



Eritrea

Eritrea's great surprise is Asmara, a UNESCO-listed capital of 1930s Italian modernism where espresso bars and cinemas still trade under their original signs, then drops more than 2,000 m down a spectacular escarpment road to Massawa's coral-stone old town and the reefs of the Dahlak islands. Travel is slow, permit-bound and cash-only, but almost never crowded.

**The UK Foreign Office (FCDO) advises against all travel to parts of Eritrea.**
Read the latest FCDO travel advice before planning a trip. Your travel insurance may be invalid if you travel against FCDO advice.
FCDO advice last updated 12 October 2026.

 CAPITAL Asmara	 CURRENCY Eritrean nakfa (ERN) £1 ≈ ERN 20.04	 LANGUAGE Tigrinya, Tigre Arabic, English	 BEST TIME Nov–Feb
 DAILY BUDGET £40–£180 ££ Moderate	 PLUGS Type C, L 230V · adapter needed	 FLIGHT FROM LONDON 11h 30m via Cairo, Istanbul or Dubai ~£600–£1,000 return	 TIME ZONE UTC+3 standard time

Eritrea is a narrow country on the Red Sea with three distinct zones: the cool highland plateau around Asmara at over 2,300 m, the steep eastern escarpment, and the hot coastal plain running south towards the Danakil. Italian colonial rule (1890–1941) left Asmara with one of the world's most complete ensembles of modernist architecture, while Massawa preserves Ottoman and Egyptian-era coral-block buildings. A first trip usually spends several days in Asmara, then follows the switchback road down to Massawa for a boat trip to the Dahlak Archipelago, with excursions north to Keren's Monday market and south to the ancient site of Qohaito.

Tourism is minimal, so you will often share Asmara's cafés and cinemas only with locals taking the evening passeggiata along Harnet Avenue. Life is unhurried and courteous, costs are moderate, and hotel standards are dated. Bureaucracy shapes everything: permits are needed for travel outside Asmara, the internet is slow and patchy, and cash is the only reliable way to pay. It suits architecture lovers, Africa specialists and anyone happy to plan around rules. Most visitors are struck by how Italian daily life feels: macchiato at the bar, bicycles in the streets and pasta on almost every menu.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

ARCHITECTURE

Asmara's modernist centre

Inscribed by UNESCO in 2017, central Asmara is a showcase of 1930s Italian design: the aircraft-shaped Fiat Tagliero service station, Cinema Impero on Harnet Avenue, and Art Deco bars and villas along jacaranda-shaded streets.
- 2

HISTORY

Massawa Old Town

Coral-block merchant houses, Ottoman arches and the shell of the Imperial Palace on Taulud Island recall Massawa's centuries as a Red Sea trading port; many buildings still bear scars from the 1990 battle for the town.

3

NATURE

Dahlak Archipelago

Scattered off Massawa, these low desert islands offer reef snorkelling and diving with few other boats in sight, plus an Islamic-era necropolis with inscribed tombstones on Dahlak Kebir. Trips need permits and are arranged in Massawa.

4

HISTORY

Asmara–Massawa Railway

The Italian-built narrow-gauge line, completed to Asmara in 1911, twists down the escarpment through tunnels and over viaducts. Restored by veteran railwaymen, it runs steam excursions, usually by advance charter, from Asmara towards Nefasit.

5

HISTORY

Qohaito

On a high plateau near Adi Keyh, the ruins of an ancient town of the Aksumite era include temple columns, an ancient stone dam and tombs, with prehistoric rock art in nearby caves and sweeping views towards the lowlands.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Asmara

≈ 900,000 people

The capital's grid of 1930s cinemas, petrol stations, bars and villas is a walkable open-air architecture museum; base yourself here for at least three days.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Keren

≈ 145,000 people

Eritrea's second city sits in a green bowl of hills; come on a Monday for the livestock market and visit the shrine of St Mary of Dearit inside a baobab.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Teseney

≈ 65,000 people

A hot lowland market town near the Sudanese border, home to Tigre, Kunama and Nara communities; it lies far off the usual circuit and few visitors make the long drive west.

There has been no national census since independence, so all figures are estimates. Mendefera is close to Teseney in size; Massawa, the Red Sea port most visitors see, is smaller, at around 40,000.

When to go to Eritrea

Best time: **Nov–Feb**.

