

Somaliland, Puntland & Somalia

Somalia has been a horror show for more than a decade. The law of the gun, kidnapping of aid workers, fighting among rival factions and a host of humanitarian crises have created a post-apocalyptic feel in this part of the Horn.

In fact, it's a bit more nuanced than that. Somalia is a patchwork state. Since 1991 the country that is still known internationally as Somalia has effectively been three countries in one: Somalia in the south, Somaliland in the northwest on the Gulf of Aden, and Puntland perched in the northeast corner. The situation in each zone is radically different. The south, and Puntland (while a little more stable), have long been riddled with clan clashes.

Amid chaos, there is a success story: Somaliland, which, like a phoenix, has risen from ashes. Discreetly. So discreetly that nobody knows that it has a parliament, a capital, a flag, a currency, a university and multiparty elections! But Somaliland remains in limbo, with very few diplomatic supporters and little media coverage to voice its achievements.

Even in Somalia, the situation may be not insurmountable. There were a few glimmers of hope at the time of writing. The Islamists that seized power in 2006 had restored relative peace and order, and humanitarian agencies may step in and help the impoverished Somalis.

Hopefully a safe and stable Somalia will emerge one day. And travellers will start trickling in again. In the meantime, all you can do is cross fingers or play it safe in Somaliland.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 637,657 sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti (only the Djiboutian and Ethiopian borders with Somaliland are open to travellers)
- **Budget** US\$25 to US\$100 per day
- **Capital** Mogadishu (Somalia), Hargeisa (Somaliland), Bosasso (Puntland)
- **Languages** Somali
- **Money** Somaliland shilling; US\$1 = SSh1350
- **Population** 10 million (including 3.5 million in Somaliland)
- **Seasons** Wet (March to June & September to December), dry (July to August & January to February)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 252; international access code ☎ 16
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 3
- **Visa** Somaliland US\$30, Somalia US\$25 (if you can get one)



CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

There are regional variations but generally it goes like this: Somalia has two rainy seasons (April to June and October to November) and two dry seasons (July to September and December to March). From July to September temperatures are unbearable, reaching 40°C. In the south, near the border with Kenya, the climate is tropical.

Travel is much easier during the winter dry season, from December to March, when daily temperatures do not exceed 30°C.

HISTORY

Originally, Somalis probably hail from the southern Ethiopian highlands, and have been subject to a strong Arabic influence ever since the 7th century, when the Somali coast formed part of the extensive Arab-controlled trans-Indian Ocean trading network.

In the 19th century much of the Ogaden Desert – ethnically a part of Somalia – was annexed by Ethiopia (an invasion that has been a source of bad blood ever since) and then in 1888 the country was divided by European powers. The French got the area around Djibouti, Britain much of the north, while Italy got Puntland and the south. Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan (known affectionately as ‘the Mad Mullah’) fought the British for two decades, but it wasn’t until 1960 that Somaliland, Puntland and southern Somalia were united, which wasn’t altogether a good idea.

HOW MUCH?

- **Cost of an armed bodyguard (per day)** US\$15
- **Entrance fee to Las Geel site** US\$10
- **Internet connection** US\$1 per hour
- **Airfare Djibouti–Hargeisa** US\$85 (one way)
- **1g of gold (21 carats)** US\$16

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.50
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.30
- **Bottled beer** No alcohol is available
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$3
- **Plate of meat and rice** US\$2

WARNING

All parts of Somalia and Puntland were an absolute no-go zone at the time of writing. We were unable to do on-the-ground research in Somalia and Puntland, so some information may be unreliable.

However, we could cover some parts of Somaliland, entering the country overland from Jijiga (Ethiopia) and using local transportation. Then, our on-the-ground coverage included Hargeisa, Las Geel, Berbera, Sheekh and Burcao, accompanied by an armed soldier (mandatory at the time of writing). That said, keep your ears to the ground and seek local advice before setting off.

Sadly, interclan tensions, radical socialism, rearmament by the USSR and the occasional (often disastrous) war with Ethiopia helped tear the country apart. Mohammed Siad Barre, Somalia’s last recognised leader, fled to Nigeria in 1991 after the forces of General Aidede took Mogadishu. At the same time the Somali National Movement (SNM) moved quickly and declared independence for Somaliland. Puntland also broke away.

Restoration of Hope?

