

Eritrea Tour Report 2011



It is raining outside, Berlin suffers from cold and windy weather, and we think with melancholy about 25°C in Ghinda - and even the 42°C heat at Massawa suddenly lose its pain. Yet looking back, it wasn't sure at all that our tours to Eritrea would run as smoothly as they did in the end.

The first major hurdle to clear was to get all visas before entering the country: the Eritrean embassy at Berlin was very helpful but also had to obey the restrictive visa-issuance-policy of the central government at Asmara. During some weeks ahead of our tour it was not possible at all to apply for tourist visas - and only thanks to the embassy's generous support, and the fact that we had been registered as railfan group with the Eritrean authorities long before, made it possible that all Berlin visas could be issued. Only two Swedish guys who applied at the Eritrean embassy at Stockholm got stuck and did not get their visa in time.



The next irritation came from the obligatory „travel permit“ that was required to leave Asmara: our trips to Ghinda and Massawa needed those permits, and some guys who wanted to visit the National Park at Filfil also couldn't do this without the right stamp - and while we first thought, this was just another paper without real meaning, the reality proved that we had to stop at various checkpoints on the road to Massawa for clearance. But how to get these permits? The original plan was to send copies of all passports and visas to our local agency that would then apply for the permits and have them ready by

the time we arrive in Eritrea. About a week before the tour started, we were told, that the entry stamp of the airport's immigration officer is also needed to apply for the permit. Great. This now meant that we had to stay in Asmara for another 24 hours and could not drive to Massawa straight away...

So we changed our plans. Upon arrival at Asmara, our guide told us that the office that would issue the permit was closed due to a Coptic Christian holiday. Now we got into trouble because we could not shift around our itinerary anymore without losing important elements of our tour. The solution: call the minister and let him instruct the office to handle our case on a public holiday! We got our permits (nearly all of them) and were ready to go!



A very special „Thank You“ goes already now to Thomas and his colleagues at the agency. Our tour would not have been such a huge success without his/their nightly phone calls and overtime hours to keep our

itinerary rolling. Not only the travel permits for our group kept him/them busy, also the fuel vouchers for our bus had to be organised (at a certain point of our tour, no vouchers were available anymore and only another intervention on government level produced new vouchers). Then we needed to confirm our itinerary on a daily basis, talk to the railways, solve small irritations and problems that always occur if you travel with a group of 20+ participants.

We do not want to forget to express our deepest gratitude to the Eritrean Railways, its General Manager, the administration, and many railway workers who supported us. After we had arrived at Asmara, we were informed about various attempts by certain individuals from Vienna or Denmark, and by one of our competitors, who mobilised all levers and contacted the E.R. on highest level in order to stop our tour. Even after we had arrived in the country, emails about us were still sent to Eritrea. Some of them were so ridiculously funny that we had a good laugh every day...

Despite all odds ahead and during our tour we had an excellent time with fantastic photographic results, met a lot of friendly and proud Eritreans, and were blessed with the helpfulness of the railway:



28. September: *Egypt Air arrived at Asmara airport around 4am - one hour late. The airport wasn't busy at all, but we spend a lot of time filling out the correct entry forms, declare our foreign exchange, file more declarations, go through customs. Then the anxious question: has my baggage arrived? All but one participants were glad to see their bag trundling on the belt... and the only unhappy person that night was the wife of one of our Japanese participants. We were encouraged: Egypt Air would „soon“ deliver the missing bag. To be continued...*

After a short break we started our first sightseeing tour through Asmara, focussing on the rich Italian heritage of the capital. Astonishingly, some of the major historical monuments have survived the civil war without severe damage. In the afternoon we stopped at the station to see 202 002 (the small Breda built 0-4-0), but unfortunately the steam locomotive faced in the wrong direction and the turntable didn't work as we and



the railway men wanted it to. Other railways would have busted into hectic chaos or simply replied with a fatalistic shrug of the shoulders, but the Eritrean railway workers simply pulled out freshly restored Mallet 442.56 and used it for shunting instead! We were totally satisfied by this sudden change of plans, because 442.56 wasn't operational for so many years and although we had requested its use so many times and only received vague replies, it stood in front of us now, steaming nicely and ready for action! Thank you, E.R.!

