

Keren: Home of Art Deco Buildings

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Eritrea is a country of art Deco buildings. Even though Asmara is notable for its historic and beautiful buildings which have been recognized by UNESCO, cities like Massawa, Keren, and Akordat also have amazing and beautiful historic architecture. In particular, many of the buildings in Keren are striking in their beauty.

A quick overview of some of Keren's historic buildings and architecture suggests that the city is blessed with many special sites, which could even be tourist attractions. Keren's historic buildings and infrastructure include religious buildings, administrative offices, restaurants, cafes, and residential houses. I recently explored Keren's rich architecture. I am happy to be able to share what I found.

Built between 1906 and 1916, during the middle of the Italian colonial era, the Administration of **Keren (Comeceriatio Keren)** was head office for the then-mayor of Keren. This building served as an administration center for the Western province during the British colonial period and as an administrative office for the then-Senhit province during the Federation with Ethiopia. After independence, this building first served as the administration for the Anseba region, before becoming the administrative office for Keren, which it remains.



Administration of Keren City

Office of the Ministry of Tourism, Anseba Branch (Cinema Empero, Casa degli Fasho), was built between 1916 and 1920. As its name indicated, this building was a residence for the Fascists. During the Italian colonial period, the building complex served as both a recreational center and as an administrative office. Later, during the period of British administration and until independence, the building was a cinema and an administration office. Currently, it is a cinema and the Office of the Ministry of Tourism, Anseba Branch.



Riva Palace

Palazo Riva (Riva Palace) was constructed in 1938. This building is situated at the very center of Keren. The upper part of the palace used to serve as a recreational center for the Italians, while the ground floor was a bar. Part of this building was a hotel, restaurant, and a bar during the British period. The upper part of this place is now a hotel, while the lower part has residential houses and also serves as a center of various commercial activities.

Built in 1920, **Senhit Hotel (Albergo Vittorio)** was where Italian soldiers went to dine. Currently, the building is a bar and hotel. Similarly, **Albergo Sicilia**, established in 1938, is a pension (similar to a “bed and breakfast” or “hostel”).

Keren Hotel (Enda Baskuzi) is a two-story building established in 1958. Constructed as a hotel, it still serves as such. Today, it is administered by the Ministry of Tourism.



Casa Degli Majri

Casa Degli Majri was a residential place for police commanders during the Italian period. Subsequently, during the rule of the Derg regime, it served as headquarters for intelligence services. The underground rooms of the building were used to imprison and execute

“criminals”. One of the oldest complexes built in the Anseba region, for many the building is also the most beautiful. Since independence, the building has served as a residential complex.

Located in front of Cinema Empero Keren, **Housing and Commercial Bank** was established in 1916. It has a conference hall that was used as a cinema and recreation center prior to the construction of Cinema Empero. Some rooms were also used as stores for commercial items. During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, the building sold to a wealthy family from Keren. “Da’qot Family” In 1975, during the rule of the Derg regime, the building was utilized as a central office for various government institutions. Since independence, the front part of the building has been used by the Housing and Commercial Bank, while the back of the building complex is being used by Al-Nasr Football Club.



Villa Mussa Bekit

Situated in front of the Keren Hospital, the **Office of the Ministry of Education, Keren Branch** was built in 1935. Originally, it was a school for Italians. In 1977, the school became an office for the Ministry of Education, Senhit province.

Currently, the building serves as the headquarters of the **Office of the Ministry of Education, Keren Branch**.

Villa Mussa Bekit was built in 1920 as a residential house for the mayor of Keren during that time. Today, the building serves as a military hospital.



Keren Bus Station (Former Railway Station)

Keren's current **Bus Station, "Ferovia"** was built in the period between 1918 and 1922. It was a railway station until 1970 and was later changed to a hotel. As of 2005, the building has been used as a bar and restaurant, as well as the Office of Transportation Service, Anseba region.

Abi Mesgid (Big Mosque) was built by the Italians in 1986. Located in the center of the city, this mosque is now the biggest in Keren.

Beilul Restaurant and Awet Hotel were constructed in the years between 1920 and 1930. While Beilul Restaurant was originally a residential house for an Italian man, Awet Hotel was constructed as a hotel, bar, and restaurant. Throughout the Italian colonial era, it served the same purpose. Later, during the period of British rule, it became club for teachers. Today, the hotel is owned by a clan known as "Enda Haj Mussa". It is located in downtown of Keren, between the Keren Hotel and the Pasta Factory.

Most of Keren's old and beautiful buildings are rich in history. Despite the many years that have passed since their original construction, their beauty is still clearly apparent. Ultimately, the buildings serve as a testament of Eritrea's vast architectural splendor and long, eventful history.

