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Sierra Leone travel advice

Summary

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Updated:

28 August 2014

Latest update:

Summary - the FCO advise against all but essential travel to Sierra Leone, except for those involved in the direct response to the Ebola outbreak

Ebola

An outbreak of Ebola virus has been confirmed in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. British Airways have suspended flights to Sierra Leone and Liberia until 31 December due to the deteriorating public health situation. Air France has suspended flights to Sierra Leone and some other airlines have also suspended flights to Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. Due to the narrowing commercial options for flights and the impact on medical facilities, the FCO advise against all but essential travel to these countries, except for those involved in the direct response to the Ebola outbreak.

If you are a British national in these countries, you should stay in contact with your employer or host organisation about the support that they can provide to you while you are in the country or should you wish to leave. You should be aware that the narrowing range of commercial flight options and growing restrictions on travel in the region may make it difficult to leave, particularly at short notice, and consider your own plans in this context.

On 8 August the World Health Organisation (WHO) released a statement following a meeting of the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee, declaring the Ebola outbreak a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern'. This includes a recommendation that there should be no general ban on international travel or trade, and that in states with Ebola transmission:

- the Head of State should declare a national emergency
- the State should activate its national disaster/emergency management mechanisms
- the State should conduct exit screening of all persons at international airports, seaports and major land crossings
- there should be no international travel of Ebola contacts or cases, unless

the travel is part of an appropriate medical evacuation

Although the chances of being infected remain low, there are measures you can take to prevent catching Ebola. You should also follow the health advice issued by the National Travel Health Network and Centre to:

- avoid contact with symptomatic patients and their bodily fluids
- avoid contact with corpses and/or bodily fluids from deceased patients.
- avoid close contact with live or dead wild animals
- avoid consumption of "bush meat"
- practice safe sex
- follow strict hand washing routines

General medical facilities throughout Sierra Leone are currently under severe strain due to the Ebola outbreak, and unable to provide the same standard of healthcare as in the UK. Dedicated healthcare facilities for Ebola are overwhelmed. Many medical facilities expect to be paid up-front.

On 30 July, President Koroma declared a State of Public Emergency. Measures include restriction of movement to and from affected areas, with some exemptions for NGO and health workers. You should confirm with your organisation whether you'll be exempt from these restrictions. Further measures were announced on 07 August including a nationwide ban on public gatherings and increased restriction on movement of people and vehicles to the districts of Kailahun and Kenema for those not working on the response to the Ebola outbreak.

The Government has also introduced new protocols for arriving and departing passengers at Lungi International airport.

Over the weekend of 25-27 July there were reports of demonstrations and local disturbances in Kenema and Freetown related to the Ebola outbreak.

For further details about this outbreak of Ebola, see the World Health Organization website, and this map showing the areas affected. The Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation is also providing regular updates on the outbreak on its Facebook page.

Anybody concerned that they might have been exposed to, or showing symptoms of Ebola should seek immediate medical advice. If in the UK call NHS on 111.

Other advice

Most visits to Sierra Leone are incident free but petty crime is present with occasional reports of associated violence. Incidents have been reported in the central commercial district, Lumley Beach, Aberdeen and eastern areas of Freetown. See Crime

Road conditions are variable. Driving conditions can deteriorate during the rainy season (May to October). Take extra care. See Local Travel (<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/sierra-leone/safety-and-security>)

Consider carefully the various transfer options between the international airport at Lungi and Freetown, especially if you plan to arrive at night. See Local Travel (<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/sierra-leone/safety-and-security>)

Strong currents exist at some beaches. Drownings have occurred. There are no lifeguards at beaches.

There is a low threat from terrorism. See Terrorism (<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/sierra-leone/terrorism>)

The Overseas Business Risk service offers information and advice for British companies operating overseas on how to manage political, economic, and business security-related risks.

Take out comprehensive travel and medical insurance before you travel.

Safety and security

Crime

Most visits to Sierra Leone are incident free. But a small number of incidents have been reported since mid 2013 of British nationals being robbed, sometimes at knife-point. These incidents were reported in the areas of Congo Cross, Wilkinson Road, Lumley Beach and Aberdeen.

The greatest risk to short-stay travellers is from pick pocketing and mugging in Freetown. If you are staying for a longer period make sure your property is secured properly and employ guards.

You should take the following precautions against crime:

- avoid crowds and political demonstrations
- don't display or carry expensive items or large sums of money
- avoid walking alone after dark
- plan your transport arrangements and minimise use of public transport, taxis, poda-podas (minibuses) and Ocadas (motorbikes). Some robberies have been carried out by associates of the drivers and other passengers.
- familiarise yourself with your surroundings and remain vigilant.

