

Short Guide to: Eritrea

Location: north-east Africa, on the Red Sea. Bordered by Djibouti, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Population: 3.5 million

Languages: Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic are predominantly spoken, as well as many others minor languages.

Major Religions: Since May 2002, the Eritrean government has officially recognised four Christian and Islamic religious groups. All others in practice are highly restricted.

Major Ethnic Groups: There are many! Including Tigrinya (50%) Tigre, Rashaida, Afar, Saho, Bilen, Beja, Kunama and Nara, plus some Eritrean Italians.

Society

Eritreans pride themselves on being hard working and resilient, and they show great social responsibility and are generally extremely polite, warm and friendly. Respect for elders and authority is deeply rooted. One SH guest said that homelessness didn't really exist in Eritrea- strangers in difficulty are looked after by society. The family unit is very important, with traditionally men making the decisions and women running the household. In the less urban areas, traditional life endures and public displays of affection between couples are not common, although boys and men are frequently seen holding hands as a sign of friendship. All traditional foods are eaten using the right hand only and without the use of silverware. The left hand is considered impure. In someone else's house- an Eritrean will need to be asked around four times if they would like something, before it is considered polite to accept. If you say to an Eritrean Guest 'would you like a coffee' they will always refuse first time, and probably second and third times- just keep asking! Definitely something to bear in mind if you are hosting an Eritrean.

Culture

The Eritrean culture is largely shaped by its location on the Red Sea and historic connections with neighbouring countries like Djibouti, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Italy, and the Near East. Local customs as well as music is influenced by the country's ethnic background. Eritrea's population comprises nine recognised ethnic groups, most of whom speak languages from the Ethiopian Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic family. Food is very similar to Ethiopian cuisine, mixed with other native culinary traditions.

Politics and migration

The country is ruled by the president Isaias Afewerki, head of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice. He has been the head of state since independence in 1993 and there have been no elections since. In Eritrea, opposition parties are prohibited, individual opposition to the state is restricted, and public and private life is highly controlled. Eritreans talk of being 'watched' by the state. A UN Enquiry in 2015 accused the government of 'operating a system of "ruthless repression" and "pervasive state control"'. National Service is both compulsory and can go on for many years with extremely poor pay and difficult 'work-camp' like conditions. There is no press freedom. Many have left Eritrea. Since around 2010, the flow of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea has significantly increased and has become the subject of international concern. In 2015, over 5,000 unaccompanied minors from Eritrea sought asylum in Europe according to the Mixed Migration Centre. In 2018, the number was 3,500. Minors are only part of a wider exodus that involves mostly Eritreans in their twenties and thirties, making dangerous journeys mostly across the Sahara, into Libya and across the Mediterranean. The UN refugee agency calculates that at the end of 2018 there were over 500,000 Eritrean refugees worldwide – a very high number for a country of around 3.5 million people.