

# Eritrea



Eritrea is a heartbreaker. It was once heralded as a good place for travelling and, with a bit of luck, it could soon be so again. But as long as the country is at odds with its neighbour Ethiopia (again!), its sworn enemy, tourism development won't be a priority. One of the most secretive countries in Africa, Eritrea seems doomed to remain a hidden gem.

On the bright side, unlimited opportunities for off-the-beaten-track exploration abound. Who knew that Asmara, the capital, boasts the most shining collection of colonial architectural wonders in Africa? It is like a set from an early Italian movie, with vintage Italian coffee machines and outstanding examples of Art Deco architecture. On the Red Sea coast, the sultry town of Massawa is redolent with Islamic influence. It is also the starting point for visits to the Dahlak Islands, one of the least-spoilt and least-known reefs in the Red Sea.

Southern Eritrea features a superb array of archaeological sites that tell volumes of history. The Sahel Mountains in the north, for a long time the home of the guerrilla fighters, have a wild and bleak quality. The apocalyptic wasteland of Dankalia, stretching to the south, is considered one of the most arresting places on Earth and has a desolate magnetism. Eritrea's nine colourful ethnic groups are diverse and individual, and are a major highlight.

Isn't that enough? Although the country faces numerous hardships, it also remains one of Africa's most peaceful, secure and welcoming destinations. Once you've set foot there, your heart will be broken. You've been warned!

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Refine the art of sipping a *macchiato* on Harnet Ave before gazing at Italian colonial architecture in **Asmara** (p308)
- Get lost in the maze of narrow streets on **Massawa Island** (p340)
- Hike joyously upward to the **monastery of Debre Libanos** (p335), near Senafe
- Speculate on Eritrea's mysterious past at **Qohaito's ruins** (p333)
- Be a guest of the many fish that live in the colourful corals off the **Dahlak Islands** (p346)
- Feel like a National Geographic explorer and travel to the ends of Earth, destination the Mars-like wasteland of **Dankalia** (p350)
- Enjoy the smug feeling of having the whole country to yourself!



## SNAPSHOT ERITREA

'I can't afford milk for my children.' 'Tef has become outrageously expensive.' 'We all ride bicycles because fuel is restricted and too expensive,' Eritreans confess in plaintive whispers. Today Eritrea is not exactly in wonderland. The country has one of the most restrictive economies on the planet, and it's in a morass. The state has taken control of all private companies. Power cuts, food shortages, skyrocketing prices and rationing of staples are the order of the day. Eritreans have refined the art of belt-tightening and suffer in near silence. In 2003, 1kg of meat cost Nfa20, 1kg of sugar was Nfa5, and they were easily available. Today they cost Nfa98 and Nfa20 respectively and Eritreans have to wait in queues at state-run stores to get their monthly ration or buy them on the black market.

As if that was not enough, freedom of speech is nonexistent. According to the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists, Eritrea is one of the world's leading jailers of journalists. A heroic guerrilla commander, President Isaias Afewerki has metamorphosed into a stereotypical dictator, quashing hopes for democracy in the name of 'protecting national security'. He has curbed civil liberties, shut down Eritrea's free press and jailed domestic dissenters. The end result? Eritrea has won the less-than-enviable sobriquet of 'the North Korea of Africa'.

Today reaching a final peace agreement with Ethiopia is a pressing issue but both President Isaias Afewerki and his Ethiopian counterpart Meles Zenawi can't relinquish their fighter's mentality, which partly explains the persistence of the senseless border conflict. 'We want peace, we're weary of this never-ending war with Ethiopia, we just want to live a normal life,' lament Eritreans, whose growing resentment against their intransigent, mulish rulers is simmering. 'I have no future,' deploras a female student, whose sole ambition is to get pregnant as quickly as possible to escape conscription (incidentally, the army is also used as cheap labour for construction works). In Eritrea, the buzz word has long been 'self-reliance'. At first, this meant a sense of responsibility. Now this has transformed into utter

paranoia. Every outside influence is viewed with suspicion. Western NGOs and UN staff? 'Ants that undermine the stability of the country' – the nasty beasts were arbitrarily expelled in 2005. The BBC correspondent – the last Western journalist based in the country – is only tolerated. No wonder that the sense of isolation is overwhelming. Foreigners feel like they are setting foot on another planet.

Is it all that grim, though? Paradoxically, visitors feel very safe and most welcome as long as they don't interfere with politics. Eritreans show an exceptional resilience and have not abandoned their dreams of a renaissance. To top it off, they have not lost their appetite for life and Asmarans still surrender to the daily ritual of *passeggiata* (see p320). And they are still *macchiato* (espresso with a dash of milk) addicts. As one Eritrean realistically puts it: 'Governments come and go, but the people stay the same.' Eritrea will bounce back. The only question that haunts the minds is: when?

## HISTORY

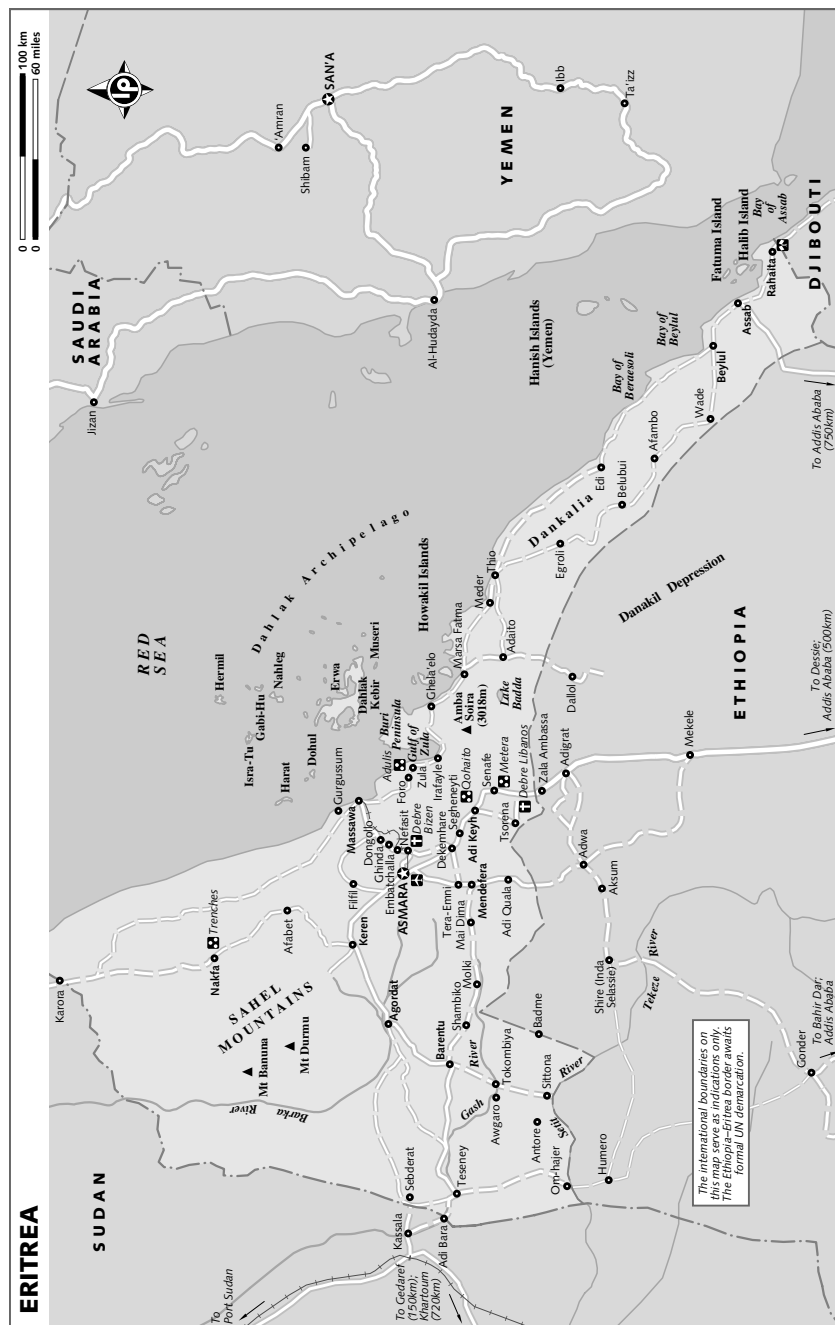
### IN THE BEGINNING

Eritrea's earliest inhabitants are thought to have been related to the Pygmies of Central Africa. Later, they intermingled with Nilotic, Hamitic and finally Semitic peoples migrating from across Africa and Arabia. By around 2000 BC, close contacts had been established with the people of the Nubian lowlands to the west and those from the Tihama coast of southern Arabia to the east. Some ruins in Eritrea are thought to date from the pre-Aksumite Civilisation.

### AKSUMITE CIVILISATION

Around the 4th century BC, the powerful kingdom of Aksum began to develop. Situated in Tigray, in the north of modern Ethiopia (around 50km from present-day Eritrea), Aksum lay just 170km from the Red Sea. Much foreign trade – on which Aksum's prosperity depended – was seaborne, and came to be handled by the ancient port of Adulis in Eritrea.

On the way to Adulis (a 12- to 15-day journey from Aksum) many exports, including rhinoceros horn, gold, hippopotamus hide, slaves, apes and particularly



### FAST FACTS

- Population: 4.6 million (estimated)
- Area: 124,320 sq km
- GNI per capita: US\$180
- Average life expectancy: 51 years (men), 55 years (women)
- Number of UN staff deployed at the Ethiopian border: 3500
- Number of Eritreans in uniform (male and female): 300,000
- Fine if you're caught changing money on the black market: Nfa2,000,000
- Number of journalists detained without charge: 14
- Average monthly income of a hotel receptionist: US\$40
- Thickness of froth in a *macchiato*: about 1.5cm (estimated)

ivory, passed through Eritrean towns, including Koloe (thought to be present-day Qohaito in the south). Some of the goods exported were Eritrean in origin, including obsidian, a black volcanic rock.

### ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity was undoubtedly the most significant 'import' into the region during the Aksumite period. According to the Byzantine ecclesiastical historian Rufinus, the religion was brought to the region by accident when Christian Syrian merchants travelling home from India were shipwrecked on the Red Sea coast. Whatever its origin, by the 4th century AD Christianity had become the Aksumite state religion. The new religion had a profound impact on Eritrea's culture, influencing much of the country's art and literature.

### THE RISE OF ISLAM & THE DECLINE OF AKSUM

Islam, the arrival of which coincided with Christian Aksum's decline in the 7th century, was the other great influence on the region. Though not directly responsible for the empire's collapse, the expansion of the religion was concomitant with the increasing power of the Arabs, who fast became the new masters of the Red Sea. Aksum's

commercial domination of the region was over.

Islam made the greatest inroads in the Dahlak Islands. Muslims traders also settled in nearby Massawa on the mainland.

Aksumite authority had long been challenged by other forces too, with incursions, attacks, rebellions and even mass migration by neighbouring tribes, particularly the Beja tribe, a Cushitic people originating from present-day Sudan.

After the settlement of the Beja in the interior of the country, and the Arabs on the coast, the Ethiopians were unable to recover the influence the Aksumites had held over the region for another thousand years.

### THE TURKISH & EGYPTIAN IMPRINTS

The Turks first arrived in the Red Sea at the beginning of the 16th century. For the next 300 years (with a few short-lived intervals) the coast, including the port of Massawa, belonged to the Ottomans.

By the middle of the 19th century, new powers were casting covetous eyes over the region. The Egyptians, under Ali Pasha (Mohammed Ali), invaded modern-day Sudan and occupied parts of Ethiopia. Soon after, the western lowlands of modern-day Eritrea were also taken, including the port of Massawa.

Under threat, the Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes eventually forced a battle. In 1875 at Ghundet, near Adi Quala in modern-day southern Eritrea, and later at Gura, near Dekemhare, Yohannes inflicted resounding defeats on the Egyptian armies.

The power vacuum left by the departing Egyptians was soon to be filled by yet another meddling foreign power – Italy.

### THE RED, RED SEA

Eritrea is said to derive its name from the Greek word erythra, meaning 'red'. It was coined from the famous Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, a trade or shipping manual written by a Greek-speaking Egyptian sailor or merchant around the 1st century AD. The erythra (or 'red of the sea') is so named because the water turns a vermilion shade as a result of newly spored algae during certain periods.

### THE LAND OF PUNT

Since the dawn of history, the Horn of Africa has been a source of fascination for the outside world. Lying on the African side of the Red Sea, the area provided a crucial trade link, connecting Egypt and the Mediterranean with India and the Far East.

However, this wasn't the region's only asset. Known to the Egyptian Pharaohs as 'Land of the Gods' or 'Land of Punt' (together with what is now Djibouti), the area yielded a seemingly limitless supply of precious commodities. Gold, frankincense, myrrh, slaves, ostrich feathers, antelopes, ebony and ivory were all loaded onto foreign ships jostling in the region's ports.

Egyptian accounts of this land accorded it almost legendary status and provide the earliest glimpse of the region. Expeditions are thought to date from the First or Second Dynasties (2920–2649 BC).

For scholars today, the Land of Punt retains its legendary aura. Thought to lie somewhere between the lands to the south of Nubia and those just north of present-day Somalia, no-one knows its exact location. Eritrea, Djibouti, Yemen, Somalia and even Kenya have all made claims to the title of the Land of Punt.

### THE ITALIANS STEP IN

During the partition of the continent by the competing European powers in the second half of the 19th century, France grabbed Djibouti (which then became known as French Somaliland) and Britain snatched Aden in Yemen, as well as a stretch of Somali coastline. Italy wasn't going to miss out on a piece of the pie. Italian colonisation started in 1869 near Assab. In 1885 the Italians occupied Massawa.

Alarmed by further expansion and the threat it posed to his kingdom, Yohannes challenged the Italians, but was killed in battle with the Mahadists (Sudanese) in 1889.

As the struggle against the Mahadists preoccupied the Ethiopians, the Italians were left to get on with the realisation of their military ambitions.

Relations were at first good with the new Ethiopian emperor, Menelik, and in 1889 the Treaty of Wechale was signed. In exchange for granting Italy the region that was to later become Eritrea, the Italians recognised Menelik's sovereignty and gave him the right to import arms freely though Ethiopia. However, relations began to sour a few years later.

Towards the end of 1889 the Italians turned their attention to the south. In 1890, they took Adwa and Mekele in Ethiopian territory, as well as Aksum and Adigrat a few years later.

Following the Battle of Adwa in 1896, when the Ethiopians resoundingly defeated the Italian armies (for more details, see p143), new international boundaries were

drawn up: Ethiopia remained independent and Eritrea became, for the first time, a separate territory – and an Italian colony.

### ITALIAN RULE

Of all Italy's colonies (Eritrea, Libya and Italian Somaliland), Eritrea was considered the jewel in the crown. Apart from providing a strategic base for imperial ambitions (particularly against Ethiopia), it boasted vital access to the Red Sea, as well as potential for mineral and agricultural exploitation. For this reason, much effort was put into industrialising the little country, and major schemes began to be developed, including the building of the great railway between Massawa and Asmara in 1909 (which was later extended to Keren) and the construction of a national network of roads.

By the end of the 1930s, Eritrea was one of the most highly industrialised colonies in Africa. By 1930 Massawa had become the largest port on the East African coast.

The Italians initially governed Eritrea indirectly through local chieftains. Later, a series of provinces was created, administered by a large body of Italian civil servants, headed by a governor.

### BRITISH TAKEOVER

In May 1936 Italy avenged itself for the defeat at Adwa and triumphed over the Ethiopians. In 1940, with the outbreak of WWII, Italy declared war on Britain, and soon became embroiled in conflicts in what was then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Though initially successful, Italian campaigns in

this area were soon repulsed by reinforced British armies.

Soon British forces were giving chase to the Italians, pursuing them into Eritrea, and capturing Agordat. The year 1941 marked a turning point: the British took the strategically important town of Keren before defeating the Italians in Asmara. The colony became an Administration of the British.

The British attempted to maintain the status quo in the territory largely due to practical constraints. They left in place the old Italian administration, but the colony inevitably sank into a state of demoralisation and decline. When the course of WWII changed, the territory lost its strategic importance and in 1945 the British began a slow withdrawal.

By 1946 the country was in trouble. The economy was floundering, unemployment was soaring, and unrest was brewing.

### ARRANGED MARRIAGE WITH ETHIOPIA

In 1948 Eritrea's fate was pondered by a commission consisting of the UK, the USA, France and the Soviet Union. Unable to reach a decision, the commission passed the issue on to the UN's General Assembly.

In 1947 a commission of inquiry found the population divided into three main factions: pro-Ethiopian Unionists (mainly Christian), anti-Unionists (mainly Muslims

### ITALIAN APARTHEID

From 1922 to 1941 a system of discrimination existed in Eritrea and Ethiopia that was remarkably similar to the apartheid system of South Africa.

Local and Italian children were educated at different schools; non-Italian adults were prevented from learning basic skills or professions; on buses and in cinemas, Italian passengers sat in the front, whereas locals were obliged to sit at the back; marriage between Italians and locals was forbidden by law, with a punishment of up to five years in prison for offenders.

Thousands of locals were evicted from their houses and resettled in reservations far from where the Italians lived. The best agricultural land was seized, rent for town houses was not paid and there were continual abuses of law; locals were punished, fined and even killed without cause.

in favour of a Muslim League) and members of a Pro-Italia party (many of them Italian pensioners). The commissioners, whose findings reflected the political interests of their respective governments, produced totally different conclusions and recommendations.

In 1950 the very contentious Resolution 390 A (V) was passed. Eritrea became Ethiopia's 14th province and disappeared from the map of Africa.

### UNMATCHED COUPLE

This 'shotgun wedding', as it has been described, between Eritrea and Ethiopia was never a happy one. Little by little, Ethiopia began to exert an ever-tighter hold over Eritrea, as both industry and political control were shifted to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. The Eritrean economy stagnated and the province's autonomy dwindled. Eritrean politicians and leaders were soon ousted, Ethiopian Amharic replaced Tigrinya as the official language in schools, and protests against the regime were suppressed with brutality.

The repeated appeals by the Eritrean people to the UN fell on deaf ears. With the start of the Cold War in the 1950s, the Americans had set their sights on establishing a communications centre in Asmara. When, in the early 1960s, Ethiopia formally annexed Eritrea in violation of international law, Cold War politics ensured that both the US and the UN kept silent.

With no recourse to the international community, the frustration of the Eritrean people grew. In 1961 the inevitable happened. In the little town of Amba Adal in the western lowlands, a small group of men led by Hamid Idriss Awate assailed one of the much-resented Ethiopian police stations and stole some pistols. The fight for independence had begun.

### TIME TO DIVORCE

The first resistance movements on the scene included the ELM (Eritrean Liberation Movement), the (Christian) People's Liberation Front (PLF), and the (Muslim) Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). From the latter two, a splinter group emerged, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which called for social revolution as well as national independence. It was only after

## A LONG, LONG WAR

The Struggle, as resistance to Ethiopian rule became popularly known, was a major event in the history of the Horn. Lasting for 30 years, it shaped – physically and psychologically – the Eritrean nation and its people. For the first time, a real sense of national identity was forged.

But the price of Eritrea's freedom was high. The war wrecked the country's infrastructure and economy, cost 65,000 lives and drove at least a third of the population into exile. It was not a story of vast armies, brilliant leadership and sweeping conquests. For three decades, a tiny guerrilla force (which numbered at most 40,000 during its last days) was able to thwart the might of a country 10 times its size, which was backed by two superpowers and had all the modern weaponry of the 20th century.

Initially a ragbag bandit force, the resistance fighters operated in tightly organised cells, taught their soldiers history, philosophy, political economy and to read and write, as well as guerrilla tactics. Equality of all people was advocated; soldiers had to respect the gender (many soldiers were women), ethnic group, religion and race of their fellow fighters.

In response to the devastating blanket bombing inflicted by the Ethiopians, whole villages were constructed underground, with schools, hospitals, factories, printing presses, mills, pharmacies, workshops and entertainment halls. The remains of these 'towns' can be seen today in the village of Nakfa in the north of Eritrea.

periods of bloody civil war and the defeat of the ELF in 1981, that the EPLF emerged as the leader of unified forces.

Nevertheless, the resistance continued to make progress, and in 1978 the Eritreans were on the brink of winning back their country. However, just on the point of victory, yet another foreign power decided to intervene.

In 1974 Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, a communist dictator, had come to power in Ethiopia. Three years later the Soviet Union began to arm his troops. In the face of massive aerial bombardment and an army bristling with modern weaponry, the EPLF was obliged to retreat. The famous 'Strategic Withdrawal', as it is known, later proved to be crucial to the movement's survival.

Eight major offensives were carried out against the Eritrean fighters from 1978 to 1986, all of which were repulsed. From 1988 the EPLF began to inflict major losses on the Ethiopian army, capturing first its northern headquarters in Afabet, then the large highland town of Keren. In 1990, amid some of the fiercest fighting of the war, the EPLF took the strategically important port of Massawa.

By this time, however, Mengistu's regime was threatened from within, and civil war had broken out in Ethiopia. In 1991 Mengistu was overthrown and fled to Zimbabwe. His 140,000 Ethiopian troops laid

down their weapons and ran. The EPLF walked into Asmara without having to fire a single bullet.

## FREEDOM, AT LAST!

In April 1993 the Provisional Government of Eritrea held a referendum on Eritrean independence. More than 99.81% of voters opted for full Eritrean sovereignty, and on 24 May 1993 independence was declared. Eritrea was back on the African map.

In early 1994 the EPLF dissolved itself and re-formed as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) under the chairmanship of the head of state, President Isaias Afewerki. Some members of the old ELF were also invited to join the team.

After the war, the little nation worked hard to rebuild its infrastructure, repair the economy and improve conditions for its people. Wide-ranging laws, policies and constitutional rights were drawn up, from protection of the environment and positive discrimination towards people with disabilities at work, to the rights of women and the fight against AIDS. Eritrea was also at pains to establish good international relations with, among others, Ethiopia, the Gulf States, Asia, the USA and Europe.

However, this progress was seriously undermined in 1998, when war broke out with Ethiopia (see p39 for details).

## ERITREA TODAY

It's still more or less the same (sad) story. The rancour between Eritrea and Ethiopia has not waned. The tensions peaked again late 2005, when the two enemies were poised on the brink of a new war. Frustrated by not seeing the enforcement of the Boundary Commission ruling (see p40), Eritreans shifted troops to the border and banned the UN from overflying its territory. The psychological war between the two countries is ongoing. For the tenacious Eritrean leaders, the enforcement of the Boundary Commission is a matter of life and death and they made it clear they would not compromise. Meanwhile, Eritrea's isolation is mounting, as is internal resentment against their despotic president, Isaias Afewerki. While Ethiopia has managed to nurture its ties with Western countries, the intransigent Eritrean government has lost the support of the international community and is growing notoriously dictatorial, threatening to expel the UN peacekeepers who are deployed on the border. Freedom of press and speech is nonexistent and any Western agency suspected of criticism against the regime runs the risk of being ousted.

The economy is in tatters, with food and oil shortages. Mass conscription has deprived many industries of manpower and there is no longer a private sector. In January 2005 the government introduced a currency declaration form to control all transactions, deterring foreign investments. Remittances from diaspora Eritreans is virtually the only source of income. As if that was not enough, for the four consecutive years to 2006, drought wreaked havoc on agricultural resources.

It has become vital to find a solution to the devastating conflict with Ethiopia and to come to terms with the stalemate. There were some signs of hope when this book went to print. The UN had just extended the stay of the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE). Whether it's enough to foster sustainable peace is anybody's guess.

## THE CULTURE

### THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Who are the Eritreans? It's a question few foreigners would be able to answer with any confidence. Eritreans remains something of an enigma to most Westerners. All things

considered, the lack of tangible international image and stereotypes about Eritrea and its people is a chance rather than a drawback.

Eritreans are different in temperament from their neighbours (which partly explains the bitter relations between the two countries). 'Rather die than surrender', could be their motto. Years of invasion have created a siege mentality and a sense of isolation. A deep-seated desire to protect the integrity of their nation, founded understandably by historic circumstances, has led to an attitude of self-preservation and, one would say, mulishness. Eritreans have a fierce pride in their own history, and their decades of struggle against the Ethiopians. Though impoverished, the nation has from the outset shown self-reliance, vigour and independence. Eritreans are not about to become anyone's vassal and this stoic attitude has elicited both passionate admiration and furious exasperation from visitors, aid workers and international organisations alike. Their ability to endure hardships without moaning – to a masochistic degree – is notorious. Tradition and a deep-rooted attachment to the land play an integral part in the national psyche too.

You'll soon realise that Eritreans are a withdrawn people who have to be coaxed into friendship, but if you succeed you'll discover a steely strength hidden beneath their stoic façade. Initially indifferent to strangers (at least by comparison with other African nations), Eritreans may appear somewhat taciturn at first meeting, but once the ice has broken you will find intense friendships. This guarded nature is hardly surprising, however, considering the country's history of oppression. This does not mean that they are standoffish or cold. Towards the traveller, Eritreans show exceptional politeness and hospitality. The inhospitability of the countryside in which most of the people live may well contribute to this keen sense of the importance of hospitality.

### LIFESTYLE

The contrast in lifestyle between Asmara and elsewhere is stark. Asmara is a city with allure, where people take the art of living seriously no matter the state of the economy. Asmarans are notoriously *bon vivants* and take the dolce vita very seriously – a legacy of the Italian era. Nobody would miss

the daily ritual of a cup of *macchiato* at a pavement terrace during the evening *passaggiata*. Then there is the rest of Eritrea: a monochrome mix of provincial town and rural landscape, where poverty is about the only prevalent excess.

Sadly, both the economic turmoil and the hard line followed by Isaias' government have severely impacted lifestyles and standards of living. Scratch the surface and you'll soon realise how hard Eritreans are hit by the economic crisis and lack of freedom. Life's a struggle for many Eritreans. Households have been feeling the financial downturn in recent times, with the cost of commodities having more than doubled in three years. Eating out and holidays have been curtailed radically, and waiting queues in front of state-controlled stores are now a common sight in Asmara. Food rationing has become a fact of life. A certain weariness can be felt. Diaspora Eritreans who returned to the country and have invested in the country are in a bit less of a predicament – they understandably enjoy a better quality of life.

In a country where people have lost faith in their government, the family remains one pillar of society on which Eritreans continue to depend. Family ties remain fiercely strong. Religious occasions and public holidays are vigorously celebrated, as are more personal, family events, such as weddings.

## POPULATION

The Eritrean people are a highlight of the country. The population is estimated to be 4.6 million. Eritrea might be a tiddler of a country by Africa's standards, but it hosts

### WILES & WAYS

For weddings, religious festivals and special occasions, Tigré and Tigrinya women love to get their hair done. The mass of tiny plaits go right up to the scalp, and can take a whole morning to prepare.

Married women can additionally have the palms of their hands and their feet tattooed with curvilinear patterns of henna. Fashionable teenagers prefer to have their gums tattooed. Pricked until they bleed, the gums are rubbed with charcoal. The resulting blue colour sets off a dazzling set of teeth, and is considered a mark of great beauty.

a kaleidoscopic range of tribes. Cultural diversity forms an integral part of the social fabric. There are nine ethnic groups, each with their own language and customs. It is estimated that about 1000 Italians live in Eritrea, mostly in Asmara.

Approximately 35% of the population are nomadic or seminomadic. About one million Eritreans live abroad.

### Tigrinya ትግርኛ

The Tigrinya make up approximately 50% of the Eritrean population and inhabit the densely populated central highlands, extending over the provinces of Dubub, Central and the area of Adi Keyh. They are largely Orthodox Christian, with just a small minority of Muslims who are known as Jiberti. The very distinct plaited hairstyle of the women has for centuries been depicted in local art.

Their language, Tigrinya, is one of the country's official languages.

### Tigré ትግሬ

The Tigré make up about 30% of the population, and inhabit the northern lowlands, from the Sudanese frontier to the western limits of the Danakil.

A heterogeneous people, the Tigré are divided into groups and clans. Most Tigreans are Muslim, and they are both sedentary and nomadic.

Tigrean society is traditionally hierarchical, with a small aristocracy known as *shemagille* ruling the masses. When the village leader dies, his power passes to his offspring.

Tigrean oral literature is rich. Fables, riddles, poetry, funeral dirges, war cries and supernatural stories colour the different elements of Tigrean life. The Tigré are also known for their love of singing and dancing, usually to the accompaniment of a drum and a guitar.

### Saho ሳሆ

The Saho make up 5% of the population. They inhabit the coast and the hinterland south of Asmara and Massawa. Towards the end of April, when the rains stop in the lowlands, many Saho leave the coastal area and trek with their livestock up to the highlands near Adi Keyh. When the rains stop in September, they return for the wet season on the coastal lowlands.

### FIGHTER'S SALUTE

Shoulder contact is used for greeting in Eritrea. When two male friends meet, they clasp hands, then lean towards one another and hit each other's right shoulders, usually three times. This sign of great comradeship is called the 'fighter's salute'. As a foreigner, you're not supposed to try this type of greeting – it's pretty hard to imitate, and you would probably look awkward!

The Saho people are predominantly Muslim, and feelings of ethnic identity are less strong among them than other groups. Known as great pastoralists, they fought for centuries with the highlanders over the pastures of the mountains. Today they often tend other people's cattle, including those of the Tigrinya, in exchange for grain. Many Saho children (up to the age of 16) wear little leather pouches around their neck, which are full of herbs and spices to ward off evil spirits.

Some Saho are farmers who have settled in the highlands south of the country. Honey is an important part of the Saho diet and they are known as good beekeepers. In the past they were also reputed as warriors, and were often enlisted to escort trade caravans between central Ethiopia and the port of Massawa.

### Afar አፋር

The Eritrean Afars, also known as the Danakils, make up 5% of the population and inhabit the long coastal strip stretching from the Gulf of Zula into Djibouti. Predominantly nomadic pastoralists, the Afar people are Muslim, though elements of ancient ancestor-worship still persist.

Since early times the Afar territory has been divided into kingdoms and ruled by individual sultans who have always remained fiercely independent of any foreign power.

The sole inhabitants of one of the most inhospitable regions on Earth, the Afars have acquired a fearsome reputation among Western travellers and explorers during the last 100 years.

The men still carry the famous *jile* (curved knife), and some file their teeth to points. Afar oral literature reveals a high esteem for military prowess, with a whole

repertoire of war chants. See also the boxed text, p222.

### Hedareb ኔዳራብ

The Hedareb, along with their 'brother' tribes the Beni Amer and Beja, make up 2.5% of the population, and inhabit the northwestern valleys of Eritrea, straddling the border with Sudan.

Most Hedarebs are nomadic and travel great distances in search of pasture. They are Cushitic in origin (probably directly descended from the ancient Beja tribe) and speak mainly Tigré and an ancient Beja language (though this is in decline, as it is replaced by more dominant languages).

The Beni Amer are a strongly patriarchal, socially stratified, almost feudal people. Their skills as camel drivers and rearers are legendary. Many of the men scarify their cheeks with three short, vertical strokes – the Italians called them the '111 tribe'.

### Bilen ብሉን

The Bilen inhabit the environs of Keren and make up approximately 2% of the population. Cushitic in origin, the Bilen are either settled Christian farmers or Muslim cattle rearers.

Bilen traditional society is organised into kinship groups. The women are known for their brightly coloured clothes and their gold, silver or copper nose rings which indicate their means and social status. Like the Beja language, Bilen is slowly being replaced by Tigré, Tigrinya and Arabic, due to intermarriage, economic interactions and because Arabic is taught in local schools. Henna tattoos that mimic diamond necklaces or little freckles are fashionable among the women.

### Kunama ኩናማ

The Kunama inhabit the Gash Barka province in the southwestern corner of Eritrea, close to the Ethiopian and Sudanese border, and make up 2% of the population. Barentu is their 'capital'. The Kunama are Nilotic in origin, and very dark skinned. They are the original inhabitants of the region.

A few Kunama are Muslim, some are Christian, but the great majority are animist. According to their beliefs, the higher divinity, Anna, created the sky and the earth

but is largely indifferent to human fate. The spirits, by contrast, must be placated before every event, even ploughing a field.

The Kunama only recognise the authority of the elders and the village assemblies. The community is closely knit, and many educated Kunama abandon the city to return to their traditional home.

Land is often farmed cooperatively and, after the work is finished, the village unites to celebrate with feasting and dancing. The Kunama are known for their dances, and have developed more than 25 dance forms, often re-enacting great historical events or victories.

### Nara ናራ

The Nara, also known as the Baria, make up about 1.5% of the population and inhabit the Barka Valley near the Sudanese border. Along with the Kunama, they are the only Nilotic Eritrean tribe, and are mainly Muslim. They have three characteristic vertical scarifications on the cheeks, similar to those of the Hedareb.

The Nara practice mixed farming and share many customs with their neighbours, the Kunama. In the past, skirmishes and raids from other tribes have forced many of the people to flee.

### Rashaida ራሻሳዳ

The Rashaida are the only true Eritrean nomads. Making up just 0.5% of the population, they roam the northern coasts of Eritrea and Sudan, as well as the southern reaches of the Nubian desert. Like their neighbours, the Beja (related to the Hedareb), they live by raising cattle and are Muslim.

The Rashaida were the last of the Semitic people to arrive in Eritrea in the middle of the 19th century. Their language is Arabic.

The magnificent Rashaida women are famous for their black-and-red geometrically patterned dresses, and their *burkas* (long, heavy veils) elaborately embroidered with silver thread, beads and sometimes seed pearls.

The Rashaida are known for their great pride; marriage is only permitted within their own clan. They are expert goat and cattle rearers, as well as merchants and traders along the Red Sea coasts.

## SPORT

Bicycle races take place in many of the larger towns. Streets are cordoned off, and everyone comes to watch. The most popular cycling event is the annual Giro d'Eritrea, a 10-day race across the country. It is held in February or March.

