

West Africa II



Liberia, Sierra Leone & Guinea

July 2016



Starting-up in Monrovia, Liberia...

With a short stop over in Monrovia, Liberia for 2 nights (actually quite enough) it took us nearly 1 ½ hour to get from Robertsfield International airport to **our hotel Mamba Point**. We ate at the restaurant in the hotel, as we arrived quite late. The hotel, probably the most expensive in town at 200 USD /night. This was also the only "safe" place to stay at during the civil war a few years back.

We took a local driver to take us around the city to see the sights worth seeing. **Broad-street, which is the main street and the local market to mention a few sights**. The local market was really interesting – as always were colourful with lots of local produce on offer. We were well received and could photograph without too much hazel.

The few foreigners you see in town are NGO's, UN-personnel or embassy staff. Tourism non-existent at the moment. With recent civil-wars and Ebola breakout only in 2014, no one seems to want to visit this country. We went to see also the nice beach areas on the Atlantic coast such as Thinkers beach. Fantastic beaches with strong under-currents and absolutely no people around. This could be paradise if it was just a bit more accessible to us up in Europe.

Monrovia is otherwise a real shit-hole. Undeveloped, run-down, un-maintained. This is all much due to the war and recent Ebola break-out. Mme. Ellen Johnson is still president, but can not run a third term for office. She is running a hard-line campaign on "anti-corruption", but is said to be part of the old establishment. She is also accused of having supported Charles Taylor who took over power in the 90-ies in a military coup.



...Friendly people,
but high risk at
night in the city!

We had lunch at the Terra Cotta. An OK place, but nothing out of the ordinary. Mme. Ellen is said to come here from time to time to lunch with dignitaries. We also spent some time to rest up at the top-notch pool at our hotel. We tried the "Living-room" on the top-floor of Hotel Royal. This was recently renovated and is now the "talk-of-the-town" restaurant – Japanese-Fusion with good wine list. We really enjoyed this place which was difficult to picture in Monrovia – it could have been anywhere in the major capitols of the world. Really superb and highly recommendable.

Our "personal" guide did not show up on our last morning here, as agreed, to take us to the airport so we had to arrange for an alternate arrangement. We managed and made good time before the almost empty aircraft (Royal Air Maroc) taking us the short distance to Freetown in Sierra Leone. It is not a problem to find taxis/drivers, however a word of warning around airport upon arrival – as there are many crocks and potentially dangerous drivers there to find business. We were recommended by the hotel to be very careful upon selecting transport. The hotels also offer this service.

Also it is not a city where you roam around at night. Very few street-lights at night/evenings and potentially a high risk of being robbed.

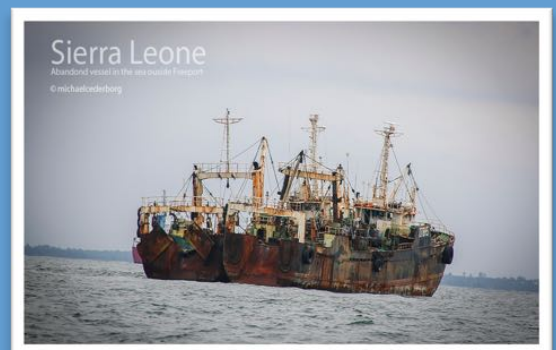
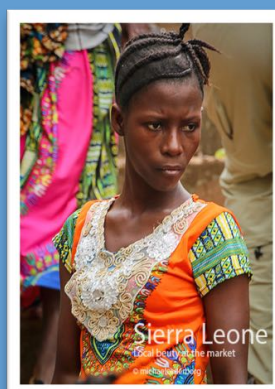




The colourful city of Freetown! Markets and streets full of activity in the city....

We arrived more or less on time to Freetown at Lungi International Airport (50 minutes flight). Yet another tiny airport with very basic arrival/departure halls. We were only a couple getting off at this stop – so it was easy to get through the customs inspection. The usual crowd outside pulling at you for their services. We had already arranged for transport which meant a short drive to the waterfront and from there take the speedboat to the other side of the lagoon. With speedboat this took about 20 minutes and cost 40 USD using Sea Coach Express. There are two other operators to take you across. There is a road option, which takes some 5-6 hours to get from the airport to town.

