Djibouti Is Hot: How a forgotten sandlot of a country became a hub of international power games.

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The bartender measures a shot of Johnnie Walker Red Label in a steel jigger and dumps it over ice. A waitress sets the glass on a tray and steers it through the dining room, where Abouye Wang, the restaurant owner, commands a booth in the back corner, elbows on the table, surveying the dinner crowd.

The buzzcuts perched around the high table in the middle of the room are Americans, he guesses. The two women lost in conversation behind them are French. He recognizes the men in the adjacent booth as German. He spots an Italian port executive and a Palestinian diplomat from the newly opened embassy.

The restaurant, La Chaumière, sits on a corner of the central square in Djibouti, the capital city in the tiny African country of the same name, which until recently was of little consequence to anyone who didn’t live there. La Chaumière’s menu pushes the outer limits of fusion as Wang caters to his evolving clientele. East African seafood dishes, Asian stir fries, French stews, American sandwiches, they’re all here. “If we don’t have what you want,” Wang tells me, “we’ll make it for you.”

It’s my first night in Djibouti, and I’ve come to La Chaumière because I was told it would be full of soldiers, speculators, diplomats, spies, aid workers, contractors—all the outsiders who are turning Djibouti into an unlikely epicenter of 21st century geopolitics. Thomas Kelly, the American ambassador here, likes to say that Djibouti today feels like what Casablanca must have felt like in 1940. “All the different nationalities elbowing into each other,” he says. “All the intrigue.” Wang stands in the center of the mix, walking from table to table, slipping from language to language, witnessing Djibouti’s transformation at close range. Born to an Ethiopian mother and a Chinese father, he roamed East Africa with his family before settling here in 1977, the year Djibouti declared independence from France. He was 7 years old, an exotic import in a place no one ever visited, where nothing ever happened.

Back then, Djibouti, a country about the size of New Jersey, had one paved road and less than a square mile of arable land. The Associated Press deemed it perfectly devoid of resources, “except for sand, salt, and 20,000 camels.” The New York Timesguessed the new nation might get swallowed up by one of its neighbors—Ethiopia or Somalia, maybe—because it was “so impoverished that it cannot stand on its own.”

Years passed, and those neighbors were too preoccupied with wars, famine, and civil anarchy to pay much attention to it. Such upheavals, and almost everything else, skirted Djibouti. Then the new century rolled around and, seemingly overnight, the country’s sleepiness became a valuable commodity.

After Sept. 11, the U.S. military rushed to establish its first base dedicated to counterterrorism, and Djibouti was about the only country in the neighborhood that wasn’t on fire. Sitting beside the narrow Bab el-Mandeb strait—a gateway to the Suez Canal at the mouth of the Red Sea, and one of the most trafficked shipping lanes in the world—it provided easy access to hot spots in both Africa and the Middle East. A few years later, when Somali pirates started threatening the global shipping industry, the militaries of Germany, Italy, and Spain joined France, which has maintained a base since colonial times, by moving troops to Djibouti. Japan arrived in 2011, opening its first military base on foreign soil since World War II. Last year, refugees displaced by war in Yemen—just 13 miles across the strait—began arriving by the thousands, attracting aid workers and NGOs looking for a stable regional base.

They eventually come to La Chaumière to gossip, to eavesdrop, to see who’s new in town. Wang is a central branch on the local grapevine. When I ask people here how Djibouti has managed to avoid the turmoil that has plagued the other countries in the region, a stock answer comes back to me from nearly everyone, both local and foreign. “No country is completely safe, but everybody knows everyone here, and they all talk,” Ilyas Moussa Dawaleh, the country’s minister of finance, tells me. “Every time a new camera comes into the country, for example, we know whose it is.” The grapevine, in other words, doubles as a safety net.

Wang knows better than most that the influx of outsiders can stretch the net thin. One evening in 2014, planted in his corner booth, he spotted an unfamiliar figure: a veiled woman walking toward one of the high tables in the middle of the floor. Before he could approach her, she exploded, filling the room with fire, noise, and confusion. A moment later, a second suicide bomber blew himself up just outside the front door. More than a dozen people were wounded, and three died. Al-Shabaab, the Somali-based terrorist group, took credit for the attack, saying it was targeting French commandos for their role in battling Islamic militants in Somalia and the Central African Republic.

Wang, uninjured, decided to rebuild. The Djibouti government, recognizing the symbolic power of the decision, helped him pay for it. The place looks almost exactly the same as it did before, but the clientele keeps evolving. “I’m noticing more Chinese,” Wang tells me.

