

ERITREA

A New Country, By Land and Sea

The African nation is welcoming
tourists to its cities and Red Sea coast.

BY ANNE CALCAGNO 8

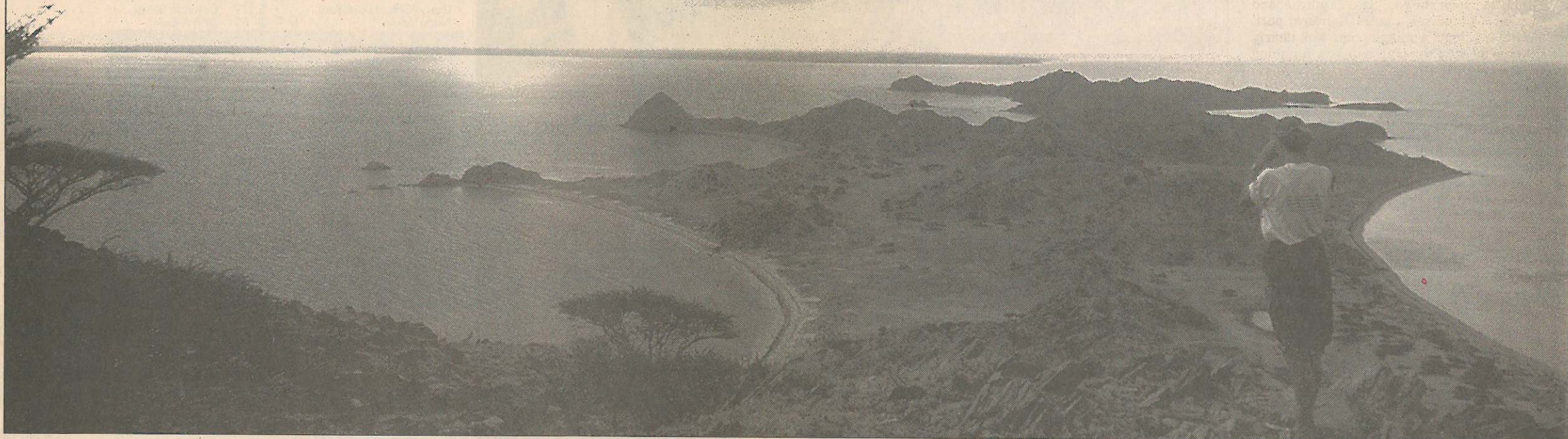


Leo Fitzpatrick

Women in Asmara, Eritrea's main city.

Eritrea: The Pulse of Life in a New Country

This nation on the Red Sea has emerged from civil war open for exploration of its welcoming culture and its wealth of marine life



Looking over Dissei, one of the 355 islands that make up the Dahlak archipelago in the Red Sea.

Photographs by Leo Fitzpatrick

By ANNE CALCAGNO

WHEN Eritrea became Africa's newest democracy in 1993, after a 30-year war of independence with Ethiopia, 800 miles of Red Sea coastline and 355 islands became accessible again. Some scientists believe only the Amazon possesses a biological richness and diversity superior to the Red Sea's. The riches of Eritrea include miles of shallow coral reef, dense forests of fish, five types of sea turtles, enormous manta rays, plump lobsters and the endangered dugong, a type of sea cow.