An additional appetizer was today's positioning move of 442.54 from Asmara to Massawa that we could catch near Sheregeni. Tender first and downhill, of course, but it gave all participants an idea what we could do with an uphill running train!

29. September: Today we started our transfer to Massawa on the scenic road via Ghinda. 442.54 already waited for us and we moved the train to the harbour. No typical coffin ships visited the harbour at that time, so a fairly modern ferry had to be used for the obligatory „steam + ship“ photo. After having entered the ferry, the videographers enjoyed a superb vantage point for their pan shots of 442.59 shunting at the docks. Over lunch time, the air-conditioned bar at the Red Sea Hotel saw us emptying the offer of cold drinks in a flash, before we headed back to our train. We went as far as the Moncullo bridge and enjoyed our freight train with camels, sunset and a lot of high spirit. A night photo session at the harbour concluded our first day at the Red Sea.



30. September: Vacation time can be so tough: already at 05:30 in the morning we steamed towards Moncullo again to await sunrise with our train on the bridge. After seven attempts all participants were satisfied with the right mixture of sunlight, smoke, animals on and beside the bridge, and we could move on towards Ghinda. Upon entering the Damas valley we immediately noticed a huge black cloud approaching us steadily. Just now we had to take water and coal, built up the fire again, needed to do the classic shots of the train passing the picturesque mosque and should not forget the old stone arch bridge...

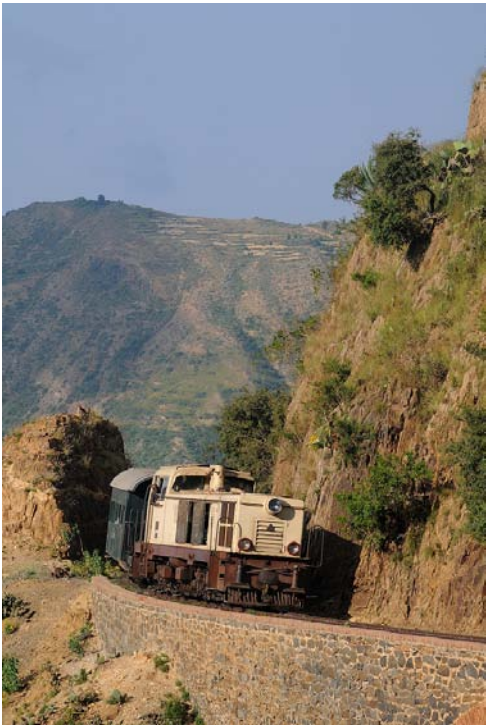
We needed to „hurry“ but this expression is totally unknown in Eritrea, and the ageing steam locomotives do need a lot of time to build up steam pressure - more than two consecutive runpasts are hardly possible. We just managed to catch the full sun light on the bridge when the sky turned into a very dark grey with heavy lightning and rain. Thick rain drops pattered against the hastily closed windows of our passenger coach. Some brave men resisted the thunderstorm and did some shots on the next bridges on our way westward. As quickly



as it had appeared, the bad weather moved on and we enjoyed blue sky with a mild sun soon after. We had reached one of the numerous galleries above the river's bed and did some runpasts there - and what is better than standing in the dry river bed and taking a shot of the steam train passing the rock cuttings? Suddenly the kids who went with the photographers got nervous and pointed hastily to the river's bend some hundred meters away: the rain had gone down on the mountains above Ghinda and now the river swell within seconds into a brown, rapidly flowing wild water! The last videographer

reached the river's banks on dry foot just before the water arrived - much to the enjoyment of those participants who preferred to stay on the bank itself!

1. October: Our second group, the mileage collectors, had arrived at Asmara tonight and relaxed in the hotel. The steam fans returned to the Sheregeni-Asmara section with small Mallet 440.008, the only working locomotive of its class in Eritrea. Thanks to an merciless early departure from our hotel, we enjoyed perfect morning light shots around Sheregeni and the upper parts of the line. We then motored back to Ghinda, taking 442.54 back to Baresa and the scenic gorges there. This time even without floods...



