

Somaliland: wonderful adventures in an independent but unrecognized country



Somaliland tortoise

In the final frontier of undiscovered Africa Somaliland is a must-see for intrepid travelers in search of the exotic. The country is not officially recognized but it is truly independent and ready to welcome the visitors who take the trouble to visit this open air museum.

Initially a British protectorate, Somaliland gained its independence in 1960 and entered voluntarily into a union with the former Italian Somaliland five days later. Before long, struggles erupted, but the country remained lashed together under the dictator Mohammad Siad Barre until a vicious civil war broke out in 1988. By its conclusion in 1991, Somaliland was bombed to the ground. It is still recovering today: travelers will see shells of tanks

along major roads, blast marks from artillery along hillsides, and a few bombed-out buildings or ruins remaining in cities.

After 1991, Somaliland began the painstaking process of separating itself. By 2010 it had its own free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections, with the presidential elections notable in particular for unseating the incumbent in a very close race. A remarkably peaceful transition of power followed.

Camels also enjoy the beach





Today the country is independent but unrecognized by the international community. Violence is rare, and there is an active police force to ensure that laws are respected. Visitors who will have a unique adventure with plenty of attractions a long way from the political debates and struggles of the rest of Somalia.

So how do you get there? You need a Somaliland visa to enter. Somali visas are not accepted. Most travellers get a visa in Addis Ababa or the Somaliland Mission in London. A Somaliland visa is

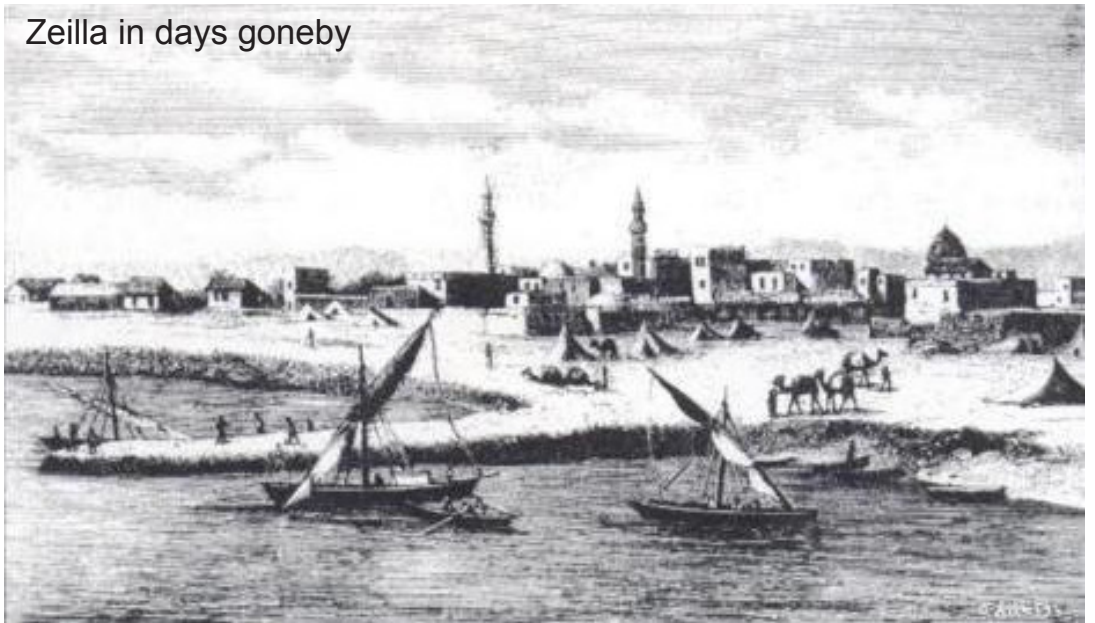
also allegedly available from the Somaliland representation in Djibouti. The unofficial Somaliland "embassy" in London will also issue a visa. The whole process is refreshingly unbureaucratic and can be handled by post, which makes London the most convenient place to get a visa for travellers who live in Europe and/or want to obtain a visa before travelling to the region.

There is an international airport in Hargeisa with flights to and from Dubai, Djibouti City, and many other cities and towns across the

Zeilla runins



Zeilla in days goneby



Horn of Africa and the Somaliland region. There is also an international airport at Berbera with many international flights, most notably to Dubai.

