



- ↑ Colorful, volcanic sulphur springs.
- ↗ Prayer time, Asheton Maryam Monastery, Lalibela.
- Busy public transport, Amhara.

known. The various habitats support slews of rare and endemic species, many of which are only found here; the main attraction among them is the iconic coyote-fox look-alike, the Ethiopian wolf.

North of Shashamane and through Addis Abeba, better roads await and the topography gets more complex around the Blue Nile River valley. Beautifully windy tar roads, like the B21 from the Gindewoin Forest to Dessie, allow easy passage through stunning countryside with virtually no traffic. The roads continue like this until Lalibela, a holy city full of rock-hewn twelfth-century Coptic Christian churches including the monolithic Bet Giyorgis as well as Biete Medhane Alem, a subterranean wonder full of colorful frescoes, carved bas reliefs, tunnels, and trenches.

Ethiopia adopted Christianity very early, in the fourth century, and tens of thousands of pilgrims still flock here

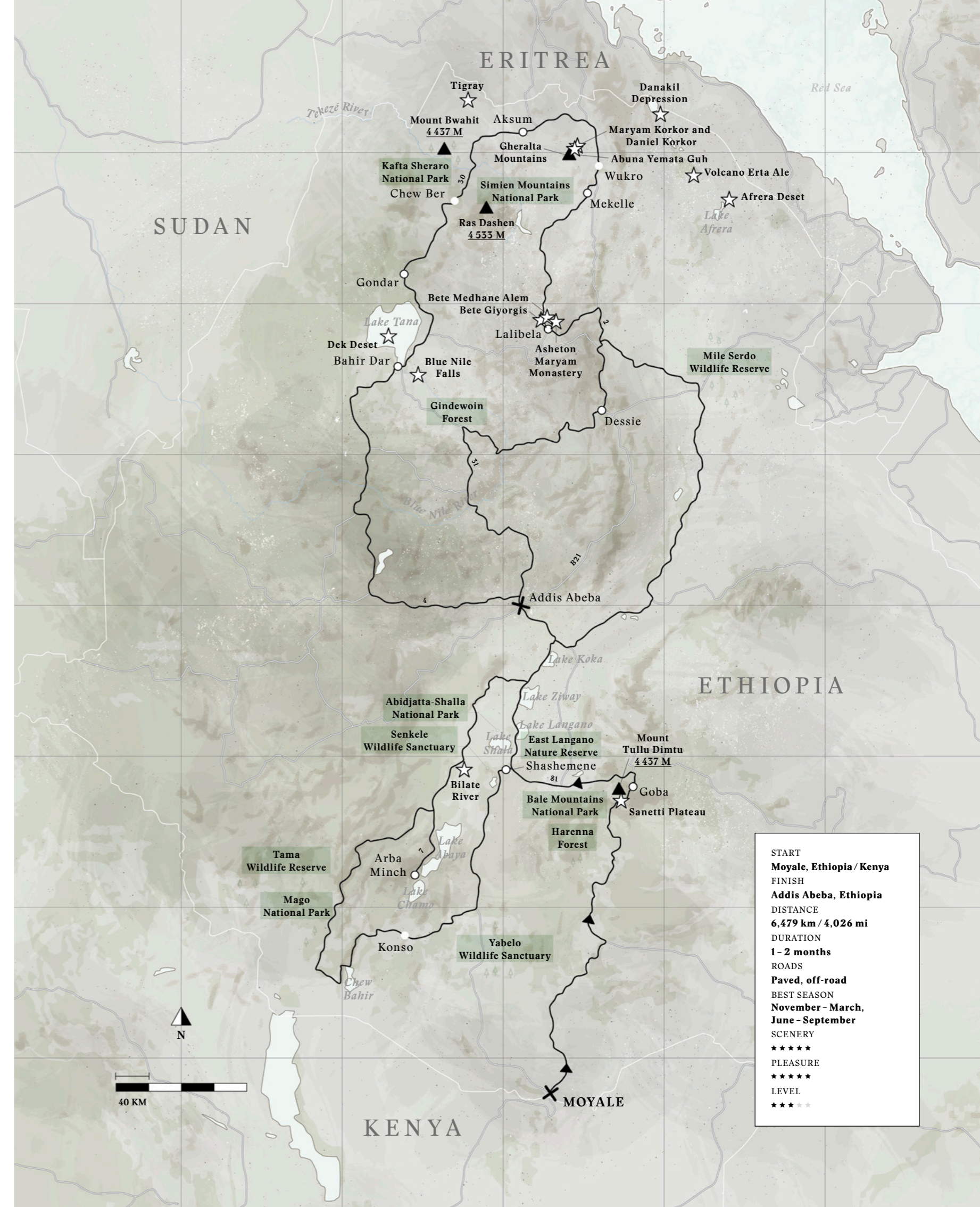
annually, on holy days. The Asheton Maryam Monastery outside town, carved into a cliff face at an altitude of 4,000 m (13,123 ft), is also a must-see.

Nice gravel roads continue north until the 2—the main tar road through the dry grassland valleys leading to the Tigray Region and its capital, Mek'ele. The city is a gateway to a volatile and fascinating geological area: the volcano Erta Ale, with its open caldera full of hot magma; the enormous Danakil Depression, a triple junction of tectonic plates that sits 125 m (410 ft) below sea level; and, at 102 m (330 ft) below sea level, the mythical, hypersaline Lake Afrera, which contains a single island, Franchetti (or Deset), considered the world's lowest-lying.

Much of Ethiopia is mountainous and hemmed in by deep river valleys, nowhere more so than in Tigray. Impressively beautiful as well as culturally, religiously,

and historically significant, the mountains here contain hundreds of ancient rock churches, carved into the soft sandstone by enterprising Christians slowly making their way south toward Lalibela, in the ninth century or earlier. Among its surreal vertical peaks and twisting spires, the Gheralta Mountains hide dozens of such places, including the twin churches of Maryam Korkor and Daniel Korkor, and nearby Abuna Yemata Guh, all with spectacular views and pristine frescoes, and accessible by a trek high up into the massif.

West of here is Aksum, one of Africa's oldest continually inhabited towns and former seat of the Aksumite Empire, whose king was turned to Christianity in the fourth century. It is the gateway to Simien Mountains National Park, and vehicular access is possible for a fee, paid at the park's headquarters in Debarq, and with the accompaniment of an armed scout—the >



START	Moyale, Ethiopia/Kenya
FINISH	Addis Abeba, Ethiopia
DISTANCE	6,479 km / 4,026 mi
DURATION	1 - 2 months
ROADS	Paved, off-road
BEST SEASON	November - March, June - September
SCENERY	★★★★★
PLEASURE	★★★★★
LEVEL	★★★★★