Three days later, on Feb. 25, China announces it has begun construction on its first-ever military installation abroad, about four miles from the American and Japanese bases. A week after that, Saudi Arabian officials say that they, too, plan to move soldiers to Djibouti and establish the country’s first military station in Africa.

Camp Lemonnier, the American base, presses against the side of Djibouti’s only commercial airport, hidden behind a maze of concrete barriers and razor wire. Inside, it’s a wilderness of containerized living units, or CLUs, stacked atop one another. The laundry building looks like the movie theater, which looks like the credit union. It’s as if someone built a city from Legos and spray-painted the whole works tan.

For years the Americans insisted it was a temporary, or “expeditionary,” camp. But a $1.4 billion upgrade launched in 2013 has turned it into a clangorous construction site. Back in 2002, when the Americans took the camp over from the French, it sprawled across 97 acres. Now it’s pushing 600 and the CLUs are slowly being replaced by multistory, apartment-style barracks.

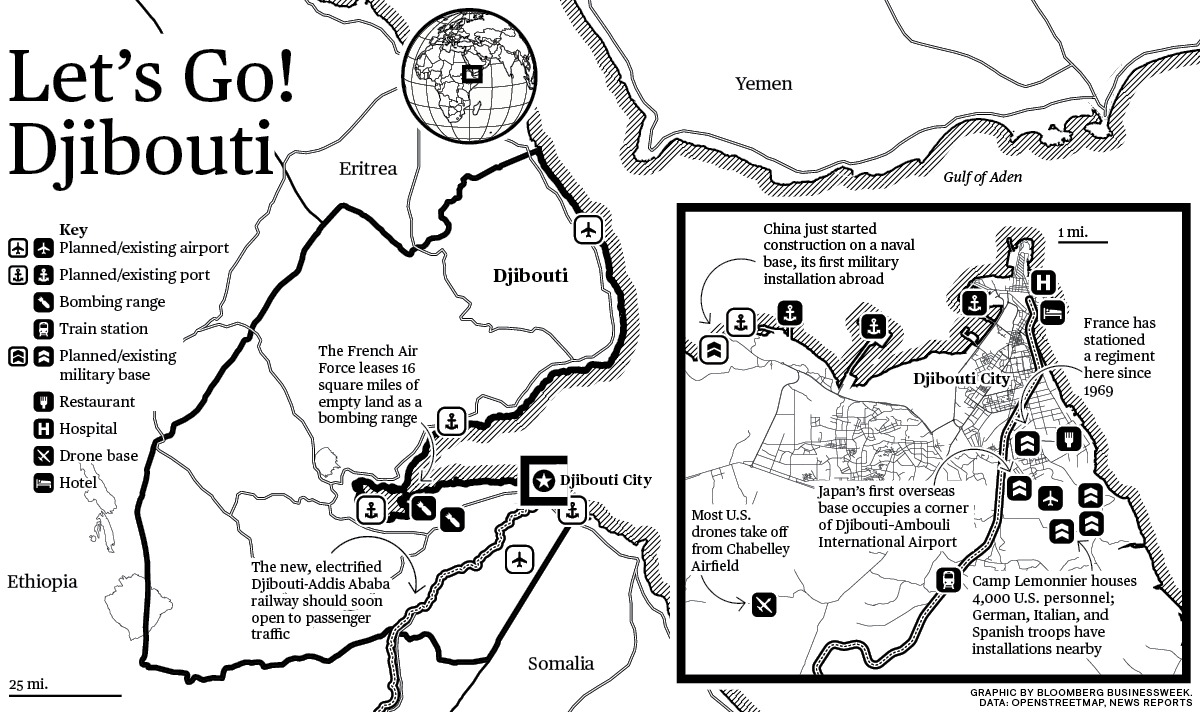
About 4,000 soldiers and contractors live here, and they include commandos from Joint Special Operations Command, the team that undertakes the military’s most sensitive counterterrorism operations. After the 2012 attack on the diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, a 150-member rapid response team was established at Camp Lemonnier, assigned to handle future threats to diplomatic personnel abroad. Djibouti is also the U.S. military’s regional hub for drones, and it sends thousands of Predators and Reapers across the region each year.

