



Kambia Hospital Appeal

Rebuilding Kambia District Hospital

Visitors Guide

History

The origin of the name “Sierra Leone” (Lion Mountain) is obscure, as the country never belonged to either Portuguese or Spanish. The name was probably given by sailors to the hills of Freetown peninsular. The country first became a British Crown Colony in 1808 and was granted independence on April 26th 1961. Liberated slaves formed the colony of Freetown, (the Krios), while inland the country retained its tribal pattern.

From 1968 to 1985 the country was ruled by Siaka Stevens, who became President in 1971, when Sierra Leone became a republic. Maj. General Momoh, who was ousted in a military coup in April 1992, succeeded him. Rebel incursions over the border from Liberia under the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) began in the South and East of Sierra Leone at around the same time.

Gen. Momoh was followed by Captain Valentine Strasser, who was only 27 years of age when he took power in 1992 under the auspices of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). Another army officer, Johnny Paul Koroma, took over from Strasser for a short time.

A democratically elected government under President Kabbah was restored in 1995. However, rebel activity increased in spite of a peace accord signed with the rebels, led by Corporal Foday Sankoh, in Lome in 1996. This was short-lived, and the rebels gained control of nearly all the country except Freetown. President Kabbah was forced to leave the country, and was only able to return with the assistance of United Nations and British troops.

Peace was finally declared in January 2002, and all the country is now back in control of the government after ten years of civil war. A Special Court and Truth and Reconciliation Commission have been set up to try and reconcile the two sides.

Geography

Sierra Leone is on the West Coast of Africa, between Guinea to the north and east, and Liberia in the south. Guinea was formerly a French colony, whereas Liberia was formed by liberated American slaves. In Liberia, a civil war is still in progress between the government of Charles Taylor and LURD rebels.

Sierra Leone lies between seven and ten degrees north of the equator, and is about the same longitude as the UK. Time in Sierra Leone is Greenwich Mean Time.

The country is comparable in size to Scotland and has a population of about five million. Being tropical, night and day are about twelve hours each throughout the year, from seven to seven. There are no real seasons such as Spring and Autumn, the main change being between the dry season (November to May), and the wet (May to November). Temperatures are generally between 20 and 30 degrees C. throughout the year.

Economically, the country has considerable potential, with diamond mining, bauxite, rutile for titanium, timber, cocoa, coffee and fishing. However, thanks to corruption, mismanagement, expropriation, and the civil war, Sierra Leone is now ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world.

Politically, the country is divided into three provinces: north, east and south. Kambia district is in the north eastern part of the northern province, and forms part of the border with Guinea. Kambia district is composed of six chiefdoms, with Kambia town as its main centre. Kambia town has a population of 60,000, the total district population being about 200,000.

Language

The official language is English, but not everyone understands this. Krio (“Creole”) is the equivalent of pidgin, and is understood by most people. Native English speakers will not find it easy to understand at first, although the origin of words such as such “runbelleh” (diarrhoea), “get-belleh” (pregnant), “marklate” (inoculation) and “Ow de body?” (How are you?) are obvious. Everyone speaks their own tribal language, but even neighbouring tribes may not be able to understand each other, hence the use of Krio as the lingua franca.

Transport

Kambia town is 90-100 miles from Freetown, but since half of this is along dirt roads, it takes about three hours to drive. It is possible to go to Freetown and back in a day. There is no functioning railway in Sierra Leone, so all travel within the country is by road. There are metalled roads around Freetown, as far as Port Loko, which is about halfway to Kambia, although even these have numerous potholes. Usual travel is by Land Rover or similar vehicle, with a driver. Public transport, in the form of buses and taxis, is plentiful but precarious.

Currency

The currency is the leone and is all paper. There are roughly 2,300 leones to the pound. As in the rest of Africa, it is probably best to take cash (US dollars or pounds sterling) and change it on arrival. The cost of living is not expensive, so you can probably live on a hundred pounds for up to a month, although it is best to have some extra for emergencies.

Communication

Communication has improved considerably with the advent of emails and mobile phones. The national telecommunications provider, Sierra Tel, is not always reliable. It is possible to make international calls from the main Post Office in Freetown, but these will probably need to be booked. It is also possible to send a fax from Freetown but not from Kambia. Emails can be sent from Kambia
Post or packages are best sent via DHL.

Services

Electricity supplies are idiosyncratic everywhere, unless you have your own generator, and batteries to start it. There is usually light at night in Freetown. Otherwise light after dark is supplied by kerosene lamps and cooking fires. A good torch, even a solar powered one, is very useful, if not essential.

Water supplies are also variable. In Freetown, there may be a pump with tanks on the roof to allow running water. In Kambia, water is more often raised from a well.

Food and Drink

Only drink bottled water, beer (Star lager, brewed from rice, or Guinness, occasionally Heineken or Dutch lager), tea, coffee or palm wine. Almost anything else is hazardous! Fresh milk is virtually unobtainable, although it is possible to find yoghurt in Freetown, if you're lucky! (The Lebanese supermarkets in Freetown supply almost anything) You will have to be content with dried milk in your tea and coffee.

Meat is scarce, the commonest being chicken, goat and fish. Rice is plentiful, especially in Kambia, and is the staple diet. Vegetables include yams, kassava leaves, sweet potatoes and "Irish potatoes". Fruit is also plentiful, particularly mangoes, oranges, bananas and plantains. Cola nuts are chewed for the mild stimulatory and appetite suppressant effect, but they are very bitter and not to be recommended. Salads and ice cream are sometimes available but probably best avoided, because of the doubt about the origin of the water used in washing or making them.

Health

Innoculation against yellow fever, cholera, typhoid, polio, tetanus and hepatitis A are recommended. It is best to start these at least six weeks before departure. If in doubt, consult your GP, public health laboratory, or the London School of Tropical Medicine (071 388 8989). Malaria prophylaxis can be bought over the counter from most pharmacists, and remember to take it as instructed. A good insect repellent is worth the cost, and it is probably also best to take some anti-diarrhoeal agent, as well as a course of broad spectrum antibiotic, and some paracetamol.

Mosquito nets are advisable in Kambia.

Avoid paddling or swimming in lake or river water as it is a good way to catch schistosomiasis (bilharzia), a disease best avoided.

Do not forget to take out reliable health insurance.

If you are seriously ill while in Sierra Leone, it is probably best to go to one of the mission hospitals, or contact the British High Commission.

General

Bribes are not recommended. Theft may occur, but is probably less likely in Kambia, where you will be known, than Freetown.

Visas

Obtained from the Sierra Leone High Commission in London. Allow three working days for processing.

Clothing

European summer clothing should be suitable. Jackets and ties are not necessary.

Bibliography

You will find it difficult to obtain reliable up-to-date information! The best guide book is the Rough Guide to West Africa. More up to date news and information can be found on websites linked to www.kambahospital.org.uk.

Finally

It is worth pointing out that the Kambia Hospital Appeal cannot be responsible for your visit, and you travel at your own risk.