

AFRICA

Sierra Leone: a natural beauty blooms again

From jungle to beach, this long off-limits country is coming back to life, its spirit intact, finds Sue Watt

With big ears, brown eyes and a nappy wrapped around him, little Caesar has no idea that he represents his homeland. His mother was killed when he was just eight weeks old (he is now aged seven months) and he has since been cared for by a woman called Mama P. I watch as she holds the baby chimp in her arms, lulling him with soft “Oooh-oo-hoo” noises. Tenderly, Caesar strokes her face, pulls down her paper mask and raises his hirsute fingers to her lips to be kissed. Caesar’s home is Tacugama Chimpanzee



Sanctuary in Sierra Leone, a country that has had a rough ride of late. The government recently announced that the chimpanzee is to be its national animal, representing the face of wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism for the future. With a troubled past, this small West African country doesn’t immediately spring to mind as a tourist destination. Its decade-long civil war, fuelled by the diamond industry, ended in 2002 at the cost of 50,000 lives. In 2014, just as the country was recovering – thanks to remarkable reconciliation efforts and a rejuvenated mining industry – Ebola arrived, killing almost 4,000 people. Sierra Leone went into lockdown for two long and lonely years. Then, in 2017, a horrific mudslide struck the capital Freetown, causing around 1,000 deaths. But Sierra Leone, known locally as Sweet Salone, is shaking off the shackles of its grim past: now peaceful and Ebola-free, it deserves a new narrative. “Sierra Leone has changed,” George Balassis tells me. He is the general manager of upmarket Radisson Blu Mammy Yoko Hotel where I am staying on Lumley Beach, Freetown’s buzzing nightlife strip. “It’s a country that believes in itself now, that’s growing stronger and more confident by the day.” The country’s revived focus on tourism reflects that new self-belief.

Visitor numbers are gradually increasing and new hotels including the Hilton are opening, Silversea cruises are sailing back, and pioneering holiday companies such as Rainbow Tours are returning. Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary, five hours east of Freetown, exemplifies the country’s potential. An idyllic destination for nature lovers, the uninhabited island on the river Moa measures just 4.6 sq miles yet is home to 135 species of birds, around 80 rare pygmy hippos and 11 primate species, one of the highest concentrations in the world, including chimps and Diana monkeys. We are welcomed with warm smiles by the people of Kambama, one of eight neighbouring communities supported by Tiwai. That afternoon, we explore by kayak as hornbills whoosh past overhead and palm fronds rattle in the breeze. In the stillness, a guide suddenly calls out “Mah-le” in an excited whisper. “Pygmy hippo” our poler translates, rushing us towards the riverbank. Someone in the first kayak sees a backside scurrying into the forest but it’s vanished before we get there. It seems the monkeys have vanished too, save for shadowy figures cavorting in the canopy at dusk.

We stay at Tiwai’s only camp, sleeping on mattresses in dome tents on sheltered platforms. Damaged by storms in 2015, it looks tired but is clean and comfortable, has a solar-powered dining area, hot showers and flushing lavatories.

Next morning, on a dark, pre-dawn walk, guide Kenewa Korma interprets the noises of nature’s alarm clocks. A rolling cackle, like a cranky car revving up, is “black and white colobus saying good morning to each other”. The quiet gulps are red colobus; rapid grunts are sooty mangabeys. And that pungent smell that hits us now and then is simply “monkey aroma”.

As dawn approaches, the rainforest becomes visible – we are walking through bamboo as high as houses, mahoganies, palms and vines, and finally spot monkeys moving in the canopy to sounds like shrieking babies. “That’s the colobus sexing!” Kenewa explains with the noise ascending to a curdling crescendo as the monkey mating reaches its climax.

In dense rainforest, Tiwai’s monkeys can seem elusive despite their high concentration and you probably won’t see pygmy hippos mooching along the riverbank. But the island’s natural



POLE POSITION
Kayaking on the Moa River, main; Tacugama chimps, below



‘It’s a country that believes in itself now, that’s growing stronger and more confident’

beauty, with honey-coloured beaches and towering trees, is truly special. The Western Peninsula coastline is special too: jungle-clad mountains meet sandy shores in vivid tiers of green, gold and blue. A three-hour drive takes us to Tokeh, lying between Bureh Beach renowned for surfing and the palm-fringed River No 2 Beach, which evoked “the taste of paradise” in Eighties Bounty ads. Our luxury hotel, The Place, has 54 chic chalets, a swimming pool, and a glass-fronted bar and restaurant overlooking the ocean. We amble along the shore, watching children

playing football while women balance baskets of bread on their heads and fishermen sail off in wooden dhows. We swim in the warm Atlantic waters, sip chilled wine on sunbeds and dine on fresh lobster, a world away from what most people imagine Sierra Leone to be. Freetown, an hour away, brings us back to earth. Despite the poverty here – Sierra Leone is one of the world’s poorest countries – it’s a vibrant, frenetic and friendly city squashed between forested hills and the sea. Born of freedom in the late 18th century when slaves returned from England, its name evokes its heritage from slave-trade centre to sanctuary. Nowhere is the poignancy of the slave trade more evident than on Bunce Island, 40 minutes by motorboat from Freetown. Between 1668 and 1807, around 50,000 men,

