

Somalia as a tourist

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At the Hargeisa airport, immigration moves at a chaotic but quick tempo. In no time, the passports are stamped with the visa from a country that doesn't technically exist!



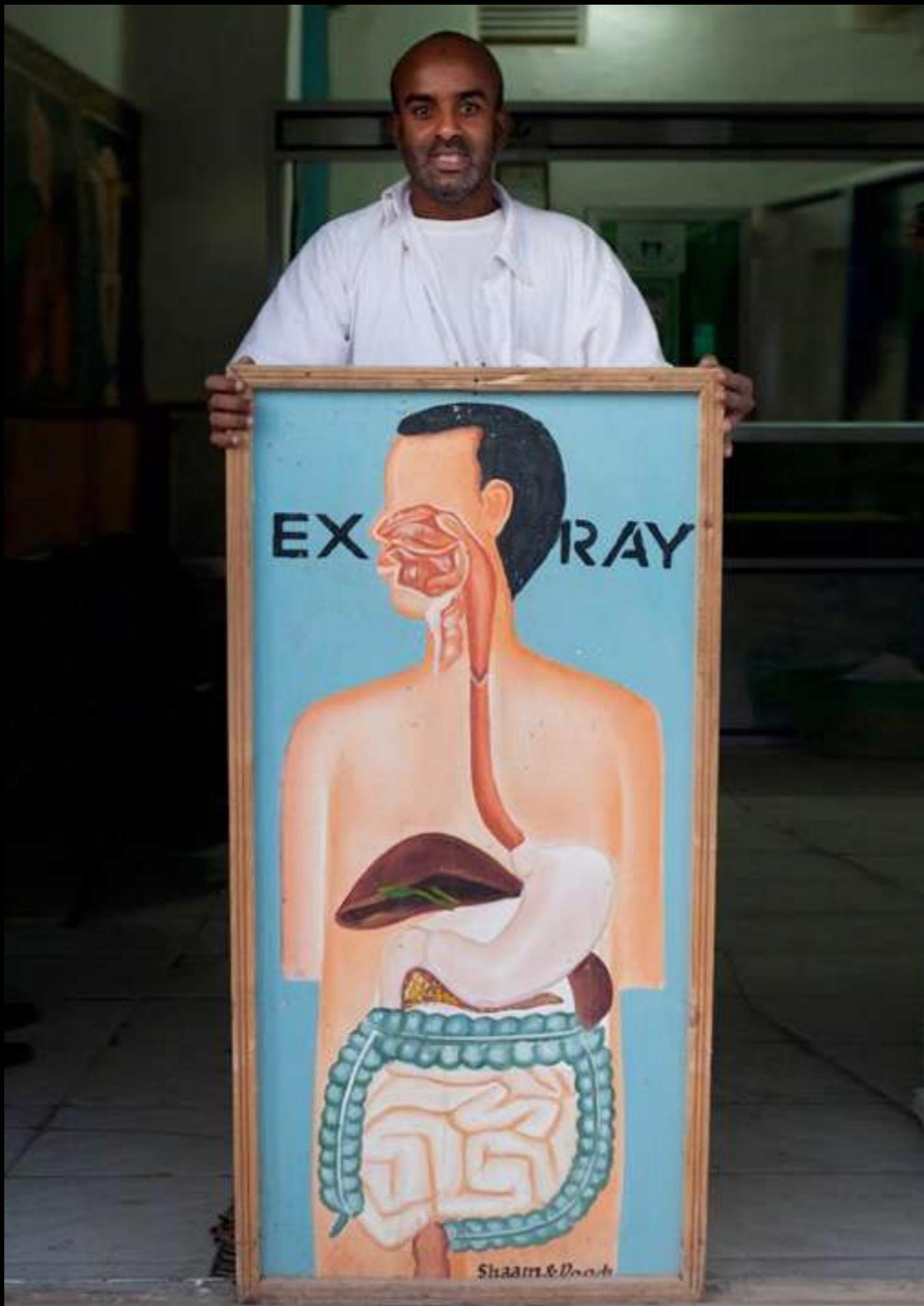
Hundreds of money exchangers display massive piles of local currency unguarded in open air. I exchange \$50 for a few drug-dealer sized stacks of Somaliland shillings. These money brokers are connected to an international informal transfer network known as “hawala” that facilitates an estimated \$1.5 billion in annual remittances from the diaspora, close to 50% of Somalia’s GDP.



A crowd surrounding the Russian MiG airplane war memorial in the middle of the city systematically moves to catch the shade throughout the day like a human sundial. On every corner, people sell and fervently chew khat leaves for their amphetamine-like stimulation.



“Don’t get kidnapped!” This was the most common response I would get when I told people I was going to Somalia. Somaliland is an autonomous region in the north that declared its independence from the war-torn south in 1991. It had even experienced a peaceful transition of power through democratic elections, a definite plus for any African country.



