

Sierra Leone

TRAVEL GUIDE

Tripomatic



Overview

Sierra Leone is a small West African country of mountains, rainforest and long Atlantic beaches. Freetown, the capital, sits between green hills and the sea. It was founded in 1792 as a settlement for freed slaves from Britain and North America. The country became independent from Britain on 27 April 1961. A civil war from 1991 to 2002 and the Ebola epidemic of 2014 to 2016 hit it hard, but it has been at peace for more than two decades.

Tourism is still small, and roads, hotels and health care are basic outside Freetown. The country suits independent, adventurous travellers who want empty beaches, wildlife and West African history. Most visits combine the beaches of the **Freetown Peninsula** with a chimpanzee sanctuary, a boat trip to the islands, and a few days in the rainforest. Neither the UK nor the US advises against travel to any part of the country, but crime in Freetown, dangerous roads and strong ocean currents need real care.

Money & payments

The leone was redenominated in 2022: 1 new leone (code SLE) equals 1,000 old leones (code SLL). Old leone notes are no longer legal tender. Prices are sometimes still quoted in old leones, so a price with three extra zeros usually means old leones. Check which one a seller means before you pay.

- **Cash**: Sierra Leone is a cash economy. Bring US dollars or euros in clean, undamaged notes, and change them at banks or licensed bureaux in Freetown.
- **Cards**: only a few upscale hotels, supermarkets and restaurants in Freetown accept cards.
- **ATMs**: ATMs in Freetown work with some foreign cards, but they are often out of order and fees are high. Outside Freetown, do not rely on them.
- **Small notes**: carry small leone notes for taxis, markets and snacks.

Freetown is expensive for imported goods, good hotels and car hire. Local food, markets and shared transport are cheap.

Currency

CURRENCY	1 SLE	1 SLE
SLE	**0.0395 EUR**	**0.0435 USD**
	1 EUR = 25.329 SLE	1 USD = 22.98 SLE

Cash preferred

Typical costs

Rough prices in touristic areas, per person

Hotel (double room, per night) mid-range hotel in Freetown, double room	1,500 – 3,500 SLE €59 – €138
Dinner (mid-range restaurant) per person, restaurant in Freetown	250 – 700 SLE €10 – €28
Inexpensive meal rice and sauce at a local cook shop	40 – 150 SLE €2 – €6
Local beer local lager	20 – 50 SLE €1 – €2
Water 1.5 l bottle	10 – 25 SLE €0 – €1
Transit ticket shared taxi or poda-poda, short ride	5 – 20 SLE €0 – €1

Tipping

Tipping is not a strong habit in Sierra Leone, but it is welcome, especially where staff serve visitors. Wages are low, so a small tip for good service makes a real difference.

- **Restaurants**: in better restaurants in Freetown, leave about 10 % if no service charge is added. In local cook shops, a tip is not expected.
- **Hotels**: give a small tip to porters and cleaners.
- **Taxis and drivers**: agree the fare first. Tip a hired driver at the end of a long trip if you were happy.
- **Guides**: tip forest, island and sanctuary guides at the end of a visit.

Restaurant about 10 % in better restaurants	Optional
Hotel small tip for porters and cleaners	Optional
Taxi	Not customary
Tour guide at the end of a tour or trek	Expected
Bar	Not customary

Electricity

Sierra Leone uses British-style three-pin sockets at 230 V / 50 Hz. Power cuts happen, and many hotels outside Freetown run generators only in the evening, so bring a power bank.

ELECTRICITY



Type G

230 V · 50 Hz

Language

English is the official language, used in government, schools, signs and the media. Hotel staff, guides and officials speak it well.

In daily life, most people speak **Krio**, an English-based language that almost everyone in the country understands. It sounds familiar but is hard to follow at first. A few words help a lot: *Kushe* (hello), *Aw di bodi?* (how are you?), *Bodi fayn* (I'm fine) and *Tenki* (thank you). Many local languages are also spoken. Mende is common in the south and east, and Temne in the north.

Staying connected

- **SIM cards**: Orange, Africell and Qcell are the main mobile networks. Buy a SIM at their shops in Freetown. Bring your passport, because SIM cards must be registered.
- **Coverage**: mobile data works in Freetown and the larger towns. It is weak or absent in the forests and national parks.

Safety & emergencies

The UK does not advise against travel to any part of Sierra Leone (advice updated 19 June 2026). The US rates the country Level 2, "exercise increased caution" (15 September 2025). Most visits pass without problems, but crime, roads and the sea need care.

