

I began to deliver my introduction once everyone became seated. I could hear Dee start to click away with the camera. I found myself suddenly and embarrassingly gasping for breath less than three minutes into my opening address. For a moment I thought I was going to pass out, not at all befitting the image of the super fit global Risk Consultant.

Asmara sits on a plateau seven thousand three hundred feet above sea level, the air is thin and it takes three weeks to acclimatize even if you do not have a thirty a day habit. I was told later that my face appeared to be purple, hideous and swollen, so what's new? Somehow I managed to struggle on through, after all I had only to stand up and orate for a further six hours. Considering my disgraceful performance of the previous day once I had spotted the tank wreckage I felt decidedly guilty about teaching 'actions on' in the event of encountering a potential minefield. Nonetheless that was the second heading on the whiteboard...



Despite the foregoing the day went well and hopefully shards of the information imparted will stand at least some of the volunteers in good stead, someday, somewhere? We laughed a lot and I like to think this was not just at the sight and sound of the purple and panting lecturer. When you think about it I was talking about local security issues to people who have been living and working alone amongst the local community there for months if not years. The stipend for a volunteer is a meager fifty US dollars a month to meet ALL of their needs. Their initial 'pre placement' kit issue on arrival in country to commence a two year 'tour of duty' consists of a briefing, a water filter, a bus fare and directions to their 'new home'. You have to take your hat off to them, I certainly do. Post workshop Dee and I took refreshment in a local hostelry at the invitation of the volunteers who had attended. That particular aspect of our excursion would warrant another article in itself, or perhaps not.

DAY FIVE dawned and it was another early start in keeping with a 'full on' workshop, this time held at the behest of the CD for the benefit of himself and other hand picked VSO permanent staff. The conduct of Security Surveys and the compilation of Evacuation

Plans formed the 'main menu' and we were able to fit in a good deal of practical and table top exercises built around these issues which appear to have been enjoyed by all involved, including the author. Dee and I also made our plans for DAY SIX a two day journey to visit the formerly thriving seaport town of Massawa some 100Kms due east of Asmara and seven and a half thousand feet below us. Several of our volunteers were located between Asmara, Massawa and the Ethiopian border beyond, we wanted to see something of their 'turf'.

On DAY SIX we tackled the mountain. Eritrea has nationwide petrol and diesel rationing, operational gas stations are very few and far between and car hire is a challenge not designed for the faint hearted. Our incentive was that the lower we got the more capable of rudimentary breathing we would hopefully become. We hired what was described to us as a brand new Toyota saloon (about 80,000 kilometers on the clock complete with an Andy Warhol paintjob). Eastwards and down. We discovered that the fuel gauge was stuck on 'full' an hour into the journey, not great under the circumstances. The downward trip toward the coast looked promising to begin with. Check Point and travel documents cleared we began our descent in bright sunshine from the top of the plateau well above the cloud base, spectacular. Forested mountain peaks and even the old railway line built by the Italians, an incredible feat of civil engineering, shimmered before us.

Head in the clouds



The narrow road snakes acutely for the first seventy kilometers, barrierless hairpin bends are frequent and the warning signage is debatable at best. We hit fog after the first ten clicks and the road soon became wet and slick with mud and rubble which appeared to be constantly falling from the mountainside. Visibility was down to just about 2 yards. Three hours later we hit the flatlands that yawned towards the coast and our destination, the town of Massawa. The weather cleared and I later learned that at this time of year the descent we made samples the entire annual seasonal spectrum extant in Eritrea.

A CHRISTMAS TALE-continued

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