Sierra Leone

Location

The country of Sierra Leone, officially known as the Republic of Sierra Leone, is located on the continent of Africa and covers an area of 27,699 square miles. Sierra Leone is in Western Africa, and is bordered by Guinea to the north and east. Liberia borders Sierra Leone to the southeast, while the Atlantic Ocean makes up the southwest and west borders. The capital of Sierra Leone is Freetown, which is located at 8º N Latitude and 13º W Longitude.

Geography

The environment in Sierra Leone ranges from savannah to rainforests. The highest point in Sierra Leone is Loma Mansa, also called Mount Bintumani, which is at an elevation of 1,948 meters, while the lowest point is the Atlantic Ocean.

There are several different ecological regions in Sierra Leone. In the West, there are 250 miles of coastline, which provide many resources and attract tourists. This is in stark contrast to the east where there are mangrove swamps, rainforests, farmlands, and mountains, where Mount Bintumani lies. The capital of Freetown is located on a coastal peninsula, which is next to the Sierra Leone Harbor. This prime location has allowed Sierra Leone to be the center of trade in this region.

Climate

The climate of Sierra Leone is tropical, since it lies close to the equator. Sierra Leone experiences two distinct seasons, the summer rainy season which lasts from May to December, and the winter dry season which is from December to April. The dry season includes harmattan,
when cool, dry winds blow in from the Sahara Desert. Rainfall along the coast of Sierra Leone can reach up to 195 inches a year, making it one of the wettest regions in western Africa.

**History**

Sierra Leone has experienced a very extensive and troubled history. Sierra Leone was first inhabited by African tribes. The first Europeans to explore Sierra Leone were the Portuguese, who gave this country the name Sierra Leone, meaning “lion mountains”. The capital of Freetown was used as a harbor to bring in runaway slaves from London, England. Sierra Leone became a British colony in 1808, and remained under British rule until their independence on April 27, 1961. Siaka Stevens became the newly independent Sierra Leone’s first President.

In 1991 a civil war broke out in Sierra Leone due to corruption within the government and exploitation of diamond resources. A new political party was formed, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which was commanded by Foday Sankoh. Sankoh was supported by Liberian president Charles Taylor. The first attack of the RUF occurred on March 23, 1991 in the Eastern area of Sierra Leone, known to be rich in diamonds. One month after beginning its attacks on the Sierra Leone, the RUF controlled most of the Eastern Province. The RUF also forced children to join their ranks and made child soldiers out of them. This civil war continued for a decade, officially ended in January 2002, with an estimated 50,000 lives lost. The United Nations enlisted troops to the Sierra Leone to keep peace and order.

The Sierra Leone has begun to slowly rebuild after the devastation caused by the civil war. The United Nations declared Sierra Leone one of the “least livable” countries due to the high rate of poverty and poor quality of life. Charles Taylor, the former Liberian president, along
with three former RUF leaders have been convicted of crimes they committed during the civil war attacks. In September 2007, Sierra Leone held its first elections since the United Nations troops left in 2004. Ernest Koroma of the All People’s Congress won the election to become the new president of Sierra Leone.

**Important Dates**

An important date to Sierra Leonean is the 27th of April, which is their independence day. On April 27th, 1961, Sierra Leone gained its independence from Great Britain. Sierra Leone wrote its constitution on October 1, 1991. The civil war in Sierra Leone ended on January 1, 2002.

**Population**

As of July 1997 the population of Sierra Leone consists of 6,144,562. The capital, Freetown, has the highest population in the country of approximately 1,070,200 people. The population density is 199 people per square mile. It is expected that by 2010 the population of Sierra Leone will exceed seven million, and 48.1% of the population will be living in rural areas, while the remaining 51.9 % living in urban areas. The population growth rate is 2.3%. The life expectancy of a Sierra Leonean is approximately 41 years. HIV/AIDS is also a common problem, with an estimated 170,000 Sierra Leoneans living with HIV/AIDS.

**Currency**

The currency of Sierra Leone is the Leone. 2,967 Leones are equal to 1 US Dollar (2008).
Education

Schooling in Sierra Leone is free and compulsory, which ensures that most children receive an education. Sierra Leone has an extensive education system which consists of six years of primary school, Class 1-6, and six years of secondary school, Form 1-6. The secondary schools are divided further into junior secondary school, Form 1-3, and senior secondary school, From 4-6. Children typically attend primary school from ages 6 to 12, and secondary schools from ages 13-18.

There are two main universities in Sierra Leone. Fourah Bay College is the oldest university in West Africa, established in 1827. Njala University is located in Njala in the Moyamba District, and it was established in 1963. There are several other teacher training colleges and seminaries located across Sierra Leone.

Language

The official language spoken in Sierra Leone is English. There are also several native languages spoken, such as Mende, Temne, and Krio. Mende is primarily spoken in the Southern region of Sierra Leone, while Temne is spoken primarily in the North. Krio is an English-based Creole that was originally spoken by slaves from Jamaica who were brought to Freetown.

Religion

The predominant religion in Sierra Leone is Muslim, which is practiced by about 60% of the population. Christians make up approximately 30% of the population, while 10% practice indigenous religions.
Agriculture

Sierra Leone is a producer of rice, coffee, cocoa, plain kernels, palm oil, peanuts, as well as, poultry, cattle, fish, sheep, and pigs. Approximately 75% of the population participates in subsistence agriculture, which makes up 53% of the national income. The Sierra Leonean government is trying to increase food and cash crop production, as well as, increase the skills of farmers.

Trade

The main export from Sierra Leone is diamonds, which accounts for over half of the exports. Another important export is rutile, which is a titanium ore used in paint pigments and welding rod coatings. The remaining exports are cocoa, coffee, and fish. Sierra Leone exports 52% of its products, specifically diamonds, to Belgium. The remaining exports are shipped to the United States and The Netherlands.
Sierra Leone imports consist of foodstuffs, machinery and equipment, fuels, lubricants, and chemicals. The largest quantities of imports come from the Ivory Coast. Other major countries that Sierra Leone imports from include the US, China, Brazil, UK, France, India, South Africa, and the Netherlands.

Food

The food in Sierra Leone is similar to the foods typical of Western Africa, such as plantains, yams, peanuts, and other fruits and vegetables. Fish is an important part of the diet in Sierra Leone, as it is the most readily available sources of protein. A popular Sierra Leonean dish is fried plantains, which are plantains fried in oil and sprinkled with salt and hot sauce.

Landmarks

There are many things to see and do while in Sierra Leone. It is known for its exotic beaches and historic sites. A must see while in Sierra Leone is Bunce Island, a former British slave castle off the coast where Africans were exported as slaves during the 1600’s. Bunce Island is now an historic site that illustrates the history of slavery. Another draw for tourists is the abundant fishing off the coast of Freetown, where there is even a fishing camp where tourists can stay. Although Sierra Leone has many beautiful sites and attractions, it is still a country that is trying to rebuild after a devastating war, and should be visited with caution, respect for its people.

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