2. October: Then there came the day of truth: would the Littorina be ready to take the mileage collectors from Asmara to Massawa? To cut a long story short: it wasn't. The gear problems could not be solved and Krupp diesel locomotive D27 was used instead. The Krupp diesel needs quite a long time to get into full operational mode, but when it is ready to go, it runs smoothly and faultlessly. Just a minor overheating problem at Massawa was recorded over the next days - not bad for a lady from 1957!

Nevertheless the railway workers didn't want to accept their defeat with the Littorina and offered us to do a trial run. We accepted and the only challenge was now, that suddenly three trains in a row wanted to use a section that normally sees a few trains per year only: the Sunday-only steam hauled tourist excursion train with 442.59, the Krupp locomotive, and the Littorina. First the steam train departed with a group of amused French guys, followed by D27, and finally the Littorina left the station. But the climb out of Asmara towards Campo de Marte was already too much for the weak railcar - and we failed outside town and just managed to return home. But now there was a problem: the mileage collectors on board the Littorina did not want to do a part of their trip on the road by catching up with the D27 at Sheregeni. Thus we called the diesel train back and started again from Zero. At the end, we were two hours late - what to do with the remaining time? We called Ghinda and asked for 442.54 to be prepared for us. Everything worked perfectly well and we steamed out of Ghinda in wonderful afternoon light!



3. October: Krupp diesel D27 shuttled between Mai Atal and Massawa harbour today, according to railway official's it was the first time that a tour group took the D27 to the docks. In the meantime, 442.54 started her long journey from Ghinda to Arbaroba: leaving with the classic departure shot out of Ghinda, passing the many horseshoe-curves and spectacular cuttings on the heights near Embatkalla, running through tunnels and doing some very nice runpasts at Nefasit. And despite a lot of unscheduled stops for building up steam pressure, we arrived at the last curves above Arbaroba exactly in that moment, when the sun bathes that section in warm sunset light! Perfect scheduling by the Experts for Africa!

4. October: The alarm clock rang much too early again: a quick cat lick, light breakfast, motoring to Arbaroba, and boarding our train to Lessa. But what a change of mood occurred there: our train stood in the early morning light high above the valley, absolutely clear air and such a peaceful atmosphere! All morning pain was soon forgotten and strangely enough, most participants seemed to have forgotten their language skills and could only say „great“, „perfect“, or other words of excitement that could not be published here.

We returned to Asmara to our lunch time favourite, a privately owned Italian restaurant with excellent cooking and a well stocked wine-cellar!



Our afternoon train was made up with 442.59 leading 442.54 and 8 freight cars from Arbaroba to Asmara. It was a wonderful train and an exciting sight on the steep gradients. Both steam locomotives worked perfectly fine, we had only minor communication problems between the two crews, the train manager, and the brake men. Not an easy task to keep 15 guys synchronized! A cloudless sky kept the spirit high and when we finished our sunset shots near Campo de Marte, everybody had a big smile on his/her face. It was truly a remarkable afternoon.

D27 was already on the way from Mai Atal to Arbaroba when we started the steam action. Our steam train still had quite a comfortable lead but many runpasts and water-stops reduced the lead significantly and we soon heard the sonorous humming of the diesel engine echoing from the surrounding mountains. We let the diesel train pass at Sheregeni and chased it by bus until the 4-arched bridge above Hinzi.



Do you remember the lost bag from the beginning of our tour? Egypt Air called today and informed us that more than 100 (!) unidentified bags had arrived at Asmara and they asked passengers to have a look for their missing baggage at the airport. „Our“ bag was quickly found and someone was very happy to get rid of sponsored men's clothes and being able to wear a women's dress again.

5. October: Two train operations at Sheregeni: 442.59 and 440.008 had the honours to operate on the steep gradients above Sheregeni. But despite several attempts, the use of 4 radios, and the good will of all



crews involved it proved to be very difficult synchronising both steam trains. The trains never met at the „right“ position, it was simply too difficult to get both trains moving in the right speed at the right time. And when we had a timely meet, there was no smoke and we had to do it again ... While photographers were more easily satisfied because we could stage a meeting on the two levels, videographers demanded more train movements. So we did several sessions for both parties until everybody was happy. A lot of spontaneous helpers (goats, camels, donkeys) did their best to enrich our scenes.