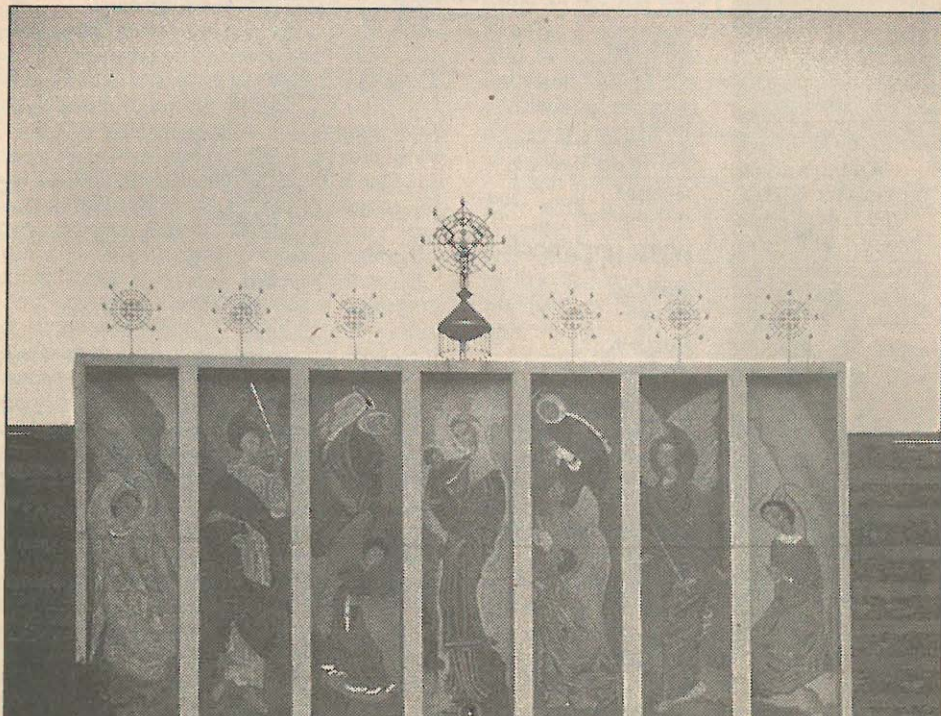
To reach this coastline last winter, my husband, Leo, and I flew to Frankfurt, then to Asmara, Eritrea's capital. Arriving past midnight, groggy, disoriented and weighed down by snorkeling gear, we decided to take a taxi to our hotel in town, about a 20-minute drive from the airport. But it was true to the generous Eritrean spirit — something we encountered frequently during our three and a half-week stay — that in our first hour there a fellow passenger's friend insisted

we stay at the Nyala Hotel, one of the more expensive (\$44 a night for two). For the remainder of our stay in Asmara, we moved to the smaller, cozier Keren Hotel, Asmara's oldest, where a simple, clean room with private bath was \$20. Built in 1899, the solid two-story hotel is four blocks from Liberation Avenue, Asmara's palm-lined main thoroughfare, where ministries, banks and airline offices mix with the more elegant shops and cafes.

A virtual army of street sweepers keeps the city immaculate. Dark, long-limbed Coptic women, draped in white futas, the traditional dress for centuries, lend a graceful dignity to the colorful scene. We hired a superb English-speaking guide, Danny Deffa, to take us through the Military Museum and the museums of ethnography and archeology. On another day, we walked through the spice, fruit and local wares markets, densely packed, one on top of the other, and bought oranges, frankincense, hand-woven baskets and ceramic coffee-pots. A brief uphill walk from the hectic market took us to the tranquillity of the steps of St. Mariam Coptic Cathedral, built in 1917 in a combination of Italian and

informal gathering place, providing information on tour guides, rental cars and excursions. There we learned how a lot of travel arrangements in Eritrea work: you put out a feeler, leave your name and desired destination at your hotel's front desk, at the Eritrean Tour Service or with anyone you've met and liked. Soon, responses trickle in. Sure enough, through the short American grapevine, Leo and I hooked up with a group: Van and Nancy, two American Fulbright scholars, and Ahmed and Sen, two Eritreans native to the town of Hirghigo. We would head down to Massawa to board a 70-foot catamaran, commanded by a capable and eccentric Italian, Doi Malingri.

In Asmara, known for year-round temperateness, the gleaming, clean December air was usually between 60 and 70 degrees. So it was not until the drive to Massawa that we finally understood the Ministry of Tourism's confounding slogan, Eritrea: Three Seasons in Two Hours. Asmara sits on a huge, red rolling plateau, gently licked at the edges by fog. As we curved out of the city, we broke onto a spectacular vista of deep green mountains, glorious upstarts of the Africa Rift. We would drop 7,600 feet in less than 75





St. Mariam's Coptic Cathedral, built 1917.

midnight, groggy, disoriented and weighed down by snorkeling gear, we decided to take a taxi to our hotel in town, about a 20-minute drive from the airport. But it was true to the generous Eritrean spirit — something we encountered frequently during our three and a half-week stay — that in our first hour there a fellow passenger's friend insisted we accept a lift.

Eritrea is untrammled, untraveled land. The civil war and at least two major droughts long precluded the cultivation of tourism, and facilities for them are not all in place. But while tourism is new to Eritrea, so are tourists. In Asmara, in the coastal town of Massara and in the Dahlak Islands, where Leo and I spent three days snorkeling, we were treated with the traditional respect granted to guests. When we offered money to those who helped us with directions or guidance, it was declined with pride.

