

At least 160 people had been killed recently along the road from Harar to Addis, so we decided to follow the advice of a Somali friend and took the dirt road from Dire Dawa to Mieso, to avoid some of the areas where the fighting had been worse. But that road was probably the worst I've ever driven.

For a long time Mariko had wanted to come to Hargeisa, and drive with Robert to Addis. He had bought an old but still strong Landcruiser in Somaliland, and had driven the car home in June. The 777 km from Hargeisa to Addis were driven in a long day, 15 hours with only three short stops. In Addis we found out that to be officially imported, the car first had to be driven back out of the country. Early July Robert had driven the car back to work, spending a night in Harrar (as the Somaliland border closes at night).

Over the summer the paperwork had been sorted out, so it was now time to bring the car back to Ethiopia. Mariko arranged last minute to fly on 7 September 2017 to Jigjiga, an Ethiopian town close to the Somaliland border, and organized a ride to the border at Tog Wajaale. Robert was to pick her up and drive back to Hargeisa to spend a night together in his working environment bachelor's life. The next day we were going to drive back, arriving Saturday evening. The plan was to stay in the old town of Harrar.

The border

Robert had half an hour to kill at Tog Wajaale while I was driving through the flat steppe from Jigjiga. He parked our car next to the Somaliland 'gate' (a cable over the road which is usually lying on the ground) and walked over the bridge to the Ethiopian side. In the usually dry riverbed there's a free market with worthless stuff being sold on muddy tarpaulins and rickety wooden stands. A guy was selling plumpy-nut out of a wheelbarrow, straight from WFP boxes, and he bought two packets.



Photo of plumpy nut wheelbarrow



Plumpy-nut is peanut butter enriched with minerals and sugars, widely used as a nutritional supplement by international humanitarian agencies. The product, manufactured by a US-based company (the French inventor has sued it for patent breach), is appreciated not only by underfed children and their mothers, but also by qat chewers and Al Shabaab. The former use it to improve the absorption of qat and thus the high, and the latter as military rations, as they are easy to transport, stay well indefinitely and are ... very nutritious. The packet, of about 200g, costs only 2000 Somaliland shilling, or 25 US cent. Less than the bananas at an admittedly extortionate price of 3000 shillings a woman was trying to sell nearby.

Mariko may have been the first foreigner arriving at the border in a long time. The Ethiopian customs official, which Robert has met at a previous crossing, looks a bit like Sartre – a weary bureaucrat with

nagging existentialist doubts – and enjoys speaking French with Robert. Turns out he had the same teacher when he was studying at the Alliance Francaise in Dire Dawa as two of our sons at the International Community School in Addis: Madame Pascaline.

As we completed the emigration process, it started hailing and we had to wait for nearly half an hour. On the way back over the bridge we found the market on and around the bridge had disappeared. The streets were gushing with dirty water carrying garbage towards the wide muddy riverbed.

The Somaliland border officials were clearly confused by Mariko's diplomatic passport without visa. We waited while they tried to get instructions from Hargeisa. A young official with a striking resemblance to Obama finally gave in to our pressure and put the stamp in her passport, maybe convinced by Robert's Somaliland residency and rudimentary Somali.

Hargeisa

We arrived in Hargeisa around 5 pm and immediately went shopping. Our car ended up loaded with lots of hastily bought food items (sugar, olive oil, juices, party food, powdered milk), washing powder, a toaster and an 'African Star' freezer that fitted nicely in the back of the car, next to the spare tire. Prices in Hargeisa are about half of what they are in Ethiopia for such products and the choice in the shops was far better than in Addis.



Performance at Hido Dhawr

Mariko Impressions of Hargeisa. Dinner at the Hido Dhawr 'cultural village' with enthusiastic performances by out of tune amateur performers. The hurried and slick-talking NGO guy managing the Academy for Peace and Development that didn't really tell us anything, and Yusuf Weyne who did tell us a lot about Ethiopia and its relations with Somalia.

