

ETHIOPIA
Guide to Top Tourist Attractions, GONDAR
Amhara National Regional State



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Amhara National Regional State
Bureau of Culture and Tourism GONDAR, Ethiopia

1. THE EMPERICAL CITY OF GONDAR AND ITS SURROUNDING

Gondar is the center of the medieval royal period and other historical and natural attractions. From the 9 World Heritage Sites of Ethiopia, the two, the castles of Gondar and the Simien Mountains National Park, are found in and around Gondar. The center of Ethiopian art and culture is famous for its many medieval castles and the design and decoration of its churches. This land of castles and churches was founded by King Fasilidas in the 1730s and served as the royal capital of Ethiopian Emperors for about 250 years. The foundation of this imperial capital witnessed a period of optimism and renaissance of the golden days of Aksum and Lalibela architecture, literature, education, music, painting, and commerce that had been perished after the fall of ancient Aksum rose to prominence. Gondar is situated in northwestern Ethiopia, about 727 and 180 kilometers away from Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar respectively. Its altitude is 2200 meters above sea level.

This royal medieval capital has valuable heritages to offer for visitors. The construction of the castles, baths and churches, which remain to this day bear witness to almost a century of splendor.



Partial view of Gondar at down town

Gondar enjoyed a privileged position not only for its natural resources, forests, and water but also for its strategic location at the crossroads of flourishing trade routes. Goods arrived from the Nile Valley (gold and slaves) and from the rich southern region (coffee) on their way to the

countries via the Red Sea. Meanwhile, a trade route to the west, linking Ethiopia with Egypt via Sudan, was becoming increasingly important. Gondar was probably established on the site of an existing settlement with its own people, but the call of trade, construction, and arts soon attracted Armenians, Greeks, Persians, Portuguese, Indians, Oromos, and Falashas.

Three emperors, Fasilidas, Yohannes I, and Iyasu I, marked the splendor of the age of Gondar. Their concerns, success, and failures revolved around trade, the arts, construction, the defense of the Orthodox faith, the threat of the encroaching Oromo, and the pressure of the increasing autonomy of its vassal lords.

1.1 Sightseeing at Gondar

1.1.1 Fasil Gibbi (Royal Enclosure/Compound)



The Fasil Ghebbi lies at the heart of modern Gondar and gives the city much of its character. The enclosure covers 70,000m² and is surrounded by a high stone wall fortification, which has twelve gates. This royal compound encompasses six lofty castles, and many different buildings like the royal archive, the house of the musicians, the lion cage, the horse zoo, the sauna bath, the house of spinners, etc.

The most impressive castle within the enclosure is the original castle palace built by Emperor Fasilidas. Fasilidas's castle is made of stone and shows a unique combination of architectural

influence. This two-storey castle of Fasilidas, with a rectangular corner tower, three smaller domed towers, and two-meter-thick stone walls is such an impressive and most marvelous building.



The castle of Fasilidas

The other major relic of Fasilidas's reign found in the royal enclosure is the royal archive building. There are also several crumbling buildings behind the castle and a bathing pool. In the north of Fasilidas's castle, the chancery of Emperor Yohannes IV and the splendid palace of Iyasu I are found there. The palace of Iyasu was astonishingly embellished with Ivory, gold, precious stones, etc. To the northwest, there lies Dawit III music hall, Emperor Bakafa's banquet house, and Empress Mintwab's palace.

Outside Emperor Fasil's Royal Enclosure, there are several buildings of the same era and architectural art. Emperor Fasil's Bath, Empress Mintiwab's compound found at Qusquam, Ras Michael Sehule's compound and Debre Birhan Seillasse are the major ones.

1.1.2 Emperor Fasilidas Swimming Pool (Bath)

The Bath of Fasilidas is another charming spot where the art of Gondar flows like the water of the pool surrounding the artistic central pavilion. Enclosed by a tall stone wall with six turrets, the pool is overlooked by a two-storey building widely said to have been Fasilidas's second

residence. You can walk out to the pool from the town center, or else take a local minibus. Entrance to the pool is included in the price for visiting the Royal Enclosure. It is about two kilometers away to the west of Fasilidas castle.

The pool is the central stage on which the Timket or Epiphany Festival is celebrated in Gonder on January 19 every year. The ceremony is led by colorfully attired priests carrying the tabots (the replica of the Ark of the Covenant) and crosses. When the ceremony was held, thousands of white-robed worshippers converge around the pool in the afternoon, where they are blessed and sprinkled with its holy water.



