

# 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, 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. Unsurprisingly, it falls below many travellers' radars.

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 film 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 recount volumes of history. 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 paradoxically remains one of Africa's most peaceful, secure and welcoming destinations. Come and see for yourself!

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 124,320 sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Djibouti, Sudan; Ethiopia border crossings closed
- **Budget** US\$20 to US\$25 a day
- **Capital** Asmara
- **Languages** Tigrinya, Arabic and other regional languages
- **Money** Nakfa; US\$1 = Nfa15
- **Population** 4.6 million
- **Seasons** Cool (October-May), hot (June-September), wet (July-September)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 291; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 3
- **Visa** From US\$40 to US\$50 for 30 days



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Asmara** (p639) Nab a seat at a snazzy café on Harnet Ave and watch the world strut by during *passeggiata*.
- **Massawa** (p645) Get lost in Massawa Island's maze of narrow streets and feast on Yemeni fish.
- **Dahlak Islands** (p646) Relish the pristine beauty of this wild archipelago, then comb the beach of Dissei Island.
- **Qohaito** (p644) Soak up the former glory of this archaeological site shrouded in peaceful solitude amid a barren plateau.
- **Dankalia** (p646) Psyche yourself up and explore one of the most inhospitable territories on earth.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

In the eastern lowlands, 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). In the Dankalia region, temperatures can reach 50°C in the shade and rainfall is practically zero.

In the highland zone, the average annual temperature is 18°C. 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. In the western zone, December is the coolest month (13°C to 25°C).

Although it's possible to visit Eritrea any time of year, the ideal time climatewise is September to October and March to April. Avoid travelling during June to August, when it's the rainy season in the highlands and western lowlands and hot and torrid in the eastern lowlands.

## ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Spend two full days in Asmara (p639), visiting its gob-smacking portfolio of architectural wonders, lapping up squidgy cakes and sipping up frothy *macchiatos*. Push onto Keren (p644), which deserves a day or two for its attractive architecture and active markets. Back to Asmara, it's time to roll down to Massawa (p645), on the Red Sea Coast.
- **Two Weeks** Follow the one-week agenda then explore the pristine Dahlak Islands (p646), which are blessed with good diving and snorkelling opportunities. Back to Asmara, forge due south to explore

## HOW MUCH?

- **Internet connection** US\$0.70 per hour
- **Asmara–Massawa bus ride** US\$1.90
- **One night in a guesthouse in the capital** US\$5.30
- **Travel permit** Free
- **4WD hire** US\$100

## LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$2.50
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.30
- **Bottle of Asmara beer** US\$0.60
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$4.70
- **Pastry** US\$0.20

the poignant ruins of Qohaito (p644) and Metera (p644).

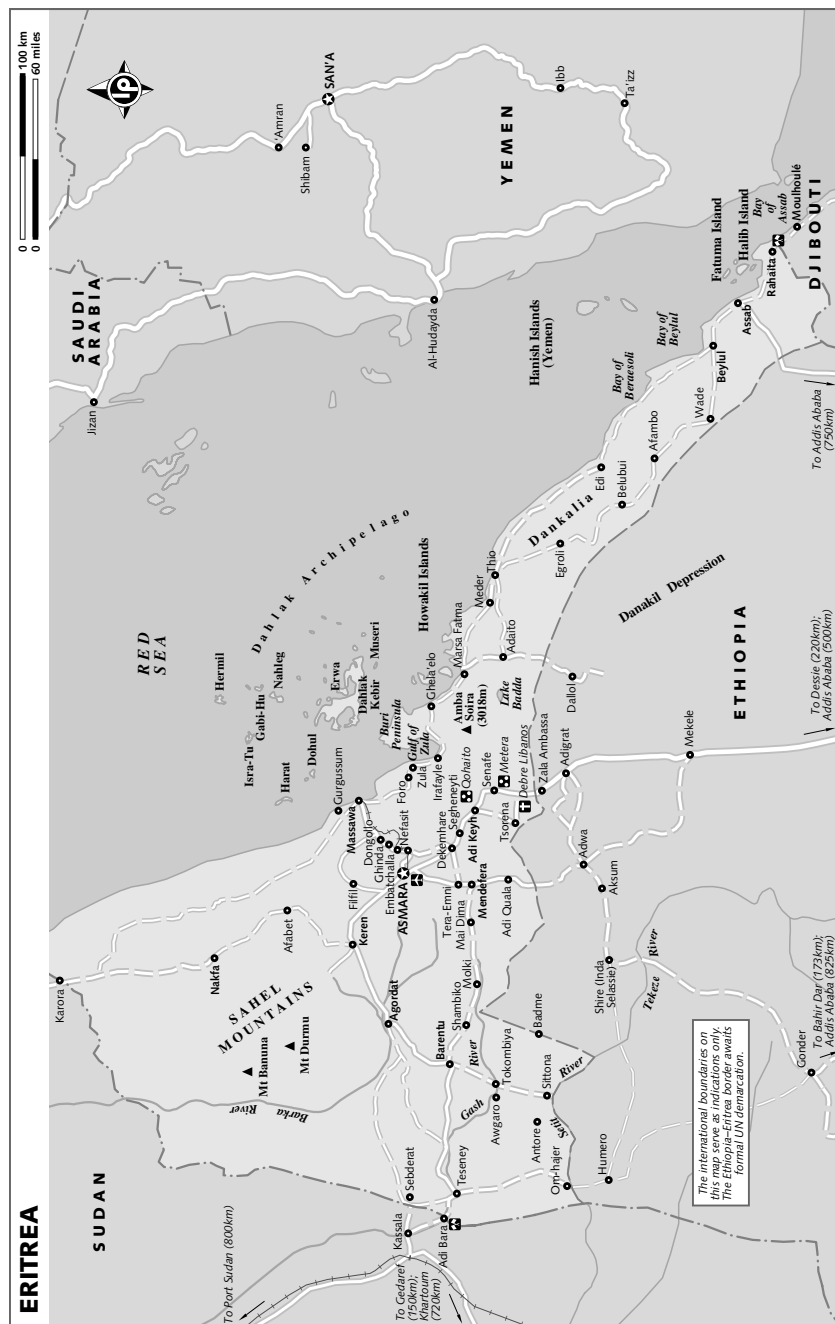
- **One Month** In addition to the two-week itinerary, haul west to Barentu (p647) in the heart of the Nara country for a glimpse of rural Eritrea. Then barrel back to Asmara. At this stage you'll probably want to spice up your journey with a trip to Dankalia (p646). You could either take the rickety old bus that trundles between the capital and Assab or hire a 4WD with a driver. Then decide whether Assab is your final destination or just another staging post on the way to Obok (Djibouti)...

