

Liberia

Liberia seems at last to have found some breathing room. Prior to late 2003, this lush, rainforested country draped across West Africa's southern flank had been at war for almost two decades. Its towns were destroyed, families were scattered and, worst of all, an entire generation was robbed of its childhood, as peace accord after peace accord was shattered. Yet, this time around, perhaps peace is here to stay.

If Liberia does stabilise and open up for travel, it promises to offer intrepid adventurers a fascinating glimpse into what had previously been one of West Africa's most hospitable and enigmatic societies. The country's artistic traditions – especially carved masks, dance and storytelling – rivalled those of anywhere in the region, and traditional culture was strong. This was especially true in the interior, where secret initiation societies played a central role in growing up, and even today still serve as an important repository of traditional knowledge and life skills.

The country's natural attractions are equally impressive. In contrast with its ravaged infrastructure, Liberia's dense, humid rainforests – some of the most extensive in West Africa – are alive with the screeching and twittering of hundreds of birds, who are kept company by forest elephants, pygmy hippos and other wildlife padding around the forest floor.

For now though, most of this cultural and natural wealth remains inaccessible to independent travellers, as Liberians focus on the task of rebuilding their livelihoods. If you're contemplating a visit, get an update on local security conditions first. Also remember that the peace is still extremely fragile, and independent travel outside of Monrovia is not considered safe.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 111,370 sq km
- **Capital** Monrovia
- **Country code** ☎ 231
- **Famous for** Rainforests; traditional masks; rubber plantations
- **Languages** English (official) plus Bassa, Kpelle, Kru, Grebo & other local languages
- **Money** Liberian dollar (L\$); US\$1 = L\$55; €1 = L\$69
- **Population** 3.3 million
- **Visas** Required by almost everyone, and must be arranged in advance. Don't forget to stop by the Bureau of Immigration to extend beyond the initial 48-hour validity (see p478).



WARNING

Liberia is finally at peace, but it's still a fragile peace, and the country is not yet geared for tourism. In general, independent travel outside of Monrovia is not yet possible. Before setting off, get a complete briefing first from people who know the situation; embassies and resident expats are the best sources.

Given the current travel restrictions, this chapter was updated as a 'desk update' from afar, with the generous assistance of various people in Liberia. We've tried to make it as accurate as possible, but the perishable information should be treated as a general guide, rather than hard and fast facts. (And if you get to Liberia, we'd love to hear back from you about your experiences!)

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Silver Beach** (p474) Relax on this surf-pounded and palm-fringed stretch of sand just minutes from central Monrovia.
- **Sapo National Park** (p469) Wander under the lush, humid canopy of one of West Africa's last remaining rainforests.
- **Monrovia** (p469) Stroll through central Monrovia, seeing what sidewalk vendors have on offer and getting a feel for the beat on the street.
- **Liberians** (p467) Mingle with the locals over a plate of *fufu* and sauce and a cold Club beer, or cheering on the Lone Stars at a soccer match.

ITINERARIES

Liberia's peace is still too fragile to contemplate classic travel itineraries. But, if you find yourself here, and security situation permitting, **Sapo National Park** (p469) is the obvious destination. There's currently nothing organised (and the park isn't even officially open yet to tourism), but if you should luck onto an excursion, allow at least five days round trip. Otherwise, both **Gbarnga** (p476) and **Buchanan** (p475) make intriguing day jaunts, affording glimpses of the countryside outside the capital. Closer to home, **Monrovia** (p469) is peppy and pleasant enough to enjoyably spend a weekend or longer poking around, with ample opportunities for relaxation available at the nearby beaches.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Monrovia is one of the two wettest capital cities in Africa (Freetown in Sierra Leone is the other), with rainfall averaging more than 4500mm per year here and elsewhere along the Liberian coast. Inland, it's less – in some areas only about 2000mm annually. Temperatures range from 23°C to 32°C in Monrovia, and slightly higher inland. However, humidity levels of more than 85% in the dry season (November to April) and more than 90% in the rainy season (May to October) often make it feel much warmer. There is little seasonal temperature variation.

The best time to visit Liberia is during the dry season, between November and April.

HISTORY

The area that is now Liberia has likely been populated for more than 2000 years, although little is known of its early history. Many present-day Liberians trace their ancestry to peoples who migrated southeast from the Sahel following the fall of the Empire of Mali in the 15th century. However, settlement of the area remained sparse because of the dense and inhospitable forests covering most of the country, and no great cities developed.

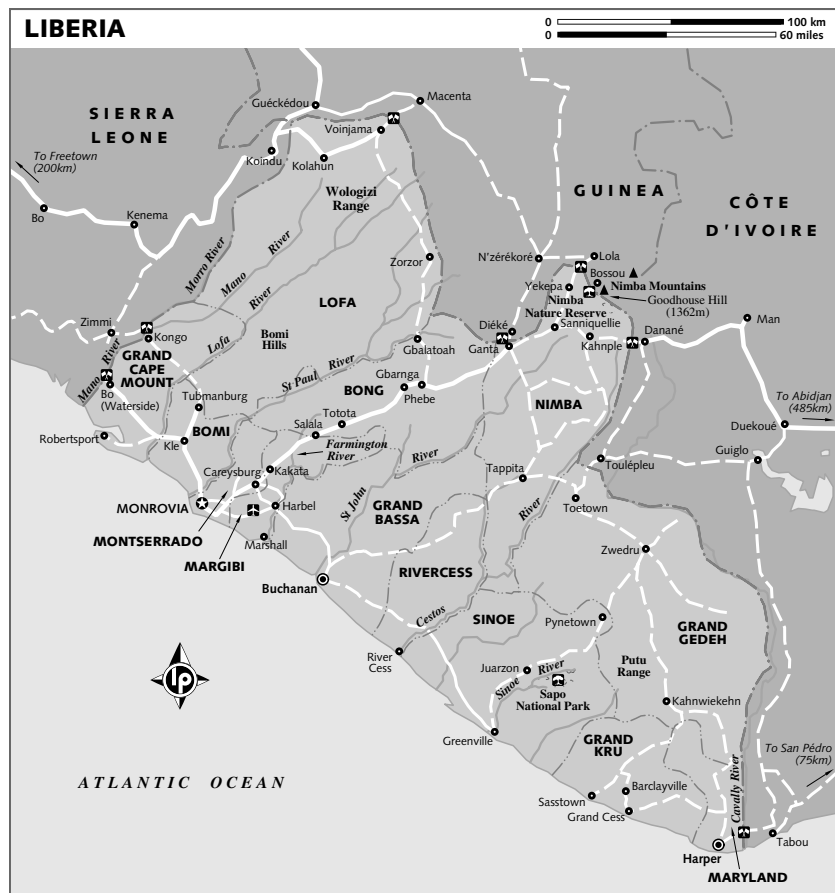
European contact with Liberia began in the 1460s with the arrival of Portuguese navigators, who named several coastal features, including Cape Mesurado (Monrovia) and Cape Palmas (Harper). Because

HOW MUCH?

- **Souvenir basket** US\$5
- **Kilo of bananas** US\$0.40
- **Fufu & soup** US\$0.75
- **Short taxi ride** US\$1
- **Soda** US\$0.30

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Litre of petrol** US\$3.45
- **Litre of bottled water** US\$0.20
- **Bottle of Club beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** You'll be lucky if you find one!
- **Street snack – cassava leaf** US\$0.75



of the trading success of a pepper grain, the area soon became known as the 'Grain Coast'.