## MULTICULTURALISM

Eritrea is surprisingly and refreshingly multicultural. Since the beginning of time, Eritrea has attracted migrants, merchants and meddlesome foreign powers. Today these influences are reflected in the country's diverse ethnic population. With nine ethnic groups and languages as well as several religions, Eritrea is a model of cultural diversity. During the war, religious, ethnic and gender differences were set aside in favour of unity against the Ethiopians. In Asmara, the Great Mosque, the Orthodox church, the Catholic cathedral and the synagogue stand placidly in the same precinct. Inter-marriage is common and there's no racial ghetto. The government ensures that each ethnic group has a voice in the decision-making process.

There's no immigration as such but diaspora Eritreans bring a refreshing influx of outside influence. More painful is the situation of the Eritrean returnees, from Sudan and Ethiopia, who live in refugee camps on the outskirts of frontier towns.

## MEDIA

Freedom of the press in Eritrea? Dream on! There is no press freedom. Period. Isaias Afewerki has been battling the press for years, forcing many independent papers out of business and jailing free-speaking journalists without charge. More than 10 independent journalists have 'disappeared' these last years. The state-run *Haddas Eritrea* is the only newspaper in the country, often featuring headlines bellowing how the country is following the right path and how perverse the Ethiopian leaders are.

Surprisingly, there's no ban on satellite TV. The few Eritreans who can afford a satellite dish can tune to BBC, CNN or Euronews to get a more balanced vision of reality.

## RELIGION

The population of Eritrea is almost equally divided between Christians and Muslims. Christians are primarily Orthodox; the

Eritrean Orthodox church has its roots in the Ethiopian one (see p50). There are also small numbers of Roman Catholics and Protestants, as a result of missionary activity. The Muslims are primarily Sunnis, with a Sufi minority.

Roughly speaking, the agriculturalist Orthodox Christians inhabit the highland region and the Muslims are concentrated in the lowlands, the coastal areas and towards the Sudanese border. Some animists inhabit the southwestern lowlands.

There are at least 18 monasteries in Eritrea. Following the raids of the famous 16th-century Muslim leader, Mohammed Gragh the Left-Handed, almost all of them were safely tucked away in very remote and inaccessible places. Three of the oldest and most important are Debre Bizen (near Nefasit), Debre Libanos (near Senafe) and Debre Sina (near Keren).

## WOMEN IN ERITREA

Women enjoy far greater equality in Eritrea than in most other African countries. This refreshingly liberal attitude has been won by Eritrea's women, who themselves contributed more than one-third of troops in both the recent wars against Ethiopia. In Asmara, they can be seen wearing the latest fashion clothes. However, Eritrea remains a deeply conservative country and the 'double liberation' (for their country and for their gender) expected after independence has not been as forthcoming as some had hoped. In rural areas, prejudices remain deeply rooted.

In the towns, several active, well-organised women's groups have sprung up in the last few years.

The status of women is something to behold. Eritrean women have guaranteed representation in Parliament. They enjoy their own national holiday, equal property rights and the right to divorce, and also have equal rights to the custody of their children in any settlement. Eritrean women have attitude. In Asmara, women who were soldiers during the war can be seen wearing old jeans and T-shirts.

## ARTS Dance

Dance plays a very important social role in Eritrea. It marks the major events of life, such as births and marriages, and is used in

celebrating special occasions and religious festivals. Dances traditionally permitted young girls and boys to meet, and warriors to show off their prowess.

The dances of the Kunama and Hedareb are particularly exuberant.

## Music

Traditional musical instruments of Eritrea have their roots in Ethiopia. They include the *krar* and *wata*, both string instruments; the *shambko*, a type of flute; and the *em-bilta*, a wind instrument.

Though sharing some similarities, each of the nine ethnic groups has its own distinct melodies and rhythms.

Atewebrhan Segid is considered one of the leading traditional musicians and singers in Eritrea today. The famous Eritrean singer Yemane Gebremichael, known as the 'father of the poor', died in 1997.

Others singers, both traditional and modern, include Faytinga, Helen Meles, Bereket Mengisteab, Osman Abdel Rahim, Idriss Mohammed Ali, Teklé Kiflemariam, Tesfay Mehari and Samuel Berhane.

## Literature

Eritrea's oral literature – in the form of folk tales, ballads, poetry, laudations etc – is rich and diverse (for more on oral literature, see p55).

The Italians imposed their own language and literature (and Latin alphabet) on the country, as did the British and Ethiopians. Woldeab Woldemariam is especially venerated for his part in fighting the suppression of the local languages. His *Zanta Quedamot* is a collection of children's stories designed to make the Tigrinyan alphabet more easily understood by children.

During the Struggle for Independence from Ethiopia, writing in the vernacular was encouraged through such publications as the fighters' magazine *Mahta* (Spark) and *Fitewrari* (Avant Garde).

Today Eritrean writers are publishing and producing increasing amounts of poetry, fiction and drama (mainly in Tigrinya and Arabic). Current novelists include Alemseged Tesfai, Solomon Drar and Bruk Habtemikael.

In recent times, the nine languages of the nine ethnic groups have adopted written scripts: six have adopted the Latin alphabet

and one Arabic. The other two, Tigrinya and Tigré, have always used the Ge'ez-derived script of ancient Aksum.

### Architecture

Eritrean vernacular architecture depends on both its ethnic and geographical origin. In the cool highlands, the traditional house is the *hidmo*. Built on a rectangular plan, the house is constructed with dry-stone walls topped with a thick, earthen roof, supported both inside and out with strong wooden pillars.

In the lowlands, where warmth is less of a concern, people traditionally live in huts. Depending on the ethnic group, the hut walls are made of adobe (sun-dried brick), wood or stone, and have thatched roofs.

In Asmara and many of the larger towns, such as Keren, Massawa and Dekemhare, the colonial heritage can be seen in the Italian-style buildings (see the boxed text, p317). Many of them, in Asmara and Massawa in particular, are remarkable historical and artistic pieces, but most of them are in urgent need of restoration. There are plans to protect and restore some of the buildings.

### Painting

The country's ancient Orthodox church has long provided an outlet for painting. Most church walls are painted with colourful and dramatic murals. Canvas and parchment manuscripts, some several hundred years old, are illustrated with delightful and sometimes very beautiful biblical scenes.

Painters in various media today include Mikael Adonai, Tesfay Gebremikael, Ygzaw Mikael and Giorgis Abraham.

### Theatre

Eritrean theatre is an ancient art and, like painting, has its roots in Ethiopia. Traditionally, it was staged to celebrate religious festivals, and involved music, singing, dance and acting.

During federation with Ethiopia, censorship was one of the principal constraints restricting the development of local theatre. With the emergence of the EPLF in the 1980s, new works began to appear. One of them, *The Other War* by Alemseged Tesfay, has appeared in an English anthology of contemporary African plays.

## ENVIRONMENT

### THE LAND

With a land area of 124,320 sq km, Eritrea is about the size of England or the state of Pennsylvania in the USA. The coastline measures around 1000km and off it there are over 350 islands.

Eritrea has three main geographical zones: the eastern escarpment and coastal plains, the central highland region, and the western lowlands.

The eastern zone consists of desert or semidesert, with little arable land. The people inhabiting the region are generally nomadic pastoralists or fishing communities.

The northern end of the East African Rift Valley opens into the infamous Dankalia region in the east, one of the hottest places on Earth. This semidesert lies in a depression up to 120m below sea level, and is home to several salt lakes.

The central highland region is more fertile, and it is intensively cultivated by farming communities.

The western lowlands, lying between Keren and the Sudanese border, are watered by the Gash and Barka Rivers. Farming is practised, but less intensively than in the highlands.

### WILDLIFE

In the past, Eritrea was home to a large range of animals, including buffaloes, cheetahs, elephants, giraffes and lions. With the loss of the forests and the decades of civil war, many of these animals have disappeared.

### Animals BIRDS

Eritrea's range of habitats is surprisingly diverse, and its birdlife is correspondingly rich. A total of 537 species of birds have been recorded, including the rare blue sawwing.

The isolated and uninhabited Dahlak Islands, and the rich feeding grounds that surround them, attract large numbers of nesting sea birds from all over the Red Sea (and from the Mediterranean and the Gulf). Some 109 species have been recorded on the islands, including the Arabian bustard and osprey.

Eritrea also lies within a popular migratory fly way. Hundreds of species of wintering

and migratory coastal and sea birds can be seen crossing between the continents of Africa and Arabia.

On the Buri Peninsula, the ostrich and Arabian bustard are commonly seen. Sea birds include gulls, terns, boobies and, on the coastline and islands, many species of wader.

In the lush, evergreen, tropical forests in the Semenawi Bahri area northeast of Asmara, birdlife is particularly abundant. Species include the near-endemic white-cheeked turaco and the Narina trogon.

### MAMMALS & REPTILES

Mammals commonly seen today include the Abyssinian hare, African wildcat, black-backed jackal, common jackal, genet, ground squirrel, pale fox, Soemmering's gazelle and warthog. Primates include the vervet monkey and hamadryas baboon.

Lions, greater kudu and Tora hartebeests are said to inhabit the mountains of Gash-Barka province, north of Barentu. On the Buri Peninsula, dik-diks and dorcas gazelles can be seen. In the area between Omhajer and Antore, in the country's southwest, Eritrea's last population of elephants is said to roam around – buy a lottery ticket if you happen to spot one!

### MARINE LIFE

Major Eritrean marine ecosystems include the coral reefs, sea-grass beds and mangrove forests.

In the Red Sea at least 350 species of coral are known to exist. Eritrea's coral is mainly found as 'patch reef' extending from the surface to a depth of around 15m to 18m; below this, coral development tends to be limited.

Eritrea is home to at least three species of mangrove, despite its location on the northerly limits of the mangrove ranges. They are found along the coast and on the Dahlak Islands.

Five species of marine turtle have been recorded. Most common are the green and hawksbill turtles. The green turtle is quite often spotted around the Dahlak Islands, as are dolphins and sharks.

The Eritrean and Sudanese coastlines are thought to be home to at least half the 4000 to 5000 endangered dugongs (sea cows) estimated to inhabit the Red Sea.

Collecting coral, shells or plant life from the beaches and waters is forbidden in the Dahlak Islands.

### ENDANGERED SPECIES

The greatest threat to wildlife in Eritrea is the loss or degradation of habitat. Almost all of Eritrea's animals (with the exception of the baboon, ostrich and gazelle) are considered endangered within the country's own national perimeters. Internationally, the Nubian ibex (which has probably disappeared from Eritrea) is considered dangerously threatened. In recent years, concerns have also been expressed for Eritrea's elephant populations. A century ago, significant numbers inhabited Gash-Barka province. Today it is thought that no more than 100 elephants exist.

### Plants

The landscape of eastern Eritrea is characterised by acacia woodland (several species), brushland and thicket, semidesert vegetation, riverine vegetation and mangrove swamp.

The highland region is dominated by an indigenous species of juniper (*Juniperus procera*) and wild olive (*Olea africana*). Various species of acacia are also found. In degraded areas, various eucalyptus plantations have been established.

The Semenawi Bahri (Green Belt area) is in the northeast of Asmara, around the village and valleys of Filfil. It contains the last remnant of mixed, evergreen, tropical woodland in Eritrea. At an elevation of between 900m and 2400m, it stretches north to south for about 20km.

The landscape to the west is made up mainly of woodland savanna, brushland, thicket and grasslands (*Aristida*). Around 50% of the firewood needed for the population of Asmara is collected from this area, resulting in serious deforestation. Species include the doum palm (*Hyphaene thebaica*), found particularly along the Barka River, eucalypts and various acacia species. Other species include baobab (*Adansonia digitata*), toothbrush tree (*Salvadora persica*) and tamarisk (*Tamarix aphylla*).

Endangered species of flora include the eucalypt (*Boswellia papyrifera*), the baobab and the tamarind tree (*Tamarindus indica*).

### RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL: ENVIRONMENT & CULTURE

The country receives relatively few tourists, so their impact on the environment has so far been fairly minimal.

The beautiful coral reefs around the Dahlak Islands are perhaps most vulnerable to damage, and in addition receive more tourists (local and foreign) than many areas.

Eritrea is a party to Cites (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), and it is therefore illegal to export any endangered species or their products, such as turtle or ivory. You may find turtle and elephant souvenirs in shops (particularly in Asmara). It's best to avoid these, as all species of marine turtle are currently threatened. Coral and shell collection is now discouraged too.

Try to resist the temptation to buy any genuinely old artefacts, such as manuscripts, scrolls and Bibles, found in some of the shops in the capital. Eritrea has already lost a huge amount of its heritage, particularly during the Italian era. Such exports will soon be illegal anyway.

Water is an extremely precious and scarce resource in Eritrea. Take care not to waste it.

### NATIONAL PARKS

There are no formal national reserves or parks in Eritrea, although their establishment is expected sooner or later.

There are no marine parks either, but several islands in the Dahlak group have been proposed, and research has been conducted to study the fragile ecosystem of these islands in greater detail.

### ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Eritrea's environment has been greatly impacted by war, famine and demographic pressure. Much of Eritrea's farming is still subsistence or semisubsistence, so land productivity is vital to the population's survival.

Today population growth is the biggest problem, placing increased demands on the land and leading to overgrazing and overcropping. Adding to woes is the practice of 'shifting cultivation' in the southwestern lowlands (in which whole areas of vegetation are burnt before planting), which is also seriously detrimental to the region's flora.

Deforestation poses a great threat to the country. Less than 1% of the country is covered by woodland, as compared with 30% a century ago – this says it all. During the war with Ethiopia, troops on both sides cleared forests for the construction of shelters, trenches and other fortifications. The traditional *hidmo* also requires large quantities of wood. In times of famine, trees provide emergency rations for the people and their livestock. Above all, the trees prevent soil erosion. Eritrea's current water shortages and low-yielding land are directly linked

to the destruction of the forests. Measures to combat deforestation include a nationwide programme of tree planting and the establishment of nearly 100 nurseries nationwide, but it will take time before the results materialise.

## FOOD & DRINK

Eritrea is not exactly the gastronomic capital of Africa but it's certainly better and more varied than you would expect, especially in Asmara. Cuisine-skip from Italian to traditional Eritrean and to the odd Indian or Chinese – you can't tire of dining in the capital. And nothing can beat a strong *macchiato* and a melt-in-your-mouth pastry at an outdoor table early morning or late afternoon.

Most types of food are reasonably priced, the only exception being imported food in some of the capital's supermarkets. A dinner for two comes to around Nfa180. People eat early in Eritrea (usually between 6.30pm and 8pm).

### STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

#### Italian

Along with their roads, towns and bridges, the Italians left another legacy: *macchiato*, pizza and spaghetti. Italian dishes are available in all restaurants throughout Eritrea. Outside the capital, these may be limited to just one dish: lasagne or spaghetti bolagnese. However, it fills the gap.

In the capital, the choice is much more extensive, with both *primi piatti* (first courses, usually pasta dishes, especially

*penne, fusili, tagliatelle*) and *secondi piatti* (main dishes, usually fish or meat) on offer.

### Traditional

*Shiro, kitfo, zizil, kwanta, fir fir, berbere...* If you have visited Ethiopia, you'll soon realise that traditional Eritrean cuisine is almost the same as in Ethiopia; see p68 for a complete rundown of typical local dishes, ingredients and food etiquette, and a glossary of food terms. Most of the terms used are the same as in Ethiopia, except for *wat*, the fiery and ubiquitous sauce, which is known as *tsebhi* in Tigrinya; *injera* (large Ethiopian version of a pancake/plate), which is sometimes called *taita* in Tigrinya; *tibs* (sliced lamb, pan fried in butter, garlic, onion and sometimes tomato), known as *tibsi* in Tigrinya; and *kai wat* (lamb, goat or beef cooked in a hot *berbere* sauce), known as *zigni* in Tigrinya.

Eritrean food can sit heavily in the stomach but is no less mouthwatering for it. If you like hot food, try the delicious *sils*, a peppery fried tomato and onion sauce served for breakfast. Another very popular breakfast dish is *ful* (based on chickpea purée), with *frittata*, omelette or scrambled egg jazzed up with a bit of pepper.

*Capretto* often features on menus. It's roast goat, sometimes served like a rack of lamb. Another succulent choice is *gored gored* (chunks of fresh beef cooked with seasoned butter and *berbere*).

Desserts aren't a traditional part of the diet and usually consist of fruit salad or synthetic crème caramel, but you could head for a pastry shop any time of day and gobble a heavenly *foret noire* (a cake with cocoa and cream) or croissant. Eritrean yoghurt (served in a glass) and the mild local cheeses are a much better bet. The latter are sometimes served with bread and exquisite local honey, which makes for a terrific and easily prepared picnic.

In the western lowlands, look out for little boys selling *legamat*, a deep-fried dough sold hot in newspaper cones in the early morning; it's delicious for an early breakfast.

In the far west, food is heavily influenced by the proximity of Sudan. One popular and very tasty dish is *sheia*, lamb drizzled with oil and herbs then barbecued on very hot stones until it sizzles. It's delicious. It's usually served with *ades*, a lentil dish, and a stocklike soup known as *merék*.

In Massawa, the Arabic influence is evident. Kebabs and Yemeni-style charcoal-baked fish are both widely available.

### DRINKS

Don't fear the heat, even in Massawa. There's no dearth of beverages to slake your thirst.

### Alcoholic Drinks

In the capital and towns, all the usual favourites are available, including whisky, gin, vodka and beer. As many are imported, they tend to be expensive.

Local varieties include Asmara gin (also known as *ouzo*), which is a bit rough around the edges (as you will be the morning after drinking it), but it is soon kicked back. A shot of gin (about Nfa10) is only slightly more expensive than Coke or mineral water (Nfa6 to Nfa8).

The local beer, called Asmara Beer, is popular among both Eritreans and foreigners who are happy to guzzle it down with a pizza or a plate of tagliatelle. It's manufactured in Asmara, has a mild, quite smooth flavour and is very drinkable. It's also cheap at about Nfa10.

As for the red Asmara wine – it is no huge cause for celebration. Local wines are very reasonably priced in restaurants, usually between Nfa30 and Nfa60 per bottle. Imported wine starts at about Nfa120.

If you're not catching an early bus out of town the next morning, try the local *araki*, a distilled aniseed drink, a little like the Greek *ouzo*. *Mies* is a delicious local wine made from honey, and comes in varying degrees of sweetness (the drier it is, the more alcoholic). Don't miss it. If you're in Afar territory in Dankalia, try the delicious – but very powerful – *doma* palm wine (see p351).

### Nonalcoholic Drinks

In Asmara and, to a lesser degree, the larger towns, innumerable little cafés and bars dot the centre. In true Italian style, frothy *macchiato*, espresso and fragrant cappuccino topped with delicate layers of foam are all served, along with a selection of pastries and cakes.

The Eritreans seem to get a fix from large amounts of sugar, which is copiously applied to all hot drinks and even fresh fruit juices. If you don't want sugar, you'll have to make that clear when you order. Ask for *beze sukkar*.



Outside the capital and in the country, sweet black tea is the most common drink. Following Islamic traditions, it is often offered as a gesture of welcome to guests. In the lowlands, cloves are often added. In the west, near the Sudanese border, coffee is sometimes spiced with ginger. If you don't want it, ask for *beze gingebele*.

The water in Asmara is considered safe to drink but, as in many places, new arrivals may experience problems with it. Various makes of bottled water (known in Tigrinya as *mai gas*) can be bought in all the towns and some villages. Local brands include Dongollo and Sabarguma (which has a lighter fizz).

Fresh fruit juices (most commonly mango, papaya, pineapple and banana) are sold in Asmara and some of the larger towns.

Various fizzy soft drinks are widely available, even in Dankalia, where without refrigeration they are served at room temperature, which in some places is as warm as tepid tea.

Glass bottles are recycled; save them and you can exchange them for full ones.

## WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The capital is well endowed with restaurants, bars, cafés, fast-food and pastry shops. Unlike other African countries, there are no street eats. You will also find several supermarkets, some stocked with a good selection of European imports. Outside the towns, local shops have a very limited selection of food products for sale and the choice of dishes on offer in the restaurants is pretty limited. In Asmara, most restaurants have their menu translated into English.

Sadly, there were some food shortages throughout the country at the time of writing, and some staples were in short supply.

## VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarians will thank their lucky stars in Eritrea – they'll be pretty well catered for, at least by African standards. Most restaurants have several vegetarian options, especially on Wednesday and Friday, the traditional fasting days. If you're after vegetarian food, ask for *nai tsom*, a selection of vegetable dishes similar to the Ethiopian *beyainatu*. And of course, you can always order a plate of spaghetti.

## HABITS & CUSTOMS

As important as the style or quality of the food is the ceremony. You won't forget your first meal, shared from a large plate with fellow diners and accompanied by *injera*. Tear off a piece of *injera* with your right hand and wrap it around the food served with it. Your host might even feed the tastiest morsel directly into your mouth – don't cringe, this is a mark of great friendship.

If you enjoyed your meal, express your satisfaction with a useful Tigrinya word that will please your host: *te-oom* (delicious).

## ASMARA ኣስመራ

pop 1,062,000 / elev 2347m

If only all African capitals were as enchanting as Asmara! Hedonistic, seductive, civilised, unexpected, Asmara has charm in spades. By some kind of miracle, it has been spared the litter-strewn, sprawling ghettos of many developing-world cities, and the bleak high-rise office buildings of postcolonial Africa. Instead, think tree-lined avenues, peaceful neighbourhoods, pavement cafés with vintage Italian coffee machines, cheery pizza parlours and tantalising pastry shops. Bathed in glorious sunshine eight months of the year, it boasts a balmy and temperate climate that rejuvenates the soul and body. Its relaxed pace of life is infectious. In many ways you'll feel like you've been teleported to a southern Italian town. And there's the fabulous architecture: even jaded visitors can't help but be enthralled by its gobsmacking portfolio of unheralded architectural wonders from the Italian era. Where else could you find such a mix of rationalist, Art Deco, cubist, expressionist, futurist and neoclassical styles?

But that is just one facet of Asmara. The city also exudes an undeniably African and Arab atmosphere. In the morning you'll hear the sound of the cathedral bells and the footsteps of the Orthodox monks on their way to Mass, as well as the Muslim call to prayer. These sounds are symbolic of the remarkable harmony that reigns in the city and throughout the country among the different religious and ethnic groups.

The picture is not all that rosy, though. Sadly, Asmara's ability to dazzle has been marred over past years by the battered economy and the clampdown on civil liberties.

Gone is the dolce vita – belt-tightening is now the order of the day. Power cuts? Almost a fact of life. Waiting queues in front of food stores? Now a daily chore. During the day, business is slack. At night, streets are dark and deserted. The city that was buzzing at the turn of the century has vanished. It's now all whispers and subdued conversations.

One thing is sure, though: this diamond of a city will shine again. Meanwhile, nab a seat at one of the outside tables at Bar Impero and watch the world go by: gorgeous giggling girls, ex-fighters and old men in double-breasted suits. You'll find it hard to tear yourself away. This is the best way to start your Eritrean journey.

## HISTORY

The town was settled in the 12th century by shepherds from the Akele Guzay region, in the southeast of the country. Encouraged by the plentiful supplies of water, they founded four villages on the hill that is now the site of the Orthodox church of Enda Mariam. The site became known as Arbate Asmere (Four Villages), from which the name Asmara is derived. Soon it developed into a small but bustling trading centre.

At the end of the 19th century, Ras Alula, the dashing Tigrinya *negus* (prince) made it his capital and the centre of a flourishing caravan trade.

The town then caught the eye of Baldissera, the Italian general, and in 1889 he took it over. Italian architects and engineers got to work and had soon laid the foundations of the new town: Piccola Roma, as it was dubbed, was born.

In 1897 the first governor of Eritrea, Governor Martini, chose Asmara (in preference to Massawa) as the future capital of the Italian East African empire. Amid dreams of great military conquests in Abyssinia during the Mussolini era, the town was greatly enlarged.

During the Struggle, Asmara was the last town held by the occupying Ethiopian army and, from 1990, it was besieged by the EPLF. By a fortuitous turn of events, the Ethiopian dictator Mengistu was overthrown in 1991, his troops fled Eritrea and a final confrontation in the capital was avoided. Asmara was left intact. It was one of the very few Eritrean towns to survive the war undamaged.

## ORIENTATION

The centre encompasses the area on and just north of Harnet Ave (the main artery), marked by Bahti Meskerem Sq at the eastern end of Harnet Ave and the former Governor's Palace in the west. To the south of Harnet Ave was once the Italian residential quarter. The areas to the northeast and well outside the confines of the town centre are the residential quarters of the local population.

To the southwest, Sematat Ave leads to the Tiravolo District, where several mid-range hotels and nightclubs are clustered. Further to the southwest you'll reach the airport, about 6km from the centre. See p326 for information on getting to/from the airport. The railway station is about 1.5km east of the centre.

Like most colonial towns, Asmara was built according to a strict urban plan. It's clearly laid out and is a breeze to navigate.

## Maps

The Municipality of Asmara produces an excellent town map (Nfa20), *Asmara City Map & Historic Perimeter*, which covers the city in detail and pinpoints historic buildings. It's available in the bookshops.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Awghet Bookshop** (Map p311; Bahti Meskerem Sq; ☎ 8am–7pm Mon–Sat) Has a mediocre selection of books on Eritrea but stocks the very useful *Asmara City Map & Historic Perimeter*.

**Ghirmay Bookshop** (Map p313; Sematat Ave; ☎ 7am–noon & 2.30–8pm) Sells old copies of the *International Herald Tribune*, *Time* and *Newsweek*.

### Cultural Centres

**Alliance Française** (Map p313; ☎ 201775; Nakfa Ave; ☎ 9–11.30am & 2–5pm Mon–Fri) In the same building as the French Embassy.

**British Council** (Map p313; ☎ 123415; 175–11 St) Has a respectable library as well as a reading room stocked with British newspapers and magazines.

### Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 122244)

**Police** (☎ 207799)

### Internet Access

Internet services have sprung up all over town in recent years, so it is not hard for webheads to get their regular hit. Be warned

ASMARA IN...

Two Days

Kick off the day with a *macchiato* at **Sweet Asmara Caffe** (p323). Confess your sins in the **Catholic cathedral** (p312), just across the street. Get your bearings over the urban sprawl you're going to embrace by climbing up the **bell tower** (p313). Next, wind your way to the nearby **Great Mosque** (p314) and delve into the jumble of streets of the **central market** (p314) area to soak up the atmosphere. Continue to **Medebar Market** (p314) for a salutary lesson in waste management.

Make your way to **Cafe Fiori** (p323) for a flaky croissant. Suitably re-energised, you can prepare yourself for the evening *passaggiata*. Stroll down Harnet Ave and watch the world go by at snazzy **Pasticceria Moderna** (p323). Is it dinner-time yet? Take your weary bones to **Hidmona** (p322) and treat yourself to a proper feed in traditional surrounds.

Start off day two with an educational hour at the **National Museum** (p315). Feeling peckish? Nothing will beat an alfresco lunch in the courtyard of **Casa degli Italiani** (p322), followed by a cake at **Modka Caffe & Pastry** (p323). Burn it off with our **city walking tour** (p316).

Return to your hotel to put on your glad rags, then hit the **Spaghetti & Pizza House** (p321) for a supertasty pizza. Drink at hip **Zara** (p323) before heading to **Mocambo** (p325) or **Green Pub** (p325), where you'll wind'n'grind the night away in good company.

that connections can be painfully slow; try early morning or late evening.

**CIC Central Internet Cafe** (Map p313; Harnet Ave; per hr Nfa10; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**Double M Internet Cafe** (Map p313; Harnet Ave; per hr Nfa10; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**Tekseb Internet Cafe** (Map p313; Adi Hawesha St; per hr Nfa10; ☎ 8am-10pm)

Laundry

Laundries are few and far between in Asmara. Ask at the reception of your hotel or your *pension*.

**Zamay Laundry** (Map p313; Mata St) Charges Nfa100 for a complete wash and dry (24 hours).

Medical Services

There's a profusion of pharmacies around town.

**Cathedral Pharmacy** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) Opposite the Catholic cathedral.

**Sembel Hospital** (☎ 150175; HDAY St) The most reputable hospital in town, on the road to the airport. The standard fee is US\$30 per consultation. Also has dental services.

Money

Since the government took over the whole banking system, there are no longer private exchange bureaus. At least changing money won't be a cause of headaches: rates are fixed by the government and are the same everywhere in the country, whether for cash or travellers cheques. There's a foreign-exchange booth at the airport; it's open to

meet all arriving flights and changes cash only. All transactions must be registered on your currency declaration form. There's a black market, but it's illegal and the risks incurred are huge (see p360).

There are currently no ATMs in Asmara. **Commercial Bank of Eritrea** (Map p313; ☎ 122425; Harnet Ave; ☎ 8-11am & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques. Also acts as an agent for Western Union.

**Himbol** Bahti Meskerem Sq (Map p311; ☎ 120735; Bahti Meskerem Sq; ☎ 8am-8pm); Harnet Ave (Map p313; ☎ 123124; Harnet Ave; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon & 2-7pm Sat, 8am-noon & 2-6pm Sun) Changes cash and travellers cheques, and can do cash advances on your credit card for a commission of 7%. The main office is on Bahti Meskerem Sq.

Post

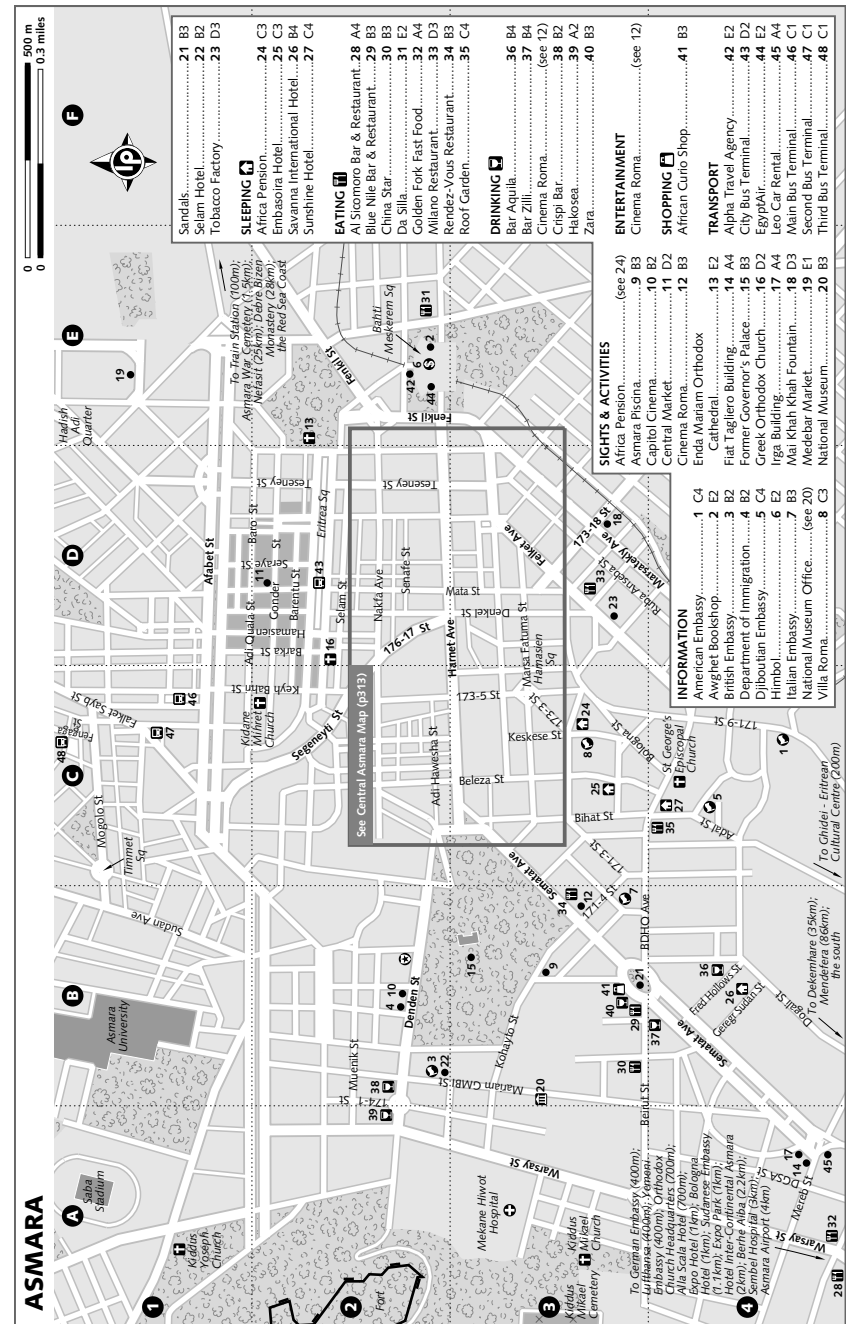
**Main post office** (Map p313; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.30pm Sat) Just north of the western end of Harnet Ave.

Telephone & Fax

**Telecommunications building** (Map p313; Harnet Ave; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-7.30pm Sat & Sun) At the western end of the street. You can make international calls in the special cabins, or local calls. Phonecards are available. There's also a fax counter, to the left of the entrance of the building. You can also receive faxes here.

Tourist Information

In addition to the tourist office, the most reliable sources of information are the travel agencies (see following).



**Tourist Information Centre** (Map p313; ☎ 124871; Harnet Ave; ☎ 7am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Next to Sweet Asmara Caffè. Has some brochures and issues the compulsory travel permit.

### Travel Agencies

The two main travel agencies in Asmara are listed here. For details of the sort of tours they offer, see p368. Flights can be booked through these agencies or through the various airline offices in Asmara.

**Explore Eritrea Travel & Tours** (Map p313;

☎ 125555, 120259; www.exploreeritrea.com; Adi Hawesha St) English-speaking staff offer a range of travel services throughout the country.

**Travel House International** (Map p313; ☎ 201881/2; www.travelhouseeritrea.com; 175-15 St; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon & 3.30-6pm Sat) A well-regarded travel agency, opposite the Casa degli Italiani restaurant. Ask for Tedros, who knows the country very well and speaks very good English. All kinds of tours can be organised.

