

Twenty Years of Independence Series –No. 2

Eritrea: An Ideal Destination

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One of the least known destinations in the world, Eritrea is a breath of fresh air for the bored tourist. A sparkling, vibrant young nation on the coast of the Red Sea, it teems with pleasant surprises and natural rarities you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere else. Among them: guided tours to ancient sites across desert and plains, ethereal views above the clouds on hikes in the highlands, strolls and impeccably made cappuccinos in art deco paradise that is the capital, nine colorful cultures on display at museums and exhibitions, and the cleanest locales with the lowest crime rates in all of Africa. For the tourist wary of trekking through dry landscapes, Eritrea hosts various tour routes to virtually untouched islands, and professional scuba training in one of the rarest Coral Reefs in the world. Best of all, in my opinion, is the hospitality amongst arguably the nicest locals you'd ever meet.

Ancient History

Eritrea has a history as old as modern hominid existence, with anthropological prediction of its shores to have sheltered the first modern humans; the country boasts civilizations spanning thousands of years and thousands of miles, and perhaps the best known of them is the ancient Axumite Kingdom, newly recognized as predominantly Eritrean (instead of Ethiopian) with 85% of its land mass north of the Mereb River. Other ancient metropolitan areas include the civilizations of the Barka Valley, Quohaito and Metera, as well as the Kingdoms of Punt, Medri Bahri, and Adulis. Collectively, these civilizations produced the nine languages functional in Eritrea today, and the ancient language and text of Ge'ez, now used predominantly in religious ceremonies. Evidence of civilizations past include cave paintings, statues, stele, tombs, rock configurations, buildings and burial sites, all sprinkled throughout rural and modern locales. Tourists are advised to take trained guides, and can travel by bus, car or foot; most importantly, tourists can travel with peace of mind, as both rural and urban areas have among the lowest level of crime in the world!

Modern History

The Ottoman Turks and Egyptians left architectural footprints on the port city of Massawa, and the Italians did the same in the capital city of Asmara, with arguably the most complete collection of Art Deco modernist design in the world. After the exit of the Italians after WWII, Eritreans were almost free from colonizers until an illegal annexation by the Ethiopian monarchy in 1960. Impressively, Eritreans fought and won an arduous 30 year armed struggle against successive Ethiopian imperial and communist armies equipped with the monetary and tactical support of (oddly both) the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Tanks, martyr memorials and reserved sites throughout the country evidence the importance of the Eritrean cause to its national sentiment (Eritreans regard their armed struggles as part of their cause, and fallen soldiers are revered as martyrs).

Natural History

As advertised on the country's tourism website, Eritrea is host to a plethora of animal species, particularly bird species, on the mainland and islands of the Dahlak archipelago. In fact, international bird watchers have visited and made famous the country's expansive collection of hundreds of bird species. Though there are numerous wild areas in the rural landscape, Semenawi Bahri (near the capital, Asmara) is being developed as an official national park, and areas throughout the highlands and lowlands have locale-specific species waiting to be discovered by the curious amateur or seasoned zoologist.

Culture

There are 9 cultures in the country's colorful repertoire, and it beautifully displays them in celebrations and festivals year round. Food is varied but consists mainly of flat breads and tomato based stews with spice combinations of pepper, cumin, coriander, and fennel. Most stews consist of veggies and/or beans, and are vegan, but there are also meat based stews, which feature one of the following at a time: chicken, goat or beef. The music of each culture is on a pentatonic scale, and instruments are usually kebero (drums), wata (violin-esque), kirar(guitar-esque), emblita and melekhet (flutes), and abungala. Beautiful jewelry and accessories are a favorite of female tourists to Eritrea, as beautifully patterned beaded pieces can be bought at very low prices; gold and silver jewelry molded in traditional designs is a favorite of those with a little more spending money. Traditional clothing is also a favorite of visitors, with complete ensembles for various celebratory occasions available for purchase in a huge, bustling open air market in the capital.

Ecotourism

In an increasingly environmentally conscious world, Eritrean officials have taken a proactive role to preserve natural and historical sites via sustainable tourism, or ecotourism. This approach focuses on the different strategies available to keep natural sites and cultural sites unspoiled by litter, interference, and general overuse by tourists. In Eritrea, regulation of tourists has been able to keep islands in top condition and the environment clean. Local inhabitants, both human and nonhuman, are largely undisturbed. Proponents of ecologically conscious technologies and systems would benefit by visiting the centers for tourism, and asking about the country's specific strategy to deal with mass tourism.

Whatever your interest, be it hearing a rare bird call, discovering millennia-old tombs, exploring coral reefs, or hiking above the clouds and coming down for a cappuccino when you're finished, Eritrea is destination for you!

Works Cited

1. Fennel, David A. *Ecotourism, An Introduction*. Routledge 1999.
2. Eritrean Tourism Webpage:
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