All those secretive aircraft buzzing around an active international airport created serious air traffic problems, which injected some tension between the Americans and their local hosts. In 2011 a Predator drone crashed into a residential area less than three miles from the airport. The following year, a U-28A surveillance plane crashed five miles from the camp, killing its four-man crew. Some of the Djiboutian air traffic controllers at the airport resented the drones, on both practical and moral grounds, and occasionally they would refuse to allow them to take off or land. The Washington Post reported that a $7 million program to retrain the local controllers was a complete failure. Often the controllers failed to show up for class; once, they even locked their American trainers out of the tower. Today most of the drones take off from a more isolated airstrip, about six miles from Camp Lemonnier.

After a couple days in Djibouti, I noticed that of all the foreign militaries stationed here, the American soldiers were the least conspicuous, rarely spotted at La Chaumière or in any of the places locals and outsiders mixed. At Camp Lemonnier, the soldiers said that since the restaurant bombing, they can’t leave the base without special approval. (“They call it ‘liberty,’ and we don’t have it anymore,” one officer explained to me.) Those who do get to go outside the security gates are often members of the Army’s Civil Affairs Battalion, reservists who rotate through for several months at a time. For Djiboutians, they’re the face of the U.S. military.

On a morning in February, a convoy of a half-dozen white Toyota SUVs exits Camp Lemonnier and heads west toward the village of Arta, a little more than an hour outside the city. The Civil Affairs unit is heading for a local clinic, where an Army dentist will offer free care to anyone who wants it.

It’s public relations, an attempt to show the locals that the Americans have more to offer than crashing drones. The Djiboutian interpreter assigned to the excursion, Hersi Aden, tells me he thinks the trip might also show the Americans that the vast majority of locals aren’t the sort that go around blowing themselves up in crowded restaurants. Aden says most Djiboutians, the air traffic controllers notwithstanding, value the presence of all that American military muscle, figuring it might deter radical Islamists from storming in and taking over the country. But Aden says the Americans’ approach to security—the barriers, the lockdowns, the secrecy—is sometimes interpreted as mistrust. “Djiboutians are peaceful people, and they don’t understand this,” he says. “They say, ‘Why are these Americans so scared of us?’ ”



The clinic in Arta is a cinder-block rectangle with a couple rooms full of medical supplies. In the middle of one, the soldiers place a portable, lightweight dental recliner. A table behind it holds a box of latex gloves, gauze, syringes, disposable dental mirrors, and a pair of pliers. The Americans have provided the clinic with $6,000 worth of medical supplies.

While they set up, an Army surgeon who has come to assess the facility tells me this isn’t where residents come when there’s an emergency. “There’s a new hospital down the road,” he says, “and it’s supposedly pretty impressive. Supposedly has lasers and all sorts of state-of-the-art equipment. I’d like to check that one out. The Chinese built it.”

The U.S. soldiers can’t go anywhere without being reminded of the People’s Republic. On the drive to the clinic, I’d noticed lengths of black tubing lying by the side of the road. “That’s a new water pipeline to Ethiopia,” the driver said, “built by the Chinese.” Nobody knows how the new Chinese base will change things, mostly because its scale isn’t yet known, but traces of anticipatory tension are palpable. Several diplomatic officials and members of U.S. Congress have publicly fretted over China’s growing influence in Djibouti, speculating that it might signal an era of increased Chinese military engagement around the world. Kelly, the U.S. ambassador, told me that “snooping,” electronic or otherwise, will be an obvious concern around Camp Lemonnier.

The Americans still have the largest foreign military presence in the country, but China’s intensifying interest in Djibouti is shifting the balance of influence. That brings us back to community relations. At the tiny clinic in Arta, about 50 people wait outside, the men dressed in button-down shirts and macawiis—a loose garment that wraps around the legs like a sarong—and the women draped in colorful headscarves and light shawls. Inside, an Army dentist straps a headlamp to his forehead and stares into the mouth of an unemployed, 29-year-old mother of four. He jabs her gum with a syringe and pries out a tooth.

Mohamed Khaireh Robleh’s truck rumbles over a set of railroad tracks that run through the center of the city, toward the port. There are no trains in sight, and the crossing lights don’t work. The tracks are broken.

“I grew up with that railroad,” says Khaireh, 67. “It was my life. It was our life.”

In the beginning, Djibouti was a railroad town. Almost a century ago, a narrow-gauge line linked the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa to a small, shallow-water port established by the French on the Red Sea. The trains rattled over a hot and treeless moonscape to carry the food, water, and labor needed to transform the port into a modest colonial outpost.

