

Eritrea

Let's start with the bad news. In just 10 years, Eritrea has gone from being a success story and a model state for the whole of Africa – egalitarian, well governed, optimistic – to being one of the most isolated nations in the world. The once progressive government has slipped to become a repressive regime. The economy is in a shambles and Eritreans are doing it tough.

But there's a brighter side. Being locked in a time capsule and almost completely unexploited by commercial tourism, Eritrea offers excitement for travellers who have a hankering for secretive places. Though some parts of the country are off limits to foreigners (especially Dankalia and western Eritrea), the sense of discovery is overwhelming. Southern Eritrea combines quintessentially Abyssinian landscapes – escarpments, plateaus and soaring peaks – with a couple of archaeological sites. Heading north, the market town of Keren offers a fascinating glimpse into Eritrea's diverse cultural fabric. On the Red Sea coast, Massawa, a Zanzibar-esque town redolent with Islamic influence, is the starting point for trips to the Dahlak Islands, a bijou archipelago with peroxide-blond beaches and thriving reefs.

The cherry on top is Asmara, Eritrea's utterly adorable capital. This whimsical art-deco city boasts the most dazzling collection of colonial architectural wonders in Africa, as well as the frothiest macchiatos this side of the Colosseum.

Here's the paradox: despite the tough political and economic landscape and the odd travel restriction, Eritrea remains one of the most inspiring destinations in Africa, with a unique blend of Abyssinian, Arabic and Mediterranean influences – which makes it all the more tempting to peek into.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 124,320 sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Djibouti, Sudan, Ethiopia; all land border crossings are currently closed
- **Budget** US\$20 to US\$35 per day
- **Capital** Asmara
- **Languages** Tigrinya, Arabic and other regional languages
- **Money** Nakfa; US\$1 = Nfa15, €1 = Nfa21.9
- **Population** 5.7 million
- **Seasons** Cool (October to May), hot (June to September), wet (July to September)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 291-1; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +3
- **Visa** From US\$50 to US\$60 for 30 days



HOW MUCH?

- **Internet connection** US\$0.70 per hour
- **Asmara–Massawa bus ride** US\$2
- **One night in a guesthouse in the capital** US\$13
- **Travel permit** US\$1.30
- **4WD hire** US\$135 per day

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$2.50
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$1
- **Bottle of Asmara beer** US\$0.85
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$6 to US\$7
- **Pastry** US\$0.30

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Asmara** (p663) Discover the capital's fantastic Italian colonial architecture and its lively cafe culture.
- **Massawa** (p669) Get lost in Massawa Island's maze of narrow streets and feast on Yemeni fish.
- **Dahlak Islands** (p670) Relish the pristine beauty of this wild archipelago, then comb the beach of Dissei Island.
- **Qohaito** (p669) Conjure up a vanished civilisation at this archaeological site shrouded in peaceful solitude.
- **Keren** (p668) Soak up the languid atmosphere of Eritrea's beguiling second city.

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.

Although it's possible to visit Eritrea any time of year, the ideal time climatewise is September to October and January to April. Avoid travelling during June to August, when

it's the rainy season in the highlands and hot and torrid in the eastern lowlands.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Spend two full days in Asmara (p663), visiting its gob-smacking portfolio of architectural wonders, lapping up squidgy cakes and sipping frothy macchiatos. Push onto Keren (p668), which deserves a day or two for its attractive architecture and active markets. Back to Asmara, then it's time to roll down to Massawa (p669) on the Red Sea coast.
- **Two Weeks** Follow the one-week agenda then explore the pristine Dahlak Islands (p670), which are blessed with good diving and snorkelling opportunities. Head back through Asmara, then forge south to explore the poignant ruins of Qohaito (p669) and Metera (p669).

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 – unlike the European colonising powers of the 19th century. The Italians managed to grab