Ethnic Conflict

Our Isaaq host from Gabileh, Yusuf 'Weyne' gave us the background to the tense relations between the Isaaq and the Ogaden which now rule the Ethiopian Zone 5. I guess Robert might soon write a blog about that. This latent hostility was confirmed the following day by Mohamed Yusuf, son of an Ogadeni chieftain. He stated that the Isaaq are '65% Al Shabaab' and not to be trusted in the least. Our Somaliland plates seemed more of a liability in the Somali region than in the rest of Ethiopia.

However the main troubles now in Ethiopia are between Somalis and Oromo. The Oromo with 45% of the population are the largest ethnic group, but they have not been granted either political power or much development in their territories. The 6% Somali have become a strategic ally of the EPDRF government, and the Oromo are now rebelling against what they see as a government-sponsored encroachment on their borderlands.

The clashes among both groups have been particularly violent in the South, in the area around the Kenyan border town of Moyale, but they were bloody also in Eastern Ethiopia, along the road we were to take back. People had died around Babile, east of Harrar, and in the densely populated area west of Harrar towards Dire Dawa. But most people, a reported 130 people, had been killed around Mieso. Although most of the victims were clashing civilians, there had also been some attacks on cars, with

stones thrown, blocked roads and even gunshots. The Oromo targeted not only Somalis but also the government and those that support it: people like us.

The federal forces were nowhere to be seen, the government leaving the security to the infamous Liyuu Police. This is a paramilitary outfit set up by Mohamed Omar Abdi, the President of the Ethiopian Zone 5, or Somali Region. Originally they were constituted of Ogadeni clansmen to fight the Ogaden National Liberation Front, who controlled much of the Somali region in the 1980s. The ONLF having practically been wiped out (by development more than by military force), the Liyuu Police now fights Al Shabaab in Ethiopia and Somalia, but is also seen as an occupation force quashing any dissent against Omar Abdi. They had recently been accused of excessive brutality and extrajudicial killings against the Oromo in Mieso. Mieso, as well as Babile, Harrar and the road towards Dire Dawa were all areas on our route and we decided not to advance without carefully informing ourselves about conditions on the road ahead.

Mohammed Yusuf 'Abdi', son of the Reer Abdille Ugas, advised us not to take the tarmac road which goes through Oromo areas close to the border with Somali people, but to take a dirt road which goes through the Somali side, which has been peaceful. We were worried that the junction between both roads was precisely at Mieso. But Yusuf told us that the deadly clashes had not been in Mieso itself, but along the tarmac road to Harrar, in a town called Asebe Teferi. Robert recalled being subjected to a minor unwarranted attack in that town and having felt hostility there again when he drove back through the town. As it stretches for kilometers along a winding mountain road, it seemed to us a nasty place to face potential attack. So we decided to take the road Yusuf 'Abdi' suggested. He called his friends along the road who assured him the situation was peaceful and the road still easy to drive, despite the recent rains. The former turned out to be true, but not the latter.

Border crossing 2

Today neither Obama nor Sartre are at their post. The crossing could have gone smooth were it not that the customs office, where we have to clear our car, has just closed when we arrive at 12, and will only reopen at 2pm. We walk around the customs building to the back courtyard, where the office staff is having lunch, and try to convince them to stamp our papers so we can proceed.

However, in Ethiopian style, they have no authority and we must await the return of the head of the office, who is having lunch at home. We are offered injera with vegan sauces, and after having politely refused once, we gladly accept their invitation the second time.

The Somaliland side of the border, and road through the Hawd plains to Jigjiga



The road to Dire Dawa

Bombas – stop to buy camel milk. Only Robert is disappointed when it turns out to be spoilt upon arrival in Addis. A dirt ‘askari jifa’ sleeping policeman turns out to be have been put there by a father who lost his 11 year old son to a passing vehicle. We both think that over for a while, how terrible it must be to lose an 11-year-old child.

Babile seems relaxed when we drive through it. The surest sign of trouble is when streets empty and businesses close. Therefore it is good to see woman and children walking in the street and people leisurely conducting their affairs.