It is possible to enter Somaliland from Ethiopia by road.. However, if you plan to leave Somaliland by road it is advisable to make Ethiopian Visa arrangements (multiple entry) before traveling to Somaliland as the process of getting an Ethiopian Visa in Hargeisa can be quite cumbersome and time consuming.

So what do you when you get

there? Travel information about the country is scarce but Afrol News (Africa online service) provides some interesting details about the main tourist attractions. The capital, Hargeisa, has a provincial museum. There is also a menagerie that includes lions, leopards, antelopes, birds, and reptiles. Outside of Hargeisa, is the Laas Gaal, a complex of caves and rock shelters that contain some of the earliest known art on the African continent, dating back to 9,000 B.C.

The cuisine is interesting: For

Hargeisa Provincial Museum





Las Geel rock paintings

breakfast, Somalis eat a flat bread called laxoox and cereal or porridge made of millet or cornmeal. They also eat rice or noodles with sauce or meat for lunch. Pasta became very popular under Italian rule. Bananas are common in the south of the region. A traditional soup called maraq is made of vegetables, meat and beans and is usually eaten with flat bread or pitta bread. Beans are usually eaten for dessert.

Though not commonly served,

Somalis eat xalwo, a jelly-like sweet made with water, sugar, and honey, though peanuts are sometimes added. Dates are also popular.

Somaliland's third largest city, Berbera, is a lot smaller than the capital. This port town has a more comfortable climate, fantastic beaches and a charming architecture. Located about 150 kilometres north-east of Hargeisa and easily and safely reached by bus, bushtaxi or air from the

capital.

Kilometres of lush sandy beaches stretch out from Berbera. It used to be a Soviet and later US military base, and locals still remember what a good time the foreigners had on the beach. They livened up the city and left a popular legacy of restaurants which offer visitors delicious seafood and other Somali and international dishes.

Beyond Berbera, its time for real adventures not for the faint hearted who do not like roughing it. The westernmost coastline, in Awdal province, is among Africa's most spectacular land and seascapes. Rugged, green cliffs, tropical beach bays, unexploited coral

reefs and ancient towns and ruins – all the ingredients of an international tourist destination in future.

From Berbera, the first major settlement is Lughaya. Camels graze on the beach, the reef is unspoilt and it is the ideal place to meet the rural locals, mostly cattle nomads and farmers, and learn about the other non-urban lifestyle that still dominates the country.

Further west, the landscape culminates in scenic cliffs, bays and beaches. The islands off the coast, for example Saad-Din Island, provide the best coral reefs and spectacular dives.

The coastline takes you to Zeilla

Lughaya beach



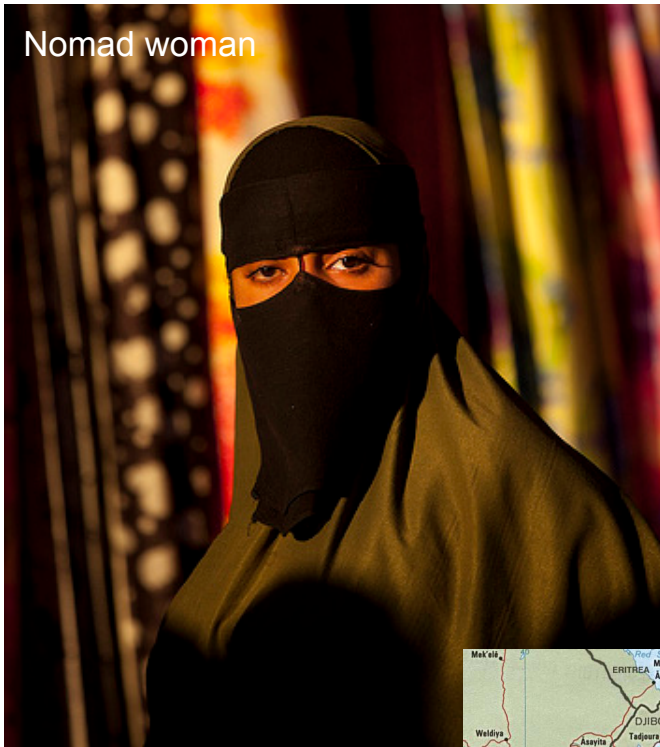


Somali
cuisine

The old and the
new in Berbera



Nomad woman



colonial times, it was overshadowed by Djibouti port in French Somaliland and the British port in Berbera and today the town is a shadow of its former self. The seaside is a great place for swimming, snorkeling, fishing and scuba-diving. Small-scale farming and semi-nomadic pastoralism is what the country is all about as its people struggle to make a living

an ancient port city on the Gulf of Aden coast which dates back to the 7th century. The town, of 25,000 inhabitants, is known for the Arabic, Persian and Ottoman influence on its architectural buildings. It was once the capital of the Sultanate of Adal a major power in the 9th and 10 century. Zeila again flourished as a city state and a trade and learning hub from the 14th to the 19th century. During



in a challenging climate.

