

Why Are You Coming Here?

As I prepared for my trip to East Africa, I made financial arrangements with my local bank. I discussed the trip, including places I would visit, with the bank teller who had a glimpse of a smile as I was talking. She said I was going to her hometown, Borama, Somaliland. (Note: Somaliland considers itself to be a sovereign country, but the world community still considers it to be part of Somalia.) We talked for nearly an hour and at the end of the conversation, she rather nonchalantly mentioned she had two uncles there and asked me if I would like to meet them. Not really thinking too much about the request due the casual manner she presented it, I agreed. She told me she would contact them and that I should return in a week. I visited with her the next week and partaking in another hour-long discussion, she again casually ended the conversation mentioning her uncles and stating that they agreed to meet with me. Thinking they worked a rather mundane job, I asked what they did for a living. She said one was vice president of the country and the other was head of civil aviation.

Excited to be meeting the vice president, I took the minibus from Jijiga, Ethiopia to the Somalian border before continuing to the capital of Hargeisa. The minibus from Jijiga to the border was a cramped ride that included a couple near miss, major traffic accidents. The trip from the border to Hargeisa was slightly less cramped and much more enjoyable. I was a rather unique passenger and enjoyed the conversations with the other passengers. I sat in back with a couple younger college students who spoke very good English and thus served as my translators. An older, frail man with white hair and an orange beard, seated two rows in front and to the left of me, showed the most interest. He asked the normal questions which I answered through the two interpreters. He asked me where I was from, and I answered Minnesota. He then said something that made the whole minivan laugh including the stoic driver. I asked the college students what the old man had said, and they replied he asked why are you coming here when all of us are coming to Minnesota?

Throughout the trip, I did meet many people who had been to Minnesota or had relatives there. Included in that list was the teller's uncle, the head of civil aviation. He told me his story. He had moved to Vancouver and worked as a parking attendant. He did nearly every job imaginable including working at a pharmacy after moving to Minneapolis. He was a vital part of the store as he spoke perfect English and Somali which is important when giving instructions on usage of prescription drugs. He lived in the Riverside area of Minneapolis which had a large Somalian population. A Somalian friend visiting from Atlanta saw this dynamic and suggested starting their own drug store. He said he didn't have any money. The Atlanta friend said he did and that with the Riverside contacts he had acquired while working at the pharmacy, they could make a lot of money. They started a company and did, as the customers followed him to the new store. Within six months, both CVS and Walgreens offered to buy them out. They opened two more stores and again were offered to be bought out and this time they couldn't refuse the offer. With the money they acquired, he returned to Somalia with the goal of making his home a better place.

His driver took us from his office in Hargeisa to Borama for one of his government meetings as he described life in Somaliland. He pointed out a bank. "That bank is owned by the richest woman in Somaliland. She used to own one little ten foot by ten-foot khat stand that I'm sure you've seen." Khat is a plant that is widely sold and chewed and serves as a stimulant. "People liked her, so she got a lot of business. She opened another stand and another and now she owns banks instead of khat stands." A few miles passed. "Look at those young kids on the road. Much like Minnesota, we have potholes. They are shoveling sand into those potholes all day long. Then when you go over the potholes, it doesn't ruin your shocks as much. Of course, the sand blows out of the potholes in about seven seconds, but they are trying. Drivers give them a tip of something like five cents as they drive by." A few more miles passed. "Right here I hit a goat a few months back. I stopped as I knew the goat would die and it was important for the farmer. The farmer wasn't home, but his young sons were. I told them to give this note containing my cell phone number to their father when he returned. An hour past and the farmer called. I said I hit your goat and I think it's dead. The farmer said that the goat was dead, and I replied saying I'd like to pay for a new one. I then asked how much a new goat would cost. He said he would call me back which he did after five minutes. I answered and he said twenty-four dollars. I told him I wouldn't be back that way for a while. Then I remembered mobile money. I asked if he had an account and he said he did. He gave me his six-digit number, I sent the money to him by cell and repaid him without ever meeting him." Mobile money is a way to send money from person to person and their corresponding banks through cell phones. It has become more popular throughout the world and in Somaliland it was possible to travel without any money as long as you had mobile money. An issue at the time was the mobile money company owned the largest telecommunications companies and banks, giving it a bit of a monopoly feel but it made for much more efficiency. A few more miles and unfortunately, we arrived in Borama and he had to leave. Even with the potholes, it was an enjoyable trip.

