The Stone Churches of Lalibela

People who go to the African nation of Ethiopia typically go to the Lasta Mountains where they can also visit a site called Lalibela. There, travelers can see an unusual series of churches that were made from the rock below the earth’s surface.

The churches were carved into the solid reddish volcanic rock during the Zagwe dynasty over 800 years ago. The people of the dynasty were influenced by Christianity. The ruler at that time said that he was commanded by God to build the churches as a representation of Jerusalem. How long it took to create the 11 churches is anybody’s guess. Some archeologists claim that it took over 40,000 workers to complete the churches. Local tradition claims that it took only twenty-four years to finish the work.

The churches themselves are connected by tunnels and narrow passages. You can also find crypts and different sized caves. You can find influences from many different cultures in the construction. Some churches have Greek-style pillars. Others have windows that show Arabic influence and buildings which have strong Egyptian styles. The first European to see Lalibela was a monk from Portugal. Friar Alvarez was shocked and surprised to find the churches since he believed that only people of Europe could build such well-crafted churches.

The churches are still used today as places of worship. People from around the world travel to Lalibela on pilgrimages. Others come to view these unique symbols of the mixing of different types of cultures.