Our Italian restaurant chef was happy to see us again over lunch time and we had a good meal. The pasta was marvellous, the sliced roast beef so tender and well done that it was a pure delight to spend the hot midday hours in the shade of the patio's trees.

In the meantime 440-008 was prepared by her crew for the challenging ride from Arbaroba to Asmara. Some of the steepest sections of the railway line from Massawa to Asmara can be found here. Originally we wanted to run a pure passenger train consist, but the E.R. asked us to reduce the train load due to the steam locomotive's decreasing performance. We did it reluctantly - and it soon proved to be the right decision because even with a lighter load we often struggled on the challenging gradients. A perfect blue sky with sun light until the very end made this trip a perfect photographic experience, even with sometimes only very light smoke effects.



6. October: *440-008 was rostered again for the morning shift and we departed from Sheregeni in this wonderful African morning light that is so clear and special that you simply „have“ to get up early not to miss it! The departure shot out of Sheregeni station with the church in the background could have been repeated every day without becoming too boring.*

Our excitement about a perfect morning was overlapped by the uncertainties regarding our flights home: strikes and riots in Cairo had forced Egypt Air to cancel its flight to Asmara, leaving four of our participants who wanted to fly home earlier tonight, stranded at Asmara. Egypt Air told us that all flights to/from Asmara had been cancelled until further notice. The next possible flight date would be October, 8th - when all remaining participants wanted to return home. We already started thinking about alternative occupation in Eritrea if we should get stuck here: tourist guide or shepherd were the most popular ones...

While 440-008 struggled to cope with the steep gradients, bigger sister 442-59 stormed uphill with no bigger problems around the tight curves at tunnel 29 this afternoon. But even 442-59 had to stop on the way to build up steam pressure, luckily it ran out of power at a very scenic location and in a good photo position, offering us a „free“ shot in-between... All three steam locomotive classes (442, 440, and 202) were present at our night photo shoot later. Michael Bleckmann gave a quick but detailed instruction how to set up your digital equipment for best night photo results.



7. October: *If you should get the chance to visit Asmara one day, do not miss the fascinating markets! We visited the recycling and chili market this morning, it is an unbelievable view what the local craftsmen can produce from a piece of broken metal or used tyres. In the afternoon we let 442-59 haul a different train consist from Sheregeni to Asmara, giving us more excellent photo opportunities than ever before! After each bend of the line lays another photo location, and yet another, and another...*

We arrived at Asmara station late afternoon, time to say „Good Bye“ to our friends: the proud and dedicated railway men, the busy consultants at our agency, our reliable bus drivers, and all invisible supporters who made our trip such a huge success!

8. October: Until the very last moment we doubted that our flight to Cairo would really depart although we had contacted the Egypt Air operation centre in Cairo before that confirmed the Asmara flight. An arrival delay of more than 1 hour didn't help making us feel more confident, but then the check-in started normally, no signs of any sudden change, the boarding call, and then, finally: hurray, we took off in the night sky above Asmara!



A wonderful trip came to an end, everybody was more than happy - and we would like to return to Eritrea in 2012 with two more tours: a short trip in March 2012, covering the spectacular section between Arabaroba-Sheregeni and Asmara, followed by a more in-depth tour, running over the entire network from Massawa to Asmara in September 2012.

We offer you experienced tour guides, limited number of participants and attractive prices! And why travelling with 30-40 participants that have not enough space for dedicated photo- or videography on the sometimes very tight and narrow photo locations if you could go with not more than only 18 like-minded travellers?

We would like to thank:

Mr. Amanuel Ghebresslassie, General Manager of the Eritrean Railways;

Mr. Solomon Abraha, General Manager of our agency;

Mr. Tekleyes Mender, E.R. Traffic Manager;

Mr. Okbazghi Tombosa, E.R. Train Manager;

all locomotive drivers, firemen, brakemen, fitters, and service-staff;

Thomas and Simon, our excellent and very professional guides;

and obviously we want to thank our customers from Australia, Germany, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland, who made this trip happen by booking our tour!

All photographs shown here have been taken on our 2011 tour to Eritrea, you may enjoy them in full scale on our homepage:

<http://www.tanago.de/erlebnisreisen/en/galleries/gallery-railway/eritrea-steam-at-the-red-sea-2011.php>





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