Bath of Emperor Fasilidas

The festival of Epiphany or Timket is colorfully celebrated all over the Amhara region. This festival is celebrated for two or three days in all kebeles and woredas of the Amhara region which have Christian members.



In Gondar, the bathing palace of Fasilidas is still dedicated to this colorful ceremony. It is still filled with water each year by a canal from the River Keha for the colorful Timket celebration. The Bath of Fasilidas is a charming spot where the art of Gondar flows like the water of the pool surrounding the artistic central pavilion. Enclosed by a tall stone wall with six turrets, the pool is overlooked by a two-storey building widely said to have been Fasilidas's second residence. It is about two kilometers away to the west of Fasilidas Castle. Visitors can walk out to the pool from the town center, or else take a local minibus. Entrance to the pool is included in the price for visiting the royal enclosure.

1.1.3 Debre Birhane Sillassie

Debre Birhane Selassie was founded by Iyasu I in the 1690s and the only Gondarine church that escaped entirely untouched from the Madadist war when the Dervish of Sudan attacked Gondar at the end of the 19th century. This is one of the most beautiful churches in Ethiopia. The sides of the walls of this church are completely covered with paintings showing various scenes. The

southern wall concentrates on the life of Jesus Christ, while the northern wall depicts various saints. The much-photographed ceiling, decorated with paintings of 80 angelic faces, is probably the most famous single example of ecclesiastical art in Ethiopia. The paintings are traditionally said to be the work of the 17th-century artist Aba Haile Meskel Woldu. The church lies about 1 km out of the town.



Church of Debre Birhane Sillassie

1.1.4 Ras Gimb (Michael Sehule Palace)

This is the other historical building that is found outside the Royal Enclosure of Fasilidas in Gondar. This palace was built by Ras Michael Sehule in the 18th century and used as a residence for the local governor of Ras Michael Sehule during the reign of Emperor Iyoas, a house for Italian generals during the Italian occupation (1936-1941) provisional palace of Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974) and as an interrogation hall under the Mengistu regime.



Ras Gimb palace, 18th century

1.1.5 Qusquam Church and Ruined Palace of Empress Mintwab



Ruined Structure of Qusquam.

The Qusquam church and the ruined palace are located about 3 km northwest of the town which overlooks the city of Gondar. To get there, drive or catch a minibus from Pizza to the Medical College, from where a road signpost to the right leads uphill to the church and the ruined palace. It was built in the second half of the 18th century by Empress Mentewab who served for many years as a regent for her young son Iyasu II.

Although in a state of partial ruin, Qusquam makes for a fascinating excursion from central Gondar. At the royal compound, visitors can visit the old church's ruined palace of the Empress, fine old manuscripts, the skeleton remains of the Empress, her son, Iysu II, and grandson Iyoas.

1.1.6 The Felasha Village (Woleqa)

Situated three kilometers to the north from the city center, the small village of Woleqa was once inhabited by the Bête Israel community (Ethiopian Jews). For its history and center of craftsmanship like earthen pots, Woleqa is one of the attractions frequently visited by tourists, especially for the earthen pots. Women in the village called plough-share worded and produced jars and various pots needed in the market of Gondar.



Local vessels produced by the Felasha at Woleqa village.

1.1.7 The Surrounding of Gondar

In addition to the castles of Fasilidas and other historical and archaeological attractions in Gondar, north Gondar is endowed with natural and cultural attractions. The main tourist sites outside Gondar are the Simien National Park and historical castles built by Medieval Emperors like Guzara, Danquaz, Dabsan, Azezo and Gorgora Novea.

1.1.8 Guzara palace

Guzara is said to be built by Emperor Sertse Dingil, who was crowned following the death of his father, Emperor Minas, in the time from 1563 to 1597. It is situated in a mountainous area called Guza which lies 1.5 kilometers east of the Gondar - Bahri Dar highway overlooking the sandy beach of Lake Tana. From Gondar to the turning to the palace is about 62 km. The palace has a

stone-fenced courtyard inside in which there is standing a row of pillars in which its function is not known. The palace is situated a little distance from these pillars.



Guzara Palace

The palace was constructed with wood, stone, and limestone and its architectural design had been used as a model for other palaces built in the time of emperors who came to power after Emperor Sertse Dingil. The ruins of the palace indicate that the building had special halls and rooms in its ground and the floor, and inside a staircase leading to the floor, and additional external stairs.

