

# Liberia

Peace and a modicum of stability have finally come to Liberia, a country that for decades has been a festering sore on West Africa's benighted coastline, known only for child soldiers and warlords. Having elected Africa's first female president and been subject to an unprecedented effort by the international community to get the shattered country back on its feet, Liberia is now safe and open for visitors once again.

This is a unique opportunity to travel through a country that is rebuilding itself after decades of violence, and one you should take if you get the chance – avoiding Liberia, while common enough for West African itineraries, will never help the country reintegrate into the region's mainstream.

Liberia itself is a lush, beautiful land criss-crossed by rivers and largely made up of impenetrable rainforest. It now again offers visitors a fascinating glimpse into one of West Africa's most hospitable and enigmatic societies. The country's artistic traditions – especially carved masks, dance and storytelling – rival those of anywhere in the region, and traditional culture remains strong. This was especially true in the interior, where until the war secret initiation societies played a central role in growing up, and even today still serve as an important repository of traditional knowledge and life skills.

The country's natural attractions are equally impressive. In contrast with its ravaged infrastructure, Liberia's dense, humid rainforests – some of the most extensive in West Africa – are alive with the screeching and twittering of hundreds of birds, who are kept company by forest elephants, pygmy hippos and other wildlife padding around the forest floor.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 111,370 sq km
- **Capital** Monrovia
- **Country code** ☎ 231
- **Famous for** Rainforests, child soldiers, traditional masks, rubber plantations
- **Languages** English (official), plus Bassa, Kpelle, Kru, Grebo and other local languages
- **Money** Liberian dollar (L\$); US\$1 = L\$66.50; €1 = L\$88.45
- **Population** 3.3 million
- **Visas** Required by almost everyone, and must be arranged in advance



**HOW MUCH?**

- **Sachet of water** US\$0.07
- **Kilo of bananas** US\$0.40
- **Fufu and soup** US\$0.75
- **Short taxi ride** US\$1
- **Soda** US\$0.30

**LONELY PLANET INDEX**

- **Gallon of petrol** US\$4.30
- **Litre of bottled water** US\$0.20
- **Bottle of Club beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$15
- **Cassava leaf snack** US\$0.75

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Monrovia** (p460) Sidewalk vendors and the beat on the street.
- **Robertsport** (p466) Surfers and sun worshippers, and Liberia's coolest hotel at a little slice of African beach paradise.
- **Sapo National Park** (see the boxed text, p468) Lush, humid canopy of one of West Africa's last remaining rainforests.
- **Harper** (p467) Elegant reminder of Liberia's wealthy past.

**ITINERARIES**

- **One week** Spend several days in Monrovia (p460) getting to know the city and travelling to some of its nearby beaches before heading to Bomi Lake (p468) and on to gorgeous Robertsport (p466).
- **Two weeks** With an extra week you can add the journey to Sapo National Park (see the boxed text, p468) and on to charming Harper (p467) before heading into Côte d'Ivoire or flying back to Monrovia if you don't fancy the long, long drive!

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

Monrovia is one of the wettest capital cities in Africa, with rainfall averaging more than 4500mm per year here and elsewhere along the Liberian coast. Inland, it's less – in some areas only about 2000mm annually. Temperatures range from 23°C to 32°C in Monrovia, and are slightly higher inland. However, humidity levels of more than 85% in the dry season (November to April) and

more than 90% in the rainy season (May to October) often make it feel much warmer. There is little seasonal temperature variation. See also Climate Charts (p811).

The best time to visit Liberia is during the dry season, between November and April.

**HISTORY**

The area that is now Liberia has likely been populated for more than 2000 years, although little is known of its early history. Many present-day Liberians trace their ancestry to peoples who migrated southeast from the Sahel following the fall of the Empire of Mali in the 15th century. However, settlement of the area remained sparse because of the dense and inhospitable forests covering most of the country, and no great cities developed.

European contact with Liberia began in the 1460s with the arrival of Portuguese navigators, who named several coastal features, including Cape Mesurado (Monrovia) and Cape Palmas (Harper). Because of the trading success of a pepper grain, the area soon became known as the Grain Coast.

**The Arrival of the Settlers**

In the early 19th century, the Grain Coast rose to the forefront of discussions within the abolitionist movement in the USA as a suitable place to resettle freed American slaves. After several failed attempts at gaining the agreement of local chiefs, officials of the American Colonization Society (ACS) forced a treaty upon a local king at Cape Mesurado. Despite resistance by the indigenous people, settlement went ahead, and in April 1822, an expedition with the first group of Black American settlers arrived at Providence Island in present-day Monrovia. Within a short time, under the leadership of the American Jehudi Ashmun, the foundations for a country were established. Additional settlements were founded along the coast, notably at Greenville and Harper. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their extremely brutal background, the former slaves' first action was to subjugate all the 'natives', forcing thousands to work as slaves for the ruling caste and laying the groundwork for decades of war a century and a half later.

**A Shaky Independence**

In 1846 the settlement at Cape Mesurado merged with others along the coast, and, settling on the name Liberia ('land of the