

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has largely stayed out of the news lately, which, considering how it earned most of its press in the 1990s, is a good thing. The decade-long civil war garnered regular media coverage thanks to widespread atrocities committed by rebel soldiers, many of them not yet in their teens.

But oh, how things have changed. Peace was declared in 2002, and it has blossomed. Life has largely returned to normal and today Sierra Leone is one of West Africa's safest destinations. Reconstruction continues apace, investors are arriving in droves and travellers are trickling in. A cruise ship even made a port call in Freetown in January 2009. And the one recent event that did make headlines was a free and fair election.

With some of the most perfect palm-lined sands on the African continent, it won't be long before Sierra Leone takes its place in Europe's packaged beach-holiday scene; but for now, visitors can have the surf outside the capital pretty much, and often completely, to themselves. Travel to the provinces, where roads are often abysmal and facilities usually basic (but getting better), remains in the realm of the adventurous, but with cheerful people and wonderful parks, the rewards are many.

To be sure, Sierra Leone still has problems. For the past two years it ranked last in the UN's Human Development Index, unemployment remains high and corruption is worsening, but most locals hang onto their optimism.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 72,325 sq km
- **Capital** Freetown
- **Telephone code** ☎ 232
- **Famous for** Diamonds
- **Languages** English, Krio, Mende and Temne
- **Money** leone (Le); US\$1 = Le3050; €1 = Le3960
- **Population** 6.4 million
- **Visa** Officially, must be arranged before arrival



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Beach bumming** Freetown Peninsula (p753) and Banana Islands (p755).
- **Tiwai Island** The relaxed Wildlife Sanctuary (p757); Pygmy hippos and primates at the famous wildlife sanctuary.
- **Outamba-Kilimi National Park** (p762) Wildlife-spotting on foot or from a canoe.
- **Freetown** (p747) Minor historic sites painting a vivid history.
- **Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary** (p756) Rehabilitation for humanity's closest relative.

ITINERARIES

- **One week** Many people spend their whole week at the beaches. Although it might be hard to pull yourself off the sand, it's worth taking some days up-country to visit Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary (p757) and a town or two. If you're here for wildlife you can get to both Tiwai Island and Outamba-Kilimi National Park (p762) and still sneak a little beach time.
- **Two weeks** In two weeks you can see most of the country without travelling too fast.
- **One month** A month is enough time to see and do just about everything in this chapter.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Sierra Leone is one of West Africa's wettest and hottest countries, with an average annual rainfall of 3150mm and temperature of 27°C (see Climate Charts, p810). The rainy season stretches from mid-May to mid-November, with July and August the wettest months. The humidity can be oppressive along the coast, although sea breezes afford some relief. Inland, the days are even hotter, but it cools down much more at night, especially in the northwest.

The best time to visit is November, after the rains and before the dusty harmattan winds blow in and paint the skies grey. The further you go into the dry season the more heat you'll have to endure and the less green you'll see in the countryside. During the rainy season, washed-out roads make travel to some destinations difficult or impossible.

HISTORY

The region now called Sierra Leone was on the southern edge of the great Empire of Mali, which flourished between the 13th and 15th

HOW MUCH?

- **Small Temne basket** Le5000
- **100km bush taxi ride** Le15,000
- **Bottle of palm wine** Le1500
- **2 lapa (about 4 sq yd of gara cloth)** Le20,000
- **A night at a music show** Free

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** Le2500
- **1.5L of bottled water** Le2500
- **Bottle of Star beer** Le2000
- **Souvenir T-shirt** Le10,000
- **Fry-fry with egg** Le1200

centuries (for more details on the early history of the region, see p27). Early inhabitants included the Temne, Sherbro and Limba, who were organised into independent chiefdoms. Mandingo/Malinké traders had also entered the region early on and integrated with indigenous peoples.

European Contact

Contact with Europeans began in 1462 with the arrival of Portuguese navigators who called the area Serra Lyoa (Lion Mountain), which was later modified to Sierra Leone. Around 120 years later, Sir Francis Drake stopped here during his voyage around the world; however, the British didn't control the area until the 18th century when they began to dominate the slave trade along the West African coast.

The American War of Independence in the 1770s provided an opportunity for thousands of slaves to gain freedom by fighting for Britain. When the war ended, over 15,000 ex-slaves made their way to London, where they suffered unemployment and poverty. In 1787 a group of philanthropists purchased 52 sq km of land in present-day Sierra Leone from a local chief for the purpose of founding a 'Province of Freedom' for ex-slaves. This became Freetown. That same year, the first group of about 400 men and women (300 ex-slaves and 100 Europeans, mainly prostitutes) arrived.

Within three years all but 48 settlers had deserted or died either from disease or in fights with the local inhabitants. But in 1792