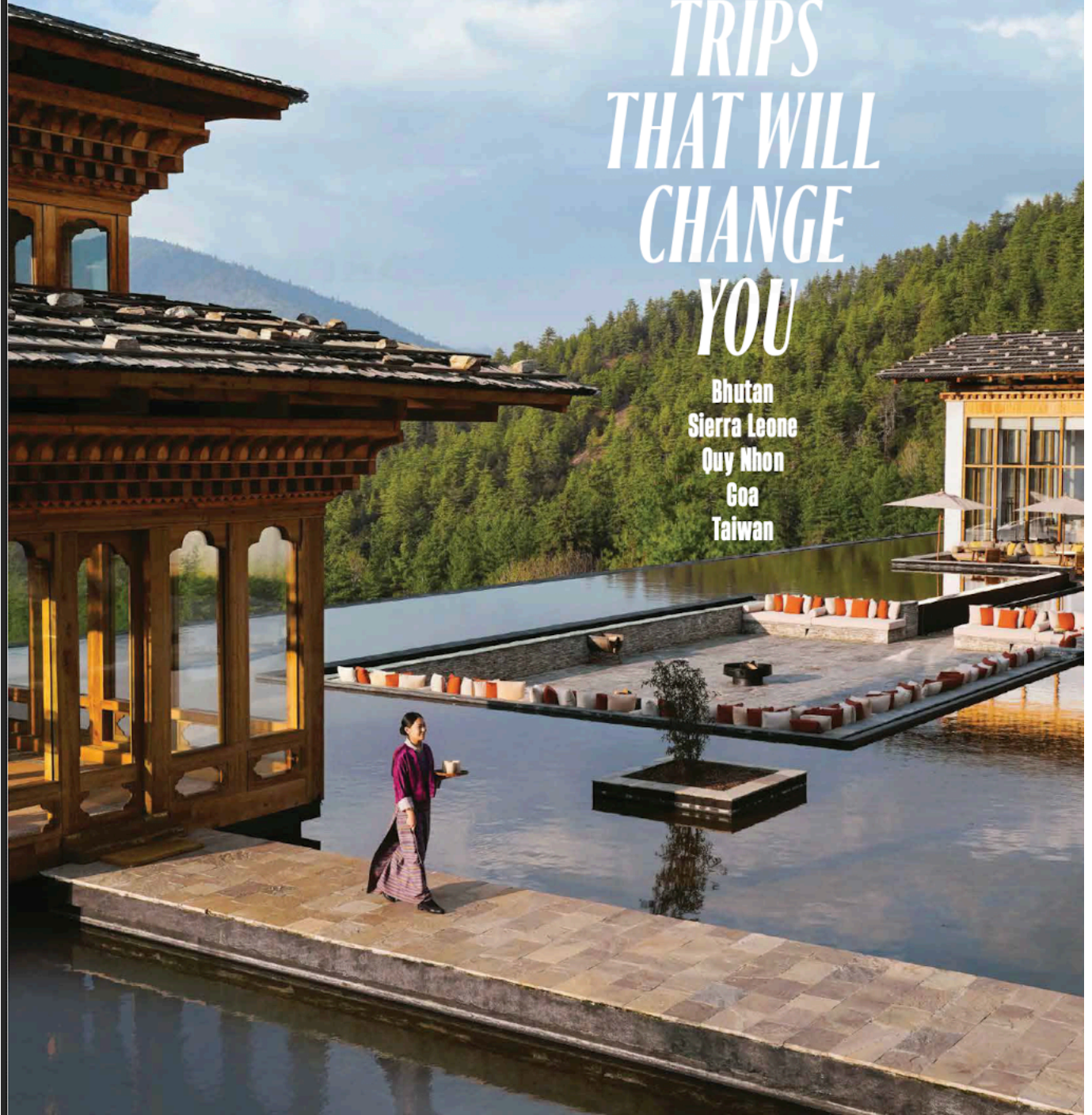


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DISPATCHES SIERRA LEONE



Uncut Gem

For all the troubles of its past, diamond-rich Sierra Leone is sparkling again as one of West Africa's most enticing destinations.

— by Joe Yogerst

SHORE ENOUGH
Above, from left: Palm-fringed Tokeh Beach is a long stretch of white sand an hour's drive south of Freetown; a guest at a garden party and fashion "salon" hosted by designer Mary-ann Kai Kai.

Like many people visiting Sierra Leone for the first time, most of what I knew about the West African nation was gleaned from press reports about its decade-long civil war (which ended in 2002) and the movie *Blood Diamond*, which revolves around the illicit gemstone market that fueled that brutal conflict. So my ears pricked up when I heard someone discussing diamonds on the water taxi from Bureh Beach to Banana Island. His name was Ezi Rapaport, an ex-New Yorker who dabbled in diamonds before moving to Sierra Leone and founding an economic development and business network in 2018.

