



BLOOD-ORANGE SKY:
A glorious sunset on
Token Beach, Sierra Leone

Sweet Salone

Given its history, Sierra Leone might not be on everybody's bucket list. But when **Sue Watt** travels there, she discovers potential and optimism in this West African country.
Photographs by **Will Whitford**

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e're tiptoeing quietly through the forest, desperately trying not to break the silence. It's not easy. Twigs snap underfoot, seeming to reverberate through the trees; dried leaves crackle and crunch, echoing in the stillness. "Shh," our guide Mohammed pleads, pointing up to the canopy. In a barely audible whisper, he reveals the reason for our self-imposed hush: "Diana monkeys – the rarest and most beautiful on the island..."

With shards of sunlight streaming down on them like nature's very own spotlight, five gorgeous monkeys, all black and white with occasional streaks of chestnut, are playing and preening above us. We're completely entranced, watching these shy primates swinging through the trees for a few precious minutes. They spot us and vanish in a flash.

Mohammed is beaming with pride: he rarely gets to show off the beauty and the beasts of Tiwai Island. Few visitors come to this tiny wildlife sanctuary in Sierra Leone. Indeed, few visitors come to Sierra Leone, full stop. But that's about to change...

This West African nation is infamous for its devastating decade-long civil war, which ended in 2002, fuelled by the diamond trade. In a cruel double-whammy, in 2014, just as Sierra Leone was enjoying a remarkable recovery, Ebola struck. The country went into lockdown as nearly 4000 people lost their lives.

Sweet Salone, as locals call it, is now Ebola-free and back in business. Unusually, it's the Sierra Leone Marathon that's blazing the trail for returning tourists. In 2017, it won the

accolade of Best International Event in the Running Awards and was described by *Running* magazine as "the world's craziest and most worthwhile marathon".

"Since we started in 2012, we've brought 600-700 runners here and they're now all advocates for the country and its beauty," Tom Dannatt explains. He's the founder of UK charity Street Child, which organises the event, raising funds for children and providing much-needed support for Ebola's 12,000 orphans. The run takes place around the large, lively market town of Makeni in the north, with around 160 international visitors and some 500 locals participating in distances of 5km, 10km, a half-marathon or the full 42km challenge.

Before we pound the pavements on the big day, we visit some Street Child projects in a five-day package organised by the charity. We chat to village elders, parents, teachers and social workers. We play with kids in remote schools, kicking footballs around or making paper aeroplanes, and meet men and women in frenetic markets, caring for orphans with the help of Street Child. But most importantly, we see the joy in the smiles of Sierra Leoneans and the warmth in their eyes: that's what makes this marathon so worthwhile.

At 7.20am, in a sweltering 30°C, my 10km run kicks off. Spectators cheer us on outside their mud-brick homes, shouting "Oporto!" ('White person' in local Krio). Cheeky children high-five us as we pass and several people shout out, "Thank you!" The humidity is stifling and energy sapping but after one hour and one minute, I cross the finishing line to deafening cheers, exhausted yet utterly exhilarated. →

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But there's more to this beguiling country than the run. New tour operator Africa Marathons – part of Tailormade Africa – now offers add-on trips after the event. Its co-founder Rob Morley knows and loves Sweet Salone. “The marathon is changing people’s perceptions – travellers are gradually regaining confidence in Sierra Leone as a safe destination,” he tells me. “There are so many positives here: their religious tolerance and peaceful elections deserve credit, especially in today’s climate. It’s early days and Sierra Leone’s still a work in progress but it has huge potential and enthusiasm for tourism.”

We see that potential and enthusiasm on Tiwai Island. Sierra Leone’s first eco-tourism venture, this reserve on the River Moa benefits the eight communities living around it. Measuring just 12sq km, it has one of the world’s highest densities of primates, home to 11 different species and to rare – and elusive – pygmy hippos. Although the hippos evade us, we see nature’s beauty as we walk through forests with centuries’ old trees and squeals of chimpanzees. Otters leave their prints on honey-coloured beaches and bats swarm out of ancient, sacred caves in nearby Niahun village, which is steeped in traditional culture: even the president made a sacrifice to the spirits here hoping to win the election. He did.

From natural heritage to slave trade heritage, we head to Bunce Island, an hour by motorboat from the capital Freetown. Strangler figs and vines crawl around the crumbling remnants of this once formidable fortress, as if they’re trying to smother its tragic past. Our guide Abdulai Sankoh brings the island’s story to life. Between 1668 and 1807, about 50,000

men, women and children left these shores in shackles for the New World; many died en route.

We see their grim cells, the rooms where they were branded with burning hot irons once sold, and the graves and cannons that lie neglected in the grounds. Haunting and heavy with melancholy, it’s an important destination for slave descendants who travel here from the southern states of America to understand their ancestors’ past. Thankfully, plans are afoot to preserve Bunce’s heritage for future generations and to halt its creeping decline.

The abandoned buildings of the Africana Resort on Tokeh Beach, ransacked during the war, tell their own story – one of good times in a country that once drew thousands of visitors to its azure seas and palm-fringed beaches. I’m stunned by the beauty of Western Area Peninsula’s coast: no wonder it became the playground for French celebrities and famous parliamentarians.

Jungle-clad mountains fringe the horizon as we walk for miles on sand as soft as white pepper to reach River Number Two beach, the setting for the iconic Bounty adverts of the 1970s. We wander past traders plying their wares of colourful fabrics, paintings and carvings on the shore; youths sell deliciously fresh juice in coconut shells; fishermen set off in dhows with white sails billowing in the breeze.

And as the sun sets on our last day here, bathing the beach in a glorious golden hue, I’m hoping it will rise on a brighter future for this resilient, brave and beautiful country. 🌍

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Spice and rice stalls in bustling Lunsar Market; a little girl on Tiwai Island, a tiny wildlife sanctuary that’s home to 11 species of primate and the rare pygmy hippo; cannons overgrown with strangler figs and weeds on the ramparts of Bunce Island, Sierra Leone’s biggest slave trade port; a local lady walks along Tokeh Beach

Sierra Leone Essentials

■ **Getting there** KLM and Brussels Air fly to Lungi Airport, Freetown, via Amsterdam and Brussels respectively. The writer travelled with Street Child Sierra Leone Marathon and tour operator Africa Marathons, part of Tailormade Africa. Street Child offers five-day packages that include project visits, a workshop and the race, with all transport, meals and accommodation. Africa Marathons arrange flights, accommodation and tailor-made trips to Sierra Leone. It suggests a six-day add-on that takes in Tokeh Beach, Tiwai Island and Freetown. This includes a driver and guide in a 4WD vehicle, a Freetown city tour, boat trip and guided tour of Bunce Island, two activities a day at Tiwai Island and a Sea Coach airport transfer to Lungi Airport.

■ **Where to stay** The writer stayed at MJ Motel in Makeni, a simple but comfortable motel near the town centre. In Tokeh Beach, she stayed at The Place, a very relaxing and luxurious 54-chalet hotel on the beach. Accommodation at Tiwai Island camp is in basic dome tents under shelter, with communal ablution blocks. It’s the only place to stay on the island. There are plenty of hotels in Freetown – Sue stayed at Hotel Barmoi, in the Aberdeen area of the city, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

■ **When to visit** The next Sierra Leone Marathon takes place on 27 May. The wet season spans from May to October, with the heaviest rains falling in July and August, when rural roads can become impassable.

■ **Further information** Visit the websites of the Sierra Leone Marathon (sierraleonemarathon.com), Street Child (street-child.co.uk) and Sierra Leone Tourism Board (sierraleonenationaltouristboard.com).