Fierce battles between warring factions throughout southern Somalia took place throughout the 1990s, but in 1992 the US led a UN mission (Operation Restore Hope) to distribute food aid to the southern population. Without much ado a nasty little conflict between the US-UN and warlord General Aidede began, during which it’s estimated that thousands of Somalis died. The last UN troops pulled out in 1995, having alleviated the famine to some extent, but the nation was still a disaster area.

Utter Failure

Designed to establish control across the whole of the country, Somalia’s lame-duck Transitional National Government (TNG) was set up in 2000. Alas, it didn’t manage to gain recognition from its own people in Somalia, who keep regarding it as a creature in the hands of international interests. Although it’s the only internationally recognised body, it has proved too weak to impose its rule and has failed in promoting reconciliation or curbing the power of militias. It has had to cower in

the west in the town of Baidoa, its redoubt, leaving the rest of the country in the hands of feuding warlords.

The Case of Somaliland & Puntland

The self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland was formed in 1991 after the collapse of unitary Somalia. Thanks mainly to the pre-dominance of a single clan (the Isaq), it has remained largely peaceful and stable since 1991. It has great oil and gas potential and voted for complete independence in 1997 before holding free presidential elections in 2003 (although opposition parties don't recognise the victory of President Dahir Riyale Kahin). Although its leaders desperately struggle to gain formal international recognition, Somaliland is still treated as a pariah by the international community and is not recognised as a separate state by the outside world. The main reason why the world is reluctant to accept Somaliland's independence is that the UN still hopes for a peace agreement covering all of Somalia, and its other neighbours are wary of an independent Somaliland, fearing a potential 'Balkanisation' of the Horn. For

Somalilanders, this sounds profoundly unfair. Unlike the rest of Somalia, they have managed to establish law and order in their country. Expat Somalilanders have kept doing their best to influence diplomatic corps in Europe, in East Africa and in North America – in vain, so far. But there are some signs of hope: Somaliland's leaders have nurtured good relations with Kenya, Ethiopia, the UK, Germany and Norway, and seem to be backed by the African Union.

In 2003 their efforts were partly ruined by a sad story: 'terrorists' from Mogadishu illegally entered Somaliland and shot several aid workers with the aim of destabilising the fledgling country and making it lose its credibility on the international scene. This explains why the local authorities tend to be overprotective of foreigners once they venture outside the capital.

Puntland is a different kettle of fish. It too did reasonably well up until 2001, when President Colonel Yusuf refused to stand down after losing an election, a point he reinforced by waging a little war. Puntland is at odds with neighbouring Somaliland: there's a territory dispute over several border provinces.

Somalia Today

June and July 2006 marked an important turning point: Islamist militias, operating under an umbrella calling itself the Council of Islamic Courts (CIC), ousted US-backed, secular warlords from Mogadishu and took control of the ravaged capital. Then they took swathes of southern Somalia. The CIC made it clear that the Quran was the constitution and there was no room for Western-style democracy, but ordinary Somalis, exhausted by years of chaos, seemed to prefer the harsh rule of Islamic hardliners over the deadly tyranny of the warlords. This hard line has raised fear outside, especially in the USA, which suspects that the CIC could become a terrorist safe haven and a Taliban-esque state.

Ethiopia, fiercely opposed to any kind of Islamist ideology at its doorstep, sent troops near Baidoa to support the transitional government, which at first opposed any power sharing with the new leaders. Finally, under international pressure, the transitional government started negotiations with the CIC. At the time of writing, the Islamic courts were on the verge of conquering the whole of Somalia,

something which no other group has managed since 1991.

As if this wasn't enough, southern Somalia was affected by the worst drought in a decade in 2006, creating the bleakest malnutrition situation in years.

There is some hope that a comprehensive victory in the south may at least restore order and perhaps bring some relief to Somalis for the first time since Siad Barre was toppled in 1991. So far, the CIC has restored law and order, as testified by the reopening of Mogadishu's port and airport in August 2006. Whether they'll manage to forge a more enduring peace remains to be seen, and their ability to establish national unity and gain international recognition has yet to be tested.

At the time of publication there was a threat of conflict with neighbouring Ethiopia – Ethiopia does not seem to accept an Islamic state at its doorstep.

CULTURE

The clan structure is the main pillar of Somali culture, which partly explains why the ideal of a modern 'state' is hard to implement here. Somalis all hail from the same tribe, which is divided into six main clans and loads of sub-clans. Somalis are more likely to ask a stranger 'Whom are you from?' than 'Where are you from?' This interclan rivalry has fuelled two decades of conflict.