Somaliland has some of the best doctors the Horn Of Africa. Most of them were trained abroad. In Somaliland you can find almost any medical doctor or specialist in any field, but to access them, you must be in Hargeisa and see that physician at their private clinic. As a result there are as many clinics as pharmacies in Hargeisa, since each doctor either owns or owns a share in that pharmacy.



Millennia-old Laas Gaal cave paintings.



Berbera old Ottoman house



Berbera old Ottoman house



Every year, an estimated 4.2 million sheep, goats, cattle, and camels – more than the total population of Somaliland – are shipped to neighboring Arab states via the port of Berbera



Young girls sporting hijabs and burkas throw up media-popularized gang signs like rappers as they pose for photos, unaware of the significance.



A few kilometers from the Berbera war-scarred center, Baathela beach.



Many women don qasil, a plant-based beauty product that gives their faces a yellow tint, an effect made all the more alluring when coupled with colorful clothing.



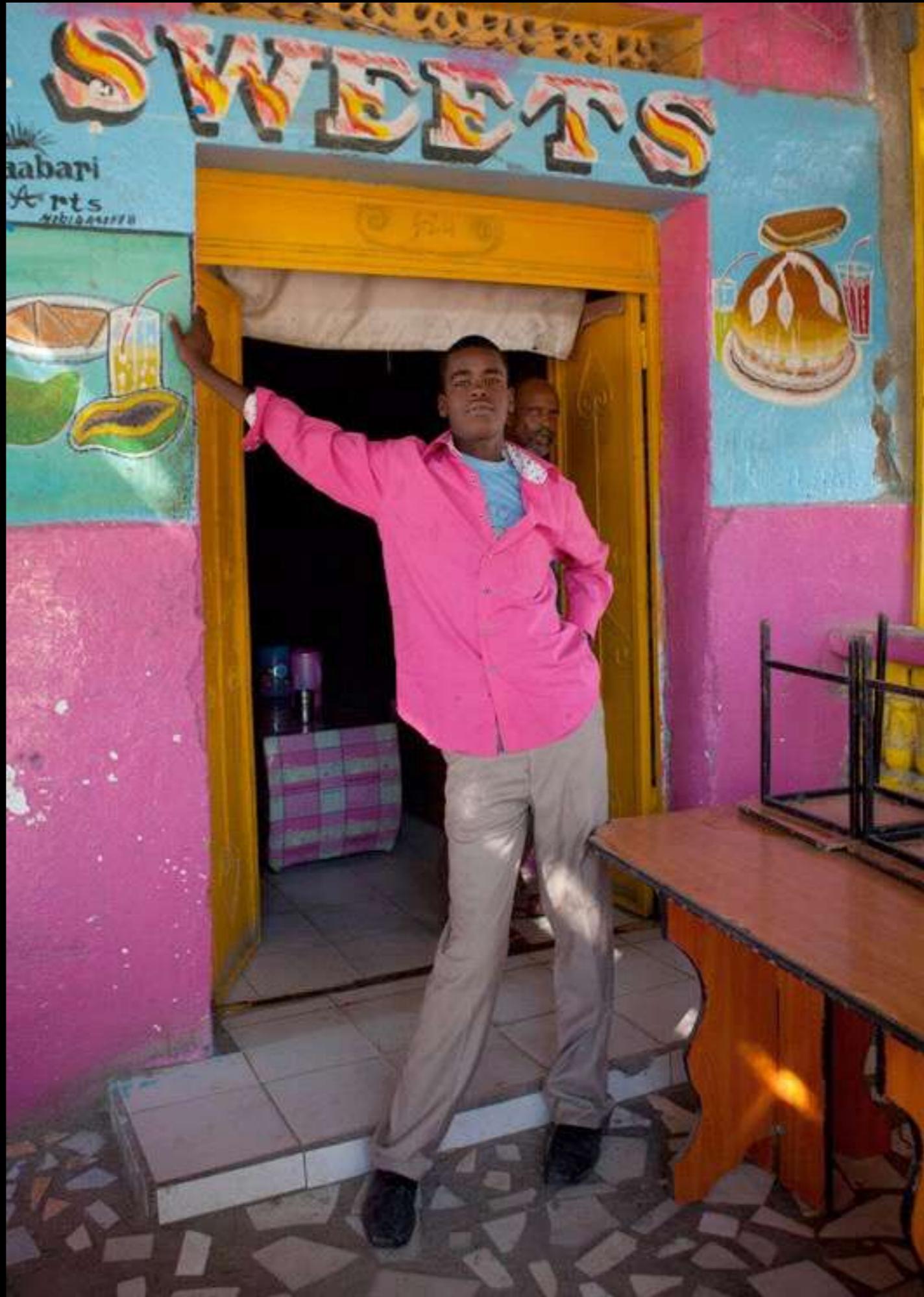




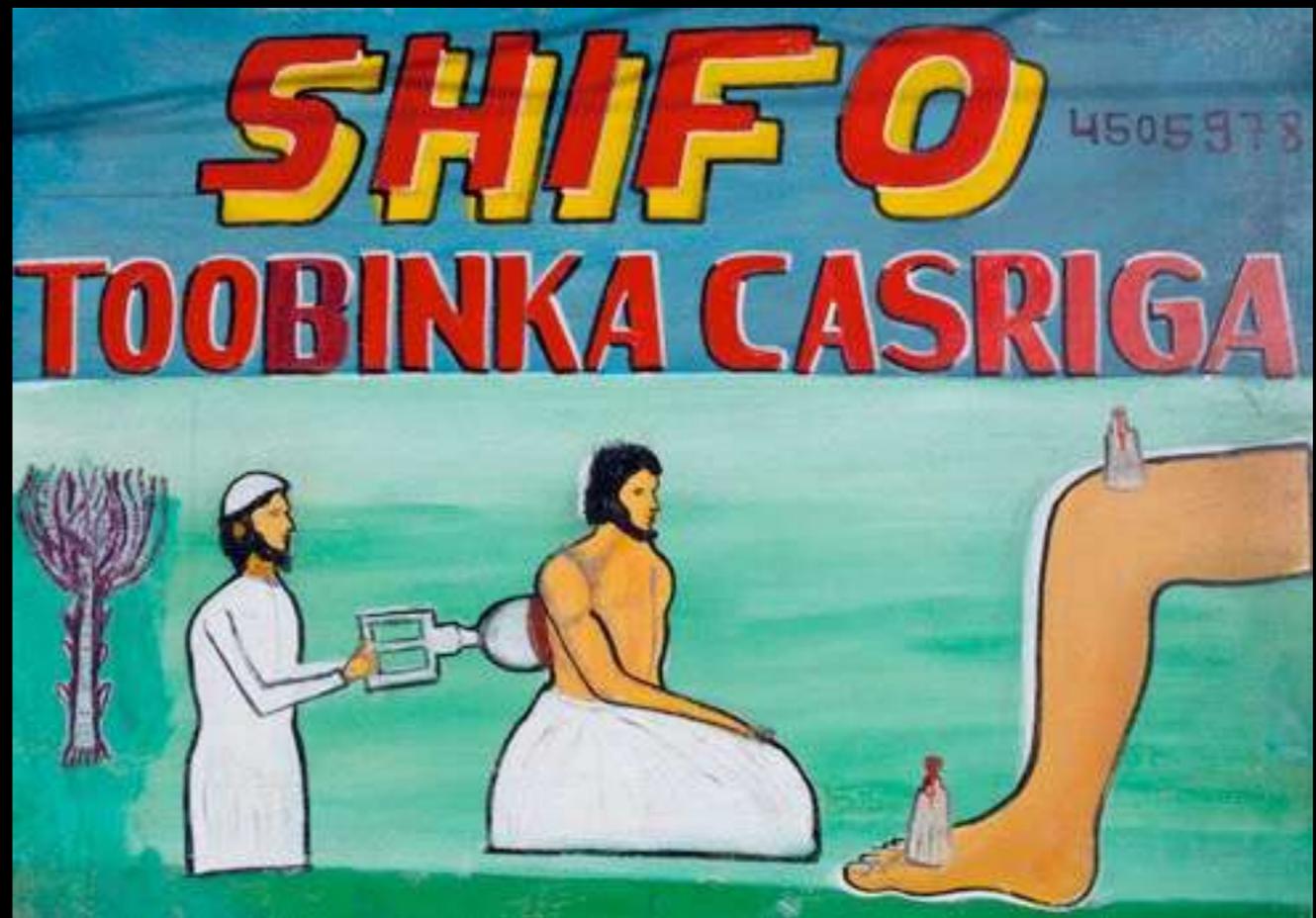
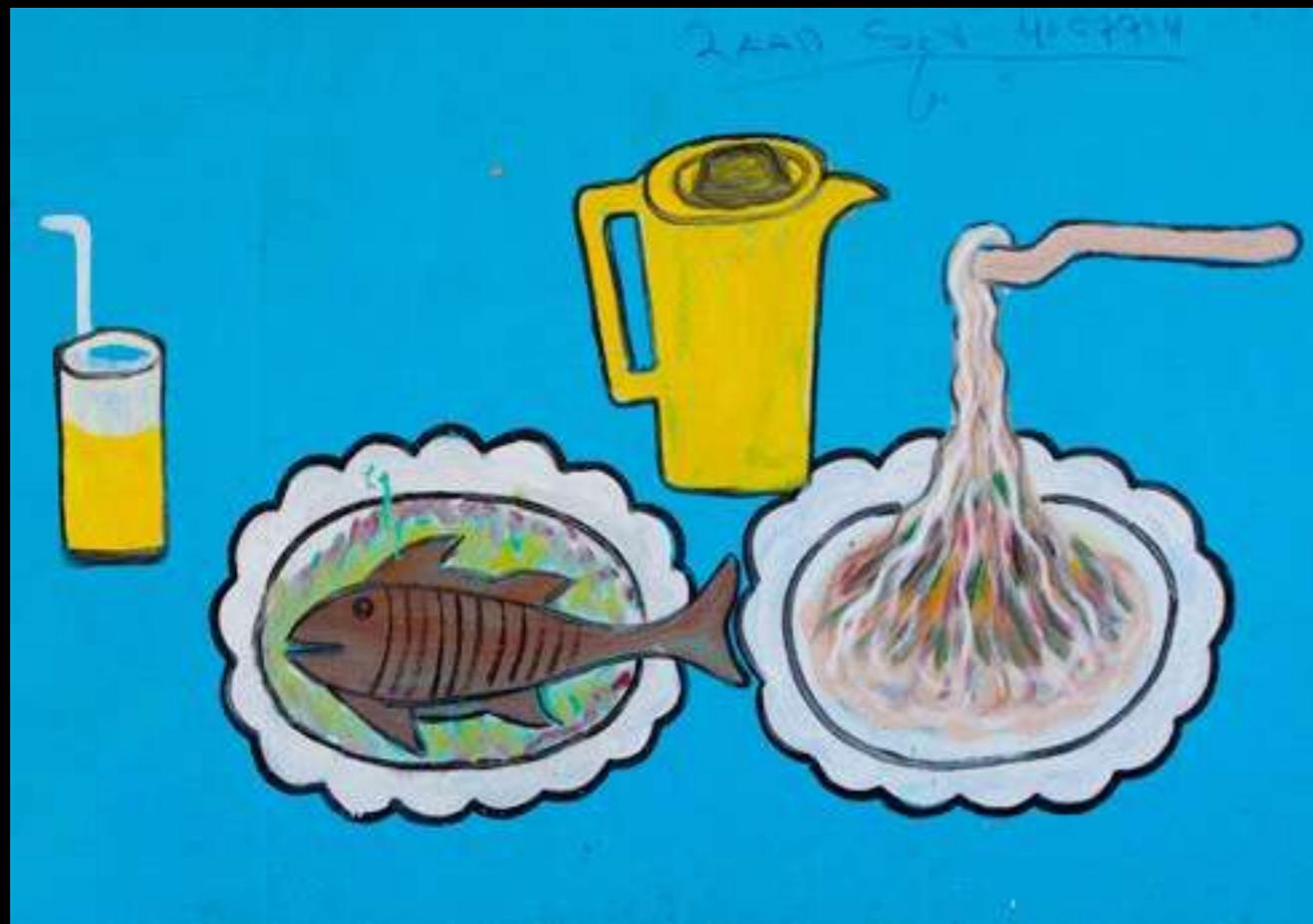
British colonial "ghost houses in Sheek hills It turns out that every brick in these buildings was razed to the ground during the war except for their chimneys.



