

I was 23 years old when I left Eritrea and came to Europe where I started a new life, a new career, a family and finally retired after working 42 years for the same Company. I had always promised myself that one day I would go back. I would go back to breathe the air that I first breathed when I was born, to see my home, to walk the streets I used to walk as a kid and a youngster.

Life in Europe was good and with it came marriage, children, School fees, mortgages, School holidays and this trip to Eritrea always took a later and later date in my 'wish to do diary'.

Then I was 65. My children had grown, I had just been given my P45 and now I was free. Free to chose a date for myself, able to take that long awaited trip. Persuading friends to come with me on this venture was a bit hard given the publicity that is going on about Eritrea and the surrounding area. None of this was to stop me. I was confident deep down that I knew the Eritrean people. I had gone to school with them, worked with them, shared happy moments of our lives as well as some very sad ones and I knew I was not going to be disappointed.

I booked my air tickets early to safeguard a cheaper rate and was anxiously awaiting the day when I would have to apply for my Visa and the rest.

Getting closer to D-day I kept following the weather reports. Asmara would not let me down on this. A cool 6 degrees early in the morning, soon followed by 22 degrees all day long.

Vaccinations in Order, money exchanged I submitted my Visa Application.

I was impressed by the way I was treated at the Eritrean Embassy in London. One day I submitted the forms with the Visa fee and the Supporting documents and the next day I had the passport with the Visa secured. All very very civilised!

What I had to do now was to prepare my bags.

Over the years I had established some new friends who lived and worked in Eritrea and I had also started supporting a School that was being built at Massawa. I wanted to buy some useful presents for them to take with me.

Soon my baggage allowance was complete with clothes, pens, pencils, and presents that my loving children had generously donated for this trip.

Upon my way to the Airport I felt restless like a child. I was about to fulfil a long longed dream.

A quick change of flights in Cairo and I was on the final leg of the journey to my hometown.

I could not eat, could not watch the movie. I was excited. Luckily I started conversation with a fellow passenger returning to Eritrea after his annual leave in India and so time passed pleasantly.

As we approached our destination I could not believe what I was seeing.

I had never seen Asmara from the air at night but this did not look like the Asmara I had in mind. Now there were rows and rows of yellow lit double carriage roads, there were perfectly lit buildings and the area was immense. Yes, it was Asmara after all and soon our aircraft touched the ground.

An earlier flight arrival from Yemen had stretched arrival formalities to the maximum. There were trolley loads of TVs, Hi Fi equipment, Satellite dishes and lots and lots of baggage, all waiting to go through Customs.

Waiting on the queue enabled me to meet a few Europeans that had also just arrived and we briefly exchanged data and information. A couple of them were joining a group of Archaeologists doing research in Mareb and Adulis, one was going to do some maintenance work on the generator supplying electricity to the newly established gold mine, others were returning after their yearly home leave and of course, there were a few like me, on visit to relatives or visiting Eritrea for the first time.

There was an air of anxiety and confusion as we cleared immigration and customs but soon we were on our separate ways to our destinations.

After check in at my Hotel I could not sleep at all though I physically felt very tired and exhausted. I lied in bed for a couple of hours and as the sun rose I was up and out of the Hotel wandering down Hanret Avenue.

The air was cool, fresh and thin. The 2500 meters altitude of Asmara seemed to take their toll and I felt slightly queasy. But I had to be out, I had to feel what the new Eritrea, the Asmara that I loved and left many may years ago, was like.

At 06.00 hrs in the morning the streets were quiet. Some women with handmade straw brooms in their hands were proudly cleaning their patch of street. The streets were spotless.

Soon cars, buses, and people started appearing and the early morning rush hour began. Some people were patiently waiting for their bus to go to work, others were going to their businesses and soon the town was alive.

Asmara has no shortage of Bars and fresh pastry shops. The air was filled with the aroma of fresh baked cakes. The old names of the Bars from the Italian era are still the same. Bar Impero, Pasticeria Moderna, Bar Vittoria, Bar Torino, all making delicious Capuccinos and the now popular tea or 'shahi'.

I met with an old friend and together we walked to the Kidane Mehret Church in Accriah..



She was trying to locate someone at the school so I walked there with her.

I was greeted in English by scores of young students all trying to shake hands with me and asking me 'what is your name?', 'where do you come from?'



They were all so cute and all looked extremely intelligent and well behaved. Upon my friends' return we made our way through the Mercato where she was looking to buy some cotton cloth to make a traditional Eritrean dress. The colours and the embroidery were delicate and traditional. The basic design being that of the Eritrean Coptic Cross on white soft cotton woven cloth with various and different colourful finishing variations.