### Travel Permits

To travel outside Asmara you'll need a travel permit, obtainable at the Tourist Information Centre. Keep it with you outside Asmara as you'll have to present it at checkpoints. Provided you're a tourist (and not a journalist or a NGO worker), it's a pretty straightforward affair, just a mere form to fill in and sign, listing all your intended destinations in Eritrea. A permit is also necessary to visit the monasteries. For more details on travel permits, see p363.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Fear not! Asmara is fundamentally a very safe city, especially compared with other African cities. It's generally safe to stroll around day or night in the centre. However, women should use their common sense and avoid walking alone in deserted and dark streets.

Due to power cuts, very few streets are lit at night. It's a bit intimidating but there's no particular risk of getting mugged.

Begging is actively 'discouraged' by the government and it's still rare to see beggars in central Asmara.

### SIGHTS

Asmara's greatest attraction is undoubtedly its gobsmacking collection of buildings revealing its colonial past (see the boxed text, p317). As you walk around the town, you will see splendid examples of the Art Deco,

international, cubist, expressionist, functionalist, futurist, rationalist and neoclassical architectural styles, that will enthral even the least culturally inclined travellers. How the buildings have managed to stay viable into the 21st century without a complete restoration is a mystery. To top it off, viewing much of it doesn't cost a cent.

Most of Asmara's major sights are clustered in the centre or within easy distance from it.

### Harnet Ave

The best place to start exploring is the **former Governor's Palace** (Map p311), which stands majestically at the western end of Harnet Ave. With its pediment supported by Corinthian columns, this architectural wonder is thought to be one of the finest neoclassical buildings in Africa. Unfortunately, it is not currently possible to visit it because it's an official building. So frustrating!

Within staggering distance of the Governor's Palace, the **Opera House** (Map p313) is sure to elicit strong reactions. One of Asmara's most elegant early-20th-century buildings, it was completed around 1920. This eclectic building combines a Renaissance scallop-shell fountain, a Romanesque portico supported by classical columns and inside, above multitiered balconies, a spectacular Art Nouveau ceiling.

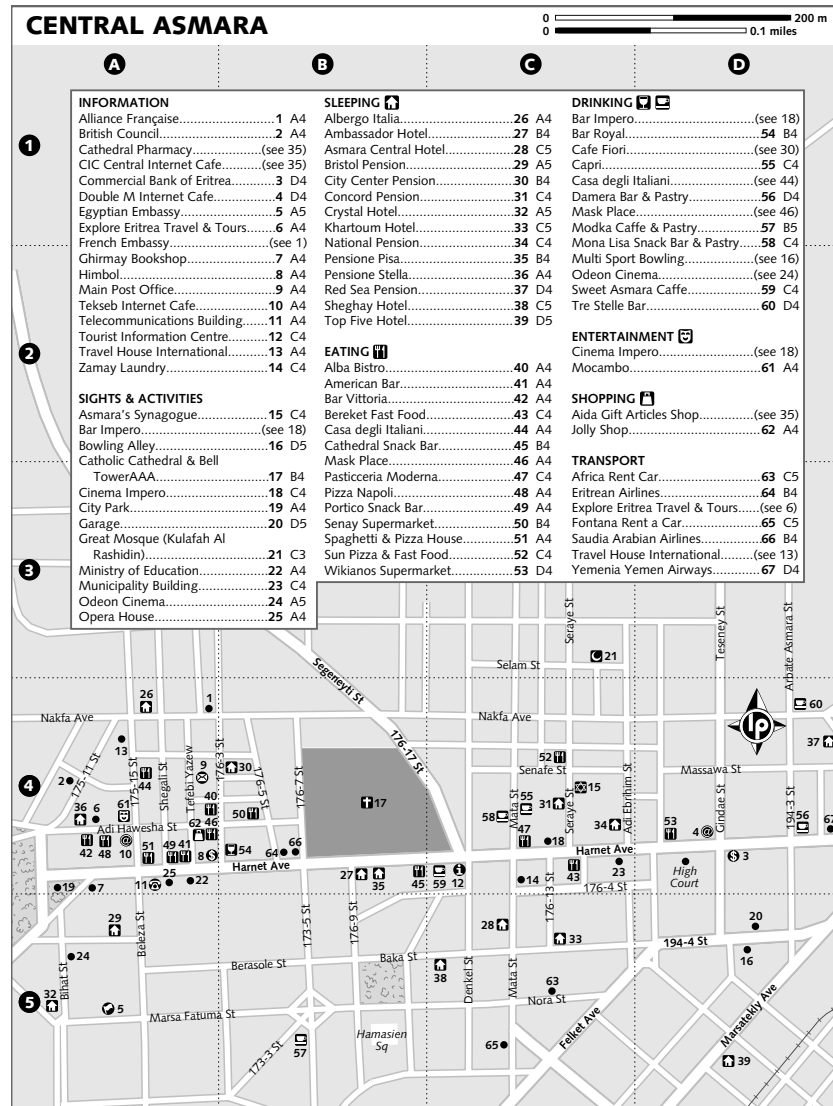
By contrast, the adjacent **Ministry of Education** (Map p313) looks strikingly austere. Typically Fascist, indeed. Built during the 1930s as the Casa del Fascio (the Fascist Party headquarters), it mixes the classical (the right-hand section) with the monumental and Fascist. Its soaring tower has strong vertical elements, including three gun-slit windows. The steps, string courses (projecting bands of bricks) and mouldings give the building harmony.

Ambling down Harnet Ave you'll soon come across Asmara's most iconic monument, the elaborate, brick-walled **Catholic cathedral** (Map p313). Consecrated in 1923, it is thought to be one of the finest Lombard-Romanesque-style churches outside Italy – this says it all. The cathedral's lofty interior is an absorbing sight: the altar is made of Carrara marble and the baptistry, confessionals and pulpit are carved from Italian walnut. Masses are celebrated every Sunday at 6.30am (in Tigrinya), 9.30am (in Italian)

and 11am (in English) in the cathedral. The tallest structure in Asmara, the narrow, Gothic **bell tower** (☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm) makes a useful landmark and offers smashing views over the town. Ask at the 'Ufficio Parrocchiale' for the key. A donation is expected.

Another eye-catching building, the nearby **Cinema Impero** (Map p313) is part of

a grand rationalist terrace built in 1938. The imposing cinema is made up of three massive windows that combine strong vertical and horizontal elements with 45 porthole lamps (which look like huge wireless buttons). In the lobby, all the marble, chrome and glass features are original. The cavernous auditorium seats 1800 people and is



decorated with motifs such as lions, nyalas and palm trees depicted in Art Deco style. Next door, the **Bar Impero** (Map p313), where cinemagoers traditionally enjoyed an aperitif before the film, is also original. Look out for the bevelled-glass cake-and-fruit cabinet, the 'zinc' bar, the dark wood panels and the old cash machine.

Further east, it's impossible to miss the imposing **Municipality building** (Map p313). Though built in the 1950s, this monolith is firmly rationalist. The two geometric wings are 'stripped Palladian' in style, and are dominated by a soaring central tower. The windows are beautifully detailed. Look out for the 'crazy majolica' façade in green and beige.

### South of Harnet Ave

A block south of the Municipality building, the **bowling alley** (Map p313; 194-4 St; ☎ 8am-8pm) is one of the few genuine 1950s alleys left in the world. It was probably built for US servicemen when they were manning military bases in the region. The reloading system is still manual. Look out also for the bowling motifs on the balustrades, the blue and white lockers and the carved wooden benches. The colourful early 'pop art' window is spectacular at sunset. Across the road from the bowling alley is a **garage** (Map p313; 194-4 St), possibly built in the 1950s. The roof of the building features zigzags.

Further south, you'll stumble across one of the most elegant pieces of architecture in Asmara, the **Mai Khah Khah fountain** (Map p311; Marsatekly Ave). It cascades down the hillside in a series of rectangular steps. Above the fountain is the attractive suburb of Gezza-banda, which is full of impressive villas.

Tucked away in a residential district further west, the **Africa Pension** (Map p311; Keskese St) is a gem of place. This huge cubist villa was built in the 1920s by a spaghetti millionaire. The villa is characterised by its elegant marble staircase and the ring of 40 marble urns. Today a solemn and slightly ludicrous bronze bust of Augustus Caesar stands guard in the once-formal garden. The villa is now a very affordable hotel (see p318). You like it? Book a room!

You can't but be dazzled by the gleaming **Villa Roma** (Map p311; 173-3 St) opposite the Africa Pension. This beautiful villa, built in 1919, epitomises the Roman style. The

marble staircases, louvred shutters, curving balustrades, shady portico, fountain, and loggia with cascading purple bougainvillea are typical features of the ideal Roman villa. Today it is the residence of the Italian ambassador. Lucky him!

Just off Harnet Ave, near the telecommunications building, the quirky **Odeon Cinema** (Map p313; Bihat St), with its authentic Art Deco interior, is attractive. The box office, bar, bevelled mirrors, black terrazzo and Art Deco strip lights are a good introduction to the large auditorium.

Heading downhill on Felket Ave, south of the centre, past a row of old shops and 1950s Formica bars with fly-bead doors, you'll see several attractive villas and buildings, including the **tobacco factory** (Map p311; Felket Ave). It is regarded as the most adventurous Art Deco building in Asmara.

### North of Harnet Ave

The sprawling **central market** (Map p311; ☎ morning Mon-Sat), just north of Eritrea Sq, is one of Asmara's major attractions. The best time to visit is early on Saturday (from 7am), when people come in from all over the country. However, it was pretty tame when we visited because of the economic downturn in the country. Highlights include the spice market, filled with colourful women from different ethnic groups. The souvenir market is a great place to browse too, and is more interesting than the shops in the town. You can find, among other things, local basket-work, wooden masks, musical instruments, decorated gourds, warrior knives and skin paintings.

Duck up northeast to soak up the atmosphere of the **Medebar Market** (Map p311; Qelhamet St). No doubt you'll be awestruck the minute you enter this mind-boggling place. It is like an open-air workshop where absolutely everything is recycled. Moseying around the alleys of this market is a uniquely unforgettable experience. The air is filled with hammering, sawing and cutting; old tyres are made into sandals, corrugated iron is flattened and made into metal buckets, and olive tins from Italy are made into coffee pots and tiny scoopers.

Thread your way back to the south until you reach the **Great Mosque** (Kulafah Al Rashidin; Map p313; Selam St). Completed in 1938 by Guido Ferrazza, this grand complex combines

rationalist, classical and Islamic styles. The symmetry of the mosque is enhanced by the minaret, which rises on one side like a fluted Roman column above Islamic domes and arches. The *mihrab* (niche indicating the direction of Mecca) inside consists of mosaics and columns made from Carrara marble. Ferrazza's style is also seen in the great square and market complex surrounding the mosque.

Another outstanding monument, the **Enda Mariam Orthodox Cathedral** (Map p311; Arbate Asmara St), to the east, was built in 1938 and is a curious blend of Italian and Eritrean architecture. Its central block is flanked by large square towers. Rather garish mosaics of stylised Christian figures are framed vertically above the entrance. Traditional elements of Aksumite architecture can be seen, such as the massive horizontal stone beams. The four objects that look like broken elephant tusks suspended on the northern side of the compound are century-old 'bells'. These make a surprisingly musical sound when 'rung' (beaten with a stick).

**Asmara's synagogue** (Map p313; Seraye St) is also worth a peek. Its pediment, Doric columns and pilasters make it very neoclassical. As is usual in Asmara, the wrought-iron gates are handcrafted.

If you haven't run out of stamina, head west of the central market to the **Greek Orthodox Church** (Map p311; Selam St). The church has frescoes, carved wood and candles.

### West of Harnet Ave

If you need to recharge the batteries before tackling the western outskirts of the centre, the **city park** (Map p313; Sematat Ave; ☎ 6.30am-10.30pm) makes a perfect transition point in which to unwind and to relish a well-deserved beer or fruit juice. Come here late afternoon, when it's full of life and chatter.

Then you can make your way to the **Capitol Cinema** (Map p311; Denden St), north of the Governor's Palace. It was built in 1937. The massive horizontal elements and sweeping curves are typical of the expressionist movement. Unfortunately the building looks rather scruffy and is in urgent need of a face-lift.

A five-minute walk from Capital Cinema, the **Selam Hotel** (Map p311; Mariam GMBI St), built in the 1930s, was one of a chain constructed by an Italian company. Interesting interior details include the Arts and Crafts serving

cabinets and the 'disc'-type lamps in the dining room, the old murals and the purple 'beehive' lamps in the rear courtyard. It's still run as a hotel.

Asmara's strong point are its buildings, rather than its museums, but it's also worth popping your head into the **National Museum** (Map p311; Mariam GMBI St; admission free; ☎ 9-11am & 3-5pm Thu-Tue), west of the Governor's Palace. It contains exhibits on the ethnic groups of Eritrea, giving a basic introduction to traditional life in the countryside, as well as various artefacts found in the main archaeological sites of the country. It's a bit disappointing in its present state but there are plans to upgrade it and to relocate it closer to the centre.

Fancy a dip? The 1930s **Asmara Piscina** (swimming pool; Map p311; Kohayto St; admission Nfa40; ☎ 9am-8pm) will fit the bill. It is housed in a yellow building, off Sematat Ave. Even if you don't feel like emulating Ian Thorpe, take a peek inside this modernist building. Interior details include the 'Leonardo' sporting figures on the walls and a rather refreshing bluish colour scheme.

Back to the main thoroughfare, you can't miss the **Cinema Roma** (Map p311; Sematat Ave), across the avenue. It's another fine example of Italian architecture. The appealing exterior features four entrances with double doors and a magnificent marble-coated façade sporting the letters ROMA below four square windows.

Ambling down Sematat Ave, you can't avoid the **Sandals** (Map p311; Sematat Ave) rising over a roundabout. Just in case it should ever slip your mind that Asmara is Eritrea's patriotic heart, this is an eccentric replica of sandals (yes!). Note that the Eritrean soldiers are equipped with sandals, not combat boots. There's not much to say about it, save that this sculpture commemorates the victory of the Eritrean fighters in the Struggle.

Don't even think of leaving town until you've seen the **Fiat Tagliero Building** (Map p311; Sematat Ave), at the southern end of Sematat Ave. Perhaps the most outstanding in Asmara, this quirky monument is liable to make you wonder, 'What the hell is that?' It's another superb example of a futuristic building. Built in 1938, it is designed to look like a plane. The central tower with its glass 'cockpit' is similar to many structures in Miami, USA. Oddly enough, it's now a service station. A sandal's throw from the

Fiat Tagliero Building, the harmonious **Irga Building** (Map p311; Sematat Ave) is both neoclassical in its proportions and very modern.

### East of Harnet Ave

On the road to Massawa on the periphery of Asmara (2km from the centre), is the beautifully tended **Asmara War Cemetery**, dating from 1941. Interred here are 280 men killed during the Ethiopian campaign. There is also a Hindu burial ground for the Indian soldiers who fought alongside the British.

### WALKING TOUR

With its ideal weather, profusion of historic buildings, lack of hassle and unhurried pace of life, it's hard to imagine a better place than Asmara for a walking tour. This saunter covers the main sights in the centre.

Start at the magnificent **Opera House** (1; p312) and **Ministry of Education** (2; p312) at the western end of Harnet Ave. Keep striding east down the main artery, where you'll pass the well-proportioned building of the former **Bank of Eritrea** (3) on your right. Asmara's most obvious landmark, the lofty **Catholic cathedral** (4; p312) soon comes into

view. The stunning façade of the **Cinema Impero** (5; p313) is 150m to the east. Next door, **Bar Impero** (6; p314) is an ideal pit stop for a caffeine fix. Turn left into Senafe St and walk along until you reach the main junction with Nakfa Ave. Turn right into Nakfa Ave then left into Adi Ebrihim St and you'll soon see the **Great Mosque** (7; p314) standing majestically. Follow Selam St for about 100m to the west, then take the first street on the right (Sarayi St). You'll enter the **market area** (8; p314). Explore it at leisure before heading to **Enda Mariam Orthodox Cathedral** (9; p315) that looms to the east. Walk down Arbate Asmera St until you emerge on Harnet Ave. Travel two blocks down Harnet Ave past the monumental **Municipality building** (10; p314). Continue west and turn left into Denkel St. Walk two blocks and turn right into Nora St.

The **Piazza Mai Cew** (11), which was once the heart of the Greek community, is a good place to unwind. On the corner on the east side you'll spy an old school that resembles a Greek temple. To the south, you can't miss the ochre building of the **Eritrean Election Commission** (12).

From the piazza, head west through the next square (which has a palm tree in the middle) and up the hill (173-3 St). Near the top of the hill you'll stumble across the **Africa Pension** (13; p318) and the lovely **Villa Roma** (14; p314). About 100m to the west, the conical roof of the quirky **Hamasiem Hotel** (15) beckons. On the northern side of the

hotel, descend 171-10 St (there's a cul-de-sac sign). The steps lead you down to Bihat St. Take 171-3 St, which begins between the Dutch embassy and the Crystal Hotel, then turn right into 171-4 St, which will bring you to Sematat Ave. On the corner have a look at **Cinema Roma** (16; p315). Cross Sematat Ave and walk down Kohayto St until you reach the **Asmara Piscina** (17; p315).

If you haven't run out of stamina, backtrack to Sematat Ave and mosey south along the avenue until the **Sandals** (18; p315) monument. Decide whether you're in the 'love it' or 'hate it' camp. After a tippie at historic **Bar Zilli** (19; p324), proceed back to Harnet Ave. Have a peek at the **Governor's Palace** (20; p312) that sprawls on your left (it's impossible to go near). Then head back to Harnet Ave and turn left into 175-15 St, which starts opposite the telecommunications building. Walk two blocks and you'll see a cluster of historic buildings, including the **main post office** (21; p310), the former building of the **Commercial Bank of Eritrea** (22) and the glamorous **Albergo Italia** (23; p320). Book a room here if you can afford it – you've really earned it!

### ASMARA FOR CHILDREN

Frankly, there aren't many attractions geared to little tackers, but the unhurried pace of life and the pervading safety make Asmara a nonetheless agreeable city for children. Understandably most of the colonial buildings will leave the little 'uns cold. If your five-year old has lost interest in rationalist architecture, you can still head to the child-friendly City Park (p315) at the western end of Harnet Ave, where they can rest safely while sampling an ice cream. They can also have a (refreshing) dip at Asmara Piscina (p315) or try their hands at the bowling alley (p314).

Climbing towers is usually a winner. Try the bell tower at the Catholic cathedral (p312), but be cautious – the stairs are steep.

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

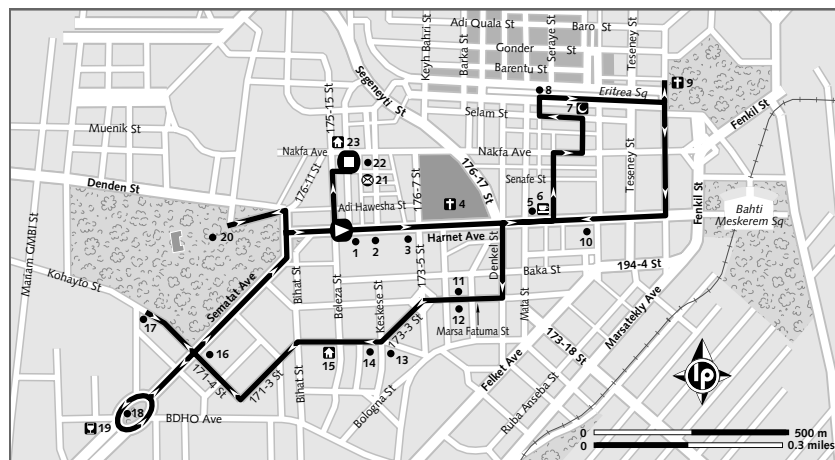
Asmara hosts many religious and secular festivals throughout the year. For more information, see p359.

### SLEEPING

Asmara boasts a cluster of accommodation options, from very affordable, homy guest-houses and good-value midrange options to

#### WALK FACTS

**Start** Opera House  
**Finish** Albergo Italia  
**Distance** About 4km  
**Duration** Half a day



#### COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE: FRAGILE BEAUTIES

Another litter-strewn African capital disfigured with concrete eyesores? Not here. Asmara is one of the most entrancing cities in Africa. It usually comes as a surprise to many travellers to discover a slick city crammed with architectural gems harking back to the city's heyday as the 'Piccolo Roma' (small Rome). Isolated for nearly 30 years during its war with Ethiopia, Asmara escaped both the trend to build postcolonial piles and the push towards developing-world urbanisation. Thus, it has kept its heritage buildings almost intact and is refreshingly low-rise. Wander the streets in the centre and you'll gaze upon a showcase of the Art Deco, international, cubist, expressionist, functionalist, futurist, rationalist and neoclassical architectural styles. No need to be an architecture buff – they all stand out.

When Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922, he nursed two ambitions relating to Italy's role in the Horn: to avenge Italy's defeat at Adwa (see p143) and to create a new Roman Empire in Africa. To realise these dreams he needed a strong industrial base. Labour, resources and lire were thus poured into the new colony and, by the 1930s, it was booming. By 1940 Eritrea had become the second-most industrialised country in sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time – and encouraged by il Duce – a new and daring architectural movement called rationalism was springing up in Italy. Eritrea, in common with many colonies, became an experimental architectural laboratory in which new and exciting ideas could be tested. Asmara, or Piccola Roma, soon came to epitomise the new philosophy: it was not just beautiful, but was well planned, well built and, above all, functional. Today Asmara remains a model Art Deco town.

Not everything is perfect. A number of buildings are decaying for lack of funds. It is hoped that some of them will be rehabilitated in the near future. The city could also be declared a World Heritage site. But peace with Ethiopia must come first.

The best way to see Asmara's built heritage is to walk around town (see opposite). *Asmara – Africa's Secret Modernist City*, by Edward Denison, is the most comprehensive book on the subject.

luxury hotels. Most places rate zero on the charm scale but are usually well equipped and fairly comfortable. However, power cuts were common at the time of writing.

Most of Asmara's accommodation is concentrated in and around the centre, but there are several good midrange places further afield on the road to the airport in the Tiravolo district.

Budget beds are not too much of an endangered species in Asmara, but avoid the cheapies dotted around the marketplace. Most of them can't be seriously recommended. Much better are those just off Harnet Ave.

Some hotels in the midrange price bracket and most top-end hotel quote their prices in US dollars but accept local currency, provided you have your currency declaration form. If you pay in hard currency, the transaction may be registered on your form.

Top-end hotels all offer rooms with bathroom.

## Harnet Ave

### BUDGET

**Pensione Pisa** (Map p313; ☎ 124491; Harnet Ave; s with shared bathroom Nfa60, d with shared bathroom Nfa95-120) This welcoming *pensione* is housed in an apartment, just opposite the (functioning) bell tower of the Catholic cathedral. Earplug alert for some, atmospheric and thrilling for others. Take into account the unbeatable location and the clinical cleanliness of the rooms. Bathroomwise, don't even think of gesticulating in the diminutive cubicles (bring a straitjacket!). If you're solo, there's only one single room. Sizzling-hot value for what you get.

## Midrange

**Ambassador Hotel** (Map p313; ☎ 126544; fax 126365; Harnet Ave; s Nfa255-420, d Nfa430-575) This faded glory is still a contender in the featherweight division of midrange and wears its worn atmosphere as a badge of honour. Cleanliness pervades throughout and there's a good restaurant on the 1st floor, with European and Eritrean specialities on offer. It's right in the thick of things, opposite the Catholic cathedral.

## South of Harnet Ave

### BUDGET

**Africa Pension** (Map p311; ☎ 121436; Kesekese St; s/d with shared bathroom Nfa150/200) Backpackers

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Concord Pension** (Map p313; ☎ 122981; Seraye St; r Nfa270) Tucked back slightly from the road (behind Hawashait Restaurant), this discreet, personable *pension* is a serene oasis in the heart of town and a godsend if you're planning to hang your hat for a while. It feels like a cosy doll house, with comfy rooms, reassuringly Air-Wicked bathrooms, an agreeable plant-filled courtyard and sweet-as-sugar staff. The petite among us will find the rooms intimate, while others may argue for the term 'claustrophobic'.

gravitate towards this mellow *pension* in a converted villa for good reason. You won't be tripping over your backpack in the generous-sized rooms, and the setting is really alluring, with a neatly manicured garden and a bronze bust. Angle for a room with a view of the Italian ambassador's residence (Villa Roma) but steer right away from room 13 at the back (Nfa100) – very shoddy. The *pension* is in a residential neighbourhood, a jaunt from Harnet Ave. Considering bathrooms are shared and hot water is sketchy at times, this place is a tad overpriced, but the historic aura that shrouds the place sweetens the deal.

**Bristol Pension** (Map p313; ☎ 121688; 175-4 St; s/d with shared bathroom Nfa110/165) A short stagger from the telecommunications building, the Bristol is a fine example of classic rationalist design, with a stunning central stairwell tower surmounting geometric designs. An architectural gem it may be, but we were not blown away by the quality of the rooms. This is what we scribbled on our notepad when we passed through: 'dull, plain but OK'. Enough said.

## MIDRANGE

**Khartoum Hotel** (Map p313; ☎ 128008; 176-13 St; s with shared bathroom Nfa200-250, d with shared bathroom Nfa250-300, s/d Nfa300/350) The Khartoum has been smartened up and is now heralded as one of the best venues in this price bracket. One block south of Harnet Ave, it offers superclean rooms and the shared bathrooms are probably the cleanest-smelling this side of the Rift Valley. The rooms with bathroom are unsurprisingly more cheerful and have satellite TV. If you need to sate a

sweet tooth any time of the day, there's a pastry shop just round the corner.

**Crystal Hotel** (Map p313; ☎ 120944; www.crystal.hoteliritrea.com; Bihat St; s incl breakfast US\$42-56, d incl breakfast US\$56-75) An excellent addition to Asmara's sleeping scene, this professionally run outfit is kept in top nick, featuring a fine selection of cheerful rooms with all the creature comforts and a working lift for easy access. If you're feeling peckish and don't fancy venturing out, there's an on-site bar and restaurant.

**Top Five Hotel** (Map p313; ☎ 124922/19; fax 124931; Marsateky Ave; s/d Nfa200/360) It's impossible to go wrong at this great-value option not far from the centre. Rooms are in good shape and the atmosphere is friendly. An added bonus is the restaurant (mains Nfa60 to Nfa100), featuring excellent local and European specialities in an attractive setting.

**Asmara Central Hotel** (Map p313; ☎ 120041, 120446; fax 122023; Mata St; r Nfa300-370) As the name suggests, the Asmara Central boasts an enviable position in the heart of town. After a much-needed face-lift, this senior citizen looks decidedly youthful. The rooms and communal areas now feature modern fixtures, sleek bathrooms, new tiles and carpeting. It has a handful of suites for those seeking a bit more space. Brilliant value.

**Embasoira Hotel** (Map p311; ☎ 123222, 120233; fax 122595; Beleza St; s incl breakfast US\$40-48, d incl breakfast US\$57-68) It's an overpriced government-run pile, but the Embasoira remains a solid choice, with sizable rooms, squeaky-clean bathrooms and glorious gardens at the back. Bag a room with a view. Credit cards are accepted, but there's an 8% commission.

**Sheghay Hotel** (Map p313; ☎ 126562; Baka St; s/d Nfa180/200) No frills, flounces or phones here, but this typical middling hotel just spitting distance from the cathedral still does the trick if you're watching the pennies. If only the bathrooms were smartened up! The roof terrace proffers great views over the town.

## TOP END

**Sunshine Hotel** (Map p311; ☎ 127880/2; fax 127866; BDHO Ave; s/d incl breakfast US\$69/87; ☑) Discerning travellers will find that the Sunshine is a reliable middle-of-the-road option. The rooms are a bit on the small side but the room scent is the smell of clean rather than cover-up air freshener. And the green-filled garden at

the back looks like a mini oasis – an instant elixir to a long day's sightseeing.

**Savanna International Hotel** (Map p311; ☎ 202143; fax 202146; Gereger Sudan St; s incl breakfast US\$40-70, d incl breakfast US\$55-85) Tired of flabby beds? Here's the antidote. We won't forget the well-sprung mattresses in the rooms we visited – so bouncy you could use them as trampolines. Overall it's shiny-clean, light-filled and well organised. That said, the architecture is dull, the carpets tatty and the furniture mismatched in some rooms. Not exactly central but within walking distance of the centre. There's a bar and restaurant.

## North of Harnet Ave

### BUDGET

**National Pension** (Map p313; ☎ 121466, 126920; Adi Ebrihim St; s with shared bathroom Nfa100-110, d with shared bathroom Nfa165-245, d Nfa220) A safe choice in this price range, with a mixed bag of rooms: ask to see a few before you make a decision to stay here, as some are pokey and have no natural light. Overall it's well maintained, clean and secure, if a bit charmless.

**City Center Pension** (Map p313; ☎ 201875; 176-3 St; r with shared bathroom Nfa200, r Nfa250-300) Another reliable stand-by, a skip from the post office. It has an apparent dearth of character and a few more lights would cheer things up, but the tariff is attractive and the place will never be far away when you decide to call it a night. Ask for a more expensive room if you want more breathing space.

**Pensione Stella** (Map p313; ☎ 120731; Adi Hawesha St; s/d with shared bathroom Nfa80/100) Off the western end of Harnet Ave, this *pension* is not exactly decked out for honeymooners but the crude rooms are acceptable and the shared bathrooms passed the schoolmarm's cleanliness inspection. It's very central and a good base if you want to spend your nights carousing at the nearby Mocombo (p325), which you will certainly do during your stay.

**Red Sea Pension** (Map p313; ☎ 126778; Nakfa Ave; s with shared bathroom Nfa100, d with shared bathroom Nfa120-150) Off the eastern end of Nakfa Ave, this average *pension* is slightly frayed around the edges but does the trick for budgeteers or architecture buffs: its sweeping façade is typical of the modernism style. Some rooms smell a bit musty, so sniff a few before committing. The hot communal showers are passable but the roof terrace is agreeable.

**PASSEGGIATA**

Times are hard in Eritrea, but good-natured hedonism has not vanished in Asmara, as testified by the *passeggiata*. Don't miss this daily ritual. As in Italy, join the evening event (between 5pm and 6.30pm), when the whole town promenades up and down Harnet Ave and the adjacent streets to see what's new, catch up with friends, hear the latest gossip, flirt, window-shop, and generally take things easy. It's when Asmara emerges from its torpor and is at its lively best. All terraces and cafés fill up with chattering locals sampling a cappuccino. Grab a seat at a well-positioned café and watch the world strut by. Believe us, it's hard not to gape slack-jawed at the gorgeous women dressed to kill and the elegant, classy elderly gentlemen wearing well-cut suits, sunglasses and Borsalino hats. You're not in Africa, but in a Fellini film!

**TOP END**

**Albergo Italia** (Map p313; ☎ 120740; fax 126993; Nakfa Ave; r incl breakfast US\$150-250) Wow! If one day we are offered fringe benefits, we will park our grungy backpack in this boutique-ish hotel housed in an old Italian villa. Offering a fine sense of individuality, the Albergo features cushy rooms decorated with period furniture, communal areas awash with heritage aesthetics, including polished wood, elegant furnishings and marble, and beds so plump you could pop them. Oh, and the bathrooms are quite blissful. If, like us, you haven't graduated to luxury class, you can still soak up the ambience in one of the two classy restaurants. Sadly, the hotel was empty when we visited.

**Tiravolo District****MIDRANGE**

**Alla Scala Hotel** (☎ 151540; fax 151541; Warsay St; s incl breakfast US\$30, d incl breakfast US\$48-55; 📺) It's not straight out of the pages of *The 1001 Nights* but at least this high-rise, located about 4km from the centre on the road to the airport, is perfectly serviceable. Standards are more than acceptable, with 28 well-appointed rooms with crisp linen, scrupulously clean bathrooms, a bar and restaurant. To round things off, Internet access is free.

**TOP END**

**Expo Hotel** (☎ 182708, 186695; fax 186686; Embahara St; s incl breakfast US\$27-63, d incl breakfast US\$63-88; 📺) In the vicinity of the Alla Scala Hotel, the Expo is a smart place to rest your head. Rooms are well kept and come equipped with satellite TV and balconies, and there's not a speck of dirt to be found. Facilities include a sauna to soothe aching bones, a restaurant and a bar. Rooms and beds vary in size and shape, so scope out a few. It's in Tiravolo, a five-minute taxi ride from the centre.

**Bologna Hotel** (☎ 186690, 181360; fax 186686; Embahara St; s US\$24-36, d US\$48) If fancy décor is out of the question but hygiene and absolute quiet are high on your list, then the Bologna could be worth it. This modernish establishment features bright and well-appointed rooms with satellite TV, a bar and a restaurant. It's almost next door to the Expo.

**Hotel Inter-Continental Asmara** (☎ 150400; [inter.com@eol.com.er](mailto:inter.com@eol.com.er); Warsay St; s incl breakfast US\$160-180, d incl breakfast US\$180-200; 📺 📺) This five-star bigwig sits at the very top of the country's hotel hierarchy – an easy distinction given the lack of competitors. Lying 4km from the town centre on the airport road, this muscular building won't appeal to fans of minimalism but it has all the bells and whistles your platinum card will allow for, including conference rooms, a brace of bars and restaurants, a business centre, a nightclub and a sparkling swimming pool (Nfa200 for nonguests) – not to mention the well-equipped fitness centre to keep off those extra pounds graciously added by too many pastries. Credit cards are accepted.

**EATING**

Asmara has the best selection of restaurants in the country and will refreshingly seem like a gourmet haven if you're returning to the city after time spent elsewhere in Eritrea. Most places serve both Eritrean and Italian dishes, but some specialise in either traditional food or Italian specialities. Many Asmara restaurants – particularly the more upmarket ones – add a tax of up to 15% to bills. Unless otherwise specified, most places are open every day for lunch and dinner. Note that most of the larger restaurants close around 10pm. Given food shortages, not everything was available on the menu when we visited.

Apart from the smart places, most restaurants charge about the same for drinks with your meal: Nfa25 to Nfa50 for local wine or Nfa90 to Nfa150 for imported wine. Beer costs around Nfa10.