We want to drive through the old town of Harrar and stop for some coffee but are a bit nervous. Yusuf wants us to stay in Dire Dawa because it is ‘safer’ but maybe also because he prefers to stay with us until his home. He works in Jigjiga but his family home is Dire Dawa, and he returns every weekend. However, given that the road after Harrar is one of the most tense spots along the road, we want to get there before the people finish chewing qat and spill onto the streets in their excited mood. That usually coincides with sundown.

So we end up skipping Harrar entirely and driving on. Yusuf is a bit tense as we drive along stretches where stones have been thrown at passing cars recently. Mariko can still feel the spit on her dress, of some Oromo children who surrounded us when we stopped to have a quick look at some beautiful rock formations before Babile (Oromo IDP settlement). The next town, 15 km further, is Awodey. It has become a fundamentalist town, according to Yusuf, and for many years sharia-like public life prevails; but the town has also become the main qat market in the region. We find that odd, but not Yusuf.

Yusuf tells us about the Chinese. Sure, they work hard and it is thanks to them that so much infrastructure is appearing – the main project being the now nearly completed railway line from Djibouti to Addis. But they are also ‘eating all the birds’ and finishing off the wildlife, Yusuf claims. He tells that when the Chinese ambassador visited Dire Dawa, he said ‘I don’t know why you Ethiopians complain about hunger. I saw at least 3000 street dogs on the way from the airport’. We laugh at what we think is a joke, but he insists the ambassador truly said that.

Dire Dawa

Dire Dawa is a surprisingly pleasant town, leafy, on a rectangular grid and built with a European sense of purpose. Like Harrar it is a liberal town, with bars, night life and freedom for women. The generally conservative bent of Somali society does not seem to apply here.

We go out for a walk after having parked the car in the hotel, and quickly get tipsy. It is thrilling to be together, on this kind of adventurous road trip, just the two of us. We eat a lousy but very happy meal in Paradizo, with a bottle of cheap local red wine. On the way back to the hotel we hang out with a young guy in a street stall giving him a slightly drunk lecture on his responsibility as the bearer of the future of this country.

The hotel, African Village, is very nice and reasonably priced (580 birr/26 \$). It’s best attraction is the grey parrot outside repeating some of the words and phrases it picks up. The main drawback is the alcohol-free policy. Strange for the Swiss owner to follow this policy in a liberal Muslim town. On the bedside table are bibles in Amharic, Ethiopian and some other language. But the room, mimicking an African hut, is nice, and so is the breakfast the following morning. Yusuf comes to visit us in the hotel and assures us the latest news is that the road is good. He waves us off at 9 am. ‘By 2 pm you’ll be in Addis’. We know that must be an exaggeration but don’t know by how much. We will arrive at 8 pm – only six hours after his buoyant estimate, which is not bad given the experience.

The road

After Dire Dawa the road gets progressively worse. Instead of driving the 160 km of dirt road in 2 ½ hours, it takes us 1 ½ hour to get to the first town, Erer, at 60 km. Robert is not driving slowly. As we follow the old railway track from Djibouti to Addis, built a century ago, the road dives into more and more gullies, and gets worse and worse as we climb out of them. In Erer we buy lovely oranges grown locally. Unfortunately the mangoes are out of season. The next town thirty km after Erer is Bike, a strange, disorganized sprawling village. It is very strange to see that the Chinese have built a huge modern train station for this forlorn settlement in an empty landscape of shrubbery and dry gulches. As they do in China, the station is built purposefully a few km out of town, to provide a direction for Bike's growth. As if urbanization in Ethiopia answered to the same logic as that in China.

We only cross a few vehicles an hour, and no train rides on the glistening tracks despite the inauguration and official news that the track is operational. The landscape remains empty, albeit very beautiful in this rugged terrain, but it takes us an hour to reach Afdem, 25 km after Bike. As we leave Afdem there is a checkpoint, probably of local militia, but we are waved through. The road then gets trickier: twice we have to branch off it to avoid a collapsed bridge. It also becomes muddy and we put the car in 4wd. We pass a pick-up truck that is stuck, with ten young men around it. We are asked to pull the truck out by the excited young men, but it is obvious that we'll get stuck ourselves if we try, and we drive on. But, as we cross the old train track in Kulmiye, 23 km and 1h15min after Afdem, we get stuck ourselves.

