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DISCOVERING TREASURES IN ERITREA

My past experiences of traveling in other developing countries included encountering heavily armed check points in Mexico, explicit safety warnings concerning crime in Jamaica, a long list of health risks in Burundi, immediate and obvious signs of extreme poverty in South Africa, and visible environmental hazards such as inadequate trash management and pollution in the Dominican Republic to mention just a few. Pre-trip conversations with non-participants inevitably brought up the image of Eritrea as the “North Korea of Africa”, an ominous comparison so widespread that it is no longer possible to pinpoint its origin. I braced myself to find indications of any or all of the above in Eritrea.

Upon arrival at Asmara Airport, I experienced a brief moment of irritation with people continuously invading my personal space without acknowledging my presence. Then I took a deep breath, relaxed, and just noticed how conditioned I am to the Western Personal Space bubble. I observed how comfortably and easily people were moving in very close proximity to each other taking care of their affairs in an unfussy way. I sensed that there would be many opportunities to adjust to a different way of life and much to learn over the next 12 days. I shook off the fatigue of 18 hours of non-stop travel, and looked around the clean, organized facility - no armed presence of any kind. Our travel documents were thoroughly checked at two separate posts, and two airport employees checked luggage stickers against luggage check-in tags before we were free to exit the airport. Eritrea was becoming real to us.

The country and its people defy many stereotypes of developing poor nations. Ensuing conversations and discussions with government officials, business owners, corporate representatives, members of other government organizations, NGO staff, and private citizens over the course of our explorations generated complex, rich and at times opposing narratives. Stories brim of promising opportunities, hopeful dreams, utopian concepts, restrictions of individual freedom, and the potential to solve global challenges.

Architecture and Cultural Discoveries as an Entry Point



Figure 1 Independence Avenue, Ministry of Education, Asmara, photo by Friderike Butler

Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, offers many visual treats for the unsuspecting first-time visitor. The city is home of an attractive mix of buildings ranging from the 7th century AD to the 20th century. Islamic influences, Italian colonial architecture, and an impressive accumulation of unique Art Deco and Futurist-style buildings, designed and constructed during the Italian occupation, form a unique cityscape. Imposing early 19th-century modernist-style buildings and stately villas line the three generous palm tree-adorned boulevards that traverse the heart of the city and give Asmara an unexpected Mediterranean flair.

Artery roads through more modest neighborhoods are bustling with people, old cars, small busses, uncountable bicycles, horse and donkey-drawn carts, and the occasional small herd of goats with their minder. With a population of about 564,000 residents, Asmara is large city with a small-town feel.

Minaret towers rise in close proximity to Christian churches. We learned from religious leaders of different faiths at a community gathering in Mendefera that relationships between the various faith communities are generally friendly and supportive. Christians and Muslims have peacefully lived here as neighbors for centuries and continue to do so actively and openly. Religious institutions and individual beliefs are respected by the secular government as long as representatives or individuals do not engage in active missionary work, recruitment, or social services under the banner of a specific religion or faith. Doing so is considered to be an act against national unity and is prosecuted. The stated intent of the Eritrean government is to ensure and protect the harmony and equality between its various faith and ethnic groups (*PFDJ National Charter*, 1994).

Various lively open-air and covered markets dot the city of Asmara offering opportunities to shop for a wide variety of local food items, household goods, and some crafts. Smaller streets in the city center brim with clothing stores, coffee bars and small shops, many with names that are still hinting at Italian roots. The city is sparkling clean – swept every morning by older women, “War widows”, explains Solomon Abraha, who invited me and one other student on a private tour of Asmara. We enjoyed exploring different neighborhoods by foot, visit several small enterprises, and of course visit the closest gelato parlor.



Figure 2 Gate of Enda Mariam, Asmara's Main Coptic Church with view onto the bell tower of the Catholic Cathedral and the minaret of the Great Mosque, photo by Friderike Butler

World Heritage in Asmara

Asmara presents itself like a living museum of Italian “Nuova Architettura” with futuristic, monumentalist, rationalist, and cubist work that is integrated and prominent in the cityscape (Denison, Ren, & Gebremedhin, 2006). The city deservedly received its designation as World Heritage Site in 2017. A tour of the Asmara Heritage Project and Department of Public Works Development offices and archives reveals a treasure trove of old photographs, architectural drawings of buildings and historic documents that chronicle the development of “Asmara, A Modernist City of

Africa” and “urban planning in an African context” (UNESCO, 2017). When asked how the colonial history of the buildings is perceived by the locals, Medhanie Teklemariam, an engineer at the Asmara Heritage Office, laughs and answers: “These buildings have been designed by the Italians, but our grandfathers built them. We preserve them and live in them and these buildings are now ours. We may not like the history, but we can easily love the buildings.”



Figure 3 Fiat Tagliero Building in Asmara, photo by Friderike Butler



Figure 4 Typical Modernist building with balconies in Asmara, photo by Friderike Butler

Overall, more than 4,300 historic buildings in Asmara have been catalogued and assessed for their cultural heritage value. A World Heritage Integrated Management Plan was developed in 2015 as part of the World Heritage Site application process (Teklemariam, Zerom, Berhane, & Ghebrekidan, 2016). The Asmara Heritage Project and the Department of Public Works Development Ministry work together to oversee and issue building permits and grants permission for maintenance work in compliance with existing regulations. In the case of the vacant historic Fiat Tagliero building, a crude interior remodeling effort

was thankfully stopped by the authorities before extensive damage was inflicted on the building.

The 2018 State of Conservation Report estimates restoration costs for just 14 of the most prominent buildings to total about USD 80 million (UNESCO, 2017). While that number may not raise eyebrows in affluent countries, in the Eritrean context it seems astronomical.

Urgent food security, water and soil conservation needs, and pressure to further improve the quality of the education system are the main priorities for the Eritrean government. They are outlined in the Macro Policy of the government (*Macro Policy*, 1994), highlighted in a recent comprehensive report on Eritrea published by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014), and echoed by almost every government official we talk to. The reality of finite financial government resources and a shortage of qualified restoration experts make a near-term implementation of large-scale restoration projects look doubtful. Many of the beautiful buildings continue to age and their patina is already teetering on the verge of decay. Unless investors can be found, who are willing to support the enormous task of preserving and restoring the city's landmarks, the clock is ticking for visitors to enjoy Asmara's architectural marvels.

Additional Photos



Figure 5 Typical scene on a street in Asmara, photo by Friderike Butler



Figure 6 Old drawings at the Asmara Heritage Project, photo by Carol Pineau



Figure 7 Friderike Butler, GMU graduate student, at the edge of the defensive line of the Battle of Badme, Adi Quala, Eritrea, photo by Rose Essiem