THE COUNTRIES THAT DONâ€™T EXIST

Are you ready to start 2013 with a great adventure?

I'd like you to come with me to the countries that don't exist: one that does exist but the world says it doesn't - and the other that doesn't exist but the world says it does.

Imagine a Moslem country that is a real democracy, pro-America, pro-free market, despises Islamist ideology and terrorism, and lies athwart one of the world's most critical chokepoints in global shipping and trade.

The US State Department would leap at the chance to support such a country, right? You are probably cynically shaking your head no - but it's much worse than that. Our government refuses to recognize the country's existence. In fact, no government or international organization in the world does - yet it has been sovereign and independent since 1991.

With no help or recognition from anyone, this country has managed to survive - and survive as a capitalist Moslem terrorist-free democracy - for over 20 years. This is a heroic achievement - and unknown to most everyone on the planet.

We are talking about *Somaliland* - the country that does exist but the world says it doesn't. The other country that doesn't exist but the world insists that it does? *Somalia*.

Yes, we are going to both. More precisely, Somaliland and the one part of Somalia that remains: the capital of Mogadishu.

Here's what the map of Somalia really looks like today, drawn by The Economist magazine, carved up by neighboring countries, Islamist terrorists, pirates, chaotic regions, and independent Somaliland:

Most of Africa's 50 countries were created by European colonial powers, who divided the strategic Horn of Africa at the entrance to the Red Sea into three colonies:

French Somalia - today the independent country of *Djibouti*;
Italian Somalia - today the failed state of *Somalia*; and in between,
British Somalia - *Somaliland* today.

France let Djibouti become independent in 1977. The Brits (who got Italian Somalia after WWII) forced British and Italian Somalia into a shotgun marriage in 1960. This lasted until 1969, when the Soviet KGB sponsored a coup led by army commander Mohammed Siad Barre.

Under Barre's military communist dictatorship, the Soviets established a major naval and submarine base in Berbera controlling the mouth of the Red Sea. But Berbera was in former British Somalia, where a serious anti-communist rebellion was emerging.

By 1988, a full-scale civil war had broken out, with the inhabitants of former British Somalia demanding their own country which they called Somaliland. It was horrifically suppressed by Barre and his Soviet supporters, resulting in wholesale destruction of towns and villages by aerial bombing, and the slaughter of more than 20,000 Somalilanders.

Finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the overthrow of Barre in 1991 by a collection of Somali warlords as Somalia disintegrated into anarchic chaos - except Somaliland.

Since 1991, Somaliland has been a well-governed peaceful de facto independent country. It is a Black African moderate Moslem nation that protects women's rights, wants to help in the war on Islamic terrorism, is building democratic and free market institutions, and wants to be an ally of America's. Plus it's in a vitally strategic location.

Yet neither the US nor any UN member state will recognize its existence. All pretend that it doesn't and Somalia does. It's absolutely perverse.

I visited Somaliland in early 2011, and was so impressed I'm going once again. I'm inviting you to come with me. Two years ago, however, while it was safe (as it is now) to visit Somaliland, Somalia was totally out of the question.

Most of Somalia remains so - but ever since 10,000 Africa Union troops kicked the Al Shabab/Al Qaeda terrorists out of Mogadishu in August 2011, "the most dangerous city in the world" is having a resurgence - as this New York Times article reports. It's having a "remarkable comeback," with its 3 million people determined to rebuild their lives out of vast destruction and rubble.

An example is Ahmad Jama, who fled to London as a young exile, opened a successful restaurant in London's Fulham district, and last year returned to Mogadishu to launch a restaurant and beach resort. We'll meet him over a marvelous lobster lunch at his bistro, The Village.

There are many stories like Ahmad's in Mogadishu, and we'll be inspired by them as Somalis attempt to bring their country back into existence.

Yet it would be foolish in the extreme to travel to Mogadishu without professional security protection. Thus our "movement security" guarding our every move in Mogadishu will be conducted by teams of ex-US and British Special Forces, the same experienced soldiers who protect UN, diplomatic, and international agency personnel.

While Somaliland is peaceful and far safer than Mogadishu, we will nonetheless have Somaliland military protection while there.

We'll find Somaliland to be a peaceful, safe, and bustlingly busy place, with friendly people overjoyed to see us. In Mogadishu, we'll see people heroically struggling to triumph over unimaginable adversity. We'll have an unmatched memorable experience, and have an indelible understanding of a part of the world so much is heard about and so little is known.

Here's the itinerary. Enjoy the pictures...

