

Our GMU study group experienced a whirlwind of 12 days of presentations, conversations, traveling, eating, exploring, marveling and wondering in Eritrea.

The trip gave us an extraordinary opportunity to gain personal impressions of the land, the people, the culture, the government, needs and dreams, and to collect a vast array of narratives. I left Eritrea with more questions than answers, knowing that I still can only grasp a fraction of what makes this country unique and precious in my eyes.

My hope is that by sharing some key moments of my trip, I may add new facets to how others view and approach the enigma of Eritrea. My impressions are not exhaustive, nor shall my stories be an attempt to reconcile the many contrasts and at times contradictions that our group encountered while trying to get to know Eritrea. My experiences are subjective, my encounters personal. Eritrea has found a special place in my heart that is expansive enough to appreciate and cherish the many positive development efforts without the demand for neat resolution and reconciliation of uncomfortable facts.

Massawa - Looking toward the Future where the Past Informs the Present

Of the many special and moving moments, one particular day brought together past, present and future for me. Traveling on the windy road from Asmara to Massawa, the perilous drive from more than 7600 feet (2300 meters) above sea level to the coast covers 3 different climate zones and offers vast views over rugged mountains. You travel through villages and small towns and share the road with bicyclists in colorful racing outfits, vehicles of all shapes and sizes, and shepherds herding their camels, cattle and donkeys to their next destination. Steep terraced mountain sides turn into smooth hills and finally almost barren flats. Temperatures quickly rise to triple digits.



Figure 1 Imperial Palace, Massawa, photo by Friderike Butler

On the mainland, the city of Massawa consists of the neighborhoods of Gurgusum Beach, Hitumlo, Amaterre and Salinas. Our bus travels to the old sections of Massawa via a causeway that connects the mainland with Talud Island. The road then leads to Bats'ii Deset with the historic old town and the commercial port. The ruins of the imperial palace in Massawa and the bombed-out residential buildings in the Free Trade Zone are visual and visceral reminders of the anguish, hardship and pain inflicted by war. We can still imagine the past grandeur of Ottoman architecture, Italian colonial

splendor, bustling trade, deep rooted ancient culture and history, yet the impact of battle, struggle and decline are jarring. One can only hope that a designation of Unesco World Heritage site will soon provide necessary funds to restore some of the most significant buildings. Yet, I hope that at least some of the scars of conflict and testimony

of resilience and resistance to external forces will be preserved as reminders and memorials to the values that were defended here with immeasurable sacrifices.

Right next to crumbling buildings, new history is in the making. “Now that peace is here”, a phrase that we must have heard a hundred times during our conversations with Eritreans, recited with a hopeful tone yet still carrying a note of caution and hesitation, the port of Massawa is preparing for an influx of business. Modern cranes and updated loading facilities, cargo containers and large commercial vessels herald a new era of commercial activity and trade on one of the busiest sea routes in the world. In his presentation of the harbor, the port master exudes optimism and resolve to turn the below-capacity operating facility into a bustling seaport. On the day we visit, the docks are quiet and only a handful of vessels are tied up at the 6 large cargo berths.

<https://masawaport.com/PortFacilities.jsp>

Standing on the docks, our eyes travel toward the horizon and take in blue shimmering waters and discover a string of natural, uninhabited islands in the distance. A large boat carries us close to the beaches of the Green Island and a smaller motorboat ferries us to coral reefs teeming with marine life. I put on one of the 3 sets of snorkels and hop into the warm sea to marvel at large schools of colorful fish in crystal clear waters. We learn that sea cucumbers are cultivated and harvested in this region, dried and offered as



Figure 2 Commercial Port of Massawa, photo by Friderike Butler

culinary delicacies. The marine biologist and newly minted HR director of the Ministry of Marine Life, who accompanies us, explains that the coral in these local waters have adapted to warmer than average water temperatures and fully recover after episodes of bleaching. Researchers are currently studying what makes these coral more resistant against warming water temperatures and they hope to be able to isolate the resilient strands and to contribute to the effort to save and repopulate dying reefs in other regions of the world.

Another promising local experiment focuses on planting and growing seawater loving plants and mangrove forests in the sandy flats of the Eritrean shores. Started by the scientist Gordon Sato in the 1980's, the mangrove forest initiative is continued and expanded by the Ministry of Marine Life with the guidance of Yohannes Teclamariam, a past student of the late Dr. Gordon Sato. Mangrove forests act as natural water filters and keep sand from spilling into coral reefs. The leaves and branches of the mangroves can be harvested as feed for livestock and firewood for people living on some of the islands off the coast of Eritrea. In addition, the forests provide shelter for myriads of

shore birds and other critters. Bee hives have been introduced to these mangrove forests. The bees serve as pollinators and the honey and bee wax are harvested by the indigenous people.

As I learn about successful local eco projects, I take in the natural beauty of the region, the bliss of pristine waters and plentiful wildlife and the view onto the modern port of Massawa and its neighboring historic markers, I can clearly see and believe the promise of a better life, of solving pressing local crises and addressing global challenges. Puzzle pieces seem to fit together in this moment in time, and I feel a renewed sense of hope and gratitude.

Friderike Butler

[https://bioone.org/journals/Wetlands/volume-25/issue-3/0277-5212\(2005\)025\[0776:ANATGM\]2.0.CO;2/A-NOVEL-APPROACH-TO-GROWING-MANGROVES-ON-THE-COASTAL-MUD/10.1672/0277-5212\(2005\)025\[0776:ANATGM\]2.0.CO;2.short](https://bioone.org/journals/Wetlands/volume-25/issue-3/0277-5212(2005)025[0776:ANATGM]2.0.CO;2/A-NOVEL-APPROACH-TO-GROWING-MANGROVES-ON-THE-COASTAL-MUD/10.1672/0277-5212(2005)025[0776:ANATGM]2.0.CO;2.short)