The Art Deco buildings of Keren still possess mesmerizing beauty. They still possess splendor and tell an engaging story. Like the buildings presented and described in the first part of this feature, the sculptures, ceramic works and inscriptions in some of these buildings have a great history to tell.

- **Shitata (Enda Molgom)**

The Shitata building complex was established in 1935 by an Italian man named Mr. Derosi. This building served as a button factory until the 1960s. During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, the building was turned into a prison and then a military camp. Later, the Dergue

regime maintained it as a military camp. Currently, the building serves as a wood and metals workshop.



Greek Orthodox Church

- **Greek Orthodox Church**

Located near Keren's large mosque, the Greek Orthodox Church was built in 1900. This church served Greek settlers until the 1960s. Later, some rooms within the Church were taken over by the Dergue regime. At this time, part of the building complex is being used as an office for Kebabi Hade administration. The Church is closed throughout the year, except during the annual commemoration of the holiday of Saint John. On this occasion, individuals and groups making pilgrimages from Asmara visit the Church.

- **Yakot Building**

This building was constructed in 1930 during the time of Italian colonization. It was owned by a woman known as Sherifa. It was mainly referred to as the "Saied Murkani Building (Enda Sidi)". Subsequently, it would fall under the ownership of the Yakot family. In 1975, the Dergue regime made it public property. Subsequently, in the post-independence period, the Government of the State of Eritrea returned the property to its previous owners, the Yakot family. This building is situated in downtown Keren, near the popular "Gira Fiyori" area.

- **Saint Michael Church**

First built in 1854 by Aba Yohaness Stella, Saint Michael's Church was a small temple. It served the same purpose until 1865. In 1872, the temple was damaged by Munzinger, an Egyptian administrator. However, it resumed services in 1873, before remarkably being damaged again, this time by an earthquake.

It was then rebuilt in 1875 and since then it has served as a church. The church is designed in the shape of a cross. Its architectural beauty and design make the building unique and one of a kind. However, its small area and capacity have made it a challenge to accommodate all the

pilgrims who visit the church. Saint Michael's Church is located in the southern part of Keren, near the foothills of Mount Wedi Gofar. There are beautifully crafted tombs of two Italians, who participated in the original construction of the church, at the very foot of the temple.



St. Michael's Church front view

- **Saint Hana School**

Saint Hana School was built in 1944 by the Saint Hana Association. Originally, it served as an orphanage and was built as a monastery and a school. This building is unique in the way it was built; a cave, serving as a prayer space, is located within the inner part of the school. Located not far from Saint Michael's Church, the school is still owned by the Saint Hana Association. Some of the services that the school offers include academic activities and training in arts and handicrafts. As well, many visit to say their prayers.

- **Selam Primary School**

Located in the western part of Keren, Selam Primary School was constructed in 1918, during the period of Italian colonization. This building was established as a center for basic education, as well as the teaching of Italian and Arabic. The primary aim for opening the school was to train locals to be able to translate between local languages and Italian. As well, the school used to offer training in carpentry, metal works, driving, mechanics, and other skills. Later, during the British Administration period, it served as a primary school. In 1977, when Keren was liberated by the EPLF, its name was changed to Harnet School.

Selam Primary School is the first of its kind in Keren. Since independence, it has served as a primary school.

- **Saint Antonios Church**

Saint Antonios Church was built in 1931. It originally served as a school. However, in 1932 it was changed to a church. What is particularly unique and beautiful about Saint Antonios Church is its wonderfully designed 26-meter tall bell tower. Three big bells are installed in the tower. The tower is also decorated by a functional big wall clock which was imported from Italy in 1933.

A cave, known as Saint Mary's Cave, is found within the premises of the church. This cave is located near the gate of the church. The exterior part of the cave, which stands as a monument, was built by Italian soldiers in 1936. The cave now serves as a prayer area.

Since its small size cannot accommodate very many people, a larger church is now being constructed nearby. The newly-built church has added even further beauty to the original church. Saint Antonios Church is located in front of Anseba region's administration office.



The old and new St. Antonios Church

- **Megarih Temple**

Megarih Temple was built in 1938 in a place known as Megarih, near the cemetery for Italian soldiers. A cemetery for Commonwealth soldiers is also located near the temple. These areas provide some insights into an important part of Eritrea's long, eventful history.

The Art Deco buildings and religious and historic sites described in the first and second part of this article are not the only tourist attractions in Keren. Remarkably, the beautiful city features many more historical and architectural wonders that were not covered but merit further research and exploration.

Source: <https://shabait.com/2019/01/12/keren-home-of-art-deco-buildings-part-i/>
<https://shabait.com/2019/01/22/keren-home-of-art-deco-buildings-part-ii/>