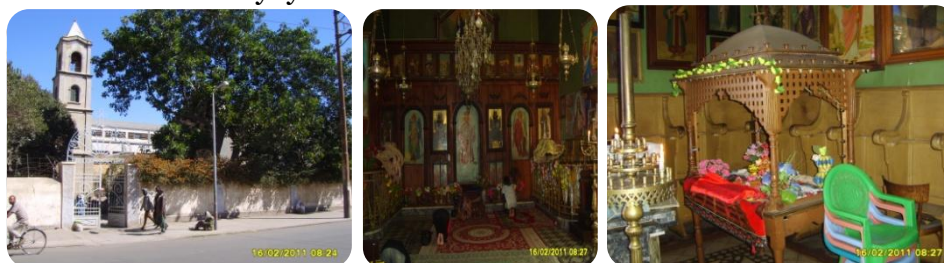


The mercato was buzzing with people. Some on foot, some on their bikes. Buyers and sellers mixing harmonically as they went about their business. I felt safe and very welcome and at no time did I feel threatened or afraid that anyone might try and take anything from me. With my digital camera in hand I snapped pictures and video never ever sensing that I was unwanted or watched.



Walking down the streets we passed in front of the main Mosque, turned left in front of the Synagogue, right in front of the Catholic Cathedral and right again into the Greek Orthodox Church that I was Baptised in. All in a square of about a mile and all symbolizing the harmony and respect of people and religion that has existed in this country through the ages.

The external of the church, now in need of a bit of attention was just as it was those many years ago. Taking my first step inside with reverence and respect I joined a few other people who were kneeling on the carpeted floor in prayer. The Icons, the Epitaph, the Brass candelabra stands, the Choir stands on either side, all having stood still and idle for many years....



I had to arrange for my permit in order to go to Massawa so I hastened with my friend to the Tour Operator who had met me at the Airport some hours earlier.

Application formalities completed we are out again meeting other friends at the busy Bar Vittoria.



Over the years due to the wars that tarnished this beautiful country, Eritreans have had to flee to all parts of the world in search of peace. Now in their old age, with their families grown up and established abroad many of them returned as pensioners to spend their well earned pensions at home. In the bars one could see groups of friends chatting and sharing their tea or coffee in company and of course the famous cappuccino.

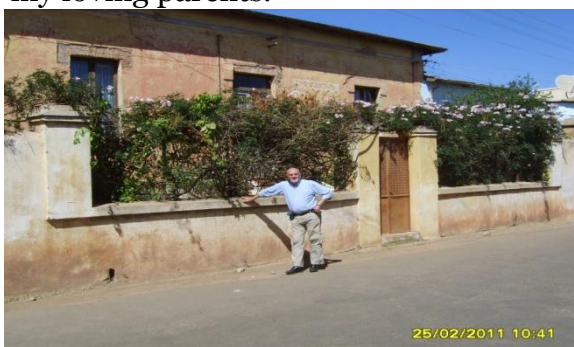


Some remembered a little bit of Italian, all of them spoke fluent English. The Hotel I stayed in was owned by an Eritrean family who once lived in the United States. Fully equipped to International standards I found the management and staff extremely obliging and helpful. By 6 pm the bars and public sectors of the hotel were patronised by young Eritreans. I could hear the buzz of happy friends socializing but with not a single case of rowdiness. By 11.30pm all went quiet again, the Hotel was cleaned and the night shift took over.

Breakfasting with a large glass of fresh Papaya Juice, my favourite scrambled eggs with chilly, tomatoes and cheese and a large black coffee I was ready to hit the town once again.

I had promised to myself to visit the house I was born in and to pay homage to my fathers' and uncles' tomb who were buried at the Asmara Cemetery.

A 15 minute walk from the Hotel took me in front of my house. Clearly neglected and looking in a sorry state it had suffered the pain of being divided in two by the previous regime, half of it being taken by the State. I did not even wish to try and go in. I preferred to remain with the memories of my happy childhood and remember it as it was then, fully stocked with all sorts of fruit trees and plants carefully tendered by my loving parents.



The cemetery stood in silence at the top of a hill past the old University , surrounded by the those walls which were intended to keep the people out rather than those ones who were in it. Tombs and monuments erected in memory of those who once lived in this beautiful city still adorned the various sections. Going to the Greek Orthodox side I was able to pay homage to my dead fathers” and uncles’ tomb and refresh my memory with names of many a friend gone by..

By mid afternoon the tour operator was able to confirm that my permit had arrived and that I would be leaving for Massawa with some group the next morning at 8 am. He had booked me with a group on a 20 seater bus. To my pleasant surprise I found myself with a group of young University Students from Norway that had come to Asmara to prepare their thesis in Architecture and Art Deco. Asmara has been declared by Unesco as an Art Deco City and being protected it attracts the attention of Architects and amateurs of art around the World.



The winding road to Massawa was well maintained and actually improved.



In the 110 kilometres down the mountains you drove along the rift valley from a height of 2500 meters to sea level.

In this distance you actually covered four seasons. Through most of the trip you could see people. There were cyclists practicing, peasants tending their flock of goats, pedestrians. At one particular bend a family of baboons were awaiting to be bribed with a bit of bread before skilfully jumping off to another vehicle for a bit of mischief and some more!



I noticed that drivers going to Massawa on these roads were very careful. I did not once feel in danger though I was seating on the very front of the car and turning round those hairpin bends were a bit scary.