Some of the smarter hotels have their own restaurants and serve average to excellent local and international food, though at more expensive prices than elsewhere.

**Harnet Ave****BUDGET**

**American Bar** (Map p313; Harnet Ave; mains Nfa20-50) This snazzy fast-food joint with polished surrounds serves up decent burgers and explosively fruity cocktails. The streetside terrace allows for a dash of people-watching panache – unless you prefer to ponder over the harmonious proportions of the Ministry of Education building, just opposite.

**Bereket Fast Food** (Map p313; ☎ 120383; Harnet Ave; mains Nfa25-70) Near the Municipality building, this modernish, bustling outfit churns out fresh lunches, filling breakfasts and delicious yogurts with honey (when available). Unfortunately there's no outdoor seating.

**Portico Snack Bar** (Map p313; Harnet Ave; mains Nfa20-25) Opposite the theatre, this popular spot fills its crevices with coffee-sipping 20-somethings without being pretentious. The menu boasts fairly standard fare (burgers, snacks and juices) but it's the buzz that most come to ingest.

**Wikianos supermarket** (Map p313; ☎ 200789; Harnet Ave; 🕒 8am-1pm & 3.30-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) Opposite the Municipality building. It has the best selection of products. Most food is imported, so prices are much higher than in local supermarkets.

**MIDRANGE**

**Spaghetti & Pizza House** (Map p313; ☎ 122112; Harnet Ave; mains Nfa50-120; 🕒 Tue-Sun) This sophisticated trattorialike venue wouldn't be out of place in Roma and gets top marks for flawlessly prepared Italian specialities. It's hard to choose between the wide range of salads, bruschetta, pasta and pizza. Wash it all down with a glass of Italian or South African wine – it can't get better than this.

**South of Harnet Ave****MIDRANGE**

**Roof Garden** (Map p311; ☎ 202625; BDHO Ave; mains Nfa80-110; 🕒 Mon-Sat) If you think the time has

come to give your tastebuds something new to sing about, this is the place. The only Indian restaurant in Eritrea, this upmarket joint on the 5th floor of the NICE building gets kudos for its lip-smacking biriyani, tandoori, fish masala, naan and chapati. The service is as smooth as its divine lassis and the décor is refreshingly cosy, if not exempt from cheesy touches (those fake Greek columns...). Definitely worth the splurge.

**Milano Restaurant** (Map p311; ☎ 120422; Felket Ave; mains Nfa50-90) It may look unpromising from the outside but fear not, you can't go wrong at this long-standing favourite if you're after Eritrean fare. It has two dining rooms; head for the one at the back, wrapped in incense smell, where local food is served in a traditional setting. The one at the front is a more conventional option in unexceptional surrounds with standard Italian dishes.

**North of Harnet Ave****BUDGET**

**Mask Place** (Map p313; ☎ 117530; Adi Hawesha St; mains Nfa40-80) Don't expect culinary revelations in this snappy joint, just snacks and burgers honestly prepared and served by sexy waiters. Grab a steak and satisfy the inner animal. And yes, there are African masks hanging on the walls.

**Pizza Napoli** (Map p313; ☎ 123784; Adi Hawesha St; pizzas Nfa30-50) Well, this unpretentious yet authentic joint is not exactly straight out of Naples, but it's regarded as one of the best places in town for a fresh pizza. After having vacuumed up the ricotta, served on a

**EATING OUT IN ASMARA**

The impact of the economic crisis in Eritrea can be measured in the restaurants, among other places. Asmara has excellent dining options but life has become so hard for cash-hungry Eritreans that they can't really afford a proper meal in these venues. In less than three years, prices have almost tripled and food shortages are common. Don't be surprised if you are the only customer who actually eats – most patrons just sit and ask for a *mai gas* (bottle of water), an Asmara Beer or a cup of coffee. True, it's a bit indent. In posher restaurants it's less of an issue as they are patronised by wealthier diaspora Eritreans on holiday and diplomats.

wooden plate, we won't argue. Oh, and the painting on the wall is cheesy too!

**Senay Supermarket** (Map p313; ☎ 122593; 176-5 St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3.30-9pm Mon-Sat, 7am-1pm Sun) A cheaper option than Wikianos.

#### MIDRANGE

**Casa degli Italiani** (Map p313; 175-15 St; mains Nfa20-60; ☎ closed dinner Sun) It's the setting that's the pull here, more than the food. Swimming in a blithe, balmy atmosphere, this haven of peace is blessed with a faa-abulous courtyard, which is a perfect spot for a relaxed feed at lunchtime or a tippie any time of the day. Try the well-presented *piatto del giorno* (dish of the day: osso bucco, lasagne, cannelloni...). It is also a good place for a restorative morning fry-up (frittata, omelette...).

**Alba Bistro** (Map p313; ☎ 202421; Adi Hawesha St; mains Nfa45-90) Brimming with good cheer, this place is an ideal refuelling stop after a walking tour in the area. Its energetic staff serve up pasta, meat and fish dishes, as well as tempting ice creams. There's a picture menu to facilitate your choice. It's also a good place to start the day: hoe into a scrumptious brekky and you'll leave with a smile on your face.

#### West of Harnet Ave

##### MIDRANGE

**Blue Nile Bar & Restaurant** (Map p311; ☎ 117965; Semat Ave; mains Nfa80-100) The Blue Nile is heralded as one of the best restaurants in town. Judging by the *zilzil tibs* (strips of beef, fried and served slightly crunchy with *awazi* sauce) or *kwanta fir fir* (strips of beef rubbed in chilli, butter, salt and *berbere* then usually hung up and dried; served with torn-up *injera*), this reputation is not exaggerated. Be warned, the servings are voluminous, so bring an empty tum. If you want to stick to Western-style food, there is also a good

selection of Italian dishes. It's patronised by expats and upper-crust locals, and the waiters are cute in their traditional garb.

**Rendez-Vous Restaurant** (Map p311; ☎ 126307; Semat Ave; mains Nfa50-90) This newish operation we could still smell the paint when we popped in) carries a modest nautical theme with a blue colour scheme. Food-wise it cooks up creative dishes, including fish (grilled, poached, curried, Provençal), pasta, soups and local specialities that will put a smile on your face.

**China Star** (Map p311; ☎ 125853; Beirut St; mains Nfa45-100; ☎ closed lunch Sun) Growing weary of *capretto* or *injera*? Take a seat amid the typical ho-hum Chinese interior, overhung with the mandatory reddish Chinese lanterns, and choose from the extensive menu. Results can be a little patchy. On the bright side it gives your palate some needed diversity.

#### East of Harnet Ave

##### MIDRANGE

**Da Silla** (Map p311; ☎ 121909; mains Nfa50-100; ☎ Mon-Sat) Owned by a well-travelled, English-speaking lady, Da Silla is a bit out of the way, 200m east of Bahti Meskerem Sq, but is well worth the detour for its delectable fare served in snug décor. The menu (with a good English translation) covers enough territory to suit all palates, including Italian and Eritrean specialities, all flawlessly cooked. If you want to blow your tastebuds, but not your arteries, opt for the *piatto tradizionale vegetariano* (traditional vegetarian plate).

#### Tiravolo District

##### BUDGET

**Golden Fork Fast Food** (Map p311; ☎ 202477; Warsay St; mains Nfa30-60) An excellent-value stomach filler for those in need of some serious Western snacking: burgers, pizzas and pastries. In warm weather, the voluminous interior spills out onto the terrace. It's a good place to make eye contact with Eritrean students.

##### MIDRANGE

**Hidmona** (☎ 07 111955; Expo Park; mains Nfa70-90) There's no question about this being one of the best places in town for traditional food and décor. Hidmona is an eclectic mix of restaurant, café, bar and live-music venue. With its lush interior and ethnic knock-knacks, scattered low tables and various indoor spaces, the snug Hidmona brings

an unexpected dash of African exoticism to Expo Park. Snaffle a plate of *zilzil tibs* if you want to look local. Of course, the waiters are in national costume.

**Al Sicomoro Bar & Restaurant** (Map p311; ☎ 202826; 189-6 St; mains Nfa70-90) Ease a belt hole at this upscale venture and feast on palate-blowing Eritrean or Italian dishes, such as *kilwa assa* (fish with *injera*), gnocchi, penne or roast lamb. The tiramisu washed down with coffee is a victory for humanity. The wine list is ably administered to complement the food. The location, on the 2nd floor of a modern high-rise, is a bit off-putting, but that's our only gripe.

**Banifer** (☎ 189200; Expo Park; mains Nfa50-100; ☎ Mon-Sat) This quirky, trattorialike venue has a tempting menu showcasing the classics of Italian cuisine. Drool over a plate of *fusili* or nosh on well-prepared veal cutlet. The spiffing rooftop terrace is an unbeatable place to linger over a meal and whisper sweet nothings into your sweetheart's ears.

#### DRINKING

Asmara prides itself on its atmosphere-laden cafés. Most of the time they are packed with Asmarans sipping the ubiquitous *macchiato*, prompting many a visitor to wonder if anyone works in this city. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish between a café and a bar as you can drink just about anywhere and any time.

#### Cafés & Pastry Shops

See the boxed text on p324 for a list of our 10 favourite places. The following ones are also good places to get jazzed.

Most places listed in this section serve pastries (usually made on the premises), fruit juices and beers, and are also great for breakfast. Most are open by 7am, some earlier, and close around 9pm.

**Sweet Asmara Caffè** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) Almost opposite the Catholic cathedral, this sleek pastry shop is a treasure-trove for the sweet tooth, with a tempting array of diet-busting little things. And, of course, coffee. Ah, the coffee. Leaving Sweet Asmara minus a cappuccino is, quite simply, a crime.

**Cafè Fiori** (Map p313; 176-3 St) With an appetising selection of croissants and other delicacies that any chef in Rome would be proud of, this pastry shop should be carb-lovers' first port of call on this side of Harnet Ave.

It is usually packed to the rafters with students in the late afternoon.

**Modka Caffè & Pastry** (Map p313; ☎ 118382; 173-3 St) A little corner of peace, a block south from the grinding pace of Harnet Ave. Keep up your strength with a *macchiato* and a delectable pastry.

**Mona Lisa Snack Bar & Pastry** (Map p313; Mata St) Ignore the two tacky pillars at the entrance and grab a chair in the vast, vivacious room. Tempting pastries and good coffee.

**Cathedral Snack Bar** (Map p313; Harnet Ave; mains Nfa20-50) Just opposite the Catholic cathedral, this ambient spot dishes up good fare at wallet-friendly prices.

**Capri** (Map p313; Mata St; juices Nfa7-15) This place is famous for one thing and one thing only: fresh fruit juices. See the heap of bananas on the counter and the rows of papaya on the shelves? They are just waiting to be squeezed and blended with milk or ice cream – mmm! Pity about the large, neon-lit interior – it is as charming as a hospital waiting room.

**Pasticceria Moderna** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) This humming, comfortably sexy venue on the main drag concocts some of the most melt-in-the-mouth croissants we've ever surrendered to – the perfect spot to start the day. Thank your lucky stars if you can nab an outdoor table during *passeggiata*.

**Damera Bar & Pastry** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) Another perennial fave, with the usual winning offerings: squidgy cakes, good coffee and fresh beer. The upstairs lounge is a slightly more intimate place to imbibe.

#### Bars

See the boxed text, p324 for a rundown of the not-to-be-missed places. The following places are also worth considering, and usually stay open longer: until 10pm or 11pm during the week, and until at least 2am at the weekend. Music in the bars is for the most part local (Tigrinya and Amharic pop), which, like the food, takes a bit of getting used to. Western music and some reggae are also played.

**Zara** (Map p311; Semat Ave) Ease into low gear sinking a cocktail at this atmospheric lounge bar. It's genteel and civilised, and a popular hang-out for well-heeled diaspora Eritreans on holiday and foreigners alike. When not on stalks gawking at the gorgeous things, expat eyes stare into rapidly

#### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Sun Pizza & Fast Food** (Map p313; ☎ 07 116391; Seraye St; mains Nfa40-130) Nancy, the English-speaking owner, knows her classics. Pasta offerings span creamy *carbonara* through to faultless spaghetti with seafood (a whopping Nfa130), but the pizzas are equally scrumptious. And all this within a warm setting that wouldn't be out of place in Roma. A winning formula.



### TOP TEN SPOTS FOR A CAFFEINE FIX (OR A TIPPLE)

Forget your good old days in Rome or Florence – Asmara is packed with cafés oozing soul and character, some of which are housed in heritage buildings. Note that the distinction between café and bar is a bit blurred; they all serve coffee, beer and local gin (aargh!). They are open every day from around 7am to 9pm or later. You'll certainly be the only foreigner in these places – be prepared to be the focus of attention for a couple of minutes. Take your pick!

- There's something delightfully timeless about the old-fashioned, hanky-sized **Tre Stelle Bar** (Map p313; Nakfa Ave) at the eastern end of Nakfa Ave. Old regulars wearing Borsalino hats sip wonderful *macchiatos* in lively surrounds. Look at the vintage Gaggia coffee machine. So Asmarino!
- We'll never forget the evening we spent in the super atmospheric **Bar Aquila** (Map p311; Fred Hollows St). With its vintage *billiardo* (pool table), faded football posters plastered on the walls, chequered floor, Art Deco bar and its old Campari advertisements (*'un sorso di benessere'*), Bar Aquila looks like it's come straight out of a Fellini film. You'll probably be greeted with a *'buena sera'* when you enter, as if you were a member of the family.
- The **Odeon Cinema** (Map p313; Bihat St) is a very inspiring place. The Art Deco bar on the south side of the lobby features on the cover of the *Asmara – Africa's Secret Modernist City* book, and no wonder: it is one of Asmara's finest historic interiors, with a melange of vertical and horizontal lines, and two spherical ceiling lights made of glass 'petals'. Oh, and the beer is dangerously cheap (Nfa7).
- Inside the bowling alley complex (see p314), the laid-back **Multi Sport Bowling** (Map p313; 194-4 St) is a great place. You can while away the hours trying your hand at *billiardo* with old men wearing double-breasted suits, or even having the odd drink or two.
- The cafeteria in the lobby area of **Cinema Roma** (Map p311; Sematat Ave) is a killer. It's high on personality, with dark wood fixtures and an impressive old projection camera. And the coffee kicks like a mule, too. The retro feel is offset by the loud TV tuned to BBC.
- Boasting one of the most intact modernist interiors of the city, **Crispi Bar** (Map p311; Denden St) has got soul to boot. Revive your spirits with a *macchiato* or an Asmara gin if you dare, and marvel at the soothing, earth-toned '30s décor. The rounded chrome bar is a stunner, and the stools would not look out of place in a design museum. Very Asmarino.
- Wax nostalgic in the heritage-style **Bar Zilli** (Map p311; Sematat Ave) while swilling a draught beer or an incendiary Asmara gin. This real earthy hang-out can become rough-and-ready, but that's part of the fun.
- Almost next door to Cinema Impero, **Bar Impero** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) is another endearing café with a more traditional feel. Enjoy a treat or sip a *macchiato* while watching the sophisticated swagger of beautiful young things passing by at *passaggiata* (see p320).
- **Casa degli Italiani** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) is the perfect salve after a day spent exploring the city on weary feet. The palm-shaded courtyard is a great place to retreat with a new friend. It's also popular at lunchtime (see p322).
- Mmm! We can still smell the scent of freshly baked cakes and the aroma of coffee wafting from the door of **Bar Vittoria** (Map p313; Adi Hawesha St). The crowd ranges from chattering old men in well-cut suits to courting students, depending on the time of the day. Irresistible cakes and a cappuccino you'll want to bathe in.

emptying wallets: you'll have to cough up Nfa90 to Nfa120 for a glass of spirits or a high-octane cocktail. The 'Grand Screw-driver' kicks like a mule. It's a good place to warm up before hitting the clubs.

**Bar Royal** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) Towards the western end of Harnet Ave. It feels a bit too

Westernised but it's congenial and buzzing in the late afternoon.

**Hakosea** (Map p311; 174-1 St) The Hakosea is housed in a nondescript 'conference hall' not far from Crispi Bar. It usually features live bands in the evening and is a great place to meet students.

**Mask Place** (Map p313; Adi Hawesha St) Is it a busy restaurant with a great bar, or a funky bar that does decent food? Spacious, luminous and snazzy, this bar/restaurant has a happening buzz.

**Banifer** (Expo Park, Tiravolo District; ☎ Mon-Sat) In the basement of the eponymous restaurant, this piano-bar pulls in a smart crowd from 7pm until late.

**Berhe Aiba** (Warsay St) A good venue in the city for those who prefer a straightforward, uncomplicated vibe, albeit sometimes cramped and a little sweaty. Come to this bar-disco on your own, as you can easily blend in with the crowd and get chatting if the music is not too deafening. It's on the road to the airport, about 100m past the Hotel Inter-Continental.

The bars of the larger hotels are also worth a try (see the midrange and top-end sections under Sleeping, p317).

### ENTERTAINMENT

Most of the country's facilities for leisure and entertainment are in Asmara. Here you'll find decent cinemas (showing films in English and sometimes Italian) and nightclubs.

There's good potential for partying in the capital but it was very quiet when we visited. The economy was in such a shambles that few Asmarans could afford to go out. The ones who do are mostly moneyed diaspora Eritreans who have returned to the country or who are on holiday.

### Nightclubs

Locals love to dance, but Asmara was not particularly awake when we visited – the economic crisis also reflects on nightlife. Still, you'll find a couple of places for whooping, whistling, sweating and jiggling. Places are scattered in various parts of the city and are fairly safe for single women travellers (at least in comparison with other African cities), but expect to be the focus of attention. Men should be aware that most of the women in the smaller bars and nightclubs are prostitutes.

*Iskista* (traditional dancing) features a lot of shaking of body parts (some of which is hard to imagine, until you see it). It's certainly unique in style. If you can give it a go, you'll win a lot of friends, however inept and awkward you may feel.

Most clubs open only on Friday and Saturday (from around midnight to 5am). Entrance costs between Nfa50 and Nfa100, depending on the venue and on the day, and local beer costs between Nfa20 and Nfa40. Transport is not a problem; taxis usually line up outside the nightclubs.

**Mocambo** (Map p313; Adi Hawesha St) With its modern black-and-white décor, Mocambo is regarded as one of the most hip nightclubs, and exhilarates dance junkies every weekend with live music, both traditional and Western. It doesn't pick up until after midnight, but once it does, it rocks.

**West End** (Expo Park, Tiravolo District) It can get packed at weekends, mostly with wealthy Eritreans and adventurous expats. Cool, edgy and favouring both Eritrean and international tunes, with sometimes a live band on stage for good measure.

**Green Pub** (Hotel Inter-Continental Asmara, Warsay St; admission Nfa50) In the Hotel Inter-Continental Asmara, this Westernised pub-disco is heating on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. It is one of the favourite haunts of expats in search of fun and company. No doubt they are lured by the pack of gorgeous Eritrean women strutting on the dance floor.

**Hidmona** (Expo Park, Warsay St) The most authentic place in town. It gets frantic at weekends, with a live band knocking out Eritrean tunes and plenty of drinks flowing. Here you won't see expats spooning with local girls but only Eritreans indulging in *iskista*. It's also a bar-restaurant (see p322) where you can chill your danced-out bones.

### Cinemas

The historic décor is as much fun as the flicks. It costs about Nfa10.

**Cinema Impero** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) One of the best places in town. It shows action-packed American and Indian films (in the original language).

**Cinema Roma** (Map p311; Sematat Ave) Another well-known cinema, with a superb auditorium.

### SHOPPING

The number of souvenir shops in Asmara is limited. For variety and colour, your best bet is to head to the central market (p314).

**Aida Gift Articles Shop** (Map p313; Harnet Ave) In the same building as Pensione Pisa. Has a bit of everything, but nothing outstanding.

**Jolly Shop** (Map p313; ☎ 121062; Adi Hawesha St) One block north of Harnet Ave. Items range from traditional paintings to carved figures, jewellery and pottery.

**African Curio Shop** (Map p311; ☎ 121109; Sematat Ave) Just off the Sandals. A good place to stock up on *mesob* (hourglass-shaped woven tables), pottery, woodcarvings and traditional clothing.

**Ghidei – Eritrean Cultural Centre** (☎ 124950; Rahayta St) An authentic place cheerfully decorated with Eritrean artefacts that are sometimes on sale. It's southwest of the centre.

There are goldsmiths and leather shops in the street running parallel to Harnet Ave, a block north. Gold goes for Nfa250 to Nfa300 per gram; silver is Nfa100 per gram.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**Eritrean Airlines** (Map p313; ☎ 125500; www.flyeritrea.com; Harnet Ave) flies three times a week to Assab (Nfa1110/2220 one way/return). Note that this flight is operated by the military and you'll be issued an open ticket only; the return flight has to be reconfirmed once in Assab. The army is given priority over civil passengers.

For details of international flights to/from Asmara airport, see p364.

### Bus

The **city bus terminal** (Map p311; Eritrea Sq) lies next to the central market.

The long-distance bus station is about 10 minutes' walk due north of Harnet Ave, and is split into three different terminals. The ticket office at the main bus terminal is open from 5am to 6pm daily.

Buses to Nefasit or Ghinda (Nfa12, one hour), Massawa (Nfa28, 3½ hours), Assab (Nfa190, two days), Agordat (Nfa45, five hours), Barentu (Nfa57, six hours) and Teseney (Nfa85, one day) leave from the **main bus terminal** (Map p311; off Afabet St). There are numerous buses to Massawa until late in the afternoon. For the other destinations, buses leave early in the morning. Tickets to Barentu, Teseney and Assab should be bought one day in advance. For Assab, there are three buses per week.

Buses to Keren (Nfa22, three hours) leave every half hour from the **second bus terminal** (Map p311; Falket Sayb St). If you want to continue to Nakfa, you must change at Keren.

Southbound buses to Dekemhare (Nfa10, one hour), Mendefera (Nfa15, two hours), Adi Quala (Nfa22, three hours), Adi Keyh (Nfa27, four hours) and Senafe (Nfa32, six hours) leave from the **third bus terminal** (Map p311; Fengaga St). There is no fixed schedule for these buses. Most buses leave early in the morning and when they are full. Tickets are sold on the bus.

### Train

An old train trundles along a remarkable railway line constructed during the Italian era (see the boxed text, below). The line runs between Asmara and Nefasit. Using this train is way more than a means of getting from Asmara to Nefasit – it's a thrilling experience. It leaves every Sunday from the **train station** (☎ 123365) at 8am and arrives in Nefasit at 9am, before returning to Asmara at 10am (arrival time: noon). It costs US\$50 or Nfa750. Seats must be booked in advance, as a minimum of 10 passengers is needed.

For groups, it's possible to charter the train down to Massawa.

## GETTING AROUND

Central Asmara is so small that almost all places can be reached within 20 minutes on foot.

### To/From the Airport

A taxi to/from the airport should cost around Nfa150 (Nfa300 at night).

You can also take the city buses 0 and 1, which pass in front of the cathedral on

### THE REBIRTH OF THE OLD RAILWAY

The old Italian railway, which climbed from Massawa 2128m up the escarpment to Asmara, passing through three climate zones, 30 tunnels and 65 bridges, is a masterpiece of civil engineering. At independence, Eritrea appealed for help to rehabilitate the old line. 'Impossible,' said most. 'Too expensive,' said some; 'It depends,' said others. Undeterred, the Eritreans pulled the old railway workers, metal forgers and blacksmiths out of retirement, called for volunteers and set to work. The great line reopened in 2003 and ranks among the world's great scenic railways. Each year it attracts a fair share of train buffs from all over the world.

Harnet Ave; they cost Nfa1.50. Buses normally come every 20 to 25 minutes, but the service is erratic and you can wait up to 40 minutes.

To catch the bus from the airport, bear left at the airport exit; the bus stop is a two-minute walk to the far end of the airport compound. The bus service runs from 6am to 8pm.

### Bicycle

It's not a bad idea to navigate around the city by bicycle. Traffic is limited and the roads are in good shape. Riding a bike is forbidden on Harnet Ave and Sematat Ave. The **Travel House International** (Map p313; ☎ 201881/2; www.travelhouseeritrea.com; 175-15 St; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon & 3.30-6pm Sat) can organise bike rental for about Nfa80 per day.

### Bus

The red Mercedes buses you'll see around serve all parts of the town, as do smaller white buses ('Coaster'). It costs Nfa1 for journeys within town with the big bus and Nfa1.50 by minibus. Buses 0 and 1, which run along Harnet Ave and out to the airport, passing Tiravolo District and the Hotel Inter-Continental, are probably the most useful for travellers.

### Car & Motorcycle

Asmara is the obvious base from which to rent a car. See p367 for details on the most reliable car-hire companies.

### Taxi

If you hire the taxi for yourself, or take it off the main routes, it will cost about Nfa40. There are no meters, so you should always agree on a fare in advance. At night, fares usually double. On Harnet Ave, taxis can be found 24 hours a day.

## AROUND ASMARA

Asmara is a good base to explore the country, and there are some excellent places within a day's trip of Asmara, such as Filfil, renowned for its superb landscape, and Debre Bizen monastery, which gives an enlightening glimpse of the religious heritage of the country.

## FILFIL ቆፋፋ

Forests, vegetation, greenery...hallelujah! Asmarans swear by Filfil (so do we), and for good reason. North of Asmara, the area around Filfil is Eritrea's 'Green Belt' and is home to Eritrea's last remnant of tropical forest. Amid the arid starkness of the surrounding landscape, Filfil rises up oasislike before you, cool, lush and verdant – a magical sight. There are also plantations of coffee and fruit trees. The forest is evergreen, so it's good to visit any time of year, but it's particularly lush from October to February, after the heavy rains.

Filfil is one of the best places in Eritrea to see birds and mammals. Vervet monkeys and hamadryas baboons are easily seen, and gazelles, duikers, bushbucks, klipspringers and even leopards have been reported.

Unfortunately, Filfil was off limits to travellers at the time of writing, due to obscure strategic reasons. Check out the situation while in Asmara.

### Getting There & Away

Filfil lies 61km due north of Asmara and is now accessible by a good tarred road. There's no public transport so you'll have to hire a car (ideally with a driver to guide you). The journey should take around two hours (one way) from Asmara, and makes a great half-day trip. There are exceptional views along the way.

## DEBRE BIZEN MONASTERY

### ደብረ-ቢረን ገዳም

If you need an escape hatch, there's no better site than the monastery of Debre Bizen. The monastery lies 2400m above sea level, near Nefasit (east of Asmara). It was founded in 1368 by Abuna Philippos. The library at the monastery contains over 1000 manuscripts as well as various church relics, including crowns, robes and incense burners. On a clear day, the view from the monastery is breathtaking; you can see the Dahlak Islands in the Red Sea. The birdlife is good in the woodlands around the monastery.

As with many Orthodox monasteries, Debre Bizen is not open to women (or any female creatures, including hens and female donkeys!). But even if you can't enter the monastery, the journey still makes a great hike.

### THE MOST SCENIC ROAD IN ERITREA

A tip: from Asmara, consider following the tarred road to Filfil and then south all the way down to the coastal plain (instead of backtracking directly to Asmara), where it joins the road from Massawa to Asmara. It's certainly the most scenic loop in Eritrea, with innumerable hairpin bends (hair-raising, *really!*), jaw-dropping vistas, cool air and sometimes a veil of mist which adds a touch of the bizarre. The whole circuit takes around six to seven hours (without a stop). This route, known as the Pendice Orientali, takes you through some of the most dramatic and diverse landscape in Eritrea. It makes a great day excursion. Unfortunately the road was off limits to foreigners at the time of writing (but not at the time of research, lucky us!). This is very frustrating, but the situation can change in the twinkling of an eye; check with the Tourist Information Centre in Asmara.

Men need to obtain a permit (see p363) to visit the monastery or they will be turned back. Bring lots of water (only rainwater is available). You will be welcomed with *sewa* (home-brewed beer) and bread when you arrive.

Men are welcome to stay at the simple monastery guesthouse (with just a bed or goatskin) for a couple of days. There's no charge but it's normal to make a contribution to the upkeep of the monastery. Simple gifts are a good idea too (sugar, coffee, candles etc).

### Getting There & Away

To get to Debre Bizen, take the bus to Ghinda and get off at Nefasit (Nfa8, about 45 minutes). A taxi costs around Nfa400. From Nefasit, it's a 1½- to two-hour steep walk. A local will show you the start of the path up to the monastery.

## NORTHERN ERITREA

Welcome to a secretive world. Bar the well-known town of Keren, northern Eritrea still remains *terra incognita* for foreigners. At the time of writing, the highly symbolic town of Nakfa was off limits to travellers. Once it becomes accessible again, don't miss the ride to reach this middle-of-nowhere town, set in the remote and wild province of Sahel. The journey alone is a lesson in Eritrean history. During the Struggle for Independence, every inch of the road was fought over, and the carcasses of the tanks that line the road testify to the ferocity of the fighting. Like the site of a pilgrimage, Nakfa is worth the long, demanding journey.

Easily accessible from Asmara, Keren is a definite must-see. This market town offers a fascinating glimpse into provincial Eritrea.

### KEREN ኪረን

pop 75,000 / elev 1392m

Set on a small plateau and surrounded by mountains, Keren is one of Eritrea's most attractive towns. It boasts an enticing mish-mash of architectural styles – mosques, churches, colonial buildings from the Italian era – and has a vibrant feel that you won't experience elsewhere in the country bar Asmara. Though austere and arid, the surrounding landscape has a peculiar appeal. Ancient baobab and acacia trees dot the plains, and at dusk, the ruggedly good-looking mountains turn a shade of blue. Camels – sometimes making up huge caravans – far outnumber vehicles. Around Keren the beautiful Bilen women, adorned with large gold rings in their noses and henna tattoos on their necks and faces, can be seen squatting in the shade of acacia trees.

Trade blossomed once Keren was connected to Asmara by the old Italian railway, and the little town grew rapidly. Today it is the third-largest town in the country and is still an important centre of commerce.

Nevertheless Keren remains firmly small-town in flavour, and this is largely its attraction. Since Italian colonial days, the town has been a popular weekend retreat for the inhabitants of Asmara.

### Orientation & Information

The centre of Keren is marked by the Giro Fiori (Circle of Flowers) roundabout.

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

**Post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) About 100m off the Giro Fiori.

**Sarina Hotel** (per hr Nfa10; Asmara Rd; ☎ 8am-9pm) Has Internet access.

**Telecommunications office** (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Next door to the post office.

### Sights & Activities

There are enough sights to keep you busy for a day or two – nothing outstanding, but a bit of everything, like a kaleidoscope.

Because of its strategic position, Keren was the scene of bitter fighting between the Italians and the British during WWII. This past is conjured up at the **British War Cemetery**, off the Agordat road, about 2.5km northwest of the centre. In it, 440 Commonwealth troops lie buried, including the Hindu soldier Subadar Richpal Ram of the Sixth Rajputana Rifles, who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest military decoration for bravery.

Just past the cemetery, a small **statue of the Madonna** watches over the road from Agordat in the west.

Keren's markets are some of the most interesting in the country and are great for an afternoon's exploration. The **covered market** immediately behind Keren Hotel sells fruit, vegetables, baskets and other household objects. Branching off the covered market are narrow alleyways, columns and low porticoes filled with the whirring machines of tailors and cloth merchants. Beyond, descending towards the well-tended **Italian cemetery**, lies the **grain market**.

If you continue on foot a further 30 minutes, you come to the shrine of **St Maryam Dearit** (see the boxed text, right), 2.3km out of town. On 29 May every year, there's a pilgrimage to the site, and hundreds of people congregate to dance and sing; if you're in the region at this time, don't miss it.

The old Italian **railway station** (now a bus station) and the old **residential area** testify to Keren's Italian heritage. As in Asmara, some of the architecture is exceptional for the period. Several Italian Roman Catholic churches dot the town, including **St Antonio** and **St Michael**.

Overlooking the town to the northeast is the **Tigu**, the Egyptian fort at 1460m, dating from the 19th century. At its foot lie the ruins of the old Imperial Palace, which was

destroyed during the Struggle in 1977. There are good views from the top of the fort.

In another quarter off the covered market, the workshops and boutiques of the **silver-smiths** can be found. Keren is traditionally the place to buy silver. Although it's a little cheaper than in Asmara (Nfa60 to Nfa80 per gram), the choice may not be as good.

There's also a picturesque **wood and camel market** in the riverbed, usually on Monday. You can expect up to several dozen camels. If you want to get up close and personal with one of these beasts, this is your chance!

### Sleeping & Eating

If you're after a romantic hideaway, you won't be spoilt for choice in Keren. It has a couple of bland places for budget and midrange travellers, but desperately lacks upscale options.

**Sarina Hotel** (☎ 400230; fax 402685; Asmara Rd; s incl breakfast Nfa225-325, d incl breakfast Nfa325-425; ☑) The ritziest of a meagre brood, this newish venture, about 2km from the centre on the road to Asmara, gives substantial bang for minimal buck. Stay here if you want functional facilities, bright rooms and prim bathrooms, but don't expect airs and graces – its institutional layout makes it a bit sterile.

**Shege Hotel** (☎ 401971; Agordat Rd; s/d Nfa132/187) On the outskirts of town on the Agordat

### MADONNA OF THE BAOBAB

Close to Keren's market area there stands an ancient and gnarled baobab tree. Long venerated by the locals, it is believed to mark the spot from which fertility springs.

In the late 19th century, the Sisters of Charity built a small chapel in the tree, in the place where the city's orphans played, and it became known as St Maryam Dearit – the Madonna of the Baobab.

In 1941 some Italian soldiers took refuge in the tree from British planes. Though the tree was hit, it, the Italians and the shrine survived.

Today, according to Tigrinya tradition, if a woman desires a husband or a child, she must prepare coffee in the shade of the tree. If a traveller passes by and accepts a cup, her wish will be granted.

road, this is a no-fuss hotel with unadorned yet cleanish rooms. Best asset is the flower-filled garden at the back.