The nomadic lifestyle also exerts a major influence on Somali culture.

PEOPLE

Somalis can be quiet and dignified, with a tendency to ignore strangers, but have a tremendous oral (often poetic) tradition. Written Somali is a very young language (the Somali Latin script was established in 1973) and spelling variation, especially place names, is very common. English is widely used in the north, but Italian dominates in the south.

Well over a million Somalis are scattered across Europe, North America and the Middle East; together they send hundreds of millions of dollars back to Somalia each year.

All Somalis are Sunni Muslims and Islam is extremely important to the Somali sense of national identity. Most women wear headscarves, and arranged marriage is still the norm in rural areas.

ENVIRONMENT

Characterised by desert or semidesert terrain, Somalia is distinguished by three main topographical features: the Oogo, a mountainous highland region in the north dominated by the Gollis Mountains; the Guban, a relatively barren, hot and humid coastal region (dominating southern Somalia), and the Hawd, a sweeping area of rich, rainy-season pasture prone to overgrazing and desertification. Serious drought continues to plague the south of the country.

Unsurprisingly, Somalia has some of the longest beaches in the world. Coral reefs and the relatively pristine Seylac Islands lie in the Red Sea off the coast of Somaliland.

FOOD & DRINK

Goat and camel meat are popular dishes in Somalia. The standard breakfast throughout Somalia is fried liver with onions and *anjeero*, a flat bread similar to the Ethiopian *injera*. Rice and noodles are also common staples. Camel is the preferred source of meat.

Tea is the favourite drink. Sheep, goat or camel's milk are also widespread. Alcohol is strictly prohibited and not available.

SOMALILAND

Tell friends that you're going to Somaliland, and the reaction is quite likely to be one of condescending incredulity ('You're going *where?*'), at the very best, or of serious warning ('you are suicidal!').

Whatever, Somaliland currently represents *the Shangri-la* for those who dare to break the mould of conventional travel. This is the road less travelled, and virgin territory for travelati. The country's big draws? Las Geel, about 50km from Hargeisa; pristine beaches – if all you want is to laze on immense, unspoiled stretches of white sand, Berbera will take your breath away; and divers in the know swear that the islands off Zeila, to the north, will one day be a mecca for divers. Sure, the landscape is far less arresting than in neighbouring Djibouti, but the terrain is torturous enough to warrant a couple of decent hikes and a hatful of excellent views. Good news: for now, most of this cultural and natural wealth is accessible to independent travellers. Go on, don't be afraid – discover!



CAVORTING AROUND WITH MY ESCORT BOY

His name was Saheed. He was my escort boy during my stay in Somaliland. Don't be confused, Saheed was technically and literally my escort boy: he was an armed soldier whose mission was to accompany and protect me during my trip outside Hargeisa. 'For safety reasons', I was told at my hotel. Since the murder of three aid workers by Somalians in 2003, local authorities take very seriously the safety of Westerners, and for good reason. If other foreigners encounter a 'problem', the whole diplomatic efforts of the country to gain international recognition are ruined. To be honest, I don't think Saheed would have been of any help if we had fallen in an ambush led by terrorists armed to the teeth on the road to Berbera. By 2pm, my guardian angel started chewing *qat* (leaf chewed as a stimulant) and was completely stoned until 7pm at least, when he started to resurrect again, only to ask for dinner. So I decided to take his presence not too seriously. After all, at that time I was the only traveller in this country and I had never experienced such a VIP treatment – and at US\$15 per day, it is a pittance! This slightly restrictive rule is said to be lifted in a few years, when the situation will be considered perfectly safe for foreigners.

If you're worried about security issues (and we're guessing you are), rest easy: Somaliland has nothing to do with Somalia. Here travellers are welcome. The safety of Westerners is taken very seriously in Somaliland, and Hargeisa was one of the safest cities in Africa when we visited.

That said, Somaliland is not Disneyland. The country is poor, its infrastructure is crumbling and it desperately lacks foreign investments to rebuild the economy. For all their friendliness and self-reliant nature, the Somalilandese life is as tough as it gets. A compounding issue is the bitter relations with neighbouring Puntland and the rest of Somalia.

