

Travelogue

I leave Hargeisa with apprehension, as I haven't taken the obligatory armed guard, called 'SPU'. My friend who was going to organize one to come with me hasn't done it and advises me to attempt traveling to Berbera without one. "If they don't let you through, just tell them you're Isse Muse" he jokes, referring to the dominant clan between Hargeisa, Berbera and Burao.

It is still hot at 4pm, when I finally leave, after having charged the boxes with library books in the back. I'm driving my friend's car, a powerful four-wheel drive with almost 400,000 km mileage. As I arrive at the first checkpoint, at the outskirts of Hargeisa, I switch on music the checkpoint guards might like, and put on my sunglasses to look relaxed. I hate checkpoints. Sure enough, they won't let me through. "Where's your SPU? You cannot go. Park there!" the guard barks at me. I walk with him to his cruel-faced commander. When he stops speaking on the phone he turns to me and asks me where I'm from. I try the joke, speaking in Somali: *wahaan Isse Muse baan ahay*. I add to that: *ina Berbera waa degaankegi* meaning: I'm Isse Muse and Berbera is my pastoral homeland. He looks at me surprised and then starts laughing. "So'ol!" – Go! he calls as he waves me through. I quickly go to the car before he changes his mind.

I give a ride to a soldier and a teacher at the checkpoint. The soldier steps out in one of the first villages, and the teacher comes with me to Berbera. Luckily he can plead my case at the following checkpoints where they want to stop me. I notice that I feel a surge of fear every time we approach a checkpoint. I hate feeling fear and wonder how I can calm myself.



After a night in Berbera's Allore hotel, with an escape to the beach, I do my stuff the following morning in Berbera: a 2-hour interview with the Secretary of the Berbera Economic Forum, and then I hand over the books to the Berbera Public Library. A local TV even does a report that I hope will be seen by other Somalilanders, as it confirms that I'm a well-intentioned academic researcher – people are surprised to see a white man like me drive himself around their country. I'm done around 11 and return to my super hot hotel room. I should've paid extra for AC. I'm trying to get hold of my friend who can organize a SPU escort that can accompany me to Burao, as I don't want the stress at each checkpoint. But he's not answering the phone. Unable to stand Berbera's heat any longer, I check out of the hotel and get in my car. There's an AC and I can listen to my new Horn of Africa playlist. What to do?

I decide to take the road to Burao. At the first checkpoint I'll tell them: fine, give me one of your men; and then we'll drive back to town to organize an escort at the headquarters. And maybe they'll let me through.

The first checkpoint after Berbera, however, is far away from the town, and I no longer want to drive back to fetch a SPU. The guard says Salaam Aleikum. Always a good start, because with a 'wa Aleikum as-Salaam' you already establish comradely trust. He looks around in my car for a SPU, and then asks me where I'm going and where I come from. I make the same joke as the day before. OK, he smiles, and he lets down the rope. I'm on my way. The only way to defeat checkpoint fear is by thinking: whatever will be will be, and going into the encounter good-naturedly. With this attitude, I feel invincible. It's good to have cracked this fear and turned it into something positive.



As the car gains altitude and then starts winding up the escarpment toward Sheekh, I avidly open the windows for fresh air. I've taken this road a few times before and know that on the ridge, in the town of Sheekh, is the best climate of Somaliland. I'm so happy to be alone in the car, without armed guard and with my music – Somalis always convince you to turn off any music which is not Somali – that I stop halfway up the mountain for a smoke. Ten minutes later, at the highest point, I turn off the road and go for a stroll. I have loads of time, as my next appointment is the following day, in Burao, at 10am; and that town is an hour's drive away.

I walk along the ridge taking in the lovely fresh air, the (relatively) green scenery, the impressive vistas. I'm gulping in my freedom with relish. Nothing better than being alone, in a good mood, and in such a special place. Behind me is the new town of Sheekh. Where I'm walking there were two stone houses, judging by the piles of stones on the ground. Must have been an English outpost, given the view it commands over the breach in the escarpment where the road winds down. I feel like an explorer.