Abandoned school of technology in Burao. The larger facilities on campus have become a sort of youth hangout with children running around and teens playing football in empty classrooms.









They invite me into a standard hut made from a patchwork of recovered metal and fabric. Even with only two people inside, it feels stuffy and overcrowded. The owner then tells me that ten people live inside this very humble abode!



Without GPS in the car, for directions, the driver relies on an Iphone compass and nomads, most migrating with their homes on their camel's back in search of greener pastures.



Our driver stops at a few roadside nomad settlements before finding one that accepts...payment by cell phone for camel milk!



Zeila. The skyline consists of giant telecom towers that dwarf the juxtaposed minarets.



Zeila's former magnificence can still be glimpsed, rendering the moment all the more melancholy.



A nomad carrying a newborn camel on his back.

“Don’t get kidnapped!” This was the most frequent response I would get when I told people I was going to Somalia. I tried to explain that I was going to Somaliland, an autonomous region in the north that declared its independence from the rest of the war-torn country in 1991. It had even experienced a peaceful transition of power through democratic elections, a definite plus for any African country. However, the stories of lawlessness, images of weapon-clad pirates, and of course *Black Hawk Down* made it impossible to change their minds. But who can blame them?

Media attention has traditionally focused on the ongoing war between the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), backed by the international community, and the Islamist insurgent group known as Al-Shabaab, an Al-Qaeda affiliate. This unrest takes place in the area commonly referred to as the “South”, which, as its name implies, comprises the bottom portion of the country including the capital, Mogadishu. Coverage has also focused largely on piracy in the Gulf of Aden where 16,000 to 22,000 ships, roughly 8% of the world’s trade, pass through annually. The sea bandits are based in Puntland, the easternmost part of the country and the very tip of the horn of Africa.

Bordering Djibouti on the west, Ethiopia on the south, and Puntland on the east, lies Somaliland, Somalia’s forgotten third. To most people, Somalia and Somaliland are one in the same. Hardly anyone speaks of this territory’s struggle for self-determination and desire to disassociate itself from the violent turmoil afflicting the rest of the country. Has this breakaway state, unrecognized by the international community, managed to implement some level of order and stability? With such limited information available, there is only one way to find out. I have to go. Camera in hand, I set out for the adventure of adventures.

