

Massawa's Maritime Marvels: a Guide to the Islands' Visits



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Nestled between the majestic mountains of Eritrea's eastern escarpments and the vast Danakil Desert, the port city of Massawa is a fascinating destination for travelers. Its rich history and natural heritage make it an ideal destination for those seeking relaxation and excitement. As we set out to explore the fascinating seashore marvels of Massawa, we delve into the hidden coves, coral reefs, and quiet beaches that await discovery, showcasing the unique charm of this off-the-beatenpath destination. This charming coastal town serves as the gateway to the splendid Dahlak archipelago, a region steeped in history and offers a wealth of recreational opportunities. For centuries, these islands had been crossroads of ancient civilizations that shaped the cultures that flourished there. The region is home to a diverse and thriving ecosystem, boasting an array of natural wonders that invite exploration and discovery. From the coast's dramatic shoreline to the lagoons' serene waters, the Dahlak archipelago is a haven for those who seek to learn, relax, and connect with its rich history, vibrant culture, and unique blend of natural beauty.

Situated east of Nokra, Dahlak Kebir is the largest island in the Dahlak archipelago. Nokra, a remote island, was the site of Italian colonialists' notorious prison where Eritrean nationalists were incarcerated. Sheikh Seid Island, which is located one kilometer east of the Massawa port, boasts a visually stunning environment. Steeped in history and natural significance, this 12-hectare island is a popular destination attracting Eritrean and international visitors. Notably, its lush mangrove forests have turned the landscape green, earning the island the name 'Green Island'. The southwestern part of the Island is home to extremely deep water, surrounded by salt-resistant trees that have adapted to this challenging environment. The island also offers a rich history, with notable remnants of Italian-period infrastructure, including military armaments and boathouses, as

well as an old mosque and a grave site dating to Ottoman rule. The island of Desse, located 24 nautical miles southeast of Massawa, is well known. It is home to numerous traditional houses, including Agudos and Hidmos. The name 'Desse' originates from a local Afar term, 'desso', which means 'island'. Traditionally, the population of Desse live on fishing and related activities, with the island's rich marine ecosystem providing a bounty of coral reefs and sea turtles. Globally, there are 7 IUCN Red List species of threatened sea turtles, five of which are found in Eritrea's Red Sea, including two species specifically of Desse



The island's distinctive landscape makes it an appealing destination for tourists. Its elevated location above the horizon allows visitors to take in the stunning views of the surrounding landscape, including Mount Ghedem and Buri. Additionally, the island's proximity to ancient sites such as Adulis and Abdur, which hold significant historical and cultural assets, also makes it a fascinating destination for those interested in exploring the region's rich heritage. Furthermore, the island's abundance of archaeological remains from antiquity and its familiarity with tourism practices ensure that visitors can easily find accommodations and activities suited to their interests, making it a popular destination. Madote, five nautical miles north of Dessie, is a small, yet enchanting, island that has gained in popularity among tourists in the past few years. Covering 5-hectares, this picturesque island is a favorite among visitors seeking a relaxing getaway.

More than three-quarters of its shores, particularly the western and southwestern parts, boast breathtaking white sandy beaches and crystal-clear waters, making them an ideal destination for scuba divers and snorkelers. Located 22.5 nautical miles east of Massawa, the island of DurGaam is known for its incredible marine biodiversity, particularly with an abundance of lobsters and octopuses. The island's ecosystem, which combines an array of flora and fauna, including vibrant seabirds, lush seagrass, shrubs, and pristine white sand beaches, creates the perfect setting for relaxation, leisure, and aquatic activities. Its picturesque shores and pristine waters also invite visitors to enjoy a range of water activities, including

swimming, sailing, diving, and other pursuits, making it an ideal destination for those seeking a relaxing and exciting aquatic experience. Dehil, 23 nautical miles northeast of Massawa, is an island of great historical and ecological significance, offering rich and diverse natural environment. Its southern half is covered with a massive coral reef that is home to a vibrant and diverse array of marine life. This island is also a hidden treasure for history buffs, with remnants of the Italian colonial period that are visible, including impressive artillery and other historical artifacts.



Accessible just a short distance from Massawa International Airport, Durgella Island is another remarkable destination offering a unique and scenic spot. This extraordinary destination is also easily accessible via a 15-minute sail from Dehil Island. Surrounded by serene white sandy beaches and teeming with diverse marine life, Durgella Island is a great place to experience the region's natural beauty. With a 2.5-kilometer perimeter, this small island offers a perfect escape for divers and those seeking relaxation, providing a serene, rejuvenating atmosphere hard to find elsewhere. Located 30 nautical miles from the Massawa port, the small islands of Intyara and Andeber, only 300 meters apart, offer a convenient, accessible experience for visitors. Abundantly filled with a variety of sea birds, nearly three-quarters of the island of Intyara is ideal for sailing and snorkeling, making it a perfect destination for nature lovers and water enthusiasts. Teeming with coral reefs, caves, and sand strands, Andeber is a small island that is well-known for its strong deep water currents. It is home to a unique species of fish, the wedif fish, which is a prized catch for local fishermen. The name 'Andeber' is derived from the local Afar language that means 'island of goats' - an etymological reference that provides insight into the way of life of the community that has traditionally inhabited the island. Located 33 Nautical miles southeast of Massawa, the historic and charming island of Shummaha is a notable landmark in the region.

The island's shores are well-suited for docking small and large vessels, while the western section is particularly convenient for diving. The island's marine ecosystem is known for its immense biodiversity, boasting an impressive array of marine life, including abundant manta rays and jellyfish, which are readily available for research and conservation efforts. During the summer months, herders and fishermen from the Dahlak Islands and Engel often come to this island to rest and graze their animals, using its natural resources as a peaceful, pastoral retreat. The island is home to a diverse array of plants, including sprawling mangrove forests and vast expanses of grasslands. And its rich history is evident in the remnants of Italian colonial era, including the relics of old water containers, homes, and boat houses that dot the landscape.



The Dahlak Islands are very attractive destinations for travelers and scientists, offering an unparalleled opportunity for extensive exploration and research. That said, effective and efficient management of Eritrea's marine resources is essential for the maintenance of a prosperous and sustainable marine environment that is free from pollution and contributes to the country's economic growth. In light of this, the government of Eritrea has taken a proactive approach to protect its vast forests and marine ecosystems, implementing a range of preservation schemes, including the establishment of protected areas, with the primary goal of safeguarding endangered species and maintaining healthy ecosystems.

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