



Tourism

TOURISM

A Land of Prehistoric Wonders

SOMALILAND IS A LAND OF GREAT historical interest, with coastal trade links to ancient Egypt and to the other classical civilizations, an interior scattered with intriguing rock art sites, mysterious cairns, and other monuments of a complex pastoral society that dates back well over 10,000 years.

The oldest direct evidence of human habitation of Somaliland is Acheulen stone blades and flint tool discovered in the vicinity of Hargeisa and in caves along the Golis. The sites where these tools were discovered have not been subjected

to modern dating techniques, but various sources place them at between 12,000 and 40,000 BC. Almost nothing is known about these Stone Age habitants of Somaliland beyond the fact that they were nomadic hunt-gathers.

A more revealing relict of ancient human activity in Somaliland is a wealth of Neolithic rock art sites, preserved thanks to the dry climate. The most famous of these is Laas-Geel, located approximately 50km north of Hargeisa. However,

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numerous other rock art paintings and engraving sites are scattered around the country, and the likelihood is that others remain to be discovered. Somali rock art includes many depictions of people and wild animals, but the dominant motif on most panels is stylised and an often unnaturally colourful representation of domestic livestock. Given their great antiquity, these paintings unambiguously demonstrate that Somaliland supported one of the world's earliest pastoral livestock herding societies, dating back some 6,000 to 9,000 years, several millennia before pastoralism was adopted in Europe or Asia. The art that adorns the rocks also appears to have a strong spiritual dimension, and – bearing in mind that any paintings made on a less durable or protected surface would have vanished long ago – it probably represents a tiny surviving fragment relict of Somaliland's sophisticated Neolithic artistic tradition.

On the one hand, this territory, of a surface of 137,600km², possesses the richest concentration of rock art of East Africa with many almost entirely unpublished sites of Neolithic polychrome paintings. On the other hand, it constitutes a very rich reserve of pre-Islamic funerary megaliths, including thousands of tombs whose architectural forms are often original and have not yet been studied by archaeologists.

Finally, thanks to the study of the few samples of ceramic collected in 2002 among the ruins of the ancient city of Ferdusa at the entry of the town of Sheikh. Experts were able to measure the importance of the role this region of East Africa must have played during the Middle Ages in the international system of maritime trade. Several items came from the Arab Peninsula but also from China. There are in Somaliland numerous ancient agglomerations whose remains are often quite well preserved and require planned excavations by experienced archaeologists, which would make it possible to write the exciting and unwritten history of this region. It would be unjust to think that this was merely a hostile and uninteresting desert,

left aside by the political and economic powers of antiquity, and of medieval and modern times.

SOMALILAND – THE LAND OF PUNT

A number of ancient Egyptian documents refer to maritime trade with a distant country known as the land of Punt or Ta Netjer (land of God). The earliest such expeditions took place around 2480 BC, during the fifth dynasty reign of Sahure. Other visits to Punt were recorded during the 11th, 12th and 16th century dynasties. It seems all maritime trade fell victim to the general disarray that gripped Egypt following the death of Queen Sobekneferu. But it was resumed under Queen Hatshepsut, who dispatched five ships to Punt around 1525 BC. Irregular trade continued for another four centuries with one final large-scale expedition being dispatched during the reign of Ramses III, whose death in 1167 BC initiated a long period of decline in Pharaonic Egypt. Subsequently, the memory of distant Punt was reduced, in the words of Egyptologist Joyce Tyldesley, to "an unreal and fabulous land of myths and legends."

The Somali location for Punt is supported by the remarkable set of reliefs that adorn the walls of Deir –Bahari, the only such expedition records the most famous at Deir-Bahari portray the ruler of Punt, named Parehu, and his family. The availability of a great number of tombs, pyramid like structures, products and linguistic and traditional evidences related to the ancient Egyptian civilization suggests that Punt was on either side of the Gulf of Aden. There is a little to place it on the Yemani side and much more evidence to suggest the land of Punt was on the Somali Peninsula. For example, it is already known that a mountain bypass close to Heis-Mait harbours (facing the Gulf of Aden) and located at 10 55, 47 31, bears the name of Queen Hatshepsut.

The bypass is called Hasasha. The vicinity is a rich source of many plant species sought after by Queen Hatshepsut, such as olibanum, frankincense, molmol, wild

olive tree, wood, buxus hildebrandtii (source of wood), damsk (wood) and many more. Locating the ancient land of Punt on today's map signifies a discovery of the original source and identity of the Cushitic civilizations.

ECOLOGICAL TOURISM

Ga'an Liba Mountains

The Ga'an Libah Mountains are one of the most interesting tourism sites in Somaliland. Rising from sun scorched plains between Berbera and Hargeisa, Ga'an Libah is a surprising example of the diversity of Somaliland. There is a diversity of wildlife in the region including kudu, hyenas, Gazelles, baboons and leopards. Situated high on an escarpment, Ga'an Libah receives more rainfall than most of the country and many parts are thick with trees and birdlife. The views, looking out over the plains below, are stunning, and the journey to the mountains is interesting – a two to three hour drive through the desert passing nomads and settlements, where gazelles and warthogs flit between the thorn bushes.

Surad is highest peak in Somaliland at around 2670ft above the sea level. It is near Erigavo, the capital of the Sanaag region. In this region, there is also Daallo, the most beautiful mountain in Somaliland, which is rich with natural views. A road rises to the top of this mountain. At the mountain's peak, one can see the sea as well as a tiny village called Mait about 60km away. Sometimes the roar of leopards can be heard, about which the local people have many stories to share.