"Sierra Leone still makes hundreds of millions of dollars each year from diamonds," he explained. But the trade is mostly legit these days, a point he emphasized with a story about the Peace Diamond, a 709-carat stone unearthed in the country's eastern Kono region in 2017 by an artisanal digger working for local pastor Emmanuel Momoh.

"It's one of the largest diamonds ever discovered," Rapaport told me. "Pastor Momoh could have



sold it on the black market, but he followed the law and turned it over to the government. Was he taking a chance? For sure. But the government also did the right thing. They put it up for auction, it sold for US\$6.5 million, and Pastor Momoh used his cut to build a school and clinic in his village and reward the digger who found it."

It was the sort of story I heard again and again during my eight-day journey through the onetime British colony. Despite Sierra Leone's dark past and the ongoing issues that confront every developing country, most of the people I encountered seemed optimistic about the future and laser focused on uplifting both their own lives and the nation as a whole.

WITH MORE THAN a million people squeezed onto the tip of a mountainous peninsula that juts into the South Atlantic, Freetown is the country's capital, economic center, and gateway for just about everyone who visits Sierra Leone. It's also the heartland of the Krio people, descendants of formerly enslaved Africans resettled here from London, Nova Scotia, and Jamaica in the 18th and 19th centuries. There is a unique coastal culture, a fusion of African, North American, and British elements underpinned by a distinctive creole language.

One of the easiest entrees to Krio life is eating. Not having tried West African food before, I had no idea what to expect. But they had me from the first taste, especially at the longstanding Crown Bakery in Freetown's bustling market area and on the patio at the Cole Street Guesthouse in waterfront Murray Town.

Miatta Marke, who runs Cole Street with her husband, has emerged as one of the stars of nouvelle Krio cuisine. "I grew up in this house with my grandmother and cousins," she told me over a lunch of *huntu* cornmeal-and-prawn dumplings and sea-



food stew with lobster, barracuda, oysters, and sweet potato.

"This courtyard was the center of our lives, so we made it the center of our dining experience. We wanted to recreate the flavors and dishes from my childhood. And we try to have everything we love about Sierra Leone in one place." The handmade furniture is locally crafted, and most of the ingredients are sourced from local markets and fishermen. "And all of our staff are from this neighborhood — we wanted to make it feel like their place, too."

On another afternoon, Freetown's energetic art scene was on full display during a garden party at the home of Mary-ann Kai Kai, a clothing designer, women's activist, and passionate advocate of everything Sierra Leone. Acrobats and musicians from the Freetown Dance Company were the opening act to a casual fashion show and alfresco "salon" that brought together many of the city's leading female artists and business owners to discuss their hopes and dreams for the country.

"We're so resilient," said Kai Kai, whose fashion brand, Madam Wokie, blends traditional Sierra Leonean pieces with modern couture. "People in Sierra Leone don't dwell on the past. We concentrate on today and the future despite all of the misfortunes this country has had in the past. That's what I'm most proud of, and what I want the whole world to know about Sierra Leone."

Sri Lanka-born conservationist Bala Amarasekaran is on a much different crusade. As founder and director of the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary in Western Area National Park, he is at the forefront of efforts to protect the country's national animal.

It started in 1988, when Amarasekaran and his wife came across a sick baby chimp during a drive through the countryside. Feeling it would soon die, they purchased the animal for US\$20 and nursed it back to health at their home in Freetown. Over the next few years, dozens more animals were rescued from captivity. With help from famed primatologist Jane Goodall, they started Tacugama, which is now home to 115 chimps.



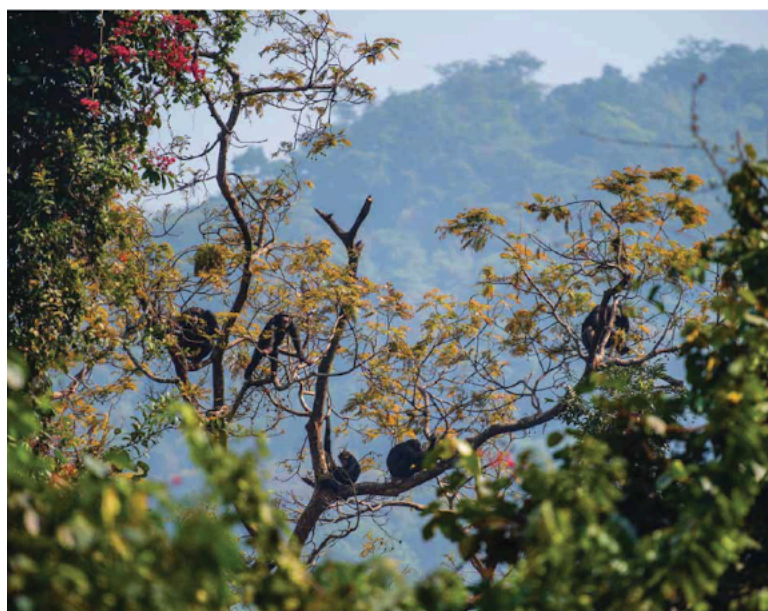
"Back in the 1960s and '70s, Sierra Leone had 60,000 to 70,000 chimpanzees," Amarasekaran explained over morning coffee at the reserve. "By 2011, that number was down to around 5,500 due to deforestation, loss of habitat, hunting for bushmeat, and poaching for pets."

