

Promised Land

Similar to its eastern neighbor, Liberia, Sierra Leone is recovering from a recent, brutal civil war. The war was over resources (largely diamonds) and eventually between the two major ethnic groups, the Mendes and Temnes. The government and rebels battled back and forth until one last major rebel offensive - Operation No Living Things – was halted by the government. In West Africa they don't have public relations firms and idealistic phrases like Operation Enduring Freedom; they just bluntly state what it is. Then the war ended, the UN helped disarm and IMATT currently is training forces. (A Brit who was worked for IMATT told me it's difficult because there is not enough petrol for missions and tribal leaders don't want to give up power but the younger people are more accepting of promotions by performance). Everything is amazingly peaceful considering hands were getting chopped off and people raped and killed just ten years ago.

The capital of Freetown in Sierra Leone (or Sa Lone to locals) is an illustration of this spirit. One of the locals, Batch, who I met on the bus to Freetown, was helping me in the city. We went to the beach in Aberdeen that attracts many westerners and wealthier locals. On the way to the beach, he showed me where the war prisons were in the late 90's and early 2000's. He didn't talk much about what he was doing at this time but talked freely about the state of the country in a calm and unbiased fashion. The movie *Blood Diamonds* is mandatory viewing for anyone interested in this war. I asked Batch if this movie was accurate or if it was "Hollywoodized". He said it was accurate and that the producers could have made it gorier if they wanted.



Batch also helped me with visas for Liberia and Ghana - the women at the Ghana Embassy wanted me to buy her lunch in order to get the visa but I refused and eventually got it. Batch owns a small clothing shop in Freetown while a brother has a fishing business throughout West Africa while his cousin is in the gold and diamond business and is the big man. For \$40,000 a year people can get a permit from the government to drill and the cousin is working with Brazilian investors who have brought over the drilling machines as the diamonds are four to seven meters deep. They don't think there is many big diamonds left but there is enough to make their business profitable. Batch doesn't have the resources that his brother or cousin has, but he was incredibly generous. He bought me food, paid for taxis and a new pair of sunglasses and his girlfriend did my laundry. This generosity is quite common in these war torn areas as I met other travelers who were given free food and had their accommodations paid for.

Regent is the nearest village to the Tacugama Chimpanzee Project, which is where abused chimps (many of whom were traumatized during the civil war) are cared for, put into groups of 20 – 30 where a leader emerges and eventually released into the wild. The chimps carry many of the diseases humans do and

people with the flu can't visit because it may transmit. Even some of the medicines used to cure the diseases are the same. The reserve seems to have the interest of the animals in mind rather than just being a tourist trap. The guides like to tell the story of an albino chimp that was adopted. There was a concern over whether the other chimps would reject the white furred chimp. But they accepted the albino and the obvious connection to humans accepting each other regardless of skin color was made.

Tiwai Island, via the city of Bo which serves as a major diamond capital, is a peaceful small island. I was woken only by the sounds of lizards scampering about on top of my tent. Colobus monkeys and several other types of monkeys live on the island. The main animal people want to see is the rare pygmy hippos but they are timid and most visitors don't get to see them. They are just 10 pounds when they are born but weigh 200 pounds by the end of the first year. There are motion sensor cameras on the island as they are part of a research project. April, from the University of Georgia, is a grad student who is spending nine months on the island studying them. She showed me some of the pictures of them taken by the motion sensor cameras. She had lived in a remote village in Niger for two years as part of the Peace Corps so she is used to being isolated. In Niger, she was given a camel so she could go to the market and they decided to give her a pregnant one so she wouldn't fall off.



Liberia and its capital Monrovia is rougher and shows more of the scars of the war. I had trouble finding a hotel for under \$100 but eventually with the help of a local found one for ten dollars that once had a restaurant and casino. The main problem is that it was hit by a missile during the war and also a fire destroyed floors five through eight. After convincing me the top floors wouldn't collapse, the owner put me in his room on the fourth floor which was serviceable. There was no electricity or running water in the hotel (actually there was water that dripped down from the roof because of the fire) but he did give me some water so I could take a bucket shower and a couple candles which served as lights. The place would be condemned in the US but many decrepit buildings are still in use as the rebuilding process is slow.

Another destroyed yet functional building is the historical Masonic Temple. This building was destroyed

in the 1980 coup that overthrew the last leader of Americo-Liberian lineage. Liberia was started as a "Back to Africa" country for American free blacks (Sierra Leone was the British version). The capital of Monrovia is named after US President James Monroe who was the US president when the first of some 16,000 blacks began to return to Africa in the 1820's. Ironically, the American blacks subjugated and enslaved the local population and set up an oppressive and corrupt government in which only they, the Americo-Liberians, could lead. Many joined the Masonic Order, thus the temple became a primary

target when the first local took control in 1980.

The role of the Americo-Liberians and the Masonic Temple can be explored at the National Museum. The museum houses a Mason's Grand Masters Thrown and murals of many of the ex-presidents. There are some of the local masks as well as old toys. A guided tour, which isn't really necessary as it's small and the exhibits are well-captioned, is free but they ask for money to help rebuild the museum. The slow process of rebuilding the museum is a palpable analogy for the rebuilding of the country.

One doesn't need to be reminded of the need to rebuild when walking through Liberia. There is garbage throughout the city waiting to be picked up by nonsexist sanitation crews. There are signs reminding Liberians to pay their taxes so such services can be completed. The waterfront market is a bustling marketplace but is surrounded by destroyed buildings. Many amputees without arms and legs ask others for small change. A small city beach, Miami Beach, allows one of the few havens from the sensory overload which is Monrovia.



One has to pull for Sierra Leone and Liberia. Both of these countries were created to be an almost promised land for enslaved blacks but suffered from a vicious history, including an especially brutal recent past. The latest civil wars have put an obvious strain on these countries yet the rebirth seems to be coming. The people persist despite this strain.