Highlights

- **Hargeisa** (below) Wander dumbfounded throughout the capital and explore its lively markets.
- **Berbera** (p741) Scoff a plate of grilled fish and take a soothing dip at Baathela Beach.
- **Las Geel** (p740) Feel like a *National Geographic* explorer and speculate on Somalia's mysterious past at this exceptional archaeological site.
- Enjoy the smug feeling of impressing your fellow travellers: 'Yes, I've been to Somaliland!'

HARGEISA

pop 1 million

No guns. No roadblocks. No fear. No oppression. Relax: Hargeisa is not Mogadishu. The image of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon may be too poetic for a capital that still bears

the scars of the civil war that destroyed the country in the past decades, but Hargeisa is an energising city with lots of good vibes.

Although tourist sights are as scarce as hen's teeth, it feels so exotic to be the only foreigner wandering in the streets. People are genuinely surprised to see a real 'tourist', so be prepared to be the focus of attention. Fear not, it's hassle-free. And it's so astonishing to see that Hargeisa has all the conveniences a traveller could hope for: decent hotels with English-speaking staff, a couple of restaurants with tasty food, internet cafés, electronics stores, bureaux de change, teasops, markets, bus stations, taxis...but no alcohol (it was too good to be true!). It's a free economy, and it shows. The streets are alive, the roads are busy and the air thick with a very bearable cacophony of mobile-phone ring tones, vehicle horns and calls to prayers. Throw in the mandatory dust and you'll have an idea of present-day Hargeisa's attire. Now it's your turn to delve in.

Orientation & Information

You can't really get lost in Hargeisa. Most places of interest to travellers are on or around the main drag, Independence Rd. Most streets don't have names; the MiG jet is a good landmark. The airport is about 5km from the centre.

For tourist information, ask at your hotel or contact the **Director of Tourism** (☎ 2424561; shabeelle7@yahoo.com; ☎ 8am-1pm Sat-Thu), inside the Ministry of Tourism (same building as the Ministry of Fisheries), who can also help with visa matters, an armed bodyguard and car hire.

There's a profusion of internet cafés on the main strip (about US\$1 per hour), as well as numerous bureaux de change, including **Dahabshiiil** (☎ 521152; www.dahabshiiil.com; Independence Rd; ☎ 7am-noon & 1-5.30pm Sat-Thu), where you can change cash (and only cash). Money transfers from a number of countries (see p742) are also possible.

Sights

Let's be frank: you're not here for museums or historic buildings. It's the ambience and the sense of exploration that are the pull here. Visually, Hargeisa has nothing much of interest except perhaps the war memorial – a Somali Airforce **MiG jet** – and a couple of markets, including the **gold market**, a short stagger from Oriental Hotel, and the **camel and goat market**, on the outskirts of town. In the centre, the imposing **Jama Mosque** is worth a peek. There's a flurry of **goldsmiths** on the main street, too. If you want to buy a necklace or a bracelet for your beloved, just know that gold costs about US\$16 per gram (21 carats).

Sleeping

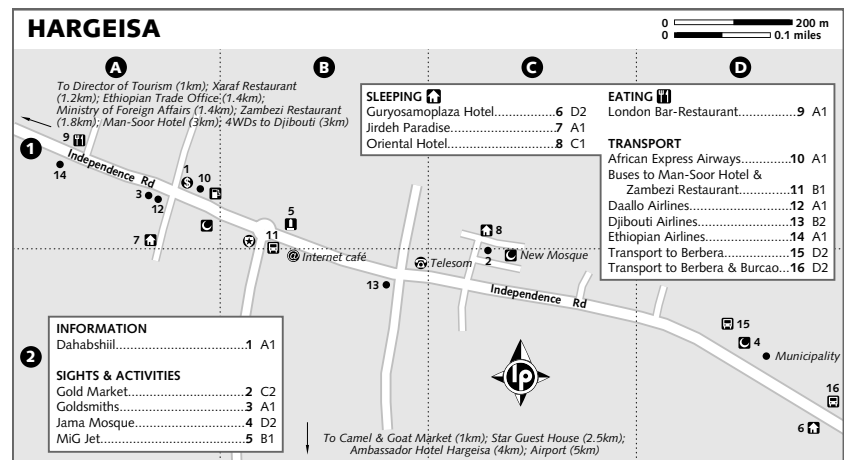
Surprise: Hargeisa has a smattering of good-value options to suit all budgets, scattered in the centre or on the outskirts of town. All were safe and secure at the time of research. The overall quality of the lodgings we visited is much higher than in Eritrea or in Ethiopia, and much better value than in neighbouring Djibouti. What's more, staff usually speak very good English. Yes!