Local Travel (Getting to Freetown from the airport)

Lungi airport is situated on the far side of a wide estuary from Freetown. There are several transfer options from Lungi airport: road, ferry, Pelican water taxi and local boats/pirogues. None is without risk. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) staff operate a policy of informed choice and use all of the transport options available with the exception of local boats/pirogues. If you plan to stay at one of the Lungi Airport hotels book early as rooms are extremely limited and in high demand.

Transfer by road

The journey time by road is normally between 3 and 5 hours. You should prearrange pick-up, as there are no car hire facilities at the airport. The [Consular section]<https://www.gov.uk/government/world/organisations/british-high-commission-freetown>) at the British High Commission can provide lists of Freetown-based car hire companies. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) staff do not use this option for travel after dark.

Transfer by sea

The options are Pelican water taxi, ferry and local boats/pirogues. No option is without risk, but reports of incidents and injuries using the Pelican and ferry are rare. FCO staff regularly use the Pelican water taxi and occasionally the ferry but not the local boats/pirogues.

During the rainy season (May-October) rough sea conditions may lead to delays or cancellations. If you choose to cross by boat, notify a reliable contact of your departure and expected arrival times and agree what action they will take if you don't arrive at the expected time.

Pelican – the journey time is 25 – 45 minutes on the water. These water taxis operate between Freetown (Aberdeen) and Lungi (Mahera Beach). They have navigational aids, night lights and provide life jackets for passengers. They have limited additional safety equipment and rescue capability.

Ferry – the journey time is about 1 hour on the water. The service terminates in Freetown in the eastern end of the city. You should pre-plan your onward journey from there, particularly if you are arriving at night. The service offers a crossing for both foot passengers and vehicles. The ferry lacks basic safety equipment. Foreign foot passengers have reported being pick-pocketed.

Local boats/pirogues – these craft operate without lights and any safety equipment. You should avoid using these craft. Previously a hovercraft service operated but it is currently out of service.

Road Travel

Plan your journeys outside Freetown, travel in convoy if possible and report your progress. Have a plan for what to do and where to go in case of emergencies.

Make sure you use well maintained vehicles. Erratic driving is common and motorbikes are a particular problem. Most roads have little or no lighting and have hazards like vehicles with no lights, wandering pedestrians and animals. Serious traffic accidents are common.

Children will sometimes put a rope across the road and ask for a small donation for mending the road. These incidents are most common at the weekend and on roads to tourist beaches in the Western Area. The rope will be lifted if you indicate that you don't intend to stop. You can distinguish them from official police checkpoints, which are manned by uniformed officers with marked barriers.

FCO staff avoid road travel outside the Freetown peninsula during night hours.

FCO staff do not use local taxis, poda-podas (minibuses) or oçadas (motorbikes).

Air Travel

On 26 August British Airways announced that they were suspending flights to Sierra Leone and Liberia until 31 December due to the deteriorating public health situation. Some other airlines have also suspended flights to Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. British nationals should only consider essential travel to these countries. You should be aware that the narrowing range of commercial flight options and growing restrictions on travel in the region may make it difficult to leave, particularly at short notice, and consider your own plans in this context. Therefore if you do decide to travel, you should check in advance flight availability with airline carriers before finalising travel plans and make sure you have adequate arrangements in place for onward travel or exit.

All airlines from Sierra Leone have been refused permission to operate services to the EU because of safety concerns. A list of recent incidents and accidents in Sierra Leone can be found on the website of the Aviation Safety network.

The FCO can't offer advice on the safety of individual airlines. However, the International Air Transport Association publishes a list of registered airlines that have been audited and found to meet a number of operational safety standards and recommended practices. This list is not exhaustive and the absence of an airline from this list does not necessarily mean that it is unsafe.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation carried out an audit of the level of implementation of the critical elements of safety oversight in Sierra Leone.

Swimming

Sierra Leone has many attractive beaches, but strong currents exist at some. Seek local advice about conditions. There are no lifeguards. Swimming is at your own risk. Beware of hospital waste, including needles, on Lumley beach.

Political situation

Sierra Leone is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and has taken significant strides following 3 democratic elections since the end of its civil war in 2002. But it is still one of the poorest countries in the world, with associated capacity and other challenges. Keep up to date with local and regional developments. Avoid all political demonstrations anywhere in the country.

Water and power

Mains water is limited. Power is improving but remains unreliable. Rented accommodation and hotels rely on generators and private water supplies.

Telephone network

No mobile network provides country-wide coverage. Some areas have no mobile reception. There is no public telephone system outside the Western Area and landline connections are poor. It is not possible to call a Sierra Leone mobile phone from a Sierra Leone landline and vice-versa.

Local laws and customs

Sierra Leone has a tolerant multi-religious culture. You should respect local traditions, customs, laws and religions at all times and be aware of your actions to ensure that they do not offend other cultures or religious beliefs.

