

## Interview with Thomas Tedros in August 2014

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### Asmara and Tourism

**Thomas Tedros** is an Eritrean tour operator and travel agent. He organises travels to Asmara and Eritrea for groups and individuals from all over the world. He talks with Peter Volgger about the tourism business, history and touristical sights in Eritrea and explains what it means to live and work in Asmara.

Thomas Tedros was born in Massawa on the Red Sea coast and is concerned about the bad condition of his birth city. Massawa was heavily damaged during the war of independence and hasn't been restored until today. He also talks about the touristical potencial of this city and Eritrea in general and expresses his visions for Eritrea in the future.

**Peter Volgger: You are a professional in the tourism industry and besides a photographer. You organised all our stays in Eritrea and your professional engagement was priceless for our work.**

**Can you tell us something about your work as a tour operator?**

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Thomas Tedros: First of all I wanna thank you for this opportunity to talkt with you. My name is Thomas Tedros and I have been on this tourism business fort he past 12 years now. I started when I was a student at the University and decided to join the company Travel House International as a travel agent.

**With people from which background do you work with and what are they looking for in Asmara and Eritrea?**

Most of the people are normal tourists. Sometimes we get historians, because this area was a strategic area during the second world war. We have writers who want to write the history of this whole region at the Horn of Africa. We have some filmmakers, we have documentation and we have some diplomats. The countries that we work for includes almost all the countries in the world, our main clients are Italians, becouse they have been here for many years, we have Germans, because one of the attractions we have ist he steam locomotive and the Germans are keen on this, we have British, because we have the history with them, we have some Australian and Japanese as well – these are our main visitors.

**You also work together with international broadcasting companies in creating documentaries about Eritrea. Can you tell us something about it?**

Most oft he companies that we work internationally with are interested in the history of Eritrea, the culture, the war we had with Ethiopia and mainly the ethnic side of the country. We have worked with BBC, one oft he biggest broadcasting companies in the world, and they were interested in the Red Sea because it is one of the very interesting places in the world, as it is a closed sea down with the Somalian peninsula and if you go up with Egypt and they were interested in the coral riff and sea life in general.

We also worked with a Danish broadcasting network, they were very interested in the historical part oft he country, we also work with German television and the Italians. We also worked with Tokyo TV from Japan, because the Japanese are always interested in the culural side of the country as a whole. So the main attraction to do are the history, the lifestyle, the culture, the war, the ethnic groups, the religion and architecture.

**What are the things you primary enjoy about your work?**

The primary thing I enjoy about the tourism business is that you always get to know new people from different backgrounds, with different professions and experiences. So each time you meet with those new people you get a very good knowledge of the widerange of different ethnic groups, different countries, different cultural bachgrounds and history. So this is my main background or attraction in my business.

**To speak now a bit about Asmara: Eritrea is a young country with a lot of potential for a future developement. It's capital is famous for it's architecture and colonial heritage, it's safety, it's cleanliness, it's peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups. What are for you the main attractions of Asmara?**

Asmara as you know it was established by the Italians, before that it was just a village. Asmara as we know it today was established between 1890 and 1920 by the Italians. The standard tour that we include is the history of Asmara, because it's very fascinating from the beginning and the formation of the city as well. The other thing that we have is Asmara in the different colonial periods. In the beginning we have the Italians, they have been here for 50 years, then the British, they have been here for 10 to 15 years, then the Ethiopians. So these are the main attractions for the tourism business.

**And apart from Asmara, how does a standard tour through Eritrea look like?**

Well, the normal tour includes everything: the history, the cultural affairs, because Eritrea has nine different ethnic groups and you can see these ethnic groups on their places, in their villages with different backgrounds, the dressing, the lifestyle, the culture, the daily activity that they do. So each place has its own beauty, when you travel outside of Asmara. So the normal tour is this historical background, we include the war, because this is one of the huge stories in the world. We have the ethnic groups, we have the culture, we have the lifestyle and the archaeological sites. So if you go south, we have a very good connection with the Ethiopians. So the architectural side is very interesting for the tourism.

We have our own birds, originally from here, different kinds of vegetation, flowers and different things. So these are the main attractions for tourism.

