

# Freetown:

## Lebanese Coffee on African Beaches

>By: Nick Redmayne

The end of 1990 saw me on a flight from Banjul to London, engaged in wistful conversation with a Sierra Leonean architect proudly describing the beauty of his home city, Freetown. Only a few months later the first attacks by Foday Sankoh's RUF (Revolutionary United Front) on villages in western Sierra Leone heralded a brutal civil war that claimed the lives of 200,000, physically and mentally maiming countless others. It's now six years since the fighting stopped, Sankoh is dead and his Liberian backer, Charles Taylor, awaits a date with justice in The Hague.

So what of my architect's city of friendly people, fine buildings and stunning beaches? Well, two out of three ain't bad, and over time bricks and mortar can be re-laid. Back in the 90s almost 30,000 travellers booked the sunshine and white sands of 'Sweet Salone' from their holiday brochures. Unsurprisingly, today it's quite rightly assumed that any and all foreigners in Freetown are project workers for one of the many NGOs.

However, suffering a couple of false starts, tourism is just beginning to be talked about seriously. Two airlines, including British Airways, now offer direct flights from London. Writers from fearless travel guide publisher Bradt are on the ground, their Sierra Leone title is due out in the UK and US early 2008. Elsewhere, pioneering UK-based tour operator Undiscovered Destinations has already announced tours of the country.

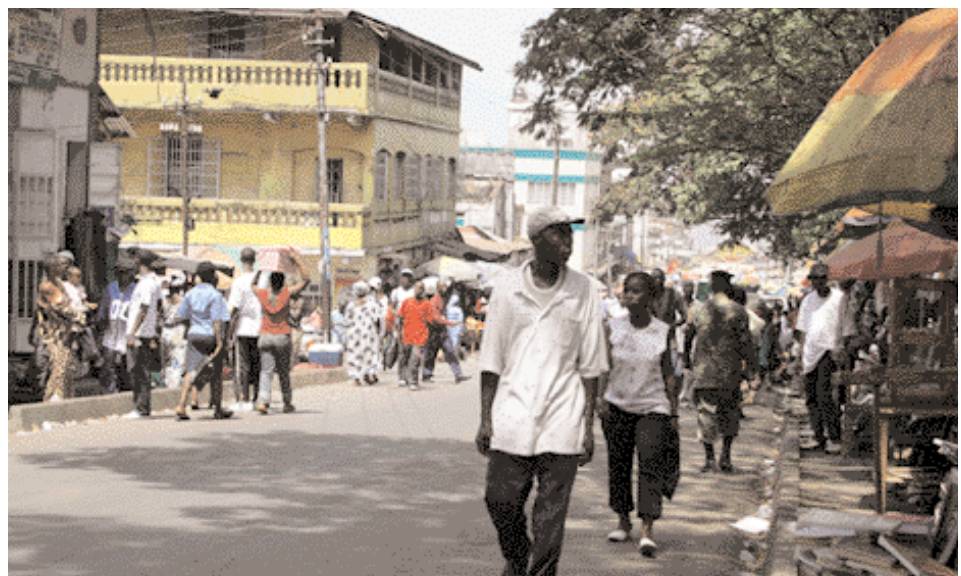
So why travel to Freetown? A city with the world's third largest natural harbour, where English is the official language and whose street names, from Liverpool Street, Wilberforce Street and Siaka Stevens Street, record chapters in its history from enslavement to hard-won emancipation and independence – this is Freetown.

For the visitor, despite uneasily accommodating in excess of 1,000,000, Freetown is tropically relaxed and immediately welcoming. Walking down Signal Hill Road, dodging muddy puddles in an unmade surface, I pass a steady uphill procession of women and boys carrying water and trays of ▶