Upon arrival we were meet by a driver from our hotel: **The Swiss Spirit Hotel in Freetown**. After check-in and some lunch at the hotel (good Croquet Madame) we headed down to the city centre to explore the surroundings. **The Cotton Tree is probably the most famous landmark**. A tree which dates back to the 17th century of more – and was a landmark already during the slave-era.





The remarkable Fish market....

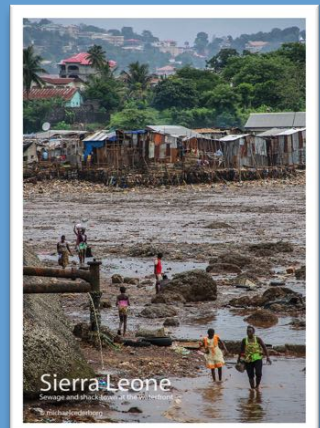
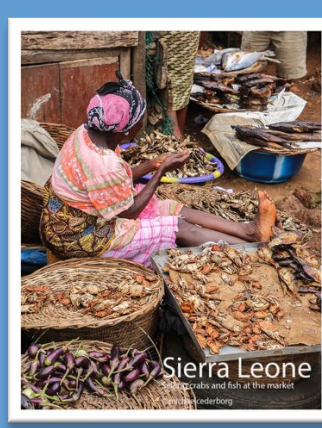
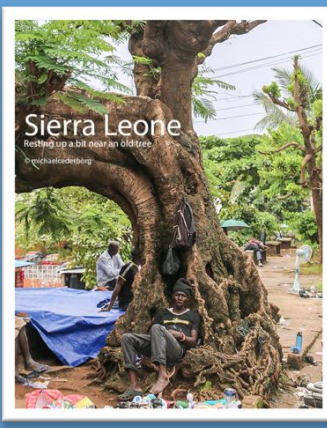
Where business is conducted with very little change over time

We walked around and visited the Fish- & vegetable market near the sea called "King Jimmy Market". Absolutely fabulous, very lively and colourful. An absolute must. We also stopped to see the King's Yard Gate built back in 1805. Here all the Krio re-settlers coming back from the Caribbean first entered to Freetown. It is also a landmark today. Also worth seeing is the "Old wharf steps" also known as the Portuguese stairs. This dates back to the 18th century when the Portuguese were here.

Stop at the small "shack-café" for a beer and mix with the locals. They are very chatty and easy to talk to. On the way you will also pass the old Boundary Cannon (one of three remaining). Would have looked nicer without the new yellow coat of paint.

There is a restaurant/café also next to the Cotton tree which is a nice place to stop for a coffee/beer and just enjoy the activity around the Cotton tree. When traveling back to our hotel, our driver took us the road through the more "colourful" and poorer areas of Freetown. Here we had to stop and wait for some time to let a funeral procession pass. Huge procession and very lively with music and chanting...

In the evening we opted for a restaurant called Roy at Hotel Roy down on Lumley Beach. Just beware of the heavy traffic. You can get stuck for hours – take the backroads to get there – quicker, even if a lot longer. We were also recommended Montana as an option. Hotel Roy is otherwise "in season" a hang out for people as it is on the beach. The food is quite OK. They also offer A/C rooms from 80-150 USD per room.



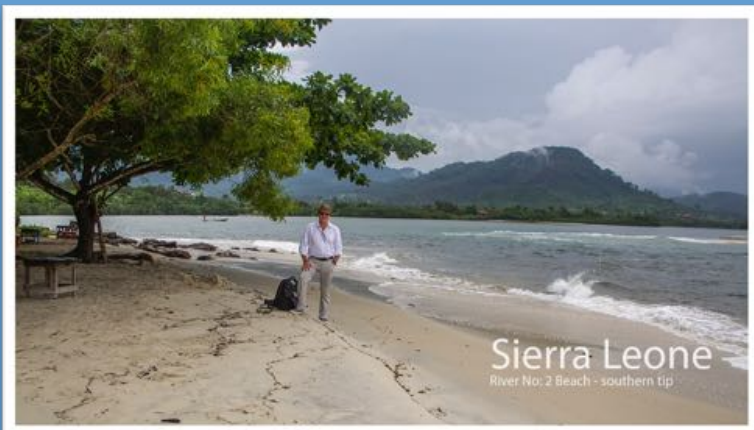


Down south of Freetown.... ...The beautiful beaches of No. 2 River beach ...

