



# Bikepacking in Eritrea

*Where the bicycle is religion*

by Gregor Mahringer (Photos by Thilo Brunner and Gregor Mahringer)



Taking a taxi from the Asmara airport: Three bikes fit on the roof, one in the trunk, and the riders and luggage go inside.

After several bike trips to Iran, I was looking for an experience that would turn my view of the world upside down in a similar way. Then a report about Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, fell into my hands. The photos showed an incredibly beautiful and clean city with relaxed people. This did not fit my picture of an isolated country with a troubled past and present.

Above all, the many bicycles on the streets aroused my interest. I continued my research and came across the *Giro d'Eritrea*, a bike race steeped in history that started during the days of the Italian colonial occupation. The reports about the race all agree: Nowhere else in Africa are bicycles so ubiquitous. Nowhere else is the enthusiasm for cycling so great as in this small northeast African country on the Red Sea. So that's where I will go!

In June 2018, happy news comes from Eritrea: Eighteen years after the end of the war, there is finally a peace treaty with Ethiopia. The conditions for my journey seem ideal. Despite great concerns of family and friends, three adventurous riders agree to join me: Toni, Luigi and Thilo. The rough plan: Start in Asmara and then connect the country's larger

cities in a large circle. We'll ride our gravel bikes with bikepacking equipment.

Traveling to Asmara is no problem. However, for all other Eritrean cities, we'll need travel permits from the Ministry of Tourism. Will it be possible to obtain permits for a bicycle trip? Reports about long processing times and arbitrary allocation worry us.

Via Instagram I contact locals in Asmara. A few weeks later Metkel, a professional cyclist, answers: "Ohhhhh that's good. All riders are welcome. We can help u. Don't worry just tell me when u ready to go." It's promising to have a contact in the country!

But I also know that we cannot rely solely on the help of locals, however enthusiastic they may be. For the next two weeks, I spend every free minute with Google Earth satellite images, old Russian maps, and GPS tracks to prepare every imaginable variant of our trip.

Four weeks later, we fly first to Cairo and then on to Asmara. Considering that we are traveling to what is supposed to be the 'North Korea of Africa,' the arrival and entry into Eritrea is smooth. In Asmara, we go directly to the Ministry of Tourism. We're pretty excited. This is where the fate of our trip is decided. Our experience is the opposite of what we expect: a friendly smile instead of suspicious questions. A few hours later, we have all travel permits for our desired route. What a relief! Perhaps the recent peace treaty with Ethiopia will finally allow tourism to develop here.

For the next two days, we explore the capital and get used to the 2,300 meter (7,600 ft) elevation. Cafés and restaurants line wide boulevards with palm trees. There are few cars, but all the more bicycles. The Italian colonial rule, as terrible as it was, has left an indelible impression on the culture: We enjoy an excellent espresso and perfect pasta, and we marvel at a modernistic architecture that is unique in Africa. This has even put Asmara on the list of world heritage sites.

For dinner, we meet with our Instagram contact Metkel. He brings with him Meron, also an international cycling professional, and Thomas, who guides tourists through Eritrea. Together we go through our planned route to clear up our last questions and concerns. To

our relief, our route has their blessing, and we celebrate with a very palatable Asmara beer.

The three of them then tell us how cycling came to Eritrea, and why people are so enthusiastic about the sport. As early as 1889, the Italian colonialists brought bicycles to Eritrea as postal vehicles. In 1937, the first race was held in Asmara, at first only for Italian riders. Two years later, Eritreans were also allowed to take part. The victory of Ghebremariam Ghebru shocked the arrogant colonialists and filled the Eritreans with incredible pride. In the following years, cycling became almost a substitute for religion. To the present day, races are organized in Asmara almost every weekend.

"We just have cycling in our blood," says Merone. Then they have to go. A message from the coach of their Malaysian team just came in: For tomorrow, hard interval training is on the program.