**Yohannes Hotel** (☎ 401422; Agordat Rd; s with shared bathroom Nfa77, d with shared bathroom Nfa88-132, s/d Nfa132/200) A Frisbee throw from Albergo Sicilia, this concrete pile offers 22 neat but rather cramped rooms with mosquito nets. Upstairs, the more expensive ones receive more sun and have firmer mattresses.

**Albergo Sicilia** (☎ 401059; Agordat Rd; r with shared bathroom Nfa55-80, r Nfa100) If you're in a good mood, you may find that this time-warped colonial house with a leafy courtyard has a grungy appeal. Plug your nose before using the shared bathrooms, though. Overall it's spartan but acceptable, at a pinch.

**Senhit Hotel – Aregay Restaurant** (☎ 401042; mains Nfa50-60) Ignore the hotel section – one look at the pongy communal toilets and your bladder will be on leave for a few days. Still, the restaurant has garnered high praise for its *capretto*. The setting is not exactly eye candy but it has a ramshackle charm. It's off Giro Fiori.

**Heran Pastry** (cakes Nfa4; ☎ 7am-8pm) Yogurt yogurt yogurt, get us our lactose fix please! Off Giro Fiori, this is our favourite refueling stop for stodgy pastries accompanied by a fresh yogurt.

**Mackerel Seafood Restaurant** (mains Nfa45-65) Not far from the Giro Fiori, this eatery unsurprisingly focuses on fish dishes. The dining room upstairs is as sexy as an operation ward but there's outdoor seating. It also has a pastry shop.

## Drinking

The veranda of Estifanos Bar (near the post office) is a good place for a sundowner while watching the world go by.

**Red Sea Hotel** (Giro Fiori) Another popular watering hole with a shady outdoor area.

The terrace at Keren Hotel (near the post office) is also an ideal place to sip a beer or a juice. The interior is so frumpy that it's almost charming!

## Getting There & Away

Keren lies 91km northwest of Asmara. The road is in good condition.

For Nakfa, one bus leaves each morning at 5am (Nfa57, eight to nine hours). To Asmara, nearly 30 buses depart daily

(Nfa22, three hours). For Massawa, change at Asmara. For Barentu, three to five buses leave each morning (Nfa35, four hours). For Teseney, two to four buses depart each morning (Nfa64, eight hours); for Agordat there are six daily buses (Nfa20, three hours).

## AROUND KEREN

There are a couple of monasteries around Keren, including the **Debre Sina monastery**, thought to date from the 6th century. The older, inner part of the church (which unlike many monasteries in Eritrea is open to both men and women) is hewn from the rock and, according to local tradition, is 2100 years old. The troglodyte dwellings of the 60 nuns and priests who live there can also be visited. The monastery lies around 35km east of Keren. You'll need a 4WD, then it's a 15-minute walk to the monastery.

## NAKFA ናቑፋ

elev 1780m

Mention Nakfa to any Eritrean, and they will immediately refer to the Eritrean Resistance. This tiny, remote village lying some 221km from Asmara has achieved cult status among the whole population, and no wonder. In 1978, after the famous 'Strategic Withdrawal', Nakfa became the EPLF's centre of resistance. Located on a strategic supply route to Sudan, it received some of the most intense and continuous assaults of the entire war.

At first sight, the corrugated-iron shacks of the village are hard to reconcile with the legendary Nakfa so venerated by Eritreans. However, Nakfa has become the symbol of the Eritrean independence, and even gave its name to the country's new currency.

With a little exploration, the town's special history soon reveals itself. Nakfa is a poignant place, even for those who are not normally military-minded.

Unfortunately, the town was off limits to travellers at the time of writing, for obscure reasons – 'because of road works', we were told. Check with the tourist office in Asmara.

## Sights

Should Nakfa be again accessible to travellers, plan on at least half a day's touring with a good local guide.

On the approach to Nakfa, look out for the distinct twin-peaked mountain known as **Den Den**. It was from here that the fighters broadcasted news of the Struggle every day. You can climb to the top of the mountain (around 1½ hours), from where the views are great.

In the centre, the **Nakfa mosque** is unmissable. For many Eritreans, it symbolised the unwavering faith of the fighters throughout the Struggle. After the continual Ethiopian bombardments, the mosque was the only building left standing with more than two walls. It is currently undergoing reconstruction.

Around the trenches (see below), constructed underground, and carefully camouflaged from the Ethiopian planes, were a series of buildings: the famous **underground towns**. The functions of these buildings ranged from manufacturing weapons to printing literature (see the boxed text, p298). At the time of writing, many of these sites were closed because of lack of access.

The **Tsa'abraha Underground Hospital**, 12.5km north of Nakfa, is accessible. Between 1973 and 1991, at least 100 patients a day were treated in the hospital by five doctors working full time. The wounded were brought here by donkey, mule or camel, and important medical equipment was smuggled in from Sudan. Though little more than the dug-out foundations of two hospital buildings and a pharmacy remain, the site is still worth a visit.

Around 1.5km from the hospital lie the remains of some school buildings. The **Winna Technical College** was another installation dug into the mountainside.

## THE TRENCHES

The shoulder-deep trenches that run warrenlike all over the southern ridges of the Den Den mountain give a vivid idea of the daily life of the fighters. Take a peek at the underground bunkers. In these tiny holes, measuring no more than 1m by 2m, five to six fighters ate, slept and fought their war for up to 18 months at a time without a break. Stretching for over 25 miles, the trenches meander across the hillside in an apparently random manner. In fact, these irregular patterns made accurate targeting by Ethiopian long-range artillery almost impossible.

Until quite recently, the trenches were littered with the bleached bones of soldiers from both sides. Most have now been buried. Shells of every type do still litter the landscape: rockets, mortar bombs, bullets...even napalm casings.

To the north of the trenches, on a peaceful spot overlooking the hillside, lies Dig Dig, the fighters' cemetery. Graves are marked with simple painted metal plaques, with the fighter's name and date of death given in Tigrinya.

## Sleeping & Eating

Come prepared: Nakfa doesn't exactly suffer from an embarrassment of riches when it comes to accommodation and dining options.

**Apollo Hotel** (s/d Nfa120/175) The only proper hotel in town, with adequate rooms. The rooms have balconies with beautiful views over the whole town.

You'll find several cheap eateries in the centre of town.

## Getting There & Away

There's a daily bus from Keren to Nakfa (Nfa47, eight hours). Although it's just about 110km from Keren, the ride is nonetheless tiring. The road after Afabet is very rough in parts and winds through the mountains. However, it's not all bad news: the road was being upgraded and sealed at the time of writing. When it's completed, getting to Nakfa should be more straightforward.

## SOUTHERN ERITREA

Discovering this part of Eritrea is a time-travel adventure. For history and archaeology buffs, it offers an unparalleled chance to step back in time. Ancient cities, monasteries cut into cliffs and interesting ruins all testify to former flourishing civilisations and vie for your attention. It's like a vast, open-air archaeological site. Though less spectacular than the more famous ruins found to the south in Ethiopia, some ruins are no less important. It is hoped that Qohaito and Metera will eventually be declared Unesco World Heritage sites.

This interweaving of past and present, along with the mystery that still surrounds Eritrea's ancient past, makes the south a fascinating place to explore. If more funds were allocated to the promotion and restoration of the ancient sites, this area could easily be a magnet for tourists – which it will eventually be when peace with Ethiopia is achieved.

What about nature? If you're after dramatic landscapes, jagged peaks and vertigo-inducing gorges, southern Eritrea has it all.

## DEKEMHARE ደቀምሳሪ

pop 26,000 / elev 2060m

Despite not being an especially charming destination, Dekemhare's past keeps it on the tourist map, with a handful of colonial buildings from the Italian era. The Italians had planned to make it the industrial capital of Eritrea, and Dekemhare became an important industrial centre where offices, warehouses and factories were concentrated. During the war of independence, however, the town suffered much damage, and today just two of the old factories still operate. Other remains of colonial days include the old market with its iron roof to protect the fruit, vegetables and grain, as well as several notable buildings in the centre.

That aside, there's nothing to lure the casual visitor.

### Information

**Commercial Bank of Eritrea** (☎ 8-11.30am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-11.30am Sat) Cannot change travellers cheques, but does change cash.

**Post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

**Telecom office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-7pm)

### Sleeping & Eating

Dekemhare is surprisingly well endowed with places to stay and you won't have to look far to find a decent pile to rest your head. Avoid the scruffy cheapies in the centre. Safer bets are listed here. And food? There's no dearth of holes in the wall in the centre, but the hotels mentioned here have better restaurants.

**Park Hotel** (☎ 641304; fax 641959; Mendefera Rd; s Nfa100-200, d Nfa200-300) Opened late 2005, this monolith lies conspicuously on the outskirts of town. It's not exactly for fans of minimalism but at least you can walk barefoot on the clean tiles and jockey comfortably on the

toilet seats. Oh, and the pinkish bedcovers, sporting lovely brocaded hearts (see room 103), are the tackiest we've ever seen. The restaurant (mains Nfa30 to Nfa70) has an eclectic menu with good Eritrean and Italian fare that will have you walk out belly-first.

**Fika Hotel** (☎ 641435; Asmara Rd; r with shared bathroom Nfa25-60, r Nfa80) On the northern edge of the town, near the bus station. It has sparse but clean rooms with furniture you would be happy to find at a flea market. Rooms vary in size, layout and plumbing quality so scope out a few before committing yourself.

**KM Hotel** (☎ 641812; Asmara Rd; r with shared bathroom Nfa50) Almost next door to the Fika, this more recent player stands its ground with luminous rooms and shared bathrooms that you won't dread using.

**Castello Bakery & Pastry** If you want to treat yourself, this place in the centre, opposite the cinema, has tempting pastries – provided flour is available. There's an adjacent bar.

Other recommendations:

**Bana Hotel** (☎ 641696; main street; r Nfa50) A decent place for a night's snooze, with 10 well-kept rooms arranged around a plant-filled courtyard at the back.

**Paradise Hotel** (☎ 641316; main street; r Nfa100) A very optimistic description but it's well maintained and there's hot showers.

### Getting There & Away

Dekemhare is 37km from Asmara. For Asmara there are about 40 buses a day (Nfa10, one hour); Adi Keyh has about three buses daily (Nfa17, two hours); for Senafe, you'll need to change at Adi Keyh.

There's a rough road that winds from Dekemhare to just north of Mendefera. Three buses travel to Mendefera daily (Nfa14, around two hours).

### AROUND DEKEMHARE

At the exit from a gorge, at the approach to some experimental agricultural nurseries, is the village of **Segheneyti**, about 20km from Dekemhare. It is dominated by the huge Catholic Church of St Michael and two forts from which there are good views.

In season (mid-June to mid-September), Segheneyti and the surrounding area is known for the delicious and surprisingly thirst-quenching *beles* (prickly pear fruit). Watch out for the skins – they're notorious for their almost invisible thorns.

Continuing south of Segheneyti, the road traverses the plain of Deghera, known popularly as the **Valley of the Sycamores** for the magnificent sycamore figs that march across the plain. At dusk, the trees make one of the most beautiful natural sights in all of Eritrea. Many are at least 300 years old. Village assemblies, community debates and advisory sessions from the elders still take place under their branches.

## ADI KEYH ናዲቶይሕ

pop 23,000 / elev 2390m

The dust-swirling city of Adi Keyh, 104km from Asmara, boasts one green mosque, a nice Catholic church and an afternoon market that should be chaotic if the economy was not in the doldrums. Unfortunately, it was almost deserted when we visited. Otherwise it is little more than a staging post for visiting the archaeological ruins of Qohaito.

### Information

**Commercial Bank of Eritrea** (☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-11.30am Sat) Close to the Central Hotel. Changes cash (euros and US dollars) and travellers cheques.

**Post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) A small building near the police station.

**Telecom office** (☎ 8am-8pm) On the northern edge of the town.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Central Hotel** (☎ 650632; s/d Nfa100/150) Opened late 2005, this is the most commendable option in town. 'Mod cons' here mean that bathrooms are well kept and functional, and that rooms are tidy and spacious.

**Midre Ghenet Hotel** (☎ 650188; s/d with shared bathroom Nfa50/80) Northwest of the centre, near the hospital. Decent fall-back but the shared toilets are a tad skanky. Bucket showers only.

**Garden Hotel** (☎ 650065; r with shared bathroom Nfa50) The best you can say about this budget hotel is that it has yawn-inspiring but acceptable rooms. It's one block behind the Commercial Bank of Eritrea.

Most of these hotels serve local food on request, with limited choice. The Central Hotel is a notch up, but don't expect culinary revelations. You'll pay around Nfa50 for a dish.

### Getting There & Away

Around one to three buses leave daily for Senafe (Nfa6, 45 minutes), and only one

to two buses were running daily to Asmara (Nfa26, four hours) at the time of writing.

## QOHAITO ቶሓይቶ

Shrouded in peaceful solitude amid a vast, barren plateau, the archaeological site of Qohaito is a must-see for anyone with an interest in Eritrea's ancient past. Don't expect colossal monuments, though – the scant finds of this site are not exactly gripping. Instead, come here to ponder over its former grandeur and you'll leave happy.

To top it off, the scenery is captivating on a clear day: the air is pure, the surrounding mountains make a perfect backdrop and there's a special kind of beauty in the barrenness of the plateau.

### History

According to some specialists, the ancient town of Qohaito flourished at the time of the great Aksumite kingdom and provided a staging post between the ancient port of Adulis in the north and the capital of the kingdom, Aksum, in the south. Even if it was not the case (some modern scholars favour Metera), Qohaito's importance in the ancient world during this time is obvious.

Very little is known about the exact history of the settlement. A few ancient chronicles record that Qohaito was still flourishing in the 6th century AD. However, like Adulis and Metera, it then vanished very suddenly in the next one or two hundred years.

At an altitude of 2700m, Qohaito lies high above the port of Adulis and the baking lowlands, and may also once have served as a summer retreat for the Aksumite merchants. The traces of cultivated areas found between the buildings have led to the belief that Qohaito was once a garden city.

### Orientation & Information

Lying some 121km south of Asmara, Qohaito's impressive ruins are spread over a large area measuring 2.5km wide by 15km long. You'll need a good half day to see all the sites. As much as 90% of the ruins remain unexcavated, and information – even the age of the sites – remains scarce. Admission is free but you will need to get a permit from the National Museum office in Asmara (see p363).

If you want to visit the rock art sites or the great canyon, you should ask at the village of

Qohaito for a guide. One guide who speaks passable English is Ibrahim. He'll check your permit and will expect a small tip.

## Sights

### GREAT CANYON

Wow! Be prepared to run out of superlatives. A short walk from Qohaito takes you to the edge of a vast canyon that plummets dramatically. Come here on a clear day (get there early in the morning, as it tends to cloud over later) and you'll be rewarded by truly orgasmic views.

A word of warning: don't stand too close to the edge of the canyon – it's easy to feel dizzy, and there's no fence.

### TEMPLE OF MARIAM WAKIRO

ግሪያም ዋዩር ቤተ - መቅደስ

Although it does not play in the same league as Macchu Picchu, the Temple of Mariam Wakiro ranks among Qohaito's most important ruins. Four columns rise out of a mass of stones and fallen pillars. One of the columns is topped by an unusual four-sided capital. The temple was built on a rectangular plan on a solid platform, and may have been the site of a very early Christian church or even a pre-Christian temple. Nearby, other pilasters and platforms attest to the existence of at least half a dozen other temples.

### EGYPTIAN TOMB

ሓወልተ መቅብር ግብጻውያን

To the north, a little less than a kilometre from the ruins of Mariam Wakiro, lies an ancient underground tomb dug out of sandstone. Discovered in 1894, the tomb faces east, overlooking the Hedamo River. Rectangular and built with large blocks of stones, its most distinctive features are the two quatrefoil (flower-shaped) crosses carved on the inside walls; go inside otherwise you won't see them.

### SAPHIRA DAM ሳፊራ ደብ

This structure, lying beyond the new village mosque, measures 67m long and 16m deep and is constructed of large rectangular blocks of stone. For around 1000 years, it has served the local Saho people as the main source of water. It's supposedly Qohaito's greatest claim to fame, although it's pretty boring from a visual point of view – it's just a pool, after all.

A team of German archaeologists has suggested – amid hot controversy – that the structure may actually be a water cistern dating to the Aksumite period, and not a dam dating to the pre-Aksumite period as had previously been thought.

### ADI ALAUTI CAVE & GORGE

There are several rock art sites scattered in the area. The most easily accessible and the best-preserved one is the cave of Adi Alauti. Getting there is half the fun. It involves a beautiful 30-minute walk along a mule path down the edge of a vertiginous gorge. The views of the surrounding mountains, including Mt Ambasoira (3013m) to the south (the highest peak in Eritrea), are stunning. Far below, you can make out the terraced fields and tiny *tukuls* (thatched conical huts) of a seemingly inaccessible Saho settlement. In the cave, a close inspection reveals a large number of animals, including camels, giraffes, hyenas and gazelles, depicted in ochre and white.

It's definitely worth the sweat, if only for the jaw-dropping vistas.

### Getting There & Away

From Adi Keyh, it's an 11km drive south until you reach the left-hand turn-off from the main road, marked by a signpost; then it's a further 10km along a dirt road to the village of Qohaito. A 4WD is essential to cover the latter stretch. Public transport being almost nonexistent, your best bet is to book a tour with one of the travel agencies in Asmara or to rent a 4WD with driver.

### AROUND QOHAITO

If you have time to kill in Adi Keyh, it's worth having a peek at the modest Aksumite ruins of **Toconda**, 4km south of Adi Keyh in a wide valley (it's signposted). The ground is littered with potsherds, broken pillars and chiselled stones. Close to the dirt road there are two pillars: a small one with a pedestal and a larger one measuring about 2m in height. Toconda is unexcavated and very little is known about it.

### SENAFE ሰንፍሬ

Shelled-out buildings, heavy military presence, refugee camps on the outskirts of town, disorganised infrastructure: at first

glance, Senafe, the last Eritrean town of any size before the Ethiopian border, 139km from Asmara, is not exactly reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*. The town suffered an extreme battering during the conflict with Ethiopia, and the scars of the tragedy are still conspicuous. With the ongoing tension with Ethiopia, Senafe is still in a bit of a mess. This shouldn't stop you visiting, though. Locals will offer you a warm welcome and the not-to-be-missed ancient city of Metera is just 2km south of Senafe.

### Information

There are few facilities in Senafe. The town has no bank and the telecom office was not in operation at the time of writing.

**Immigration office** (main street) Opposite the temporary hospital, about 100m past the bus station. It's housed in a crumbling, concrete building, behind a ruined house, and it's staffed by the military. If you have your travel permit delivered by the Tourist Information Centre in Asmara and the permit from the Orthodox Tewahdo Church Headquarters (see p363), and provided there's no tension at the border, it will issue on the spot the permit to visit Metera and the monastery of Debre Libanos.

**Post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri)

### Sights & Activities

Apart from the archaeological site of Metera, Senafe is known for the huge rocky outcrops that dominate the plain. You can hike to the top of **Amba Metera**, one of the outcrops, in about an hour, though there are several routes with varying degrees of difficulty. Local boys soon appear and will guide you for a small tip. The most popular route takes 45 to 60 minutes and is in parts a scramble over boulders; in one place, a fixed rope helps you up a short section in which grooves are chiselled into the rock. Heavy or bulky camera equipment should be left behind. From the top there is a dizzying view that recalls Senafe's name, which is supposedly derived from the Arabic: 'Can you see San'a?'

Make sure you go early in the morning, as it gets very hazy later on.

The **grain and vegetable market**, located just over a kilometre outside town, is worth a peek, particularly on Saturday, the major market day.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Star Hotel** (main street; s/d with shared bathroom Nfa40/80, r Nfa60) Rooms with private bath-

room and running water, arranged around a flowery courtyard for this price? Don't ask questions – just take the room! There's an attached restaurant. This newish venture is at the southern fringe of town, just past the temporary hospital.

**Senafe Hotel** (main street; r with shared bathroom Nfa35) Near the main intersection, the Senafe has spartan, hanky-sized rooms and the mattresses sink like hammocks, but at this price we're not complaining.

**Momona Hotel** (main street; mains Nfa30-45) Was the only decent hotel before the war but was destroyed by the Ethiopians. The restaurant at the back of the compound is open, though. It serves *capretto*, pasta, *zigni* (meat cooked in a hot sauce) and sandwiches at puny prices, but the service is painfully slow.

### Getting There & Away

Buses from Senafe go to Adi Keyh at least every hour (Nfa6, 45 minutes). To Asmara (Nfa30, four hours), four buses were plying the route every morning at the time of writing.

When the border with Ethiopia was open, there were regular buses to Zala Ambessa, the first village after the border.

### AROUND SENAFE

#### Monastery of Debre Libanos

It takes a certain amount of decisiveness and a sense of adventure to come to the monastery of Debre Libanos (also known as Debre Hawariyat) but it's well worth every effort. Debre Libanos is the oldest church in Eritrea, and is accessible from the very remote village of Hamm, perched dramatically on a high plateau, with sweeping views all around.

Embedded into a steep cliff, the monastery is thought to date from the 6th century. It is open only to men (a rule that is strictly enforced) but other parts on the other side of the valley can be visited by women, including a collection of 60 mummified bodies (supposed to date from the 4th century).

Hamm can be reached in less than two hours by foot from the village of Haaz. The walk from Haaz is worthwhile for its scenery of dramatic peaks and valleys and vertiginous views south into Ethiopia. There is a guesthouse some 10 minutes from the monastery where you can stay for free (on a goat skin on the floor). Remember to leave

a contribution for the monastery. You'll be offered bread and *sewa*.

To get to Haaz from Senafe, follow the road to the south for about 15km until you reach a turn-off. Then take a dirt track on the right for about 9km; a 4WD is essential. In Haaz, you'll need a guide to show you the way (about Nfa50). From Hamm, a steep and fairly difficult descent takes you down to the monastery (around 50 minutes down). From the monastery, it's a one-hour walk across the valley to reach the site of the mummified bodies. From there your guide can show you a quicker way back to Hamm (about one hour), but expect a steep ascent. Altogether, it's a six-hour loop (minimum) from Haaz.

A fun alternative is to approach Debre Libanos from Tsorena, about 30km to the northwest.

Public transport is virtually nonexistent. To get there, your best bet is to hire a 4WD with driver in Asmara.

To be allowed to access the monastery, you'll need a permit obtainable at the Orthodox Tewahdo Church Headquarters in Asmara (see p363), on top of your travel permit. If you have both, the military based in Senafe will let you proceed to Debre Libanos, provided there's no tension at the border. At the time of writing, the Orthodox Tewahdo Church did not issue permits to foreigners – allegedly for security reasons. The situation is very versatile so check when you're in Asmara.

## METERA መተራ

While it will never be mistaken for the Acropolis, the site of Metera is a definite must-see if you're serious about history or archaeology. Visually, it's fairly underwhelming, but it has a high historical significance. If you happen to be here late afternoon on a clear day, the truly magnificent setting adds a touch of poignancy and eeriness to the site.

## History

Like Qohaito, Metera flourished around the time of the ancient civilisation of Aksum. The scattered ruins testify to the existence of a once large and prosperous town.

Metera is important for three main reasons: for its age – some of it, from about the 5th century BC, actually pre-dates Aksum;

for its huge size – it spreads over at least 20 hectares, making it the largest Aksumite site after Aksum itself and Aksum's port, Adulis; and for its unusual character – it is the only place in the Aksumite civilisation where a large bourgeois community is known to have thrived.

If you've visited Aksum in Ethiopia, you'll soon recognise the typical Aksumite architectural features present at Metera, such as construction in tiers. There are also big differences from Aksum, such as the plan and layout of the buildings. Nevertheless, it is clear that there were very strong cultural ties between Aksum, Adulis and Metera, not just during the Aksumite period, but earlier too.

## Orientation & Information

The site lies about 2km south of Senafe. Admission is free but you'll need a permit from the National Museum office in Asmara (see p363).

If you want to do full justice to this site, your best bet is to visit it with a knowledgeable guide. Contact one of the travel agencies in Asmara (see p312).

## Sights

### THE STELE ሓወልተ - ንሓዳራ እምነ መቻብር

One of Metera's most important objects is its enigmatic stele. Unique in Eritrea, the stele is known for its pagan, pre-Christian symbol of the sun over the crescent moon, engraved on the top of the eastern face. Like the famous Aksum stelae, it faces eastward.

Standing about 5m tall, the stele has an inscription near the middle in Ge'ez. An unknown king dedicates the stele to his ancestors who had subjugated the 'mighty people of Awanjalon, Tsebelan'.

Inexplicably, the stele was uprooted from its original position on the hill, and was at one time broken into two pieces. Today it is at the foot of the hill Amba Saim, in front of the open plain.

## EXCAVATIONS

Metera was 'discovered' in 1868, when Frenchman Denis de Rivoire reported its existence. In 1959 the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology began major excavations under the French archaeologist Francis Anfray. From 1959 to 1965 Anfray excavated various sites. A large mound 100m northwest of

the stele revealed a large central building – perhaps a **royal palace** or a villa – attached to an annexe of living quarters. A huge wall surrounds the whole complex. Excavations revealed several burial chambers in the larger building; in one of them, the skeleton of a chained prisoner was discovered.

Between 1961 and 1962, two additional mounds were investigated. Excavations exposed a large, square, multiroomed complex, built on a sturdy podium. A **tomb chamber** was also unearthed – but, curiously, it was empty.

In the middle of the ruins, one of the building structures, made from finely chiselled, large blocks of limestone, contains a stairway that descends into a corridor. Though collapsed, the remains of what seems to be an **underground tunnel** are visible. According to local legend, this tunnel dates from the time of King Kaleb, and leads all the way to Aksum, hundreds of kilometres to the south. Curiously, a similar entrance is said to exist in Aksum, but it is blocked by a large boulder. A more modern hypothesis – and almost as exciting – is that the 'tunnel' is a deep burial chamber containing great sarcophagi.

Objects unearthed at Metera in the last 50 years include some beautiful and amazingly well-preserved gold objects – two crosses, two chains, a brooch, necklaces and 14 Roman coins dating from between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD – found in a bronze vase. Bronze coins minted by the great Aksumite kings have also been found, as have many 'household' items.

Only a tiny part of Metera has been excavated. Big mounds lie tantalisingly untouched all around. The ancient people's tombs – hidden somewhere among the rocks – still await exploration, and may yield remarkable finds.

## Getting There & Around

Metera lies just 2km from Senafe, so is easily reached on foot.

## MENDEFERA መንደፊራ

pop 65,000 / elev 1980m

Mendefera is a city with something up its sleeve. Glamorous it may not be, but Mendefera has managed to retain a lively ambience despite Eritrea's economic woes. The capital of Dubub province, it's refreshingly active.

Reflecting an old rivalry, the town is dominated by two churches: the Orthodox San Giorgio and the Catholic church school, situated on hills opposite one another.

The town's name refers to the hill around which the town grew up. Mendefera (literally meaning 'No One Dared') is a reference to the fierce resistance put up by the local people against Italian colonialisation. The hill was never taken.

Mendefera also makes a convenient stop-off point on your way to or from the south.

## Information

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) Can change cash (euros and US dollars) and travellers cheques.

**Paul & Peter Internet Cafe** (per hr Nfa10; ☎ 8am-9pm) One block behind the post office, near the grain market.

**Post office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) On the main roundabout.

**Telecom office** (☎ 8am-3pm) On the main roundabout.

## Sleeping & Eating

Mendefera has several places to stay. Most hotels are scattered along the road to Adi Quala, on the southern outskirts of town. Most places have their own restaurant and welcome nonguests.

**Mereb Hotel** (☎ 611443, 611636; Adi Quala Rd; r Nfa200-280) The Mereb shines out like a diamond in the dust and has well-maintained rooms. OK, it's a tad pricey for Mendefera but it's churlish to quibble when the rates include amiable, English-speaking staff (ask for the lady who runs the place), hot showers, toilets that are a complete joy and the odd chance of scoring a room with garden views at the back. Throw in a good restaurant (mains Nfa35 to Nfa65) with an extensive menu featuring Eritrean and Italian specialities and you're laughing. It's the southernmost place to stay, about 800m from the post office.

**Semhar Hotel** (☎ 611356; Adi Quala Rd; r with shared bathroom Nfa50) This popular haunt boasts a pleasant setting with an enticing leafy courtyard. It features nine sparse yet cleanish rooms with shared bathrooms that shouldn't make you squirm. Another plus is the on-site restaurant (mains Nfa30 to Nfa50) with dishes that will fill your grumbling tummy without emptying your wallet.

**Awet Hotel** (☎ 611063; Adi Quala Rd; r with shared bathroom Nfa50) Almost a carbon copy of the

Semhar (same architect?), this relatively well-maintained place, with 19 shoebox-sized rooms clustered around a courtyard enlivened by papaya trees, is worth considering. And the shared bathrooms (cold water) will have you sighing with relief.

**Kangaroo Pastry** (☎ 611226; Asmara Rd; ☒ 8am-9pm) No, it's not owned by an Aussie expat... No matter, it's time to say goodbye to those pastry cravings! It's almost next door to the Mobil petrol station.

**N Bar-Restaurant** (Asmara Rd; mains Nfa20-45) On the road to Asmara, 100m from the Mobil petrol station, this modest eatery won't leave you everlasting memories but it knocks out local and Italian dishes and a few snacks at criminally low prices.

### Getting There & Away

Mendefera's bus station lies around 20 minutes' walk from the town centre, off the road to Asmara. If your bus is continuing south, ask to be dropped off at one of the hotels on the main street.

To Adi Quala, around 20 buses leave daily (Nfa9, 1½ hours); for Barentu, you'll have to hop between towns: first to Mai Dima (Nfa21, three hours), then to Shambiko (Nfa25, three hours), then to Barentu (Nfa25, two hours). It's impossible to cover this stretch in one day; you'll have to overnight in Mai Dima or Shambiko. To Dekemhare, five buses go daily (Nfa12, three hours); to Asmara, around 50 buses depart daily (Nfa15, two hours).

The road west to Barentu is a gravel track, and there's just one fuel station, at Shambiko. If you're driving, make sure you fill up before setting off.

### ADI QUALA ናዲ ኃላ

elev 2054m

Adi Quala functions as a frontier town (it's the last town of any size before the Ethiopian border). The status of frontier town can be either a blessing or a damnation. In the case of Adi Quala, it's more a damnation. With the border with Ethiopia being indefinitely closed, this town is another casualty of war – it has lost much of its vitality and *raison d'être*. Polite observers might call it languid and peaceful, others would simply call it a depressed outpost, the fate of which is closely linked to geopolitics. But when the border crossing with

Ethiopia reopens, be sure that Adi Quala will resurrect and get the most out of its proximity with Ethiopia.

At the time of writing there was no bank in Adi Quala.

Visitors come here to see the attractive **tukul church** on the southern edge of the city. The church has some interesting frescoes, including a depiction of the battle of Adwa. It's a good place to see traditional Eritrean religious painting if you haven't already; if you want a guided tour of the frescoes, ask for the resident priest Gebremichael. He'll expect a small tip.

If you plan to stay overnight, the **Gash Hotel** (s/d with shared bathroom Nfa30/50) should fit the bill. It's in a side street off the main road, close to the bus station. If Gash Hotel is full, try the **Tourist Hotel** (r with shared bathroom Nfa20, r Nfa30), on the main road. Meals are available on request at both places.

### Getting There & Away

To Mendefera, around 10 buses leave daily (Nfa9, 1½ hours); to Asmara, about 10 buses run daily (Nfa22, 4½ hours). When the border with Ethiopia reopens, there will be regular services to Adwa.

## THE RED SEA COAST

Say 'Red Sea Coast' and images of sprawling resorts, concrete eyesores disfiguring the land, built-up coastline and horrendous crowds spring to mind. But don't mistake Eritrea for Egypt. Luckily, the Eritrean coast has remained wild, pristine and untouched. There's a lot to love about this area: hundreds of miles of beach, luscious coastline, a historic city and a fantastic archipelago. This is an idiosyncratic, largely unspoilt region where tourism development is still in its infancy. Sure, Massawa boasts a number of well-organised facilities but it retains a refreshingly humble scale, with a distinct atmosphere. It looks not west towards Asmara but east across the water towards Arabia.

As for the Dahlak Islands off Massawa, they give access to Eritrea's thriving coral reefs. Snorkelling and diving are possible there, although the logistics are not easy to organise. Seekers of peace and solitude will experience nirvana in these sparsely

populated islands, where the environment is both harsh and unique. A couple of days sailing around them or camping on their beaches makes for a memorable experience.

However, one thing is sure: when the country is back on its feet, the Eritrean Red Sea coast will face a boom in tourism and construction. The Massawa area is due to become another 'resort area' in the Red Sea, and foreign investors will be most welcome. So far, the political situation has prevented any development on the coast. Before it gets trendy, be a pioneer. Discover this region before everyone else does.

### ASMARA TO MASSAWA

Be prepared for a dizzying downhill trip. The journey from Asmara to Massawa is one of the most dramatic in Eritrea. In just 115km, the road descends nearly 2500m, plummeting through mountains often clad in mist, around hairpin bends and over old Italian bridges. Built by the Italians in 1935–36, the road was the most important in the country, linking the capital with the coast. You'll find several good viewpoints along the way. Don't forget your camera!

After leaving Asmara, the first village you come to is **Sheghrini**. Meaning roughly 'I've got a problem' in Tigrinya, these were supposedly the words uttered during the colonial era by an Italian whose car, like so many other vehicles, finally gave out at the top of the steep climb from Massawa.

Three kilometres further on from the Seidici Restaurant (near Sheghrini) is the little village of **Arborobu**. Its name means 'Wednesday-Friday' after its market days. The town is known for its *beles*, in season from mid-June to mid-September.

Around 25km east of Asmara lies the little town of **Nefasit**, the starting point for trips to the Debre Bizen Monastery (p327). The monastery, perched high above the town, is just visible from the road.

**Ghinda** is 47km from Asmara and halfway to Massawa. It lies in a little valley that traps the warm, moist air from the coast. Rainfall is much higher than normal here and its green, terraced hillsides supply the fruit and vegetable markets of Asmara and Massawa. The Jiberti (Tigrinya Muslims) inhabit the area. Prohibited in the past from owning and cultivating land, they became instead great craftspeople, artists and scholars.