We also visited River No: 2 down the peninsula. This is a community operated establishment, where they also offer bungalow and food. The main season though is starting in November, when it is said to be quite crowded. Lovely “picture perfect” beaches with palm trees. We spent some time here, but did not stay overnight. They also offer boat-trips up-river to the water-fall for some 150,000 Le. Further down the peninsula – at Kent – it is possible to take boats out to the Banana Islands, where it is possible to stay overnight in bungalows. Here there are also some wild-life. Many locals hid here during the civil-war out in the bush. They also operate an eco-friendly stay in season.

The weather is a bit unpredictable at this time of year (I.e. July-August) as it is the rainiest season in the year. Do expect some rain showers during the day.

Taxi is relatively cheap in Freetown. We paid some 50-60 sek for 2 hours drive including waiting. Difficult to find taxis around as there are no tourists – so this is how to manage...





The Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary.... ...a safe-haven for Orphaned Chimpanzees for 20 years

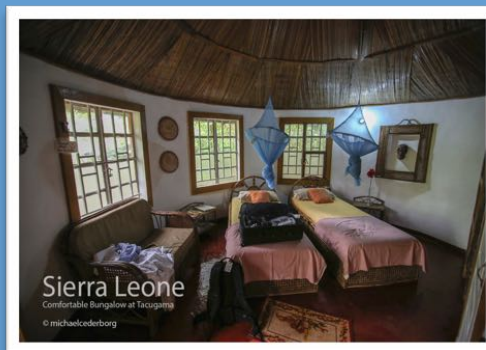
Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary: We travelled a relatively short trip from Freetown (40 minutes) to Tacugama up the hills. Beautifully situated on the hill-tops completely covered in rain forest. The last 15 minutes up-hill you'll require a 4-wheel drive vehicle. We spent 2 nights at the sanctuary. They have only 3 or 4 bungalows and there is no one else staying at the same time (but book ahead especially in high season) Web-site available.

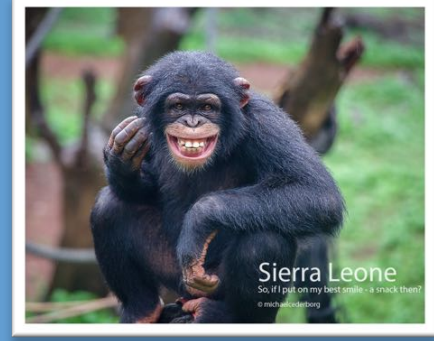
We have today been given a tour around the rehabilitation grounds. They take care of orphaned chimpanzees and have been active since 1995 – yet to relocate any chimpanzees into the wild. They also were in operation during the civil war which took place for over 10 years until when it ended some 10 years ago.



When it rains – it pours! An old saying which could not be more true here up in the hilly rain forest. It has rained all through the night and it still continues into the day. It is quite soothing actually, as I am now sitting under roof hearing the rain and looking out at the green lush forest all around me making these notes. Will wait a bit to venture out to see the waterfalls which are some 3-4 hours trekking from our bungalows.

They released a Civet cat into the wild today. We also had a chance of seeing a Duiker which had been taken in for rehab with a broken leg, which was snared by hunters in the forest. We spent another full day at the Sanctuary and met with the Park Director, who also founded the place back in 1995. Amazingly enough they managed to run it all through the Civil-war times as well as during the Ebola outbreak recently.





Chico, one of many Chimpanzees

...a five-stage rehabilitation program takes time...



We have decided to become donators and will adopt once Chimpanzee each. No, no, we will not box them up and ship them home to Sweden... They will stay where they belong and where they are best looked after before eventually being released out again into the wild.

We eventually left after 2 nights and 2 full days at the Sanctuary, being the only guest at the time. Pitch dark, consistent rain all through out, but we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly even so. Got good locally prepared meals and drank wine and beer on-mass. Having only a candle light sitting under palm-roof hearing the rain poring down outside – it could not get any better.



