

# Touring the African Horn

# Djibouti

## Small is beautiful

Djibouti -Mounir El-Fishawy

We left the airport of the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, in a small airplane, Fokker 55, on our way to Djibouti. The journey took about 90 minutes. We landed in Djibouti International Airport, (Hampoli). When the door opened and we climbed down the steps of the aircraft, we were welcomed by both the hot climate and the warm reception. The airport is so small there was no need for transport to the terminal building and we walked the 300 m to passport control. In Djibouti small is the operative word. The country itself is only 23000 sq. km. It has common borders with Somalia to the south, Ethiopia and Sudan to the west, Eritrea to the north and it faces the Red Sea to the east. Its population is estimated at 500-600 thousand, but there has not been a recent census to confirm this. Almost all the people are Muslims who speak four languages: French, Afari, Somali and Arabic. The least used by the minority, who are either of Yemenite origin, ex- students of Al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo or graduates of schools and universities in different Arab countries. ➤

بيت بالقرب من مدينة "تَجْرَة"  
A house near Tadjoura.

## Qat

All the people in Djibouti have a point of universal agreement: qat! Qat is a short green plant, sold in bundles. It is consumed, with a diluted fizzy drink, by chewing the leaves and storing them in one corner of the mouth. The qat-chewing session lasts several hours, usually starting at 1pm, when the eagerly awaited Ethiopian transport plane arrives every day. The people have developed the art of recognizing its roaring sound which is different from that of other aircraft.

When I asked one of the locals about the effects of qat he told me that it starts to work an hour after it is taken by inducing feelings of elation, hyperactivity and constant euphoria. Djiboutians consumes 12 tons of qat every day, at a cost of about \$200 thousand. The delay of the Ethiopian airplane makes the people anxious but the couriers dare not miss a delivery as they are well aware they would have a riot on their hands.

One lady told me that qat consumes between 30-40% of the family income. Women's attempts to make their husbands refrain from this habit almost always end in failure. The wives give in and have a good time with their husbands instead of fighting a battle they will never win.

Talking to the people of Djibouti is a delicate undertaking because there are so many red lines one should not cross. They believe chewing qat is normal and there is no use telling them it is haram: they even chew it in Ramadan after Iftar (first meal after sunset) and before Imsak (the last meal before dawn)

When we spoke to the elders about this drug they answered wisely and thoughtfully that every nation has it's own culture and customs. The people of Djibouti are happy, so why do they need to think about changing?

When we discussed tourism the topic we were mainly interested in: I was impressed by a comment from one lady who pointed out that if the people had different forms of entertainment, parks or cultural events they might eventually give up qat. She probably meant tourism is the solution.

Djibouti, one of the countries of the African Horn, is an ideal tourist venue due to its location and climate, which ranges from warm to hot. The climate affects the people, who are good-natured and warm-hearted. Perhaps the shining ➔



حرفة يدوية.  
Hand craft..

جبال جيبوتي الخضراء.  
The green mountains of Djibouti.

white teeth which contrast with their black faces give you the added impression that the wide smile expresses a strong welcome to visitors. They all rush to help if you ask them for anything. Djibouti City, the capital, is not the main

tourist; it is merely a transit point, especially when approached by air or ship. All the ministries, government establishments, committees and companies, as well as private sector companies especially in the import – export sector are in the capital.

Commercial activity in Djibouti depends on the import of almost everything. The main local industry is salt mining and manufacturing in the Lake Assal region. Little else is worth exporting hence the unlimited opportunities for Arab and foreign industrialists and merchants. Faisal Mohammad, the Head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry emphasised that the government offers all the incentives and facilities to any investor who wants to conduct a feasibility study in any field: industrial or commercial or is interested in investing in the tourist sector.

The city itself is very small: the word 'large' has to be reserved for the port and airport. Djibouti's airport (Hampoli) is run by the administration of Jabal Ali in Dubai. This authority

poured around \$400 million into the country – seemingly a sound investment, but the locals are afraid of the negative consequences of oil exploration. It threatens the fish stocks, especially sharks known

locally as rawcan palin, which are found only in Djibouti and Australia. The coral reefs, an irreplaceable treasure, take 100 years to grow and must not be damaged by an oil spill.

