



# FRESH START

While established tourist destinations around the world struggle to cope with *too much* tourism, some countries emerging from strife are looking to tourism to help kickstart their economies. **Sierra Leone** is one. So, what does this nascent country have to offer visitors, and what needs to be done to build appropriate infrastructure? It's an exciting proposition

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Vacillating between a circus and self-harm convention, a shirtless performer swallows broken glass whilst another slashes his bloody tongue before the febrile crowd gasps at a corpse wrapped in calico. "Don't worry. He's pretending and will be brought back to life," smiles Mohammed Marar, coordinating an energetic welcome to Kabala. "What our show is saying is if you have heart you can perform miracles in life."

If two qualities are required for Sierra Leone's redemption, it is 'miracles' and 'heart'. From the moment 380 emancipated slaves came ashore in 1787 to lay the foundations for this West African nation it has endured a fraught passage through history. Slavery lingered well beyond abolition in 1807 and thereafter British colonial shenanigans maintained a divided society. After 1961's independence politicians gorged themselves on diamond wealth before civil war (1991-2002) shocked the world with its savagery. In 2014, as Sierra Leone staggered to recovery, Ebola struck, claiming 4000 lives.

Now Ebola-free, Julius Maada Bio's new government is looking towards tourism to revive a depressed economy and mend its shattered reputation. I arrived on a nine-day recce to consider what kind of tourism might evolve? →

**Right:** Musicians perform at a cultural event in Kabala





**Freetown is rippled by hills.** It reminds me of Kigali. Named in 1792 when Afro-American Thomas Peters arrived with 15 ships of freed Nova Scotian slaves, Freetown's slave past is palpable around King Jimmy's Wharf, where returning Africans first arrived, and also beneath an immense 400-year-old cotton tree where those early settlers congregated to barter goods.

Among several international hotels is the Radisson Blu Mammy Yoko, where I listen to Minister of Tourism, Mrs Memunatu Pratt, outline her vision. She talks of putting communities and ecotourism at the heart of tourism and better protecting slavery's architectural heritage.

"Tourism must contribute to creating youth employment and national cohesion," she espouses, acknowledging a paucity of direct flights from Europe and expensive visas (£109) as barriers to overcome. With a blank canvas I ask her if Sierra Leone might position itself as a mass beach destination like The Gambia or go for high-end ecotourism, like Botswana? "We have everything: beaches, cultural sites, and wildlife... we can be known for many things," she suggests.

The coast's dreamy white beaches and historic slave legacy will likely form the vanguard for Sierra Leonean tourism. Before the war Tokeh Beach was an international jetsetters playground. The old Africana Hotel, now ruined and overrun amid palms backing Tokeh's perfect talcum-white sand, employed 600 staff during halcyon pre-war days.

Now this mantle has fallen upon The Place, opened in 2013 by mining-executive Chris Brown. Sierra Leone's only five-star resort demonstrates how low number-high yield properties can be tied to socio-economic betterment and avoid the negative impacts that can arise with mass beach tourism in destinations like The Gambia, such as prostitution and ugly resort design. Instead The Place's solar-powered low-rise bungalows harmonise with Tokeh's sweeping natural symmetry, and their commitment to the local community has been exemplary, providing jobs and building a secondary school.

It's also easy to imagine Sierra Leone's slave-era heritage providing beach holidaymakers with day-excursions, rather like The Gambia's popular outing to James Island. Although the legacy of that trade here is by some magnitude more visceral.

Departing the ferry terminal near Aberdeen Bridge, I sail to Bunce Island in Freetown's deep natural harbour. Bunce



**A new dawn:** Will Sierra Leone build its tourism on its sweeping beaches, like Lumley Beach, and new resorts like The Place on Tokeh Beach?

was a British slave fort that sent 50,000 Africans transatlantic between 1668 and 1807. Corroding cannons, installed to deter French privateers, front the largely Georgian-era buildings now being refortified to prevent collapse. The whole island exudes heartache yet poignancy. Among the ruins is a fireplace where slaves were branded during the tenure of the Royal African Company of England (1678-1728) with its ironic acronym 'RACE'.

However, Bunce currently lacks infrastructure to handle larger groups and only the island's unwitting caretaker, Mohammed, was on hand to show me around. Protecting this heritage should be an urgent priority, not least to capture an Afro-American diaspora seeking to trace their lineage, which touristically could be a goldmine.

"We had a group of South Carolinians who traced their ancestry to here. Every one of them cried when they arrived," remembers Mohammed.

Many slaves originated from the 16 ethnic groups populating an interior retaining an engaging authenticity that could drive

community tourism. At Kabala, in the predominately Muslim north, custom dictates when entering a chiefdom that outsiders pay a courtesy call to the paramount-chief. These chiefs date from British interference in the 1890s, when they were introduced to diminish the absolute power of royal households. I find Chief Ali Balansama Marah III relaxing on a wooden throne emblazoned with 'EIIR' - a gift from Queen Elizabeth in 1961. He has ruled for 16 years and 7 months; some way short of his father's 51 years. I'd come to hike in the sacred bronzed hills of the Wara-Wara where, he explains, "our forefathers' spirits reside and elders have the power to speak with them".

