

PILGRIMAGE TO HARGEISA

Hargeisa Snapshots

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The best coffee in town is at Sinow's. He's a tall elegant grey-haired man who wears all white, every day, topped by a brown *kufia*. Sinow makes the coffee himself, behind a huge red contraption that looks like it belongs to a museum. After I am served, he comes over and asks, 'E buono?' I had told him I speak Italian, which I don't really, but we stagger along until he has to ask my guide, in Somali, what on earth I am saying. Once Sinow takes your order, he won't ever forget it. I keep changing mine though, from *caffè latte* to *espresso* to *macchiato* and back again. Still, always, he comes over to ask, do I like it?

On election day, I ask Sinow if he has voted. He whispers in my ear that he is from Mogadishu. He smiles, half-shy, half-sly. But everyone knows this. He had a coffee shop there for years, first working for Italians, then on his own. He escaped the war and came up north to Hargeisa. His family, wife and kids, are still there. He sends all his money back to them.

Somalia, the festering wound. Somaliland, a wound healing, though the scars are huge: rubble from bombed-down buildings; rusting tankers along the highway sinking into sand; veterans on crutches; everyone's story that begins, *when I came back to Hargeisa* ... And, of course, the city's central monument: one of the fighter jets that bombed Hargeisa to dust in the 1988–91 civil war against the south. It is raised high as if to be worshipped, balancing atop an ugly pedestal roughly painted with a battle scene showing bloody bodies with heads and limbs chopped off. No wonder everyone tells me again and again: 'All we want is peace.'

We take our coffee in the car when all we need is a quick refuelling of energy. When there's more time, we sit outside the café on plastic chairs on the sandy pavement, shaded by two trees, close to the road that is bustling with people and lumbering 4x4s (I'm told Hargeisa has the highest number of four-wheel drives per capita in the world. My guess is it rates just as high for its number of goats), donkeys dragging carts, lorries and buses painted in carnival colours, and always, everywhere, the flowing, swaying black or every other possible colour and pattern, of the women's clothing. I haven't seen women sitting outside the café, though a woman owns it.

One afternoon I have coffee with Abdihakim Mohamed Dirir, a painter who sells his work in a store opposite the café. He paints pastoral scenes of majestic camels and chubby sheep and goats against golden-yellow desert backgrounds, or traditional milk gourds, thumb pianos and hair combs arranged into group portraits. He says these paintings sell well, especially when diaspora Somalis are back for the summer. He says of course he paints anything else he wants, and is inspired by what he sees on the internet, but he won't display those in the shop.

As we talk on in the still mid-afternoon heat, a couple of baboons, with heart-shaped cheeky faces, long grey hair, and flared pink bottoms, join us. One of them is given an almost empty bottle of Sprite, which it drinks from like a child. The wind rises, whips our faces with sand.

Next to the art shop is a stall selling *khat*, the leafy intoxicant sold all over Hargeisa. On election day, I ask the stall owner, 'How is business?' She says, 'Same as usual'. She is wide with success and self-satisfaction, glowing in a white and blue flowered hijab. A boy of about 10 sits next to her drinking tea out of a tin cup. He stares at me, curious, open-faced.

'What about Fridays, is it business as usual?', I ask.
'*Khat* chewers don't take holidays', she says. 'They don't even fall sick'. She adds, laughing, 'They grow fat'.

I laugh with her. She reaches between her widespread feet and throws back a brown sack to reveal *khat* stems tied in large bunches that she says go for USD30 (which everywhere are used just as often as Somali shillings).

I am in awe of her self-assured matter-of-factness; I no longer want to ask her, but what about all the men who do nothing but chew? What about all that money not used for school fees or saved? What about the ethical issues? Shouldn't her customers 'Just Say No'? Was it just the same as selling coffee, only more lucrative? She would have a sassy comeback, for sure.

Ryszard Kapucinski once wrote that political rallies in Africa are celebrations. We all know such sweeping statements should be swept into the dustbin, and we are more familiar with political bloodbaths than celebrations, but in late June 2010, in Hargeisa, a celebration it was. In the last week leading up to the vote, when each party was given a day for its final campaign, the roads were full of cheering crowds by seven in the morning. I joined the crowd supporting the main opposition party, Kulmiye, as it chanted and danced its way to Liberty Park. Everyone was wearing green and yellow headscarves or bands or waving green and yellow cuts of cloth way above their heads. In the park, groups of women formed circles and danced, stamping feet, raising dust and drawing sweat as one woman beat a goatskin-covered drum vehemently.

The scene was repeated the next day, except the colour that covered the city now was the dark avocado green of the other opposition party, UCID, pronounced more like a gurgle than a word. Hundreds of cars raced by with men and women hanging from the windows, sitting on the boots of the cars, clambering on the tops, crowded in lorries, shouting, singing, delirious with excitement. The scene was repeated yet again, at an even higher pitch, a few nights later when the winner, Kulmiye, was announced.

Why the fuss? This was my reaction as an observer bred to be cynical about politics. Why expend, expel such passion? Yes, a party is good fun, of course. And a good excuse to publicly dance and sing, in a country that boasts not a single disco. Public theatre, public catharsis, and so on.

Somalilanders have fought hard and paid much to reject a joint destiny with Somalia; and were continuing to do so with this dance and this vote. They were in the streets and campaign halls and in long lines at voting centres all over country, knowing full well that the al-Shabaab terrorist group had called the elections 'the work of the devil'. Anything awfully bloody could happen. But they celebrated the sheer audacity of holding a national election, a peaceful and organised one at that, whether the world recognised Somaliland or not. They danced in the streets, knowing how precious this was, because down south, their fellow Somalis in Mogadishu were dying in the streets. As my guide on election day said, all that their political leaders asked of them was their vote, while in Somalia people were asked for their lives.

The bullet or the ballot? This wasn't a hypothetical question, not for Somalis. So how could they not, as Somalilanders, celebrate the choice they were making? Whatever the election outcome, it was already a victory. It was time to party.