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Find authentic ‘otherworldliness’ in Australia’s last frontier

Comb-crested jacana, coachwhip stingrays, vast, stunning coastlines stretching 12,000km... the wonderful region of the Kimberley is hard to define, but here’s a taste of its wild treasures, writes **Gordon Scott**



You have been to the remote Galapagos and seen the ancient tortoises. You may have already journeyed into the white emptiness of Antarctica and experienced its freezing isolation. Think you have run out of options to experience the thrill of authentic “otherworldiness”? Then you need to visit the Kimberley – the vast, untamed wilderness in the north of Western Australia. A land of craggy gorges, vertiginous limestone cliffs and epic stunning coastlines, the region sums up the deep history of Australia’s interior, a land that feels as if it has existed as it is now since the dawn of time. To get the most out of this extraordinary part of the world you should visit with Australian touring company APT. It takes small groups of adventure-minded travellers along the waterways and into this vast terrain. Here you can explore the landscape in a custom-designed four-wheel-drive Mercedes-Benz van and take excursions in a helicopter and river boat. Guests stay at its network of luxuriously appointed yet ecologically conscious Wilderness Lodges, bell tents with proper beds and fully equipped bars. None

of these mod cons, however, detracts from the sense of adventure. This is a proper off-road journey. **Awe-inspiring place** The Kimberley is rated alongside the polar regions as one of the last remaining wildernesses in the world – a place that dwarfs you with its scale and majesty. Take Windjana Gorge, where ancient marine fossils are embedded in the towering cliff face, or Montgomery Reef, where coral structures appear to rise from the ocean in a torrent of water and wildlife at low tide. At the Horizontal Falls, the tidal current blasts dramatically through two narrow gorges of the McLarty Range at an astonishing rate. Similarly beautiful is Zebedee Springs, a network of thermal pools where you can sink into the water, surrounded by a prehistoric Livistona palm forest. And the colours here are something else. At the Cockburn Range in El Questro, where Baz Luhrmann shot the 2008 film *Australia*, the sunsets seem to invent a spectrum of colours, and, over at Purnululu National Park, the famous Bungle Bungle Range is



a glorious sight of striated beehive domes that glow gold and black. The area’s wildlife is equally thrilling. At Geikie Gorge visitors may be lucky enough to spot freshwater crocodiles and coachwhip stingrays in the waters as well as wallabies foraging nearby. And at Lake Argyle’s Ord river, there’s an incredible range of birds: comb-crested jacana, brown speckled osprey and, if you are lucky, black-necked crane.

Prehistoric cave art The Kimberley is culturally significant too. At Little Mertens Falls on the Mitchell Plateau, you can get up close to some of the area’s most significant Aboriginal rock art. Some of it depicts Tasmanian tigers, which are known to have been extinct on mainland Australia for 3,000 years. Just up the road are the glorious Mitchell Falls. This four-tiered cascade seems to capture the essence

JOHN TORODE TAKES ON THE KIMBERLEY

The celebrity chef shares his feelings about the region
Born in Australia but living in the UK, celebrity chef John Torode has been back to his homeland many times, although until recently he had never visited the Kimberley. Blown away by this breathtaking destination, John is working with APT and Tourism Western Australia to showcase what this unique region has to offer. He will be designing exclusive menus for the company’s Luxury Wilderness Lodge in the Bungle Bungle Range, as well as hosting a dine-and-delight experience in person on selected dates in May 2020. “It’s a special place,” says John, right. “You can feel it’s a special place and the Kimberley will become something which truly inspires you for the rest of your life. All I’m going to say is you’ve got to get here.”



Sublime sights Clockwise from main image: Horizontal Falls; Wandjina art; the spectacular Bungle Bungle Range

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ESSENTIALS

Rainbow Tours (020 8131 8473; rainbowtours.co.uk) offers an eight-night trip to Sierra Leone with return international flights on Brussels Airlines from £2,795pp sharing. The price includes two nights in Freetown, two nights at Tacugama, two nights at Tiwai Island, one night at Banana Islands, and one night at Tokeh (all on a B&B basis except at Tiwai island, which is full board), plus all transfers and activities including a trip to Bunce Island.



women and children were incarcerated in this once-imposing fort before leaving for America's southern states. Neglected for centuries and smothered by vines and strangler figs, the eerie ruin is finally being restored. Our guide brings the past alive, showing us cannons on the ramparts still pointing out to sea, the graveyard with still-legible tombstones of slave masters, the cells where ordinary people, once sold, were branded with red-hot irons. We walk in silence, immersed in the island's inhumane brutality and haunting melancholy.

