



*After hiking and horseback riding, tour operators arrive at the largest of Lepis Forest's waterfalls*



# Tour Operator Familiarization Trip Yields Valuable Information and Commitments

**The Ethiopian Sustainable Tourism Alliance (ESTA) firmly believes that a market-based approach must be utilized for community tourism product development. In line with this approach, ESTA called upon Ethiopian tour operators to participate in a familiarization trip from March 15-17. The principal objective of the trip was for the operators to provide product development feedback to communities in two Central Rift Valley destinations: the Lepis Forest and Lake Ziway.**

On the first day, participants trekked and rode horses through the Lepis Forest to an 80-meter waterfall. They then enjoyed a traditional meal prepared by the local community. The following day they took a boat trip on Lake Ziway. Some of the highlights included bird watching on Tulu Simbero Island, a visit to the Tulu Gudo Island monastery where the Ark of the Covenant is said to have been hidden over a millennium ago, a lunch featuring fresh grilled fish, hippo viewing, and a hike to a scenic viewpoint on the mainland.

After both trips, the ten participating tour operators filled out surveys and then shared their insights with the communities during lengthy feedback sessions. None had previously been to Lepis Forest and only a few had explored more than the near shore of Lake Ziway. Many expressed great surprise at the quality of attractions of both destinations. In the case of the Lepis Forest, three operators said they could start bringing tourist immediately. Negussie Tore, one of the country's top bird watching operators, was thrilled to identify 10 endemic species and will now incorporate Lepis Forest into his principal circuit. The other tour operators said they could bring tourists once new or improved products were in place. These included safer hiking trails, trained guides, more hygienic food service, proper toilets, and basic camping facilities.

In Ziway, nearly all of the tour operators saw great tourism potential given the lake's proximity to Addis Ababa and unique combination of natural and cultural assets.

Several even mentioned that due to the link to the Ark of the Covenant story, there is strong potential to include the trip as an add-on to the Northern Historic Circuit—Ethiopia's top selling tour. Yet most also indicated that they could only bring tourists once the boat service becomes safer and more comfortable. Other key recommendations included the need for trained guides, better display of the ancient relics in the monastery, more hygienic food service, heightened conservation efforts on the islands, and a proper jetty.

One highly encouraging outcome of the trip was the strengthened link between the community and the tour operators. Beyond their role of selling the products, nearly all operators also indicated a desire to provide assistance during the product development process. Three even offered to sponsor training for community members.

Perhaps the most important outcome, however, was that the communities gained valuable, market-based knowledge which empowered them to determine which products they want to develop during subsequent business planning sessions. ESTA is a USAID-funded project.