**Asmara is famous for its architecture and many visitors from outside describe their experience of Asmara similar to the visit of the past. Is this sensation a general phenomenon or something mainly Italians experience, since their history is directly linked to the one of Eritrea?**

You can say this in general, because the Italians have been here for many years, but the influence we have is not only about the Italians, we have also the influence of the British. But to start from the beginning: Asmara has its own culture, it has its own thing as a nation. But when Asmara was formed, it was done by the Italians. And they have been here for 50 years and they have influenced so much: culture, lifestyle, everything. Just to give you an example: The daily life that we have, the daily activity, we start work at 8 o'clock, then we have the *siesta*, we call it in Italian, and this was introduced by the Italians. Normally the Eritreans don't use this. This was a very big influence by the Italians and nowadays we use the siesta from lunchtime to 2 o'clock.

So this is one of the influences, the way that we dress was influenced by the Italians, everything that we have, the coffee, was introduced by the Italians.

**...la passeggiata...**

...the passeggiata. We have our own way of making coffee but every morning when we wake up or go to the cafe and have *café* – like coffee. So this was introduced, or influenced by the Italians. Or for example the steam locomotive – this was one of the very big things the Italians did for the country Eritrea and nowadays the people come for the steam locomotive. This is a past history and still influencing the present's day. So people come to see the past time because you don't see so many steam trains in the world.

When the Italians left, the British took over and they did some good things and some bad things. This happens with all the colonial parties in the world. But one of the very good things the British did, was the encouragement of education, because during the Italian time everyone could go up to grade 4. But when the British took over they allowed people to go

10th grade. So the curriculum we follow now was influenced by the British. When you walk around Asmara everybody can talk English, because we start learning English from grade 2. And this was influenced by the British. So everybody speaks and understands English. Another example: the British are famous for having tea in their daily life, and as you can see in all the bars tea is served as a main drink every day. And this was influenced by the British.

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**So still today there are two different ways of preparing coffee, the Eritrean and the Italian...**

Yes, the traditional way of making coffee was different from the Italian influence. The traditional way of preparing coffee takes 3 hours, because the life standard we have is more sociable. We like to talk to each other, we like to share ideas, we like to get to know each other, so it takes so much time. We use this during the special occasions, when you go to visit a family, to visit a friend, we prepare this traditional coffee. But in our daily life, when you go to work or have breaks between jobs, we take the Italian influence of coffee, the modern one. You find this in every cafe nowadays. You could say the coffee is very good here.

**At our last trip to Eritrea we visited the Red Sea coast and the port city of Massawa. It's beauty astonished us. Surprisingly enough there were only a few visitors. You know this region very well, what are your personal dreams or wishes for Massawa and the Red Sea coast?**

I was born and raised in Massawa and I know this area very well. But when we talk about Massawa I always feel so bad because of the history behind it and when I see it now and what's happening there. Massawa as we know it has a diverse history behind it. The start of Massawa was by the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish, and they have been in that region for about 400 years. And if you go to Massawa you see a mixed history of the Ottomans, because they have been there for many years. Then after the Ottomans the Egyptians came and you see a Egyptian lifestyle and before this was finished, the Italians took over and you get an Italian flavour and Italian buildings there. Massawa is a mixture of all of this: the Ottomans, the Italians, the Egyptians. So if you see all this buildings standing together and giving you different eras of life together in the same place, this is always fascinating. But with the budget the government has and with the lack of professionals, we see those buildings falling down now. We see the plastering falling down, you can't see too many activities there. So I always feel sad when I see Massawa these days. And I hope that one day with the help of professionals and proper funding this buildings might get back to life again.

**The coastal area is definitely a region with a huge potential, what other places in Eritrea do you regard having a high potential for tourism?**

Other places... I say the southern part of Kohaito and Adikeite, because this is related to the origin of the country. You see a lot of history and archeological sites related to it. Besides Asmara, Massawa and other places, I consider the southern part of Kohaito and Adiedeke to be very interesting for tourist potential. Because of its history and archeological sites we have.

**We are being very speculative here, so my last question is: what is your vision for Asmara in the future?**

One thing that concerns me is those buildings that you see around Asmara most of them were build by the Italians and have been there for many years, more than 100 years. You see the plastering go down, the windows falling down and they need a proper look out for those buildings, because all this buildings show the history and there have been too many brains involved, different architects, different engineers and different designers. Each building that you see has it's own beauty and it's own history. What I wish is those buildings to be renovated again by professionals, getting proper take care of those buildings, everybody looks after those buildings, this is what I wish for the future of Asmara. Most of the buildings now are in danger and if nothing is done for those buildings all the buildings will fall someday.

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**Thank you very much, Thomas.**



Thomas Tedros and Peter Volgger in Asmara, August 2014. Foto: Daniel Dlouhy