Itinerary: **February 23 to March 01**
[Note: briefest total time from US departure to US return: February 21 to March 02]

Our visit to The Countries That Don't Exist will last one week from departure in Dubai for Mogadishu on Saturday, February 23 to departure from Berbera back to Dubai on Friday, March 01. Emirates Air has non-stop flights from LA, San Francisco, Houston, and JFK.

Participants may get to Dubai whenever and however they wish. The quickest itinerary would be to depart the US via Emirates on Thursday, February 21, arriving Dubai early evening on Friday, February 22. Participants can then get a good night's sleep at the Dubai International Hotel that is *inside* security/passport control in the airport.

We depart for Mogadishu at 6:00am Saturday morning February 23 - thus *all participants are responsible for arriving in Dubai in time to make this flight*. *The itinerary commences with the flight to Mogadishu*.

Saturday, February 23. Depart Dubai via Jubba Airways at 6:00am, arrive Mogadishu at 11:15am. We will be met by our US/British security team that will provide full movement security during our stay. Transfer to the Jazira Hotel:

The afternoon will be spent gaining an in-depth security briefing on where we will go and how, what to do in various security situations, and the general security situation in Mogadishu and throughout Somalia.

Dinner will be at the hotel, with government officials and business leaders as our guests.

Sunday, February 24- Monday, February 25. For two days, we will explore Mogadishu. The city is in mostly rubble and ruins. Here is what remains of the Catholic Cathedral built by the Italians:

Yet the city is rapidly being rebuilt:

We'll visit the Old City with its ancient fishing port:

The Bakara Market, where you can buy most anything from clothes and handicrafts to AK-47 machine guns and RPG rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

And the famous Lido Beach:

Another section of the beach is at the city's rubble-ized seafront:

Where we go and what we'll see is determined by the security situation at the time. That said, it is surprising how peaceful the city has become since being secured by the AU troops. The

Economist even reports that ice cream parlors and restaurants are open until midnight now.

Our security team will most likely be quite cautious about our nighttime venturing. We'll probably focus our evenings on briefings by officials, diplomats, and international aid agency personnel visiting us at the Jazira.

Tuesday, February 26. We depart Mogadishu via Jubba at 10:00am, arriving Berbera, Somaliland at 11:30am. The airport's Soviet-built runway is the longest in Africa -- so long it was designated by NASA as an emergency landing strip for the Space Shuttle (and the US still won't recognize the country!).

We'll visit the historic port which is well over 2,000 years old and known to Greek and Roman traders. In the 1980s under Communist rule, the Soviets built a major submarine base here. It's been converted to a port for containerized shipping:

We stay at the Maan-Soor Hotel right on the beach. That dark sand you see is due to oil seeps off the coast. Yes, Somaliland has large reserves of offshore oil and gas.

We'll explore the town and find friendly kids:

Ladies:

And elderly gentlemen:

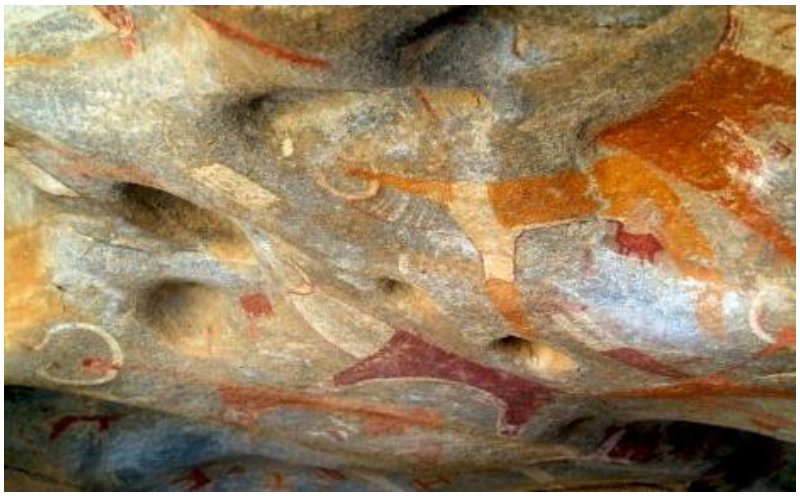
We'll end the day with a fresh fish sunset feast overlooking the Arabian Sea, joined by leaders of Berbera's business and trading community:

Wednesday, February 27. We're up early for a spectacular drive into the Somaliland highlands

(where we may spot kudu, zebra, antelopes, and possibly lion), to the picturesque, bustling city of Burao on the Toghdeer River where we'll enjoy a marvelous lunch of roast lamb by the river. The road is dramatic:

And Burao's building boom is dramatic too. Here's the latest shopping mall:

We then exit the mountains and head for the extraordinary wonder of Laas Gheel. Discovered by the outside world only 10 years ago (December 2002), there are hundreds of multi-colored rock paintings several thousand years old, perfectly preserved in a series of interconnected caves and shelters. Laas Gheel is one of the world's great unknown archeological treasures. The UN refuses to recognize it as a World Heritage Site as it won't recognize Somaliland.