Once considered one of Africa's most beautiful cities, Asmara was largely built during the Italian colonial occupation in the early 20th century. Today it is Eritrea's largest city, with a population of about 420,000. Evidence of the civil war is minimal; many of the Ethiopian troops were posted here, which protected Asmara from extensive damage. We spent several days exploring this lyrical city before leaving for Massawa and the Dahlaks. For the first two

ANNE CALCAGNO, author of the novel "Pray for Yourself," is at work on a novel set in Eritrea.

through the busy markets, densely packed, one on top of the other, and bought oranges, frankincense, hand-woven baskets and ceramic coffee-pots. A brief uphill walk from the hectic market took us to the tranquillity of the steps of St. Mariam Coptic Cathedral, built in 1917 in a combination of Italian and Ethiopian styles.

The Eritrean Tour Service acts as an

Visiting the islands

Boat trips to the Dahlak Islands must be reserved at least three weeks in advance. Diving and snorkeling equipment rental are made through Dania Avallone (see below). A certified diver will accompany the group for a fee. Generally groups are limited to 10.

Reservations for the **Incaurina Marianna**, Doi Malingri's catamaran, can be made through his Italian office, telephone from the United States (39 75) 9253158. Cost: \$100 a person a day.

Eritrea's **Ministry of Marine Resources** owns three boats that, when not on research expeditions, will transport tourists for \$300 a day for the group. For scheduling and reservations, contact Dania Avallone, Diving Services Division Ministry of Marine Resources, Attention Haika, Post Office Box 923, Asmara, Eritrea; telephone 552688, fax

552498. (The country code for Eritrea is 291 and the area code for Asmara is 1).
confronting slogan, Eritrea: Three Seasons in Two Hours. Asmara sits on a huge, red rolling plateau, gently licked at the edges by fog. As we curved out of the city, we broke onto a spectacular vista of deep green mountains, glorious upstarts of the Africa Rift. We would drop 7,600 feet in less than 75 miles, descending from Asmara's "winter" to spring to summer. For lunch, we stopped

Local fishermen also take groups at a slower pace in their traditional wooden boats called sambuchi. The boats dock near Massawa's fishery. The nicer ones have good bedding, fresh-water showers and tent cloths for shade. Find out if food and water are provided; in any case, it is a good idea to take extra water. These boats are \$240 to \$250 a night, with meals. Two sources are **Dahlak Sea Touring** (ask for Captain Mike), 552489, and **Capt. Mohammed Gazz**, 552119.

A permit for boat travel to the Dahlak Islands must be obtained at the Tourism office in the Red Sea Hotel in Massawa, 552522. The cost is \$30 a person for up to three days; the cost for each additional day is \$10.

A. C.

midway at a brightly painted cafe in Ghinda, and ate zighini, a spicy goat stew with pancake made out of teff, the bitter-sweet African grain. Tigre women and girls went by in long dresses and gauzy scarves, effulgent contrasts of color and pattern. As we passed old Italian villas bougainvillea spilled abundant tresses of red, purple, orange, yellow. Shallow, winding rivers nourished fertile papaya plantations and scented lemon groves. Gradually, the mountainsides softened into dry gold hills spilling into an indigo Red Sea.

Eritrea derives its name from the ancient Greek name for the Red Sea, Erythrae, and Massawa is the sea's largest natural port. Such a strategic vantage point was dearly coveted by the Ethiopian military. Bombing in 1990 and 1991 almost destroyed Massawa, legendary for its white seaside porticoes, elaborate Turkish-style latticework and pink and white buildings hewn of coral block. Much of its Ottoman influence must now be pieced together by the imagination, though Eritrean authorities are carefully working to restore ancient buildings rather than constructing anew. The Moorish port area, with its winding alleys and shaded porticos, carries on with its daily business. The cracked, blue and white shell of Haile Selassie's former summer place is as yet unrestored, its grand curved staircase leading to nothing.

AMONG the hotel choices were the Spartan Corallo Hotel, \$7 a night, which offers ceiling fans. But Massawa is very hot year round (December, with its humid 90-degree days, is one of its coolest months) and mosquitoes in this malarial area can be fierce. So we chose the Dahlak Hotel, where our large, air-conditioned room (\$20 a night) with private bath overlooked the turquoise Hirghigo Bay.