- **Crime in Freetown**: pickpocketing and mugging are the main risks. Take extra care around Congo Cross, Wilkinson Road, Lumley Beach and Aberdeen, and at beach resorts on the peninsula and islands. Do not walk alone after dark.
- **Local transport**: taxis, minibuses (*poda-podas*), three-wheeled *kekes* and motorbike taxis (*okadas*) are unsafe. Motorbike accidents are common. Use a trusted driver or a hotel car.
- **Roads at night**: do not travel by road outside the Freetown Peninsula after dark. Roads and vehicles are often unlit.
- **Swimming**: **strong ocean currents** run along the whole coast, and there are no lifeguards on any beach. Ask locally about sea conditions before you swim. Lumley Beach in Freetown can have hospital waste, including needles, on the sand.
- **Kush**: *kush*, a cheap synthetic drug, is a serious problem, and the government declared a national emergency over it in 2024. You may see people affected by it in Freetown. Never get involved with drugs of any kind. Penalties are heavy, and prisons are harsh.
- **Protests**: avoid political gatherings and demonstrations, which can turn violent.
- **Local laws**: sex between men is illegal. Do not photograph military sites, government buildings, courts, prisons, airports or bridges. You need a licence to export diamonds, gold or other precious stones.
- **Emergency help**: ambulance services are unreliable in Freetown and unavailable in most of the country. A taxi or private car to a clinic is often faster.

Emergency numbers

✱ GENERAL EMERGENCY

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Health

- **Yellow fever**: you must show a yellow fever vaccination certificate to enter Sierra Leone.
- **Health declaration**: complete the online health declaration on the Sierra Leone Health Travel Portal within 72 hours before travel, and keep the confirmation.
- **Malaria**: the risk is high everywhere, all year. Take antimalarial tablets and use repellent and a mosquito net.
- **Other risks**: cholera and other water-borne diseases spread in the rainy season. Rabies is present. Ask a travel clinic about vaccines at least 8 weeks before you go.
- **Water**: tap water is not safe to drink. Drink bottled or boiled water, and avoid ice.
- **Medical care**: hospitals are very limited, even in Freetown, and blood is not always screened. Many clinics outside Freetown accept only cash. Get travel insurance that covers medical evacuation.
- **Medicines**: bring enough of your own prescription medicines for the whole trip, in their original packaging.

Visas & entry

Most visitors need a visa, including UK, EU and US citizens. Citizens of most West African ECOWAS countries can enter without one.

- **eVisa**: apply online before you travel with Sierra Leone Immigration eVisa. This is the easiest option.
- **Visa on arrival**: you can also get a visa at Freetown International Airport in Lungi. For UK citizens and many others the fee is USD 80, paid in cash. Fees depend on your nationality.
- **Length of stay**: a single-entry visa allows a stay of up to 30 days.
- **Passport**: it must be valid for at least 6 months after the date of your visa application, with a blank page.
- **Yellow fever**: you must carry a yellow fever vaccination certificate (see health).
- **Airport security fee**: all passengers pay a USD 25 airport security fee. You can pay it online in advance.

> Visa and entry requirements change frequently. Verify current requirements with the official immigration authority or your country's embassy before travel.

Etiquette

- **Greetings**: always greet people before you ask a question or start business. Ask how they are, and wait for the answer.
- **Respect**: be polite and patient with elders, chiefs and officials. In villages, visit the chief first when you arrive with a guide.
- **Dress**: dress modestly in towns, mosques and churches. Keep swimwear for the beach.
- **Religion**: most people are Muslim, and a large minority is Christian. The two faiths live together closely, and many families have members of both. Take off your shoes before you enter a mosque.
- **Photos**: ask before you photograph people, especially at markets.
- **Bargaining**: prices in markets and taxi fares are negotiable. Agree the price before you buy or get in.
- **Right hand**: use your right hand to eat, give and receive things.

Holidays & opening hours

On public holidays, government offices and banks close, and many shops close too. Markets often stay open. The Muslim holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha follow the Islamic calendar, so their dates move earlier each year.

Public holidays

Jan 1	New Year's Day
Feb 18	Armed Forces Day
Mar 8	International Women's Day
Apr 27	Independence Day
May 1	Labour Day
Dec 25	Christmas Day
Dec 26	St. Stephen's Day
movable — Mar/Apr	Easter Monday
movable — Mar/Apr	Good Friday
movable — Islamic calendar	Eid al-Fitr
movable — Islamic calendar	Eid al-Adha
movable — Islamic calendar	Prophet's Birthday (Maulid)

Shops usually open Monday to Saturday from morning until early evening. Sunday is quiet, and many businesses close.

Getting around

- **From the airport**: Freetown International Airport is at Lungi, across the wide Sierra Leone River estuary from Freetown. There is no bridge yet. Most visitors take a water taxi, which takes 30 to 45 minutes and runs to Aberdeen in Freetown. Sea Coach Express and SeaBird are the two reliable operators, with life jackets and night lights. A slower ferry runs only when there is enough demand. The road around the estuary takes about 3 hours and should not be used after dark.
- **With a driver**: the safest way to travel around the country is a hired car with a local driver, ideally a 4x4 for rural trips.
- **By road**: there is no passenger train. Shared taxis and minibuses link the towns. They are cheap but crowded, and accidents are common.
- **By boat**: small boats take visitors to Tasso Island, Bunce Island and the Banana Islands. Use operators with life jackets, and do not travel in rough seas.
- **Rainy season**: from about May to October, heavy rain makes many rural roads very slow or impassable. Plan long trips in the dry season.

