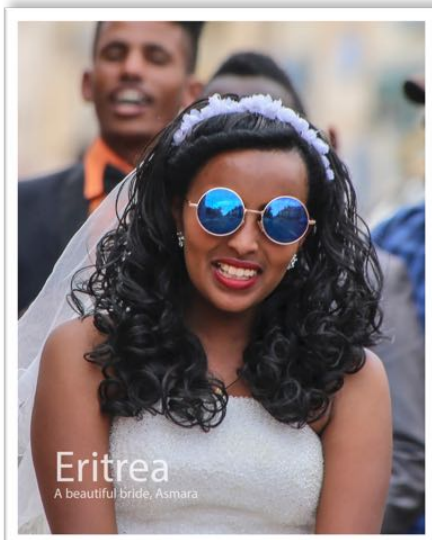


Eritrea



A positive outlook
on Eritrea...

September 2017



A country with two faces.

...with only 5,7 million inhabitants, Eritrea is one of the smallest nations on the African continent. Even this number is said to be high, when asking the locals. There is a steady stream of illegal emigrants leaving crossing into Sudan or Ethiopia overland still.

We all have sketchy ideas about what really is going on in this country. Especially with the reports and media coverage in the press. It is a totalitarian regime where freedom of speech and press does not exist. The walls outside churches and other public places are plastered with "missing people" posters. It also becomes evident when speaking to locals, that no one dares to speak out or say anything negative about the present regime, fearing imprisonment or worse. Having said that, I have rarely felt so welcome and well taken care of by local people. They all made me feel at home with their incredible hospitality.





Eritrea

The second most closed country after North Korea



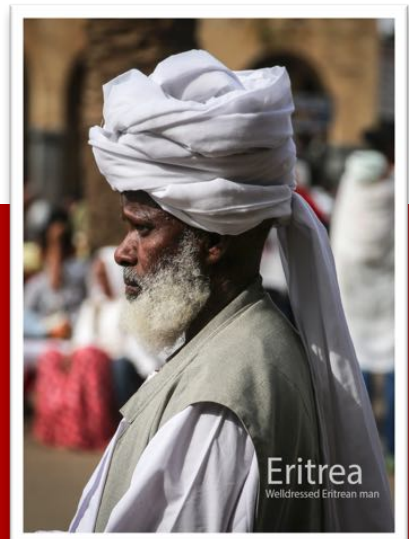
The country became independent back in 1993, and was at first seen as a role-model and rising star. The country is today one of the poorest in the world. It is often also described as the second most closed country only after North Korea. The country is isolated and is still in conflict with its neighbours – Sudan and Ethiopia – even though a lot of goods come in through the borders from both these countries.

Many people try and leave the country in order to avoid having to live under these circumstances and often unpaid military services which can go on for up to 10 years.

I was fortunate to have people look after me and help me locally with practical arrangements including transport and permit applications etc. This made a huge difference and also gave me an insight into how people live.

I arrived almost on time to Asmara from Istanbul with Turkish airlines. I was quickly out through the immigrations – not too much hassle – and then was happy to see my luggage being one of the first on the belt. Not a lot of people at the airport and only a few outside waiting in line (nicely) to get through check-points to get in. It was relatively cold when I came outside at around 2 AM in the night.

I had to wait around for ½ hour but then to my amazement a hotel minibus came and picked me up from my hotel **Crystal Hotel Asmara**. It was good to be able to get to the hotel to check in soonest possible.