Don't become involved with drugs of any kind.

All precious stones require an export licence. Check the quality of any gems and/or minerals you buy. Any deals that appear too good to be true probably are.

If you commit any criminal offences, including drug trafficking and diamond smuggling you can expect to be subjected to local law. There are heavy penalties and local prison conditions are harsh.

Homosexual acts are illegal in Sierra Leone.

You should carry ID (passport or residence permit) at all times.

The Sierra Leone Police levy a SLL300,000 fee for all foreign nationals who need a police report. They are unable to issue crime reference numbers without a police report. You should make your payment to the Sierra Leone Police Revenue Generation Fund Account at the Bank of Sierra Leone and get a receipt. Don't pay the Sierra Leone Police direct. If you wish to report a crime but do not require a crime reference number or a written report there will be no charge.

Adoption

Adoption orders from Sierra Leone are not recognised in the UK. The Government of Sierra Leone, together with UNICEF, are tackling issues related to the trafficking of children. If you are planning to adopt a child make sure you comply with Sierra Leone's adoption laws. The government office responsible for adoptions in Sierra Leone is the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (Telephone: +232 76 624 597).

Entry requirements

Visas

All British nationals need a visa to enter Sierra Leone. Contact the Sierra Leonean High Commission in London.

The Sierra Leone High Commission in London sometimes issues Emergency Travel Certificates to Sierra Leoneans resident in the UK and those with dual British/Sierra Leone nationality. These documents are not valid for return travel to the UK. Sierra Leone nationals require a visa for the UK, which can only be issued in a full passport.

Passport validity

Your passport should be valid for a minimum period of 6 months from the time of your visa application.

Yellow fever vaccination certifications

You need to show a valid yellow fever vaccination certificate when entering Sierra Leone.

UK Emergency Travel Documents

UK Emergency Travel Documents (ETDs) are not valid for entry into Sierra Leone. ETDs are accepted for airside transit and exit from Sierra Leone

Health

Ebola

Following an outbreak of Ebola virus disease in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia British nationals should only consider essential travel to these countries, and if travelling to them, should ensure that they have adequate arrangements in place for onward travel/exit and have adequate emergency health provision. You should stay in contact with your employer or host organisation about the support that they can provide to you while you are in the country or should you wish to leave.

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Further general health advice

Contact your GP around 8 weeks before your trip to check whether you need any vaccinations or other preventive measures. Country specific information and advice is published by the National Travel Health Network and Centre (NaTHNaC), and useful information about healthcare abroad, including a country-by-country guide of reciprocal health care agreements with the UK, is available from NHS Choices.

Medical facilities are poor - you should carry basic medical supplies and make sure you have adequate supplies of prescription medication, bearing in mind the risk of delays due to flight cancellations. There is no reciprocal health care agreement between the UK and Sierra Leone. You should expect to pay for all medical treatment in advance. British nationals have been refused admittance to hospital without proof of ability to pay their medical bills. Make sure you have adequate travel health insurance and accessible funds to cover the cost of any medical treatment abroad, medical evacuation and repatriation. You should contact your insurance/medical assistance company promptly if you are referred to a medical facility for treatment.

Rabies, Lassa fever, water-borne diseases, malaria and other tropical diseases are common to Sierra Leone. Vaccination against yellow fever is required to enter Sierra Leone.

Cholera is endemic in Sierra Leone with outbreaks, particularly during the rainy season, in areas where there is poor sanitation. You should drink or use only boiled or bottled water and avoid ice in drinks.

In the 2012 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic the UNAIDS/WHO Working Group estimated that around 52,000 adults aged 15 or over in Sierra Leone were living with HIV; the prevalence percentage was estimated at around 1.5% of the adult population compared to the prevalence percentage in adults in the UK of around 0.25%. You should exercise precautions to avoid exposure to HIV/AIDS.

Terrorism

There is a low threat from terrorism, but you should be aware of the global risk of indiscriminate terrorist attacks which could be in public areas, including those frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

Money

Sierra Leone has a cash-based society and bank or credit cards are only accepted in a few hotels in Freetown. There are a few ATMs in the capital, but you should be vigilant when using them because of high levels of fraud. Outside the capital bank and credit cards are not accepted and you should assume that ATMs will not be available.

Opportunities to exchange travellers' cheques are limited. All foreign exchange transactions must be handled through banks and official exchange offices. A small number of banks in central Freetown may be prepared to accept credit cards to buy local currency.

Contact FCO Travel Advice Team

If you have a question about this travel advice, you can email the FCO Travel Advice Team:

! Want to know whether your passport's valid for travel? Don't send an email - you can get this info now in the entry requirements section (<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/sierra-leone/entry-requirements>) of this travel advice

TravelAdvicePublicEnquiries@fco.gov.uk