Driving

- **Licence**: you need an International Driving Permit.
- **Road conditions**: main roads between Freetown and the larger towns are paved, but many other roads are unpaved and full of potholes. Many vehicles are overloaded or in poor repair.
- **Night**: do not drive outside the Freetown Peninsula after dark. Roads have little or no lighting, and many vehicles have no lights.
- **Traffic**: Freetown has heavy traffic jams, especially on the narrow roads to the beaches.
- **Tolls**: the main highway out of Freetown has toll gates. Pay in cash, in leones.
- **Accidents**: crowds can gather after a crash. Follow police instructions and stay away from large crowds.
- **Photos**: do not photograph bridges, police or checkpoints.
- **Fuel**: stations are attended, and you pay in cash. Petrol is usually called "petrol" and diesel "diesel". Fill up in towns, because stations are rare in rural areas.

PETROL
Petrol

DIESEL
Diesel

Drive on the right

No motorway vignette needed

Toll gates on the main highway out of Freetown (Wellington–Masiaka) and some other major highways. Pay in cash, in leones, at the barrier.

Food & drink

Rice is the centre of almost every meal in Sierra Leone. Lunch is the main meal. Rice comes with a rich sauce, often made with palm oil, fish or meat, and leaves such as cassava leaves or potato leaves. Groundnut stew and okra sauce are also common. Fufu, a soft dough made from cassava, is eaten with soups. Along the coast, grilled fish and fresh lobster are cheap and very good. Food is often spicy, so ask for less pepper if you prefer it mild.

Locals eat at small cook shops and market stalls. Street snacks include roasted corn, fried plantain, fried dough balls and *binch akara*, bean fritters. To drink, try ginger beer, fresh coconut water, bissap made from hibiscus and palm wine. Star beer is the local lager. Freetown also has Lebanese, Indian and international restaurants.

What to eat & drink

LUNCH

Jollof rice
Rice cooked in a spicy tomato sauce, popular at parties.

DINNER

Grilled fish
Fresh fish grilled on the beach or at street stalls.

SNACKS & STREET FOOD

Bean fritters · binch akara
Fried black-eyed pea fritters sold on the street.

Fried plantain
Ripe plantain fried in palm or vegetable oil.

DRINKS

Ginger beer
Strong, spicy homemade ginger drink.

Palm wine · poyo
Mildly alcoholic sap of the palm tree.

Star beer
The local lager.

SIGNATURE DISHES

Cassava leaves · plasas
Pounded cassava leaves cooked in palm oil with fish or meat, served with rice.

Potato leaves
Sweet-potato leaf stew with palm oil and fish or meat, served with rice.

Groundnut stew
Peanut sauce with chicken or fish, served with rice.

Okra sauce
Thick okra stew with fish or meat, served with rice or fufu.

Fufu
Soft fermented cassava dough eaten with soups.

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Where to explore

Sierra Leone's main sights are on and around the Freetown Peninsula. The rainforest and the mountains in the east and north need more time and a good driver.

Freetown

- Freetown is the capital and the base for most trips. Visit the National Museum, and walk the busy streets around Big Market and Dove Cot Market for crafts, fabrics and food. The famous Cotton Tree, the symbol of the city for more than two centuries, fell in a storm in May 2023.
- Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, in the forest above Freetown, cares for rescued chimpanzees. Book a guided visit in advance.

Freetown Peninsula beaches

- South of Freetown, the peninsula has long white-sand beaches. River No. 2 has white sand where a river meets the sea, surrounded by forested hills.
- Tokeh Beach is a long white-sand beach with a few resorts.
- Bureh Beach is the home of the Bureh Beach Surf Club, with surf lessons and simple beach huts.
- From Kent, at the southern tip of the peninsula, boats go to the Banana Islands, with quiet beaches, snorkelling and old colonial ruins.

Sierra Leone River

- Bunce Island, next to Tasso Island, holds the ruins of a British slave-trading fort from the 18th century. Thousands of enslaved Africans were shipped from here to North America. It is reached by boat from Freetown.

East and north

- Tiwai Island, on the Moa River in the south-east, is a community-run wildlife sanctuary. It has 11 primate species and rare pygmy hippos, and simple accommodation. In 2025 it became part of Sierra Leone's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Gola-Tiwai Complex.
- Outamba-Kilimi National Park, near the border with Guinea in the north, protects savanna and forest with chimpanzees, hippos and other wildlife. Facilities are very basic.
- Mount Bintumani, in the Loma Mountains in the north-east, is the highest mountain in Sierra Leone. Climbing it needs a guided trek of several days.

DATA SOURCES

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