A hint: get your bearings by spending your first night at the Ambassador, then hunker down in one of the more central places, which will give you a more 'real' feel for the town. Women travellers should stick with the Ambassador.

Guryosamoplaza Hotel (☎ 2521399; Independence Rd; r US\$5-25) About 300m from Jama Mosque, this quirky pile with a pinkish façade has rooms of all shapes and sizes, from family apartments with balconies to windowless singles with shared bathrooms. Rooms are a trifle spare and some bathrooms could use a touch up but overall this place is well maintained. Aim for the doubles with private bathrooms. Meals are available on request.

Jirdeh Paradise (☎ 2528792; s/d US\$10/15) Frankly, if this place is considered paradise, we'll be happy to end up in hell! That said, it's an OK runner-up if the others are full. It offers spacious rooms, tiled bathrooms (hot shower) and a central location. Pictures dating from the time of the British Protectorate greet you up in the lobby. It's one block behind Daallo Airlines office; you can't miss the incongruously blueish façade.

Oriental Hotel (☎ 2514999, 8289296; orientalhotelhga@hotmail.com; s/d US\$15/30; ☎) Our second favourite in Hargeisa. The location, near the gold market, is ideal if you want to immerse yourself in this quirky city – it's right in the centre. Ignore the fairly decrepit façade; inside, it's much more agreeable, with a vast, sun-filled patio, well-furnished rooms, salubrious bathrooms, working fans (but no



air-con) and good service. There's an excellent restaurant (mains US\$2 to US\$4) where you can tuck into tasty lamb and beef dishes, soups, salads, kebabs and pasta. Abdi Abdi, the well-travelled, English-speaking owner, will go the extra mile to help foreigners with their logistics (read: a security soldier to chap-erone you, and a hire car).

Star Guest House (☎ 2526699; deeqadheeg@hotmail.com; Airport Rd; s/d incl breakfast US\$20/25) These typical midrange digs won't feature in the pages of *Condé Nast Traveler* but it's hard to argue with the prices. Although none too inspiring in terms of charm or location – it's on the road to the airport, about 2km from the centre – it features tiled rooms with fans, satellite TVs, firm bedding, frilly curtains and sparkling bathrooms. There's a food store and a restaurant on the premises.

Maan-Soor Hotel (☎ 8283638; www.maansoor.com; r US\$25-80; ☎ ☎ ☎) On the far edge of town, the Maan-Soor is another sound option, with sprawling gardens, clean rooms that vary in size and appeal, and good services. It's perfectly OK, but it lacks the charisma of the Ambassador.

Ambassador Hotel Hargeisa (☎ 2138895; 2526666; www.ambassadorhotelhargeisa.com; Airport Rd; s/d US\$35/55; ☎ ☎ ☎) Quick, tell your mum you've survived Hargeisa and that you're comfortably curled up in the ultrasecure Ambassador... This is where foreign bigwigs bunk down when in town, which is enough to recommend this place. It scores high on facilities and services, with 45 diaphanous doubles and 11 self-contained villas, virginal white walls, white-glove-test-clean bathrooms, satellite TVs, two restaurants, a fitness centre, speedy internet access and, should you feel the urge to ask for any deity's protection, a mosque. There's a bar too – coool! Sadly, it's not licensed – boo! English-speaking management does an excellent job with logistics, car hire, tour guides, police escort and visa matters. It's a 4km minibus or taxi ride to the centre, near the airport.

Eating & Drinking

Not only will you find secure places here to rest your head, but you'll also find a string of decent eateries.

Zambezi Restaurant (mains US\$2; ☎ lunch & dinner) Hmm, the rice is truly finger-licking here (and you'll eat it with your fingers, anyway), as are the goat meat and fish dishes. Sit under a

gazebo in the plant-filled garden and put some bounce in your step with a glass of mango juice. It's on the road to Borama.

London Bar-Restaurant (off Independence Rd; mains US\$2; ☎ lunch & dinner) The closest thing Hargeisa has to a groovy café. It's a good place to recharge the batteries and meet young holiday-ing expat Somalilanders.