1.1.9 Azezo Genete Iyesus

The remains of Azezo Genete Iyesus underground building are found in Gondar, left of Azezo Primary School located at the entrance of Azezo on Bahir Dar - Gondar road. The area where different structures were found is called Genete-Iyesus (Paradise of Jesus). It was a royal settlement during the kingdom of Susenyos (1607-1632), though it never was a capital in a strict sense of the word. According to different sources (the chronicle of Susenyos and the written records of Paez, Almeida, and Mendes), there are about six structures built at different times. These include:

1. A Jesuit church built by Pedro Páez between 1621-1623 (completed after his death in 1622);
2. A royal palace by Susenyos (1622-1624);
3. A Jesuit residence (1625-1628);

4. A fortified wall around the Jesuit church (1627-1628); and
5. A rectangular water pool with a square pavilion in its cent probable antecedent of the famous royal bath of Fasil in Gondar, built by the king Susenyos (1627-28).

In addition to these structures, in the excavation season of 2011, three bathrooms and the foundation of towers were identified.



Azezo Genete Iyesus complex ruins of fortified wall and towers

1.1.10 Gorgora Nova

A big ruined structure of Gorgora Nova is found in Dembiya Woreda in North Gonder Administrative Zone at a place called Mange Kebele. It is located 11 km far from Abirja village which is located on the Gonder-Kola Diba-Gorgora road. The site is located facing the northern

shore of Lake Tana, which is highly worth visiting as a historical and archaeological place to visit.

Gorgora Nova comprises a very big complex that is filled with ruined structures. The majority of the structures found in the complex were collapsed and it is on the southern and the eastern side that some structures still exist. The site contains ruins of an old Catholic Church, a recent Orthodox Church, and a residence. This site, with a church and a squared annexed building, also known as Maryam Ghimb (locally called “Susenyos”), is one of the best-known Jesuit constructions in Ethiopia. Its magnificent church has been often and erroneously attributed to the Spanish Jesuit Pedro.



Part of the Remaining Building of Gorgora Nova.

The apse vault is very finely decorated with sculpted boxes in limestone. Inside the boxes, there are sculpted rosettes that remind those painted in Dänqäz and sculpted in Märtule Maryam. This

decoration had some influence on the art of the Gondarine period in the 17-18th century.



Photos showing the rosettes in the boxes of the vault and in the decorated frieze of the apses

According to the Jesuit texts, king Susenyos had his royal camp in this place from 1611 to 1618, before moving to a higher and wealthier place (Dänqäz). In 1614 the king asked the Jesuits to build a building in the European style, and they made for him a house with two storeys (Babet Laybet, “house over the house”), “the first one erected in Ethiopia”. The Jesuits were then based at Gorgora Velha, and only when the king left for Dänqäz they came to live in Gorgora Nova, using the palace as their residence and annexing it to the church in 1627.

1.1.11 Debre Sina Maryam

Debre Sina Maryam is an ancient church separated from the lounge of the port of Gorgora only by a fence. The clergy explain that the church was put up during the reign of Emperor Amde Tsion in the 14th century by a monk called Aba Asdiros. Since the monk had come from Shewa-Debre Sina, the church was given the name Debre Sina Mariam.

Built from wood and plastered with mud and adorned with a thatched roof, Debre Sina Mariam is one of the ancient churches which are now in a well-conditioned condition. The nave of the church is decorated with fascinating religious paintings. These pictures are said to be painted in the 17th century by the order of Emperor Fasil’s sister w/ro Meleketawi.

Due to the renovation made by experts of the Ministry of Culture in the 1970s on the basis of scientific renovation principles, the church, and its paintings have still maintained their ancient splendor. ‘Sinkisar’, ‘Haimanote Abew’, ‘Digua’ and other parchment manuscripts are ancient heritages of the church.



Debre Sina Maryam

1.1.12 Debsan Building

The ruin of a monumental structure of the settlement of Dabsan is located in the North Gonder zone Gondar Zurian Woreda at a particular kebele called Tiqara. This site lies 35 kilometers south of the town of Gondar and 2.5 kilometers east of the town of Infraz on the Gondar - Bahar Dar road. The site is located on a very commanding view that helps to control all the surrounding areas including the Tana basin in the west and the Guzara Castle in the southwest which is located 3.5 km from Dabsan.

Däbsan and Guzara are found both to the east of the Gondar-Bahir Dar road. The site of Gubay (Coga, no. 3) was the place of a royal camp in the time of King Ya'eqob (1597-1603/1605-1607).



