

# The Guardian

## Africa's 'Little Rome', the Eritrean city frozen in time by war and secrecy

What's the capital of this notoriously closed-off country like? On a rare visit, finds faded 30s glamour, colonial-era futurist architecture - and bicycles everywhere



Sanctioned by the UN, and closed off to the rest of the world, Asmara is a city where stunning architectural gems have been hidden away. Photograph: Natasha Stallard/Brownbook

**Natasha Stallard** for *Brownbook*, part of the *Guardian Africa network*

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**S**itting on the edge of a roundabout in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea and the centre of Italy's former African empire, the Fiat Tagliero service station is a glorious sight: art deco lettering spells out its name in both Italian and Amharic in a font worthy of a Fellini film poster, while two 30-metre concrete wings soar across the former garage forecourt below, mimicking an aeroplane.

The building's wings are full of the bold attitude of a bygone era in Eritrean history. Built in 1938 by Italian architect Giuseppe Pettazzi, it was the year Europe teetered on the brink of world war, and in Italy, prime minister Benito Mussolini and his Fascist party were no longer just flirting with their imperial ambitions to conquer as much of Africa as possible.

Mussolini had inherited the Italian colony of Eritrea from the European “scramble for Africa” that began in the 1890s. In 1936 King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy crowned himself the Emperor of Ethiopia, a title never recognised by the international community, and from a settlement on the Eritrean Red Sea coastline, the Italians spread their colonial campaign across the Horn of Africa.

For Mussolini, Asmara was the nexus in his new Roman Empire - and the administrative centre of his Africa *Oriente Italiana*. He called the city “La Piccola Roma” - Africa’s little Rome.



The stylish Cinema Impero in Asmara, built in 1937. Photograph: Brownbook



Mussolini called the city 'La Piccola Roma' - Africa's little Rome. Photograph: Natasha Stallard/Brownbook

Fascist Italy actively encouraged emigration to Eritrea and by 1939, according to a census of the same year, over half of Asmara’s population was Italian. Handed over as a blank canvas for Italy’s most radical architects, the city found its new role as an unlikely playground for futurist architecture.

Mussolini encouraged Italian architects and engineers to transform Asmara into an urban utopia, full of cinemas, cafés, imported bicycles and sycamore trees.

“[The Fiat] is the reason I became an architect. It’s a very peculiar building. Structurally it was very bold. Engineers nowadays wouldn’t dare to build a cantilever half the size of that,” says Mesfi Metuasu, a local architect and urban planner who has been working with Asmara’s buildings since 1995.



Mussolini encouraged Italian architects and engineers to transform Asmara into an urban utopia. Photograph: Brownbook



The city found a strange new role as an unlikely playground for futurist architecture under its Italian colonisers. Photograph: Natasha Stallard/Brownbook



The country's conflicts placed Asmara's buildings in a time capsule: as well as the Fiat building, there are art deco cinemas, futurist service stations and boulevards built for bicycles. Photograph: Natasha Stallard/Brownbook

Now, the Fiat building sits at the heart of a complex city, in a complex country.

Like many others still standing in the capital, its history has been neglected over the years; the building was barely accessible to anyone outside the city until the early 1990s.

Colonised by the Ottomans, the Egyptians, the Italians, the British and then the Ethiopians, after 30 years of conflict with Haile Selassie's Ethiopian army Eritrea finally won its

independence in 1991. Asmara's buildings were revealed once again to the world - leaving architects around the world gobsmacked.

In this way, Eritrea's political history has been brutal to its people, but strangely kind to its architecture. The country's conflicts placed Asmara's buildings in a time capsule: there are art deco cinemas, futurist service stations, a building shaped like a wireless radio, bowling alleys with old wooden pins, pizzerias, and boulevards built for bicycles.



Eritrea's political history has been brutal to its people, but has been oddly kind to its architecture Photograph: Natasha Stallard/Brownbook



Cafe Photograph: Brownbook

“Not everyone is conscious of the architecture in Asmara. But everyone's lifestyle here is influenced by the character of the urban space. The buildings have their role,” explains Metuasu, speaking from his government office.

“The buildings influence what you see, how you move and the character of the city.”

Walking along the streets of the city on a cool, dark August evening (very dark: the government electricity shuts down every evening and working street lamps are few and far between) you feel the city's stillness. Its streets are busy but without the clatter of Sudan's Khartoum or Ethiopia's Addis Ababa, Eritrea's northern and southern neighbours.

“You appreciate the nature of Asmara when you go to other cities. Cairo is chaos. This is cool,” says Metuasu.

And at night, the cafés and streets stay full. Especially on Harnet Avenue. Previously known as Mussolini Avenue and Haile Selassie Avenue, its former names are a painful reminder of

the racial segregation the city endured - and still does - when no Eritrean was allowed to enter the street without being arrested, imprisoned or worse.

Now, Harnet Avenue is full of Eritrean faces, but a cloud of repression hangs over the city. While some argue the city has broken with its violent past, human rights organisations say little has changed.



Each summer Eritrea's population swells with visitors from the country's diaspora. Photograph: Brownbook



'You appreciate the nature of Asmara when you go to other cities. Cairo is chaos. This is cool' Photograph: Natasha Stallard/Brownbook

The government, led by president Isaias Afwerki, has been accused of abusing its citizens through an insidious climate of forced labour, frequent arrests, detentions, disappearances, torture - and stringent restrictions on freedoms of expression.

In this pariah state, now under UN sanctions, the dismal attitude to human rights make it a tough country to access as a journalist, or a tourist.

Visitors to Asmara beyond Eritrea's large diaspora are rare. Eritrean Airlines remains grounded due to its patchy safety record and the sanctions. However, both Qatar Airways and Turkish Airlines launched new flight routes to Asmara in 2014. Most tourists are brides and their grooms on honeymoon from Sudan - as well as some curious architects.

Efforts are being made to preserve the city, but slowly. The Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Programme, a project fuelled by the recently published book *Asmara: Africa's Secret Modernist City*, is currently lobbying to have Asmara's architectural gems listed as a Unesco World Heritage site.

And its true that the country's history and heritage can be keenly felt on the city's streets: the Italian influence still lingers, and Fiat Bambinos, vintage Ladas and Volkswagen Beetles stutter down the wide streets. Bicycles are everywhere.

“Wherever there's a road in Eritrea, there's a bicycle,” says Filmon Mihreteab, a translator. Eritrea is cycling mad and the breathtaking slope of the 100km road from Asmara to the Red Sea sees a lot of local cyclists training and racing. “There's no word for bicycle in Eritrea. We call it ‘bicycletta’, like the Italians.”

As Asmara remains engulfed by political and economic hardship, its art deco time-warp continues to give a small source of pride to its residents.

“When people are conscious of the beauty of the buildings, they will fall in love,” says Metuasu.

*A version of this article first appeared in Brownbook. Natasha Stallard visited Asmara in August 2013*

● This article was amended on 19 August 2015 to correct a reference to Victor III to Victor Emmanuel III.

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