

## TRIP REVIEW

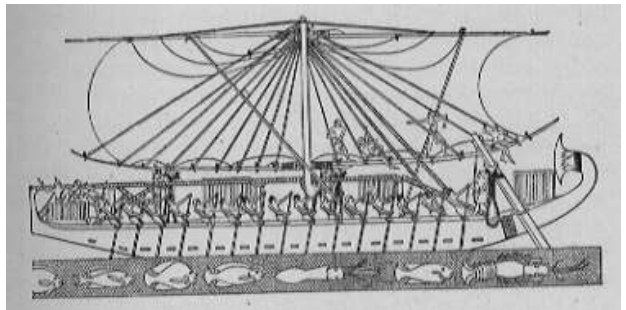
## HORN of AFRICA

by Michel Behar (November 2016)

A remote and rarely visited part of the world, the Horn of Africa is an undiscovered gem. In fact, aside from a few travelers in Djibouti, our group was the only tourists on this memorable journey.



Located at the access of the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa is one of the most strategic spots in the world. Because of this, the region was colonized at the end of the 19th century. Previously ruled by the Ottoman Empire for 300 years, the 1800s would see the Horn of Africa divided, with Somaliland going to the British, Djibouti to the French, and Eritrea to the Italians (Ethiopia was never colonized). To this day, many inhabitants of these lands still speak the languages of their colonizers.



The Horn of Africa was known to the Ancient Egyptians as the Land of Punt as far back as the third millennium BCE. The Punt people had a reputation for being great traders, and monopolized trade on the Red Sea, which linked the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean. Goods from the Persian Gulf, India, and the Far East were exported to Ancient Egypt, and later Greece and Rome. The Land of Punt imported items that were highly valued in Ancient Egypt such as gold, ebony, elephant tusks, livestock, ostrich feathers and eggs, and giraffe and leopard skins from Africa's interior. During this time period, 80,000 units of myrrh and frankincense were imported from Oman via Punt to the Eastern Mediterranean annually. Other ships carried spices from India and Southeast Asia. They all had to pass through the Red Sea to Egypt, and, from there, through a swampy wadi to the Nile, which was navigable only part of the year.



Home to one of the largest camel populations in the world, the Horn of Africa has many livestock markets, and we were able to visit

one in Eritrea and one in Somaliland. Camels are a useful animal in this region: they have splayed feet for walking on sand, nostrils that can seal off, a double row of eyelashes to shield against the harsh desert sun, humps which store fat, they can lose a third of their weight, and are able to drink 22 gallons in 10 minutes. Camel milk is low in fat, stays fresh longer than cow milk, contains iron, potassium, vitamins, and camel meat contains very low cholesterol.

## ***Ethiopia***

Our first stop on this tour was the city of Addis Ababa, which has grown from a small town to a bustling metropolis complete with many skyscrapers in just over 100 years. Here, we visited the National Museum, which holds some of the most ancient examples of early man, like Lucy, the 3.2 million year old skeleton of the Australopithecus Afarensis genus. Perhaps even more impressive than Lucy – and certainly much older – was Ardi, the 4.2 million year old Ardipithecus skeleton, the first primate to walk upright. Another unforgettable sight at the National Museum is the throne of Haile Selassie, Ethiopia's emperor from 1930-1974.

Later on, we toured the beautiful Kidist Selassie Church, in which Selassie and other victims of Mengistu's genocidal regime are buried. Our next destination in Addis Ababa was the Ethnological Museum, a museum set within Haile Selassie's former palace, and surrounded by magnificent gardens. From there, we drove up to Mt. Entoto, where Emperor Menelik's (he reigned from 1889-1913) palace resides, and the highest peak in the Entoto mountains, which overlooks the city of Addis Ababa. Last, we visited the "Red Terror" Martyrs' Memorial Museum, a sobering experience in which we learned of the atrocities of Mengistu's Derg Regime.

The next day, we reached Harar, the most charming town in Ethiopia. A beautiful walled city where Muslims and Christians coexist peacefully, there are no less than 90 stunning mosques in Harar, as well as a 15 ft high wall dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The city is famous for its high quality qat (a hallucinatory plant that is commonly chewed by the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa) and coffee. We visited a traditional Harar house, decorated with niches in its walls and filled with colorful pottery and cookware. Next, we explored the 16<sup>th</sup> century tomb of Emir Nur, an the 18<sup>th</sup> century al-Jami mosque, the Ras Mekkonen palace (where Haile Selassie spent much of his childhood) and the places where British explorer Richard Burton and French poet/trader Arthur Rimbaud lived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The city is a maze of alleys and is considered a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Later, we toured the impressive Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church on Horse Market Square. In the evening, we saw a man feeding hyenas, a



practice dating back to a famine centuries ago, when hyenas were fed porridge to prevent them from eating the locals' poultry. Each of our intrepid travelers had an opportunity to feed them and interact with them and surely was an intense adrenaline-rush experience.