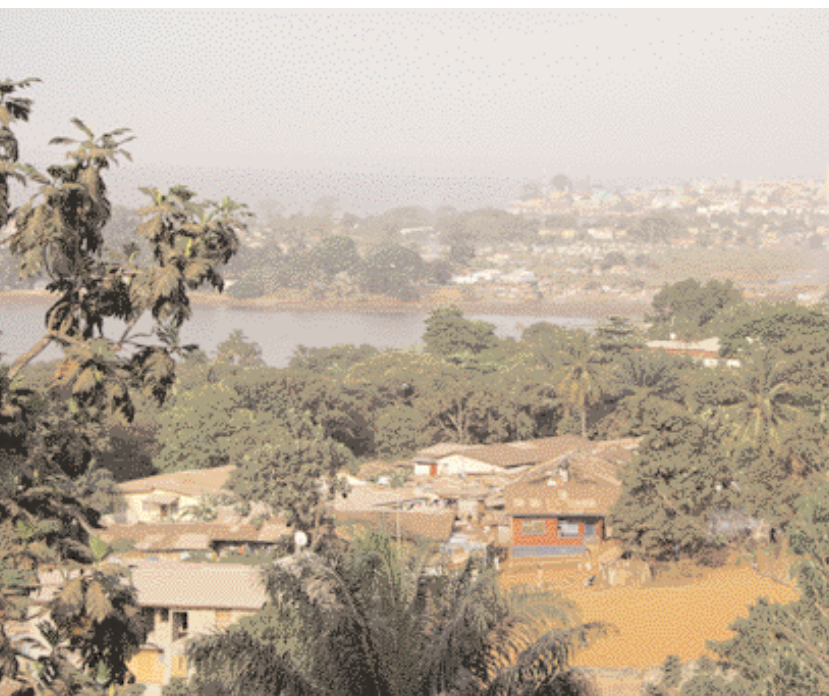
The market

السوق



A main road in Freetown

شارع رئيسي في فريتاون



General view

منظر عام



The old ladies of Freetown

سيدات من فريتاون

fresh fish. Occasional shared glances prompt a measured and politely enunciated, 'Good Morning'. The exertions of enthusiastic crowing cockerels are wasted on a populous that's been roused for hours. It's Sunday morning and below the road I can see a whole family hard at work on home improvements. No B&Q Warehouse here, it's all from first principles – for a wall you need bricks, for bricks you need mud. Birdsong competes with the thrum of generators whilst a remarkably purposeful stream of butterflies navigates a course through the humid air. A poda poda share taxi, optimistically running under the hand-painted nomenclature of 'The Liberator' honks for business, or perhaps as a warning, I can't be sure. Passing through the busy Congo Cross junction, street-side stalls are vie for business. Charge your phone, buy furniture, buy radios, buy cigarettes, it's all here. A serious policeman directs already heavy traffic. As an obvious stranger I attract only positive attention, polite greetings and occasional enthusiastic enquiries.

Downtown there are a few second and third generation Lebanese restaurants. Some familiar Arabic words reach out into the street from the open front of one such establishment and I can resist a Lebanese coffee no longer. Here I am in West Africa and though I didn't put it to the test I think I could have paid for my excellent coffee in Lebanese pounds. Further down Howe Street are the offices of

Freetown-based tour operator KTI-Express Tours. Here I've arranged to meet Patricia Brown, recently returned home from the US to promote tourism in Sierra Leone. I ask her how she plans to overcome associations with conflict to bring tourists, together with their dollars, back into town. 'Education of travellers, exposure and marketing. We have a rare combination of culture and wildlife. Sierra Leone is for the adventurous traveller who has "done" the other places', suggests Patricia 'For now, our hotels, small or large, they have to have their own electricity generation. Water also has to be brought in. Poor Roads require vehicles to be constantly maintained. Once infrastructure is in place costs will come down too.' She shows me itineraries for hikers, birdwatchers and wildlife tourists featuring opportunities to see Chimpanzees, Colobus Monkeys, and rare Pigmy Hippos. Out of town accommodation features eco-lodges based around local communities, specifically on Banana Island and Tiwai Island. If Patricia is right it appears that in the future tourists visiting Sierra Leone will be going green rather than just golden brown...

A late afternoon walk along Lumley Beach, sweeping out from Aberdeen following the peninsula, allows chest-cracking breaths of ozone-rich sea air to reach even the backwaters of ones lungs. Soon I find Ramadas, no glitzy hotel this, just a simple candle-lit beach bar serving ocean-fresh

fish to customers with their feet in the sand. I order and contemplate the future whilst looking towards a darkening Atlantic. In some quarters powerful voices supported by foreign interests lobby for exploitation of the country's mineral wealth to effect an economic quick fix. Voting later this year will elect a new President for the first time since the war. The conduct and results of the process will determine the country's future course, something that holds many in nervous anticipation. My own appreciation of Sierra Leone's future is a hopeful one, where increasing confidence draws travellers back to enjoy an undoubted jewel of West Africa. A route to a stronger economy through nurturing culture, sustaining landscapes and habitats and conserving wildlife gets my vote every time, I hope it's the same for Sierra Leone. ■

Nick Redmayne travelled from Heathrow to Freetown with British Airways 0870 850 9850 [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com) who offer return fares from £720 including taxes and fees.

Undiscovered Destinations 0191 206 4038 [www.undiscovered-destinations.com](http://www.undiscovered-destinations.com) offer new 12-day tours of Sierra Leone featuring from £2,445 p/p including flights, accommodation, most meals and guiding.

Sierra Leone ([www.bradtguides.com](http://www.bradtguides.com)) is published early 2008.