The lady is Dr. Sade Mire (*mee-ray*), Director of Somaliland's Department of Antiquities, who currently teaches at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Hopefully, she'll be able to join us as she was in 2011.

We end our day in Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital. We stay at the Maan-Soor Hotel, the meeting place for Hargeisa's business and government leaders. The Maan-Soor is clean and comfortable, the service is friendly, the Wi-Fi is free, the food is good, and the bar is open - with our own booze, of course.

We'll have a reception and dinner, hosting a number of government officials and business leaders.

Thursday, February 28. Hargeisa is bustling and booming even more than Burao. One unusual landmark, of which Somalilanders are inordinately proud, is Siad Barre's Russian MiG they shot down and is displayed on a plinth:

We'll explore the city in the morning, with its famous gold and silver Souk, colorful markets and wonderfully friendly people, then visit the president, Mahamoud Silanyo and his wife, First Lady Asmina, at the presidential offices:

Here I am with First Lady Asmina in 2011.

We end the day with a sumptuous banquet, our farewell dinner, with our newfound friends in the Somaliland government and business community.

Friday, March 01. Up early to drive back to Berbera - past nomad encampments:

And remnants of Siad Barre's destroyed army:

We depart Berbera via Jubba at noon, arriving in Dubai at 6:30pm. Here is where our adventure - one of the most intensely memorable weeks of our lives - ends. Participants may stay overnight at the hotel inside the airport to catch the Emirates' non-stops back to the US the following morning, thus arriving home the same day, Saturday March 02.

Note: The Jubba flight from Berbera to Dubai stops in Djibouti. Participants may elect to stopover in Djibouti, where there is a luxurious (albeit pricey!) Kempinski Hotel, and spend a day visiting Lake Abbé, the lowest point on the African continent, 509 ft below sea level, center of the Afar Triple Junction where three great rifts are tearing Africa apart - the Red Sea Rift, the Gulf of Aden Rift, and the Great Rift Valley - meet. The earth is splitting apart at ½ to 1 inch a year along each, creating some of the most dramatic geology in the world.

So dramatic it was a location for the *Planet of the Apes* movie, featuring Abbé's towering limestone chimneys venting volcanic steam. The lake is populated by thousands of pink flamingos, and its shores by the Afar nomads. This is an optional excursion, not included in the itinerary, but we'll be happy to make the arrangements.

Cost: $7,250

Cost includes:

*Airplane flights Dubai-Mogadishu-Berbera-Dubai
*All hotel accommodation in Mogadishu, Berbera, and Hargeisa
*All meals with group, airport transfers, ground transportation, and activities as specified in the itinerary
*Movement security in Mogadishu provided by US/British ex-Special Forces
*Movement security in Somaliland provided by Somaliland military
*Visas: issued upon arrival at Mogadishu for Somalia and Berbera for Somaliland

Cost does not include:

*Any personal expenses for incidentals, such as alcohol, laundry, or souvenirs.

Important caveats:

*Every effort will be made to provide maximum security. Participants must accept, however, the clear risk of traveling to notoriously dangerous areas where the US State Department warns US citizens not to travel. Participants must therefore agree not to hold Global Ventures or Jack Wheeler liable in any manner during this itinerary.

*Every effort will be made to adhere to the itinerary above. Due to the vagaries of travel in this region and of adventure travel in general, the itinerary may be altered in any way necessary. Participants are expected to accept this.

Payments, Cancellations and Refunds

*Balance in full - $7,250 - must be received by January 15, 2013.
*Refund of deposit and balance in full on the condition of a fully-paid acceptable replacement for you. *Note: You may want to consider* trip cancellation insurance.

Note that the maximum number of participants is 12. We encourage you to send your payment ASAP to make sure you are one of them.

Only a dozen TTPers! To be one of them, contact Miko now: miko@tothepointnews.com. This really is an adventure of a lifetime. I sure hope you'll be with me.