Massawa comes alive in the cool of evening. Lanterns are lighted, the narrow alleys fill, and people gather to chat on bright doorsteps or in coffee bars. Restaurants carry tables outside and serve tasty grilled fish and mokbasa, a bread porridge sweetened with chopped dates.

In the deeper end of the dark port waters lay the Incaurina Marianna, the catamaran that would take us on a tour of the islands the next morning. The owner and captain, Doi Malingri, once a world-class racer, greeted us, announcing: "This is a terrible country." He grinned. "I came for 15 days. Two years later, and I'm still here." His catamaran has two double rooms, two singles and two large hammocklike nets for sleeping outside.

Doi takes divers, researchers and adventurers to the Dahlak Islands, and cooks their meals. The following morning, the Incaurina Marianna had spirited us out into the glistening sea and Gheden Mountain rose faint on the horizon.

The Dahlak Archipelago is made up of 209 of Eritrea's 355 islands. Only 10 of the Dahlaks are inhabited. The largest and most populated, Dahlak Kebir, has eight villages, nearly 1,500 inhabitants in all, an ancient necropolis and a handful of cars that



Leo Fitzpatrick

The Saturday animal market in Eritrea's biggest city, Asmara.

function as taxis. The Marine Resources Diving Services Division can arrange a stay at Lul, which has the only overnight accommodations on any island as yet. There are seven simple but air-conditioned bungalows with showers and a compressor for refilling dive tanks. It costs \$23 a person per night, meals included.

A more typical experience of the Dahlaks is provided by Dur Ghella, Enteara or Madote. Madote is a flat, bleached sliver of white sand barely visible on the horizon. Most of the Dahlaks are strips of stony coral and sand less than a mile square, rising no more than 20 feet above water. "It isn't a paradise," Dr. Chris Hillman, the head of the Eritrean Marine Resources Environmental Research Division, told me later. "There are no swaying palm trees. These islands are deserts on the sea."

Madote was a little discouraging until I stepped onshore. There, thousands of tiny coral fragments — white, cream, orange, and maroon — swirled under my feet. A

rose pink conch shell clunked into my ankle. The beach indifferently displayed coral branches large as footballs. These are treasure-strewn deserts, disbursing evidence of where the real life is: under water.

Since our group of six was divided between snorkelers and divers, Doi stopped twice near each island. After speeding the rubber dinghy to a good snorkeling site near the shoreline, he and his assistant would return to lead the divers' descent. Some of the favorite dive sites were Shumma, Dur Ghella, Isratu and Nokra. Leo and I, among the four snorkelers on the trip, preferred Madote and Dissei.

As we donned our snorkeling gear on the shores of Madote, alert needlefish spied us from the shallows, freezing in place like sticks. Within minutes, I was breaking into schools of black and white coral fish. They darted vehemently in and out of lavender and violet coral. The more unabashed blue-green coralfish and goatfish followed me, intrigued and assiduous. Three parrotfish,

twice the size of those I'd seen in the Bahamas, acted like possessive guides. Divers who have been here call these waters "fish soup." The term isn't fully complimentary. The southern part of the narrow Red Sea traps and absorbs nutrient-rich plankton flowing from the Indian Ocean. This plankton, in combination with rich minerals that pour continuously from the Red Sea's deep brine springs, sustains more than 1,000 species of fish and 220 species of coral. Yet the abundant nutrients can limit the visibility to 30 or 40 feet in December. The plankton also attracts huge manta rays and larger predatory fish like tuna and mackerel. Hamid, a scuba-diving teacher taking part in our excursion, reported that he had played with a mild shark, while Doi teased two large rays out of the sand.

Waterlogged and sun-stunned, we climbed back on board to eat a tasty pasta alla marinara, accompanied by Eritrean beer and followed by papayas, oranges and espresso.

Our next stop was the remarkable island of Dissei. Unlike the others we visited, Dissei's origins are volcanic. A descending train of hills plummets into the sea. Midway, a fishing village of about 150 inhabitants faces a deep, wide-curved lagoon. As we approached, the women in this Muslim village whisked their daughters and themselves out of sight, retreating to their sparse homes, built of wood scraps with small bramble-enclosed yards. As we bargained with the village chief for some of the day's catch, the moon rose over the royal purple water. Diving into the moonlit water, we set off thousands of neon green sparklers: glittering phosphorescent plankton.