Overland from Tacugama to Pamelap at the Guinean border. We were picked up after breakfast, just as agreed with a pre-arranged driver, at 07:30 to be taken overland to the Guinean border. We were baffled by the excellent roads almost all the way from Freetown to Pamelap on the border. All UN-Financed and I great condition – not only in African standards. They are also constructing a new International Airport on the “right” side of the water so that their will be an easy access into Freetown, not having to rely on Speed-boats to het across in reasonable time. So instead of the scheduled 6 hours, we now reached the border in only 2,5 hours. Arrange locally and negotiate a rate to the border including the flexibility to stop where you want. The option is Poda-Poda departing from city centre if you want to go it local and real cheap.

We adopted a Chimpanzee each at Tacugama....





Worst possible road conditions....

Guinea has not been successful in attracting EU-funding...

The roads in the Guinean side were worse than worst. At certain sections almost impassable and many local boys were helping filling up the water-filled pot-holes and then a fine balancing act across what seemed at times as a small lake not knowing if the wheels would sink in completely.

Reaching Conakry around 2 PM we thought that we were home safe and soon to reach our hotel. No such luck. The traffic got hysteric as the roads got even worse. Our driver was getting agitated and started to do some craze crossings and overtaking. When a policeman stepped out in front of the car to stop us – he simply stepped on the gas and took off, almost overrunning the poor policeman. A second policeman was also trying to halt us – mind you the speed wasn't that high with the traffic so a third policeman managed to run up next to us and open the car door and hurl himself inside the car... Yes – we then did come to a stop. The local chief of police and a swarm of policemen blocked the car and were very angry to put it mildly. What made things worse was that the driver did not apologize, he simply stepped up the game and shouted back. I tried to calm the situation down by purchasing plastic bags of water and cigarettes for the policemen, which seemed to work in the beginning. We did not progress however and they demanded a very high "penalty fee" – especially since they were clear that we "the white faced and probably very wealthy tourists" had overpaid for the transport from the border.





Caught by the local police...

When our driver tried to escape from police road-blocks...



Things didn't exactly improve when I decided to leave for a short while with my camera (of course) to shoot some pictures of the local people selling goods, while the Police-driver negotiations continued. Then a group of local Military Gendarmerie saw me and got wind of the opportunity to make some extra money as well. So then we have the group of policemen + some military guys pulling at my camera and claiming that I had been photographing sensitive objects including people which was not OK in this predominantly Muslim country. Now, I got really worried and saw in front of me a long night in jail unless something could be negotiated. I had befriended one of the policemen a bit more and he of course seized the opportunity and broke in to support me including putting me back in the car with my camera. He did not do this only by good nature. It did cost a couple of bucks... But, hey it was really worth it – got really worried there for a while. So, back to the driver, who at this time had negotiated down his fee substantially, and we were on our way again after a long stop in the scorching heat in the outskirts of Conakry.





A Congested and run down Conakry

Also this city was being in very poor condition – no surprises...



We eventually arrived to our Hotel, the Chakra Hotel, a clean and good hotel for 90 USD / night owned by a German guy and his wife. We later made our way down to the old city centre near the water-front and tried the restaurant “Obama” built on stilts and bamboo out over the water. It looked really “NOT OK” from the outside, but to our surprise turned out to be a really great and cosy spot with good food for a reasonable price.



Conakry, I’m sorry to say, is not much to write home about. Another shit-hole African capitol on the West-African coast. It is I am afraid the said truth. Some 2-3 million are said to live in the capitol, of the total 11 million in the Country. Corruption and lack of maintenance and very low level of infrastructure, makes this city even less developed than Freetown or Monrovia – but it is a close call. Again, the weather did not help much to let Conakry shine a bit during the short 3 days visit we made. The streets are very poorly maintained, especially during the wet season, when they all seem to turn into canals of water and flooded everywhere. The city does not have much to show for when it comes to historical buildings or interesting sights in general. My recommendation is to make Conakry a starting or departure point on a trip onwards overland.

You can visit the Grand Mosque, which is quite impressive and the 4th largest in the world. There is also a National museum (takes 15 minutes to cover), and a walk-about to get the atmosphere in the harbour area – if you can stand the stench...

