

Equatorial Guinea

Failed coups, danger money, bushmeat and buckets of oil – you could say Equatorial Guinea has something of a reputation. But mercenaries and crime writers aren't the only ones attracted to the country's beautiful black-and-white shores. This is the land of primates with painted faces, soft clouds of butterflies and insects so colourful they belong in the realm of fiction.

If the excited beats of Equatorial-Guinean hip hop don't get you dancing, the architecture will – Gothic cathedrals, ancient wooden churches and butter-coloured homes. Though the country is dripping in oil wealth, many people's taps run dry. Poverty deeply permeates ordinary life, making a trip to Malabo – alive with the flames of oil rigs and the buzz of rapid construction – at once hedonistic and heartbreaking. You'll spot glass-fronted buildings, fountains high as waterfalls and mini skyscrapers that rub clouds as swollen as ripe mangoes.

On the mainland, white beaches, forest paths and junglescapes await, while Bioko Island is home to mellow fishing villages and ethnicities found nowhere else in the world. We wouldn't be surprised to find – way above the mahogany trees and the rain-soaked hills – a cloak of mystery spread over this country like cling film, keeping its heat, humidity and secrets locked inside.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 28,050 sq km
- **ATMs** None at the time of research
- **Borders** Cameroon and Gabon
- **Budget** US\$90 per day in Malabo, US\$30 to US\$60 per day elsewhere
- **Capital** Malabo
- **Languages** Spanish, French, Fang, Creole English (Pidginglis)
- **Money** Central African CFA; US\$1 = CFA463, €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 659,200
- **Seasons** Bioko Island is dry December to February and rainy the rest of the year; Rio Muni is dry from June to August, with high humidity and sporadic-to-frequent rainfall the rest of the year
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 240; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1; no daylight saving
- **Visa** Required by all except Americans; must be acquired before arrival



HOW MUCH?

- **Tailor-made dress** US\$14
- **Short taxi ride in Malabo** US\$1.10
- **Guided jungle hike** US\$26
- **Fried plantain snack** US\$2.15
- **President Obiang's California mansion** US\$32 million

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.80
- **1L bottled water** US\$1.10
- **Cold beer** US\$1.75
- **Souvenir mini xylophone** US\$8.65
- **Plate of rice and fish** US\$6.50

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Malabo** (p595) Explore the architecture and nightlife of this bizarre oil town.
- **Bioko Island** (p599) Go wide-eyed over the strange combination of dense rainforest, rare wildlife and oil platforms.
- **Monte Alen National Park** (p601) Whisper during forest walks in search of gorillas, elephants and chimps.
- **Isla Corisco** (p601) Tread softly on the squeaky-clean sand of this undiscovered paradise isle.
- **Bata** (p599) Watch the city grow vertically with oil money.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Equatorial Guinea is hot, humid and tropical. The mainland, Rio Muni, has a dry season from June to August while Bioko Island is dry from December to February. Rainfall is likely in both places outside of those months, though Bioko generally receives much more rain than the mainland. Depending on your tolerance of heat and humidity, the dry season is probably the best time to travel; temperatures fall during the wet season but roads are less easily navigated.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Kick off your visit in Malabo (p595), working in a day trip to Moka (p599), then get yourself on a plane to the mainland, pausing in Bata (p599)

before an overnight trip to Monte Alen National Park (p601).

- **Two Weeks** Using Gabon's Libreville (p608) as a cheap entry point, make your way down south to Cogo (p600) and catch the boat to Isla Corisco (p601) to kick off your shoes on the gorgeous beach. Then head up to Monte Alen National Park (p601) to hike through the forest, winding up in Bata (p599). From there, fly to Malabo (p595) for a few days in the city and exploring Bioko Island (p599). Fly back to Bata to leave via Libreville, or if money permits, exit from Malabo.

HISTORY
The Early Days

Bantu tribes, including the Bubi, came to the mainland in the 12th century from other parts of West and Central Africa. The Bubi are said to have fled to Bioko to escape the Fang, who are believed to have become the dominant ethnic group in the 1600s. Europeans made their first contact on the distant island of Anobón, which was visited by the Portuguese in 1470. In the 18th century, Bioko, Anobón and parts of the mainland were traded to Spain in exchange for regions in Latin America. Bioko subsequently became an important base for slave-trading in the early 19th century and later a naval base for England, which by then was trying to stop the slave trade. Cocoa plantations were started on the island in the late 19th century, making Malabo Spain's most important possession in equatorial Africa.

Independence & Coup Attempts

Equatorial Guinea attained independence in October 1968 under the presidency of Macias Nguema. Months later, relations with Spain deteriorated rapidly and Nguema's 10-year dictatorship began. Thousands of people were tortured and publicly executed or beaten to death in the forced-labour camps of the mainland. Much of the violence was tribally motivated – the Bubis were particularly sought. By the time Nguema's regime was finally toppled in 1979, only a third of the 300,000 Guineans who lived there at the time of independence remained. In August 1979, Nguema was overthrown by his nephew Teodoro Obiang Nguema, who then ordered his uncle's execution. A coup attempt was made on Obiang in 2004; see the boxed text, p596.