We stopped halfway for refreshments at the bustling town of Ghinda and I was lucky to strike friendship with members of the Denden Football Club who were on their way to Massawa for a few days training.



Pictures taken, emails exchanged we drove on..

The Landscape soon changed to one where there was a lot of vegetation with Acacia trees in white flowers lining the road on either side. There was a pleasant scent and a thin low cloud was softly touching the ground. Some honey bee cages had been set alongside the road but we drove on.

I could just imagine what the honey produced from those acacia flowers would taste like.

A few more villages and a few bridges crossed we were heading full ahead for Massawa across the lowlands and the scenery changed to a landscape of thorny bushes and a few goats here and there trying to reach for the few green leaves still left on their branches. The air now was getting warmer and drier



Massawa is built on three Islands which are linked by causeways. These have recently been widened and strengthened to allow traffic to flow safely. In the old days one could smell of rotten fish as you approached the first bridge past a Button factory which does not exist anymore and which was situated in Otumlo and that was a sure indication that you had arrived at the outskirts of Massawa.

Now of course the landscape is different. New villages have been built and there seem to be a lot of housing projects which seem to be still unoccupied.

On the right side of the road and in particular, where the old airport used to be, now proudly stands the New St Francis Junior/High School. A project which was started by a Franciscan monk called Father Protasio in 2005 is now adorning the landscape as a landmark to the sandy landscape surrounding it.



Built completely with donations received from ex Asmarinos and Charity Organizations in Italy it is now open to education for around 900 students of mixed sex and religious beliefs. The School comprises a Junior and High School complete with a Library and sports grounds and is now in the process of completing the School for the Hotel and Catering Industry. It is almost inconceivable that in the middle of a desert, in a country which is struggling to recover the damages of war and starting to

establish itself as a free and worthy country a group of hard working people has managed to achieve such an outstanding project.



And all of this in just six years!

Last year an appeal was launched to help the children with transport as the school lies a few miles out of town. One Italian Charity rose to the challenge and 750 bicycles have been donated to date.



One cannot help but notice the red girls bikes and the yellow boys bikes which can be seen everywhere in the surrounding villages and in town. They are the 'Bike School Busses'.

There is a sense of positive feeling talking to locals about this school and surely the students who are the protagonists in this project are doing well and are proud of what they have.

Father Protasio and his team have seen their dream come true and continue to work for the future of this establishment and the welfare of their children. It is an endless task and Father Protasio and his friends are continuously seeking for support from willing sources around the world.

Fist causeway crossed one can see a monument of three huge tanks set up as a reminder of that heroic crossing when Massawa was recaptured from the fleeing Ethiopian army.



Just behind it, the Red Sea Hotel.



A few hundred meters further on just before crossing the third causeway you cannot but come across the remnants of what used to be the Imperial Palace of Haile Selassie, destroyed by his own forces in the course of their defeat from the fighting forces of the Eritrean army.



Next to it, the Dahlak Hotel with an impressive swimming sea water swimming pool and a breathtaking view of Old Massawa, the port and the 'Isola Verde' or Green Island just across a deep water channel.



During my stay at this Hotel I had the best seafood meal I ever had in a resort.



Standing proudly in the center of the entry to this part of old Massawa and dressed in shining white colour, stands the beautiful building of Bar Torino. A Night Club that has entertained many a foreign seamen and their friends.

To me, visiting this part of town was like visiting a friend in hospital. It was sad to see the terrible wounds that had been inflicted by the tragedy of war but also promising to know that this could be a challenging potential for development and change for the future entrepreneurs who live in this country. Somehow people still live amongst the ruins and this is proof of humanity's ability to survive the calamity of disaster.



There, by a side road from the Mosque in the corner of a dark and poorly lit alley is an eating place run by Restaurateur of Dankaly origin called Saleh.



His speciality 'Fresh Red Sea fish' cooked in a traditional Clay oven and served plainly with a bit of lemon and a slice of home baked bread. This is eaten by hand and of course, no alcoholic drinks can be found as the owner respects the Moslem tradition. A must for many tourists who wish to taste the traditional benefits that a small country such as Eritrea can offer I was surprised to find how many people were there.

On the other side a dozen of kilometres away from Massawa is situated the Beach Complex of Gurgussum. An extensive array of bungalows and restaurants catering to all the needs of its visitors.



The long sandy beach and perfect sunshine offering a natural and relaxing holiday to its many visitors.

Visible at a distance are a couple of other huge Hotel complexes under construction but work seems to be halted for the time being.

Transport to/from the beach is by 12 seater minibuses.



Though they may look a little bit worn out on the inside, they are functional and cheap. It was indeed a very pleasant experience to share this form of transport with the locals who go about their daily business using these means.

Soon my ten days holiday were over.

My emotions were mixed and at times confused.

I had seen these places in better days but now I was experiencing a whole new thing. A country free at last to its own destiny. A country whose proud citizens are able and willing to make it the Best country in the World. I hope my wishes will one day come true!