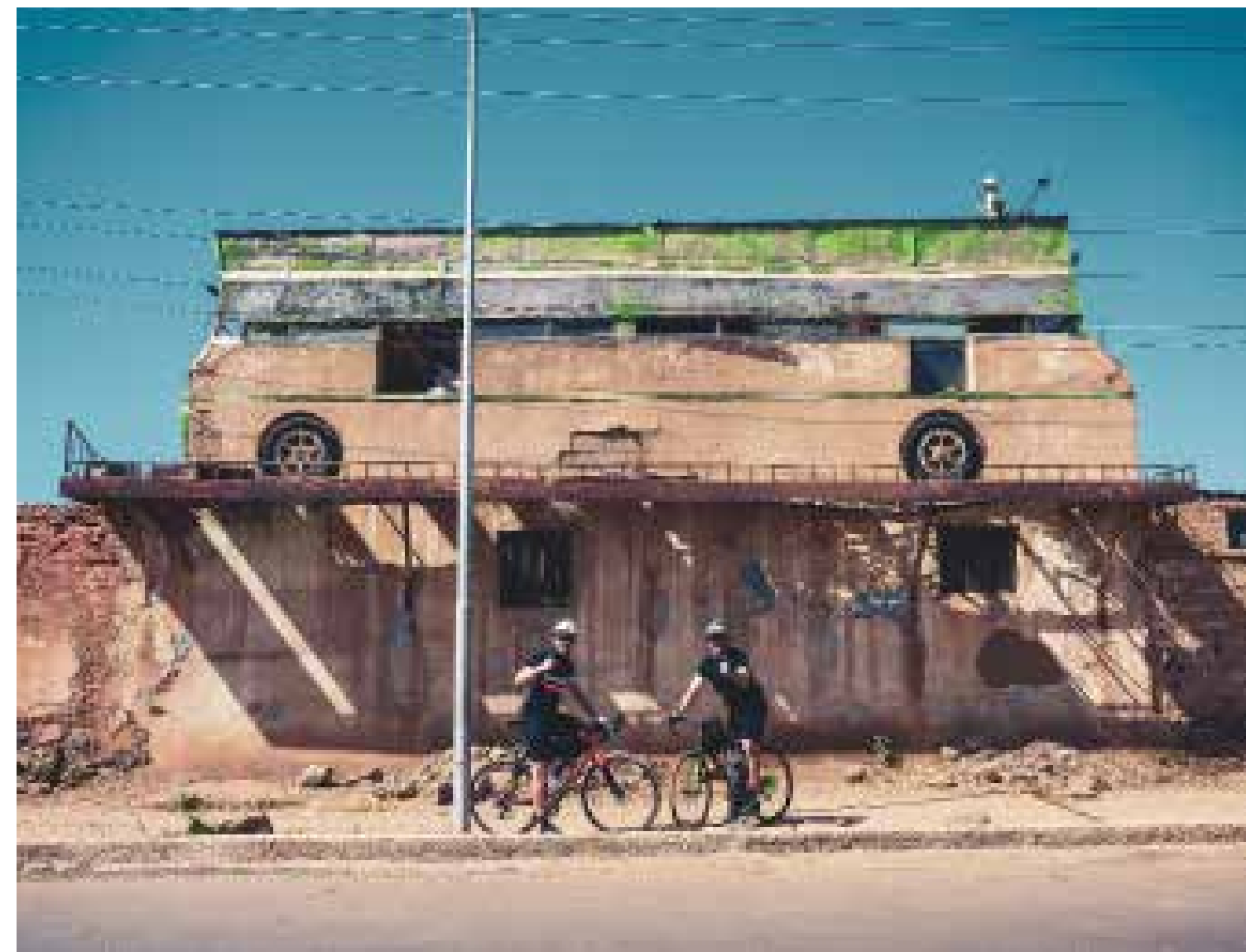


Top: Bike repair in Asmara. Every village has a shop, so basic repairs are no problem.



Middle: Every morning, the streets around the capital are full of young cyclists. Their dream is to become professional and be able to leave the country legally.

Bottom: Gasoline, cars and even buses are not affordable for most Eritreans. But that doesn't keep them from dreaming.





As we leave, they present us with a very special gift: a local SIM card. This is the only way to use your mobile phone in Eritrea, and it's not available for tourists. A new feeling of security overcomes us and gives a huge boost to our motivation. Our new friends promise to contact us every evening to check if everything is going well.

The next morning, we start. We are about 90 km (55 miles) from Keren, the second largest city in Eritrea that is famous for its camel market. As we leave Asmara, we see countless young cyclists on their morning training rides. We are surprised how popular the sport is here!

We think of our conversation with Metkel and Merone: The bicycle as a symbol of national pride. In addition, the ideal training conditions almost year-round help explain the local passion for cycling. But what they didn't mention: For successful cyclists, it's possible to leave the country legally. In contrast, the rest



Above: All packed and ready to go! Gravel bikes with bikepacking equipment worked well in Eritrea.

Left: Bicycle-loving kids in front of a bike shop in Asmara.

Opposite: The author, Gregor, and local cycling pro Metkel Eyob first met on Instagram.

of the population suffers from a harsh national service that can last up to 20 years. No one is legally entitled to take leave from this. This potential way to freedom may be another reason why Eritrea has produced some of the best racing cyclists in the world in recent years.

The further we go, the more the landscape meets our mental image of Africa: thatched