**Dongollo** and the springs of **Sabarguma**, 15km towards Massawa from Ghinda, are the sources of the Eritrean mineral waters that bear their names.

Nearby, across the River Dongollo, is the triple-arched **Italian bridge** with the inscription in Italian Piedmontese *Ca Custa Lon Ca Custa* (Whatever It Costs), said to be a reference to the Italian purchase of the Bay of Assab in the late 1860s.

### Getting There & Away

Take any bus or minibus plying the route from Asmara to Massawa and ask to be dropped at the town of your choice.

There's also a weekly train service from Asmara to Nefasit (see p326).

### MASSAWA ባሕር ዳር

pop 35,000

Massawa is a real gem that oozes ambience and soul and should definitely be on your itinerary. Entering Massawa Island, you could be forgiven for thinking you're in Zanzibar or Yemen, and it's pure joy to explore the alleyways and streets flanked by low, whitewashed buildings, porticoes and arcades.

Though only about 100km to the east of Asmara, Massawa could not be more different from the capital. The history, climate, architecture and atmosphere of the town seem to come from another world. Massawa has a more Arab feel to it, reflecting its centuries-old connection with Arabia across the other side of the Red Sea. The town boasts some remarkable Islamic architecture but, like an old museum, the exhibits are covered in dust and gradually disintegrating. It is hoped that in the future funds will be found to restore these historic buildings.

Although Massawa now far from warrants its former accolade of 'Pearl of the Red Sea', it retains an engaging, exotic character, which makes it an interesting place to explore. It's also hassle-free and pretty safe – no mean feat for a modern, international port. One major drawback is the heat. The average annual temperature is 29.5°C, though it often far exceeds that, sometimes reaching 46.5°C. With the high coastal humidity, the town can seem like a furnace, and there's marginal variation between day- and night-time temperatures.



The best time to visit Massawa is from October to May.

## History

Massawa's natural deep harbour and its position close to the mouth of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean have long made it the target of foreign powers. It was occupied by the Portuguese, Arabs, Turks and Egyptians; finally, the British held it for a time before they all but handed it over to the Italians in 1885. Trade in Massawa flourished throughout these occupations; everything – slaves, pearls, giraffes, incense, ostriches and myrrh – passed through the port.

Massawa's buildings reflect its history of occupation. The Ottoman Turks, who occupied the city for nearly 300 years, had the biggest influence on the architecture. Their successors, the Egyptians, also left a legacy of buildings and public works, including the elevated causeways, an aqueduct and the governor's palace. In 1885 the Italians occupied Massawa, and the town became their capital until it was superseded by Asmara in 1897. During this time, many of the fabulous villas were built.

Once one of the most beautiful cities on the Red Sea, Massawa was all but flattened during the Struggle for Independence. Around 90% of the town was blitzed by Ethiopian blanket bombing, and great scars are still visible. Many visitors are shocked by the derelict state of a number of historic buildings. Rehabilitation has started but the process is slow for lack of funds. Various restoration schemes are under investigation and there should be decisive changes in the forthcoming years due to the financial support of various international organisations.

## Orientation

The town of Massawa consists of two islands, Taulud and Massawa, and a mainland area. The mainland area, called Massawa, is largely residential, and a long causeway connects it to Taulud Island. Taulud is home to some old Italian villas, the administrative buildings, and a few of the town's smarter hotels.

A shorter causeway connects Taulud to the second island, known simply as Batsi or Massawa Island. This is the oldest part of town and in many ways its heart. The port is here, along with most restaurants and bars.

## Information

Note that business hours in Massawa differ from those in the rest of the country. Government offices open from 6am to 2.30pm Monday to Friday from June to September and from 8am to noon and 4pm to 6.30pm Monday to Friday from October to May. Private businesses open from 6am to noon and 3pm to 6pm Monday to Friday the whole year.

**Commercial Bank of Eritrea** (mainland; ☎ 7-11.30am & 4-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 7-10.30am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques (US dollars and euros).

**Internet Training Centre** (Massawa Island; per hr Nfa15; ☎ 7am-10pm) Under the arcades on the seafront.

**Post office** (Massawa Island, ☎ 7am-noon & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-noon Sat)

**Telecommunications office** (Massawa Island; ☎ 7am-10pm) In the same building as the post office.

## Sights

### MASSAWA ISLAND

Even if many buildings are in a very bad shape, they boast a dilapidated charm that is uniquely unforgettable. Start your exploration with a cup of coffee and delve into the maze of little streets. Fear not, you're never lost for long.

As you come over the causeway from Taulud Island, a broad sweep of white, arched *palazzi* (palaces) stretches out before you. On the corner, opposite the transport office, you'll see the **Hotel Savoiya** with its long gallery.

Near the port entrance there is a good example of a 17th-century **coral-block house**. For centuries, coral was the local building stone. Heading back towards the causeway, you'll pass the **Banco d'Italia**, an exact copy of its 1920s original and a mishmash of styles, including Gothic windows and towers. Unfortunately, the building is dilapidated and awaits restoration. In a square beyond the Banco is a rare example of a **Turkish house** with a domed roof, now partially restored. Turn back towards the port entrance, passing by the **Shaafi Mosque**. Founded in the 11th century but rebuilt several times since, it's worth a quick look.

As you keep heading towards the port, you'll come across the ancient **house of Mammub Mohammed Nahari** with soaring Ottoman-style windows on every side. Unfortunately, they are particularly decrepit. Around this area are some large and ornate

18th-century Armenian and Jewish **merchant houses**.

On your right, about 150m from the port entrance, is the **house of Abu Hamdum**, with its *mashrabiyya* (trellised) balcony, which allowed cool breezes to enter and the air inside to circulate. It's a remarkable example of Turkish Ottoman architecture, but it is almost crumbling and needs urgent restoration. Continue on until you get to the Piazza degli Incendi (meaning 'Square of the Fire', after it was the scene of a great fire in 1885), in the centre of which is the **Sheikh Hanafi Mosque**. At over 500 years old, this mosque is one of the oldest surviving structures in the city. Sheikh Hanafi was a great teacher, who funded his students' studies in Egypt. The walls of the courtyard are decorated with stuccowork and inside hangs a remarkable chandelier from the glassworks of Murano near Venice in Italy.

Passing through the piazza, notice the small group of **coral-block houses** with finely detailed façades on your right. Then turn left into the **Campo**, a huge square lined on all sides by houses with trellised balconies, finely carved wooden doors and shutters of Turkish or Egyptian origin.

To the north of the Campo is the **covered market**. Behind and to the north of the market lies the Massawa Hotel, bringing you into the main commercial artery of the town. Turn right towards the heart of the old town then take the first left. This area was the old **covered bazaar**. Its ancient roof – in the Turkish style – was beamed like an upturned boat; at the time of writing, there was only a very small section remaining. There are plans to rebuild it.

### TAULUD ISLAND

Just north of the gates of the Dahlak Hotel is the **Imperial Palace**, overlooking the harbour. The palace was badly damaged during the Struggle for Independence. In its present state, it gives a very vivid idea of how all Massawa looked shortly after the war. The original palace was built by the Turkish Osdemir Pasha in the 16th century. The present building dates from 1872, when it was built for the Swiss adventurer Werner Munzinger. During the federation with Ethiopia, it was used as a winter palace by Emperor Haile Selassie, whose heraldic lions still decorate

the gates. It's usually possible to wander around the grounds.

Back on the causeway road, you'll see to your right the old Italian municipal buildings. Head south down the tree-lined road, past the Dahlak Hotel. Hotels and villas line the eastern shore. Some of the villas are exceptionally beautiful, combining elements of Art Deco style with traditional Moorish arcades and huge *mashrabiyya* balconies. After about 500m you'll find yourself at the Orthodox **St Mariani Cathedral**, which is at the end of the causeway from the mainland. Opposite the cathedral is the massive **monument** to the Eritrean Struggle for Independence. Three huge tanks are preserved where they stopped in the final assault on the town in 1990, and now stand on a black marble base which is lovingly cleaned each morning.

South of the cathedral is the famous **Red Sea Hotel**, scene of many glamorous balls in the 1960s and 1970s. Devastated in the war, it has been rebuilt and is now a reputable hotel.

At the southern tip of the island is the beautiful 1930s **Villa Melotti**, built by the owners of the Asmara brewery. With its stunning setting on the seafront, gardens and swimming pools, it has the decadent grandeur of a Fellini film set. Unfortunately, it's not possible to go near the building.

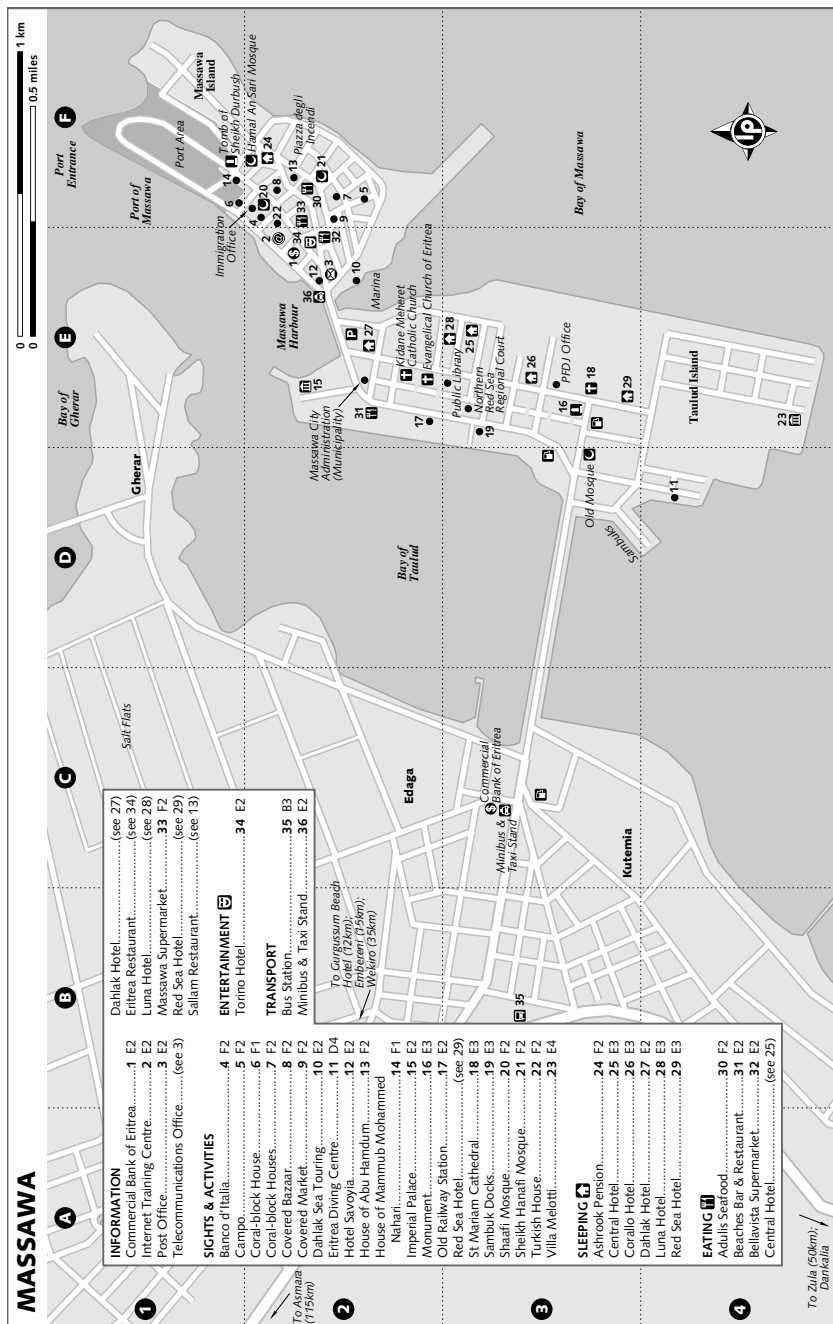
From the villa, take the road on the western side of Taulud and head north, passing by the causeway leading to the mainland. Look out for birds in the mud flats around the causeway. Pelicans are quite common visitors. Continuing north, you'll pass the **old railway station**, built during the Italian occupation, with its columns and elegant façade. There is access to the *sambuk* (dhow) **docks** just south of the train station, and it's worth taking a look at these beautiful traditional boats. There are always at least a couple around; the boats require a lot of maintenance (see the boxed text, p343).

## Activities

### DIVING

Massawa is the starting point for trips to the Dahlak Islands, Eritrea's main diving destination. Trips to the islands and equipment hire can be organised in Massawa. For details on boat and equipment hire, see p348.

If you want to learn to dive, you can contact the **Eritrea Diving Center** (☎ 552688, 07 120145; fax 551287) on Taulud Island. Ask for the



## INDEFATIGABLE DHOWS

Since the 15th century, the ancient trading vessel, the dhow, has provided a link between Africa and Asia. Unmistakable on the sea for its single lateen (triangular) sail, the dhow is painted with multicoloured patterns, particularly around the castellated stern. Today many dhows are also fitted with engines.

Three types of dhow are found in Eritrea: sizes range from the *zaroug* (the largest), to the *zeima* and the *sambuk* (the smallest). The boats are traditionally constructed (without the aid of a plan) entirely from the expertise and memory of the master craftspeople who make them. Many Yemeni builders have inherited the art directly from the legendary builders of Mukallah (on the east coast of the Gulf of Aden, in Yemen). A *sambuk* takes around three months to build.

The vessel is lined with large planks of teak, impregnated with shark oil to prevent rot. A mixture of shark fat and lime is boiled together to make an extremely efficient, airtight filler, which still outperforms any modern equivalent. Weighing between 30 and 500 tonnes and measuring from 15m to 40m, the boats ply the waters between Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf. The boats attain a maximum speed of only about 5 to 6 knots, even with a favourable wind.

The holds of the boats are crammed with every merchandise imaginable, from salt, cigarettes, animal hides and coffee, to dates, shark fins, electronic goods and dried fish. Even vehicles have been loaded – with the help of a lorry. Stories and rumours still abound of dhows filled with other cargo: smuggled goods, arms and even slaves.

Navigation is always without maps. Most sailors have plied the sea routes since their childhood days. The boats' captains continue to fear the storms of the Red Sea – the dhows, though beautiful, are notoriously unstable. Pirates are also said to scour the seas.

helpful English-speaking Nasreddin Osman, who can organise the usual Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) courses. Open-water courses (US\$360) can usually be completed in four days. For those who just want a taste of Eritrea's underwater world, there's a 'Scuba Diving Introduction' for US\$50, which runs over a half day.

## FISHING

If you want to go fishing, you can hire a boat and a captain and set off. A half-day's rental of a small boat in the Bay of Massawa costs about Nfa2000 for one to three people, including the boat captain. Contact **Dahlak Sea Touring** (☎ /fax 552489; Massawa Island).

## SNORKELLING

Green Island (also known as Sheikh Said Island) is 10 to 20 minutes from Massawa and is the most accessible place for decent snorkelling and tolerable beaches. To be frank, it ain't Bora Bora, but it can make an excellent retreat if you need some hush and a place to rest your sightseeing-abused feet. Dahlak Hotel organises day trips to Green Island (Nfa600 per boat). You can also contact Dahlak Sea Touring (see p349 for contact details and prices).

## SWIMMING

Don't expect porcelain sand and translucent waters lapping your toes – beaches are *not* Massawa's forte. If you really fancy a dip, try the stretch of sand at the Gurgusum Beach Hotel (p344) on the mainland. It's OK, though it suffers a bit from litter and algae due to tidal fluctuations. It can get crowded at weekends. You could also head to Green Island (see left).

## Sleeping

It's best to avoid the hotels on Massawa Island bar the one we've included. They are noisy and decrepit and none of them can be seriously recommended. Though less central, Taulud is much quieter and offers better standards in more polished surroundings, but prices are fairly high for Eritrea. A brief reminder: though most hotels are close to the shore, there's no beach where you can cool off.

## TAULUD ISLAND

**Red Sea Hotel** (☎ 552839; fax 552544; s/d Nfa420/480; ) This Italian-designed hotel is regarded as one of the best options in Massawa. It is well arranged and has 50 tidy rooms with air-con, satellite TV, balcony and sea views.

Freshen up in the big bathrooms after a dreamy slumber in the comfy beds. Facilities include a restaurant and well-tended gardens in which to curl up with a book.

**Corallo Hotel** (☎ 552406; r with shared bathroom Nfa180, r Nfa250; 🍷) A good safe bet well worth bookmarking, with a ramshackle charm. There are three kinds of rooms to suit most budgets. Though very simple, the cheaper rooms are good value. The more expensive ones have bathroom, air-con and balcony with sea views. The on-site restaurant is an added bonus.

**Central Hotel** (☎ 552002, 552218; r Nfa240-485, ste Nfa485; 🍷) Soothingly positioned by the shore, the well-managed Central Hotel won't start a revolution but it offers three kinds of well-kept rooms, with air-con and TV. The more expensive ones face the sea and are more spacious. If your wallet is plump, upgrade to a suite. There's a restaurant on the premises.

**Luna Hotel** (☎ 552272; r with shared bathroom Nfa130, r Nfa250; 🍷) While the unexceptional rooms don't set hearts aflutter, the Luna is a decent option if the bottom line counts. There's a good restaurant on the premises.

**Dahlak Hotel** (☎ 552818; fax 551282; s/d Nfa250/325; 🍷) The Dahlak was undergoing a major revamp and extension at the time of writing but construction works were progressing slowly because of the economic slump. When it's completed, it should feature excellent facilities, including a dive centre, a swimming pool and a marina – *insh allah*. The owner has also launched the construction of a new hotel on Dissei Island, which will likely be called Dahlak Village Resort.

## MASSAWA ISLAND

**Ashrook Pension** (☎ 552535; r with shared bathroom Nfa110) After a ruthless inspection of all accommodation options on Massawa Island, we were left with this unpretentious guesthouse, a short bag-haul from the port entrance. It's a little dowdy if you look too closely and the shared bathrooms are a tad dank but at this price it would be churlish to quibble. There's no air-con but fans will save your night. Ibrahim, the owner, speaks good English.

## MAINLAND

**Gurgussum Beach Hotel** (☎ 551901/4; fax 551902; r Nfa252-756; 🍷) On the mainland, 12km from Massawa on a moderate stretch of beach.

This sprawling venue is the closest thing Massawa has to a resort, though 'resort' is an optimistic description. At least it's fronted with an acceptable beach. It's very popular with Eritrean families at the weekend and the beach is usually crowded at that time (and almost empty during the week). The rooms vary in size, shape and atmosphere, but overall it's clean. If your purse strings are a bit relaxed, opt for the more comfortable and spacious family cottages. There's a decent restaurant and an open-air bar on the premises. To get there from Massawa Island, hire a taxi (Nfa100) or take a minibus on Saturday or Sunday (Nfa10).

## Eating

Most restaurants, except the ones at the big hotels, are on Massawa Island.

## MASSAWA ISLAND ባሕሪ ደሴት

You'll find a handful of cheap eateries on and around the main street. The following ones are the pick of the crop.

**Sallam Restaurant** (fish dishes around Nfa80; 🍷 dinner) It doesn't look like much from the outside and actually looks worse inside but, believe it or not, it is a culinary gem. Here you can relish the Yemeni speciality of fresh fish sprinkled with hot pepper and baked in a tandoori oven. The fish, served with a *chapatti* flat bread, is served in two sizes: medium and big. It's absolutely superb! Ask also for the *mok-busa*, the traditional accompaniment made with honey, butter and either dates or bananas. It's deservedly popular with holidaying Asmarans and gets crowded at weekends. While eating you'll be surrounded by plenty of cats expecting a tidbit.

**Adulis Seafood** (fish dishes around Nfa70; 🍷 dinner) Opposite the mosque. Adulis also specialises in seafood. It enjoys better outdoor seating than the Sallam but the fried shrimps were utterly disappointing and service was lackadaisical the day we stopped by. Alcohol is not served.

**Eritrea Restaurant** (☎ 552640; mains Nfa50-80) This used to be the best place for Italian food on Massawa Island but these days the Eritrea has seemingly lost much of its appeal, with a thin menu and a general lack of motivation.

Self-catering is a doddle with a smattering of well-stocked supermarkets that are easily found.

**Massawa Supermarket** (☎ 552480) The best stocked if you're preparing for a picnic, a trip to the islands or an expedition through Dankalia.

**Bellavista Supermarket** (☎ 552986) Opposite Massawa Supermarket. Another worthwhile option if you need to load up on food.

## TAULUD ISLAND

Rumbling tummies won't go hungry on Taulud Island. Most hotels have an on-site restaurant and welcome nonguests. They won't win any Michelin awards but serve the usual suspects at reasonable prices. Ease a belt hole at the following favourites.

**Central Hotel** (mains Nfa50-100) Chequered tablecloths bring a touch of colour to this bright but impersonal dining room. Seafood, meat dishes and pasta are available.

**Dahlak Hotel** (mains Nfa60-120) The circular dining room proffers good views of Massawa Island. The stomach-grumbling menu includes fish and meat dishes, as well as pasta. Undecided tastebuds should go for seafood, including crabs or lobster. The indulgent wine list yields some good quaffs.

**Red Sea Hotel** (mains Nfa60-110) If you can forgive the plain dining room, the food is generally good quality.

**Luna Hotel** (mains Nfa40-60) The most affordable option. The setting is nothing flash but the food has garnered hearty recommendations for the copious servings. It's deservedly popular with weekenders Eritreans, which is not a bad sign.

**Beaches Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 552940; mains Nfa50-95) Found at the back of the prominent, Soviet-style greyish building, this is the only independent restaurant on Taulud Island. What it lacks in style – the dining room is about as cosy as a dentist's waiting room – it makes up for with tasty dishes and a seaside terrace from where you can watch the *sambuks*. Italian and Eritrean specialties feature equally on the menu.

## Drinking

There's a host of lively little bars on Massawa Island. Don't expect subdued sophistication, elaborate cocktails and nifty décor: they're rather boisterous, down-at-heel affairs serving only Asmara Beer, Eritrean gin (good luck!), sodas and coffee. Single male travellers will soon find they have plenty of local female company. Most bars have large terraces in which to idle

away hours in the late evening. Just follow your nose.

## Entertainment

**Torino Hotel** (admission Nfa30; Massawa Island; 🎫 10pm-3am) Don't come to Massawa to wallow in revelry but if you want to find a dance partner head to this hotel. It has an airy roof terrace as well as a dancing area inside with the obligatory mirror ball. Depending on the day and the clientele, the atmosphere can vary from fun and relaxed to rather seedy.

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

At the time of writing, there was talk of launching regular cargo services between Massawa and Assab, in the country's south. Check while you're in Massawa.

### BUS

There are frequent buses leaving from the bus station on the mainland for Asmara (Nfa28, 3½ to four hours). The last bus departs at about 5pm. For Assab, you will have to go to Asmara and catch the bus there, as the buses pass through Massawa but don't take passengers as they are usually full. For Foro (to visit Adulis) in the south, one bus leaves daily, at noon (Nfa20, two to 2½ hours).

### CAR

The road to Massawa is sealed and in good condition. A normal car can make the journey from Asmara in around three hours.

### TRAIN

The old Italian train linking Massawa to Asmara began functioning again in 2003, and at the time of writing only offered charter services to groups; check with travel agencies in Asmara (see p312).

## Getting Around

### MINIBUS

The town minibuses (with 'Taxi' written on the front) are plentiful, fast and efficient. They can be flagged down anywhere, and are great for hopping between the islands and getting to Gurgussum Beach Hotel (Nfa10) at weekends. Short journeys around town cost Nfa2.

### TAXI

A taxi ride costs about Nfa60. To the Gurgussum Beach Hotel a taxi costs Nfa100.

An unofficial taxi stand can be found at the entrance of Massawa Island.

## AROUND MASSAWA

North of Massawa, stretching along the sandy coast into Sudan, lies the traditional territory of the enigmatic Rashaida people (see p302). Around 4km out of Gurgussum, a track branches right off the Massawa road. A few Rashaida camps are visible between the villages of **Emberemi** and **Wekiro**. A peek into their world is as fascinating as ever, but you'll need a 4WD and a local guide who speaks Arabic. It's essential to show respect towards the people and not attempt to take any photos until you have clear permission. It's a good idea to bring some simple gifts, such as tea and sugar. You may well be expected to buy something, such as the traditional silver jewellery, and it's normal to haggle over the prices.

## DAHLAK ISLANDS ዳህላክ ደሴት

It sounds like another tropical paradise on Earth but it's certainly not. Don't be confused: the Dahlak Islands are not the Bahamas. Those searching for room service, fully fledged resorts, all-night carousing and luxurious pampering were badly advised by their travel agent. The only superlatives that spring to mind are 'austere', 'rough', 'desolate'. If you come prepared, you'll enjoy this sense of austerity.

Some 350 islands lie off the Eritrean coast, the majority – 209 – of which make up the Dahlak Archipelago. Largely arid, barren and flat, the islands have a maximum altitude of 15m. Fresh water is very scarce, and very few of the islands are inhabited (only three within the Dahlak Archipelago).

## Information

You need a permit to visit any of the Dahlak Islands, except Green Island. The permit costs US\$20 per person for the first three days, then US\$10 for each day after that. The fee has to be paid in US dollars (cash) or in nakfa. If you're joining a tour or hiring a boat, the permit should be organised for you. Don't forget your passport.

There's only one (basic) hotel on the islands. Another was being constructed when we visited. Independent travel is not really possible. You'll have to go through a boat rental operation or a travel agent in Asmara.

## Sights

### DAHLAK KEBIR ዳህላክ ከቢር

This is the largest island (over 650 sq km) in the archipelago, with nine villages and a population of 2300. The island has been inhabited for at least 2000 years and is known for its archaeological ruins. The islanders speak their own dialect, Dahalik, guard their own customs and traditions, and seem to use the same centuries-old building techniques as their ancestors. Most islanders make a living from the sea, either fishing in village cooperatives or collecting sea cucumbers and shark fins for the Middle East, India, the Philippines and China.

The Luul Hotel, the only hotel in the archipelago, is on this island. There's a post office on the island not far from the hotel, and a wonderful old wind-up Italian telephone, which even does for international calls (via Asmara).

On the southern coast of the island, 300m southeast of the village of Dahlak Kebir, lie some of Eritrea's most ancient relics, including 360 or so **underground cisterns**, cut from the madreporic (coral) limestone. According to local tradition, there was a different well for every day of the year. The cisterns catch rainwater and are the main source of water for the islanders, though the water from some is not drinkable now.

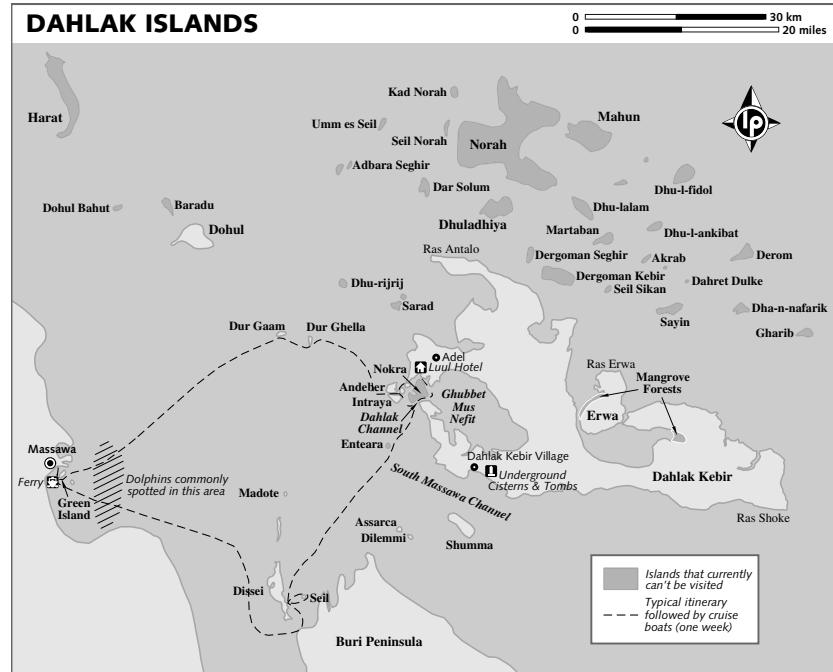
Around 50m southwest of the cisterns lies a huge and ancient necropolis, with literally thousands of **tombs** marked by small, upright basalt stones, beautifully inscribed with Kufic (ancient Arabic) script. The tombs are thought to date from at least AD 912 to the 15th century. Look out for the fossils scattered everywhere. Needless to say, nothing should be removed from the site.

### Adel አደሌ

This is a fascinating and totally unexcavated site near the village of **Selawit**, around 30km north of Dahlak Kebir village, on the journey back to the Luul Hotel. Very little is known about the mysterious ruined buildings, but the site may be even older than Dahlak Kebir, possibly dating from pre-Islamic times. The buildings are beautifully constructed, with very straight, thick walls, arches and some columns.

Currently the only way of getting to the sites is by hiring a car from the Luul Hotel. From the hotel, it's a 44km journey (around

## DAHLAK ISLANDS



1½ to two hours) to the village of Dahlak Kebir, along a bumpy road. It's polite to stop at the village (before or after a visit to the ruins), where you'll be offered tea and biscuits. You should leave a tip. Though not expected, any income is much appreciated – life is tough here for the islanders.

A fishing trip on a traditional *sambuk* can usually be arranged through the Luul Hotel.

### DISSEI

There's a small settlement on this island, the destiny of which should change quite rapidly in the forthcoming years. The owner of the Dahlak Hotel in Massawa has launched the construction of 42 comfortable bungalows, due to open in 2007.

## Activities

### DIVING & SNORKELLING

There's huge potential for diving in the Dahlak Islands, but they shouldn't be mistaken for Egypt or the Bahamas. Diving in Eritrea is still in its infancy because of lack of facilities and tourists; don't expect state-of-the-art dive outfits and top-notch gear.

One of the very few positive effects of the Struggle for Independence is that Eritrea's reefs have been allowed to flourish. The reefs were also spared pollution from industry and marine traffic, and the invasions of tour boats and divers. As a result, the fish population has grown to an incredibly dense level and the reefs may well be home to one of the last pristine subaquatic coral environments in the Red Sea. The variety of wreck diving around the Dahlak Islands is also good, ranging from well-preserved Ethiopian cargo boats and WWII Italian warships to rusting Russian tankers.

To really appreciate the reefs, you need to bear a few things in mind. Because the reefs lie on a shallow continental shelf, there are no vertical drop-offs or 'deep blues' around the Dahlak Islands, and the coral growth is not as profuse here as in the northern Red Sea. During the summer, the water temperatures on the plateau rise to the upper limit of coral tolerance. Dense algae, plankton spore and sediment are also thought to inhibit growth. Most coral is found as fringing 'patch' reefs, ranging from the surface

to a depth of around 15m to 18m. At greater depths, coral colonies tend to drop off.

The biggest cause of disappointment – particularly for underwater photographers – is visibility, which is notoriously erratic. The clarity of the water depends on the influx of cooler waters and plankton and nutrients from the Indian Ocean. Visibility frequently drops to between 10m and 13m, or even less. The best time for water visibility seems to be during the summer months (end of June to end of August), when temperatures outside touch 45°C. At this time, the sea can seem like a bath: surface temperatures of up to 36°C have been reported. Many cruise boats are not, or not adequately, air-conditioned, and sleeping on deck is the only option.

All divers must be certified (you will be asked for evidence), and each dive must be accompanied by a local dive master.

### Diving Services

At the time of writing, the **Eritrea Diving Center** (☎ 552688, 07 120145; fax 551287; Taulud Island, Massawa) on Taulud Island in Massawa was the only diving operation organising diving trips to the islands. It's fairly reliable but some readers have complained about the lack of professionalism of the structure and its lackadaisical safety procedures.

When the extension of the Dahlak Hotel is completed, the hotel will have facilities for diving.

If you want to hire snorkelling gear, check also with the Eritrea Diving Centre

(about Nfa200 for mask, fins and snorkel) or Dahlak Sea Touring (see opposite).

### Tours

Cruises around the islands, usually lasting anything from three days to a week, can be organised through the best travel agencies in Asmara (see p312). Boats range from beautiful Turkish *caiques* with private cabins and bathrooms to converted *sambuks*. Chefs, dive masters and crew are provided, as are air cylinders (boats have their own compressors). Some have diving and fishing equipment for hire. Prices depend on the type of boat and the number of persons. The bigger the group, the cheaper it is. Be prepared to spend at least US\$150 per day per person.

### Sleeping

**Luul Hotel** (bungalows US\$50) On Dahlak Kebir, this is the only hotel on the islands. There are small bungalows, as well as suites. Add another US\$20 per person for food. You can also use the kitchen for a small fee (all provisions must be brought from the mainland). Prices must be paid in cash in US dollars.

It's possible to camp on some of the islands, including Dissei, Madote, Dur Gaam and Dahlak Kebir. Some boat operators hire out full camping equipment; fresh water for showering is included in the price. Dissei (the east or north of the island) and Madote are probably the best for camping. Bring plenty of mosquito repellent.

## THE JOYS OF DIVING IN ERITREA

The southern waters of the Red Sea around Eritrea are known principally for four things: the huge shoals of fish, the large size of individual specimens of fish, the fishes' apparent lack of fear of humans and the significant number of unusual species, even by Red Sea standards.

Snappers, jackfish, sweetlips, unicorn fish and fusiliers all form enormous schools. Giant specimens of grouper are quite frequently seen, and large Napoleons, bumphead parrotfish and lyretail cod are common sightings.

The southern Red Sea was once famous for its shark population but shark life is not as abundant as it once was due to commercial shark fishing. However, reef, grey, hammerhead and nurse sharks, turtles, stingrays and dolphins are all common. Manta rays and dugongs are occasionally seen.

Divers should be aware that the reef is a very fragile ecosystem. Avoid touching living organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. Maintain proper buoyancy control. Resist also the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells, and ensure that you take home all your rubbish, especially plastics.