The Arrival of the Settlers

In the early 19th century, the Grain Coast rose to the forefront of discussions within the abolitionist movement in the USA as a suitable place to resettle freed American slaves. After several failed attempts at gaining the agreement of local chiefs, officials of the American Colonization Society (ACS) forced a treaty upon a local king at Cape Mesurado. Despite resistance by the indigenous people, settlement went ahead, and in April 1822, an expedition with the first group of Black American settlers arrived at

Providence Island in present-day Monrovia. Within a short time, under the leadership of the American Jehudi Ashmun, the foundations for a country were established. Additional settlements were founded along the coast, notably at Greenville and Harper.

A Shaky Independence

In 1839 Thomas Buchanan was appointed first governor of the new territory. He was succeeded in 1841 by Joseph Jenkins Roberts, who expanded its boundaries and encouraged cooperation among the various settlements. In 1846 the settlement at Cape Mesurado merged with others along the coast, and a declaration of independence and a constitution were drafted. Both

were modelled on those of the USA. In 1847 Liberia declared itself an independent republic, although – fatally for its future history – citizenship excluded indigenous peoples. Roberts was elected the first president. Every successive president until 1980 was of American freed-slave ancestry.

By the mid-19th century, about half of the 5000 Black Americans who had originally migrated to Liberia had either died or returned to the USA. The remaining settlers, the citizens of the new republic, came to be known as Americo-Liberians. They saw themselves as part of a mission to bring civilisation and Christianity to Africa, and although constituting only a tiny fraction of Liberia's total population, they dominated the indigenous peoples. The Masonic Order, established in the country in 1851, came to be a symbol of Americo-Liberian solidarity and five presidents, starting with Roberts, were grand masters.

For nearly a century, Liberia flourished economically and politically while indigenous populations continued to be repressed, suffering under a form of forced labour that anywhere else would have been called slavery. In 1930 Britain and the USA cut off diplomatic relations for five years because of the sale of human labour to Spanish colonialists in what was then Fernando Po (now Bioko in Equatorial Guinea).

The Golden Years?

The True Whig Party monopolised power from early in Liberia's history. Despite the country's labour-recruitment policies, the party was able to project an image of Liberia as Africa's most stable country. During William Tubman's presidency (1944–71), this led to massive foreign investment, and for several decades following WWII Liberia sustained sub-Saharan Africa's highest growth rate. Firestone and other American companies made major investments and Tubman earned praise as the 'maker of modern Liberia'. In the 1960s, iron ore-mining operations began near Yekepa by Lamco (Liberian-American Swedish Minerals Company), which became the largest private enterprise in sub-Saharan Africa.

The influx of foreign money soon began to distort the economy, resulting in exacerbation of social inequalities and increased hostility between Americo-Liberians and

the indigenous population. Viewing this development with alarm, Tubman was forced to concede that the indigenous people would have to be granted some political and economic involvement in the country, including the franchise. Until this point (1963), 97% of the population had been denied voting rights.

William Tolbert succeeded Tubman as president in 1971. While Tolbert initiated a series of reforms, the government continued to be controlled by about a dozen related Americo-Liberian families and corruption was rampant. Tolbert established diplomatic relations with Communist countries such as the People's Republic of China, and at home clamped down harshly on opposition.

Coup d'Etat & Years of Darkness

Resentment of these policies and of growing government corruption grew. In 1979 several demonstrators were shot in protests against a proposed increase in rice prices. Finally, in April 1980, Tolbert was overthrown in a coup led by an uneducated master sergeant, Samuel Doe. In the accompanying fighting, Tolbert and many high-ranking ministers were killed. For the first time, Liberia had a ruler who wasn't an Americo-Liberian, giving the indigenous population a taste of political power and an opportunity for vengeance. The 28-year-old Doe shocked the world by ordering 13 ex-ministers to be publicly executed on a beach in Monrovia.

Although the coup gave power to the indigenous population, it was condemned by most other African countries and by Liberia's other allies and trading partners. Over the next few years, relations with neighbouring African states gradually thawed. However, the post-coup flight of capital, coupled with ongoing corruption, caused Liberia's economy to rapidly decline. During the 1980s, real incomes fell by half, the unemployment rate in Monrovia rose to 50% and electricity blackouts became common.

Doe struggled to maintain his grip on power by any means available, including a sham election held in 1985, largely to appease his major creditor, the USA. By the late 1980s, however, it was clear that opposition forces had had enough. Following a foiled post-election coup attempt, members

of Doe's Krahn tribe began killing and torturing rival tribespeople, particularly the Gio and Mano in Nimba County.

Civil War

On Christmas Eve 1989, several hundred rebels led by Charles Taylor (former head of the Doe government's procurement agency) invaded Nimba County from Côte d'Ivoire. Doe's troops arrived shortly thereafter and indiscriminately killed hundreds of unarmed civilians, raped women and burned villages. Thousands fled into Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea.

Shortly after the invasion, Prince Johnson of the Gio tribe broke away from Taylor and formed his own rebel group. By mid-1990, Taylor's forces controlled most of the country, while Johnson's guerrillas had seized most of Monrovia; Doe was holed up with loyal troops in his mansion. Meanwhile, Liberia lay in ruins. Refugees were streaming into neighbouring countries, US warships were anchored off the coast and an Ecomog peacekeeping force (known as Ecomog or an Ecomog Monitoring Group) was despatched in an attempt to keep the warring factions apart.

It was all to no avail. Refusing to surrender or even step down as president, Doe and many of his supporters were finally wiped out by Johnson's forces. With both Johnson and Taylor claiming the presidency, Ecomog forces installed their own candidate, political-science professor Amos Sawyer, as head of the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU). Meanwhile, Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) forces continued to occupy about 90% of the country, while remnants of Doe's former army and Johnson's followers were encamped within Monrovia itself.

Peace Accords But No Peace

After a brutal assault by Taylor on Monrovia in October 1992, Ecomog increased its forces and in August 1993 the protagonists finally hammered out the Cotonou Agreement peace accord. This called for installation of a six-month transitional government representing IGNU, NPFL and the third major player, Ulimo (United Liberation Movement for Democracy), Doe's former soldiers. When its mandate expired in September 1994 a new agreement, the

GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

Liberia's government is modelled on that in the USA, with popularly elected executive and legislative branches and a court system, although a network of paramount chiefs still holds sway at the local level.

Akosombo Amendment, was signed, but then later rejected.

In August 1995, yet another peace agreement (the Abuja Accord) was signed by leaders of the main warring factions. This one lasted until April 1996, when fighting erupted in Monrovia between NPFL and Ulimo, resulting in widespread looting and damage.

August 1996 saw the negotiation of an amended Abuja Accord, providing for a cease-fire, disarmament and demobilisation, followed by elections. Despite serious cease-fire violations and an incomplete disarmament process, elections took place in July. Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Party (NPP) won an overwhelming majority (75%) – in large part because many Liberians feared the consequences if he lost.

Following the elections, life began to resume its normal rhythms, yet the political scene remained tenuous. By late 1998, all former faction leaders except Taylor were living in exile and power became increasingly consolidated in the presidency. In 1999 dissident groups led by the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) launched armed incursions in Lofa County near the Guinean border, setting off a new round of low-level fighting. The peace was further shattered with devastating outbreaks of fighting in 2002 and 2003. Finally, in August 2003, with LURD and other groups controlling much of the country, and under pressure from the international community, Charles Taylor went into exile in Nigeria. A transitional government was established, headed by local businessman Charles Gyude Bryant and assisted by UN peacekeepers.