The visit with Vice President Abdirahman Saylici, was also enjoyable as he was personable



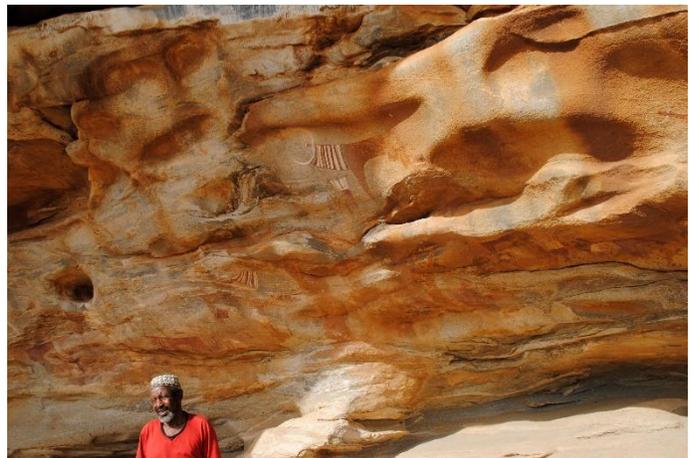
and described Somaliland as well. He was talkative, yet rather quiet and humble considering his numerous accomplishments. Abdirahman veered from politics, but one major issue is that this state, with its own government, is not recognized by other countries. These countries are afraid by recognizing Hargeisa Somalia, who broke from the rest of Somalia in 1991, that they would antagonize the rest of Somalia, or

sometimes called Mogadishu Somalia. However, Hargeisa is considered to be safer and has economic possibilities. For example, their neighbor is Ethiopia which has the largest economy in

East Africa but has no port for exporting goods. Somaliland has a sufficient port in Berbera which would seem like a win-win for both countries. However, Ethiopia's fear of upsetting Mogadishu means they decline using that port.

Despite being safer than Mogadishu Somalia, it was still required to have an armed guard while traveling outside Hargeisa. The Vice President set me up with one of his assistants, thus fulfilling that requirement. They showed me around Borama after my educational car ride to that city. Included was a visit to Amoud University which was started in 1997, when there was only one university, but it was in Mogadishu. The university is impressive as it has over 4,000 students and offers degrees in education, medicine, agriculture, environment, nursing, law, engineering, and computer science. They also took me to the city of Berbera which has the previously mentioned port. They introduced me to the port director but my impression of him was not as positive as the other two government officials I met. He came off as arrogant and demeaning and I got the impression he could be easily bribed. However, away from the port we had a delicious seafood lunch at a restaurant on the water within viewing distance of the port. We visited Baathela Beach to escape the 110 plus degree heat by jumping in the water. Strolling the city and just absorbing the people and architecture was also entertaining.

The final area they took me was Las Geel, which are remarkably vibrant 7,000-year-old cave paintings. Las Geel means "Camels Waterhole" and marks where two rivers had met but now all that remains is desert. The colors are in red, white and yellow and depict humans and animals such as cows, dogs, goats and antelopes. Locals knew of these caves, but foreign archaeologists "discovered" them in 2002. What stood out was how bright they were, so hopefully the attention from tourists



does not ruin this site. I was the only foreigner there and it did require a permit from the government to visit so this may help preserve these paintings.

My guards were not necessary in Hargeisa thus I could walk around freely in the city. There were reports that visitors needed to be on the lookout for young kids that would throw rocks at them. However, I only had one kid come up to me and that was to ask for money with an adult resident quickly shooing him away. I found the city to be quite relaxing with numerous areas easily accessible from my city center hotel, the Oriental Hotel. Nearby were two entertaining markets, one for changing dollars to large bricks of Somaliland Shillings, and another market for nearly every type of food and goods or services. Close to the market is the Jama Mosque which I could admire from the outside, and near my hotel was the War Memorial, a MiG fighter jet that was taken from the Somali Army during the Civil War. Outside the center was the



camel market, to see camels being bought and sold. Otherwise, walking the streets, talking to friendly kids and adults talk about Minnesota, was how I spent my time in Hargeisa.

The old, orange-bearded man in the minivan wasn't the only person to ask why I was going to Somalia; my taxi driver to the Minneapolis airport asked why too. He said he was from Mogadishu, and he didn't feel safe going back. When I told him I was going to Somaliland, he

told me I should be good. I was more than good in Somaliland. The trip was unique with the connections I had made, but it would have been enjoyable even without those connections. There were areas to stroll and take in the culture, amazing cave paintings, a lot of positive energy and, for someone who then resided in Minnesota, a major connection with many others besides the two uncles. My experiences in Somaliland made it very easy to answer the old man's question, why are you coming here?