## HISTORY

During the 1st millennium BC, tribes from present-day Yemen migrated to the southern highlands of Eritrea, settling on both sides of today's Eritrea–Ethiopia border. The contemporary Tigrinya and Amharic languages derive from their language, Ge'ez.

The powerful Aksumite kingdom flourished in Eritrea from the 4th century BC to the 9th century AD. While the kingdom's capital city, Aksum, was in today's Ethiopia, important Aksumite towns were built in Eritrea. Much foreign trade – on which Aksum's prosperity depended – was seaborne, and came to be handled by the ancient port of Adulis, to the south of today's Massawa.

Christianity is supposed to have been brought here by Christian Syrian merchants who were shipwrecked on the Red Sea Coast.



By the 4th century AD Christianity had become the Aksumite state religion.

Islam, the arrival of which coincided with Christian Aksum's decline in the 7th century, was the other great influence on the region. For centuries the dividing line between the Muslim Red Sea Coast and the Christian Ethiopian highlands moved back and forth over what is now Eritrea.

From the early 16th century to the late 19th century, the Ottoman Turks and the Egyptians fought each other for control of the Eritrean coast and its ports, but they left few imprints. Not like the European powers, who undertook a massive colonisation process in Africa in the second half of the 19th century. The Italians managed to grab a slice of North and East Africa, and Eritrea became a full-blown Italian colony in 1896. By the end of the 1930s, Eritrea was one of the most highly industrialised colonies in Africa. All the architectural treasures in Asmara date from this period.

The Italians' golden era ceased in 1941, when the Allied forces defeated the Italian army in Europe. Italy was forced to give up its African possessions, including Eritrea. The colony became an administration of the British until 1950, when a contentious UN resolution granted Eritrea self-government within a federal union with Ethiopia. Eritrea disappeared from the map of Africa.

Little by little, Ethiopia began to exert an ever-tighter hold over Eritrea and formally annexed it in violation of international law in the early 1960s. This was unbearable for the Eritrean people, who started their struggle for independence in 1961. This was the beginning of Africa's longest conflict of the 20th century. After numerous harsh guerrilla attacks, fierce fights and major offensives, the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces (EPLF) finally won the war in 1991 and the Ethiopian troops left the country. Following a referendum, independence was declared on 24 May 1993. Eritrea was back on the African map.

Alas, after only five years of peaceful relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia, another conflict, known as the 'border dispute', reared its ugly head in 1998. What followed were two bitter years of conflict that saw tens of thousands killed. After tortuous negotiations, a ceasefire was signed on 18 June 2000. According to the peace deal that was brokered, a UN peacekeeping force was deployed

in Eritrean territory pending a final demarcation of the disputed border. In April 2002 the UN Boundary Commission announced its decision on the demarcation of the border. Surveying of boundary posts began in May 2003, but Ethiopia soon began to contest the demarcation again.

## Eritrea Today

The psychological war between the two countries is ongoing. The tensions peaked again in 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, Eritrea shifted troops to the border and banned the UN from overflying its territory.

As if this was not enough, Eritrea's isolation is mounting, as is internal resentment against its intransigent government. Freedom of press and speech is nonexistent. The economy is in tatters, with both 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.

It has become vital to find a solution to the seemingly never-ending conflict with Ethiopia. The situation was still tense and volatile when this book went to print, despite the presence of the United Nation's Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), whose mission is to monitor the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) between the two countries.

## CULTURE

Eritreans are different in temperament from Ethiopians (which partly explains the bitter relations between the two countries). Years of invasion have created a siege mentality and a sense of isolation. Though impoverished, the nation has from the outset shown self-reliance, vigour and independence.

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 been broken you will find intense friendships.

The contrast in lifestyle between Asmara and elsewhere is stark. No matter the state of the economy and rationing, Asmarans still take the *passeggiata* (see p643) very seriously – a legacy of the Italian era. Then there is the

rest of Eritrea, where poverty is about the only prevalent excess.

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

Women enjoy far greater equality in Eritrea than in most other African countries. Eritrea's women themselves contributed more than one-third of troops in both the recent wars against Ethiopia.

## PEOPLE

With nine ethnic groups and languages as well as several religions, Eritrea is a model of cultural diversity. The most important group is the Tigrinya, who make up approximately 50% of the population, followed by the Tigre.

The population is equally divided between Christians, primarily Orthodox, and Muslims. The government ensures that each ethnic group has a voice in the decision-making process. Asmara epitomises this peaceful coexistence: it hosts a Catholic cathedral, a mosque, an Orthodox church and even an old Jewish synagogue in the same precinct!

Approximately 35% of the population are nomadic or seminomadic.

## ARTS & CRAFTS

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.

*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.

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 *embilta*, a wind instrument.

Atewebhran Segid is considered one of the leading traditional musicians and singers in Eritrea today. Others singers, both traditional and modern, include Faytinga, Helen Meles, Osman Abdel Rahim, Idriss Mohammed Ali, Teklé Kiflemariam, Tesfay Mehari and Samuel Berhane.

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. Many of them are remarkable historical and artistic pieces.

## ENVIRONMENT

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 semi-desert, with little arable land. 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.

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.

Several mountains exceed 2500m, with the highest peak, Amba Soira, reaching 3018m. Offshore lie 350 islands, including the Dahlak Archipelago, the largest in the Red Sea.

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

The main environmental issue is deforestation. Less than 1% of the country is covered by woodland, as against 30% a century ago – this says it all.

## FOOD & DRINK

Italian dishes, including pasta, pizza and pastries, are available in most restaurants throughout Eritrea. Outside the capital, these may be limited to just one dish: lasagne or spaghetti bolognese. As for traditional Eritrean cuisine, you'll soon realise that it's almost the same as in Ethiopia. There are regional variations, though. In the far west, the food is heavily influenced by the proximity of Sudan. In Massawa, the Arabic influence is evident, with kebabs and Yemeni-style charcoal-baked fish on offer. Sadly, there were some food shortages throughout the country at the time of writing.