A view of the hill with residence building on top, from the western valley and partial view of Dabsan ruin settlement

The whole complex of Dabsan includes a big ruined monumental structure, a cistern, and various stone foundations. The ruined building was found in 1626-27, and it was the residence of the last Catholic Patriarch of Ethiopia, Afonso Mendes, until the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1634. This building is surrounded by a circular structure, probably an old fence/fort of the building.

1.1.13 Danqaz

Danqaz is located in North Gonder Administrative Zone, Gonder Zuriya wereda in Danqaz Zantra Kebele. The site is accessible by car and about 80 km far from Gondar town. To reach the site, the first one should take the Gonder-Bahir Dar road and turn to the east when reaching Bahri Ginb village which is not far from Maksegnat town.

The site contains two important monuments. These important monuments from the Susenyos period are the cathedral church of the Jesuits made at the top of their influence and the first stone palace of the king. Both sites are located beside the small village of Gomenghe. Both are located at about 2720 m above sea level.

Danqaz- The Palace of of Susenyos

Historical data show that the Danqaz area was the residence of Susenyos between and his death in 1632. During those years the place was the Abyssinian royal camp (kätäma).

On the site, most of the palace walls have been collapsed and a few parts are preserved up to the original roof height. But there are still some preserved parts which are found at the northwest over the floor. Some wall paintings are still preserved, usually vegetal motifs in clear colors over a red background. Some rosettes remind those sculpted in the churches of Gorgora Nova and Martu Le Maryam.



Danqaz-Susenyos palace, view of the palace from the northern cliff and some remains of the original palace from inside

On the southeastern side of the place, there is an impressive cistern. This cistern is badly preserved, as there is not any cover to protect it from the rain. Yet it still impresses the visitor by its big size and the bold upper arches.



Danqaz-Susenyos palace, the inside part of the cistern

1.1.14 Danqaz – the Cathedral

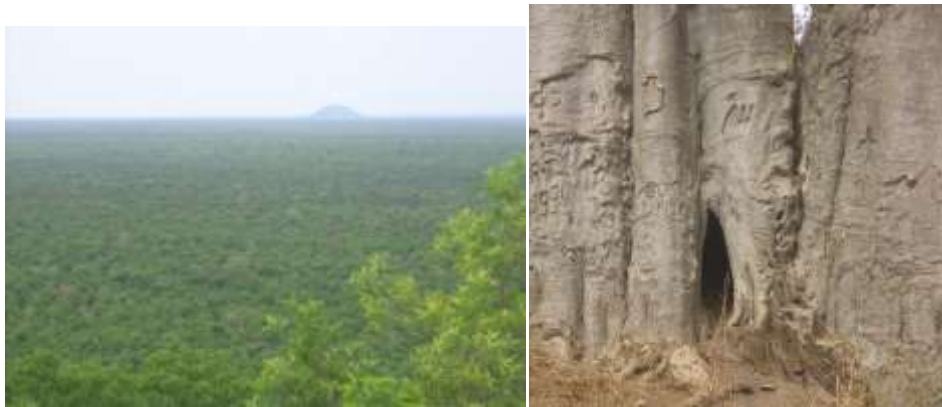
At 250 m south of the palace Danqaz, the remains of a Catholic church from the time of the Jesuit intervention in Ethiopia are still well-preserved. The church was founded in 1628, i.e. three years after the beginning of the palace construction, by the Patriarch Afonso Mendes, who had his own residence in Dabsan, some 26 km in a straight line south of Danqaz. The church was accorded the title of “cathedral of Ethiopia”. The church has a plan of a Latin cross, with a small transversal nave crossing the main nave in the transept.

The loading arches over the windows and doors, made with limestone squared stones, have the same style as those seen in Dabsan, Gorgora Nova, and other Jesuit buildings. The annex building in the southern corner of the church could be the residences of the missionaries or the college (referred to in the Jesuit texts) or both. This monument is an important historical and archaeological attraction that is worth visiting by tourists.



Danqaz-Catholic Church, some of the elaborated arch and wall structures

1.1.15 Alitash National Park



Covering an area of 2665 square kilometers of land and situated at an altitude of 500-900 meters above sea level, Alitash National Park is found southwest of Quara Woreda in the North Gondar Zone. Its area is the largest in the region and the fourth in Ethiopia. It is located 460 kilometers from Bahir Dar, 280 kilometers from Gondar, and 163 kilometers from Metema Yohannes. The local people say that the park has got the name ‘Alitash’ from the River Alitash which pours out of the park.

