

## Semenawi Bahri

### Suitable Site for Eco-Tourism



Habtom Tesfamichael

Eritrea is endowed with a variety of spectacular landscapes in the highlands, eastern escarpments, eastern and western lowlands, coastal areas and islands. It has rivers, river beds and natural harbors. The vibrant places can serve as distinctive destinations for tourists. The natural topography consisting of volcanic mountains, flat-topped hills, wide plateaus, marvelous escarpments, rugged mountains, undulating plains, unspoiled and spectacular coasts and pleasing islands provide great potential for the tourism industry. In a mere two-hour drive, one can experience three seasons and see diverse landscapes.

Eritrea's mountains provide plenty of opportunities for hiking, photographic tourism and landscape appreciation. They are also very good grounds for sport-based tourism like mountain climbing and biking. Furthermore, they have historical importance as many of them had significance during the armed struggle for independence.

One of Eritrea's natural attractions, the Eastern Escarpment, is found east of the central plateau, the eastern highlands and upper Anseba highlands. The eastern escarpment is characterized by its two rainy seasons and the Green Belt whose scenery is stunningly beautiful. It is ever-green and provides excellent scenes for bio-diversity-based tourism and bird watching. The ever-green tones of the Green Belt vegetation dominate the earth colors on the steep slope platforms of the eastern escarpments. The play of light and shade on the landscape etches the shapes in relief, enhancing their coloration and making the escarpment landforms look somehow even more grand and monumental.

One sight that you must not miss is the drive down to the Semenawi Bahri park, possibly the most beautiful place in Eritrea. It is always green, covered with forests and plantations. Half way down the escarpment you find grass on the road side in the dry season, which must make this area almost unique in the country. To reach this dramatic track, one may take the Asmara-Keren road. The road forks right down the escarpment seventeen kilometers from the Keren road and you are on the way. This area used to be a major haven for wild life, offering extensive cover and plenty of water, not to mention plenty of farm animals on which to prey. Baboons and monkeys are still much in evidence. The wildlife department of the Ministry of Agriculture has also attested to the presence of leopards, kudu, push buck, klipspringer, duiker and warthog in a recent survey. Filfil and Solomuna, places in Semenawi Bahri, are filled with large picturesque trees, home to a large variety of bird life.

The rail way that goes through this region adds to the potential of the place as suitable for eco-tourism. The railway from Asmara to Massawa and from Asmara to Keren and Agordat was initially set up in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The railway functioned until 1975, but was destroyed completely during the war of independence. Sadly, the once-proud stations, tracks, and beautiful works of engineering were reduced to rubble by the Ethiopian colonists who used them to make trenches. However, by the time Eritrea became independent in 1993, the government decided to rebuild and restore the railway for tourism. The country proceeded to salvage the railways with the aid of local volunteers and put the engines back into working conditions using the brains of the retired engineers and the efforts of the youth. When the railway finally became operational, it started to give a new sense of adventure for railway enthusiasts by providing spectacular scenery of the escarpments and valleys. This journey takes you on an unforgettable trip through valleys, bridges and culverts atop riverbeds.

To reach the Semenawi Bahri take the Asmara-Keren road. The road forks right at the village of Serejeka (21km) and the recently paved road crosses through the village of Woki (29KM) to the Semenawi Bahri. Shortly after Woki, you reach the highest point of the Semenawi Bahri evergreen forests. The forests extend along a chain of mountains as well as in the valleys. The elevation is between 900-2400 meters. From Woki the snaking descent is even more impressive than the Asmara-Massawa road with a really dramatic view as you wind your way down ward to the coastal plains. When you reach a place called Vivaio (31 km) you can take the road to your left which will pass through Ambelko, Fisheey, Daukur, and then to Mirara (58 km). If you continue on the paved road you shortly reach Mog'ó (43 km), an attractive place that allows you to see the wonders of Semenawi Bahri in every direction. Again pause for a while at a particularly breathtaking view point in Sabur (50 km), which overlooks the lush forests of the Filfil valley. You will be simply amazed by the large number of birds that seem to be everywhere. From Sabur you descend

towards Medhanit (58 km) which has a moderate climate. Then continue to Filfil (68 km)-Solomuna (77 km) part of Semenawi Bahri, which has large picturesque trees that are home to a vast variety of bird life. Visitors cannot fail to experience the soothing sound of birds that bring peace and delight.

Approximately half way between Asmara and Massawa, at 1000 meters above sea level, is the town of Ghindae. This town benefits from two rainy seasons and is a green oasis almost all year round. Its hillsides are blessed with fruits and vegetables that grow naturally. Famed for its capreto (goat stew), Ghindae is a popular resting place for travellers on a journey to Massawa.

### **Debre Bizen Monastery**

Soon after leaving Asmara eastward, the road passes through the Hindu and the British cemeteries and the Asmara zoo. The escarpment's scenery is spectacular. Thousands of visitors are discovering the breathtaking landscapes of the mountains while driving on the road. After 20 km of drive, a stretch of bending road takes you down to the first town, Nefasit. In Nefasit, perched high above the town and often invisible due to cloud is the monastery of Debre-Bizen, which is at the top of a mountain ridge at 2,400 meters above sea level. Experienced climbers can accomplish the climb in as many as two hours. Debre Bizen Monastery was built by Abune Fillipos in 1361 to escape the perils of the Keren plains Legend has it that Abune Filliops moved the Coptic religious community up the mountain because he preferred the roar of lions to the distraction of a woman's face.

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