In Asmara and, to a lesser degree, the larger towns, innumerable little cafés and bars dot the centre. They serve *macchiato* (an espresso with a dash of milk), espresso and fragrant cappuccino, along with a selection of pastries and cakes. Tea is also widely available, as is bottled water. If you want to put some wobble in your steps, all the usual favourites are

available, including whisky, gin, vodka as well as local beer and wine.

## ASMARA

pop 1,062,000 / elev 2347m

Ah, Asmara. Arrive here on a clear day, and you'll fall in love with this diamond of a capital. Peaceful neighbourhoods, pavement cafés with vintage Italian coffee machines, cheery pizza parlours, tantalising pastry shops, a relaxed pace of life... You'll feel like you've been transported to a southern Italian town. And there's the fabulous architecture, with a melee of architectural wonders from the Italian era. The balmy climate is another draw: Asmara is bathed in sunshine eight months of the year.

Alas, it's too good to be true. The battered economy and the clampdown on civil liberties have taken their toll over past years, and it shows. Gone is the *dolce vita* (life of luxury) – belt-tightening is now the order of the day, with power cuts, queues in front of food stores, slack business, and deserted streets at night.

One thing is sure, though: Asmara remains one of the most agreeable cities in Africa and it will be one of the highlights of your African journey.

## ORIENTATION

The centre encompasses the area on, and just north of, Harnet Ave (the main artery). To the south of Harnet Ave was once the Italian residential quarter.

To the southeast, Sematat Ave leads to Tiravolo District, where several midrange hotels and nightclubs are clustered. Further to the southeast you'll reach the airport, about 6km from the centre. The railway station is about 1.5km east of the centre.

## INFORMATION

### Cultural Centres

**Alliance Française** (☎ 201775; Nakfa Ave; ☎ 9-11.30am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri)

**British Council** (☎ 123415; 175-11 St)

### 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.

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

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

## Medical Services

There's a profusion of pharmacies around town.

**Semmel Hospital** (☎ 150175; HDAY St) The most reputable hospital in town, on the road to the airport.

## Money

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 p648).

There are currently no ATMs in Asmara. **Commerz Bank of Eritrea** (☎ 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** Harnet Branch (☎ 123124; Harnet Ave; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon & 2-7pm Sat, 8am-noon & 2-6pm Sun); **Main Office** (☎ 120735; Bahti Meskerem Sq; ☎ 8am-8pm) Changes cash and travellers cheques, and can do cash advances on your credit card for a commission of 7%.

## Post

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

## Telephone & Fax

**Telecommunications building** (Harnet Ave; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 7.30pm Sat & Sun)

## Tourist Information

In addition to the tourist office, the most reliable sources of information are the local travel agencies.

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

## Travel Agencies

**Explore Eritrea Travel & Tours** (☎ 125555, 120259; www.exploreeritrea.com; Adi Hawesha St; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

**Travel House International** (☎ 201881/2; www.travelhouseeritrea.com; 175-15 St; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon & 3.30-6pm Sat)

**ERITREA**

**ASMARA**

**SLEEPING**

|                            |       |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Africa Pension             | 33 C3 |
| Abergo Boutique Hotel      | 34 A1 |
| Concord Pension            | 35 D3 |
| Crystal Hotel              | 36 C2 |
| Khartoum Hotel             | 37 C3 |
| Pensone Pisa               | 38 D3 |
| Sunshine Hotel             | 39 B2 |
| Top Five Hotel             | 40 C4 |
| Alba Bistrot               | 42 A2 |
| American Bar               | 43 A2 |
| Blue Nile Bar & Restaurant | 44 B3 |
| Casa Degli Italiani        | 45 A1 |
| Mask Place                 | 46 A2 |
| Pasticceria Modema         | 47 C2 |
| Roof Garden                | 48 C4 |
| Spaghetti & Pizza House    | 49 A2 |
| Sun Pizza & Fast Food      | 50 C1 |

**EATING**

|                     |          |
|---------------------|----------|
| Bar Impero          | (see 21) |
| Bar Zilli           | 51 B4    |
| Cafe Fiori          | 52 B1    |
| Cathedral Snack Bar | 53 B2    |
| Cinema Roma         | (see 22) |
| Sweet Asmara Cafe   | 54 B2    |
| Zara                | 55 B3    |

**ENTERTAINMENT**

|                                    |       |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| Central Market                     | 20 D2 |
| Cinema Impero                      | 21 C2 |
| Cinema Roma                        | 22 B3 |
| Enda Mariani Orthodox Cathedral    | 23 E2 |
| Former Governor's Palace           | 24 B3 |
| Great Mosque (Kulafah Al Rashidin) | 25 D2 |
| Medebar Market                     | 26 E1 |
| Ministry of Education              | 27 A2 |
| Municipality Building              | 28 D3 |
| National Museum                    | 29 B3 |
| Odeon Cinema                       | 30 C3 |
| Opera House                        | 31 A2 |
| Villa Roma                         | 32 C3 |

**TRANSPORT**

|                         |       |
|-------------------------|-------|
| EgyptAir                | 58 E2 |
| Eritrean Airlines       | 59 E2 |
| Fantana Rent A Car      | 60 D3 |
| Leo Car Rental          | 61 A4 |
| Main Bus Terminal       | 62 C1 |
| Saudia Arabian Airlines | 63 B2 |
| Second Bus Terminal     | 64 C1 |
| Third Bus Terminal      | 65 C1 |
| Yemenia Yemen Airways   | 66 E2 |

**INFORMATION cont**

|                             |       |
|-----------------------------|-------|
| Architectural Office        | 10 A2 |
| Post Office                 | 11 A1 |
| Telekaf Internet Cafe       | 12 A2 |
| Telecommunications Building | 13 A2 |
| Tourist Information Centre  | 14 C2 |
| Travel House International  | 15 A1 |
| US Embassy                  | 16 C4 |

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

|                                 |          |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| Africa Pension                  | (see 33) |
| Asmara Piscina                  | 17 B3    |
| Bar Impero                      | (see 21) |
| Bowling Alley                   | 18 D3    |
| Catholic Cathedral & Bell Tower | 19 B2    |

**INFORMATION**

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| Alliance Française   | 1 A1    |
| British Embassy  | 2 A1    |
| CIC Central Internet Cafe  | 3 B2    |
| Commercial Bank of Eritrea   | 4 D3    |
| Department of Immigration  | 5 B2    |
| Diboutan Embassy   | 6 C4    |
| Egyptian Embassy   | 7 C3    |
| Explore Eritrea Travel & Tours   | 8 A2    |
| French Embassy   | (see 1) |
| Himboli  | 9 E2    |
| To German Embassy (400m), Lufthansa Express (400m), French Embassy (600m), Hotel Inter-Continental Asmara (2km), Sembel Hospital (3km), Asmara Airport (4km) |         |

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**ERITREA**

## SIGHTS

Asmara is one of the most entrancing cities in Africa, with a host of splendid buildings harking back to the city's heyday as the 'Piccolo Roma' (little Rome) in the 1920s and 1930s. Most 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** (Harnet Ave), which stands majestically at the western end of Harnet Ave. Built in 1897 by the first Italian governor, it was used by Haile Selassie during the Ethiopian occupation. Unfortunately, it is not currently possible to visit it because it's an official building.