Khaireh worked those tracks for 40 years, rising into management positions, until the trains stopped running in the early 2000s. The narrow tracks couldn’t handle big payloads, and derailments were common. “We thought the European Union might help us rebuild and modernize it, but they didn’t believe in the project,” he says. “I felt like crying.”

Along came China. For decades it has invested heavily in African infrastructure, bankrolling projects from Angola to Zimbabwe, in exchange for access to natural resources. To move those resources from the heart of the continent to Asia, it needed a terminus, a reliable outlet to the east. Djibouti was perfectly positioned. China is financing a railroad, as well as an expansion of port terminals, fuel and water pipelines, a natural gas liquefaction plant, highway upgrades, two proposed airports, and several government buildings. The new military installation will be a sort of insurance policy, a security station to protect its investments and extend its economic reach.

When the Chinese began construction on the railroad in 2013, Khaireh was called out of retirement, and now he’s driving me to one of the projects he’s overseeing: a passenger station rising on the outskirts of town. The tracks linking that construction site to Addis Ababa are finished. The first freight train began running last November; it’s powered by a diesel engine because the electrification system isn’t finished. The first passenger trains will run when the station is completed and the electricity works.

Khaireh drives along a dusty frontage road to see how construction is coming. Hundreds of new Chinese freight wagons, tankers, and air-conditioned passenger cars sit beside the tracks, and dozens of locomotives are hidden under blue plastic tarps. The station itself is encased in scaffolding. Workers with whirring circular saws balance high on the beams. Showers of sparks fall to the ground, where a Chinese worker cuts slabs of marble and plasters them to the building’s facade.

“Someday,” Khaireh says, “the railroad will extend to South Sudan, and then all the way to the Atlantic.” He’s pushing the workers, a mix of Chinese and Djiboutians, to finish the station by April. Djibouti’s vacation season begins in May, when lots of people flee the humid, 100F-plus temperatures for the more tolerable hills of Ethiopia. But that’s not the only thing driving construction. He reminds me, with a smile, that Djibouti has a presidential election in April.

“We want to be able to have the president come out here and celebrate by riding on one of the first trains,” he says. “We will get it done.” The certainty of that statement—not that they’ll complete the project, but that the president will win the election—is a near-universal assumption here, and it casts a revealing light on everything that’s unfolding in this country.

The presidential election is just six weeks away, but I don’t see a soul hanging campaign banners or making speeches. The election season, by law, is limited to the two weeks before votes are cast.

Djibouti’s president is Ismail Omar Guelleh, who in 1999 became the second president since independence. When term limits got in the way of a third term for him in 2011, he changed the constitution. That election was boycotted by opposition leaders. This time they say they’ll field a challenger, but it’s not yet clear who it will be.

“The opposition is very unorganized,” says Mohamed Osman Farah, an editor with La Nation, the country’s principal newspaper, which is aligned with Guelleh’s government. “Most of them live abroad. The people don’t trust someone who moves his family to Europe, because he doesn’t believe in the development of our country.”

That’s one way of looking at it, but what if the opposition leaders didn’t choose to move abroad so much as they were forced to flee? The most visible leader of the opposition, Abdourahman Boreh, lives in London. He once was one of Guelleh’s closest confidants and oversaw the country’s free-trade zone and port, which is by far the biggest driver of the economy. In 2008 the government accused Boreh of taking kickbacks when he negotiated on Djibouti’s behalf for the construction of a container terminal, managed by the Dubai-based company DP World. Boreh says the accusation was in retaliation for his opposition to Guelleh’s plan to seek a third term.

Threatened with arrest, Boreh fled to London. Djibouti soon seized all of Boreh’s assets inside the country, and in 2010 its courts convicted him in absentia on terrorism charges: He was the mastermind, the government alleged, of a politically motivated grenade attack on a local grocery store. The conviction allowed Guelleh’s government to freeze Boreh’s assets worldwide and to try to extradite him to Djibouti to face a 15-year prison sentence.

The key evidence in the terrorism case was a tapped cell phone call. “Last night the act was completed,” Boreh was recorded saying. “The people heard it, and it had a deep resonance.”

The call, however, wasn’t made after the supermarket blast; it was recorded the day before.

The corruption charges against Boreh were tried in a London court, which had jurisdiction over the case because extradition hadn’t yet been granted. Djibouti’s lawyer, from the American-based firm of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, hid the timing of the intercepted call from the British courts. After the discrepancy was discovered, a British judge last year reprimanded Djibouti and its lawyer for “reprehensible” conduct. Early this March, the judge dismissed every one of the government’s claims, concluding that Guelleh himself had been aware of the terms of the deals with DP World. The court ordered Djibouti to pay Boreh £9.3 million, or about $13.1 million, for his legal fees.