The streets of Djibouti are always buzzing with life despite the hot summer weather. These streets are well maintained without a single traffic light in the capital or the entire country. Yet the cars move around very smoothly and accidents are almost unheard of!

### The City Centre

The city centre of Djibouti is full of restaurants and cafeterias, which stay open late. The best meal is grilled fish, quite similar in shape, taste and preparation to masgouf, famous in the restaurants which line Baghdad's Abu Nawas riverside boulevard. The fish is cut from the back, seasoned with salt and spices, and then cooked in the oven.

The Odeon is the only cinema in the heart of the capital. In fact it is the only cinema in the country and is only open two nights a week. We were told the city had two other cinemas but they closed their doors because the spread of satellite television, with its numerous channels, distracted cinema goers. The city centre is also the place for hotels: mostly three star establishments including Residence de Europe and Residence de Bellevue. The only five stars hotel is the Djibouti Sheraton.

The most popular sport, entertainment and leisure activity for both foreigners and locals is an evening walk along the Red Sea coast. You can see the harbour and the opposite side of the bay over the calm water. Walking in the heat of the day is not recommended.

### Development of tourism

On our second day in the country we met French-educated Mohammad Adulallah Waais, the Director General of the National Office of Tourism in Djibouti. A quiet, cultured individual he was as active as Mosa Mohammad Ahmad, the Djiboutian ambassador in Egypt who facilitated our trip and Ahmad Esi Jaboba, the Djibouti ➤



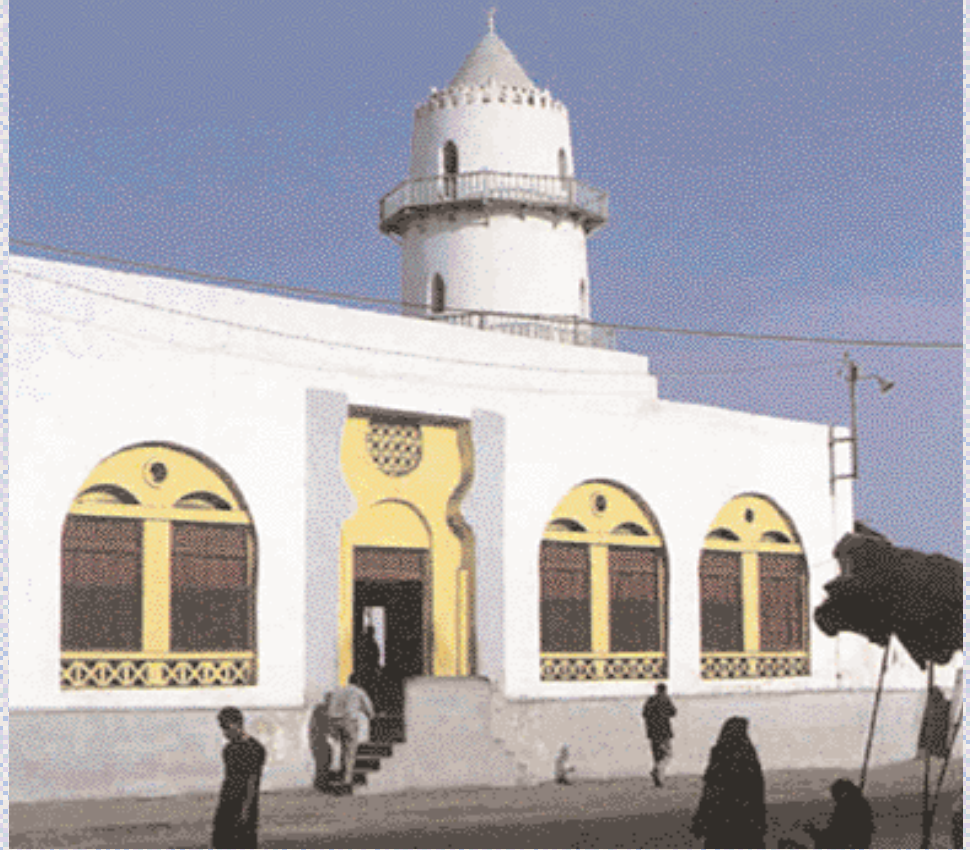
عريس من "عفري".  
Bride groom from "Afra".

مسجد حمودي  
Hammoudi Mosque.

ambassador in Asmara. Waais loves his country, wants to promote it in the best possible light and goes far beyond the call of duty to make visitors feel welcome and comfortable.