Within strolling distance from the Governor's Palace, the **Opera House** (Harnet Ave), completed early 1920, is one of Asmara's most elegant early-20th-century buildings. By contrast, the adjacent **Ministry of Education** (Harnet Ave), with its massive stepped tower, looks strikingly austere.

Ambling down Harnet Ave you'll soon come across Asmara's most iconic monument, the elaborate, brick-walled **Catholic cathedral** (Harnet Ave). Consecrated in 1923, it is thought to be one of the finest Lombard-Romanesque-style churches outside Italy. The tallest structure in Asmara, the narrow, Gothic **bell tower** (☞ 8-11am & 2-5pm) offers unrivalled views over the town.

Another eye-catching building, the nearby **Cinema Impero** (Harnet Ave) is made up of three massive windows that combine strong vertical and horizontal elements with 45 porthole lamps. Next door, you can re-energise at the **Bar Impero** (Harnet Ave), which is original with its 'zinc' bar, dark wood panels and old cash machine.

### Other Sights

A block south of the Municipality building, the **bowling alley** (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.

Tucked away in a residential district further west, the **Africa Pension** (173-3 St) is a gem of place. This huge Cubist villa was built in the 1920s by a spaghetti millionaire. The villa is now a very affordable hotel (see p642). Opposite the Africa Pension, the gleaming **Villa Roma** (173-3 St) is reminiscent of a Roman villa

with its marble staircases, louvred shutters, curving balustrades and shady portico.

Just off Harnet Ave, near the telecommunications building, the quirky **Odeon Cinema** (Bihat St), with its authentic Art Deco interior, is attractive.

North of Harnet Ave, the sprawling **central market** (☞ Mon-Sat morning) 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.

Duck up northeast to soak up the atmosphere of the **Medebar Market** (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: old tyres are made into sandals, corrugated iron is flattened and made into metal buckets, and olive tins from Italy are made into coffeepots and tiny scoopers.

Thread your way back to the south until you reach the **Great Mosque** (Kulafah Al Rashidin; Selam St). Completed in 1938, this grand complex combines rationalist, classical and Islamic styles.

Another outstanding monument, the **Enda Mariam Orthodox Cathedral** (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.

Fancy a dip? The 1930s **Asmara Piscina** (swimming pool; Kohayto St; admission Nfa40; ☞ 9am-8pm) will fit the bill. Even if you don't feel like splashing about, it's worth taking a peek inside this modernist building.

Back to the main thoroughfare, you can't miss the **Cinema Roma** (Sematat Ave), across the avenue. It's another fine example of Italian architecture.

Asmara's strong point are its buildings, rather than its museums, but it's also worth popping your head into the **National Museum** (Mariam GMBI St; admission free; ☞ 9-11am & 3-5pm Thu-Tue), west of the former Governor's Palace. It contains exhibits on the ethnic groups of Eritrea that give a basic introduction to traditional life in the countryside.

## SLEEPING

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

## Budget

**Pensione Pisa** (☎ 124491; Harnet Ave; s without bathroom Nfa60, d without bathroom Nfa95-120) This welcoming pension is housed in an apartment, just opposite the Catholic Cathedral. The uncluttered rooms are kept in good nick, as are the diminutive shared bathrooms. Location is ace. Sizzling hot value for what you get.

**Africa Pension** (☎ 121436; Kesekese St; s/d without bathroom Nfa150/200) A good place to bunk down in if you're after some style without breaking the bank. This mellow pension is set in a converted villa and features generous-sized rooms overlooking a neatly manicured garden. It's in a residential neighbourhood, a jaunt from Harnet Ave. A tad overpriced, but the historic aura sweetens the deal.

**Concord Pension** (☎ 122981; Seraye St; r Nfa270) Tucked back slightly from the road, this discreet pension is a serene oasis in the heart of town. It feels like a cosy doll's house, with comfy rooms, an agreeable plant-filled courtyard and sweet-as-sugar staff.

## Midrange & Top End

Some hotels in this price bracket 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 must be registered on your form.

**Khartoum Hotel** (☎ 128008; 176-13 St; s/d Nfa300/350, s without bathroom Nfa200-250, d without bathroom Nfa250-300) One block south of Harnet Ave, the Khartoum offers superclean rooms and the shared bathrooms are probably the cleanest-smelling this side of the Rift Valley.

**Top Five Hotel** (☎ 124922/19; fax 124931; Marsatekly Ave; s/d Nfa200/360) A great-value option not far from the centre, with well-scrubbed rooms and an attached quality restaurant.

**Crystal Hotel** (☎ 120944; www.crystalhotel.eritrea.com; Bihat St; s US\$42-56, d US\$56-75, all incl breakfast) This professionally run outfit is kept in top nick, featuring a fine selection of cheerful rooms with all the creature comforts. There's an on-site bar and restaurant.

**Asmara Central Hotel** (☎ 120041, 120446; fax 122023; Mata St; r Nfa300-370) In the heart of town. After a much-needed face-lift, the rooms and communal areas now feature modern fixtures, sleek bathrooms, new tiles and carpeting.

**Sunshine Hotel** (☎ 127880, 127882; fax 127866; BDHO Ave; s/d incl breakfast US\$69/87; ☎) A reliable middle-of-the-road option, with smallish rooms and a green-filled garden at the back.

**Albergo Italia** (☎ 120740; fax 126993; Nakfa Ave; r incl breakfast US\$150-250) A lovely boutique-ish hotel housed in an old Italian villa, with cushy rooms decorated with period furniture and communal areas awash with heritage aesthetics.

