



Study Abroad Program: Eritrea - Challenging Narratives of Development in Post Conflict Settings: S-CAR, Summer 2019

Written by Friderike Butler, ODKM Graduate Student at George Mason University

DISCOVERING TREASURES IN ERITREA

“This is not a vacation trip!” With this statement, Carol Pineau, one of the leaders of the first study abroad program in Eritrea organized through the School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, intended to manage expectations at the initial pre-trip gathering. The program titled “Eritrea: Challenging Narratives of Development in Post Conflict Settings” was created to “focus on the country’s efforts towards self-reliant development, exploring the locally initiated and implemented peace building process that is impacting and transforming the strategically important Horn of Africa” (GMU, 2018). The objective was to engage in qualitative research in Eritrea by collecting and analyzing narratives in order to formulate a personal impression of Eritrea. The findings were then to be related to the 17 sustainable development goals as defined by the member states of the United Nations in 2012.



(United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

The planned schedule included meetings at various ministries and institutions, a hospital tour, field trips to water and soil preservation projects, field observations of different agricultural programs, a battle field visit, and a long list of complementary activities that would give the group insights of current social, political, economic, and cultural affairs. Pre-trip readings spanned the full spectrum from highly critical to very positive reports on Eritrea, its history, past and current leadership, and cultural heritage. As I engaged with the material, my excitement grew. I envisioned all the unique experiences Eritrea had to offer – from exotic food to a rich history, architectural marvels, and natural beauty. I was secretly dreaming of swimming with the fish in the Red Sea, but I pledged to put my traveler dreams aside to focus on post-conflict issues.

Tourism as a Path Forward to Preserving and Sharing Eritrea’s Treasures

I recall what had been a talking point of the minister of National and the Director of the Investment Center but what didn’t register with me at the time. Both listed food security, fisheries, and tourism as three major pillars of investment into national development. While sustainable tourism positively impacts decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), climate action (SDG 13), life below water (SDG 14), life on land (SDG 15) and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17), tourism indeed has been identified by the World Tourism Organization as an

accelerator across all 17 SDGs. (*Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals – Journey to 2030*, 2017).

Not only can tourism support Eritrea's development efforts, Eritrea's valuable cultural and environmental heritage can enrich the lives of other people. Innovative climate adaptation and preservation programs have the potential to be exported to other areas in the world to solve pressing issues there. It is in fact curious to me that the preservation of cultural and natural heritage is not included in the Sustainable Development Goals. A nation's or region's identity is often closely tied to its history and cultural heritage and it seems important to preserve and protect that as part stabilizing a developing country.



Figure 1 Green Island off the coast of Massawa, videographer Dawit Gebreyessus, editor Friderike Butler

The Eritrean Ministry of Tourism, one of the few ministries that is not part of our official visits, already explored and discussed tourism opportunities in depth in a visionary 20-year plan: "Tourism will be based on a wide range of attractions and activities related to the natural environment and historic and cultural heritage. Several types of tourism can be developed in the country:

- Beach and marine resort tourism in the coastal and island areas
- Cultural tourism based on the archaeological/historic sites, architectural heritage and cultural patterns
- Nature or ecotourism based on national parks and reserves
- Urban tourism, especially in Asmara, Massawa and Keren
- Adventure tourism including activities such as trekking in the mountains and deserts and river boating
- Health tourism focused on the hot springs
- Agrotourism and rural tourism involving visits to agricultural enterprises and villages
- Business and conference tourism based on business travel and developing meeting and conference facilities
- Cruise tourism including visits by private yachts, local Red Sea ship cruises and larger ships." (Ministry of Tourism, State of Eritrea, 1999)



Figure 2 Ram Farms, Redaegzy Gebremedhin highlights his vision for the future educational park

Building on this document, others have already developed specific ideas and plans for integrated economic growth through tourism in Eritrea. An inspiring example is Ram Farms, managed by Redaegzy Gebremedhin, who organized a visit to his experiential eco farm for our group. It is a truly imaginative and inspired place, with the creative center situated on a berm in a picturesque valley overlooking farmland and with spectacular views onto the surrounding mountains. Here, local school

children learn about agriculture and the environment through work and study. University students have been asked to submit designs for an animal park with a scenic cable car. The submitted drawings of cable car stations in the shape of traditional coffee vessels are extraordinarily creative. Agricultural engineers are experimenting with different water preservation and irrigation systems. All around us we see work in progress, albeit at a very slow pace due to limited funding. In 2003, Redaegzy submitted a witty and compelling partnering proposal to Cargill that should have brightened any marketing and PR director's day. In the summer of 2019, sadly, the idea of a full-fledged educational farm with integrated animal sanctuary as an attraction for local and international visitors still mostly lives in documents and the imaginative heads of a few Eritreans. (Gebremedhin, 2003)