The Las Geel (Meaning "camel watering hold") is a cave painting site situated in the countryside near Hargeisa. It was discovered by a French archaeological team in 2002. The cave paintings are thought to be the oldest and best preserved in Africa dating back to 9,000 B.C The government keeps the cave paintings safe and only a restricted number of tourists are allowed.

Security is a problem in the enchanting Erigavo mountain area which is close to Puntland a region

that has its sights on the eastern parts of Somaliland.

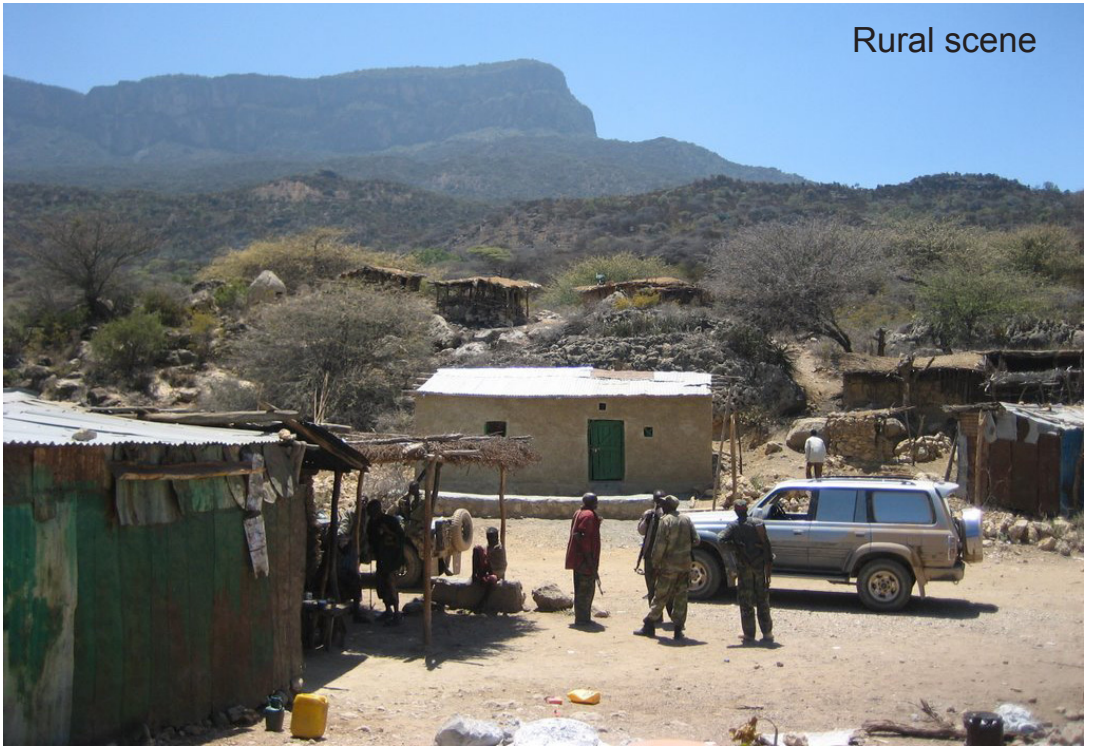
Erivago is the entrance to the highest mountains in the region, reaching over 2400 metres with spectacular views and interesting little villages. With the height, the climate improves, the vegetation increase and juniper forests can be found in some of the valleys.

The scenic mountain landscape and its many trails are an open invitation to trekkers looking for the unusual. In addition to some breathtaking landscapes, wildlife - while rapidly declining - is



Ottoman
architecture
in Berbera

Rural scene



interesting and includes jackals, gazelles and baboons. Somaliland is famous for its extensive and exotic birdlife, with over 600 species.

Travelers should consider Somaliland's tough climate as a key to travel timing. There are two rainy seasons - March to June and October to November - and unlike other travel destinations, this is the time to go. Avoid the dry season from July to September, as temperatures up to 40 degrees Celsius make travelling exhausting. Anytime from December to June

would be a good time.



Awdal Province