**Hotel Inter-Continental Asmara** (☎ 150400; intercon@eol.com.er; Warsay St; s US\$160-180, d US\$180-200, all incl breakfast; ☎) Lying 4km from the town centre on the airport road, this five-star bigwig has all the bells and whistles your platinum card will allow for.

## EATING

Asmara has the best selection of restaurants in the country. Most places serve both Eritrean and Italian dishes. Unless otherwise specified, most eateries are open every day for lunch and dinner. Given the food shortages, not everything was available on the menu when we visited.

**American Bar** (Harnet Ave; mains Nfa20-50) This snazzy fast-food joint serves up decent burgers and explosively fruity cocktails. The streetside terrace allows for a dash of people-watching panache.

**Casa degli Italiani** (175-15 St; mains Nfa20-60; ☎ closed dinner Sun) It's the setting that's the pull here, more than the food. Think atmospheric courtyard that is a perfect spot for a relaxed feed at lunchtime or a tippie any time of the day.

**Mask Place** (☎ 117530; Adi Hawesha St; mains Nfa40-80) A good-value stomach filler for those in need of some honestly prepared burgers and snacks.

**Sun Pizza & Fast Food** (☎ 07 116391; Seraye St; mains Nfa40-130) Nancy, the English-speaking owner, prepares excellent pasta dishes and scrumptious pizzas. And all this within a warm setting that wouldn't be out of place in Rome.

**Alba Bistro** (☎ 202421; Adi Hawesha St; mains Nfa45-90) Brimming with good cheer, this place is an excellent refuelling stop, with pasta, meat and fish dishes, as well as tempting ice creams.

**Spaghetti & Pizza House** (☎ 122112; Harnet Ave; mains Nfa50-120; ☎ Tue-Sun) This sophisticated trattoria-like venue gets top marks for its flawlessly prepared Italian specialities.

**Hidmona** (☎ 07 111955; Expo Park, Tiravolo District; mains Nfa70-90) An eclectic mix of restaurant, café, bar and live-music venue, Hidmona is one of the best places in town for traditional food and décor.

**Blue Nile Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 117965; Sematat Ave; mains Nfa80-100) One of the best restaurants in town, with both traditional and Western-style food. The servings are voluminous, so bring an empty tum.

**Roof Garden** (☎ 202625; BDHO Ave; mains Nfa80-110; ☎ Mon-Sat) The only Indian restaurant in Eritrea, this upmarket joint on the 5th floor of a modernish building is praised for its lip-smacking biriyani and tandoori dishes. Recommended if you feel the time has come to give your tastebuds something new to sing about.

## DRINKING

Asmara boasts a superb selection of atmospheric bars and cafés. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish between a café and a bar as you can drink just about anywhere, any time.

Many places listed in this section also serve pastries. Most are open by 7am, and close around 9pm.

**Sweet Asmara Caffe** (Harnet Ave) This sleek pastry shop is a treasure-trove for the sweet tooth, with a tempting array of diet-busting little treats.

**Pasticceria Moderna** (Harnet Ave) A humming venue on the main drag. Keep up your strength with a *macchiato* and a delectable pastry.

**Zara** (Sematat Ave) Ease into low gear by sinking a cocktail at this genteel lounge bar. It stays open until midnight, and is a good place to warm up before hitting the clubs.

**Cinema Roma** (Sematat Ave) A very inspiring place, with one of Asmara's finest historic interiors. Enjoy a beer or a coffee in the cafeteria in the lobby area.

**Bar Zilli** (Sematat Ave) This real earthy hang-out is a good place to revive your spirits with a *macchiato* or an Asmara gin, if you dare!

**Bar Impero** (Harnet Ave) Almost next door to Cinema Impero, this is another endearing café with a more traditional feel. Perfect for a coffee during *passeggiata*.

**Cathedral Snack Bar** (Harnet Ave) An ambient spot just opposite the Catholic cathedral.

**Cafe Fiori** (176-3 St) The *macchiato* kicks like a mule here. Café Fiori also features an appetizing selection of croissants.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Most of the country's facilities for leisure and entertainment are in Asmara. Here, you'll find decent nightclubs. Most clubs open only on

### HOT TIP: PASSEGGIATA

Don't snooze on your bed during *passeggiata*, or you'll miss out a typical Asmarean ritual. As in Italy, join the evening event (between 5pm and 6.30pm), when the whole town emerges from its torpor and promenades up and down Harnet Ave to see what's new, catch up with friends, hear the latest gossip, flirt and window shop. All terraces and cafés fill up with chattering locals sampling *macchiatos*. Lovely!

Friday and Saturday (from around midnight to 5am). Entrance costs between Nfa50 and Nfa100.

**Mocambo** (Adi Hawesha St) This hip nightclub exhilarates dance junkies every weekend with live music, a mix of both traditional and Western.

**Green Pub** (Hotel Inter-Continental Asmara, Warsay St; admission Nfa50) This pub-disco is one of the favourite haunts of expats in search of fun and company.

**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.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The following are international airlines servicing Eritrea, with offices in Asmara:

**EgyptAir** (☎ 127034; www.egyptair.com.eg; Marsa Fatuma St)

**Eritrean Airlines** (☎ 125500; www.flyeritrea.com; Harnet Ave)

**Lufthansa** (☎ 18 69 04; www.lufthansa.com; Warsay St)

**Saudi Arabian Airlines** (☎ 120166; www.saudiairlines.com; Harnet Ave)

**Yemenia Yemen Airways** (☎ 121035; www.yemenia.com; Harnet Ave)

For details of international and domestic flights to/from Asmara airport, see p649.

## Bus

The long-distance bus station is about 10 minutes' walk due north of Harnet Ave, and is split into three different terminals.

Buses to Massawa (Nfa28, 3½ hours), Assab (Nfa190, two days) and Barentu (Nfa57, six hours) leave from the **main bus terminal** (off Afabet St). There are numerous buses to Massawa

until late in the afternoon. For the other destinations, buses leave early in the morning. For Assab, there are three buses per week.

Buses to Keren (Nfa22, three hours) leave every half-hour from the **second bus terminal** (Falket Sayb St).

Southbound buses to Adi Keyh (Nfa27, four hours) and Senafe (for Metera; Nfa32, six hours) leave from the **third bus terminal** (Fengaga St). Most buses leave early in the morning and only when they are full.