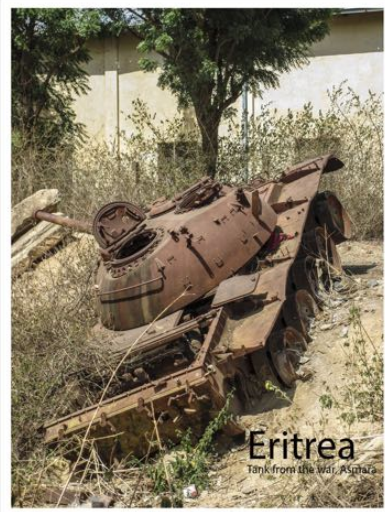
Asmara – day 1

Sunday and first day on the ground so to speak. A very basic breakfast was included and served at the hotel. I had noted my mobile phone was not connected as you need a local sim card to operate. This was said to be difficult if not impossible to get. I managed to call Abeba, the aunt of Yodit whom I meet and who lives in Sweden. She brought a relative who could speak some English. It was arranged so that he would take me around Asmara to see all the worthwhile sites. This took us the better part of the day. I was impressed with the art deco style of the Italian 1920 – 1930 period style. Although run down, still very nice to see. We covered the main street of Harnet and saw the major sights around there including the local markets, the churches and mosque. We covered the old Post office and central bank, both which were housed in old art-deco styled houses. We also saw the UNESCO world heritage protected **Italian Fiat Tagliero building**. There seemed to be a lot of weddings going on with decorated cars and newly-wed couples with their entourage of people posing for pictures in the centre at historical buildings. We visited also the main Cathedral, catholic, protestant as well as orthodox Christian churches in town.



We then took a break to have lunch at Abeba Abrahams' Restaurant. This was a real treat. She had a few other guests invited and served all traditional Eritrean food – really delicious. Spent a couple of hours here to eat and visit with her friends. Among others a local and apparently well-known photographer. I hope to visit his studio before I depart. The late afternoon was used to see the old **Italian cemetery** and **the Tank grave yard in Tiravoli district**. I had dinner at the restaurant in my hotel in the evening resting up after a long day.





Asmara – day 2

The electricity was gone this morning. It turns out it will be gone in all of the country for at least 30 hours due to repair work. This was the day when I was supposed to pick-up permits quickly and then leave directly to Fil-Fil for a day tour. Abeba came with a taxi-friend and picked me up in the morning. When we arrived at the Tourist Information Centre, I was then told that Fil Fil was off limits at present due to bad roads. As these are at a high altitude and with heavy rains, they had been washed away. Secondly, they informed me, when we then asked if we could instead go to Keren during the day that the permits were not a “quick-fix”. We could apply in the morning and come back in the late afternoon to pick up if they had been approved. This meant I had to spend another full day in Asmara.

I thought I had seen most of the sights already yesterday. Anyway, we decided to make the most of it. In order to submit the permit application, we had to go and photocopy my visa with entry stamp on it + a copy of the car-registration number with which I intended to travel. After have paid the 100 Nakfa for the application we were off to visit Tekeste and his photo studio. This was the man I met for lunch the day before. He showed me his photographs that he had taken over the years. We then continued to see the central market which was in full operations today Monday. Thereafter we went to see Medebar metal market. This was closed when we drove by yesterday, so today we could actually enter inside. An amazing place where there seemed to be endless possibilities of using scrap metal in all shapes and forms. Talk about recycling and Circular Economy – terms which we love to use in the Western world. This was fascinating in the best visit for the day.

Mrs. Abeba then invited me to her home where I got to meet her family and friends. This was a real treat to be invited to her home. First, she roasted the beans over the fire for some time. Then she grinded them, before finally boiling the water with the coffee. An enjoyable performance. The smell and taste was really great. I was then treated again to a traditional lunch eaten with your fingers of course. I also got to try their local alcohol - Zibib, 30% strength. which tasted a lot like French Pastis. Her son then drew me back to my hotel for a short break before I set-off on my own to collect the permits in town. I also walked the streets of Asmara, tried the Asmara Sweet Cafe on Harnet street and once again made it up to Central market to try and get some good photo shots. The electricity has been gone in the city and I understand in most of the country now for two days. Some hotels and shops run on diesel generators, but it is pitch dark outside in the city otherwise.