After a three-hour wait at the Djibouti airport, I walk out to board Jubba Airways’s four-propeller clunky Soviet aircraft. The pilot looks more like a nightclub bouncer with aging bodybuilder muscles bulging through a T-shirt marked “UKRAINE”. As I crouch to enter the cabin, a nauseating stench sets my head spinning. It turns out that these planes are sometimes used for livestock transport. Consequently, in a futile attempt to mask the smell of goat urine, sweat-soaked crewmembers generously spray perfume throughout the cabin (and we’re not talking Chanel No 5). While passengers are still trying to find a seat that works, the flight attendant marches down the microbe-infested aisles handing dripping cold water bottles to passengers.

At the Hargeisa airport, immigration moves at a chaotic but quick tempo. In no time, my passport is stamped with a visa from a country that doesn’t technically exist. I exchange \$50 for a few drug-dealer sized stacks of Somaliland shillings and get picked up by my driver, Ali, and police escort, Farah, to explore the capital. From the airport, the city appears massive. During a brief struggle to find a parking spot, Ali insists that police are quick to ticket illegally parked cars, proof of some law and order in Somaliland.

The cacophony of police-directed traffic, Cushitic symphony that is Somali conversation, and occasional megaphoned Sunni religious lecture or “khutba”, give Somaliland’s metropolis a unique vivacity. Shops run up and down busy streets lined with vendors of all kinds. A crowd surrounding the Russian MiG airplane war memorial in the middle of the city systematically moves to catch the shade throughout the day like a human sundial. The reason for all the Russian matériel traces back to the Cold War when Somalia initially aligned itself with the USSR, claiming to incorporate communist practices. However, when the Soviets intervened in the Ogaden War supporting Somalia’s archrival Ethiopia, the Somalis quickly shifted their allegiance to the United States. This maneuver enabled Somalia to build Africa’s largest army at the time.

Hundreds of money exchangers display huge piles of local currency unguarded in open air. Some have their phone numbers written on top so people can have money delivered right to their door, like pizza. One of them waves around a plastic bag full of shillings. “It’s my safety box!” he says laughing, proud of the city’s high level of security. These money brokers are connected to an international informal transfer network known as “hawala” that operates on a strict honor system; it’s like Western Union, except no promissory notes are ever exchanged. This unregulated banking system facilitates an estimated \$1.5 billion in annual remittances from the diaspora, close to 50% of Somalia’s GDP. Many countries are trying to ban hawala, claiming that it is a money laundering mechanism or a way to fund terrorism.

On every corner, men fervently chew bitter-tasting khat leaves for their amphetamine-like stimulation. Most actually swallow the herb after mastication, a practice unique to Somalis that sometimes causes stomach problems. This addictive plant became a staple of Somali society during the civil war when militiamen would chew it to stay alert for hours on end. Today, it is one of the country’s largest imports. Many spend a large portion of their daily income on what the World Health Organization has labeled as a “drug of abuse”, sometimes even choosing it over food. In many countries, chewing khat is illegal, but in Somaliland, it’s the favorite pastime.

En route to the legendary coastal town of Berbera, I stop at the Laas Gaal cave paintings which date back to somewhere between 9,000 and 3,000 BCE. After only a 100-meter walk, I reach walls of Neolithic art depicting humans and a range of animals in a variety of positions. With a mouthful of khat and the juvenile excitement of a teenage boy, Farah shouts as he points out a drawing of cows in coitus. Amazingly well preserved with vibrant colors and clear outlines, these Picasso-like drawings are impressive in both quality and quantity. It is a mystery why UNESCO has yet to declare this stunning testament to human creativity a World Heritage Site. Discovered as recently as 2002, Las Gaal provides a glimpse of what other treasures might be hidden in the country. These caves are about as close as Somaliland gets to a tourist attraction and yet there is not so much as a T-shirt or magnet for sale, let alone a souvenir shop.

Sensing Berbera's welcoming atmosphere, I tell Ali and Farah to take a break while I tour this coastal town set to develop greatly due to its prime location for commerce with Ethiopia and Arabia. 20% of land-locked Ethiopia's exports already pass through this port. Overall, people here tend to be pretty open towards photography. All politely return my greetings and many initiate conversation with a warm welcome. Saying "asalaam aleikum", a traditional Muslim salutation, with an open-palmed right-handed wave practically guarantees a good reception. Quite a few invite me for dinner. One young girl goes out of her way to bring me a bowl of the day's sizzling pasta special in the middle of the street. Another woman makes me a tempting proposal to marry her daughter, in good English, as education is a top priority in the country. Many of the urbanized young Somalis I speak to want to study information technology or work with computers.