## GETTING AROUND

Eritrea's one international airport lies 6km from the capital (around Nfa150 during the day in taxi). You can also take the city buses 0 or 1, which pass in front of the cathedral on Harnet Ave. A taxi ride in the centre will set you back about Nfa40.

Asmara is the obvious base from where to rent a car. Reliable outfits include **Africa Rent Car** (☎ 121755; fax 202597; Nora St), **Fontana Rent a Car** (☎ 120052; fax 127905; Mata St) and **Leo Car Rental** (☎ 125859, 202307; dilorenzo@cts.com.er; Sematat Ave).

## NORTHERN ERITREA

Bar the well-known town of Keren, northern Eritrea still remains *terra incognita* for foreigners.

### KEREN

pop 75,000 / elev 1392m

Easily accessible from Asmara, this market town is perhaps the most remarkable of all of Eritrea's provincial towns. Hemmed in by a range of rugged, good-looking mountains, it boasts an attractive setting, as well as an appealing melange of architectural styles.

Several Italian Roman Catholic churches are dotted around the town, including **St Antonio** and **St Michael**. The old Italian **railway station** (now a bus station) also testifies to Keren's Italian heritage.

Keren's **markets** are some of the most interesting in the country and are great for an afternoon's exploration. Mosey around the covered market or the grain market. There's also a picturesque wood and camel market in the riverbed, usually on Monday.

**Albergo Sicilia** (☎ 401059; Agordat Rd; r Nfa100, with-out bathroom Nfa55-80) is right in the centre but its facilities are rudimentary and the ablution blocks a tad skanky. You can rest your head

in the newish **Sarina Hotel** (☎ 400230; fax 402685; Asmara Rd; s Nfa225-325, d Nfa325-425, all incl breakfast; ☑), with all mod cons and functional facilities, about 2km from the centre on the road to Asmara.

You'll also find acceptable, cheap eateries in the heart of town.

Nearly 30 buses depart daily to Asmara (Nfa22, three hours, 91km). There are also several buses in the morning for Barentu (Nfa35, four hours).

## SOUTHERN ERITREA

For history and archaeology buffs, southern Eritrea offers an unparalleled chance to step back in time. It's like a vast, open-air archaeological site. Though less spectacular than the more famous ruins found to the south in Ethiopia, many of southern Eritrea's ruins are no less important.

### QOHAITO

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. It lies some 121km south of Asmara. Don't expect colossal monuments, though: the scant finds of this site are spread over a large area measuring 2.5km wide and include a temple, a dam, an Egyptian tomb, a cave and a gorge. Admission is free but you'll need a permit from the National Museum office in Asmara (see p649).

Public transport being almost nonexistent, your best bet is to book a tour with one of the travel agencies in Asmara or to hire a 4WD with driver.

### METERA

While it will never be mistaken for the Acropolis, the site of Metera is another worthwhile site to visit. Like Qohaito, Metera flourished around the time of the ancient civilisation of Aksum. The scattered ruins, including a stele and various excavations, testify to the existence of a once large and prosperous town. If you happen to be here late afternoon on a clear day, the truly magnificent setting adds a touch of eeriness to the site.

The site lies about 2km south of Senafe and is easily reached on foot. Admission is free but you'll need a permit from the National

Museum office in Asmara (see p649). If you're stuck, Senafe has a couple of accommodation options.

See p643 for details on getting to Senafe from Asmara.

## THE RED SEA COAST

Luckily, the Eritrean coast has remained wild, pristine and untouched – nothing comparable with, say, Egypt. There's a lot to love about this area: hundreds of kilometres of luscious coastline, a historic city and a fantastic archipelago. Discover this region before everyone else does.

### MASSAWA

pop 35,000

Though only about 100km to the east of Asmara, Massawa could not be more different from the capital. Entering the old town, 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.

Sadly, Massawa was all but flattened during the struggle for independence, and many visitors are shocked by the derelict state of a number of historical buildings. Restoration has started but the process is slow due to lack of funds.

### Sights & Activities

The most interesting part of the city is **Massawa Island**, where the port and old town lie. It's a fascinating blend of Egyptian, Turkish and Italo-Moorish architecture. Massawa Island is connected to **Taulud Island** by a causeway. From Taulud Island, a second causeway leads to the mainland.

Massawa is the starting point for trips to the Dahlak Islands, Eritrea's main diving destination. For details on boat and equipment hire, see p646.

### Sleeping

All reliable options are on Taulud Island. Though not in the old town, they offer higher standards. Sadly, there's no beach where you can cool off.

**Corallo Hotel** (☎ 552406; Taulud Island; r with/without bathroom Nfa250/180; ☑) The Corallo offers 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.

**Central Hotel** (☎ 552002, 552218; Taulud Island; r Nfa240-485, ste Nfa485; ☑) Soothingly positioned by the shore, the well-managed Central Hotel offers three kinds of well-kept rooms, with air-con and TV. The more expensive ones face the sea and are more spacious.

**Dahlak Hotel** (☎ 552818; fax 551282; Taulud Island; s/d Nfa250/325; ☑) The Dahlak was undergoing a major revamp 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 diving centre, a swimming pool and a marina.

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

### Eating & Drinking

You'll find a handful of cheap eateries and supermarkets on and around the main street on Massawa Island. Most hotels on Taulud Island also have an on-site restaurant and welcome nonguests.

**Sallam Restaurant** (Massawa Island; fish dishes around Nfa80; ☑ dinner) Though it doesn't look like much from the outside, this place has garnered high praise for its Yemeni speciality of fresh fish sprinkled with hot pepper and baked in a tandoori oven.

**Beaches Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 552940; Taulud Island; mains Nfa50-95) The only independent restaurant on Taulud Island. It has a seaside terrace from where you can watch the dhows sail by. Italian and Eritrean specialities feature equally on the menu.

There's a host of lively little bars on Massawa Island. They're rather boisterous, down-at-heel affairs serving only Asmara beer, Eritrean gin (good luck!), soft drinks and coffee.

### Getting There & Around

There are frequent buses leaving from the bus station on the mainland for Asmara (Nfa28, 3½ to four hours). For Assab, you will have to go to Asmara and catch the bus there, as the buses pass through Massawa but don't stop.

Shared taxis and town minibuses are convenient for short hops around town (Nfa2).

