



# Somalia

POP 11 MILLION / 252

## Includes →

Understand Somalia .....	656
Somalia Today.....	656
History .....	656
Culture .....	657
Environment .....	658

## Fast Facts

**Capital** Mogadishu

**Population** 10.82 million

**Languages** Somali, Arabic, Italian, English

**Area** 637,657 sq km

**Currency** Somali shilling (SOS), Somaliland shilling (Ssh)

## Introduction

A few decades ago Somalia was a magnet for travellers and, with a bit of luck and a following wind, it could be again. But right now the country is still unsafe for foreigners, with its people, places and infrastructure still recovering from over 25 years of brutal civil war. The situation is not insurmountable. There are increasing signs of hope and Mogadishu, the capital, is experiencing an urban boom thanks to massive investments from returning Somalis. And amid chaos, there is a success story: the self-proclaimed nation of Somaliland, north of the country, which has managed to retain something close to peace and stability. If Somalia does open up for travel, visitors will again be able to experience its fascinating culture and enjoy its natural attractions, bask on pristine beaches and trek across arid mountains.

## Somalia at a Glance

**Mogadishu** The fascinating streets of the former 'Pearl of the Indian Ocean'.

**Hargeisa** A lively gold market where haggling erupts over jewellery.

**Berbera** The pleasure of a soft drink and fresh fish while relaxing on white-sand beaches.

**Las Geel** This astounding archaeological site, festooned in ancient rock art, tells of Somalia's mysterious past.

**Raas Xaafun** A remarkable vista at the tip of the Horn of Africa.

**Merca** Myriad alleyways in this wonderful old Arab coastal town.

**Bajuni Islands** A fantastic archipelago blessed with glistening white-sand beaches.

## UNDERSTAND SOMALIA

### Somalia Today

In terms of security and stability, there has been some improvement over the last few years in Somalia but gains are fragile. Life has not returned to normal yet and, bar a few pockets of economic activity, deep poverty is widespread. The national army, backed by peacekeepers from the African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom) force, has managed to dislodge many Islamic fundamentalists of the Al Shabab movement from many towns and cities, including Mogadishu and the strategic port town of Kismayo. The situation remains highly unpredictable, however: Al Shabab groups still control swaths of the country and remain very active. They regularly launch guerilla-style attacks and assassinations in the capital in order to destabilise the fragile



Somali government, which has a devastating effect on economic development. Al Shabab militants have also proved resilient, adapting their destructive operations to the new context; instead of trying to retake the city centres, Al Shabab rebels seek to control neighbourhoods and suburbs.

Politically, some progress has been made in reestablishing viable and stable state structures and a central government – no mean feat after three decades of conflict and lawlessness. The African Union and UN have played a key part in revitalising institutions. Somalia turned a corner in 2012 when the first presidential elections were held, but voting took place only in Mogadishu. Another breakthrough took place in February 2017, when Somalia's MPs elected Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo, a Somali-US national, as the country's new president; the vote was held at the heavily guarded Mogadishu airport. This vote is seen by the UN and the African Union as a milestone towards a stable democracy, in the hope that the next president will be chosen in a one-person one-vote election. Farmajo's challenges are enormous, and he has pledged to tackle corruption during his term in office.

## History

### Somalia's Roots

Originally, Somalis probably hail from the southern Ethiopian highlands. As a people, they 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.

### Foreign Interventions

In the 19th century much of the Ogaden Desert – whose people are ethnically a part of Somalia – was annexed by Ethiopia (an invasion that has been a source of bad blood ever since), 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.