Eritrea's surreal mix of war and Art Deco

By Jeffrey Gettleman

ASMARA, Eritrea

We were covered in soot, sitting on rock-hard benches, hot, sweaty and crawling along at maybe five miles an hour.

But we were loving every minute of it, chugging straight up a mountainside in a 1938 steam train built by the Italians when Eritrea was the jewel in their African crown. Outside our windows unfurled a sun-blasted landscape — stone walls, trickling waterfalls, boys tugging camels, women with beautifully braided hair and gold hoops through their noses trudging up the mountain paths. The sky was impossibly blue and from the railway tracks 2,300 meters, or 7,000 feet, above sea level, we could see for hundreds of miles in each direction.

Eritrea, for better and for worse, is a nation locked in a time capsule. Old men in dapper Fedora hats and antique Italian shades haunt Harnet Avenue, the palm-studded main drag in Asmara, the capital. The city itself is a showcase for some of the world's boldest, most whimsical examples of 1930s Art Deco architecture.

The capital city's Art Deco architecture includes the former Fiat Tagliero service station, above, with concrete wings, which was designed in 1938; and, at right, the Cinema Impero, built in 1937.

There's the Cinema Impero, built in 1937, with a facade that looks like a circuit board. And Bar Zilli, with its curved walls and porthole windows. Most of these are still being used and lived in. One exception is a very unusual, now shuttered gas station more akin to an airplane, or a space ship about to take off.

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A slide show and a video from Eritrea.

Asmara the architectural marvel is not so much the purposeful result of a hard-fought preservation battle. No. It was Eritrea's history of conflict and civil war that has kept this country sealed to the outside world. The result is a surreal tourist experience, where you feel dislocated from just about everywhere else, but euphoric and inspired by what is in front of you. Africa? The Mediterranean? The Middle East? It's hard to pinpoint exactly what Eritrea feels like.

There's almost no crime. Asmara is known as one of the safest cities in Africa. The climate is ideal, in the 20s centigrade, or 70s and 80s Fahrenheit, during the day, and teens at night. The hotels are cheap but rich with character. On the coast, the beaches are deserted. And the water? Evian clear.

If all this sounds too good to be true, it isn't. But it does come with a hefty cayeat. U.S.-Eritrean relations are at a low, with U.S. officials accusing the Eritrean government of sponsoring terrorism in Somalia. It's a long story, having to do with the chaos in Somalia and the poisonous relationship between Eritrea and its much larger neighbor, Ethiopia, which happens to be the United States' new B.F.F. (best friend forever) in Africa and is currently occupying Somalia. The Eritreans paint themselves as victims of a Western conspiracy. The accusations and counteraccusations could have some tourist fallout because the United States has made it hard for Eritreans to get visas and the Eritreans may do the same. (In addition, since June 1, 2006, all foreign nationals need a travel permit to visit areas outside Asmara.)

Eritrea has always been a bit of a hot potato. It was colonized by the Italians at the end of the 19th century, seen as strategic because of its location at the mouth of the Red Sea. Italian professionals and artisans flooded into Asmara and built shoe factories, laboratories, plazas, hotels, the railroad and even an alpine-style cable car. Between 1936 and 1941, Italy's Fascist rulers transformed Eritrea into one of the most industrialized, modern colonies in Africa. The major blight, though, was a harsh apartheid system that prevented Eritreans and Italians from living, working or even drinking together.

Not long after the Italians were defeated in World War II, Eritrea was colonized again — this time by Ethiopia. In response, Eritreans launched a guerrilla war, a period they call "the struggle." And after 30 years, they won. Eritrea became independent in 1993.

Since then, its leader, a guerrilla hero, President Isaias Afewerki, has struggled to find his way, and has rejected most foreign aid. Eritrea's economy suffers, with long bread and milk lines (though as tourists we had no problem stuffing ourselves on homemade tagliatelle and gelato).

Since independence, Eritrea, population 5 million, has gone to war (or nearly gone to war) with just about all of its neighbors: Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen, Djibouti and Sudan. The worst conflict was in 1998-2000, when Eritrea and Ethiopia battled over a border town.

Photographs by Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times

Boys make their way past a 1938 Ansaldo steam train traveling toward Asmara. The train was built by Italians when Eritrea was the jewel of their colonies.

I traveled to Eritrea last fall with my wife, Courtenay, from Nairobi where I am based as The Times's bureau chief for East Africa. The minute we landed at Asmara International, I was struck by how bright the light was. Asmara is located on a plateau, 2,57 meters above sea level.

Asmara became an Art Deco laboratory during the 1930s for designs that seemed, well, just too out there for mainland Italy. Rationalism, Novecento, neo-Classicism, neo-Baroque and monumentalism are among the varied avant-garde styles played out here. The result today is hundreds of aging, sherbet-colored buildings.

Asmara's broad Harnet Avenue is ideal for a stroll.

The star of the show is the Fiat Tagliero gas station, designed in 38 by Giuseppe Pettazzi to look like an airpla, a spaceship or possibly a bat. Pettazzi's extraordinary flourish was the concrete wings that jout a total of more than 30 meters. The municipal authorities at the time required him to build pillars under the wings so they wouldn't collapse, which was an unforgivable insult to Pettazzi. According to local legend, Pettazzi installed detachable pillars, and at the station's opening, he pulled out a pistol and forced the builder to remove the supports. Needless to say, the wings are still there.

We saw many of these modernist gems as we strolled around Harnet Avenue. The city, with its broad boulevards and wide sidewalks, was laid out with the passeggiata, or evening stroll, in mind. At sunset, thousands of people hit the main drag and you can feel the communal spirit, going back to the days of the struggle.

It was in this collective, understated spirit that Eritreans built a most original war memorial: a pair of giant sandals. The shida sandal, a $3 black plastic shoe, is the official symbol of the struggle. In the center of town is a pair of 7-meter-long sheet metal shidas. In the 1980s, Eritrean rebels built a mobile shida machine underground that survived countless bombings. The sandals became legendary.

We found most people friendly, unless the subject was politics. Eritreans are fiercely proud of their independence and reluctant to criticize their government, which has jailed political opponents. "The problem with Eritrea," explained an Eritrean friend who has left the country, "is that half of my friends are in prison and the other half put them there!"

After a few days in Asmara, we headed to Massawa, Eritrea's swelteringly hot and therefore not surprisingly sleepy beach town. We took the steam train about a quarter of the way and then had a driver meet us and went by road for the rest. The train was built by the Italians starting in 1887 and still operates, mostly for tourists. Massawa itself is hot, moist, quiet and battle-scarred.

Some of the world's most spectacular diving is in the Red Sea. There are a few dive shops in Massawa with rentable gear and boats to take you to the Dahlak Archipelago, which includes more than 200 islands and dozens of wrecks.

At night, when it cooled down a bit, we took a stroll. The roads by the port are straight, wide and empty. The 300-year-old Ottoman quarter, on the other hand, is a maze of alleyways and crumbling coral houses. The smell of frankincense wafted from under the beaded curtains of the bars. We had dinner at an outdoor fish restaurant called Sallam. The fish was barbecued Yemeni-style by slicing it in half, smacking the whole thing against the walls of a fire pit and baking it to a black crisp. It was cheap — $20 for four. And delicious.

Former military vehicles sit in a field in Eritrea.

In many ways, the story of Eritrea is the story of modern Africa, so much promise melting into so many problems. In just 15 years, Eritrea has gone from being the darling of the West, the egalitarian, crime-free, little-country-that-could, to a struggling, closed-off society, which, in a way, makes it all the more interesting to peek into.