Tacugama works with schools, villages, and even soccer teams to spread the word about saving chimps. The sanctuary also partners with national parks to enhance research on wild chimps and develop infrastructure in the remote reserves that will hopefully draw tourists — and generate income for local villages — in future years.

As I had discovered the night before, the next

SAVORING SIERRA LEONE
Clockwise from top left: A Sierra Leonean lunch of huntu dumplings, ros bif tacos, and falafels at Cole Street Guesthouse in Freetown; a banana plantation in Kabala; locally designed jewelry.

DISPATCHES SIERRA LEONE



best thing to visiting the country's largely inaccessible national parks is sleeping in one of the rustic bungalows at Tacugama, listening to the grunts, hoots, and screams of chimpanzees echo through the pitch-dark forest.

IT TOOK ABOUT FIVE HOURS over 300 kilometers of rough road to reach Kabala, an agricultural town in northern Sierra Leone. In dramatic contrast to the coast, the terrain here is punctuated by mountains renowned for their diamond-bearing kimberlite veins. They also harbor some of the country's best hikes, like my early morning trek up Wara Wara Mountain to snatch a bird's-eye view of Kabala and the mist-shrouded valleys that encircle it. The steep 90-minute walk led me through farm fields and tropical woodland before emerging onto a bald, sun-splashed summit.

More than 90 percent of Kabala's residents are Muslim, which means you're awakened each morning by the cry of muezzins summoning the faithful to prayer, rather than church bells you hear in primarily Christian Freetown. But it's Islam flavored with a large dose of animism.

Stopping to take a photo of the town's central mosque, I met a man who described himself as a sorcerer. Inviting me into a tiny roadside shrine where he performs his ceremonies, Said Kamara told me that both his father and grandfather were shamans, and that he was currently training an apprentice

GOING APE
Above: A family of chimps at the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary in Western Area National Park.
Right: A surfer on Tokeh Beach.



because of the growing demand for his services.

Naturally, I had to ask, what services?

Surrounded by a roomful of bones, feathers, candles, potions — and a framed government certificate stating his shamanistic bona fides — Kamara described some of his duties. "If a person goes to a hospital and they cannot find a sickness, I can tell right away what sickness they have. If something is stolen, I can find the thief. I can give you protection from someone who is jealous or doesn't like you. I can find a good relationship for lonely women or help your erection if you are a man."

We would have talked longer if not for a familiar ringtone in the pocket of his floor-length frock. Answering the call, Kamara chatted briefly with a prospective client and politely excused himself by saying, "Someone needs me urgently!" ☺

How to Plan a Sierra Leone Sojourn

GETTING THERE

Freetown's recently expanded international airport is served by Air France flights from Paris, Turkish Airlines flights from Istanbul, and a handful of inter-African flights.

WHERE TO STAY

Radisson Blu Mammy Yoko
Freetown's only five-star hotel comes with 172 rooms and direct access to the nightlife strip of Lumley Beach (radissonhotels.com; doubles from US\$180).

The Place

This 50-chalet resort makes the most of its setting on Tokeh Beach, a gorgeous stretch of talc-fine sand on the Freetown Peninsula (stayattheplace.com; doubles from US\$200).

Kabala Hill View Bar & Guesthouse

With 13 basic but comfortable rooms, the trump card here is the views over Kabala and the Wara Wara Mountain range (kalahillview.org; doubles from US\$25).

WHERE TO EAT

Cole Street Guesthouse

The first upmarket restaurant in Freetown dedicated to Sierra Leone's ancestral flavors puts a gourmet spin on dishes like *acarajé* (crispy bean and onion cakes), *huntu* dumplings, and jerk goat (colestreetguesthouse.com).

WHAT TO SEE

Sierra Leone National Museum

A small but absorbing collection documenting Sierra Leonean history, including the arrival of the first liberated slaves in 1787 and the establishment of Freetown five years later (sierra Leoneheritage.org).

Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary

A half-hour drive from Freetown in the dense forests of Western Area National Park, this wildlife refuge is home to over 100 rescued chimps. Six wooden eco-lobges are available for those looking to spend the night (tacugama.com).