Xaraf Restaurant (☎ 2523866; mains US\$4; ☎ lunch & dinner) This eatery is held in high esteem by locals, and it's easy to see why. It trots out excellent Somali food, with an emphasis on fish dishes, pasta and chicken. It's in the same street as the Ministry of Tourism, and is popular with local office workers.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Airlines with offices in Hargeisa:

African Express Airways (☎ 2134636; Independence Rd)

Daallo Airlines (☎ 523003; www.daallo.com; Independence Rd)

Djibouti Airlines (☎ 21523555; www.djiboutiairlines.com; Independence Rd)

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 21528444; www.flyethiopian.com; Independence Rd)

Turn to p743 for details on flights to/from Somaliland.

LAND

Regular buses and 4WDs travel between Hargeisa, Berbera, Sheekh, Burcao and the Ethiopian border. It costs from US\$5 to US\$10 depending on the destination.

Getting Around

A taxi ride in the centre from Independence Rd should cost no more than US\$3, and about US\$10 to the airport. The Ambassador has a free pick-up service. Man-Soor Hotel and Zambezi Restaurant can be reached by minibus from the centre.

LAS GEEL

Here's a secret: were it not in Somaliland, this fantastic **site** (admission US\$20) would immediately be declared a World Heritage Site and would be swamped with masses of tourists. Sadly (well, not quite), as long as Somaliland is not recognised by the international community, all attempts at protecting the site will remain unsuccessful and it will remain a hidden gem.

Las Geel is undisputably Somaliland's *pièce de résistance*. Hundreds of magnificent Neolithic rock-art paintings in perfect condition, representing humans and animals, adorn the walls of several interconnected caves and shelters. Some paintings exceed 1m in length and their state of preservation is exceptional – nothing can convey the sort of response you're likely to have the minute you see them. There are even some very risqué scenes... This archaeological wonder was only brought to light in 2003, following research conducted by a team of French archaeologists.

It's about 50km from Hargeisa, off the road to Berbera. You'll need a guide and a private vehicle to get there, both easily arranged in Hargeisa.

BERBERA

The name alone sounds impossibly exotic, conjuring images of tropical ports, spices and palm oil. If the reality is a little more prosaic, it's nonetheless a great place to chill for a while. It's hard to believe when you see it, but Berbera was once an active port town. Today this shady town consists mostly of crumbling buildings and mud-and-thatch houses.

Berbera's potential is immense, though. It's a nice little earner for Somaliland thanks to land-locked Ethiopia's need for a cheap, friendly port.

The journey from Hargeisa to here is beautiful and there are some majestic sea cliffs along the coast. Berbera is also bounded by blissful **beaches**, about 4km from the centre, including Baathela Beach. It also has a huge runway, built in the early 1980s as an emergency landing strip for the NASA space shuttle!

Sleeping & Eating

Al Madiina Hotel (☎ 2720254; r US\$5-20, without bathroom US\$3; ☎) Centrally located and economical, Dahabshiiil is a good place to drop anchor in Berbera, with a mixed bag of rooms to suit all budgets. The better rooms have air-con. There's a small store across the street. It's a one-storey yellow and green building.

Dahabshiiil Hotel (☎ 2447845; r US\$5, with air-con US\$20, r without bathroom US\$3; ☎) Stumbling distance from the Al Madiina, this is another acceptable option, with luminous rooms and well-scrubbed bathrooms.

Maan-Soor Hotel (☎ 2447975; s/d US\$40/50; ☎) The Maan-Soor has a resort-style feel, with a series of well-furnished 'cottages' scattered

around a large property spitting distance from the beach. It scores high on facilities, with satellite TV, laundry service, excellent bedding, air-con and an attached restaurant. Its drawback is that it's a fair way out of town. Oh, and the loos and the sinks, sporting blue-ish friezes, are the tackiest we've ever seen this side of the Gulf of Aden. Prices are negotiable if it's slack.

Al Xayaat Restaurant & Fish House (☎ 2740224; mains US\$3; ☎ lunch & dinner) Lap up a reviving fruit juice and scoff a grilled fish at this unpretentious eatery overlooking the bay, and you'll leave with a smile on your face. The amiable owner, Ali, speaks a little French. While eating you'll be surrounded by plenty of cats, crows and seagulls expecting a tidbit.

Getting There & Away

Regular buses and 4WDs travel between Hargeisa and Berbera (US\$5, 150km).