A couple weeks before my visit, supporters of the Djibouti opposition based in Paris issued a letter urging the international community—“especially those countries with a military base or who are partners in development”—to hold Guelleh to democratic standards. The statement referred to an incident in December when government security forces killed 19 people, including a 6-year-old girl, at a meeting organized in part by opposition members. (The government disputes the death toll, contending that seven people were killed.) I asked the U.S. ambassador if Guelleh’s reputation as a crusher of dissent was something the U.S. would simply have to live with, given the importance of Camp Lemonnier.

“We don’t want to have to ‘live with it,’ ” he said. “For our presence here to be sustainable in the long term, this place has to be governed with transparency.”

But the U.S. has already signed on for the long term. In 2014 it extended its lease on the base for at least 20 more years. In negotiating the terms of that deal, Guelleh nearly doubled America’s rent, to about $64 million per year.

Before I arrived in Djibouti, I carried a picture in my mind of what untapped African economic potential, in the traditionally exploitative sense, was supposed to look like: The dirt was red, the leaves were green, and the hills sparkled on the inside. But the ministers in President Guelleh’s cabinet all tried to paint me a much different picture of modern opportunity. Imagine a trackless desert, a relentless sun, and a near-complete absence of fresh water. With that lineup of natural resources—along with a port on one of the most geopolitically significant straits in the world—they believe that in the next 20 years or so, Djibouti will become the next Dubai, a magnet for capital and free trade. To hear them talk, making billions by selling the world’s militaries on the country’s lack of incident was just the first step.

“And why not?” asks Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Youssouf. “We have some assets that Dubai never had.”

First, there’s that shipping lane. It’s busier than Dubai’s. Second, there are all those landlocked African countries stacked up behind it; they’re desperate for a portal to the wider world. Third, there’s the infrastructure. Not traditional infrastructure, which, China notwithstanding, is still in short supply, but rather digital infrastructure. Seven submarine fiber-optic cables, the kind that carry the vast majority of the world’s digital information, come ashore in Djibouti, making it the most important hub of connectivity in East Africa. “Forget gigabytes,” says Finance Minister Ilyas Moussa Dawaleh. “We offer terabytes.”

Instead of a bountiful freshwater reservoir, Djibouti has Lac Assal, which is 10 times saltier than the ocean and where the only sign of aquamarine life is an abundance of common bacteria; it’s also beautiful, in an extraplanetary sort of way, and the centerpiece of the government’s tourism plan.

The scouring Khamsin winds, which blow through the country from June to August, are being harnessed to power a 60-megawatt wind farm, and the pitiless sun, which beats down with near-kinetic force, will power solar energy developments and more than quadruple the country’s total domestic energy output. Within a decade, the government hopes to be the first country in Africa to be powered solely by renewable energy.

“It’s interesting,” says Ali Yacoub Mahamoud, the minister of energy and natural resources. “In the colonial period, everything in Djibouti was viewed negatively. They all said we only had a hot sun, dry winds, and a lot of rocks. Nothing valuable. Even the nomads felt that way. But now the negatives are positives.”

When the dinner crowd leaves La Chaumière each night, the lobby of the Sheraton fills up. For contractors and foreign militaries, the hotel is a quasi-permanent supplementary barracks. One floor is occupied almost solely by German soldiers. When I try to connect to the hotel Wi-Fi, I’m given two network options: one for guests, one for “Germans.” I can’t find a single tourist here.

At night in the lobby bar, six German soldiers are playing cards, leaning into the game over a low table. Along the far wall, 14 Japanese sailors stare at 13 cell phones (two of them share one, watching a video). Two American contractors, tech workers, are snacking on fruit, eyeing it suspiciously, and slandering their bosses.

One starts punching numbers into the calculator on his phone, tabulating hours worked, unclaimable expenses, total wages. He puts the phone down and leans back in his chair. “A thousand dollars a week,” he says.

“A thousand? Hell, we can make that at home.”

“That’s what I’m saying.” He tastes a wedge of orange and makes a face. “Why are we here?”

They don’t come up with an answer, as if they're unwilling to believe history could have deposited them in this remote, forlorn corner of the world. But the country where nothing happens no longer exists.