Liberia Today

In late 2005 Liberians again went to the polls. In a hotly contested run-off vote between former World Bank economist Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and international soccer star George Weah, Johnson-Sirleaf won the

presidency, thereby also becoming the first woman to be elected president anywhere in Africa. As she steps into her new role, the tasks facing Liberia are massive – completion of the disarmament process, resettlement of vast numbers of displaced persons and refugees, solidification of the still-fragile peace and a complete rebuilding of the country's government, economy and infrastructure. Yet most Liberians and longtime Liberia watchers are upbeat. While optimism for the future is tempered by the tragic realities of the country's recent past, the future on the whole is looking brighter.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

If there's any word that characterises Liberians, it's resilience. Here, in this lush, war-ravaged land, almost one in two Liberians were displaced from their homes during the long years of conflict and many were brutalised or witnessed unspeakable atrocities. Yet, despite all the suffering, there's a remarkable air of peppiness, especially on the streets of Monrovia, and a sense of cautious hope that the time has finally come to rise up from the ashes and start rebuilding. In one recent display of this determination to move forward, thousands of Liberians stood in line for hours in the hot sun waiting for a chance to cast their votes in the 2005 national elections.

Apart from war, one of the most significant defining factors in Liberia's national psyche is the long-standing division between Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population. The inequalities and sense of separateness that have existed since the country's earliest days (see p463) continue to shadow political and economic life, although hopes are that the shared desire of all Liberians for peace will gradually work to overcome this.

Daily Life

Want to take a peek inside a typical home? It's not such an easy task these days, as most Liberians are just starting to rebuild theirs. In a country where there's no electricity grid, national telephone network nor comprehensive road network, life for most focuses on survival. Families have been divided, and children traumatised and estranged from their communities. During the war years, schooling for most children was severely disrupted, and rebuilding educational networks is one of the most important tasks facing the new government. Yet slowly the rhythms of daily life are returning. Produce from rural areas is once again making its way to Monrovia's markets, returning residents are seeking zinc to roof their newly rebuilt houses, and the hospitality for which Liberians are renowned is alive and well.

SECRET SOCIETIES

Liberia is famous for its secret societies, called *poro* for men and *sande* for women. They are found throughout the country, except in the southeast, and they are especially strong in the northwest. Each society has a wealth of rites and ceremonies that are used to educate young people in tribal ways, folklore and general life skills, and they continue to be a major force in preserving Liberia's traditional culture.

Many rituals centre around initiations into adulthood, which traditionally involved up to four years of training, though these days the time is usually shorter. If you're lucky enough to spend time in the countryside, you may see initiates, who are easily recognised by their white painted faces and bodies and their shaved heads.

Within the societies, there's usually a strong pecking order, with lower-ranking members forbidden from sharing in the special knowledge of higher-ranking members or attending their secret meetings. The most extreme example of these hierarchies is the *poro* among the Vai, with up to 99 levels. Ascending in the ranks depends on a combination of birth (with leadership sometimes restricted to certain families), seniority and savvyness in mastering traditional beliefs and rituals.

The secret societies shape not only religious rituals and education, but also community life, with *zoes* (*poro* society leaders) wielding significant political influence. The societies also control the activities of traditional medicinal practitioners, and are used to settle disputes or to levy punishments. A village chief who doesn't have the support of the *poro* on important decisions can expect trouble enforcing them.

Population

With about 30 persons per sq km, Liberia is one of the least densely populated of West Africa's coastal countries. Monrovia is the only real city, with other population centres elsewhere along the coast, in the centre near Gbarnga and Ganta, in the northwest near the Sierra Leone border and in the south-east near Harper. Elsewhere, large tracts of the country are completely uninhabited or have only very scattered populations.

The population of about 3.3 million consists overwhelmingly of people of indigenous origin belonging to more than a dozen major tribal groups. These include the Kpelle in the centre, the Bassa around Buchanan, the Krahn in the southeast, the Mandingo (also called Mandinka) in the north and the Kru along the coast. The Kpelle and the Bassa together comprise just over one-third of the population, while Americo-Liberians account for barely 5% of the total. There's also a large Lebanese community in Monrovia, who wield a disproportionate share of economic power.

SPORT

Liberian soccer – long a national passion – gained worldwide attention with the rise of George Weah to become Fifa world player of the year in 1995. Since retiring, Weah has kept himself busy as coach and sponsor of Liberia's national team, the Lone Stars, as well as by campaigning for president and serving as a UN goodwill ambassador. His personal following in the country is almost as great as that for the sport itself.

RELIGION

Religious fervour is strong in Liberia. This is particularly evident on New Year's Eve, when many churches stay open throughout the night, filled with singing and praying Liberians, and on Sundays, when services are invariably packed. Close to half of the population are Christians and about 20% are Muslim, with the remainder following traditional religions.

ARTS Sculpture

Liberia has long been famed for its masks, which hold religious as well as artistic significance, and traditionally were used for entertainment as well as to teach traditional

TALKING DRUMS

One of Liberia's best-known traditional instruments – although it's not uniquely Liberian – is the 'talking drum'. It looks like an hourglass, with the upper and lower ends connected by tension strings. When the drummer compresses the strings while holding the drum under one arm next to his body, the pitch of the drum increases, producing a variable tone and giving the drum its name. Talking drums are generally beaten with a stick, rather than with the hands.

values. The Gio in Nimba County in the northeast have some particularly rich traditions, including the *gunyege* mask, which shelters a power-giving spirit, and the *kagle* mask, which resembles a chimpanzee. The Bassa around Buchanan are renowned for their *gela* masks, which often have elaborately carved coiffures, always with an odd number of plaits.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Liberia, which occupies a very wet 111,000 sq km patch of the West African coastline, is just under half the size of the UK. Its humid and low-lying coastal plain is intersected by countless marshes and tidal lagoons, and bisected by at least nine major rivers, the largest of which is the St Paul. Inland is a densely forested plateau rising to low mountains in the northeast, in Lofa and Nimba counties. The highest point in the country is Goodhouse Hill (1362m), in the Nimba range on the borders with Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

Plants & Wildlife

Liberia's rainforests host an amazing diversity of birds, plants and other wildlife, including forest elephants, pygmy hippos, various antelope species and even leopards, as well as West African chimpanzees and numerous other primates. Sapo National Park alone is home to over 500 different bird species.

National Parks

Liberia's only fully protected area is Sapo National Park (opposite) in the far southeast of the country. In 2003 the Nimba Nature

Reserve was declared, near the borders with Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, and contiguous with the Guinean-Côte d'Ivoirian Mont Nimba Strict Nature Reserve (a Unesco World Heritage Site). There are no facilities, but it will ultimately be open for tourism.

Environmental Issues

Liberia is one of the last West African countries with significant areas of rainforest, although these now cover only about 40% of land area, primarily near the Sierra Leone border and around Sapo National Park. Until recently, up to two-dozen logging companies were operating in the country, primarily in the southeast, and large swathes of forest were cleared. The recent international timber trade sanctions have significantly halted this decimation, although only about 4% of Liberia's total forest cover is currently under protection, and effective regulation is weak.