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

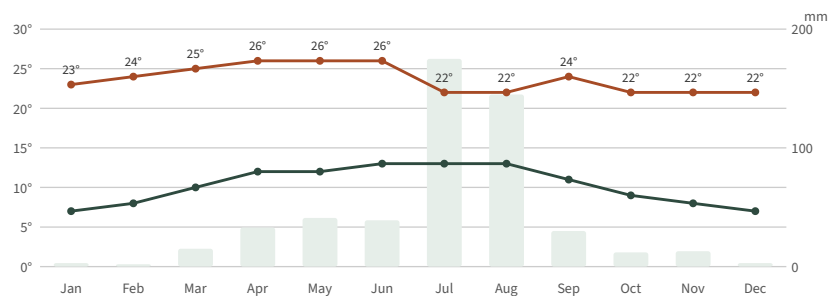
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Asmara

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Jan	Timket Orthodox Epiphany, around 19 January, when priests carry the church tabots in colourful procession to water for blessing, accompanied by drumming and chanting crowds.
May	Independence Day 24 May celebrates liberation in 1991 with several days of street parties, concerts and parades along Harnet Avenue in Asmara; hotels fill up, so book early.
Sep	Meskel The Orthodox Finding of the True Cross, around 27 September, when huge bonfires are lit in Asmara's squares and church courtyards amid singing and dancing.

How much does Eritrea cost?

SHOESTRING £40 per person / day ≈ ERN 802 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £90 per person / day ≈ ERN 1,804 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £180 per person / day ≈ ERN 3,608 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Zigni with injera

Fiery stew of beef or lamb simmered with onions and berbere spice, scooped up with injera, the spongy, sour flatbread made from teff or sorghum.

Shiro

Silky stew of ground chickpeas or broad beans with berbere and garlic, served bubbling in a clay pot; the everyday staple, especially on Orthodox fasting days.

Ful

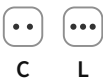
Breakfast of mashed fava beans topped with oil, chilli, onion, tomato and yoghurt, eaten with warm bread rolls; the classic morning order in Asmara cafés.

Getting around

Within Asmara, walk or flag down shared taxis that run fixed routes for a set fare; contract taxis cost more. Public buses link Asmara with Keren, Massawa and Mendefera cheaply but slowly and fill early, so many visitors hire a car with driver. Every trip outside the capital needs a travel permit naming your destinations, which is checked at road checkpoints. There are no ride-hailing apps.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE



230V — bring a UK-to-C/L adapter

DIALLING CODE

+291

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Ambulance: **122244**

Fire: **116**

Police: **113**

Source: FCDO “Getting help”

TIME ZONE

UTC+3 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Not safe — drink bottled or treated water

DRIVING

On the right

TIPPING

Not traditionally expected, but rounding up or leaving 5–10% in restaurants, and tipping drivers and guides, is appreciated.

ETIQUETTE

Greetings are long and warm; men often touch shoulders while shaking hands. Dress modestly, remove shoes in churches and mosques, and never photograph military sites, government buildings or bridges.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Asmara International Airport (ASM), Asmara

Visas & entry for Eritrea

Shown for a British passport.

Visa required — apply before you go

You must have a visa to enter Eritrea. For information about visas, contact the Eritrean Embassy in the UK or the nearest Eritrean embassy. Check with your airline or travel company for the latest information.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Hepatitis A

Tetanus

Typhoid

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Chikungunya

Dengue

Hepatitis B

Measles

Meningococcal disease

Rabies

Tuberculosis

Yellow fever

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

A yellow fever certificate is only required if you arrive from (or transit through) a country with yellow fever risk — not if you fly direct from the UK.

MALARIA

High risk of malaria

- There is a high risk of malaria in Eritrea below 2,200m: antimalarial tablets recommended.
- There is no risk of malaria in Asmara or in areas above 2,200m.

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Eritrea

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Fri 1 Jan 2027

New Year's Day

Thu 7 Jan 2027	Orthodox Christmas
Tue 19 Jan 2027	Epiphany
Mon 8 Mar 2027	Women's Day
Tue 9 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr (date may shift)
Fri 30 Apr 2027	Good Friday
Sat 1 May 2027	International Workers' Day
Sun 2 May 2027	Orthodox Easter
Sun 16 May 2027	Eid al-Adha (date may shift)
Mon 24 May 2027	Independence Day
Sun 20 Jun 2027	Martyrs' Day
Sat 14 Aug 2027	Prophet's Birthday (date may shift)
Wed 1 Sep 2027	Revolution Day
Sun 12 Sep 2027	Ethiopian New Year
Tue 28 Sep 2027	Finding of the True Cross

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Tigrinya

ENGLISH	TIGRINYA	SAY IT
Hello	ሰላም	<i>se-LAHM</i>
Thank you	የቐንዖለይ	<i>ye-ken-ye-LEY</i>
Please	በጃኸ	<i>be-JA-kha</i>
Excuse me	ይቕሬታ	<i>yik-REH-ta</i>
How much is this?	እዚ ብኸንደይ እዩ?	<i>EE-zee bi-KEN-dey EE-yu</i>

Know before you go

- Apply for travel permits at the Ministry of Tourism in Asmara soon after arriving; they list specific destinations and dates and can take a day or more to issue.
- Bring all the money you need in cash (euros or US dollars), change it only at official exchange offices and keep receipts; foreign cards and ATMs essentially don't work.
- Expect to be largely offline: mobile data is scarce and internet cafés slow, so download maps, guides and booking confirmations before you arrive.