There is no shortage of proven concepts and suitable program ideas for controllable niche tourism, especially involving science, academic and volunteer-oriented tourism that aligns with the development goals of Eritrea:

- Agro-tourism that would allow international agricultural students and professionals to visit, study and work at MIHAP farms for a full-spectrum practical and cultural experience
- Red Sea packages to study and explore life under water with emphasis on environmental issues (scuba, snorkel, sailing, fishing)

- Educational climate adaptation tours that combine tree planting activities with visits to reforestation projects such as those studied over the course of 20 years by Dr. Scott Jones, who gave us a colorful account of his project experiences (Jones, 2016) and include unique, culturally authentic encounters with locals
- Exchange programs with architecture aficionados and trade specialists, who would appreciate being part of restoring the historic buildings in Asmara
- Specialized train tours on the old Italian steam trains, as already carried out for example by FarRail Tours, augmented with detailed and candid post-tour reports (Seiler, 2019)
- History tours that focus on faith, social issues and conflict resolution.

Supporting enterprise opportunities are limitless: agricultural product manufacturing partnerships, development of environmentally safe sunscreen to protect life under water, partnering with foreign universities and climate advocates, partnerships with trade organizations for apprenticeship programs, PR and marketing for train products and relics, local art and crafts that tie in with the different themes, international artisan connections, and the list can go on.

Partnering with Eritrea

At this time many of Eritrea's most interesting locations are not easily accessible for tourists. Traveling outside of Asmara requires official permits and making visiting arrangements to most sites requires a local insider. The significance and historic relevance of special sites are rarely self-explanatory, and without prominent signage most go unnoticed by the uninitiated visitor. Even the cultural museum of Massawa greatly understates and underexplains the significance of its artifacts. I have not been able to find a comprehensive printed travel guide for Eritrea, although there is a wealth of travel blogs and online information available. Once you are in the country, however, internet access is limited to hotels and internet cafes, and truly seeing and appreciating unassuming but nevertheless extraordinary places in all of Eritrea requires knowledgeable local guides.

Tourism can be a blessing for a poor nation by injecting urgently needed funds and it can be a tremendous curse by impacting local culture, disrupting a familiar way of living, and creating inequality. Protecting, preserving and in some cases restoring what makes Eritrea

unique, immensely charming and lovable requires careful planning, cultural sensitivity towards all stakeholders, flexibility, education and openness. It also requires sophisticated PR work on the Eritrean side to get in front of unfavorable news reports to create a counter-narrative that instills confidence in Eritrea as a reliable partner for outside institutions. “Business doesn’t like surprises.” as Tony Harrington, development manager of the Danakali Mine in Erea so aptly stated. Long-term investors want reassurance of stability, clear legal frameworks and with regard to Tourism, a positive image is paramount. Fortunately, the groundwork for tourism can already be laid without major investment and a positive narrative can already emerge.

In Eritrean culture, self-promotion and drawing attention to accomplishments is generally frowned upon and avoided. It is refreshing but I wonder how often promising opportunities for new connections and further development go unrealized because intrinsic values are not advertised and communicated in a way that outsiders can easily see and comprehend. Eritrea’s often highly creative, innovative and deeply integrative approach to turn challenges into opportunities is an asset that is not easily discernible from the outside.

Even though part of me may feel protective of the unspoiled nature of Eritrea and the relatively pure culture, I do wish for Eritrea to be truly discovered for all the treasures it holds. I wish for a rapid expansion of environmental studies and projects, an export of climate adaptation and modification programs and an inflow of funds so that extreme poverty can be eradicated, organic agricultural projects can be expanded, historic sites can be adequately preserved and crumbling structures restored. I hope that many more groups will travel to Eritrea to discover and protect the nation’s treasures - not as a vacation trip but as a life-changing experience.



Figure 3 Friderike Butler, GMU graduate student, at the edge of the defensive line of the Battle of Badme, Adi Quala, Eritrea, photo by Rose Essiem