On the brighter side, Liberia's forests comprise a critical part of the Guinean Forests of West Africa Hotspot – an exceptionally biodiverse area stretching across 11 countries in the region – and have attracted significant international attention, spearheaded by Conservation International (www.conservation.org), and its local partner, the **Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia** (Map p470; SCNL; ☎ 227 058, 06-512 506; scnlib2001@yahoo.com; Monrovia Zoo, Larkpase). Among

other endeavours, they have been working to bring at least 30% of Liberia's forest areas under protection, to curb poaching and to protect endangered species, including the critically endangered Western chimpanzee.

FOOD & DRINK

Monrovia has a satisfying array of dining options; elsewhere, you'll have to rely on chop bars.

Traditional Liberian food consists of rice or a cassava-based staple (called *fufu*, *dumbo* or GB), which is eaten with a soup or sauce made with greens and palm oil, and sometimes also meat or fish. Other popular dishes include *togborgee* (a Lofa County speciality made with kitaly – a type of eggplant – or bitterbuoy – another local vegetable – and country soda), *palava* sauce (made with *plato* leaf, dried fish or meat and palm oil) and palm butter (a sauce traditionally popular in Maryland and Grand Kru counties and made from palm nuts).

MONROVIA

Monrovia, sprawled across a narrow peninsula between the Mesurado River and the sea, has suffered badly during the past two decades. Most infrastructure was gutted during the fighting, and infrastructure

SAPO NATIONAL PARK

Sapo, Liberia's only national park, is a lush 1808-sq-km tract containing some of West Africa's last remaining primary rainforest, as well as forest elephants, pygmy hippos, chimpanzees, antelopes and other wildlife, although these populations suffered greatly during the final years of fighting at the hands of both refugees and rebels who had moved into the park boundaries. Large swathes of nearby forest, as well as some forest areas within the park itself, were also felled.

With the recent eviction of the remaining squatters from Sapo, work is now getting started on rebuilding infrastructure, including park headquarters, and on enforcing its protected status. Agro-forestry projects are slowly being recommenced in the 1.6km-wide buffer zone surrounding the park, and efforts are ongoing to increase community involvement in park management.

Currently, there are no commercial tours into Sapo, although this is expected to quickly change once the new government is in place. If you are interested in visiting, the best contact for updated information is the Society for the Conservation of Nature of Liberia (SCNL; above). Allow a full day to reach Sapo from Monrovia by 4WD along the road paralleling the coast, and at least two days going via Zwedru. Following the coastal road, once at Greenville, head 60km north to Juarzon and then 5km southeast to Jalay's Town in the park's buffer zone. From here it's 1.5km further on foot to the park boundary, on the opposite side of Pahneh Creek (a tributary of the Sinoe River). Once at the park, you can arrange guided hikes and canoe rides.

In addition to SCNL, you can obtain information on Sapo through Conservation International's office in Monrovia or through fpi@forestpartnersinternational.org.



largely destroyed. Yet, if you can overlook the drone of generators and the bullet-scarred building shells, the city has an unmistakable pep and an unbending determination to rebuild. It's also one of the friendliest capitals you are likely to visit in Africa and – thanks in part to the large UN presence – also has a surprisingly good restaurant and bar scene. Pick a day when it's not raining, find some Liberian friends, and soon you'll forget you're walking around in what was only recently a war zone.

ORIENTATION

The heart of town is Benson and Randall Sts, and along Broad St, where you'll find most shops and businesses. Southwest of here

at Mamba Point is Monrovia's tiny diplomatic enclave, and 1.5km to the southeast is Capitol Hill, with government buildings, many quite damaged. Beyond that is Sinkor, which sprawls about 6km further southeast until reaching Elwa Junction and Red Light Motor Park. On Monrovia's northern edge is Waterside Market, and beyond that, Freeport and Bushrod Island. In the Mesurado River just opposite Waterside Market is Providence Island, where the first expedition of freed American slaves landed in 1822.

INFORMATION

There's a reasonable selection of Internet cafés in the town centre, including several on or around Broad St. This is also the best

place to look for foreign exchange bureaus and banks.

Charif Pharmacy (Map p472; Randall St) Good selection of European and US items.

Karou Voyages (Map p472; ☎ 226 508; Broad St) Regional and international flight bookings.

Liberia Telecom (Map p472; Lynch St; ☎ 8am-10pm) International calls, three-minute minimum, deposit required.

Main post office (Map p472; cnr Randall & Ashmun Sts; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat)

St Joseph's Catholic Hospital (Map p472; ☎ 226 207) About 7km southeast of town on the extension of Tubman Blvd, and for dire emergencies only.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Use caution when going out in the evening, and get an update on security when you arrive from your embassy or resident expats.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **National Museum** (Map p472; Broad St; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) is only a shadow of its former self, with a handful of dusty masks, drums and paintings, accompanied by some interesting descriptions.

The now ruined **Masonic Temple** (Map p470; Benson St) was once Monrovia's major landmark. Since most Masons were Americo-Liberian descendants of the original settlers, the Temple was a prominent symbol of previous regimes, and was vandalised after the 1980 coup when the Masonic Order was banned. A grand master's throne from the temple, once used by William Tubman, sits on dusty display at the National Museum.

The chaotic and colourful **Waterside Market** (Map p472; Water St) offers almost everything for sale, including some attractive textiles (which are sold by the *lapa* or 2m).

SLEEPING

Breakfast is included in room prices, except as noted.

Mamba Point Hotel (Map p470; ☎ 06-544 544, 06-440 000; mambapointhotel@yahoo.com; UN Dr, Mamba Point; s/d/ste US\$120/160/175; ☎ ☎) This cosy establishment has long been Monrovia's best, and is a favourite with journalists and business travellers. Its 64 rooms, while not luxurious, are comfortable and well-appointed – all with satellite TV and wi-fi – and some have sea views. There's also a casino.

CHILD SOLDIERS & STREET CHILDREN

It's no secret that many of the guns shot during Liberia's years of war were wielded by young people. However, it has only been during recent disarmament phases that the extent to which children were used in the fighting has become apparent. Of the approximately 20,000 former combatants disarmed under the August 1996 peace accord, about 4000 were under 17, and about half of these were aged 15 or under. Statistics are similarly sobering for the more recent disarmament, and some reports place the number of child soldiers at more than triple these figures. Equally distressing is the fact that fewer than 10% of the former combatants (about 97% of whom are males) have more than an elementary level of schooling.

Many of these disenfranchised youths now find themselves on the streets – disillusioned and lacking sufficient education or skills to move to happier circumstances. Many are unwilling or unable to return to their families, either for fear of community retaliation and rejection, or because of the difficulty of fitting into an established routine after spending so much time in the bush. In addition to the former combatants, hundreds of other youths are on the streets, estranged from family and community through the near-total suspension of schooling during the war, coupled with massive community displacement and wartime deaths and family separations.

There are several groups working to assist these boys and girls, including the church-run Don Bosco Program, which provides temporary night shelters and skills training while working to reunify children with their families. For the girls, many of whom have turned to prostitution, health advice and counselling are offered, as well as basic small-business training to help them find an alternative livelihood. Many of the young boys you'll meet by the supermarkets and on the street in downtown Monrovia are enrolled in the program. If you want to give them some support, speak to staff at the Sinkor headquarters off Tubman Blvd in Monrovia, or just give them a few minutes of your time and attention.