Beauty is common among the women. Young girls sporting hijabs and burkas throw up media-popularized gang signs like rappers while they pose for photos, unaware of the significance. Many women wear qasil, a natural beauty product that at once rejuvenates skin and protects from the sun. Made from the grinded leaves of a tree, this exotic garnish gives their faces a yellow tint, an effect made all the more alluring when coupled with colorful clothing. I take as many shots as I can before the men come and scold them for their playful brush with vanity.

The relaxed seaside atmosphere permeates the sandy streets. Distinctive Ottoman architecture hints at a rich history when the Empire annexed Somaliland for its strategic location on the Red Sea. A few kilometers from the war-scarred center, I delight in a nice afternoon swim in idle seclusion at Baathela beach. I know they are probably just fishermen, but I can't help but keep a watchful eye on the boats passing in the distance. A colour-rich sunset over the abandoned naval vessels in Berbera's harbor fades to reveal a star-filled sky. The beachside restaurant where I feast on fresh fish is well prepared for blackouts as they immediately bring out flashlights once the power goes out.

At dinner, I strike up a conversation with Yoosuf, a Berbera native and proud Somalilander. With the conversation gravitating towards Somaliland's political history, he contends that the current secessionist drive in Somaliland is completely justified. He explains that before there was a unified Somali Republic, there was the sovereign State of Somaliland; granted, this state existed for five days in mid-1960 before unifying with Puntland and the South under a single flag. The tumultuous political saga that ensued includes the assassination of a President, a military coup d'etat, and the violent totalitarian regime of Siad Barre. When Barre's dictatorship was overthrown in 1991, the country quickly fell into a state of anarchy with warlords battling for power, beginning the horrific Somali Civil War. On May 18th of that same year, Somaliland declared its independence from the rest of the country, attempting to reclaim what it once had. The war still took its toll on the region with destruction parallel to the rest of Somalia. Present-day Somalia is still in crisis mode with an ongoing war, 1.4 million internally displaced persons, almost 700,000 refugees, and an estimated 3.2 million people in need of emergency assistance according to Oxfam. But what about Somaliland? From what I've seen thusfar, so far so stable.

The next day, I'm off to the shanty-filled outskirts of town to see the massive livestock farm only to discover that every last animal has been sent to Saudi Arabia for Eid celebrations. Each year, an estimated 4.2 million sheep, goats, cattle, and camel – more than the total population of Somaliland – are shipped to neighboring Arab states via the port of Berbera. I come across a camel herder who parades about 40 camels (each worth about \$1000) out to the drinking well for me to photograph. He is reluctant to give me an exact number of how many are in his troop because apparently a Somali superstition states that some of the animals will then die. Few creatures embody awkwardness and elegance quite so well as the photo-friendly camel. To Somalis, these animals are more than just livestock, they are the measure of wealth, the most prized possession. From the age of seven, young boys learn how to raise and herd them, a fundamental component of the pastoralist lifestyle. As something of a rarity in the Horn of Africa, the herder never asks for money, but he does appreciate the Polaroid.

I take a day trip to a small farming village known as Lasadacwo, arriving just as they are conducting a town meeting to address communal issues. It is this type of grassroots problem solving that has made Somaliland an African paradigm of peace and order. Excited to see a tourist, they welcome me with a glass of raw, unpasteurized cow milk putting me in an awkward position: commit a social faux-pas by declining or risk salmonella and E. coli poisoning? I drink the milk and hope for the best. They invite me into a standard hut made from a patchwork of recovered metal and fabric. Even with only a few people inside, it feels stuffy and overcrowded. The owner then explains that ten people live inside this very humble abode! Upon leaving, I offer the town elder a few dollars which he immediately declines. Insisting, I almost slip and stupidly tell this devout Muslim to buy a round of beer. You would be hard-pressed to find a single drop of alcohol in Somaliland as the religion is adhered to. Luckily, “buy things for the children” comes out, and the elder finally accepts.

On the way to Burao, our next destination, we drive up a serpentine mountain road to the bucolic village known as Sheikh. From the ascent, a beautiful panorama contains a characteristic Somali landscape of brown earth speckled with shrubbery and modest mountains occasionally disrupting the level terrain. Ali throws in a little suspense, telling me of “ghost houses” built by the colonists. During the scramble for Africa in the late 19th century, Great Britain made it a protectorate while the rest of Somalia was colonized by Italy. Since Somaliland has a semi-arid environment not ideal for agriculture, the British took less of an interventionist approach to governance here than in sub-Saharan Africa since their aim was trade, not manual labor. The territory served primarily to secure important areas for shipping such as the Suez Canal and Mandab Strait. Little evidence is left of the British presence in Sheikh. It turns out that every brick in these ghost houses was razed to the ground during the civil war except for the chimneys and no one knows exactly why. Some adorable grazing sheep interrupt the eerie ambiance. Nearby lies a necropolis dating back to the 13th century that has yet to be excavated. In its current state, it really tests my imagination as there remains nothing but a few scattered bricks.

