

Tourism in Sierra Leone

Global trends show an increase in travellers' desire for authentic and immersive experiences with nature and communities. As an 'undiscovered' destination, Sierra Leone is in a unique position to capitalise on its biodiversity and rich cultures.



Industry snapshot

The government has identified tourism as one of the key sectors for the diversification of the economy and has set ambitious targets for its growth. Currently, it provides livelihoods for over 41,000 people and contributes 2.6% of GDP.

The UK is the largest source of international visitors to Sierra Leone. This is followed by Germany, Western Europe, the USA and Asia. Continental and intra-tourism in Africa is increasing with about four out of 10 international tourists originating from within Africa. Reasons cited include the high cost of travel outside of Africa, the relatively short distances between countries, low or no cost visas, fewer travel restrictions and familiarity with regional traditions, customs and food.¹

The recently formed Hospitality and Tourism Industry Association is becoming an effective unified voice. Other tourism sector groups include the Sierra Leone Tourism Federation, the Hotel Association and the Tour Operators Association.

The National Tourism Board (NTB) has identified ecotourism, culture and nature as their strategic promotional areas. Their key target markets are the USA and Western Europe – mainly the UK, Germany, Nordic countries and Switzerland. In addition, the NTB has implemented a target market diversification strategy to accelerate growth in the sector.

The challenges

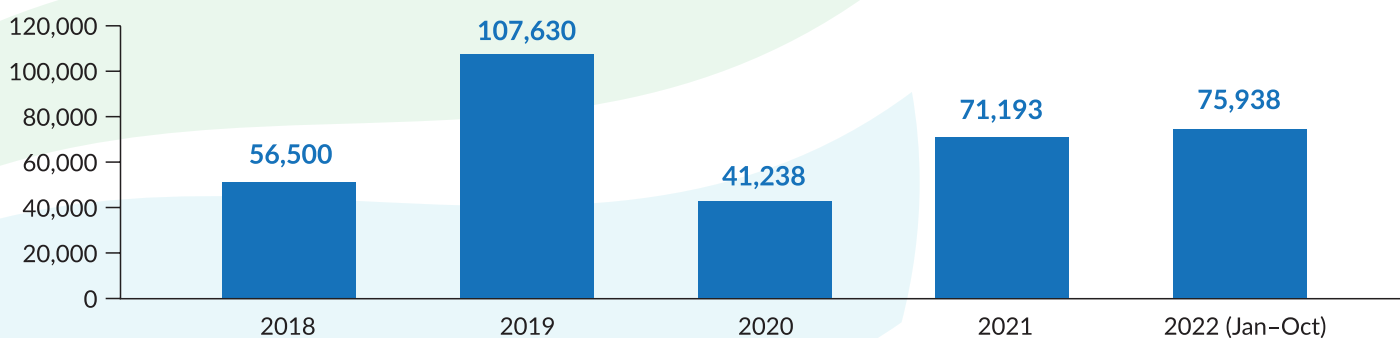
Although Sierra Leone is bouncing back from the COVID-19 crisis, the tourism industry recognises that it has other challenges to tackle, such as brand awareness, infrequency of direct flights, quality control issues and a lack of skilled workers.

Increasing destination brand awareness, both domestically and internationally, is a priority and with the support of the World Bank's Economic Diversification Project, the NTB has developed a new brand identity, 'Explore Freedom', with an accompanying website.

There are no direct flights from the UK and the small airport struggles to cope with the increasing number of travellers, but a major airport makeover under a Build, Operate, Transfer (BOT) agreement between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Summa Group, will significantly expand handling capacity. However, key challenges to emerge from the new modern and more efficient airport, may include higher landing costs for airlines and ensuring that a better airport experience for passengers, is matched by the onward journey to their destination.

Standardised quality control of tourism services and products and a hotel rating system would help improve standards and reassure travellers. Greater availability of vehicles with the capacity to transport large groups (such as cruise ship passengers) to tourism sites is essential, and while the government is tackling the infrastructure deficit, much remains to be done.

Sierra Leone Tourism Arrivals



Sierra Leone Tourism Arrivals, National Tourism Board

The shortage of skilled labour in the sector is another hinderance to its development. There is also a need to improve waste management and tackle illegal activities such as poaching and logging which threaten the natural beauty and biodiversity of the country, thereby potentially damaging tourism opportunities.

Most tour organisers will only work with a Destination Management Company (DMC) who will ensure their clients have an enjoyable holiday by overseeing logistics and other arrangements. This adds another layer of costs.

The opportunity

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist to attract investment in this sector. Sierra Leone is a culturally rich country with unique selling points:

- Interesting biodiversity
- New destination for the tourism market
- English is widely spoken
- Beautiful beaches and mountains
- Convenient stop during trans-Africa trips
- Variety of primates, birds and other wildlife
- Vibrant traditions, history and cultures

The government is supportive of the sector. It is improving the policy and legal environment, and developing the relevant infrastructure. Tourism receipts, which were hit by COVID-19, have doubled since 2021 and the new airport is expected to be operational early in 2023.

There is an opportunity to focus efforts on the following target groups: (i) adventure/eco-travellers who seek trips 'off the beaten track' to new destinations; (ii) heritage travellers who are interested in culture/history/traditions; (iii) ancestry-inspired travellers who are visiting friends and relatives; and (iv) winter sun worshippers who want to escape the grey skies of Europe.

What will it take?

It will be important to continue to invite specialist travel companies to Sierra Leone on familiarisation visits to showcase the destination.

As most travel organisers will not enter an African destination without a DMC, the nurturing and support of local DMCs and those in neighbouring countries, who undertake multi-country itineraries, is vital. Showcasing the DMCs' work to travel companies on familiarisation visits will build confidence in their ability to deliver.

The government is aware that strengthening a coordinated sector and enhancing a favourable investment climate is key to addressing sector-specific regulatory constraints that impede growth. This will increase the possibility of investment in the sector, thereby driving systems change.

Recommendations

- 1 Enhance quality standards; tackle issues and inhibitors to business performance; develop workforce skills for the tourism and hospitality industries
- 2 Support domestic and international awareness campaigns that promote Sierra Leone as a tourism destination
- 3 Develop new attractions/experiences and enhance existing ones to expand the menu of possibilities on offer for tour operators and tourists

¹ Economic Development in Africa Report. (2017) United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

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