CENTRAL MONROVIA

INFORMATION	BRAMANTE
Charif Pharmacy.....1 C2	Bramante.....(see 9)
Karou Voyages.....2 C1	Diana Restaurant.....13 D2
Liberia Telecom.....3 D2	Mama Sheriff.....14 D2
LUBI Bank.....4 C2	Sidewalk Fruit & Vegetable
Main Post Office.....5 D1	Vendors.....15 C2
	Stop & Shop.....16 C2
	Sweet Finger.....17 D2
	Upstairs Café.....18 C2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	DRINKING
Bureau of Immigration.....6 D2	Metropolitan
National Museum.....7 D2	Hotel Disco.....(see 8)

SLEEPING	SHOPPING
Metropolitan Hotel.....8 D2	Waterside Market.....19 D1
Milano Hotel.....9 C2	
Palm Hotel.....10 C2	

EATING	TRANSPORT
Abi Jaoudi.....(see 18)	Association of Evangelicals
Aunty Nana.....11 C1	of Liberia Bldg.....20 C2
Bamboo Bar.....(see 10)	SN Brussels.....21 C1
Beirut.....12 D2	Weasua Air Transport.....(see 2)

Krystal Oceanview Hotel (Map p470; ☎ 07-776 7676, 06-510 424; UN Dr, Mamba Point; s/d US\$130/180; 📶 📺 📺) This 26-room hotel, well located overlooking the sea opposite La Pointe restaurant, is one of the city's newest. Its rooms are homey – rates include Internet access and laundry service – and there's a pricey but very pleasant waterside restaurant-bar.

Royal Hotel (Map p470; ☎ 06-566 669; royalhotel.liberia@yahoo.com; cnr 14th St & Tubman Blvd, Sinkor; s/d/ste US\$100/120/175; 📶 📺 📺) The Royal is another popular choice, especially with UN staff, with 30 small but pleasant rooms, two restaurants and an Internet café.

Metropolitan Hotel (Map p472; ☎ 06-510 853; Broad St; r/US\$45-75; 📶 📺) Located between Centre and Gurley Sts, this low-end alternative has 29 bland rooms of varying size and standard, though all come with continental breakfast and TV. Prices are often negotiable.

Also recommended:

Milano Hotel (Map p472; ☎ 06-454 068; hotel.milano@yahoo.com; cnr Carey & Randall Sts; s/d/ste US\$90/150/200; 📶 📺 📺) A new, centrally-located place with 42 rooms – all with minibar, cable TV and Internet access – and a good restaurant.

Palm Hotel (Map p472; ☎ 05-618 618, 06-535 177; palmhotelmonrovia@yahoo.com; cnr Broad & Randall Sts; s/d US\$100/150; 📶 📺) Conveniently located in the heart of town, with 16 twin-bedded rooms with TV, and a popular rooftop restaurant-bar.

EATING

Most places are open for lunch and dinner daily, except as noted.

Liberian

Aunty Nana (Map p472; Robert St; meals US\$7.50; 📶 noon-7pm Mon-Sat, to 3pm Sun) This upscale version of a chop house is a great place to get introduced to Liberian food, with everything from *fufu* soup and palm butter sauce to *jollof* rice and *dumbuy*, plus inexpensive beers. It's between Ashmun and Front Sts.

Mama Sheriff (Map p472; cnr Carey & Lynch Sts; meals US\$1.50-3) For an earthier experience, try this local haunt, with heaping portions of cassava leaf, groundnut soup and other favourites at rock-bottom prices, all served up in small, medium or large ('special') portions.

Sweet Finger (Map p472; cnr Carey & Lynch; meals US\$2-3) Just around the corner from Mama Sheriff, with a daily-changing menu featuring potato greens, *palava* sauce, dry rice with fish and other specialities.

Lebanese

Diana Restaurant (Map p472; ☎ 06-563 333, 06-623 333; Center St; meals US\$3-10, pizzas US\$9-13; 📶 7.30am-11pm) This small, no-frills place favoured by Lebanese businessmen and expats is one of Monrovia's dining bargains. The menu features meat or chicken shawarma, felafel sandwiches, hummus, a large mixed grill platter and kofta, and there's also good pizza. It's between Carey and Broad Sts.

Beirut (Map p472; ☎ 227 299; Center St; meze US\$3-8, meals US\$10-26; 📶 📺) This Lebanese institution has meze, plus salads, pastas, steaks, seafood (even lobster thermidor) and vegetarian platters. It's between Ashmun and Broad Sts.

Upstairs Café (Map p472; ☎ 06-438 718; Randall St; light meals US\$1.50-5; meals US\$6-12; 📶 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) An unassuming place above Abi Jaoudi supermarket, and one of Monrovia's insider tips, with inexpensive Lebanese fare, plus omelettes, grilled platters, salads, pizzas and a Saturday afternoon buffet (US\$8).

Asian

Bangkok Thai Restaurant (☎ 06-590 455; Old Rd, Sinkor; meals US\$4-12) A recent addition to the Monrovia restaurant scene, with a large selection of Thai dishes, plus a separate vegetarian menu. Outdoor seating is best if you want to get away from the blaring TV.

China Great Wall Restaurant (Map p470; ☎ 07-755 5666; 10th St, Sinkor; mains US\$12-20) Monrovia's fanciest Chinese eatery with an authentic, if rather pricey, menu.

Taaj Indian Restaurant (Map p470; ☎ 07-777 6666; 5th St, Sinkor; mains US\$5-10) The Taaj's extensive Indian and Chinese menu includes chicken, mutton, seafood and rice plates, plus vegetarian specialities, fruit shakes and mango lassis, and a Sunday buffet.

Living Room (Map p470; ☎ 05-672 375; Royal Hotel, cnr Tubman Blvd & 14th St, Sinkor; sushi US\$3-6; 📶 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Monrovia's first sushi bar, with a gleaming sushi counter, and an appetising array of nigiri sushi, sashimi and more.

Continental

La Pointe (Map p470; ☎ 06-510 587; UN Dr, Mamba Point; mains US\$10-25) This pleasant eatery overlooking the ocean offers a great-value daily lunch buffet (US\$10) featuring continental and Liberian cuisine, but arrive early, as appetizers and salads run out. The à la carte menu has chicken, meat, pasta and seafood dishes, plus some vegetarian selections.

Bramante (Map p472; ☎ 06-454 068; Milano Hotel, Carey St; meals US\$15-20) The place to go for fine Italian dining, with everything from Parma ham to tagliatelle with shrimp. If you have room for more, the dessert menu includes tiramisu and chocolate mousse.

Bamboo Bar (Map p472; ☎ 05-618 618; Palm Hotel, cnr Broad & Randall Sts; appetizers US\$3-6, sandwiches US\$5-7, pizzas US\$7-20, meals US\$10-21; 📶 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This rooftop restaurant is ideal for people watching, while enjoying well-priced Lebanese appetizers, plus chicken, seafood and steak dishes, salads, burgers or pizzas.

Mamba Point Hotel Restaurant (Map p470; ☎ 06-440 000, 06-544 544; UN Dr, Mamba Point; light meals

US\$6-8, mains US\$13-20; 📶 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The main hotel restaurant offers continental, Lebanese and Indian menus, plus a Sunday lunch buffet (US\$12). There's also the smaller Mezza House, with burgers, salads and a tempting array of deserts and juices.

Other recommendations:

Heartbreak Restaurant (Map p470; ☎ 06-566 669; Royal Hotel, cnr Tubman Blvd & 14th St, Sinkor; meals US\$10-25) A popular haunt, with a menu featuring everything from Lebanese appetizers to seafood, pasta and burgers, a Sunday lunch buffet (US\$12) and music and dancing on Wednesday and Saturday evenings.

