

Stuck on my way to Somaliland

By Isobel Hamilton

I remember in 2015, when we arrived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, one of the first trips that we took was to the ancient city of Harar. My father could not leave work, as he was the most recent arrival, and all of the other Officers had requested leave way in advance. We had our first week off in a new place and my mother had already decided that we needed to see as much as we could of Ethiopia and make the most of every school break. So she booked tickets for herself and her three children to fly to Dire Dawa, only finding out later that it was not a top tourist destination.

Dire Dawa is the closet airport to the famous city of Harar, an incredibly old city to the far East of Ethiopia, which has five gates in its surrounding wall. It is also a UNESCO world heritage site, because it is an extremely historical city. I was okay sleeping inside the old city walls in a traditional home even though all we had to eat was fitera (a type of tamale made with flour and water) topped with local honey and tea flavored with nutmeg. I managed to keep calm when our guide my mom hired took us out into a pitch dark evening to see hyenas being hand fed from a seated man who appeared insane. (My brother also volunteered to feed the hyenas which we are still too scared to talk about.) And I kept calm (ish) when our guide made me feed kite birds raw camel meat to see them swoop in out of nowhere. My hand got scratched and she grabbed limes off of a nearby wheelbarrow and squeezed their juice on my cut. My hyena-feeding brother and I did manage to keep touring the next day even though we both spent time during the night throwing up (my mom said maybe because we had both handled raw camel meat).

And yet, the experience that took me out of my comfort zone was when we went touring with

our guide in her friend's very old taxi. Our destination was the camel trading market in Babile, outside of Harar. It was full of animals being sold and traded and men in traditional skirts. That is what the men there wear. We toured a few Somaliland -huts" that are like upside down cups with almost nothing inside. A scowling little girl was left to guard her compound and a bramble bush was being used as the gate.

Our guide insisted on showing us "just one more thing" - to see a famous site, the Dakata Rock, just outside of Babile. It seemed interesting, so we got in a very rickety old car, eight of us crowding into a car that was obviously made for only five people. It was a tight squeeze, and I looked down to tie my shoelace and saw that there was a large hole in the bottom of the car! My mother asked how old the Peugeot was, and the driver responded proudly, "Fifty-seven years." I looked around worriedly that the rusty contraption would not last long enough to get us out to this famous rock and back. We continued driving long enough to get impatient, seeing desert, the occasional shrub, and a few people riding their donkeys, when we stopped. We piled out of the car, stretched, took some pictures and puzzled at how strange a sight it was. Then the driver started up the car, and kept driving on. I sank back into my seat, wanting to go back and have some lunch. I heard my mother's voice ask the driver and the tour guide "Aren't we supposed to go the other way?" and the guide's curt response "We are going to see sites a few miles from here." The guide's response which was not a question on what we wanted to do but rather a comment on what we are going to do, struck me as rather odd. I sat up and looked around, realizing that we were still going in the same direction as before, instead of going back to Harar, driving straight into Somaliland! This scared me a little bit because I realized that we were not supposed to enter Somalia. and I started to panic. My mother was talking quietly with the driver

and tour guide, asking about getting back. Then I heard somebody say that we were crossing into Somaliland. I was beginning to freak out, and I looked out the window anxiously.

Then the car's engine stopped.

My heart almost stopped with it. No, no, no, this cannot be happening, I was thinking to myself.

We are stuck in Somaliland? This was the *absolute WORST* case scenario. The driver looked out the window and swore in Amharic. The tour guide looked very relaxed, like this happened every day to her. My brothers were looking around, smiles fading as they realized that this was not a joke, we were truly stuck by the side of the road... in Somaliland? We got out of the car, my brothers and I looking around at the barren, desolate landscape, while the driver, guide, and my mother put their bodies up against the car and began pushing it down the road back towards Babile. The car started up again, and the driver hopped in to drive, so we followed his lead and jumped in as it was rolling down the road. We started back to the city, and each mile got me more calmed down.

This experience brought me farther out of my comfort zone than I had ever been, and I learned that no matter the situation, I always have to remain calm. If I am calm, I will be able to think more clearly and maybe fix the problem. I am uncomfortable if we are not in control of our trip, if we are in a dangerous area, and if our car is so old that it breaks down. In retrospect, I was probably the most frightened person in that car.