I had help in changing some USD cash into local currency. The official rate being 1 USD = 15 Nakfa and the black-market rate being 1 = 19. I changed 300 USD in total, which was quite enough for the 5 days I was there.





Massawa → Gurgusum

Left this morning for Massawa on the Red Sea coast. It took us some 3 hours' drive over initially very hilly and beautiful country. We passed through some smaller villages but it was very barren and empty otherwise. We met maybe some 5-10 cars/busses only on the whole trip! We ran in to a group of Gibbon monkeys on the road. They were quite fears and approached us when we stopped the car for photography. My driver Senay does not speak a word of English. This is both good and bad, and he listens to Eritrean music in the car which gets a bit too much after a while. The weather changed also as we got closer to the coast from the cool and nice high altitude 20 degrees in Asmara to a 40 degree with high humidity.

I checked in at noon at the **Grand Dhalak Hotel** on the Island. Supposedly the best in the area. I was greatly disappointed with complete lack of service, the rooms, restaurant and staff. Not to mention a pool which was so dirty you couldn't see 10 cm. below surface. First room was without working A/C and at first, they did not want to give me another room – said it was full. The staff was very unfriendly to say the least. What a complete joke this hotel is – stay away! I had lunch here and they had almost nothing on the menu. The pasta I was able to order was 2 ½ times more expensive compared to Asmara. In the evening, I tried the **Red Sea Palace**, ranked no: 2 in Massawa. I was the only person at the hotel and in the restaurant, it seemed. Almost spooky in this ghost town. Here I at least got a decent pasta and beer. But you wonder where all the people are of course.