After a cool night's sleep on the Marianna, we woke at dawn to climb Dissei's steep, rocky peaks, best done early. Forty-five minutes later, we were at the summit. Below, the black-and-silver sea met curves of white, sandy beach; sage-green hills rolled

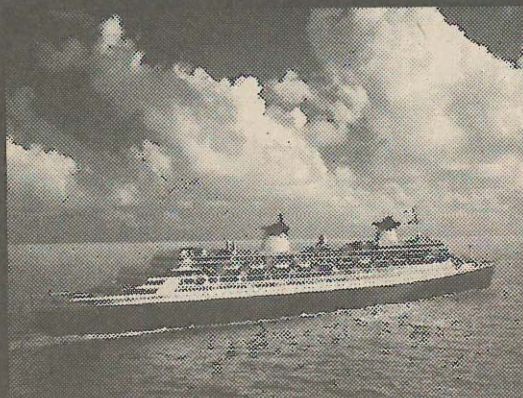
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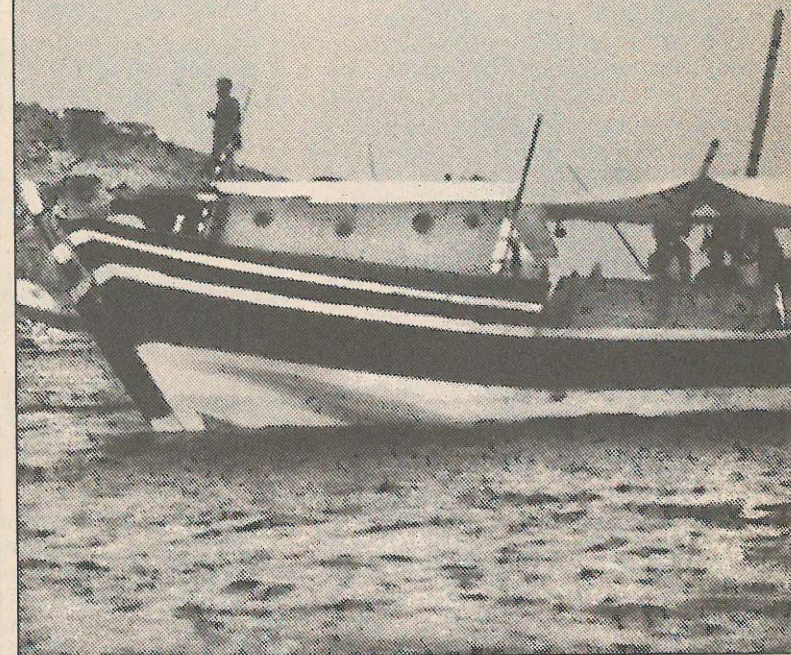
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Eritrea



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A traditional boat in Dissei Bay.

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into one another, carrying the wail of bleating goats, and the water's distances revealed other blue-gray islands. Nearby, butterflies clung to the low bushes. When the sun burst through the early-morning clouds, Dissei began to glimmer. Van explained that the island's layers of schist and quartz are overlaid with thin gold chips of mica.

That afternoon, Doi directed the catamaran to the western shores of Dissei, dropping snorkelers off on the beaches. Within 30 feet of the shore, we saw a variety of sealife that far surpassed Madote's. Emperorfish, queen angelfish, butterflyfish, surgeonfish, rainbowfish and rabbitfish swam about coral reefs that had turned shades of flamboyant gold rust and lavender.

Salty and cold, we climbed onto the catamaran to warm in the sun and lunch on two sweet, plump groupers that Hamid had caught. Hours later, we sailed into the magenta blaze of Massawa at sunset.

At the Dahlak Hotel, the clear,

simple, filling evening meal of pasta seemed almost elegant. The next day, our fellow passengers parted in various directions. Leo and I decided to return to Asmara by public bus. During a rollicking trip, riders handed us food, stared at our guidebook and eagerly tried to explain things to us. Back at the Keren Hotel, the staff welcomed us like old friends.

The morning we left, two women on the hotel dining room staff gave us small Catholic communion favors for our daughter back home — as if such gift-giving were proper, normal. This may be a country where poverty is the norm, but it is not poverty of the land, sea or spirit. ■