## DAHLAK ISLANDS

Some 350 islands lie off the Eritrean coast, the majority – 209 – of which make up the Dahlak Archipelago. It could be another tropical paradise on earth, but it's not. Largely arid, barren and flat, the islands are rather austere and desolate. Fresh water is very scarce, and very few of the islands are inhabited (only three within the Dahlak Archipelago). There's only one (basic) hotel on the islands. Another one was under construction when we visited.

This untouched world is not within everyone's reach, and independent travel is not really possible. You'll have to go through a travel agent in Asmara (see p639) or a boat-rental operation in Massawa. In Massawa, you can contact the **Eritrea Diving Centre** (☎ 552688, 07 120145; fax 551287; Taulud Island) or **Dahlak Sea Touring** (☎ /fax 552489; Massawa Island). The journey from Massawa to most of the islands takes between 1½ and two hours by motorboat. Prices depend on the number of islands visited and on the number of people. Cruises around the islands, usually lasting anything from three days to a week, can be organised. Be prepared to cough up at least US\$150 per person per day.

Green Island is 10 to 20 minutes from Massawa and is the most accessible place for decent snorkelling and tolerable beaches. Dahlak Hotel organises day trips to Green Island (Nfa600 per boat). You can also contact Dahlak Sea Touring.

There's a huge potential for **diving** in the Dahlak Islands, but facilities are sorely lacking. At the time of writing, the Eritrea Diving Centre (see earlier) was the only diving operation organising diving trips to the islands. It has a 'Scuba Diving Introduction' for US\$50.

You need a permit to visit any of the Dahlak Islands (US\$20), except Green Island. If you're joining a tour or hiring a boat, the permit should be organised for you.

## DANKALIA

If there's one place in Eritrea where travel is for travel's sake, it's Dankalia. 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. It's reputed to be one of the hottest places on earth and home to the famously hardy and fierce Afar people. There's little to see, nothing to do, and no great destination awaiting you at

the other end. But that's exactly what makes this area so fascinating, with a genuine sense of exploration, even on the rickety old bus. If you drive, the journey is likely to be one of the most memorable of your trip. The best time to go is from November to April.

Between Massawa and Assab, there's only a smattering of little fishing villages, including Irafayle, Thio, Edi and Beylul.

## ASSAB

pop 75,000

Lying less than 100km from Ethiopia, at the southern extremity of the desolate and inaccessible Dankalia region, Assab has always been a bit of an outpost. Tourism facilities are almost totally lacking. For centuries, and up until recently, it was Ethiopia's principal port of access to the Red Sea. The diversion of all Ethiopian commerce via Djibouti has made Assab even more of a backwater. There's a pervasive ghost-town feel that can be captivating, and its sheer isolation is an attraction in itself.

If you come from Djibouti, you'll have to get a travel permit at the **Immigration Office** (8am-noon & 4-6pm Mon-Fri) to journey on.

You'll find a bank and a post office in the centre. For a place to sleep, **Kebal International Hotel** (☎ 661700, 660229; fax 661708; r Nfa75-185; 📶) is 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. There's an attached restaurant. Or head for the **Aurora Restaurant** (mains Nfa40-80), the best place to enjoy pasta or grilled fish.

**Eritrean Airlines** (☎ 660028, 660665) has three flights a week to Asmara (Nfa1110). There's also a bus service between Assab and Asmara via Massawa three times a week. The journey takes approximately two days.

Assab is also a convenient stopover for travellers heading for Djibouti; the border is just 112km south. For more information on transport to Obock (Djibouti), see p649.

## WESTERN ERITREA

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 its wild expanses and empty spaces. 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.

## BARENTU

pop 16,200 / elev 980m

Barentu is the heartland of the Kunama people, one of the most fascinating of Eritrea's ethnic groups. If you want to mingle with locals, delve into the colourful market on Thursday or Saturday (the market days). In the evening, the main street fills up with college students in blue shirts – a superb sight in its own right.

The most reliable place to stay is the **Unite Family Hotel** (☎ 731073; Teseney Rd; r without bathroom Nfa80), on the southern edge of town, just spitting distance from the bus station. There's a central compound where you might catch the breeze (if any) and a restaurant that serves cheap but filling staples.

There are about four daily buses to Asmara (Nfa57, six hours), Keren (Nfa35, four hours) and Teseney (Nfa29, three hours).

## ERITREA DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Only Asmara and, to a lesser extent, Massawa, offer a good range of hotels. Elsewhere the hotel scene is very modest. All the small towns have hotels, but they're often pretty basic affairs and many lack running water (you get a bucket shower instead).

Prices for budget accommodation in the capital 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. In the rest of the country, rates are usually cheaper.

Few hotels accept credit cards.

### ACTIVITIES

Eritrea has great potential for outdoor pursuits but there are few well-organised facilities. 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.

### PRACTICALITIES

- Eritrea uses the metric system for weights, measures and road distances.
- Eritrea predominantly uses the 220V system, with two-round-pin plugs.
- The only local publication in English is the twice-weekly *Eritrea Profile*.
- Eritrean national radio broadcasts three times a day in the nine Eritrean national languages.
- The government-controlled EriTV has two national TV channels.

### BUSINESS HOURS

See p1102 for standard business hours. Most banks open from 8am to 11am and from 2pm to 4pm Monday to Friday, and from 8am to 11.30am on Saturday. In eastern Eritrea, government offices and private businesses are usually closed between noon and 4pm.

### CUSTOMS

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.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Eritrea is a very safe country in which to travel. The biggest threat outside the capital is the risk of land mines and unexploded munitions. Never stray off the road.

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 p649).

