

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 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.

The challenges

Apart from external shocks such as COVID-19, there are many challenges facing Sierra Leone's tourism sector. One of the most significant is the lack of destination brand awareness, both domestically and internationally.

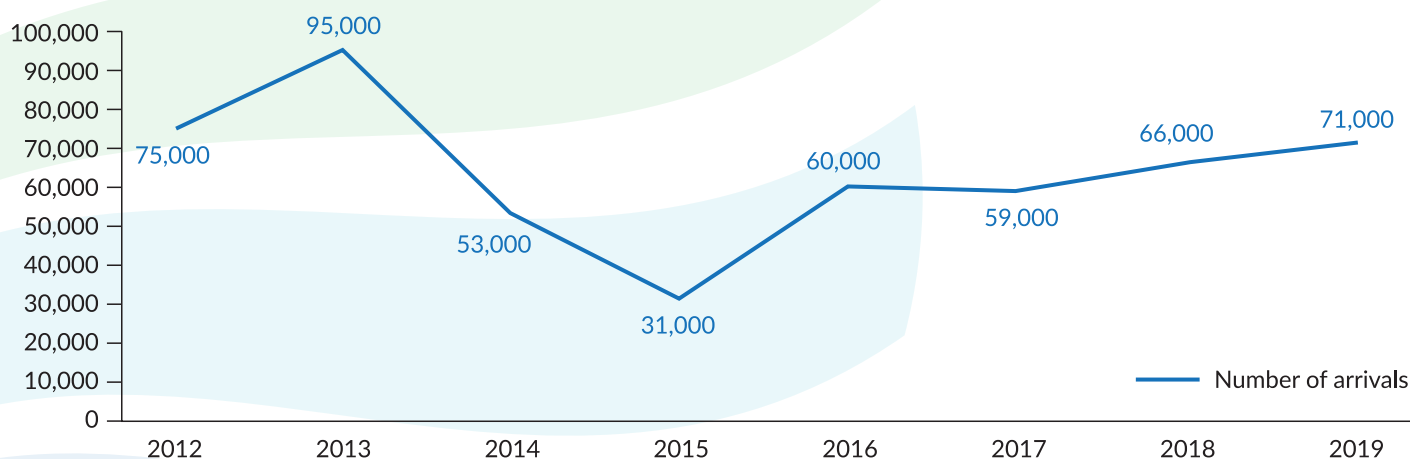
Invest Salone interviewed several African travel specialists and 80% had little knowledge of Sierra Leone or its tourism assets. They had largely negative perceptions of the country due to past events such as the civil war and Ebola and the belief that there is "nothing exciting to do in Sierra Leone".

There are no direct flights from the UK. The airport is small, often congested and inefficient. There is no reliable quality control of tourism services and products or a hotel rating system to improve standards and reassure travellers. The availability of vehicles with the capacity to transport large groups (such as cruise ship passengers) to tourism sites, is limited and infrastructure overall is inadequate.

There is a need to provide sector-specific training, improve waste management and tackle illegal activities such as poaching and logging which can result in tourists boycotting the country on ethical grounds.

Most tour organisers will only work with a Destination Management Company (DMC) because the possibility of arrangements going wrong is high. This adds another level of cost.

Sierra Leone international tourism



World Tourism Organisation, Yearbook of Tourism Statistics, Compendium of Tourism Statistics and data files.

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 wildlife
- Vibrant traditions, history and culture

The government is supportive of the sector and is improving the policy and legal environment, as well as developing relevant infrastructure. Already a new international airport is under construction.

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 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.

Strengthening a coordinated sector and enhancing a favourable investment climate is also 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 Develop local industry awareness, knowledge exchange and quality standards benchmarking; tackle issues and inhibitors to business performance; develop workforce skills for the tourism and hospitality industries
- 2 Develop fundamental requirements to facilitate ecotourism and wildlife and nature holiday experiences in Sierra Leone as a first approach mechanism
- 3 Develop a further portfolio of products with the private sector based on Sierra Leone's strengths, which can be used by DMCs and international tour operators as part of their Sierra Leone packages (e.g. adventure/ecotourism, heritage, visiting friends and family and winter sun and beaches)
- 4 Support domestic and international awareness campaigns that promote Sierra Leone as a tourism destination

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

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