Driving onward to the town, I decide I'm going to find a hotel and stay in Sheekh. I've always wanted to visit this town, famous for its location and its educated people. There is a Sufi sect that has rejected clan

identity: any Somali clan member can join by marrying in, and respecting the rules. These include a ban on commercial activity, and on smoking, qat chewing and any other un-Islamic behavior. This cross-clan identity is very surprising in Somalia, where almost the entire identity is derived from (sub-)clan. This tariqa has focused instead on education. The British helped by exempting them from taxes and by building a secondary school. Inaugurated in 1958, it was the first secondary school in Somaliland *and* Somalia. Since then Sheekh is known for its education. The African Union operates a veterinary clinic and Sheekh high school is home to about 300 students that come from all over Somalia, and teachers from Kenya and Ethiopia; all have accommodation on campus.

I drive through town slowly looking for a hotel. One I stop at is too local: small rooms, no common area outside, no WiFi. The rooms are 3\$ a night. The gate of a fancy guesthouse is opened after much honking by an insolent lazy guard. I find out they will reopen it for me if I pay 50 \$. I decide to have some tea and ask around.



A smartly dressed contractor who speaks good English points me to the Mashallah Hotel, newly built on a promontory on one side of the town. The rooms cost 5\$ and have a balcony. There seem to be at least 30 rooms, but I'm the only guest. None of the balcony doors can be opened, as drawers have been put against them in the tiny rooms, but eventually they agree to re-organise one room for me. Abdirashid, who has received me, then suggests we go drink some tea in town. He and Guleid, who have accompanied me to the hotel, speak to me of archaeological sites and sources of precious stones in the

town's surroundings, so I agree that they will be my guides. I buy them some qat, they buy water, coca-cola and cigarettes, and we spend the rest of the afternoon visiting the sites in my car.

This must be my favorite activity: exploring little-known historic sites in beautiful landscapes with local enthusiasts. I reflect on how getting over the fear of breaking the SPU rule, which I have followed and propagated during my past two years' work in Hargeisa with an NGO safety organization, has opened this opportunity.



We first visit a crystal quarry that only Abdirashid knows about. It is a 30 minutes' walk away. Then we walk through the ruined town of Ferdows – great heaps of stone and remains of masonry work show that this must have been quite an advanced settlement. The name (Paradise in Persian) makes me suspect that it was settled by Persians in the 10th or 11th century, when they also settled further down the Indian Ocean coast. An underground set of rooms, in which Guleid lowers himself, excites the myth-making skills of my Somali guides, who speak of ancient treasure vaults. Guleid shows me some plain glass ring insets and evidently machine-made beads as proof of the treasure. I dispel his speculations and venture it might have been a large underground cistern, to provide the town with water during the dry season – like the Somali *berkads* used by pastoralists to store rain water. This typical Persian town-feature may even have inspired the pastoralists.



We then visit the ruins of the British residence, where Queen Elisabeth spent a night in 1958. I wonder why the town's inhabitants, supposedly educated, could not preserve the splendid stone building. Probably it was simply so beyond their building skills that they didn't even try. Nearby is the shrine of Sheikh Qudub on top of a hill. The pure white mausoleum is very well maintained. My guides are flabbergasted that a building could exist for so long. The current edifice probably dates from the Ottoman period.





On the other side of the main road are the school facilities. Along the way we encounter a tariqa elder who consents to reply to some of my questions, and then grudgingly has his portrait taken with me. We walk through Sheekh High School, which both of my guides have attended. Finally we make our way back into town, for tea and dinner. By now I introduce myself as Roble Cadaan (the White born in the rain), the nickname I got in Mogadishu, and specify that I am Isse Muse/Mohammed Isse, the local sub-clan, and add some more Somali phrases. This has made me into an attraction which my guides gladly parade, and I'm introduced to dozens of people. Guleid goes home and Abdirashid, still unmarried, uses me as a dating tool. I have understood that Somalis always date in groups, boys and girls, so I get my share of looks. Abdirashid and his friends have decided I need to find a local wife and settle with my new clan.



The last thing I need, of course, is that kind of trouble, and I hurry back to the hotel to isolate myself in my garish hotel room. Tomorrow morning, I will go on to Burco.