After exchanging platitudes, he presents me with a bitter kola nut as a blessing, then explains his agricultural people lack educational facilities, clean water and electrical security. "Tourism is a real opportunity to improve our financial state and give us a better idea of the world outside," he says.

The hike itself proves almost incidental. I drink freshly-tapped poyo palm wine halfway up, then descend to the paramount

chief's tongue-slashing glass-swallowing extravaganza. Cultural shows can be so anodyne at hotel-resorts yet, unjaded by tourism, this feels genuine and heartfelt. The challenge will be maintaining this freshness if larger numbers of tourists come.



**Rural poverty has placed** great strain on Sierra Leone's natural capital and it's common to see smouldering slash-and-burn forest clearance; particularly during my drive to the Eastern District. In recent decades Sierra Leone's Upper Guinea rainforest ecosystem has reduced dramatically through deforestation. Figures suggest Sierra Leone lost 12.6 per cent of its forest cover between 1998 and 2010 (mongabay.com). The National Tourist Board recently made a strong statement in replacing their diamond logo (with its negative connotations as 'blood diamonds' during wartime) with that of a chimpanzee, hoping to attract wildlife-lovers to explore a still remaining high biodiversity. Chimpanzees are present inside Gola →



**Left to right:** At the heart of Freetown is a 400-year-old cotton tree, where early settlers gathered to barter goods; the ruins at Bunce Island are derelict but still an impressive reminder of the slave history; at Kabala, the chiefs use a wooden throne gifted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1961

**Looking to the future:** "Tourism is a real opportunity to improve our financial state and give us a better idea of the world outside," says the chief from the rural community of Wara-Wara



**Making their way:** Informal traders in Makeni market; a worker in a restaurant in Kabala; our tracker in Tiwai, Kenewa Koroma

Rainforest National Park, which protects 71,070 hectares of fragmented primary rainforest and regenerating secondary forest. Within its leviathan canopy are some 330 bird species, including endemic white-necked picathartes, plus numerous primates.

Yet just before reaching the Park HQ in Kenema I saw monkey bushmeat on sale at Moyamba Junction. “It’s prohibited to hunt monkeys, but people do not see it as a crime,” sighs Benji Barca, a researcher on secondment from the RSPB. He says they are working hard with local communities to create alternative incomes from slash-and-burn, such as planting shade-tolerant cocoa under secondary forest. Lobbying by conservationists has also seen the Gola R.E.D.D. (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) programme certify the park as a carbon-trading commodity – a boon for its international stature.

But Gola is looking at tourism to boost its revenues. It currently only receives 200 visitors per year. “Ecotourism is vital to protect the few blocks of Upper Guinean rainforest left across West Africa as it creates a presence within the forest,” says Barca.

Gola’s star attraction is endangered pygmy hippos and the park hosts 80 per cent of an estimated 200 remaining in Sierra Leone. Visitors are taken on nocturnal safaris to try spotting them with night-vision goggles, but luck is required. “A Japanese team was here for 40 days trying to film them and saw them twice,” says Barca.

I take an afternoon walk under Gola’s tangled canopy featuring regional endemics like the colossal *Brachystegia cynometroides*, a prized teak tree. With guide Mohammed Lumeh, I see little wildlife. He says more trails, better interpretation and guide training is needed. To aid sightings, a researcher is habituating a troop of rare Diana monkeys, which will be a significant boost for tourism. Interestingly, Lumeh says during the Ebola outbreak outsiders accused them of spreading the virus because they protected monkeys. “One reason our forest communities stayed healthy was because we educated them not to hunt bushmeat,” claims Lumeh.

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**Sierra Leone’s flagbearer** for ecotourism is Tiwai Island – a further four-hours’ drive to Kambamba, a small village of Mende people by the River Moa. Its community benefits from the world-class primate reserve on their doorstep, and they welcome guests with dancing and drumming so intense small children scatter in terror. Again, it feels totally authentic, not least the *ndoli jowei*, a ceremonial female initiation mask dance performed in heavy ebony-coloured pot-shaped headpieces with neck rings symbolising rolls of fat, a classical trait of Mende beauty.

“We are happy to see you because visitors have a positive impact for our community,” greets Mohamed Koroma, the headman. He explains how working with the NGO Environmental Foundation for Africa (EFA) has provided jobs as guides and funded several children’s scholarships.

I cross the Moa by boat onto the 12sq km midriver island said to possess the densest concentration of primates in the world: 11 species including six families of chimpanzees. They too have pygmy hippos, although wildlife tracker Kenewa Koroma says an

American researcher came a while back to radio-collar them and never saw one.