Back on the road, Ali explains that Burao is a very dangerous place where apparently a policeman was murdered the previous week. After six exhaustive hours of driving on a poorly paved route, he takes me to an abandoned school of technology. The larger facilities on campus have become a sort of youth hangout with children running around and teens playing football in empty classrooms. I go to the main outdoor marketplace where a man approaches Ali and asks, "Why did you bring him here? He will get killed!" With the total drive time exceeding the amount of time actually spent in Burao, we leave to Balligubedle.

Ali says that this small village on the Ethiopian border will provide a perfect example of Somali village life. On the way, I pass through a small community where ten men strapped with AK-47s stand about. As Ali slows to a stop, a little paranoia creeps into my mind. I then discover that negative stereotypes can go both ways. Some men begin yelling as I snap a few pictures of a truck. "They don't want any foreigners to take pictures," explains Khalid, a well-educated town elder who has travelled to over 30 countries. "They think that the Americans will then come and bomb with the drones."

Once in Balligubedle, I walk the entire village in minutes. The invisible border with Ethiopia cuts through houses, a prime example of the arbitrary way in which colonists divided Africa. They warn me not to cross for fear that I might end up in an Ethiopian prison for entering without a visa. At the only restaurant in town, patrons joyfully use their hands to eat dripping spaghetti while watching reruns of over-the-top American wrestling on Arabic satellite TV. They turn to me with expressions of anxious curiosity to ask me if it's fake. I don't have the heart to break it to them so I opt for an "I don't know" before washing down my last strand of spaghetti with some lukewarm Sprite.

Back in Hargeisa, I debate whether or not to attempt the harrowing journey to Zeila which is situated on the northwest tip, closer to Djibouti than any large Somali city. Its recorded history dates back to the 9th century when it was the capital of an influential sultanate in the region. In the 14th century, it became a major trade hub under the influence of Arab merchants who converted their business partners to Islam. This is one of the key ways in which the religion spread so successfully throughout this part of the continent. Somalis and foreigners alike warn me of the difficulty in reaching the legendary port town. I even have to get a different driver, Abdi, who has a more durable car than Ali, to make the trip. Eventually, the spirit of adventure overcomes the desire for comfort and I set off west.

Two hours into the drive, I stop for an exploration and overnight in Borama. The city is host to an impressive grain market, a short-tented bazaar, a metal door workshop, and a nice hotel with free wifi. Every business is easily identified by the custom paintings on the outside walls: fish and spaghetti for a restaurant, a giant tooth for the dentist, medicine for pharmacists. The storeowners happily pose for pictures. One barber even calls a kid over and begins to shave his head for the sake of the photo. Blaring speakers lure me to an English Premier League football viewing hall where inexplicably, there are two identical televisions side-by-side, screening the exact same match. I continue my wandering when out of nowhere the police pull up. After a few minutes of questioning, they "invite" me to get into the car. Dropping me off at the hotel, one officer explains that there are gangs of thieves quick to snatch my camera, so I need my escort. I wait for Farah's return from his afternoon khat chewing, before I continue exploring.

Curiously dressed in a sharp three-piece suit, a man takes my dinner order in perfect English. He introduces himself as Muhammad and reveals that he works as a lawyer during the day and as a waiter at night, an unusual pairing of vocations to say the least. He explains how traditional conflict resolution weaves together with “first world” law practices in Somaliland’s legislative system. Courts can issue judgments and sentences but if the plaintiff and defendant’s clans are able to come to a mutually accepted resolution amongst themselves, then that decision overrules the court. As in pre-colonial times, clan elders conduct these negotiations. Though the complex Somali clan structure plays a central role in people’s social and cultural lives, tribalism is less pronounced here than in other parts of Africa; intermarriage is widely practiced, a common first language is spoken, and Somalilanders have a strong sense of national pride for their unrecognized country.

The road to Zeila is not for the faint of stomach as it’s mostly off-roading. The terrain starts as semi-paved but soon switches to dirt. An abundance of cacti line the route for hours. I suddenly find myself bouncing over uneven rock as I make my way through a mountain range. This finally settles into thick sand where I even endure the obligatory get-stuck-in-sand episode. Gazelle stand still as statues watching the car approach before sprinting off majestically in all directions. The empty panoramas inspire a feeling of insignificance in nature’s wonder. Despite the vastness, some tents or livestock are usually in sight, signs of the remarkable fact that I was never far from human settlements. Despite a continuing trend towards urban migration, a large portion of the Somali population still lives a nomadic pastoralist lifestyle.

With light fading as I finally pull in to Zeila, I hurry out to discover my long-awaited destination. To my great surprise, it bears little resemblance to the rest of Somaliland. Whereas in other places, the scars of war are noticeable, in Zeila, it’s as if the wounds haven’t even begun to heal. This is the first time in the entire trip that I am confronted with such a graphic image of ruination; it’s like walking into a museum of destruction. Yet amid the all the rubble, Zeila’s former magnificence can still be glimpsed, rendering the moment all the more melancholy. The skyline consists of giant telecom towers that dwarf the juxtaposed minarets. Storeowners prefer payment in Djibouti francs to Somaliland shillings. Socially, the people seem more reserved, spending free time in front of the many outdoor televisions, evicting goats for a good seat.

