwahit Pass descend some 1300 metres past the village of Chiro Leba to the unbridged Mesheha Wenz River. Cross the river and then ascend a side valley for 1 hour to reach the traditional village and campsite of Ambiko.
6	Ambiko	Menta Ber	23 km	1510	1100	10 hrs	Leave Ambiko at 0500hrs and head east up the valley for 1½ hours. Cross a ridge and climb gently for 2 hours to a saddle. From the saddle it is 1½ hours to Ras Dashen, 4533m, the last section involving a scramble. Scramble off the north side of the summit and cross a plateau for 1½ hours to reach a large path to the north of Tefew Leser. Follow this path for 3 hours to the village of Menta Ber.
7	Menta Ber	Sona	23 km	890	1380	8 hrs	Head east from Menta Ber and contour round the hillside for 2 hours to the villages of Azmari and then Berge. Then contour round a spur and drop down into the Mesheha Wenz valley and cross a side-stream with some bathing pools. After the stream climb to Dibil village and continue up to a saddle at Arkwasiye village. From here it is a pleasant 2 hour descent to a scenic campsite below Sona.
8	Sona	Mekarebya	12 km	290	1370	5 hrs	From Sona campsite begin a long descent via numerous zig-zags down a steep and loose path for 1100m as you leave an escarpment and descend into the Ansiya Wenz Valley. At the river head downstream for ½km to a wonderful swimming pool. At the pool cross to the south side of the river and contour round the hill for 2 hours on a path at about 2000m to reach Mekarebya campsite.
9	Mekarebya	Mulit	13 km	590	490	6 hrs	Leave the camp and head down a stream for an hour to the Ansiya Wenz river which is then followed for an hour downstream. Leave the river on the north side and enter a valley between the massive outcrops of Hawasa and Toloka. Ascend this valley 1 hour before beginning a hot, 1 hour climb up the valley side to the village of Hawasa. Mulit campsite is 1 hour beyond this village.
10	Mulit	Adi Arkay	6 km	50	440	2 hrs	It is only an easy pastoral 2 hours descent to the small town of Adi Arkay. This town has poor facilities and it is better to camp at Mulit rather than finish the previous day and spend the night here. From Adi Arkay there are daily buses South to Debark and Gondor or North to Axum. These buses are often full so need to be pre-booked, or you will have to hitch a ride in a lorry cab.
			155 km	7430	8580	65 hrs	