

GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY TRAVELLERS' CLUB ADDRESS

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“GUARDIANS OF THE RED SEA” by Stephen Codrington

On Sunday 25th July Stephen Codrington flew into Sydney from a meeting in Berlin to address the Traveller's Club on the topic of “Guardians of the Red Sea”. This was a comparative study of the three small counties – Eritrea, Djibouti and Yemen – that share borders with the narrow Strait of Bab al-Mandab which separates the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden to the south.

Despite their close proximity to each other, the three countries are very different from each other. Eritrea is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 202nd out of the 209 countries surveyed by the World Bank according to GNP per capita. Djibouti, which is one of the world's least known countries, is more wealthy due to large investments and aid received from overseas, especially from the US and France. Yemen is one of the world's least stable countries, having numerous internal armed conflicts and being an important centre of Al-Qaida activity. All three countries have been conquered over the centuries by various foreign powers, but recent influence in Eritrea has been Italian, contrasting with French influence in Djibouti and a combination British and Soviet influence in Yemen.

Stephen's address took us in turn to each of the three counties, starting with Eritrea.

Eritrea's capital city, Asmara, was seen to be a pleasant, slow-paced provincial type of city. The recent history of Asmara was evident almost everywhere, such as in the Italian Fascist era art deco buildings, and the large field filled with war-damaged weapons and machinery. Asmara's art deco buildings are a distinctive feature of the city, even though many are now in a sad state of disrepair. Particularly noteworthy were the Fiat Tagliero Building, (which is a disused petrol station resembling an aircraft in flight) and the nearby Irga Building.

Asmara enjoys a relatively cool climate considering its equatorial latitude (15°N) due to its high altitude (2325 metres, higher than the summit of Australia's highest mountain, Mount Kosciuszko). A very different part of Eritrea lies on a narrow coastal plain at a much lower elevation. This coastal plain is connected to the higher plateau by just a few narrow, winding roads that are still lined in places with burned out tanks from the war of independence with Ethiopia in the late 1990s.

The coastal plain is a hot, arid area with sparse desert scenery, nomadic graziers and fuelwood gatherers, and just a few settlements. The largest coastal settlement is the port city of Massawa, with a population of about 35,000 people. Massawa has many grand buildings from the optimistic early period of Italian colonisation, but sadly many of them remain badly damaged bombed out shells from the war with Ethiopia in the 1990s. Consequently, the provision of housing in Massawa is very poor, with many families still living in damaged buildings or in the streets.

In marked contrast with Eritrea, Djibouti is a moderately affluent country (by North-east African standards) whose capital city (also called Djibouti) is dominated by tree-lined streets and crumbling French colonial-era buildings in its centre. In keeping with the significant French and American funds being received, the presence of multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola and Blédina is very evident throughout the city.

The outskirts of Djibouti city contain large areas of shanty settlements, with many of the people being refugees from war-torn areas in nearby Somalia, and to a lesser extent, from the border areas of Eritrea with Ethiopia and Djibouti. The shanty areas lack basic services such as running water, creating significant health issues for the population.

To the west of Djibouti city lies one of north-east Africa's most remarkable sights, the heavily saline Lake Assal. At 150 metres below sea level, Lake Assal is the lowest point on the African continent, and marks one of the most northerly points of the Great Rift Valley that runs through East Africa. The waters of the lake contain the highest concentration of salt in any natural water body in the world, being 34.8% saline (compared with 33.7% for the Dead Sea and an average of 3.5% for the world's oceans).

The third country discussed in Stephen's address, Yemen, has a long history of political instability and conflict that continues to this day. Stephen began his discussion of Yemen in the country's capital city, Sana'a. With a population of 1.8 million people, it is claimed that Sana'a is the world's oldest city, having been started by Shem, one of Noah's sons.

Today, the city is distinguished by its distinctive, old high-rise buildings, elaborately decorated with lace-like patterns around the windows, balconies and exterior walls. In many ways, the old section of Sana'a retains some of the features of a traditional Yemeni village, albeit a very large one, including areas of crop cultivation, the raising of livestock, as well as traditional crafts and manufacturing,

Another interesting facet of Sana'a's traditions is the absence of women from public places and outside areas. As we saw in Stephen's photos, it is indeed very rare to see women outside in the streets of Sana'a, or even in the markets.

In spite of the well publicised dangers of car-jackings, hostage taking and beheading of tourists in Yemen, Stephen went with his son to travel into some of the rural areas of the country, notably the Haraz Mountains which are said to be a significant recruiting area for Al-Qaida.

As we saw in Stephen's photos, the rural areas of Yemen are breathtaking in their beauty. The mountains are high and steep, but very arid and often terraced for farming to make use of the thin, rocky soils. A major crop in Yemen is the qat plant, also known by various names such as khat and gat in Yemen, chat in Ethiopia, jaad in Somalia, and miraa in Kenya and Tanzania. When chewed, the leaves release amphetamines which act as a narcotic. It is estimated that about 80% of Yemenis chew qat on an almost daily basis, and its cultivation has taken over many areas of land previously used for growing food. As a result, Yemen

faces something of a food crisis, importing about 85% of its food, as well as serious water shortages because of the demands made by qat cultivation.

Stephen's photographs and explanations took us to a variety of Yemeni towns and villages, some of which were located on rocky mountaintops for defence, while others were situated at the base of escarpments to tap into water supplies. Regardless of their location, however, the towns and villages were spectacular for their architecture, outlooks, inaccessibility and lifestyles.

Stephen's address gave us a rare insight into this seldom-visited yet highly significant part of the world. Given the difficulties of obtaining visas, the challenges of transport, the uncomfortable climate and the occasional risks of kidnapping, hostage-taking, torture and beheading, we were delighted that we could gain an insight into the "Guardians of the Red Sea" within the safe and secure environment of Stephen's talk.