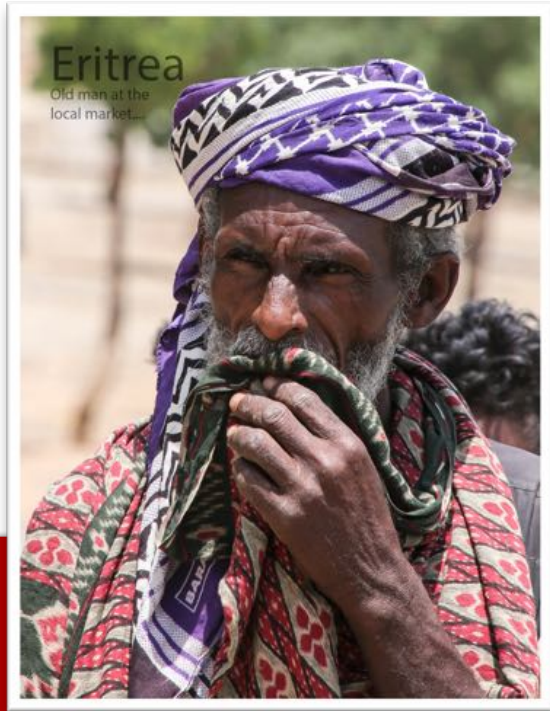


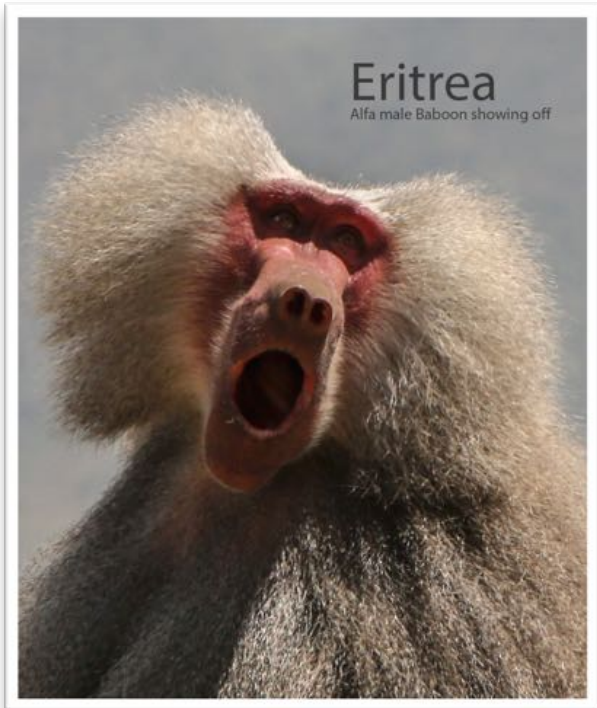
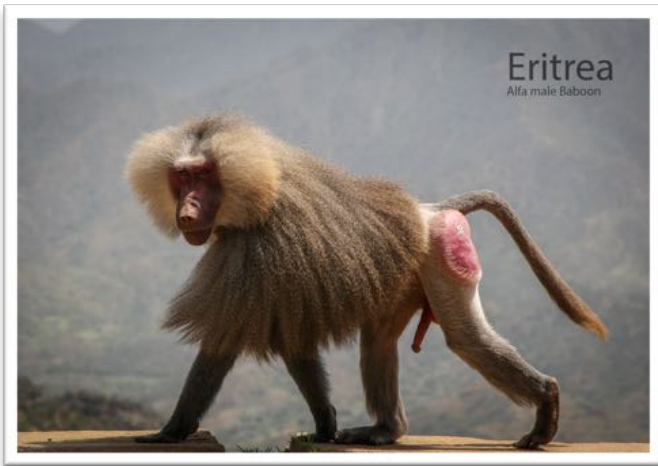
Gurgusum → Ghinda

In the morning of day 4 my driver came to pick me up (30 minutes late as always). We then took off to **Gurgusum** which is located some 30 minutes north of Massawa along the beach. This is a beach resort. Here there were at least some people visiting, but Eritreans on vacation it seemed. Spend the morning here and did some longer walks along the beach, although it was some +40 degrees. We ran into some nomads on the way back, which I managed to engage with a bit to get some good photos of in exchange for a small bag of lime. Time to take the 3-hour drive back home to Asmara. I was a bit surprised that there were no military checkpoints along the road. Half way back at the small town of **Ghinda** we ran into some luck. **Wednesday is weekly market day!** So, we stopped and walked around to see what was on offer. A colour explosion with all the spices, fruits and women dressed up in their best dresses. The only problem as always is to be able to take pictures, especially since this seemed to be predominantly a Muslim region. Women, especially, are then very wary about having their photos taken. I managed to get a few anyhow.

We then continued and ran into, possibly the same group of Gibbons, along the road and stopped for some more photos. This was up in the higher mountains closer to Asmara. There seemed to be quite a lot of them. My estimate was between 50-100 at least. Made it back to Asmara and checked in at Crystal Hotel, where I stayed earlier this week. I fell ill and through up. Must have been something I ate in combination with the heat earlier today.









Asmara → Keren

I was picked-up this morning by Abeba, Samuel and our driver. We dropped Abeba off at the centre and then left for **Keren** at around 9 o'clock. We headed north through some nice and mountainous regions. We stopped in a village half way to have a look at the weekly market which was very lively. We reached Keren at around 12 o'clock and started out with having a macchiato coffee at one of the local cafes. It was then time to check out the city and its market. Not so much activities today as it is not the main day for market. We had lunch at one of the local hotels and then headed for the locally famous open air church with its holy tree. The weather suddenly changes and the sky opened up with rain pouring down. We had to wait it out as the roads were flooded.

We then headed back to Asmara and to the home of Abeba. There it was time for the royal treatment again with coffee made the traditional way over open charcoal fire on the floor. The procedure takes half an hour. You then have to drink a minimum of four cups. I was then served a traditional Eritrean meal again with their very special bread. You have to eat with your fingers, not as easy as it sounds when it is a bit mushy mixed with sauce. The meal is not complete without the Zibib liquor to end the meal.