We were introduced to Hasna Hassanto, an energetic woman in her fifties and the most prominent female MP – ten percent of parliamentary seats have been allocated for women. She also does voluntary work throughout the country and runs a hand craft workshop to conserve Djibouti's heritage. As soon as she learned about our interest in tourism, she invited us to a traditional Afri wedding. The Afri tribes are the most prominent tribe in Djibouti and neighbouring countries. She promised that the Sultan of the region would be honoured to receive us in Tadjoura County.

When we left the capital by jeep, stunning natural scenery greeted us: very high mountains, valleys and caves. In contrast some of the roads followed the coastline of the Red Sea. In Saga Lou, deer and camels darted across our path as we drove through date palm forests. The sea region is dotted with islands. Seen from above



they resemble a marvellous natural painting. As we became engrossed in this beautiful landscape painted by God's almighty hand, we felt it was haram that such a jewel in the tourist crown had yet to be discovered by the international tourist industry.

### The road to Tadjoura passes Bier Siha

The tar seal came to an end and the driver ventured into the ragged mountains where the journey became an endurance test for the passengers. Most of the roads ➤



حياة بسيطة.  
A simple life.

## Djibouti at a glance

<b>The capital</b>	: Djibouti City
<b>Location</b>	: African Horn (East Africa)
<b>Common Borders</b>	: Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea
<b>Area</b>	: 23,000 sq.km
<b>Population</b>	: 0.5 million
<b>Important cities</b>	: Djibouti & Tadjoura
<b>System of Government</b>	: Republic
<b>Currency</b>	: Djibouti Franc ( Dj.F)
<b>Rate of exchange</b>	: \$1 = 177.760 Dj. F
<b>Spoken language</b>	: French, Afari, Somalis, Arabic.
<b>Religion</b>	: Islam (almost 100%)
<b>Number of cinemas</b>	: One

were empty except for a few nomadic tribesmen and their small settlements. We were surprised to find a mosque en route constructed by a well-intentioned individual from the Gulf. We stopped to pray and chatted to the young and old. The conversation of the old folks was interspersed with a warm sense of humour and they served us cardamon tea. After travelling for an hour through ragged mountains and trees, we reached the thatched houses and tents of the village of Beir Siha, where we spent the night. The weather was cool, or at least refreshing in contrast with the capital. The facilities in Beir Siha are just like the hotels of a small tourist village. Friendly people gave us refreshments in beautiful, natural surroundings: The area was surrounded by trees, the air unbelievably pure, the spas purified by the porous mountains which ensured the best drinking water.

## Tadjoura and Randa

We spent an enjoyable night with our companion Mohammad Ali the famous Djiboutian tv broadcaster. He told us many stories about the people of Tadjoura and Randa, whom we met the next day. They are no different from the people of Beir Siha - only the environment is different. Beir Siha is densely populated with busy shops and restaurants, in contrast to the small city of Tadjoura and the sea side



Djibouti Map.

خارطة جيبوتي.

port. This area can be used for ship building, and the berthing of large cargo and passenger ships, as well as boats and cruise liners which could easily activate commerce and tourism. The area has tremendous potential for the development of tourism and could easily become Djibouti's main attraction. But the building of hotels has to be a top priority. We arrived at the wedding the next day and were welcomed by the Sultan of Al-Afar. After taking a few pictures, we accompanied the bridegroom to his tent and talked about the customs and how people keep up their traditions in an attempt to preserve their identity. Mr. Waais introduced us to Mr. Attban Jawata Mosa the Minister of Youth, Tourism and Sport with whom we discussed all facets of the country's tourist industry and

its problems. Djibouti lies in a sea of trouble and must radiate a positive image which will put it on the African and international tourist map. The tourism minister was very interested in attracting Arab and foreign investors to see the country's tourist treasures, almost completely unexploited despite their uniqueness. Did we see all there is to see in Djibouti? Of course not! We didn't make it to Lake Assal the salt mining region and we did not see the islands of Musha and Maskali or the region of Dorale, eight miles from the capital, where the construction of the new port has begun. Sadly we didn't enjoy Arta Beach, twenty miles from the capital, which is never without visitors. But we returned convinced that in Djibouti one is not a lonely number and small is really beautiful! ■