New Jack Café & Bar (Map p470; UN Drive, Mamba Point; meals US\$5-15) On the seafont opposite Mamba Point Hotel, with shaded huts and delicious grilled lobster (US\$14), plus ribs and more.

Self-Catering

Self-caterers can try the well-stocked **Abi Jaoudi** (Map p472; Randall St; 📶 8am-8pm Mon-Fri) between Sekou Touré and Benson Sts, which sells everything from French cheese and croissants to wine and liquors, or **Stop & Shop** (Map p472; Randall St), nearby, with a range of US products. Sidewalk vendors along Benson St sell a colourful array of fruits, vegetables and freshwater prawns.

DRINKING

For drinks, the Bamboo Bar (left) is a favourite at any hour, and has live music Saturday evenings. For more local flavour, try **Porch** (off Benson St) or the lively but somewhat seedy **La Point** (Map p470; Mamba Point). Popular nightspots include **Pepper Bush** (Map p470; Warren St), near Carey St, and the disco at the Metropolitan Hotel (opposite).

ENTERTAINMENT

Soccer games always draw a crowd. Liberia's Lone Stars play at the stadium near Elwa Junction, 12km southeast of town.

SHOPPING

Vendors near the US embassy's Gate One – in tiny stalls lining a small alley bordering UN Drive – sell everything from wooden masks to baskets and textiles. Other places shop for crafts include the vendors opposite Mamba Point Hotel and in Waterside Market.

Textiles are sold by the *lapa* (2m) – the best place to look is Waterside Market (p471), near Gurley St. For custom-made

African clothes, try the tailors along Benson St near the Randall St junction.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

All flights arrive and depart from **Roberts International Airport** (Code ROB; Robertsfield), 60km southeast of Monrovia.

For details on flights to/from Monrovia see p480.

Boat

Sam Kazouh (1st fl, Association of Evangelicals of Liberia Bldg, Randall St) runs a weekly boat to Greenville (US\$30, deck seating only, 12 to 15 hours), sometimes continuing on to Harper (US\$50 from Monrovia, 22 to 25 hours); schedules vary. There's also a sporadic speedboat between Monrovia and Harper (US\$60, 36 hours). Inquire at the 'fishing pier' at the Freeport.

Bush Taxi & Minibus

Bush taxis for Tubmanburg and the Sierra Leone border leave from Duala Motor Park, 9km northeast of the town centre. Transport for most other destinations, including the borders of Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, leaves from the Red Light Motor Park, Monrovia's main motor park 15km northeast of the centre.

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

Roberts International Airport (Robertsfield) is 60km southeast of Monrovia. Taxis charge about US\$30 to central Monrovia, but it's best to arrange a pick-up in advance with your hotel.

Taxi

Shared taxis are the main public transport. They operate on a zone system (US\$0.20 from the centre to Duala Motor Park; US\$0.50 to Red Light Motor Park).

AROUND MONROVIA

BEACHES

There are some beautiful beaches stretching south and north of Monrovia, which fill up with locals and foreign residents on weekends. Before jumping in, get local advice, as currents can be quite dangerous. One of

the most popular is **Silver Beach**, about 15km southeast of central Monrovia off the airport road. There's a restaurant here, small volleyball court, craft vendors, shower and toilet, and chairs and umbrellas for hire. About 2km further south is **Thinkers Beach**, also with a small restaurant, shower and toilets. **St Martin's Beach**, just beyond Thinkers Beach, is quiet and isolated, with no facilities, and is good for getting away from the crowds.

About 45 minutes further southeast is **Marshall**, where the Junk, Farmington and Little Bassa Rivers meet the sea. It boasts a lagoon and a deserted stretch of beach.

FIRESTONE PLANTATION

Firestone – the world's largest rubber plantation – was established in 1926 when the Firestone tyre company secured one million acres of land in Liberia at an annual rent of only US\$0.06 per acre. In its heyday, the company employed 20,000 workers, more than 10% of Liberia's labour force; Liberia was once known as the Firestone Republic.

After lying dormant during the war, Firestone is again operating, although at reduced capacity. There are no regular tours, but you can usually find employees on the grounds who can show you around and explain the tapping process. Stick to the beaten path, as Firestone is one of several areas in Liberia where land mines have been found.

The plantation is in Harbel, near Robertsfield International Airport. You'll need private transport to get here.

THE COAST

Liberia's wild and heavily vegetated coastline is broken only by occasional towns and fishing villages, and numerous major rivers. Infrastructure is nonexistent. The coastal road is passable as far as Greenville, from where you'll need to head up and around along the rugged inland route to Harper.

ROBERTSPORT

Once a relaxing seaside town, Robertsport was completely destroyed during the war. While there's no infrastructure and no

where to stay, the beaches are still beautiful, and are rumoured to offer some of the best surfing along the West African coast. During WWII, Robertsport was used as an Allied submarine base.

Lake Piso, separating Robertsport from the mainland, often flows onto the road during the rainy season; inquire first in Monrovia about conditions before heading out here.

BUCHANAN

Lively, laid-back Buchanan is Liberia's second port and the capital of Grand Bassa County. While the town itself doesn't offer much, it's an agreeable place, and makes a good introduction to upcountry Liberia. Southeast of the port are some attractive beaches. To reach them, follow the port road to the old Lamco Compound, then ask locals the way.

Buchanan also hosts a large Fanti community, most of whom live in the lively Fanti Town fishing village – a small piece of Ghana in Liberia.

Wherever you wander, stick to the beaten path, especially on the outskirts of

town and in the vegetated strip bordering the beaches, as some areas were mined during the war.

Getting There & Away

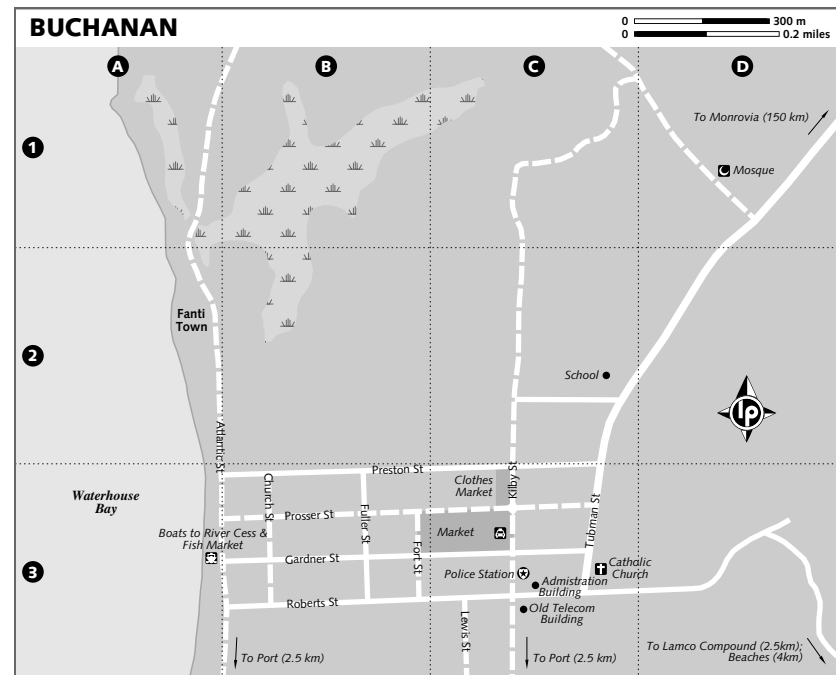
Bush taxis run daily to Monrovia (US\$5, three hours). From Monrovia, it's better to get one at Elwa Junction than at the hectic Red Light Motor Park.