Water temperatures range from 27°C to 29°C, so a swimskin or 3mm tropical wetsuit offers more than adequate protection.

For more information, refer to Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Red Sea*.

## Getting There & Away

Unless you've got your own boat, you'll need to hire one. The journey from Massawa to most of the islands takes between 1½ and two hours by motorboat.

Boats can be hired for picnic excursions, fishing, snorkelling or diving trips to the islands. It's worth shopping around, as prices vary from company to company and also depend on the season (low season is from October to February). If you come in the low season, you should be able to get a discount. Boat operators advise reservations of one week to 10 days in advance. However, if you just turn up, something can almost always be organised within 24 hours. If a boat is available, it takes about an hour to get it ready. The services of a boat captain are always included in the price. You may be offered cheaper deals for *sambuks*; check that they look reasonably seaworthy (some are very rickety) and are carrying sufficient life jackets and supplies of water. Most are infested with mice and cockroaches.

No boats are currently fitted with compressors. A maximum of 10 air cylinders can be carried at one time.

**Eritrea Diving Centre** (☎ 552688; fax 551287; Taulud Island) charges Nfa1000 for a trip to Green Island, and from Nfa1300 to Nfa11,000 for the other islands.

**Dahlak Sea Touring** (☎ /fax 552489; Massawa Island), run by Btzuamlak Gebre Selassie who is better known as 'Maik', has various boats for hire. A trip to Green Island costs Nfa700 for one to three people. Boats to all the other islands cost between Nfa9000 and Nfa11,000. Bigger boats (for up to 10 people) can also be organised. Maik also has ice boxes, gas stoves, cutlery and dishes for hire.

Most travel agencies in Asmara (see p312) offer tours to the islands. Prices depend on the number of islands visited and on the number of people.

## Getting Around

Boats can be hired from the Luul Hotel for trips to the surrounding islands and cost between Nfa1500 and Nfa6000 (depending on the distance) for round trips with up to two hours spent on an island.

A couple of village cars can usually be hired on Dahlak Kebir Island for about Nfa900 per day, including driver, petrol

and mileage. The villagers have a monopoly so they can ask what they like but you can try bargaining. You'll need to give two to three days' notice to organise a car.

## ADULIS አዲስ

To be frank, we're at a loss as to why this site has such a name. Lying 59km to the south of Massawa, near the village of **Foro**, the ancient Aksumite ruins of Adulis have a high historical significance but visually it's not particularly exciting. Adulis' present condition belies its former grandeur, and many travellers are disappointed. It remains around 98% unexcavated; almost everything is still underground. If you're not an archaeology fiend, it's probably not worth the hassle to go there.

## History

Once numbering among the greatest ports of the ancient world, Adulis was the site of large and elegant buildings and a bustling international port. Inhabited since at least the 6th century BC, the site is the oldest in Eritrea.

Like modern-day Massawa, Adulis' importance lay in its port, and by the 3rd century AD the port had grown to become one of the most important on the Red Sea. Trade at this time flourished from the Mediterranean all the way to India.

Adulis' fortunes waxed and waned with the ancient kingdom of Aksum. Like Aksum, its heyday came during the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. It then went into decline, before a brief revival in the 7th century. The town supplied all sorts of foreign goods, including gold, myrrh and frankincense, to all the major Aksumite towns of the interior: Aksum, Qohaito, Metera and Kesese.

## Orientation & Information

To visit Adulis, it's best to pick up a guide at Foro. Try asking for Salhé, who has long accompanied the archaeologists working on the site. He speaks quite good Italian and Arabic, and passable English; ask for him at one of the cafés or bars. From Foro it's around 7km to Adulis, in the direction of Zula.

Don't forget that you need a permit from the National Museum Office in Asmara to visit the site (see p363).

## Sleeping

**Assab Hotel** (Foro; r with shared bathroom Nfa15) The only acceptable option in Foro, just in case you get stuck there. You guessed it – it's ultrabasic.

## Getting There & Away

The road from Massawa as far as Adulis is quite good. If you're driving, you can usually find a guide at Foro.

From Massawa, one bus leaves daily for Foro at noon (Nfa20, two hours). You'll need a guide to take you to the ruins, which lie about 7km northeast of Foro. To return to Massawa, there's a bus from Foro at 6am. Chartered bush taxis can also make the journey (Nfa50). Ask around at Foro.

# DANKALIA ደንከልያ

Dankalia is the sort of place that has writers lunging for their thesauruses in search of superlatives: 'dramatic, stunning, overwhelming' will do. Dankalia is the name given to the narrow strip of land about 50km wide that stretches south of Massawa down to Djibouti (about 600km), along the coastline. You can't miss it on the map: it looks like a long peninsula protruding from the south of the country. It's a volcanic desert where you'll be struck in awe by otherworldly, lunar landscapes. It is known as one of the hottest and most inhospitable places on Earth: there's little to see, nothing to do, and no great destination awaiting you at the other end. The journey is hot, tiring and demanding; few travellers come here. But the sense of exploration is real, even on the rickety old bus. If you drive, the journey is likely to be one of the most memorable of your trip. If there's one place in Eritrea where travel is for travel's sake, it's Dankalia.

As if that was not enough, Dankalia is the territory of the legendary Afar people, described as one of the fiercest tribes on Earth (see p46). A journey into Dankalia gives a fascinating glimpse into their way of life.

The best time to go is from November to December or from March to April. At the height of summer, the heat is unbearable; in winter, the sparse rain can quickly turn the tracks and wadis (valleys) into a mire.

## SOUTH TO ASSAB

Most villages on the Danakil coast survive from a mixed economy of fishing, salt mining and animal husbandry. The millennia-old trading contact with the Arabian peninsula still thrives; in some places smuggling with Yemeni merchants has proved a more lucrative means of income. If your time and budget are limited, an excursion as far as Thio will give you a good idea of the region.

## Irafayle

The little fishing village of Irafayle (meaning 'Place of Elephants' – slim chance now) lies 87km from Massawa and marks the boundary between the provinces of Akele Guzay and Dankalia. Here Afar territory and its desolate landscape begins. The village offers simple refreshments and accommodation.

The bay around the **Gulf of Zula** has good sandy beaches and snorkelling, and birdlife is plentiful along the shore. The British General Sir Robert Napier landed here in 1868 to rescue the hostages held by the Emperor Tewodros.

The **Buri Peninsula** is probably one of the best places in Eritrea for wildlife. Ostriches, hamadryas baboons and gazelles (Soemering's and Dorca) are all quite frequently seen. The wild ass is also reported, though it's now very rare. Mangroves, good beaches and huge salt flats also characterise the area. If you have the time, a detour into the peninsula is worthwhile. Ask for a guide (about Nfa50) at Ghela'elo, some 70km from Zula.

## Marsa Fatma ማርፋት ፋትማ

Marsa Fatma, 158km from Massawa, is the starting point for a visit to the crater lake known as **Lake Badda**, around two hours (43km) west of the village of **Adaito**. Lying below sea level, seasonal water from the Tigré Mountains collects here, feeding the agricultural plantations. Unless you have lots of time, it's probably not worth a special excursion.

South of Marsa Fatma, fishing village **Thio** (245km from Massawa) offers food and accommodation. The village, with its brightly painted wooden huts, is worth a stroll.

## Edi ዕዲ

Edi, 130km from Thio, is another Afar fishing village and also offers food and accommodation. Some 70km south of Edi, the **Bayof**

## DOMA, ANYONE?

Road-weary? Take a break and heighten your spirits in the village of Wade, around 70km southeast of Afambo. Situated on a large plain dotted with *amba* (flat-topped mountains), the village is the site of an oasis of *doum* palms. The whole area from Wade to Beylul is known for its production of the very alcoholic *doum* palm 'wine', called *doma*. You'll see old lemonade bottles in the villages frothing over with a milky liquid.

Don't miss the chance to try some; you may be invited into one of the local 'pubs': discreet enclosures made from the wood and palms of the *doum* palms. A litre bottle costs between Nfa1.50 and Nfa7, depending on the quality.

In Wade, the drink has become almost a village addiction, and the authorities have tried to ban consumption! Fines of up to Nfa100 have been introduced.

**Beraesoli** features a stunning lunar landscape. There are several islands off the coast.

Some 60km further south, you'll reach the village of **Beylul** (515km from Massawa), surrounded by palms. You'll be offered the *doma*, a local palm wine. From Beylul, it is another 61km until Assab.

## ASSAB ዓሰብ

pop 75,000

Depending on your mood, you'll find Assab either somniferous or a ghost town. Around the middle of the day, you could pretty safely fire a gun along the main streets and not hit anyone. Assab, Eritrea's largest port, is hot, windy and industrial, and has none of the charm of small-town Massawa. Lying less than 100km from Ethiopia, at the southern extremity of the desolate and inaccessible Dankalia region, it has always been a bit of an outpost. Tourism facilities are almost totally lacking. For centuries up until recently, it was Ethiopia's principal port of access to the Red Sea. However, the dispute with Eritrea in 1998 ended that. The deviation of all Ethiopian commerce via Djibouti has made Assab even more of a backwater, and a feeling of dereliction emanates from the town. It's not as desperate as that, though. When the conflict with Ethiopia is settled, it could resurrect and again be used by the Ethiopians.

Come prepared: Assab's average annual temperature is 29.5°C, though it can reach 46.5°C. Annual rainfall is just 58mm. The coolest time is between November and February.

## Orientation & Information

The town can be divided into three parts. To the northeast lies Assab Seghir (Little

Assab), home to the large Yemeni community with their many restaurants, fruit sellers and small shops. In the centre lies Assab Kebhir (Big Assab), which makes up the administrative centre and includes the port. Most of the hotels are located here. To the west lies Campo Sudan, formerly the residential quarter for many of the town's Ethiopians and the main area for 'nightlife'.

There is no tourist office in Assab. The post office, in front of the Municipality of Assab, keeps regular business hours.

Note: if you come from Djibouti, you'll have to get a travel permit at the **Immigration Office** (8am-noon & 4-6pm Mon-Fri) – in the centre, not far from the Bank of Eritrea – to journey on. You'll be asked to show this permit at the various checkpoints on the road to Massawa.

**Commercial Bank of Eritrea** (☎ 7am-noon & 4-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 7am-11.30am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

**Telecom office** (☎ 7am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat) Next to the Commercial Bank of Eritrea. International calls are possible from here.

## Dangers & Annoyances

There are significant red-light districts, requiring vigilance, around both Campo Sudan and the port. These are poorer areas with many bars and the atmosphere can get rough and ready at times.

Heat rash is a common problem here and is best relieved by cold showers. There are also electrical power cuts.

## Sights & Activities

The pleasant and sandy **Bayeta beach** lies 4km to 5km from town on the airport road. A contract taxi to here costs around Nfa120.

## Sleeping & Eating

In most of the hotels in Assab, the showers are cold.

**Kebal International Hotel** (☎ 661700, 660229; fax 661708; r Nfa75-185; 🏠) Often still known by its old name, the Nino. It's a bargain, with three types of spacious and well-kept rooms to suit most budgets. The more expensive ones are fairly bright and comfortable and come with air-con, TV and fridge. It's in the town centre.

**Assab Pension** (r with shared bathroom Nfa45, d Nfa50-110; 🏠) Opposite Kebal International Hotel, this old colonial place is a reasonable option for budget travellers.

**Ras Gembo Hotel** (☎ 661114; s Nfa75-140, d Nfa95-175; 🏠) This faded glory, near St Michael's Church outside the main port area, lacks atmosphere and customers. Still, it remains presentable with decent rooms amid a leafy compound. Its greatest advantage is its beach.

**Aurora Restaurant** (mains Nfa40-80) The best place to assuage hunger pangs. Pasta and grilled fish are available. It's in the town centre.

As Assab Seghir is a Muslim area, no alcohol is served at restaurants.

## Drinking

You could have a sundowner at your hotel. If you're after something more authentic, head for Campo Sudan, where local joints and outdoor 'beer gardens' (usually a gravel or cement courtyard plus a single tree decorated with Christmas lights) abound. It is a lively area at night, though you'll need to take care: bring with you the minimum amount of money, and women should be accompanied.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport, about 5km from town, is little more than a shack with a few wooden tables set up inside. **Eritrean Airlines** (☎ 660028, 660665), in the town centre, is closed Wednesday and Sunday. There are three flights a week to Asmara (Nfa1110/2220 one way/return).

### BUS

Incredibly, a bus service connects Assab to Massawa (and on to Asmara). The track between the two cities has been improved and the service is now relatively reliable, though

still tiring and uncomfortable. After heavy rain, when the track becomes too muddy, services might be cancelled. The journey usually takes at least one day. Bring all the food and water you can carry.

Three buses a week (usually Monday, Thursday and Saturday) depart for Asmara (Nfa190) at 4am; the journey takes approximately two days. Tickets should be bought one day in advance. There is no bus station, but the bus departs from the Shell petrol station, near Kebal International Hotel.

## Djibouti

The border between Eritrea and Djibouti is open but there are no buses between Assab and Djibouti. Before the recent Ethiopia-Eritrea War, the best option for Djibouti was to hitch a lift with a truck towards Addis Ababa and get off at the junction to Galafi on the border between Ethiopia and Djibouti; from there, it was an easy hitch to Djibouti City.

The alternative route via Rahaita (around 112km from Assab) in the south is possible, though traffic between the two towns is limited. From Assab, shared taxis sometimes go as far as Moulhoulé in Djibouti to pick up passengers coming from Obock. Check the situation while in Assab, as this service is unreliable. Another option is to hire a 4WD to the border and then try and hitch to Obock; from there, you can take a dhow or a speedboat to Djibouti City. In any case, there's no fixed schedule. Be ready to get stuck for a couple of days in Assab.

## Ethiopia

At the time of writing the border with Ethiopia was indefinitely closed. Before the conflict with Ethiopia, many trucks ran from Assab port to Addis Ababa (1½ days).

## BOAT

At the time of writing there was talk of establishing a line between Massawa and Assab.

Currently it's not possible to hitch a ride on boats to Yemen.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Ignore the taxis jostling for custom at the exit; you can take a minibus, which costs Nfa30, into town.

## MINIBUS

The yellow minibuses serve as taxis about town. Journeys cost between Nfa2 and Nfa4 depending on the distance. You can also hire the whole bus (Nfa60).

# WESTERN ERITREA

Historic sites and must-see attractions? Nope. Attractive cities? Virtually nonexistent. Superb scenery? Not really. Tourist infrastructure? Poor. At first sight, western Eritrea doesn't have much to promote itself; it's easy to see why it is overshadowed by the Red Sea coast or the much-lauded south.

Time seems to have stood still in this part of the country. It lacks the development and bustle of the densely populated south or east, and tourists are an almost nonexistent species – you'll probably have the whole place to yourself. Yet it's here, in these often forgotten lowlands, where you can experience a slice of quintessential Eritrea. A bit like the Australian outback, western Eritrea seduces with wild expanses and empty spaces. All things considered, the region seeing so few travellers is a major part of its attraction. Not to mention its fascinating inhabitants: some of the ethnic groups that populate the west – such as the Kunama – are among the more enigmatic in Eritrea. In climate, geography, religion, industry, people and way of life, Eritrea's Muslim lowlands could not be more different from the Christian highlands. The more you forge west, the more you can feel a Sudanese flavour.

Very few people know that this area is also famed for its birdlife. The current state of the economy hampers any development, but this area will attract twitchers from around the globe as soon as the country is back on its feet.

During the Struggle, many towns in the west witnessed some bloody fighting. The relics of war are visible everywhere: tank carcasses, blown-up bridges, rubble and bullet holes – poignant remnants of a not-so-distant past.

With your own 4WD, the west is a great place to explore; you can also travel relatively easily by bus. The road is now entirely sealed between Asmara and Teseney. Be prepared for searing heat, pesky mosquitoes and basic accommodation.

## AGORDAT አገረዳት

pop 25,000 / elev 615m

Lying 160km west of Asmara, Agordat is not particularly engaging. The town seems to have been severely hit by the transfer of the administration of the Gash Barka province to Barentu. The sickly state of the economy does not help and business was particularly slack when we stayed here.

There's a post office and a telecom office. The **Commercial Bank** (☎ 8am-noon & 4-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8-11.30am Sat) changes cash and travellers cheques (US dollars and euros).

Like most towns in the west, Agordat has an overwhelmingly Arab feel to it – even the colonial governor's **palace** is Moorish-inspired. Other major Muslim landmarks include the **mosque** – the second-largest in Eritrea – and the **marketplace**, one of the most important in the lowlands.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Beilul Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 711228; r with shared bathroom Nfa70) A little out of town, near the main junction, this bare-bones option can fit the bill should you decide to overnight in Agordat. The rooms with ceiling fan and mosquito net are Spartan, to say the least. Meals are served in a migraine-inducing dining room but the food is surprisingly varied and tasty (fresh salad, pasta, *shiro* or chickpea purée, yogurt, roast beef).

You'll find several cheap eateries around the market and the bus station. Most places have a small terrace where you can unwind and have a drink in the evening.

## Getting There & Away

Buses leave from the main square, close to the ticket office. One to three buses depart early each morning for Asmara (Nfa48, five hours); about four buses travel daily to Keren between 6am and 4pm (Nfa20, three hours); one minibus goes to Barentu (Nfa16, 1½ hours). For Teseney, you should go to Barentu and change buses there.

If you have your own vehicle, you must be off the roads outside the town by 6pm for the night curfew.

## BARENTU ባረንተ

pop 16,200 / elev 980m

Barentu is a peaceful, sprawling town that sees few visitors. Heading west, it's a relaxed place to hang out and a convenient spot to

break a journey to Teseney or Sudan. There's not much to see or do here, but the town exudes a congenial ambience without being overwhelming. The new seat of the regional Gash Barka administration, Barentu does not have the forlorn atmosphere that you can feel in Agordat. In the evening, the main street fills up with college students in blue shirts – a superb sight in its own right.

Barentu is also the heartland of the Kunama people, one of the most fascinating of Eritrea's ethnic groups (see p301). If you want to mingle with locals, delve into Barentu's colourful market on Thursday or Saturday, the two market days. Fantastic!

### Information

The following are all located off the main square.

**Commercial Bank of Eritrea** (☎ 7-11.30am & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 7-10am Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

**Post office** (☎ 7am-2.30pm Mon-Sat, 7am-2pm Sat)

**Telecom office** (☎ 8am-6pm) Same building as the post office.

### Sleeping & Eating

There's a bevy of slipshod cheapies located in the centre, but none can be seriously recommended.

**Unite Family Hotel** (☎ 731073; Teseney Rd; r with shared bathroom Nfa80) At the southern edge of town, spitting distance from the bus station, the Unite was the only reliable pile at the time of writing, and the lack of competition shows. Beds are a bit of the 'ye olde' variety but rooms come equipped with mosquito net and fan. There's a central compound where you might catch the breeze (if any) and a restaurant that serves cheap but filling staples, including pasta, *capretto* and *shiro*. Overall it's simple but not at all depressing.

**Merhaba Hotel** (☎ 731101; Teseney Rd) A short hop from the Unite, the Merhaba was undergoing a major overhaul when we visited and should hit the mark with well-appointed, modern rooms with all mod cons. Stay tuned.

**Sahel Cafeteria** (main street; mains Nfa10-20) Munch on a tasty *ful* and get stuffed for minimal coinage at this modest eatery, about 250m from the main square (don't look for signage – it's so worn out that it's illegible). The delicious yogurt goes down a treat too. There's a congenial terrace at the rear.

You'll find other cheap eateries in the centre.

### Getting There & Away

The bus station is on the outskirts of the town, on the road to Teseney. For Mendefera, you'll have to hop between towns: first go to Shambiko (Nfa25, three hours, four daily) and then take a minibus to Mai Dima (Nfa25, three hours, three daily) and another to Mendefera (Nfa21, two or three daily, three hours). It's impossible to cover this stretch in one day; you'll have to overnight in Mai Dima or Shambiko. The road east to Mendefera is a gravel track, and there's just one fuel station, at Shambiko. If you're driving, make sure you fill up before setting off.

For Asmara, four buses leave daily (Nfa57, six hours). Four buses go daily to Keren (Nfa35, four hours). To Teseney, five buses leave daily (Nfa29, three hours). For Agordat (Nfa16, one hour), there are regular minibus services.

If you have your own vehicle, the night curfew comes into effect here too: be off the road by 6pm.

### TESENEY ተሰነይ

pop 15,000 / elev 585m

Teseney is a large frontier town, just 45km from the Sudanese border. The status of border town usually does not bode well but Teseney is unexpectedly vibrant and thrives on trade and smuggling with neighbouring Sudan. Coming from Agordat, you'll find it refreshingly dynamic.

At first sight the town seems like a large, sprawling, rubble-strewn conglomeration, devoid of trees, beautiful architecture or anything of interest. But Teseney has an intriguing atmosphere and is unlike any other town in Eritrea.

A crossroads between Eritrea and Sudan, the town has long been a meeting place for various ethnic groups from both countries. Feel like dabbling in contraband? You can visit the various Rashaida markets on the outskirts of the town, where the Rashaida people sell virtually everything from petrol to satellite dishes.

### Information

**Commercial Bank** (☎ 7.30-11.30am & 3.30-5pm

Mon-Fri, 7-10.30am Sat) Cash can be changed here. It's in the centre.

**Immigration & Nationality** (☎ 721011; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) Stop here to get the latest on border crossing with Sudan, as the situation is volatile. It's near the Housing & Commerce Bank, in the centre.

**Post office** (☎ 7.30am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) In the centre.

**Telecom building** (☎ 7am-noon & 2-5pm) Diagonally opposite the post office.

### Sleeping & Eating

There are a number of cheapies in Teseney. They all offer spartan accommodation, with cold showers, fans, mosquito nets and saggy beds. And air-con? Forget it – you're in Teseney, darlings. Pick of the crop are listed. In summer, it's too hot to sleep inside; your best bet is to opt for a bed outside. A new hotel was under construction when we visited.

**Luna Hotel** (☎ 721037; r with shared bathroom Nfa45, r Nfa66) A good pick. Try to snaffle a room upstairs; they have more generous proportions and come equipped with private bathrooms. There's a leafy courtyard where you can hang out and relax.

**Khartoum Hotel** (s/d Nfa150/200) The Khartoum has the best rooms but prices are inflated and tend to vary according to the owner's mood.

**Sabrina Hotel** (☎ 721231; s/d Nfa66/91) The Sabrina is nothing to write home about but the rooms pass the cringe test and are more than OK for a night's kip.

For cheap and tasty fare in the evening, nothing beats the souq area, known locally as 'Shuk al Shab' ('Market of the Masses' in Arabic). It is straight out of Sudan. It's home to a huge open-air restaurant; you just join the rabble (most of them truck drivers from Sudan) at the long wooden tables and wait to be served. It's lively and fun and the evening air fills with the smoking and sizzling of the *sheia*. Beer is not available, but you can swallow delicious yogurts or guzzle exquisite orange juices. It's also a good place to start the day.

From June to August, watermelons are sold by the roads around the town.

### Getting There & Away

Teseney is situated 119km west of Barentu. The road is entirely tarred from Asmara.

Teseney's bus station lies about 500m east of Shuk al Shab. Six buses run daily to Barentu (Nfa29, three hours). Two buses

go every morning to Asmara (Nfa85, one day).

Teseney is a jumping-off point to Sudan and the border was open at the time of writing. A handful of minibuses and shared taxis leave every morning to Adi Bara, at the border (Nfa30, one hour), from where you can find transportation to Kassala, the nearest Sudanese town of substance.

With your own vehicle, you must be safely off the roads by 6pm.

## ERITREA DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Tourism is still in its infancy in Eritrea, and accommodation is limited.

### Camping

Alas, there are no official camping facilities in Eritrea.

### Hotels

There's a stark contrast between Asmara and the rest of the country. The capital boasts hotels of all categories that will suit all wallets. The real shame though is the lack of imaginative and different places to stay. Most places, including top-drawer options, rate zero in the charm department. Elsewhere the hotel scene is much more modest, except maybe in Massawa, and accommodation is quite humdrum and no cause for great excitement. Lack of investment is the main explanation. In Asmara, you should find someone who can speak English at the reception.

Many budget hotels also have cold water only (not a worry in the lowlands). Though breakfast is provided by some, you will usually be charged extra for it. Unless otherwise stated, all rooms have private bathroom facilities. Towels and soap are usually not provided in budget hotels. Power cuts are common.

All the small towns have hotels. They're often pretty basic affairs. Often rooms contain up to six beds (though you can pay for the whole room) and many lack running water (you get a bucket shower instead).

In the torrid lowlands, including Massawa, many people sleep on beds in the courtyards and on the verandas or rooftops. The cheap hotels, which do not have any



## PRACTICALITIES

- Eritrea uses the metric system for weights and measures.
- Eritrea predominantly uses the 220V system, and most sockets take European continental two-round-pin plugs. Bring a universal adaptor if you need to charge your phone or run other appliances. Power cuts are frequent, especially at night.
- The only local publication is *Hadas Eritrea* (New Eritrea), a newspaper published six days a week in both Tigrinya and Arabic. It's the voice of the government. It has an equivalent in English, *Eritrea Profile*, which is published twice weekly by the Ministry of Information. It is available from roaming street vendors (Nfa1.50). Don't expect breaking news – press freedom is a thing of the past in Eritrea.
- Eritrean national radio, known as 'Voice of the Broad Masses', broadcasts three times a day in the nine Eritrean national languages (on 945 kHz medium wave and 41 and 49 metre bands short wave). The BBC World Service can be picked up on short-wave radios.
- BBC World, Euronews and CNN can be received on satellite TVs.
- Eritrea, like Italy, uses the PAL system. It differs from France (which uses the SECAM system), and the USA, Canada and Japan (which use NTSC). The three systems are not compatible.
- The government-controlled EriTV has two national TV channels. EriTV 1 broadcasts every evening from around 4pm in Tigray, Arabic, Tigrinya and English. You can tune in to the English programmes at 9.30pm. EriTV2 broadcasts only in Asmara.

air-conditioning or ceiling fans, usually have similar arrangements.

In the rural areas, accommodation is sometimes little more than a bed in a hut, without running water, electricity or even washing facilities.

In Eritrea, a room with a double bed is usually called a 'single', and a room with twin beds a 'double'. In our reviews we've used the Western interpretation of singles, doubles and twins. Prices for one and two people are often the same.

Where appropriate, accommodation options are split into budget, midrange and top-end categories. In general, lodging won't wreak havoc on your budget. Prices for budget accommodation average US\$7 to US\$10 for singles and US\$8 to US\$15 for doubles. For midrange hotels, you'll pay about US\$15 to US\$30 for singles and US\$20 to US\$60 for doubles. A five-star place to stay will set you back up to US\$200. These prices apply to hotels in the capital. In the rest of the country, rates are usually cheaper.

Few hotels accept credit cards. The ones that do charge a hefty commission. In Asmara, some midrange and top-end hotels quote their prices in US dollars. Payment can also be made in local currency, but at the official rate, and you may be asked to show your currency declaration form.

## ACTIVITIES

Action seekers, be prepared to grit your teeth: Eritrea has great potential for outdoor pursuits but there are no proper facilities. Because of the war and the lack of funds, nothing has been really developed yet. Be patient: when the situation stabilises, Eritrea will probably catch up and you'll be offered the full slate of outdoor pursuits.

### Bird-Watching

Eritrea is heaven for bird-watchers (see p304). The best bird-watching opportunities can be found around the Semenawi Bari area (Filfil), around Massawa and in the Gash Barka area. Sadly, there's no infrastructure yet. There's potential but it's still embryonic and much has to be done to promote this activity. The owner of Travel House International in Asmara (see p312) is passionate about bird-watching and may organise tailor-made bird-watching trips on request.

### Diving & Snorkelling

Eritrea's best-known activity is diving in the Red Sea. The Dahlak Islands off the coast near Massawa are currently the only place where organised diving and snorkelling takes place. A word of warning, though: it has absolutely nothing to do with the northern Red Sea. Diving in Eritrea is still on a

very low-key scale. At the time of writing, there was only one operator based in Massawa. When the country is back on its feet, you can expect many more outfits as there's great potential off the Dahlak Islands.

Again, don't expect too much. If you have dived, say, in Egypt, you might be slightly disappointed. Visibility is far from exceptional and most sites require a tedious (and expensive) boat ride from Massawa. Though the islands are opening up, access is still limited, monopolised by a few boat companies charging very high prices. At the moment, most destinations are out of the reach of budget travellers. To make it worthwhile and affordable, a minimum of eight divers is usually required – a condition which, in practice, is not easy to meet.

But if you can afford a trip – even just snorkelling – the opportunity is not to be missed. The sites are absolutely pristine and there are absolutely no crowds – you'll feel like a pioneer.

For more information, see p347.

### Hiking & Camel Trekking

In theory hiking is possible in the various hills and mountain ranges in the east of the country, but unfortunately there are no sign-posted paths and you should consider hiring a local guide because some areas are still not cleared of land mines.

Some travel agents in the capital can organise treks into the hinterland by camel (for contact details see p368).

## BUSINESS HOURS

Private businesses, shops and post offices keep various hours. In general, most open from 8am to noon and 2pm to 6pm Monday to Friday, and on Saturday morning. Many shops in the capital stay open until 7.30pm.

Most banks open from 8am to 11am and from 2pm to 4pm Monday to Friday, and from 8am to 11.30am on Saturday.

In Massawa and Assab, government offices open from 6am to 2.30pm Monday to Friday during the hot season (June to September) and from 8am to noon and 4pm to 6.30pm Monday to Friday the rest of the year. Private businesses open from 6am to noon and 3pm to 6pm Monday to Friday the whole year.

In Muslim areas, business hours are shorter during Ramadan, and cafés and restaurants may be closed during the day.

Normal opening hours for restaurants are 7.30am to 10pm, cafés 7.30am to 8pm and bars 8am till late.

Reviews won't list business hours unless they differ from the standards given here.

## CHILDREN

Eritreans are very welcoming and open towards children, and travelling here with young ones is unlikely to present any major problems. However, many useful facilities for children are almost totally lacking. Other concerns include the presence of malaria in certain areas, the stifling heat in summer, the scarcity of good medical facilities outside Asmara, and the length involved in many road journeys. Not to mention the dearth of basic staples, including milk, in small towns.

Items such as nappies and mineral water are available only in the expat supermarkets of Asmara, but they are quite expensive.

When it comes to sights specifically geared towards children, it's true to say that they are rare. The beaches along the Red Sea coast are not supervised, and the Dahlak Islands are almost devoid of infrastructure.

For more information on family travel generally, see Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan.

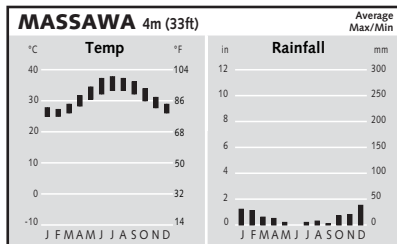
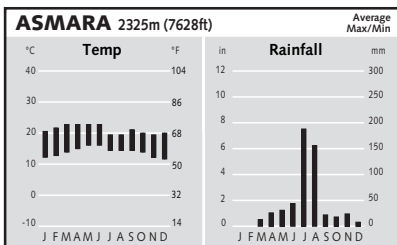
## CLIMATE CHARTS

Eritrea's climate corresponds to its geography. The low, eastern zone is by far the hottest area. Temperatures range from a torrid 30°C to 39°C during the hot season (June to September) and from 25°C to 32°C during the cooler season (October to May). During the rains from July to September, the roads north can become impassable.

Rainfall on the coast is less than 200mm per year, and occurs mostly from December to February. The high humidity in the coastal region makes temperatures seem much higher than those further inland.

In the Dankalia region, temperatures can reach 50°C in the shade! Rainfall is practically zero.

In the highland zone, the average annual temperature is 18°C (17°C in Asmara). May is the hottest month, when daily temperatures can reach around 30°C. The coldest months are from December to February, when lows can approach freezing point. Temperatures can vary by up to 20°C between day and



night. Light rains fall from March to April, with heavy rains from the end of June to the beginning of September.

In the western zone, temperatures range from 30°C to 41°C in the hot season (April to June). December is the coolest month (13°C to 25°C). Rainfall mirrors that in the highland zone.

See also p14.

## CUSTOMS

On arrival at the airport, any major electronic items (such as expensive cameras, laptops, video cameras) must be registered at customs. This is to deter black-market business. On departure the items will be signed off. If anything is stolen during your stay in Eritrea, make sure you immediately obtain a police statement registering the loss.

Duty-free allowances include 1L of alcohol and 200 cigarettes.

Since January 2005 any person entering the country must fill in a foreign currency declaration form. The declaration form is mandatory for changing money so don't lose it. You'll have to hand it in upon departure and an official will check your statement.

It is strictly forbidden in theory to export any nakfa from Eritrea. In practice, an allowance of up to Nfa50 is permitted to allow for any problems or needs.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

### Checkpoints

There are army checkpoints at the entrance and exit of each major town. They are pretty straightforward and foreigners never get hassled or asked for bribes; just show your passport and your travel permit (see p363) and you'll be OK.

### Crime

Eritrea is a very safe country in which to travel. Muggings are unheard of, pickpocketings rare, corruption not visible and everyone lets everyone else get on with their business.

Asmara is an extremely peaceful city and the crime rate is incredibly low, but minor incidents of street crime are occasionally reported. With the economy squeezed ever tighter by the war with Ethiopia, such incidents will inevitably become more common. Markets all over the world attract pickpockets, and no less so in Asmara, so take some basic precautions. Outside the capital, the crime rate is even lower.

In the far western and northern areas bordering Sudan, a few incidents of bandit and terrorist attacks against Eritrean civilians were reported in the late 1990s but the situation was back to normal when we visited. It's still wise to keep your ear to the ground.

### Land Mines

After 30 years of war, the biggest threat outside the capital is the risk of land mines and unexploded munitions. Despite the government's best efforts, thousands still litter the countryside; they continue to sporadically kill and maim the population.

Most mines are confined to the sites of major battle fronts but there is some element of risk anywhere fighting has occurred. Areas north and west of Keren and around Ghinda are still thought to be heavily mined.