Guests sleep in pre-erected tents in a disappointingly rundown reception area where I meet professional birdwatching guide Momo Bicesse, here with three private clients. He says Sierra Leone has 645 bird species and a high number of Upper Guinean forest endemics. “We have the potential to become the region’s number one birding destination, but lack trained guides and equipment.” One of his clients, Richard, an Australian, chips in to say he’d birded in The Gambia and Ghana (two ornithological powerhouses) but Sierra Leone is the most extraordinary because of numerous rarities like rufous fishing owls.

Next morning the rainforest crackles with garrulous birds and primates. Whooshing sounds of hornbills’ wingbeats evoke flapping sails whilst Kenewa says red-chested cuckoos rekindle wartime memories. “The bird increases its call when sensing trouble. During the war we were alerted when the rebels approached, so we fled,” he recalls.

Throughout a wonderful walk I’m entertained by aerobic black-and-white colobus and howling galago, sooty mangabey, and red colobus. Yet there’s also a disturbing sound. Gunshots. Kenewa winces. “Poachers are shooting at the primates,” he says. “Tiwai is split between two chiefdoms. At Kambamba we have a good relationship with the park so do not hunt, but the other chiefdom still does”.

Without effective anti-poaching it strikes me the country is crying out for an organisation like African Parks to assume total management of their protected areas. I can imagine the creation of a super-sized reserve of the Gola and Tiwai ecosystem with effectively enforced wildlife corridors between the rainforest blocks that could create international attention and enable forest communities to economically benefit from its success. The resources and capacity of African Parks could handle this.

Just outside Freetown, semi-wild upland forest Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary (one of the country’s leading attractions) is trying to ameliorate the bushmeat hunting and pet-trading crisis.

Habitat loss and poaching has caused the country’s western chimpanzee population to slump since the 1980s, from 20,000 to around 5000. Tacugama emerged in 1988 when former accountant Bala Amareskaran bought a baby chimpanzee being sold roadside for bushmeat. He called it Bruno.

*I can imagine the creation of a super-sized reserve of the Gola and Tiwai ecosystem with effectively enforced wildlife corridors between the rainforest blocks that could create international attention and enable forest communities to economically benefit from its success*

The same chimp attracted international headlines in 2006 when leading 30 others in a mass breakout. Most were recovered although Bruno’s whereabouts remains a mystery. Today Tacugama provides sanctuary to 89 chimpanzees which had been illegally removed from the wild.

Employee Aram Kazandjian shows me their nursery for orphaned babies, where Mama P (a human) nurses an adorably cute seven-month-old chimp called Caesar. “Caesar was very weak when confiscated from poachers, but she has nursed him back to health,” says Aram. Yet he’s concerned. “For every poached baby chimpanzee, maybe ten will be killed. At that rate they’ll be lost in a decade. We simply cannot relax. In 2018 we had four baby arrivals but this year it’s already 10, including three from Gola”.

Visitors learn about the chimps’ rehabilitation and the positive things Tacugama is doing to address their conservation. Beyond a juvenile’s enclosure for 6-10-years-olds learning to develop independence is a lovely tract of fenced maturing secondary forest where adults live semi-wild in social groupings. Aram says they are given contraceptive implants because fostering chimpanzees in captivity sends out the wrong message of Tacugama’s purpose, but they cannot be released because of a lack of safe locations to free them.

The centre works tirelessly with schoolchildren to foster awareness of conservation and is initiating ecotourism packages around the country, including in Gola and Tiwai. Their work includes visiting local villages within chimpanzee zones on a community outreach programme attempting to develop sustainable livelihood alternatives to deforestation and poaching.

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**Back in Freetown** I feel certain that with greater security of these natural resources, heritage preservation, more community guesthouses and appropriate beach development, Sierra Leone can create a sustainable niche market encouraging profitable ventures like birdwatching, whilst its

beautiful beaches must be restricted to resorts tied to appropriate environmental design and strong social commitment.

“I am astonished at the riches that exist here given most people’s negative image of Sierra Leone’s past,” says Tim Henshall, CEO of Kamageo, a UK marketing company engaged to promote the destination. “My vision was for a winter sun beach destination but it has a wealth of other experiences, although much remains to be done with guide training and improving tourist services,” he says.

If somehow, with peace, investment and sustainability at its heart, Sierra Leone can unlock the shackles of its past, it could become West Africa’s shining diamond. ✎



**GETTING THERE**

Mark Stratton flew with Brussels Airlines from London to Freetown via Brussels. His tour was organised by Rainbow Tours, which offer a 9-day tour costing £2445 per person including flight.

**ACCOMMODATION**

The Place (Tokeh Beach) has sea-facing double suites for around £130 per night (with breakfast).

**VISAS**

Visas are required (single entry £109). [www.slhc-uk.org](http://www.slhc-uk.org)

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

[www.welcometo.sierraleone.sl](http://www.welcometo.sierraleone.sl)

**FURTHER READING**

Bradt publishes a dedicated guide to Sierra Leone (2018)



**Natural assets:** If the country is to truly harness tourism it will need to protect its rainforests and forest reserves, where populations of mammals – especially primates – and birds could thrive. Sanctuaries such as Tacugama are helping to raise greater awareness