Robert has been doing all the driving and he's managed until now, but here he makes a mistake and drives into a muddy pool of water thinking he'll get through it. But the car immediately gets stuck. Before deepening the quandary by spinning the wheels unnecessarily, we get out. There is no network coverage. Luckily we're in a settlement and there are people around. With his Somali, Robert secures the cooperation of the village men in exchange for 1000 birr (45 USD), a handsome amount around here: they guarantee they'll get the car unstuck and past the deep and treacherous muddy stretch immediately beyond.



They don't have a vehicle and they proceed to pull the car out with an iron cable. That goes much quicker than expected, and while Mariko stays behind filming the operation in the spattering mud, Robert slithers the car to the far side. We pay and offer a ride to one of the villagers who wants to sell some milk in the next village. He will make himself useful in the muddy stretches ahead by walking ahead and pointing out the safest way through each obstacle. We drop him in Muli at 14.21. It has taken us twenty minutes to drive the last 5 km. Only 12 km remain to Mieso, and that will take us more than an hour.

The road improves a bit after Muli, but soon becomes very muddy again. Robert, or the car, has gotten the hang of it and manages the next few treacherous stretches. By now we are the only car on the road, except a huge army truck, which is in its own league. We slip and slide along the new train track towards Mieso. The town is within view when the path drops down to a river. A very fast-flowing river, swollen by the recent rains, rushes over the ford and immediately drops a meter or so after the crossing. It seems impossible to cross it, and we almost decide to wait until the river stops flowing so fast. But then we try to cross by foot. Although the water reaches over Robert's knees, nearly knocking him over and dragging him down the small cascade, the ground feels very steady and the grip is good.



So we go back to the car and invoke Buddha, our nerves and dame fortune. We fear that the water, rising above the sideboards, will push the car over the edge and make it roll down the river. We decide to drive slowly, to avoid the impact of the water when we hit the river, but steadily.

Towards the middle of the river the muddy water unexpectedly gushes over the windscreen, and in through the driver's window Robert foolishly left open, and we lose all visibility. But Buddha and dame Fortune and our nerves save the day, and we find the other side of the river and drive up its slippery slope. We get out, shaken, and then lose hope at what we see in front. It looks like huge bombs have detonated deep holes in the road, with slippery sides and no flat or steady ground left, with high ridges and treacherous corners ahead.

For a while we walk around – we are by now covered in mud from top to toe, and are walking barefoot because our shoes have become too heavy – looking for an escape route, but then it dawns on us that the only way is ahead, through the thick of it. About a kilometer away, at the end of this road, we see a pink multi-storey building, proof that salvation lies ahead. Again, but even more thoroughly, we invoke Buddha and surrender to whatever may come. And: miracle. The car, in 2nd gear, slithers through each deep hole, up every ridge and around every bend, and emerges on the other side near the pink building, where we dare pause.

It is not over yet: a huge Chinese dump truck is buried to its headlights in another mud pool ahead, and it takes some figuring out how we'll get past it without sliding into it; but by now we have hope and we manage, and finally the village starts and we make it to the asphalt road, in Mieso at 15:27, only six and a half hours after we started out on the 155 km. On the paved road it would have taken less than 3 ½ hours to drive the 185 km, as I measured during a previous drive.

There remains a 4-hour drive of 285 km to Addis, and that road would be considered by most sane drivers to be quite dangerous, as it is narrow, has a lot of slow-moving truck traffic, many hills and bends, and sometimes rutted road surface. But by now we just want to get home, and we speedily overtake hundreds of dimly-lit trucks through the Rift Valley, along crater rims, up and down plateaus, into the darkness all the way into the chaotic evening traffic of Addis in our mud-covered, but already beloved trustworthy car.

When we arrive home we are so tense that it takes quite some drinking, shower and simply time to wind down enough to sleep.

Written by Mariko & Robert shortly afterwards