Losing light, I hurry for the ruins of a mosque to capture an incredible deep orange sunset, but before I arrive, two heavily armed paratroopers appear, ordering me to follow them into a gated two-story house. Despite of my pleas, they lead me up some creaky stairs to the second story of their compound, the former British governor’s house. A group of men lying on the floor with a mountain of khat stems stare at me through bloodshot eyes. After a short interrogation, tension quickly dissipates. The most vocal man introduces himself as the Mayor of Zeila and his fellow khat-chewers as the other key officials in the city (chief of police, chief judge). He welcomes me to take all the photos I want but the sun has already set.

At night, I devour a delicious Yemeni-style fish, evidence of Zeila's Arab influence. At the end of the meal, the waiter brings a bottle of perfume to the table; it is the same kind used in the plane ride over. I head to apparently the only hotel in Zeila; the sign out front advertises "Resort". With no running water and a combination shower and outhouse, this lodging might be slightly improperly named.

In terms of hazard, the drive to Berbera actually outdoes the drive to Zeila. We spend at least an hour trying to cross a muddy lakebed, continually getting stuck, retracing our steps, and then trying a different route. The terrain changes and the abandoned roadside tanks prevalent in the rest of the country are replaced with 360 degrees of mind-blowing mirage. Without GPS in the car, for directions, Abdi relies on the iPhone compass and nomads, many migrating with their homes on their camel's back in search of grazing pastures. We stop at a few roadside settlements within a short period of time. When I ask Abdi if we are lost, he replies with a smile, "No, I am just looking for nomads that I can pay by cell phone for camel milk!" In no time, the transaction is completed. I can only sit back and admire this entertaining example of technological advancement in such a traditional country.

Clearly, Somaliland's technological infrastructure is no joke. Some locals attribute this to the lack of a postal system, a side effect of being an unrecognized country and thus unable to join the Universal Postal Union. Maintaining an active and expansive social life is a fundamental component of Somali society so the people have relied on alternative ways to communicate. The country has a booming telecommunications industry, with some of the cheapest international calling rates in the world; practically everyone has a cell phone. Internet access is only slightly less widespread. At the many internet cafés, screens are lit up with the blue and white of Facebook. Almost every hotel has high-speed reliable wifi, a serious anomaly for an African country. Abdi could call ahead and find out the road conditions, Farah could double check the security situation, and I could stay up to date with my email and post envy-inspiring tweets.

Stopping at Lughaya, a beachside village with a refugee camp visible on the outskirts, I eat a simple lunch of rice in a tin bowl and camel milk. A man from the refugee camp becomes agitated as he exchanges words with Farah. Abdi, relaxed as ever, begins to caress the man's cheeks and scratch his dyed-orange beard in an attempt to calm him. This unusual placating technique actually works.

As the car jumps and my head meets the roof for the 63rd time, I realize that my adventure in Somaliland will soon be over. I reflect on how the common apprehensions were trumped by the reality: the unanticipated welcoming and level of openness comparable to other countries, people's willingness to help without asking for anything in return, and the peaceful way of life cherished by the majority of inhabitants. Sure, tourist attractions were few, road time was excessive, and I encountered my fair share of rudeness. But every country has its downsides and embracing them is what separates the travelers from the tourists.

The people of Somaliland are very aware of their tarnished public image due to their historical association with Puntland and the South. In every city I visited, people urged me to show how Somaliland was different from Somalia. They want the world to know the level of peace they've attained in their ultimate quest for self-determination. Though Somaliland may share a common history, language, and blood with the South, the people deserve a distinct portrayal. They border one of the most dangerous and violent territories to ever exist, a place where the anarchy is surpassed only by tragedy. Merely twenty years ago their cities were razed to the ground by civil war, forcing them to rebuild almost everything. The international community refuses to reward their efforts towards peace and order, insisting on continuous ineffective solutions for the region. Despite these obstacles, the Somalilanders have somehow managed to construct a functioning state. Of course, it still has a long way to go, but what they've accomplished so far is nothing short of amazing. Currently, they wish to be recognized as a separate country, but the people I spoke to overwhelming hope for the day when their "brothers" from Puntland and the South finally find peace so that they can reunite under a single flag.

Suddenly, the car stops in the middle of nowhere. I look out to find the most ironic sight I've ever seen: a man carrying a newborn camel on his back. The thin, grey baby tosses its head from side to side as its owner gently lays it on the ground. It looks up with utter contentment and lets out an adorable cry as if to say, "Hello world. Here I am!" Like this baby camel, tourism in Somaliland is today young and struggling to stand on its feet while proudly declaring its existence. With proper care, it will grow into a strong animal of its own.

SILAND

