



Travel

Honeymoon In Sierra Leone

Zack O'Malley Greenburg, 03.04.09, 4:00 PM ET

Sporting a rumpled button-down shirt and something a little scruffier than a five o'clock shadow, restaurateur Faysal Debeis has an air of weariness about him. And well he should--he's from Sierra Leone.

Debeis and his countrymen are seven years removed from a decade-long civil war that claimed at least 50,000 lives, permanently injured half a million people and turned 2 million more into refugees. The conflict left the world aghast with images of dismembered corpses and inspired the gut-churning 2006 film *Blood Diamond*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

But with the country relatively stable for the first time in decades, Debeis is also one of many Sierra Leoneans cheering the emergence of an unlikely industry: tourism.

In Pictures: Roaming Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone, a tiny West African nation of 6 million, would have joined Somalia atop of Forbes' list of the [world's most dangerous countries](#) as recently as 2002. Today the nation is safer--but thanks to a lofty inflation rate of 8%, a microscopic gross domestic product of \$2 billion, an abysmal life expectancy of 41 and widespread human rights violations, Sierra Leone ranks last in the United Nations' Human Development index.

"I still love this country," says Debeis, the 40-something owner of the beach-side restaurant [Chez Nous](#) in Freetown, the country's capital.

Sierra Leone has its share of foreign boosters as well. In 2006, *Lonely Planet* declared, "It won't be long before Sierra Leone takes its place in Europe's packaged beach-holiday scene."

Three years later, it seems the travel guide was right.

"Recently, small groups have started to come," says Fatmata Abe-Osagie of Sierra Leone's National Tourist Board. "We intend to rebrand Sierra Leone as a tourist destination."

A Slow, But Steady Start

Drawn by vast white-sand beaches, lush jungles and, perhaps, an overdeveloped sense of adventure, 3,842 foreigners vacationed in Sierra Leone last year, up 27%. That's still a paltry 10.5 visitors per day (the tiny Caribbean island of St. Barth's gets 550), but it's a start. Last year's figure is more than three times the number of sightseers that came to the country a decade ago.

"Sierra Leone definitely has the potential to become a tourist destination," says Erica Bonanno, 24, a New Jersey native who works in Freetown at a nonprofit called Search for Common Ground. "Of course there are precautions you have to take, like not going out alone at night or leaving valuables unlocked, but I have never felt like I was in danger."

The relative peace of the past few years is something of an aberration in Sierra Leone's history.

In 1787 the British brought 400 freed slaves to the "Province of Freedom" with intentions of establishing a Utopian colony. Many of the first settlers were quickly decimated by disease and hostile natives. The remainder clashed constantly with both the British and indigenous tribes until the U.K. granted Sierra Leone independence in 1961.

By then, miners had already begun to find the seeds of madness buried in the country's warm dirt: diamonds. From their discovery in the 1930s well up through the '70s, one could scoop gems from the moist earth after a hard rain.

As diamonds grew more difficult to retrieve, however, Sierra Leone became synonymous with bloodshed. In the early 1990s, Liberian strongman Charles Taylor trained and bankrolled militias to take the diamond fields by force, culminating in a vicious civil war with an average day involving everything from rebel child soldiers to rape to amputation of limbs.

The rebels eventually were repelled and disarmed by U.N. forces. By 2002, most of the ringleaders had been apprehended and Taylor is currently awaiting trial for war crimes in The Hague.

The September 2007 election of President Ernest Bai Koroma marked the first time in Sierra Leone's history that the victory of an opposition party didn't spark armed conflict. Koroma has since launched task forces to combat everything from governmental corruption to public urination.

Legal diamond exports, which had dwindled to \$1.2 million in 1999 when rebels controlled most of the country, are up to \$200 million. Sierra Leone has finally been removed from the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory list.

Extreme Vacation

Flights to Freetown are pricey (starting at \$1,600 round trip from New York), but the trip is well worth it for the adventurous vacationer.

Once through customs--no need to bribe agents nor be alarmed if they chalk a large dollar sign on your suitcase, which seemed to mean nothing at all--the most harrowing part of the journey is the trip from Lungi to the mainland. Visitors must choose between a ferry (\$5 each way, typically arrives late--or never), a rusty Soviet-era helicopter (\$70, despite its dubious appearance and accompanying history of fatal crashes) and a hovercraft (\$60, often arrives and departs on time). Take the hovercraft. Occasional accidents are inconvenient, but not fatal.

If you arrive at night, don't be alarmed by the fires that dot the landscape during the dingy shuttle-bus ride from the airport to the hovercraft terminal. These are the torches that light the unpaved streets; electricity is virtually nonexistent in most parts of the country. So are traffic lights, cash machines, indoor plumbing and a host of other things taken for granted in the West.

Flush toilets, clean water and other first-world comforts can be had for about \$100 per night at a few hotels in Freetown's seaside Aberdeen section. Consider Hotel Bintumani, the country's largest, or the Cape Sierra, one of its most picturesque. Perched atop a rocky promontory at the edge of the Atlantic, the Cape Sierra offers clean rooms, a pool and a bar-restaurant with sweeping views of the ocean.

Lumley Beach is steps from both hotels. Flanked by blue-green sea on one side and cottage-dotted hills on the other, it's a pleasant place to relax, provided you don't mind the occasional panhandler or roving bootleg DVD salesman. Grab a Heineken for \$1 at one of the thatched-roofed beach bars or stroll another half-mile along the water for a seafood meal at The Bunker, a shrimp dinner at [Chez Nous](#), or a cheese steak at Roy's. A delicious dinner for two, complete with cocktails, will set you back about \$12.

For those willing to venture beyond the beach, there's plenty to do in downtown Freetown. A \$2 taxi ride will get you to the city's center in 20 traffic-clogged minutes; hail a motorcycle and, for \$1, you'll get a much quicker ride--and a delightfully harrowing experience weaving between smog-spewing jalopies.

If you want to see the rest of the country, hire a driver (\$150 per day, fuel included) to take you to the northern provinces. The countryside is still littered with burnt-out jeep carcasses and bullet-riddled buildings; as you pass through tiny villages, children emerge from huts to stare and point. Pack plenty of food to hand out--and for yourself to eat. There are not many places to stop for snack breaks, unless you want rural Sierra Leonean food like "crain-crain," a mix of fish, beef, spices, rice and cassava leaves.

The diamond-mining town of Koidu is about 200 miles from Freetown, a seven-hour trip on unpaved roads. There, you can peruse the wares of the diamond dealers sitting behind the barred windows of the shops that line the town's Wild West-looking main street. The doors and walls of the crumbling buildings still bear the bullet-wounds of war.

Buy a diamond if you must, but make sure to declare it on your way out and pay the necessary 5% export fee. Conditions in Sierra Leone are improving, yes. But its prisons make American jails look like a vacation.

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