

# 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 being subject to an unprecedented effort by the international community to get it back on its feet, Liberia is now safe and open for visitors once again.

Liberia itself is a lush, beautiful land criss-crossed by rivers and largely made up of impenetrable rainforest. It 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 on the continent, and traditional culture remains strong.

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
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone
- **Budget** From US\$50 per day
- **Capital** Monrovia
- **Languages** English and more than 20 indigenous languages
- **Money** Liberian dollar; US\$1 = L\$70, €1 = L\$102
- **Population** 3.3 million
- **Seasons** Dry (November to April), wet (May to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 231; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** Vary in cost and must be obtained 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**

- **1L petrol** US\$1.13
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.15
- **Bottle of Club beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$15
- **Cassava leaf** US\$0.75

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Monrovia** (p391) Stroll through central Monrovia and absorb the chaos and drama of this great African city.
- **Robertsport** (p392) Join the surfers and sun-worshippers at this little slice of beach paradise and stay for a couple of days at Liberia's coolest hotel.
- **Sapo National Park** (boxed text, p393) Really get off the beaten track and wander under the lush, humid canopy of one of West Africa's last remaining rainforests.
- **Harper** (p392) Kick back in this out-of-the-way town, an elegant reminder of Liberia's wealthy past.

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

Monrovia is one of Africa's two wettest capitals (Freetown in Sierra Leone is the other), with annual rainfall averaging more than 4500mm here and along the coast. Temperatures range from 23°C to 32°C in Monrovia, and slightly higher inland, though high humidity often makes it feel much warmer.

The best time to visit is during the November to April dry season.

**ITINERARIES**

- **One Week** Spend several days in Monrovia (p391) before heading to Bomi Lake (p392) and on to gorgeous Robertsport (p392).
- **Two Weeks** With an extra week you can add on the long journey to Sapo National Park (p393) and on to charming Harper

(p392), before carrying on into Côte d'Ivoire.

**HISTORY**

After being populated for a mere few thousand years, Liberia struck American abolitionists as an ideal place to resettle freed slaves. In 1822, the first group stepped off the boat at Providence Island, Monrovia. They saw themselves as part of a mission to bring civilisation and Christianity to Africa, but their numbers were soon depleted by tropical diseases and hostile indigenous residents, who resented being dominated by the new arrivals.

The surviving settlers, known as Americo-Liberians, declared an independent republic in 1847. Yet, fatally for the new republic's future, citizenship excluded indigenous peoples, and every president until 1980 was of American freed-slave ancestry. For nearly a century, Liberia flourished economically and politically while the indigenous population suffered under a form of forced labour that would have been called slavery anywhere else.

During William Tubman's presidency (1944–71) the tides began to change. Thanks to the image of stability that Tubman was able to project, foreign investment flowed into the country, and for several decades Liberia sustained sub-Saharan Africa's highest growth rate. Firestone and other American companies made major investments, and Tubman earned praise as the 'maker of modern Liberia'.

Yet the influx of new money exacerbated existing social inequalities, and hostilities between Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population worsened. While indigenous Liberians were finally granted the right to vote in 1963, the concession was too little too late. The government continued to be controlled by about a dozen interrelated Americo-Liberian families, and corruption was rampant.

**Coup d'Etat & Years of Darkness**

Resentment began to simmer, and in April 1980 William Tolbert (who had succeeded Tubman as president) was overthrown and killed in a coup led by uneducated master-sergeant Samuel Doe. For the very first time, Liberia had a ruler who wasn't an Americo-Liberian, giving the indigenous population a taste of political power and an opportunity for vengeance. The 28-year-old Doe shocked the world by ordering 13 ex-ministers be publicly executed on a beach in Monrovia.