In Freetown, we wander past slatted plantation houses on Pademba Road where freed settlers first lived and stand under the 500-year-old Cotton Tree, more than 100ft tall, where slaves worked under its boughs. Today, fruit bats dangle surreally from branches, their squeals competing with the din of traffic and tuk tuks. We see the worn stone "slave steps" at King Jimmy Wharf, now a manic market selling everything from grains, vegetables and fruit to plastic pots and flip-flops. The city has mellow moments too: back in Lumley, we sip G&Ts at a beach bar listening to smooth reggae as the sun sets.

On our last day, we visit Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary spanning 100 acres of forest near Freetown. Sharing a deep bond with Freetown's communities, the sanctuary teaches schoolchildren about conservation, offers scholarships and currently employs 40 local people. Founded in 1995, it has endured war and Ebola and today is home to 89 chimps (including



HEAD START
Selling bread on Tokeh Beach; The Place hotel, top

that beautiful baby Caesar) orphaned through the illegal bushmeat trade or rescued from captivity.

"We rescued 10 babies last year," manager Aram Kazandjian explains. "For each one rescued, it's estimated poachers have killed up to 10 chimps. Sierra Leone has around 5,500 chimpanzees: if we don't act, they'll likely be extinct within 10 years."

In rural areas where chimps are most threatened, Tacugama educates and works with more than 40 communities. It is planning a national

ecolodge circuit taking in Loma for West Africa's highest mountain, Mobondah for rare manatees and Jaibui Island, Tiwai's neighbour, for those elusive pygmy hippos. And Tacugama Sanctuary itself has six rustic ecolodges with hiking trails, birding tours, jazz nights and yoga retreats. I wish I'd stayed the night here, waking up to chimps' squeals and birdsong.

The primates live in huge fenced enclosures. As we walk around, one cheeky chimp throws stones at us, then sits by the pond acting all innocent. Nearby, Mortes and Perry groom each other quietly. "Mortes was the alpha male here but Perry has taken over. They're still friends," Aram says. "Chimps share 98.6 per cent of human DNA and they show

emotions just like us – joy, happiness, I often see them kissing."

As we leave, we pass Caesar again, still cuddling Mama P. With chimps symbolising the nation's future, Tacugama has a starring role in the new Sierra Leone. Much like the sanctuary's homeland and its people, together they have survived the toughest of times but their soul and indomitable spirit shine through.

RUN, WALK, SNORKEL ... (BUT ASK THE LOCAL CHIEFS FIRST)

MARATHON MAGIC
Named Best International Event in the Running Awards 2017, the Sierra Leone Marathon takes over the northern market town of Makeni every May. Organised by Street Child UK, distances include 5km, 10km and a half-marathon. All runners raise funds for the charity, visiting their projects before the race. The feel-good factor and friendly supporters inspire you to cross that finish line when the jungle-clad hills



and humidity seem insurmountable. See sierraleonemarathon.com and www.africamarathons.com for packages.

WALK IN SACRED HILLS
You need permission from local chiefs to hike the Wara Wara Hills – they ask their god to protect you. With views over the pretty town of Kabala in northern Sierra Leone, the summit is reached by various routes. The East, taking around one hour, is the easiest and most scenic; the West is shorter and steeper. Come for the lively New Year's Eve party at the top or buy deliciously fresh *poyo* (palm wine) from tappers

on the hillside should you happen to pass them. Don't miss the performance from the Council of Traditional Healers – the liveliest, most captivating cultural show you'll ever see.

BASK ON THE BANANA ISLANDS
So-called because this archipelago of three islands is apparently shaped like a banana, the main island Dublin is a 30-minute boat ride from Kent on the Western Peninsula. Chill on

the beaches, snorkel, canoe, dive to shipwrecks, take a tour of the town or amble around what's left of the slave-trade fort and

18th-century church. Stay at Daltons (daltonsbananaguesthouse.com) for budget accommodation or Bafa Resort (bafaresort.com) for a touch of glamping. Both serve excellent seafood including fresh lobster and crab.

GO BIRDING IN GOLA
Gola Rainforest National Park in the east has some of the best birdwatching in West Africa, with around 300 species including the white-necked picathartes

and rufous fishing owl. It's home to elusive pygmy hippos, seven primate species including chimps and semi-habituated Diana monkeys, and a staggering 600 species of butterflies. Take guided walks in the forest or try cultural activities including dancing, fishing, cooking and palm wine tapping. Accommodation is in community guesthouses or basic lodges and camping at the park entrances. (golarainforest.org)

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