Other mountains – high, beautiful and rich with natural views – are located between Hudisa and Sheikh in the Sahil region. The ascent here from Berbera through the Sheikh bypass follows one of the most dramatic roads in Somaliland, starting from the village of Hudisa at the base of the Gollis range, then climbing some 700 metres over a 10km series of switchbacks that offer fantastic views of the plains below.

Borama is located in another mountainous and hilly region to the west of Somaliland. It has one of the most wonderful and scenic landscapes in the country. It has green meadows and fields and is a key wildlife area in the country. The fertility ►



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and greenery of Borama has attracted many animals into the region including gazelles, birds and camels.

BEACHES

Berbera is a coastal city, which serves as Somaliland's main seaport. With its clean and unspoiled beaches at the Gulf of Aden, swimming, snorkeling, fishing and scuba diving are some of the activities on offer. You will be surprised by how much fish there is with just 1% is used for consumption whilst the other 99% remain swimming around the waters.

Zeila has been identified as the historic city of the Avalitae. The town is known for its offshore island, coral reef and mangroves. Snorkeling and diving are still in their infancy yet the waters in Zeila are rich with turtles and dolphins.

ISLANDS

The Sa'adadin Island is currently being promoted as a tourism resort and is the

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home to hundreds of species of plants and animals. The island lies in the Red Sea facing the Gulf of Aden. It is currently only accessible by boat or sea transport but there are plans in the near future to improve transport infrastructure to connect the island to the mainland. The island would be an attractive investment for an eco-developer, as would Ebad is another island further along the coast.

HOTELS

Hotels and guesthouses, as a tourism subsector, are found in all urban areas throughout Somaliland and around most tourism sites. Many hotels and guesthouses have benefited from the increasing number of visitor, often

Diaspora, and have adapted to meet the demands of international and local visitors. These have been complimented by good local knowledge of tourist sites.

Accommodation standards in Somaliland are relatively high. In the major cities (Hargeisa, Berbera, Borama, Burao, Erigavo, etc), rooms tend to be reasonably priced with basic amenities and good internet connectivity.

Hotel staff are often well-trained and friendly and most speak English to a good standard. However, there is a growing need for luxury hotels with international standards in Somaliland as its tourism sector and its economy in general continues to grow. ■

Now Is THE TIME

Somaliland Tourism Sector Investment

UNTouched AND FULL OF opportunity – the tourism sector in Somaliland is a blank canvas surrounded by colourful pots of culture, coastline and sunshine ready to paint a beautiful picture.

Particularly underdeveloped, Somaliland's tourism sector is open for business. Untouched white-sand coastlines in Berbera, an abundance of culture and heritage, brilliant entrepreneurs and friendly people make Somaliland shout "opportunity" to international investors.

Berbera is of particular historical significance as a rich trading port, once capital of British Somaliland and home of the romantic poet Bodhari. The white sands running as far as the eye can see can compete with any other exotic beach paradise, but incredibly the area still only has one international standard hotel. Off the coast, there is an opportunity to develop scuba diving and snorkelling.

Spanning the countryside between Berbera and Hargeisa, the main opportunities are at Las Geel. Accessed by a winding bumpy dirt road, it is home to some of the oldest rock art in the world, more than ten thousand years old; the highlight of any trip. Tours are provided by elders from the community who enable an in-depth understanding to the exceptional history of the petroglyphs. There are more unique archaeological sites, scenic mountain ranges, rare flora

and fauna and a continuously sunny and warm climate throughout the year.

Somaliland's capital Hargeisa has benefited from substantial investment from the proud and loyal Diaspora community. And surrounding the city there are great escapes to be had including numerous nearby hills to summit including the famous 'Breasts of Hargeisa'. These can be reached, hiked and conquered in one day in time to return for a traditional dinner including delicious camel and goat meat. The Bradt Guide highlights the diverse opportunities in the country and suggest that one should "take a trip to the camel market in Hargeisa, marvel at prehistoric rock art at Las Geel, or go on a 4x4 excursion to the wildlife-rich Daallo Escarpment". Such an array of valuable assets should be considered when thinking about where and why to invest. Pioneering UK tour operators such as Undiscovered Destinations have already demonstrated the market for this extraordinary region that for many remains the quintessential terra incognita.

Investors have shied away from the region in the past due to real risks. The security situation is probably the most relevant and the biggest deterrent given there was a full UK FCO travel ban on all travel to the country. Now however the FCO has become aware of the value of lifting the travel ban and has revised it for the main tourism destinations – Hargeisa and Berbera. With real security and growing confidence the tourism

sector has welcomed an increasing number of international tourists. Visitors are also now able to easily obtain travel cover from specialist insurers AAIB who provide comprehensive and competitive cover including emergency evacuation, although those that have been lucky enough to visit this virgin destination will know that such provision is "OTT" and really only necessary for peace of mind!

UK-based Dunira Strategy in partnership with local partners Horn Heritage recently conducted a Comic Relief funded study to assess the feasibility of heritage tourism as a driver of sustainable economic development. Well received by the government of Somaliland, the outcomes of the project were overwhelmingly positive and identified a large number of critical investment opportunities in accommodation, transport and hospitality services.

Somaliland's tourism sector is the Horn of Africa's sleeping giant and offers huge rewards to investors that want to support this emerging destination. This ancient land is moving into modern times and welcoming international investment.

Tourism in Somaliland is growing organically with the Diaspora community playing a large role both as developers and as tourists. Not only is tourism helping to showcase Somaliland's rich heritage for investors and visitors alike, but it is also offering alternative livelihoods to young people, particularly in rural areas, helping to ensure a rich and prosperous future for Somaliland and her friends.

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Dunira Strategy (www.dunira.com) is an award-winning tourism consultancy specialising in emerging markets. To discuss investment opportunities in Somaliland, please contact Georgina Jamieson (georgina@dunira.com). ■