Check with local government and local village officials before travelling in less-frequented areas. Never stray off the road.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Eritrean Embassies & Consulates

The Eritrean embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was closed when this edition went to print. Eritrean embassies and consulates include the following:

### MAIMING MINES

During the Struggle, two million land mines were laid, which works out at almost one for every Eritrean inhabitant. However, the guerrillas quickly learnt to turn the deadly weapons against those who had laid them. Replanted up to 10 or 12 times, the mines accounted for 30% of all Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) victories.

Since independence, the government has tried hard to rid the land of mines, but thousands still remain. Between 1995 and 1998, 3500 antitank and antipersonnel mines exploded. Almost all victims were children.

**Australia** (☎ 02-6282 3489; fax 02-6282 5233; 26 Guilfoyle St, Yarralumla, ACT 2606)

**Canada** (☎ 613-234 3989; fax 613-234 6213; Suite 610, 75 Albert St, Ottawa K1P 5E7)

**Djibouti** (☎ 354961; fax 250212; Le Heron District, Djibouti City)

**Egypt** (☎ 20-2-303-3505; fax 20-2-303-0516; 6 El Fallah St, Al Muhandesein, PO Box 2624 Cairo)

**France** (☎ 01 43 06 15 56; fax 01 43 06 07 51; 1 rue de Stael, 75015 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 30-446 74 60; fax 30-446 74621; Stavanger Str 18, 10439 Berlin)

**Italy** (☎ 06-4274 1293; fax 06-4208 6806; Via Boncompagni No 16 Int 6, 00187 Roma)

**Kenya** (☎ 2-443164; fax 2-443165; 2nd fl, New Rehema House, Raphta Rd, Westlands, PO Box 38651, Nairobi)

**Sudan** (☎ 11-483834; fax 483835; Khartoum 2-St 39, PO Box 1618)

**UK** (☎ 207-713 0096; fax 207-713 0161; 96 White Lion St, London N1 9PF)

**US** (☎ 202-319 1991; fax 202-319 1304; 1708 New Hampshire Ave, NW Washington DC 20009)

**Yemen** (☎ 1-209422; fax 1-214088; Western Safia, Algeria St, Bldg No 68, PO Box 11040 San'a)

### Embassies & Consulates in Eritrea

All embassies and consulates are based in Asmara. They are open from Monday to Friday and keep regular business hours. Visa applications are usually received in the morning.

**Djibouti** (Map p311; ☎ 125990; Saro St)

**Egypt** (Map p313; ☎ 120056; Marsa Fatuma St)

**Ethiopia** Closed at the time of writing.

**France** (Map p313; ☎ 126599, 127615; Nakfa Ave)

**Germany** (☎ 186670; Saba Bldg, Warsaw St)

**Italy** (Map p311; ☎ 120160; 171-1 St)

**Sudan** (☎ 189595; Tiravolo District)

**UK** (Map p311; ☎ 120145; Mariam GMBI St)

**USA** (Map p311; ☎ 120004; 171-9 St)

**Yemen** (☎ 181399; Agamet St, Tiravolo District)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The best festivals and celebrations in Eritrea are linked to religious and secular holidays. See below.

### FOOD

For a rundown of the culinary delights in Eritrea, see the Food & Drink section (p306). The restaurant scene is fairly low-key except in Asmara, and prices won't make you cringe. Given the state of the economy, there are severe food shortages in the country, even in Asmara, and not everything is available on the menus.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is severely condemned by traditional and religious cultures and is a topic of absolute taboo. Eritrea's penal code concerning homosexuality is currently still based on Ethiopian law (see p262). Although homosexuality obviously exists in Eritrea, local gays behave with extreme discretion and caution. Gay and lesbian travellers are advised to do likewise.

## HOLIDAYS

### Public Holidays

Eritrea's public holidays can be divided into three categories: national (secular) holidays, Christian Orthodox holidays and Islamic holidays.

The country follows the Gregorian (European) calendar, with 12 months to the year. However, the Eritrean Orthodox church, which is derived from the Ethiopian Orthodox church, follows the Julian calendar, which has 13 months (see p268). Some events, therefore, trail those of the Gregorian calendar by around one week. Muslim holidays are based on the Hejira calendar, which is 10 or 11 days shorter than the Gregorian calendar, so these holidays fall 10 or 11 days earlier each year. The precise dates of these holidays are determined by the sighting of the moon.

National holidays include the following:

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**International Women's Day** 8 March

**Workers' Day** 1 May

**Liberation Day** 24 May

**Martyrs' Day** 20 June**Start of the Armed Struggle** 1 September

The main Christian Orthodox holidays:

**Leddēt (Christmas)** 7 January

**Timkat (Epiphany)** 19 January

**Tensae (Easter)** March/April (variable)

**Kiddus Yohannes (Orthodox New Year)** 11 September

**Meskel (Finding of the True Cross)** 27 September

Islamic holidays include Lailat al-Miraji, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha Arafa (the Muslim New Year), Al-Ashura, and Eid Mawlid al-Nabi (the Prophet's birthday).

For more information on the religious holidays listed in this section, see p261.

**INSURANCE**

A travel insurance policy covering all medical problems is essential for travel in Eritrea, while one to cover theft and loss really is helpful but not vital. For information on medical insurance, see p369.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

In Asmara, you'll never be far from an Internet café. Fees are usually around Nfa10 per hour. All Internet cafés have English keyboards. Unfortunately, connections were pretty slow at the time of writing. Outside the capital, Internet access is harder to find. There are a few outlets with Internet access in Massawa and Mendefera.

If you're travelling with a notebook, a couple of midrange and top-end hotels in Asmara have dataports in the rooms. However, your modem may not work once you leave your home country; for more information, see www.teleadapt.com.

**LEGAL MATTERS**

Foreign visitors are subject to the laws of the country in which they are travelling. Penalties for possession, use or trafficking of illegal drugs are strictly enforced in Eritrea. Convicted offenders can expect long jail sentences, fines and possible confiscation of personal property.

Note that consumption of the mildly intoxicating leaf *chat* isn't permitted in Eritrea.

Exchanging money at the black market (outside the banks) is strictly illegal. If you do indulge, be aware that you're taking a big risk: a two-year imprisonment sentence and a fine of up to Nfa2 million.

**MAPS**

A country map is useful, but not vital, given that most travellers rent a car with driver.

The best map currently available is the one produced by ITMB Publishing in Canada (1:9,000,000). Most map suppliers should stock it, including **Stanfords** (☎ 020-7836 1321; www.stanfords.co.uk), in London. For those planning a longer trip in the Horn, Michelin's 1:4,000,000 map 11745 (*Africa North and East - Arabia*) is very useful.

At the time of writing, no maps of the country were available in Eritrea. Your best bet is to get one before leaving home.

**MONEY**

The unit of currency is the nakfa (Nfa). It was introduced in November 1997 to replace the old Ethiopian birr. It is divided into 100 cents, and is available in 5, 10, 25, 50 and 100 cent pieces, and in 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 nakfa notes.

For exchange rates, see the table on the inside front cover of this guide. For information on costs, see p15.

**ATMs**

There are currently no ATMs in Eritrea.

**Black Market**

Oops, this is a very touchy issue in Eritrea since the government took drastic measures to eliminate the black market. Changing money on the black market still exists but is no longer widespread due to the heavy penalties incurred. However, it's tempting to change money on the black market because official rates massively overvalue the nakfa (up to 30%, which can make a big difference). But if you do indulge, you're taking a very big risk. Always conduct your transaction very discreetly, with somebody you know. US dollars and euros are the hot favourites. Note that the government introduced a currency declaration form in 2005, which makes changing money on the black market more complicated to handle.

**Cash**

While most major currencies are accepted in Asmara, US dollars (cash or travellers cheques) are the best currency to carry, followed a distant second by euros. Not only are US dollars easier to exchange outside the capital, but you have to pay for certain

things in US dollars, including some hotels, visa extensions, some air tickets and the departure tax.

**Credit Cards**

The larger hotels in the capital, some airlines and, increasingly, some travel agents accept credit cards but they usually charge an additional 5% to 7% commission; check in advance.

Himbol in Asmara can do cash advances on your credit card but the commission exacted is a ludicrous 7%.

**Moneychangers**

You can change cash with a minimum of hassle at the Commercial Bank of Eritrea in all major towns and cities. Himbol exchange office in Asmara also changes money. Each transaction must be registered on your currency declaration form. Don't lose time shopping around and comparing rates; they are fixed nationwide by the government and there is no commission.

Travellers cheques can also be changed without fuss in Asmara, as well as in the bigger branches of the Commercial Bank of Eritrea outside the capital.

**INTERNATIONAL TRANSFERS**

If you need to wire money, **Western Union** (www.westernunion.com) transfers can be made at the Commercial Bank of Eritrea in Asmara. Using the service of this global money-transfer company is a handy way of receiving money in Eritrea. The sender pays all the charges. Contact Western Union to find out the location of their nearest agency.

**Tippling**

The practice of tipping is expected in the towns only. In the rural areas, you may even have your tip returned to you.

In the smaller restaurants in the towns, service is included, and Eritreans don't tip unless the service has been exceptional (in this case, Nfa2 to Nfa5 would be an appropriate amount to leave). In bars and cafés, loose coins are sometimes left. However, in the larger restaurants accustomed to tourists, at least 10% will be expected, and in the larger hotels, staff will expect a bare minimum of Nfa10.

**Travellers Cheques**

It's not a bad idea to carry travellers cheques in Eritrea since the exchange rates are the same as cash and no commission is applied. Moreover, the process is pretty straightforward.

As with cash, travellers cheques are best carried in US dollars, although most major currencies can be exchanged in the banks in the capital and some banks in the bigger towns.

Don't forget to list your travellers cheques on your currency declaration form upon arrival, otherwise you won't be able to cash them.

**PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO**

Decent print film is quite widely available in the capital and costs around Nfa70 for a 36-exposure Kodak film. Some slide film is also available, but only in the capital. Outside Asmara, it's difficult to find film except in the larger towns, and it may not always be within its use-by date.

Asmara has plenty of one-hour film-processing labs. Depending on the print size, processing and printing costs about Nfa130 for a 36-exposure film. Don't count on transferring digital images onto CD; consider yourself lucky if you find an Internet café that is equipped to do it.

For information and technical tips on photographing in the Horn of Africa, see the boxed text, p266.

**Photographing People**

In some areas, people such as the colourful Rashaida and enigmatic Afars are more accustomed to photographers and understandably want to benefit by it too. They may ask for money. The fee should always be agreed in advance. In some places, you may be charged a fee for video cameras, though this seems to be randomly applied.

**Restrictions**

After 30 years of war, certain subjects in Eritrea are still considered 'sensitive'. Avoid military and police installations and personnel, and even airports and bridges. Civil engineering and government buildings are off limits too.

Outside the capital, it's fine to take pictures of war relics.

## POST

The Eritrean postal service is considered quite reliable, albeit not the speediest. Postage for the first 20g is Nfa7 worldwide, except for neighbouring countries, which are cheaper. Postcards cost Nfa6 worldwide. Courier services are available in Asmara.

There is a free poste restante service in the capital; you'll need to show your passport to collect mail. Address mail to Poste Restante, Post Office, Asmara, Eritrea.

## SHOPPING

Eritrea's tourism industry is not yet greatly developed, and you won't find many shops catering to tourists. Most curios are imported from other countries (such as the wooden carvings and sculptures from Kenya).

Shops sell intricate silver and gold jewellery (priced by weight), fabrics, ceramics and basketware. Quality (and some might say taste) is variable, so it's worth taking a good look around before you buy.

More unusual and interesting souvenirs include little pewter crosses, which are often crudely fashioned.

*Gabi*, the equivalent of a toga worn by the local men, are also available. They are quite bulky, but can be turned to a multitude of uses – blankets, ground sheets, pillows and wraps – while you're travelling.

In some of the shops along Harnet Ave, ivory carvings and turtle shells are still available. Apart from the environmental arguments against buying these, it is also illegal to import them into most Western countries.

Outside the capital, simple pottery, basketware and combs can be found in local markets.

## Bargaining

Unlike in other places in Africa, corruption is not the norm in Eritrea. Overcharging of tourists is very rare in the country, and prices are usually firmly fixed; haggling can offend Eritreans. However, all the usual discounts apply, and it's always worth asking for them for long stays in hotels, extended car hire and the like.

The one exception where haggling is almost expected is in the local shops and markets; there are no fixed prices. In shops, prices are rarely displayed.

## SOLO TRAVELLERS

As the level of day-to-day harassment is negligible, solo travellers will find travelling alone a breeze. You may be a minor curiosity in rural areas, but that's part of the fun, after all. However, it is an advantage to join a group (if any) if you want to hire a car so you can share costs.

## TELEPHONE & FAX

For the international dialling code, see the inside front cover of this book. International calls are best made from the telecommunications office found in all the main towns. International rates are the same all day, and costs are calculated per minute: about Nfa20 for Italy, Germany, Sweden, the UK and the USA; and Nfa25 for Australia, Canada and New Zealand. National calls cost between Nfa1.15 and Nfa5.45 (Nfa0.40 within Asmara). Telephone cards are available in denominations of Nfa34, Nfa59 and Nfa109 but are useful only in Asmara.

Mobile (cell) phones are becoming more widespread. The expanding network covers major towns throughout the country. Mobile phone numbers use eight digits: a two-digit number starting with 0, followed by six-digits. To reach a mobile phone from outside Eritrea, dial the country code, then the mobile number without the initial 0. At the time of writing, foreign mobile phones were not functioning in Eritrea for lack of roaming agreements with foreign countries. Check with your own company.

Faxes can be sent and received from some of the telecommunications offices. It costs between Nfa24 and Nfa35 for one minute's transmission, depending on the destination. It is also possible to make calls and send or receive faxes from the larger hotels, but rates are much more expensive than from telecommunications offices.

## TIME

Eritrea is three hours ahead of GMT/UTC. There is no daylight saving time. See the World Time Zone map, pp402-3.

## TOILETS

Both the sit-down and squat types of toilet are found in Eritrea, reflecting Italian and Arab influences respectively.

In the highlands, the sit-down type tends to prevail. In the Muslim lowlands

such as in Massawa, the squat style is more commonly found (but only in the cheaper hotels). Toilet paper is very rare in either, so carry your own.

In the small villages of the lowlands, you'll be lucky to find a bush. The inhabitants simply demarcate an area outside the village, point you in that direction, and off you trot.

If you're caught short in the towns, the hotels are the best places to head, and unlike in Europe, wouldn't dream of turning you away in your moment of need. Some of the Italian-designed cafés also have toilets.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

Eritrea's tourist facilities are fairly woeful, with little literature and only one tourist office, in Asmara. On the bright side, it's usually staffed by English-speaking students as part of their military service, but don't expect esoteric tips. However, it's a mandatory stop because it issues travel permits for foreign visitors. You could also approach one of the two privately run travel agencies in Asmara (see p312). They are a fount of useful information, but their interests obviously lie in selling you a tour.

Outside Eritrea, the Eritrean embassy or consulate in your home country (the few that exist) is your best bet, but tourist literature is generally limited.

In France contact the **Association France-Erythré** (asmara@paris@hotmail.com; 6 rue Charles Bassée, 94120 Fontenay-sous-Bois).

## TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Taxis are widely available in towns and are good for getting around, though none have wheelchair access. Car hire with a driver is easy to organise, if expensive. In Asmara, at least one hotel (Hotel Inter-Continental) has facilities for travellers with wheelchairs. A few hotels have lifts.

Eritrea's Struggle for Independence left many of its inhabitants disabled. Land mines continue to maim the population. Disabled visitors can expect to find a sympathetic and accommodating attitude from Eritreans.

## VISAS & DOCUMENTS

All foreign nationals require visas for entry to Eritrea. Visas should be obtained from the Eritrean embassy or consulate before you leave your home country. If there isn't any diplomatic representation in your home

country, obtain a visa from the nearest one. If this is inconvenient, you can contact one of the travel agencies in Asmara (see p312). They can offer a tourist visa service for about US\$20. You'll need to fax them details of your passport pages and give them at least 10 days to organise the visa. They will fax the details back to you and you'll then be issued with the visa upon arrival at the airport (US\$40).

If you're planning to visit neighbouring countries first, including Djibouti, it might be easier to get a visa there, although it's not possible in Ethiopia.

For visa applications, you'll need your passport (valid for at least three months) and one passport photo. Some embassies also require you to show proof of an onward ticket before they'll issue a visa. Most embassies require you to possess a certificate as evidence of yellow-fever vaccination if you will be arriving in Eritrea within six days of visiting an infected area.

The visa application form may require an address in Eritrea and a 'reference'. If you don't have any, find a hotel and tour operator in this chapter, and use these names. Applications can be made by post, and normally take 48 hours to process.

You usually have to travel within three months of the date of issue of the visa.

Tourist visas are for single entry only, and are valid for 30 days from the date of arrival in Eritrea. They cost between US\$40 and US\$50.

## Travel Permits

Due to the ongoing tension with Ethiopia, travelling in Eritrea has become pretty bureaucratic. But there's nothing too irksome; getting permits is pretty straightforward.

Head first to the Tourist Information Centre (p312) in Asmara, where you'll fill in a form and list all the places you intend to visit in the country (be extensive). The form is then signed on the spot by the staff. Then you'll be asked to make a copy and keep one for yourself. Keep this travel permit at all times outside Asmara, as you'll be asked to show it at checkpoints, along with your passport. If you travel overland and come from Djibouti, you'll need to go to the Immigration Office in Assab to get this permit, otherwise you won't be allowed to journey on.

Eritrea's 'national treasures' are protected by paperwork. To visit any of the archaeological sites of Eritrea, you'll need to get a special permit from the **National Museum office** (Map p311; ☎ 112318; Mariam GMBI St, Asmara; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri), on the 1st floor of the National Museum building. You'll need your passport and Nfa150 per site (or US\$10). The paper can be issued immediately; the staff are helpful and efficient. If you're taking a tour, your agency should do this for you. Bring your passport.

You'll also need a permit to visit the Dahlak Islands, but this should be handled by the travel agency or the owner of the boat that takes you there. It costs US\$20.

To visit the monasteries obtain a permit from the **Orthodox Tewahdo Church Headquarters** (☎ 182098; Warsay St; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) in Asmara (ask for the 'monastery tour application'). It's about 300m past the Lufthansa office, across the street. It costs Nfa150 or US\$10 per monastery.

At the time of writing, Nakfa and Filfil were off limits to travellers.

### Visa Extensions

In Asmara, the **Department of Immigration** (Map p311; ☎ 200033, ext 204; Denden St; ☎ 7-11.30am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) will extend your visa twice for a further 30 days. This costs US\$40 (except for US citizens, who pay US\$25) and you will need one photo, photocopies of your passport details and visa page, and a 20¢ stamp. Payment must be made in cash and with exact change. It takes about three days to process. Applications must be made before the old visa expires.

### Visas for Onward Travel

For contact details of embassies and consulates in Eritrea, see p358.

**Djibouti** One-month entry visas cost US\$30 or €25, require two photos, and are issued within 24 hours.

**Sudan** You'll need two photos and a copy of your passport pages. Then the application is sent to Khartoum (Sudan). Expect a long processing time (about three weeks). If the answer is favourable, you'll pay US\$60 (US\$160 for US citizens) and you'll have to take a medical examination at Sembel Hospital. The embassy is tricky to find; it's tucked away in a side street about 500m north of Alla Scala Hotel.

**Yemen** One-month entry visas cost US\$55, require two photos, a valid return air ticket and a medical examination at Sembel Hospital. They are processed within 24 hours.

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

With a very low national crime rate and an unusually liberal policy towards women, Eritrea must be one of the safest and least restrictive countries on the continent for women travellers. Use your common sense, though; all the usual precautions apply, such as safety in numbers.

## ERITREA TRANSPORT

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Although Eritrea's conflict with Ethiopia has taken a heavy toll on its international land, sea and air links, Eritrea is by no means isolated and is still connected to the outside world. Flying is by far the most convenient way to enter the country. A few adventurous souls also travel overland to Eritrea from Djibouti.

### Entering Eritrea

As long as you have a visa (p363) or have made arrangements to pick up your visa on arrival at the airport, entering Eritrea should be no sweat. You will be asked to fill out a currency declaration form (see p358).

### PASSPORT

Other than needing a visa, there are no entry restrictions for any nationalities bar Ethiopians.

### Air

Travel during the months of July and August, and over Easter, Christmas and New Year should be booked well in advance. Eritreans living abroad tend to visit their families during this time and most flights are more expensive.

### THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this section is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this section should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

### AIRPORTS & AIRLINES

Eritrea's one international airport lies 6km from the capital. Eritrean Airlines is the national carrier and has a good safety record.

The following are airlines flying to and from Eritrea, with offices in Asmara:

**EgyptAir** (airline code MS; Map p311; ☎ 127034; www.egyptair.com.eg; Marsa Fatuma St) Hub Cairo.

**Eritrean Airlines** (airline code B8; Map p313;

☎ 125500; www.flyeritrea.com; Harnet Ave) Hub Asmara.

**Lufthansa** (airline code LH; ☎ 186904; www.lufthansa.com; Warsay St) Hub Frankfurt.

**Saudi Arabian Airlines** (airline code SV; Map p313;

☎ 120166; www.saudiarabianairlines.com; Harnet Ave) Hub Jeddah.

**Yemenia Yemen Airways** (airline code IY; Map p313; ☎ 121035; www.yemenia.com; Harnet Ave) Hub Sana'a.

### AFRICA & MIDDLE EAST

Before the war, Ethiopian Airlines had daily flights from Addis Ababa to Asmara. These should resume eventually, but it is difficult to predict when.

EgyptAir has two flights a week between Asmara and Cairo for US\$550/680 one way/return.

Saudi Arabian Airlines has three flights a week between Asmara and Riyadh via Jeddah (US\$570 return).

Yemenia has three flights weekly between Asmara and Sana'a (US\$285 return).

Eritrean Airlines flies twice a week to Djibouti (US\$215/285 one way/return) and on to Dubai (US\$275 return). It also flies to Jeddah (US\$255/375 one way/return).

At the time of writing there was talk of starting services between Asmara and Nairobi (Kenya). The flight would be operated by Kenya Airways on a twice-weekly basis. Check with your travel agent.

### ASIA

The best connections from Asia are via Dubai (United Arab Emirates), from where there are connections to Asmara with Eritrean Airlines.

### AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

There are no direct flights from Australia and New Zealand to Eritrea. The best routing is through Cairo (via Singapore) or via Sana'a (Yemen). You can also fly to Dubai (United Arab Emirates), and then continue to Eritrea via Djibouti with Eritrean Airlines. Plan on from about A\$2500 return.

### DEPARTURE TAX

International departure tax is US\$20 or €20, paid in cash after check-in.

### UK & EUROPE

Eritrean Airlines flies to Frankfurt, Rome, Milan and Amsterdam, on a twice-weekly basis in high season, and on a once-weekly basis in low season. Expect to pay around €750 return to/from Frankfurt, €820 return to/from Amsterdam, Rome or Milan.

Other international airlines connecting Asmara to Europe include Lufthansa, which currently flies three times a week from Frankfurt for around €980 return; EgyptAir, which flies to Asmara (via Cairo) from London or Paris twice a week for around €850; and Yemenia Yemen Airways, which has flights from Paris, Frankfurt and Rome to Asmara (via Sana'a) for around €820.

### USA

United Airlines and Lufthansa fly on a code-share basis three times a week from various US cities to Asmara (via Frankfurt), and a return trip will set you back anything from US\$2000 to US\$2300.

Eritrean Airlines, in conjunction with either Northwest Airlines, Delta Airlines or United Airlines, operates flights to/from the USA via Amsterdam or Frankfurt. Return trips cost from US\$1500 to US\$1800 (depending on which US city you depart from).

### Land

#### BUS

There are no bus services between the neighbouring countries and Eritrea.

### DJIBOUTI

There's only one border crossing, at Rahaita/Moulhoulé, about 110km south of Assab. Travel overland to/from Djibouti is possible but traffic is fairly limited and public transport far from reliable. Only dirt roads lead south of Assab to Djibouti.

From Djibouti, there are infrequent pickups and Land Cruisers that ply the route between Obock and Moulhoulé, the last Djiboutian settlement before the border (about four hours); from there, in theory, Eritrean bush taxis go to Assab (four hours). Be

warned: there's no fixed schedule, so stock up on travel literature and CDs and be prepared to hang around for a few days either in Obock or in Assab before setting off.

Coming from Djibouti, you'll have to go to the Immigration Office in Assab to get your travel permit. You'll need it to journey on in Eritrea.

Leaving Eritrea, it's still advisable to register at the Immigration Office in Assab, even if there's an Immigration Office at Rahaita (the Eritrean border town).

For more information on this border crossing, see p290.

## ETHIOPIA

As long as the conflict with Ethiopia remains unresolved, the borders between the two countries will remain closed. The most convenient way to get to Ethiopia is to go through Djibouti (p284).

When the situation between the two countries improves, you'll be able to use one of the three sealed roads connecting Eritrea with Ethiopia: the first goes from Asmara via Mendefera and Adi Quala to Aksum in Ethiopia; the second route goes from Asmara via Dekemhare and Adi Keyh in Eritrea to Adigrat in Ethiopia; and the third route connects Assab in the south with Addis Ababa in Ethiopia.

## SUDAN

At the time of writing, it was possible to cross the border from Eritrea to Sudan but not the other way. Check the current situation when you get there.

The road is now sealed from Asmara to Teseney, near the border. From Teseney, there are bush taxis to Adi Bara at the Sudanese border. From there you should find transportation to Kassala (Sudan).

## Sea

Eritrea has two ports, Massawa and Assab. There are no scheduled passenger services, but many cargo ships from other Red Sea countries use the ports, particularly the one at Massawa. It is sometimes possible to hitch lifts.

## GETTING AROUND

While the conflict with Ethiopia remains unresolved, travel around Eritrea may be slightly restricted. A travel permit is necessary

to travel outside Asmara. Fear not, it's quite an unfussy affair (see p363). At the time of research, Nakfa and Filfil were declared off limits to foreigners for unknown reasons. However, this might change in the twinkling of an eye, so check the situation when you get to Asmara.

## Air

### AIRLINES IN ERITREA

**Eritrean Airlines** (☎ 125500; www.flyeritrea.com), the national carrier, flies to just one domestic destination: Assab.

## Bicycle

If you're ready to sweat it out, it's not a bad idea to get around by bicycle. Given the outrageous price of petrol, traffic is minimal. The only real problem is the steep roads, except in the western lowlands where you can expect more flat terrain. Oh, and there's the heat too. After a couple of weeks, you'll be ready for the Tour de France!

Asmara is also a great city in which to cycle. It's possible to hire bikes in one place only, see p327.

## Boat

At the time of writing there were no regular boat services between Massawa and Assab on the Red Sea, but there's speculation that ferry transport may resume on this route. Ask in Massawa.

## Bus

The bus service in Eritrea is reasonably efficient and extensive, but few would call it comfortable – expect something resembling a battered school bus. Coverage of Keren, Massawa, Mendefera and Dekemhare is excellent. Services thin out the further away from the capital you get. There are usually at least two buses a day between the larger towns (Asmara, Massawa and Keren), and in principle one bus a day between the smaller ones.

Fares used to be very cheap, but with the soaring fuel prices and shortages it's become a bit less economical. However, the bus still remains the best mode of transport

### DOMESTIC DEPARTURE TAX

The domestic departure tax is Nfa20.

### CYCLING IN ERITREA *Tom Hall*

Eritreans love their cycling. At weekends races are cheered by enthusiastic, ululating crowds and the annual Giro d'Eritrea in February is the country's biggest sporting event. If this gets your legs twitching, here are a few pointers on two-wheeled travel in Eritrea.

Bike hire isn't common in Asmara. Your hotel can probably arrange a mountain bike for a morning, but they won't know what to charge you so be ready to negotiate. For anything more serious consider bringing your own wheels. Workshops in the market area of Asmara can fix most problems but lack sophisticated spare parts. If you think you might need a titanium screw or a specialised pedal clip, bring one with you.

Lots of the day excursions from Asmara in this book could be done by bicycle, at least one way. If your brakes are in good order the ride from Asmara to Nefasit, complete with hairpin bends and baboons for company, is thrilling. At the bottom simply flag down a passing bus and ask them to put your bike on the roof for the ride back up. One bus I travelled on had two live goats on the roof for most of the journey, so a bike won't pose a problem! The area around Massawa is flat, hot and windy so cycling is best limited to local exploring. Always take as much water as you're likely to need and keep protected from the sun. Seek local advice before setting out.

If you do any cycling, remember to keep your passport with you for going through checkpoints when leaving and entering towns. Cycling isn't allowed on the main streets of downtown Asmara – a hangover from pre-independence days when cyclists played a prominent role in agitating against Ethiopian targets.

for budgeteers. Services run between 6am and 4.30pm or 6pm but it's wise to start your journey early in the morning. For long-distance journeys (those taking three hours or longer), buses usually leave between 5.30am and 6.30am.

The major drawback of bus travel is that it's time-consuming. Progress on the road is often slow. Additionally, buses don't adhere to fixed timetables; they depart when they're full. For long-distance journeys, you need to be at the bus station by 6am to buy a ticket and be guaranteed a seat. It's not usually possible to buy tickets in advance, except for the journey between Asmara and Teseney and between Asmara and Assab.

## Car & Motorcycle

Over long distances in Eritrea, cars can be twice as quick as buses. It gives you freedom of movement and it's a great way to visit the country at your own pace.

### BRING YOUR OWN VEHICLE

If you're taking your own car or motorcycle into Eritrea, you should always carry your passport, a valid international driving licence, the vehicle ownership papers and proof of insurance (third-party insurance is mandatory) covering all the countries you are visiting. Cars can be imported duty-free for a period of four months.

### DRIVING LICENCE

To hire a car, you must have a valid international driving licence and be over 25 years old.

### FUEL & SPARE PARTS

Ouch! At the time of research, petrol was in short supply in Eritrea and prices were exorbitant. In Asmara petrol was Nfa38 per litre and diesel Nfa17. Fortunately, distances between most destinations are quite short.

### HIRE

Vehicle hire is expensive in Eritrea. If you're just planning on travelling on the main routes between towns, a 2WD vehicle is sufficient. But some sights, including Qohaito, are only accessible by 4WD.

Fortunately, the country is small and, with your own wheels, most of its attractions can be seen in quite a short period. If you're travelling solo, or as a couple, you can reduce the cost by joining up with other travellers to hire a car plus a driver/guide. Most vehicles accommodate around five passengers.

A deposit of around Nfa2000 is required to rent a 4WD; for a car it's around Nfa1000.

A driver is usually provided for your 4WD, which is a great help. Having someone who speaks Tigrinya and knows the

**FUEL CRISIS**

There were major diesel and petrol shortages in Eritrea at the time of writing, as a result of the country's lack of hard currency to buy petrol. This might affect bus schedules and vehicle hire.

roads is absolutely priceless. Sometimes there's an additional charge if you want the driver to work more than eight hours in a day; check in advance.

Cars cost Nfa350 to Nfa550 per day; a 4WD costs Nfa1500 to Nfa1900 per day, including third-party insurance. The first 50km to 90km are free, and each additional kilometre costs between Nfa1.50 and Nfa3. For Assab, there's usually a surcharge of Nfa500 per day. If you want to hire a car with a driver, add Nfa100 per day. Not all rental agencies accept credit cards. If they do, they add an extra commission (usually 7%).

Cars can be rented from the following agencies in Asmara:

**Africa Rent Car** (Map p313; ☎ 121755; fax 202597; Nora St)

**Alpha Travel Agency** (Map p311; ☎ 201355; fax 121668) Off Bahti Meskerem Sq.

**Fontana Rent a Car** (Map p313; ☎ 120052; fax 127905; Mata St)

**Leo Car Rental** (Map p311; ☎ 125859, 202307; dilorenzo@cts.com.er; Sematat Ave)

**ROAD CONDITIONS**

There's a small but surprisingly good network of sealed roads connecting Asmara to the north (until Keren), south (until the Ethiopian border), east (until Massawa) and west (until Barentu). Recent projects include the construction of sealed roads between Keren and Nakfa (under progress), Massawa and Nakfa and, eventually, Massawa and Assab in the south (sealing works had begun on the southern edge of Massawa at the time of writing).

The track between Massawa and Assab has been much improved.

**ROAD HAZARDS**

The road hazards that exist in Ethiopia also apply in Eritrea: precipitous roads, curfews, children playing, livestock wandering, land

mines and roads that are impassable in the rainy season. For more detailed information see p280.

**ROAD RULES**

Driving is on the right-hand side of the road.

**Hitching**

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country, and we don't recommend it. Given the scarcity of traffic, hitching is not really an option in Eritrea anyway.

**Local Transport**

Taxis are plentiful in Asmara and can also be easily found in Massawa, Keren and Mendefera.

**Tours**

In Asmara there's a handful of reputable travel agencies that organise tours around the country. Tours can be tailored to your time, means and interests; from one-day bird-watching excursions from Asmara or weekend trips to the beach in Massawa, to boat trips to the Dahlak Islands or six-day expeditions through the Dankalia region to Assab. They also offer hotel and flight reservations and car hire, as well as visa services. The following ones get good reports from travellers and have plenty of experience in guiding foreigners:

**Explore Eritrea Travel & Tours** (Map p313; ☎ 120259, 125555; www.exploreeritrea.com; Adi Hawesha St, Asmara)

**Travel House International** (Map p313; ☎ 201881/2; www.travelhouseeritrea.com; 175-15 St, Asmara)

**Train**

The old Italian railway that stretched between Massawa, Asmara, Keren and Agordat was another casualty of war. Many of its tracks were pulled up to reinforce trenches. See also p326.

However, a section of the stretch has been repaired and there's now a regular service on Sunday morning between Asmara and Nefasit (US\$50 or Nfa750 return, one hour). It leaves Asmara at 8am and is back at noon. If there's a group of you (say, eight to 10 people), the train can also be chartered until Massawa. Contact the **train station** (☎ 123365) in Asmara.

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