

# Nature, culture, opportunity

## SPECIAL FEATURE

Visitors to Liberia will find a hospitable and fascinating society

Once again a member of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Liberia is developing a sustainable travel and tourism industry based on marketing and creating an international branding image.

Even before readmission to UNWTO in November 2011, the government and private sector had been working hard to develop the travel and tourism industry, a task given further impetus under the presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Inbound tourism is steadily recovering thanks to active marketing campaigns by the Tourism Ministry in traditional and potential source markets. At the same time, the government is pushing ahead with reconciliation, peace, and security initiatives to open up and stabilise more areas of the country after the 14-year conflict.

### Cultural Vitality

Visitors to Liberia will find a hospitable and fascinating society. The population is multi-cultural, with 16 major ethnic groups. Christianity and Islam are the two major religions but Buddhism, Bahai, Mormonism and other faiths are also practiced in the country. The country's rich and diverse culture and artistic traditions are expressed through carved masks, dance, and storytelling, and remain particularly vibrant in the interior where secret initiation societies still play a central role in growing up, serving as important repositories of traditional knowledge and life skills. The music of Liberia has evolved from traditional West African tribal folk songs to inclusion of reggae vibes by the likes of Miatta Fahnbulleh and American influenced Liberian hip-hop (Hipco). Liberia has also produced some acclaimed novelists and writers such as Jallah K.K. Kamara, Bai T. Moore and the recently deceased playwright and cultural icon Peter Ballah. Visual arts are a key part of Liberian culture, and the late Vanyard Richards (killed during the war) pioneered a style of painting and sculpture which emerged from the centuries-old tradition of tribal mask decoration into a uniquely Liberian take on African art.

### Wondrous Nature

Thanks to its natural assets, Liberia's tourism potential is considerable. Its 350-mile-long Atlantic

coastline boasts innumerable, unspoiled beaches that alternate with humid river deltas and tranquil tidal lagoons such as Lake Piso, a 40-square-mile open coastal lagoon west of Monrovia that is now part of a 300-square mile protected wetland that is a nursery and spawning ground for fish and sea turtles and a feeding and roosting place for large numbers of sea and shore birds.

Liberia's dense, humid rainforests make up 45 per cent of Africa's remaining tropical forest cover, and are alive with the screeching and twittering of hundreds of birds, who are kept company by forest elephants, pygmy hippos and other wildlife padding around the forest floor. The potential for ecotourism is huge.

Sapo National Park is of special significance, 505 square miles bounded on the west by the Sinoe River and on the north by the Putu mountains, with all the major wildlife species of the Upper Guinea forests. Mammals include water chevrotains – primitive, tusked, rabbit-sized, looking half-pig-half-deer – golden cats, big, forest-dwelling drill baboons, seven species of monkeys, seven species of duiker antelopes, three kinds of armoured pangolins, as well as river otters, giant forest hogs, and African civets. There are hundreds of species of butterflies. Birds include African fish eagles, Senegalese kingfishers, great blue turacos, African gray parrots – the largest parrot in Africa – bee-eaters, sunbirds, rollers, and egrets.

Among the other natural wonders of central Liberia are the Kpatawee Waterfalls in Bong County, the Nimba Mountain Range in Nimba County, and the Sapo National Park in Sinoe County.

There are also many historical and landmark sites dating back to the country's founding by black settlers from the United States in the 19th century, such as the Providence Baptist Church, the J.J. Roberts Monument (Ducor Hotel), the United Methodist Church (Nimba), the National Museum, and Hotel Africa, in Virginia, Montserrado County.

Monrovia, sprawling across a narrow peninsula between the Mesurado River and the sea, has suffered badly during the past two decades, but is gradually being rebuilt and smartened up. It has a friendly, small-town atmosphere and a lively restaurant and bar scene. In the heart of the capital, below the Gabriel Tucker Bridge, lies Providence Island, where the first settlers met the indigenous peoples of the area.

### An Investment Opportunity

There are huge investment opportunities to establish hospitality training schools build and run hotels and beach resorts, provide domestic air transport and to renovate domestic airports.

Liberia's two main gateways are the Roberts International Airport and the Spriggs Payne Airport. The former is the primary aviation facility for the nation and has recently seen an increase in international flights due to high demand for air transport to the country. Delta Airlines and Air France are among the new entrants in the market for air transport services in Liberia. Delta Airlines launched schedule flights to the country in late-2010 and is also the first American carrier to fly to Liberia in twenty years. In early-2011, Air France also expanded its offer of services in West Africa by introducing two weekly flights to the capital city of Monrovia. The arrival of new air carriers has helped to open the sky over the country for business as well as for travel and tourism activities.

Liberia possesses huge, and as yet untapped, opportunities for travel and tourism development and can expect to see modest growth now that peace and calm reign. It may still be a long way from becoming a mass-tourism destination, but tourism in Liberia can still develop into one of the largest contributors to revitalise the national economy, if properly managed. The main challenges facing Liberia's nascent tourism industry are inadequate infrastructure and lingering perceptions of insecurity. Both of these constraining factors are likely to be mitigated as reconstruction proceeds and investment begins to flow.

Meanwhile, the government is addressing key issues such as improving access to finance for SMEs, as well as reducing the cost of doing business. The government is also working on ways to build links and partnerships between young Liberian entrepreneurs and investors abroad for mentoring and support, and at the same time promoting education, jobs and skills training in the sector.

Moving forward, the country should be able to access the international tourism market, including the significant niche sector of the Liberian diaspora, particularly in the United States.

There is also hope that the industry will recover in the long-term as a result of government efforts to boost its development. The Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism is planning a major tour to identify potential tourism sites across the country. Draft policy has already been prepared in collaboration with various stakeholders, including the Liberia Maritime Authority, Forestry Development Authority, Environmental Protection Agency, Commerce and Finance Ministries to enhance the tourism sector.



The Kpatawee Waterfall is Liberia's largest



Liberia has a 350-mile-long Atlantic coastline



Lewis Brown, Minister of Information, Tourism and Culture, is heading a renewed drive to bolster tourism in Liberia