The park had been identified as a protected area since the beginning of the 1970s and was upgraded into a national park in 2006. Different animals, plant and bird species, forest-covered hills, rivers, and streams accompanied by the dense forest and grass together give the park a scenic beauty. It is known that during the Italian invasion (1936-1941) Haile Selassie I stayed in England in exile and returned to his homeland after the war. When he came back to Ethiopia

through Sudan, he is said to have spent 7 days at Omedla, a place found at the edge of this park. For his rest, a temporary cave was prepared from a big tree. The cave had an estimated size of accommodating 8 people and a space for two rooms to shelve books. On the tree, there is an entrance door above which are carved the first letters of the king's full name /Ke.Ha.A 'Kedamawi Haile Selassie' (Haile Selassie I) and a seat for a guard.

The lifestyle of the Amhara, Agew, and Argoba nationalities and their feeding and dressing styles together create a beautiful mix and hence are special attractions worth visiting. The town of Metema Yohannes which lies bordering Sudan and the nearby monument of Emperor Yohannes IV are the other historical attractions of the site.

1.1.16 Mahbere Sillassie monastery



Metema

The town of Metema Yohannes, which lies bordering Sudan, and the nearby monument of Emperor Yohannes IV, the battlefield, WediArba, Mahibere Selassie monastery community protected area are additional attractions around the Alitash National park.

1.1.17 Zoz Amba Giyorgis

130 kilometers from Gonder to Arbaya or 200 kilometers from Ibinat, there is a small town called Gohala. After an hour and a half walking distance from Gohala, there is Zoz Amba hill that provides a panoramic distant view of Lalibela, Sekota, and the Tekeze watershed in the east;

Ibinat, Wogera, the suburbs of Gondar and Dankaz in the west and the Simien Mountains in the north.

At the foot of the hill is located the ancient Zoz Amba Giyorgis Church, which is hewn from solid rock. The church is attached to the main rock from its top. While some elderly people say that Zoz Amba Giyorgis, which resembles the Rock-hewn Churches of Lalibela, is hewn by Emperor Lalibela, others explain that it is built during the reign of Emperor Yishak (1422-1437) by a religious father named Aba Absadu /Absadi/. However unless there is a similarity of names, Aba Absadi was one of the leading followers of Aba Iyostatewos, a known religious father who had been living in an estimated time between 1274-1353. It is estimated that after the death of Aba Iyostatewos, Aba Absadi had been living up to the reign of Emperor Seife A'erid.

It has holy water having an estimated depth of 40 meters and a separate room for Christening Service and called 'Yemushra Bet' (House of a Bridegroom). Eight beautifully hewn pillars support the roof and the widows made in the shape of a cross add to the grandeur of the church. This ancient church houses several parchment manuscripts, holy articles, and other heritages some of which are three batons (sticks that symbolize rank) and a chair said to belonged to Ahmed Gagn, a bell having an Arabic inscription, and a silver cross donated by Ras Wolle. There are two religious holidays colorfully celebrated in Zoz Amba Giyorgis- one on December 20 and the other on May 1.



Zoz Amba Giyorgis

The unfinished modified cave church known commonly as Siwuru Bête Samuel (the Hidden House of Samuel), the ruins of Emperor Susenyos’s palace found in Denkez in a special place called Gomengie, Gragn Ber- the place where Ahmed Gragn died – and Gond Tekle Haimanot are historical sites well worth visiting on the way to Zoz Amba Giyorgis.

1.2 Getting there and where to stay

Public transport is available to Quara and Metema. But it is advisable to take a four-wheel drive for a visit through deserts. Visitors can get accommodation services in Metema, Genda Wuha, and Quara towns in addition to Gondar city.

Where to Stay

There are tourist class hotels & lodges in Lalibela city. Here is the list of star rated hotels in the destination

No	Name of hotel	city	star	Telephone
1	Gondar Landmark Hotel	Gondar	3	0581122929
2	Taye Belay Hotel	Gondar	3	0581112252
3	AG Hotel	Gondar	3	0581260073
4	Goha Hotel	Gondar	3	0581110358
5	Quara Hotel	Gondar	2	0581110040
6	Florida International	Gondar	3	0581112260
7	Jantekel Hotel	Gondar	3	0581118399
8	Zoble Resort Hotel	Gonder	4	0582113737/0582112626
9	Herfazy Resort Hotel	Gonder	4	0582112839
10	Ruth Hotel	Gonder	2	0581141360

Guests indeed enjoy much the luxurious accommodations, the cheap and delicious dishes, and the most hospitable reception. There are also non Star rated hotels, lodges, pensions, guest houses, give services for tourists based on tourists interest.