## ***Eritrea***

Eritrea is an ancient country, with evidence of human life as far back as 2,000 BCE. Initially inhabited by the Pygmoid, the region was also home to Nilotic, Kushitic, Hamitic, and Semitic ethnic groups. Today, as many as 10 different ethnic groups live in this country, and Muslims, Coptic Christians, and Roman Catholics coexist peacefully. Historically referred to as "the land of plenty," because of its vast array of diverse species of wildlife, Eritrea is Africa's youngest state, having won independence from Ethiopia less than 30 years ago. The nation is dotted with cemeteries from WWII, when the British fought the Italians on Eritrean soil. The region is also littered with battle fields, tank graveyards, and destroyed buildings from its long and bloody war with Ethiopia, which lasted from 1961 until 1993.



On our first day of travel in this ancient land, we visited the various dwellings of the semi-nomadic tribes in the region. Our group was welcomed by these large tribal families as they gave us a tour of their modest abodes. Comprised of wood, clay, or stone covered with twigs, the *hidmo* (used by the Tigrinya and Sabo tribes), consist of 2 rooms separated by miniature cylindrical silos, plus a *gebela* (for relaxation during the day and a safe area for cattle at night). These homes have a lifespan of two generations. The smaller *agdo* are made up of timber, grass, tree bark, soil, and stone, are plastered with mud, and have a column in the center. The Tigre, Hedareb, and Rashaida tribes' makeshift homes, known as *agnet*, are built using mats/quilts, ropes, and pikes. These temporary houses typically last around a year.



The next day, in the nearby port city of Massawa, we admired the well-preserved Ottoman architecture. Though severe damage was inflicted by Eritrean rebels battling the Ethiopian army in 1977, reconstruction of the city has been on-going since 1990. Later, we explored the Dahlak archipelago, known for its large variety of birds and fish. This region consists of 209 islands, though only 3 of them are inhabited. Here, travelers can purchase corals, shells, and other souvenirs from one of the shops run by the islanders. That night, we stayed in a historical





property that has since been converted into a charming boutique hotel and dined on delicious fish from the Red Sea.

Early the next morning we boarded a bus for the ruins of the bygone city of Adulis. After a short walk through the desert, we suddenly stumbled upon the foundation of a 4,000 year old temple, the evidence of a thriving ancient civilization. The house of worship was excavated by Italians in 2013. Later, we explored a church from the early middle Ages, when Axum was a powerful Christian nation which traded with India and Byzantium.



Our last stop in Eritrea was its capital city, Asmara. A lush region with an altitude of over 7500 feet, it is Africa's highest capital. During colonial rule, Asmara was the headquarters of Eritrea from 1890 until 1941, and as such still retains the nickname "*Piccola Roma.*" With its Italian architectural features, the city was exceptionally modern when it was founded.



We discovered quaint cinemas and espresso bars from the 1930s that remain unchanged since their inception. In addition to the shops and architecture, the city is covered in Bougainvillea, enhancing even more the enchantment that is Asmara. In 2017, this fascinating capital was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

## ***Djibouti***

With a population of just 600,000, Djibouti is one of the smallest countries in Africa. Though small, its strategic location on the Indian Ocean near Bab al Mandab strait at the access of the Red Sea places it at the crossroads of one of the busiest shipping routes in the world. After checking in at our hotel, we dined at a fantastic seafood restaurant, and set off to explore the capital, Djibouti City, a typical small African capital with colonial architecture. Later, we toured the country's extensive port areas. It is said that Djibouti could be east Africa's Dubai, with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait investing in its port, as well as China, France, and the U.S. opening their own naval ports a decade ago.



Outside of the capital city, we passed through volcanic plateaus, and through the Great Rift Valley, until we reached Lake Abbé, where the filming of the original Planet of the Apes took place. Lake

Abbé is filled with majestic sights, from the hot springs to the lava chimney formations. In the morning, we walked up to the lake, and spotted flamingos from a distance.

On the way from the charming colonial port city of Taïoua, where slaves and ivory were traded just a century ago, we passed through new formations of the Great Rift Valley, as we continued our journey to Lake Assal. The lowest spot on land in Africa and the third lowest in the world, Lake Assal has a salinity level ten times higher than the sea. Chunks of salt are scattered on its shore. To this day, afar nomads still extract salt to trade at this famous lake.



## **Somaliland**

Somaliland is an unrecognized, but peaceful and stable country with a democratically elected government and its own currency. Its population is majority Muslim, and deeply religious. The main source of income for Somaliland's inhabitants is mostly pastoral agriculture; export of meat, animal skins, myrrh, and frankincense. Here, we explored the nation's capital, Hargeisa, an ancient city that has managed to rebuild after tragedy. The 1988 Hargeisa Holocaust saw thousands massacred and the city destroyed. Today, however, Hargeisa has restored itself to its original greatness, and is home to 1.3 million people. We toured its main sights: the money market with giant piles of banknotes, and a crashed MIG fighter memorial on a pedestal.

Our last stop of this memorable trip was only an hour's drive from the modern city of Hargeisa, but was like being transported back in time. The Laas Geel (meaning camel's well) rock paintings are one of the most spectacular Neolithic cave paintings on the African continent in general. The caves, which were discovered by a French archaeological team in 2002, had been untouched for nearly 10,000 years. We saw the splendor of its 350 paintings in shades of red, ochre, yellow and white that show cattle herders/hunters, giraffes, domesticated canines, wild antelopes, and cows wearing ceremonial robes, while next to them, the ancient people of this region are prostrating in front of the cattle.



As this was the final site of our unforgettable journey, from there we drove straight to the airport and, via Addis, home.