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

#### Eritrean Embassies & Consulates

The Eritrean embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was closed when this edition went to print. Eritrea has representation in the following countries:

**Australia** (☎ 02-6282 3489; fax 6282 5233; 26 Guilfoyle St, Yarralumla, ACT 2606)

**Canada** (☎ 613-234 3989; fax 234 6213; Ste 610, 75 Albert St, Ottawa K1P 5E7)

**Djibouti** (☎ 354961; fax 250212; Le Heron District, Djibouti City)

**Egypt** (☎ 20-2-303-3505; fax 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 446 74621; Stavanger Str 18, 10439 Berlin)

**Kenya** (☎ 2-443164; fax 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 713 0161; 96 White Lion St, London N1 9PF)

**USA** (☎ 202-319 1991; fax 319 1304; 1708 New Hampshire Ave, NW Washington, DC 20009)

**Yemen** (☎ 1-209422; fax 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.

**Djibouti** (☎ 125990; Saro St)

**France** (☎ 126599, 127615; Nakfa Ave)

**Germany** (☎ 186670; Saba Bldg, Warsaw St)

**Sudan** (☎ 189595; Tiravolo District)

**UK** (☎ 120145; Mariam GMBI St)

**USA** (☎ 120004; 171-9 St)

**Yemen** (☎ 181399; Agamet St, Tiravolo District)

### HOLIDAYS

As well as religious holidays listed in the Africa Directory (p1106), these are the principal public holidays in Eritrea:

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Leddet (Christmas)** 7 January

**Timkat (Epiphany)** 19 January

**International Women's Day** 8 March

**Tensae (Easter)** March/April (variable)

**Workers' Day** 1 May

**Liberation Day** 24 May

**Martyrs' Day** 20 June

**Start of the Armed Struggle** 1 September

**Kiddus Yohannes (Orthodox New Year)** 11 September

**Meskel (Finding of the True Cross)** 27 September

### MAPS

The best map currently available is the one produced by ITMB Publishing in Canada (1:9,000,000). At the time of writing, no maps of the country were available in Eritrea.

### MONEY

The unit of currency is the Nakfa (Nfa). There are currently no ATMs in Eritrea. US dollars (cash or travellers cheques) are the

### RISKY BUSINESS

It's tempting to change money on the black market because official rates massively overvalue the Nakfa (up to 30%). But if you do indulge, you're taking a very big risk. Always conduct your transaction very discreetly, with somebody you know. The introduction of a currency declaration form in 2005 makes changing money on the black market a complicated business.

best currency to carry, followed a distant second by euros. Each transaction must be registered on your currency declaration form, which is handed out at your arrival at the airport.

Changing money on the black market still exists but is no longer widespread due to the heavy penalties incurred.

The larger hotels in the capital, some air-liners and some travel agents accept credit cards but they usually charge an additional 5% to 7% commission.

### TELEPHONE

International calls are best made from the telecommunications offices found in all the main towns. For calls to Eritrea from abroad, phone numbers for the major towns must be prefixed by the number 1.

Mobile phones are becoming widespread. 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.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

Eritrea's tourist facilities are fairly woeful, with little literature and only one tourist office, in Asmara. But you could try one of the two privately run travel agencies in Asmara (see p639).

### VISAS & DOCUMENTS

All foreign nationals require visas for entry to Eritrea. 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.

Visas should be obtained from the Eritrean embassy or consulate before you leave your home country. If this is inconvenient,

you can contact one of the travel agencies in Asmara (see p639). They can help you organise a visa.

Visas can be extended at the **Department of Immigration** (☎ 200033, ext 204; Denden St; ☎ 7-11.30am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) in Asmara.

### Travel Permits

Because of the ongoing tension with Ethiopia, travelling in Eritrea has become pretty bureaucratic these days. To travel outside Asmara, you'll need a travel permit, obtainable the same day at the Tourist Information Centre in Asmara. If you travel overland and come from Djibouti, you'll need to go to the Immigration Office in Assab to get this permit.

To visit any of the archaeological sites of Eritrea, you'll need to get a special permit from the **National Museum office** (☎ 112318; Mariam GMBI St, Asmara; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri). You'll need your passport and Nfa150 per site (or US\$10).

### Visas for Onward Travel

For contact details of embassies and consulates in Eritrea, see p647.

**Djibouti** One-month entry visas cost US\$30 or €25, require two photos, and are issued within 24 hours.

**Sudan** You will need two photos and a copy of your passport pages. Your application is then sent to Khartoum (Sudan) and you can 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 will have to take a medical examination.

**Yemen** One-month entry visas cost US\$55, require two photos, a valid return air ticket and a medical examination. They are processed within 24 hours.

## TRANSPORT IN ERITREA

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

Eritrea has one international gateway for arrival by air, Asmara Airport, about 6km from town. Eritrean Airlines is the national carrier. It has flights to Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Milan and Rome with prices starting at around US\$1000 return. Lufthansa also flies to Frankfurt. Your best bet for a cheaper deal is with Egyptair and Yemenia Yemen Airways, which fly to Asmara from Europe via Cairo and Sana'a respectively.

Within Africa you can fly to Asmara from Djibouti with Eritrean Airlines. Eritrean Air-

### DEPARTURE TAX

International departure tax is US\$20 or €20, paid in cash after check-in. The domestic departure tax is Nfa20.

lines also flies to Dubai. Saudi Arabian Airlines has flights to Riyadh via Jeddah.

See p643 for contact details.

### Land

#### DJIBOUTI

There's only one border crossing, at Rahaita/Moulhoulé, about 112km south of Assab. Travel overland to/from Djibouti is possible but traffic is fairly limited. Only dirt roads lead south of Assab to Djibouti. 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 Djibouti, there are infrequent pickups and landcruisers that ply the route between Obock and Moulhoulé (about four hours); from there, in theory, Eritrean bush taxis go to Assab (four hours).

#### ETHIOPIA

As long as the conflict with Ethiopia remains unresolved, the borders between the two countries remain closed. The most convenient way to get to Ethiopia is through Djibouti.

#### 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.

From Teseney, there are bush taxis to Adi Bara at the Sudanese border. From there you should find transport to Kassala (Sudan).

### GETTING AROUND

#### Air

Eritrean Airlines, the national carrier, flies from Asmara to just one domestic destination: Assab.

#### Bus

The bus service in Eritrea is reasonably extensive, but few would call it comfortable. Coverage of Keren and Massawa is excellent.



Services thin out the further away from the capital you get.

Fares used to be very cheap, but with the soaring fuel prices and fuel shortages, they're a bit less economical. Buses don't adhere to fixed timetables; they depart only when they're full. For long-distance journeys, you need to be at the bus station by 6am to buy a ticket and to be guaranteed a seat.

### Car & Motorcycle

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. A driver is usually provided for your 4WD, which is a great help.

Car rental costs 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 is usually a surcharge. Not all rental agencies accept credit cards but, if they do, they add an extra surcharge (usually 7%).

### Train

A section of the old Italian railway that stretched between Asmara and Massawa has been repaired and there's now a regular service on Sunday morning between Asmara and Nefasit, about 25km east of Asmara (US\$50 or Nfa750 return, one hour).