SHEEKH

From Berbera and the coastal plain, it's a beautiful journey along the switchback ascent to the central plateau on the Berbera–Burcao road and stop at the hill town of Sheekh, which is a welcome refuge from the heat of lowland areas. Sheekh boasts a small **necropolis**, called Ferdusa, which dates from the 13th century. There's not much to be seen, as the site has not been excavated yet.

Sheekh is approximately halfway between Berbera and Burcao (bus US\$2), so you can break up your odyssey at **Mashaallah Hotel** (☎ 2730164; s/d incl breakfast US\$10/20), which has ordinary rooms set around a courtyard.

BURCAO (BURAO)

The second-largest city in the country and the capital of Togdheer province, Burcao feels a bit rougher around the edges than Berbera or Hargeisa, but that's part of its appeal. There's nothing of tangible interest here, but you can soak up the atmosphere at the livestock market and enjoy being the focus of attention – you'll be somewhat of a novelty here!

You'll find internet and telephone outlets, as well as bureaux de change in the centre.

Sleeping & Eating

Gabay-Xaddi Hotel (☎ 224400; r US\$10, without bathroom US\$5) A bit nibbled around the edges, with bare-bones rooms and slightly musty bathrooms, but tolerable if the City Plaza is full.

Burao City Plaza Hotel (☎ 2710658; r US\$17, ste US\$33, all incl breakfast; 🚻 📺) Ignore the intimidating sign at the entrance of the property ('all kind of weapons and all kind of knives are forbidden inside of the hotel'); the City Plaza is perfectly secure and comfortable, with well-appointed rooms arrayed around a leafy compound, stout bedding, salubrious bathrooms, good services and internet access (US\$2 per hour). Treat yourself to a suite if you want to strew your stuff around. There's also an on-site restaurant. It's on the road to Las Anod, past the airport.

Shamaxe Restaurant (mains US\$3; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The best option in town, right by the Todgheer River, off the main road, at the foot of a bridge (ask for directions). Just thinking about the ultratender kid meat served with basmati rice sends our tastebuds on a taitspin. And the papaya juice is victory for humanity, too.

Getting There & Away

Bus and 4WD transport leaves for Hargeisa (US\$5 to US\$10) via Berbera.

SOMALILAND DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

In Somaliland there's a fairly good range of options, at very affordable prices. There are two hotels meeting international standards in Hargeisa, and a smattering of budget and midrange options in the capital and main cities. They are generally better value than in Djibouti and better equipped than Ethiopia.

BUSINESS HOURS

All shops, offices and businesses are closed on Friday, but most restaurants are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner daily.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Follow what hotel staff will tell you – an armed soldier (at your own expense) and a tour guide might be compulsory outside Hargeisa. If you venture out without a guard, you might be turned back at checkpoints. Check the situation while in Hargeisa. All travel in the Sool and Sanaag regions of Somaliland is currently unsafe due to conflict in Puntland, which claims those provinces.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

The only official foreign representation in Somaliland is the **Ethiopian Trade Office** (☎ 252 2421214; Hargeisa), which serves as a de facto embassy.

Somaliland Liaison Offices abroad include the following:

Djibouti (☎ 355526; Plateau du Serpent)

Ethiopia (☎ 11-635921; fax 11-627847; Bole Rd District, Addis Ababa)

UK (☎ 020-7961 9098; slrmission@btinternet.com; 102 Cave St; London E1 2JA)

USA (☎ 202-467 0602; 3705 South George Mansion, Falls Church, VA 22041)

HOLIDAYS

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

1 January Independence Day in Somalia

26 June Independence Day in Somaliland

MONEY

There are no ATMs anywhere in Somaliland, so you'll need to carry considerable amounts of US dollars (vastly preferable to euros) that can be exchanged for shillings in hotels, shops and bureaux de change. Most hotels and shops also accept payment in US dollars. There's no chance of changing your travellers cheques. If you need to wire money, try **Dahabshiil** (www.dahabshiil.com); transfers can be made at the various Dahabshiil offices in Hargeisa. Dahabshiil has offices in Australia, Canada, Holland, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the USA, among others.

TELEPHONE

There are numerous private telephone companies in Somaliland, including Telesom and Telecom. International telephone calls made from Somaliland are the cheapest in Africa (less than US\$0.50 per minute).

VISAS

You will need a visa to enter Somaliland. The most convenient place to get a visa is Addis Ababa. Visas are issued the same day through the Somaliland Liaison Office (see above) and cost US\$30. You'll need a photo. In Djibouti, you'll need a copy of your passport, which will be faxed to Hargeisa. Once the approval is faxed back, you get a visa, which you will pay at the airport in Hargeisa. The whole process takes about three days.