During the dry season, at least several vehicles travel weekly from Buchanan to River Cess. It's also possible to take a fishing boat, although these are notoriously unsafe. Boats leave from Fanti Town and from near the fish market just west of the town centre.

Bush taxi for all destinations depart from the main taxi stand near the market; some also leave from the junction on the Monrovia road several kilometres northeast of town.

GREENVILLE

Greenville (also known as Sinoe) is the capital of Sinoe County, and a former port and logging centre. On the edge of town is a



beach, but to reach the open sea you'll need to cross a shallow lagoon.

Greenville is also the jumping-off point for excursions to Sapu National Park, though you'll need your own vehicle as there's no public transport; see p469.

The main route between Monrovia and Greenville is via Buchanan along the rough coastal road. Otherwise, the only route is via Zwedru. There's also an occasional boat service from Monrovia (see p474).

HARPER

Harper (sometimes referred to as Cape Palmas) is the capital of Maryland, which has long had a reputation as Liberia's most progressive county; until 1857 it was even a separate republic. In contrast with much of the rest of the country, where indigenous populations were severely repressed, settlers in Harper worked to cultivate a more cooperative relationship with the local residents. In the town centre is a monument commemorating the original accord between settlers and locals. Harper was also the seat of Liberia's first university (Cuttington, later transferred to Gbarnga), and the country's educational centre.

Now the town is just a shell of its former self. Only ruins remain of the many fine old houses that once graced Harper's streets, including former president William Tubman's mansion.

While there's no accommodation in Harper, food and other basics are available.

Getting There & Away

Road access from Monrovia is via Tappita and Zwedru, then southeast to the coast. There's no public transport. Under good conditions, it's a three-day journey in a 4WD; during the rainy season the road from Zwedru becomes impassable. There's no accommodation en route, and you'll need to be self-sufficient with food and water. Although longer, many Liberians prefer to make the Monrovia–Harper journey via Sanniquellie and Danané in Côte d'Ivoire. From Danané continue to Man and then along the better Ivorian roads south and west to San Pédro, re-entering Liberia west of Tabou. Bush taxis run frequently between the border and Harper, 20km further west. See p480.

A boat runs sporadically between Harper and Monrovia (see p474).

THE INTERIOR

Away from the Monrovia to Ganta corridor, Liberia's interior is covered with dense forests, gently rolling hills and small villages. Apart from the rough tracks leading to the handful of larger towns, there is no road network, and there are no tourist facilities.

TUBMANBURG

Tubmanburg (which is also called Bomi), with an agreeable setting among the Bomi Hills, was once an important iron-ore and diamond mining centre. Although almost all of Tubmanburg's residents had to flee during the war. These days, as families make their way back, makeshift mud-and-thatch houses have replaced the sturdier zinc-roofed dwellings that once lined the streets, and the main activity in town is rebuilding.

For an inexpensive meal, try Sis Helen's Eye to Eye Bar & Restaurant on the main road.

Bush taxis cost US\$3 to Monrovia. There is also occasional transport to the Sierra Leone border, usually via Bo (Waterside).

GBARNGA

During the war years, Gbarnga gained notoriety as Charles Taylor's centre of operations, and virtually became the second capital of Liberia. Today it's still a major town, and one of the few easily reached on tarmac from Monrovia.

About 10km southwest along the Monrovia road is Phebe, site of Cuttington College and the ruins of the old Africana Museum, which once boasted a 3000-piece collection. About 30km northwest of Phebe are the pretty Kpatawe Falls, reached via bicycle or 4WD along the dirt road opposite Phebe Hospital.

About 40km north of Gbarnga on the Voinjama road, just before the bridge over the St Paul River, is Tolbert Farms, once the home of former President Tolbert.

Sleeping & Eating

Gbarnga has little to offer for accommodation and food. **Jalk Enterprises Restaurant & Store** (Josephine's; r without bathroom US\$20) in Phebe is probably the most reliable bet,

with adequate rooms and a restaurant (closed Sunday lunch).

CooCoo Nest (Tubman Farms; r US\$35, r with generator US\$50) is an eccentric place, on the main road about 60km southwest of Gbarnga between Totota and Salala, was former president Tubman's private residence. Its name supposedly comes from Tubman's pet name for his young daughter. Rooms are reasonably spacious, and when the generator works, there's also a restaurant.

Getting There & Away

Bush taxis go frequently from Gbarnga to Monrovia (US\$10, six hours). Taxis from Gbarnga to Phebe Junction (US\$0.60) leave from the taxi union parking lot at the top of the hill just off the highway. You need your own transport to get to CooCoo Nest.

GANTA

Bustling and unassuming Ganta (officially called Gompa City) is just 2km from the Guinean border. For diversion, there's a small market, and an intriguing **mosque** (north of the main road), the design of which is said to be unique in Liberia. Otherwise, visit the small **craft shop** (☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Sat) on the edge of town along the Sanniquellie road.

Sleeping & Eating

Mid-Nite Fever Motel (s/d US\$7/9) This place on the Tappita road is the only hotel in town. Rooms are basic, but sheets are clean, and if the generator is working there's also a fan. Bring your own mosquito net.

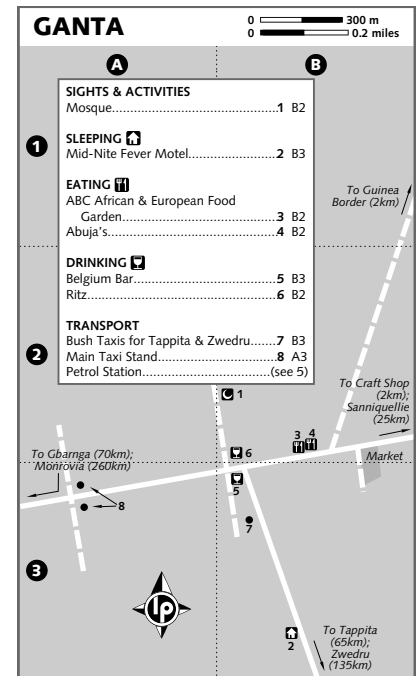
For food, try **ABC African & European Food Garden** (meals from US\$2.50), Anthony Buster Clinton's place, serving up good chicken or the more basic **Abuja's** (meals around US\$1), next door, with rice and sauce.

For cold drinks and dancing try the Ritz, at the Tappita road junction. Opposite is Belgium Bar, also good for a drink.

Getting There & Around

Bush taxis leave several times daily from the main taxi stand to Gbarnga (US\$3, 1½ hours), Monrovia (US\$13, five hours) and Sanniquellie (US\$3, one hour). A few bush taxis go weekly to Tappita and Zwedru.

Bush taxis from the centre to the Guinean border cost US\$0.30; from the border there's daily transport to Diéké (US\$1).



SANNIQUELLIE

Tiny Sanniquellie has a disproportionately big place in history as the birthplace of the Organisation of African Unity. Along the main road into town you can see the building where William Tubman, Sekou Touré and Kwame Nkrumah met in 1957 to discuss a union of African states – an idea that was formalised the next year with the drafting of a preliminary charter. The compound is now used to house official visitors.