In the UK or the USA, you can contact the Somaliland Liaison Office. Another straightforward option is to go through a local sponsor, such as the Oriental Hotel, the Ambassador (see p739) or the Director of Tourism (see p738). You'll need to fax them details of your passport pages and give them at least a week 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\$30).

Visas for Onward Travel

The Ethiopian Trade Office (opposite) can issue Ethiopian visas. You'll need two photos, US\$20 and a letter from the Somaliland **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 22253871; Independence Rd, Hargeisa). The whole process is pretty straightforward and takes less than a day.

TRANSPORT IN SOMALILAND

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air
Daallo Airlines, the national carrier, operates weekly services from Jeddah, London and Paris to Djibouti, from where there are connections to Hargeisa (Somaliland) and Mogadishu (southern Somalia). It also has flights from Djibouti to other smaller Somali destinations, including Bosasso (Puntland; US\$192, two hours). Ethiopian Airlines offers flights from Addis Ababa to Hargeisa (US\$285 return, two hours), while Djibouti Airlines flies from Djibouti to Hargeisa (US\$100, 45 minutes) and from Hargeisa to Aden (Yemen) and Dubai.

From Nairobi, African Express Airways flies to Mogadishu, Berbera and on to Dubai.

Land

DJIBOUTI
The land border between Somaliland and Djibouti is open, but it's a gruelling two-day truck journey between Djibouti and Hargeisa (about US\$25). The border crossing is at Loyaada.

ETHIOPIA

From Jijiga in eastern Ethiopia there's regular bus traffic to the border town of Wajaale. It takes about 1½ to two hours, depending on

DEPARTURE & ARRIVAL TAX

International departure tax is US\$30, payable in cash. Arrival tax is US\$20. You're also obliged to change US\$50 at the airport.

the number of punctures, and costs Birr15. Get stamped out at the Ethiopian immigration office (look for the MAO building on the main street), cross no-man's-land to Somaliland's immigration shack, where your passport will be stamped and your visa checked. Then take a taxi (about US\$30) or a minibus (about US\$4) to Hargeisa (two hours, 88km). Expect a couple of checkpoints, but no hassles.

KENYA

There's no way you can get overland from Somalia to Kenya or Ethiopia at present.

GETTING AROUND

In Somaliland there are a few sealed roads (such as from Hargeisa to Berbera and from Berbera to Burcao). Medium-sized buses and crowded 4WDs service routes between major Somaliland settlements.

You can hire a taxi for US\$60 per day (fuel is extra). A police escort costs about US\$15.

PUNTLAND

Forming the tip of the Horn of Africa, Puntland is the easternmost region of the continent. Raas Xaafuun should occupy a top spot but, alas, is fraught with danger. Not only is the political situation pretty fluid, the coast is renowned for piracy and kidnapping. There are also flashpoints in the Sool, southern and eastern Sanaag regions and Buhoodle district that currently lie in Somaliland, but are claimed by Puntland. The 'capital' is Bosasso.

Daallo Airlines has flights to Bosasso from Djibouti.

SOMALIA

If you're looking for good news, you've opened this guide on the wrong page. At the time of writing, Somalia was considered the most dangerous place in the world. There are some signs of hope, though. In July 2006 the

Islamic Courts replaced the US-backed warlords in Mogadishu and restored a semblance of unity and order in southern Somalia. But it doesn't seem that foreigners are made more welcome, and it is hardly likely to be on travelers' itineraries any time soon.

At the time of writing, the ravaged capital of **Mogadishu** was possibly the most perilous city in the world and a definite no-go zone for foreigners. Should you be forced to get there, a reader has recommended the Hotel Shamo and the Hotel Sahafi, which rent rooms for about US\$60 (full board). Add an extra daily US\$120 for a police escort.

What's left of this city that was founded in the 10th century AD by Arab merchants and ruled by sultans until the 20th century? It's probably now about as far from the glories of its 13th-century heyday as it's possible to get. Before the war, a number of isolated coves along the coast and pristine beaches were popular with expats. The **Bakara Market** is the infamous location where US Rangers and special forces units were pinned down for over 15 hours (as documented in the Hollywood kill-fest *Black Hawk Down*).

Daallo Airlines and African Express Airways have flights to Mogadishu.