Ordinary folk will need to content themselves with a room at the **Traveller's Inn Motel** (s/d without bathroom from US\$4/7), 500m off the main road, and the only accommodation.

There are a few undistinguished chop houses along the main road and some reasonably well-stocked shops. Market day is Saturday.

Getting There & Away

Bush taxis for the Côte d'Ivoire border (US\$4) via Kahnple and sporadically onto Yekepa (US\$3) congregate north of the market, while those for Ganta (US\$3) and Monrovia (US\$16) leave from the other end.

YEKEPA

Yekepa's perch – about 350m above sea level – gives it a refreshingly cooler climate and panoramic views of the lush surrounding mountains that compensate in part for the town's complete lack of infrastructure and facilities. Nearby is Guesthouse Hill (1362m), Liberia's highest peak.

In its heyday, Yekepa was the company town of Lamco and site of some of the world's richest iron-ore deposits. If you're desperate for accommodation, locals living in the old Lamco compound may be willing to hire out rooms. Ma Edith's on the central market square is the best bet for a meal.

Getting There & Away

The Guinean border is 2km away, traversed by foot or occasional moto-taxis. For Côte d'Ivoire, go first to Sanniquellie.

LIBERIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Monrovia has a fairly decent selection of hotels and most of them are top end. Expect to pay from around US\$40 to \$60 for a decent 'budget' double, around US\$80 to 100 for midrange, and from around US\$150 for top end. Elsewhere, apart from the occasional guesthouse or basic budget establishment, there's no accommodation other than with missions or aid organisations, although these usually don't have sufficient facilities to accommodate independent travellers.

BOOKS

Journey Without Maps is Graham Greene's classic tale of adventuring across Liberia on foot in the 1930s.

For a gripping take on the war, look for *The Final Days of Dr Doe* by Lynda Schuster (published in *Granta* 48, 1994).

Rock of the Ancestors by William Siegmann with Cynthia Schmidt is a catalogue based on museum exhibits, with fascinating information on traditional Liberian artwork.

History buffs should look for any of J Gus Liebenow's intriguing series of writings about Liberia, including *Liberia, 1969 through 1987*.

PRACTICALITIES

- Voltage is 110V, and most plugs are US-style (two flat pins).
- There's no power outside the capital, and blackouts and power surges are common in Monrovia.
- Local dailies include the *Inquirer* and the *Monrovia Guardian*.
- Liberia uses the imperial system for weights and measures.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices are open 8.30am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Most businesses operate from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday (often with a break between noon and 2pm) and from 9am until 1pm on Saturday. Banking hours are 9.30am to noon Monday to Thursday and until 12.30pm on Friday.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The security situation in Liberia is fragile and there are still weapons around. In general, independent travel outside of Monrovia is not yet possible. Before setting off, get a complete briefing first from people who know the situation; embassies and resident expats are the best sources.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Liberian Embassies & Consulates

In West Africa, Liberia has embassies or consulates in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. See the relevant country chapters for more details. Elsewhere, embassies and consulates include the following:

Belgium (☎ 02-414 7317, 02-664 1653; 50 Ave du Château, 1081 Brussels)

France (☎ 01-47 63 58 55; libem.paris@wanadoo.fr; 12 Place du General Catroux, 75017 Paris)

Germany (☎ 0228-923 9173; Mainzerstrasse 259, 53179 Bonn)

UK (☎ 020-7388 5489; 23 Fitzroy Square, London W1T 6EW)

USA (☎ 202-723 0437; www.embassyofliberia.org; 5201 16th St NW, Washington, DC 20011)

Embassies & Consulates in Liberia

Diplomatic representations in Monrovia include the following. Canadians and Australians should contact their high commis-

sions in Abidjan (see p286) and Ghana (see p396), respectively.

Côte d'Ivoire (Map p470; 8th St, Sinkor)

Germany (☎ 06-438 365; Tubman Blvd)

Ghana (Map p470; ☎ 06-518 269; 15th St, Sinkor)

Guinea (Map p470; cnr 24th St & Tubman Blvd, Sinkor)

Nigeria (Map p470; Nigeria House, Tubman Blvd, Congo Town)

Sierra Leone (Map p470; ☎ 06-515 061, 06-515 058; 15th St, Sinkor)

UK (chalkleyroy@aol.com; Clara Town, UN Drive, Bushrod Island) Honorary consul, emergency assistance only; otherwise contact the British High Commission in Freetown (p768).

USA (Map p470; ☎ 07-705 4826; http://monrovia.usembassy.gov; United Nations Dr, Mamba Point)

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays include the following:

New Year's Day 1 January

Armed Forces Day 11 February

Decoration Day 2nd Wednesday in March

JJ Roberts' Birthday 15 March

Fast & Prayer Day 11 April

National Unification Day 14 May

Independence Day 26 July

Flag Day 24 August

Thanksgiving Day 1st Thursday in November

Tubman Day 29 November

Christmas Day 25 December

INTERNET RESOURCES

Friends of Liberia (www.fol.org) Started by former Peace Corps volunteers, with information on the activities and projects of the nonprofit Friends of Liberia group.

Liberia News (www.liberianews.com) Current events.

Liberian Connection (www.liberian-connection.com)

General information and news.

Onliberia.org (www.onliberia.org/urls.htm) A comprehensive site with an excellent page of links.

Perspective (www.theperspective.org) Liberian news and opinions.

LANGUAGE

More than 20 African languages are spoken, including Kpelle in the north-central region, Bassa and Kru along the coast, and Grebo in the southeast. English is the official language. The following will help you get started understanding the local version:

<i>dash</i>	bribe
<i>coal tar</i>	tar road
<i>waste</i>	discard (<i>waste</i> the milk) or splash (<i>waste</i> water)
<i>I beg you</i>	please (with emphasis)
<i>carry</i>	give a ride to

wait small just a moment please
kala kala crooked, corrupt

MONEY

The unit of currency is the Liberian 'unity' dollar (L\$). US dollars are also widely accepted.

Money can be changed at the airport, at one of the several foreign-exchange bureaus in Monrovia and at a bank. Avoid changing money on the street. The best rates are for the US dollar, though other major currencies are also accepted. Travellers cheques are virtually useless, although if you're stuck some shop owners may accept payment for purchases in travellers cheques and give you the change in local currency. Credit cards are not accepted anywhere, and there are no ATMs.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Use a high degree of caution when photographing. Don't take photos of government buildings, airports, bridges, military installations or anything even remotely official, and always ask permission before photographing locals.

Kodak film is available in Monrovia.

TELEPHONE

The country code is ☎ 231, and the international access code is ☎ 00.

There are no telephones upcountry, and no area codes. Rates are about US\$3 per minute to the USA and US\$4 to Australia and Europe. Telephone numbers are six digits, although the national telephone network is essentially defunct, with mobile phones the only way to connect. Mobile numbers are six to seven digits, preceded by 04, 05, 06 or 07.

VACCINATION CERTIFICATE

A valid yellow fever vaccination certificate is required to enter Liberia.

VISAS

Visas are required by all except nationals of Ecowas countries and cost US\$54 (US\$100 for US citizens) for three-month single entry, plus two photos, a medical statement of good health and proof of financial resources. Regardless of the duration of your visa, you'll be given 48 hours on arrival during which you must report for an extension to the **Bureau of Immigration** (Map p472; Broad St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) in Monrovia.

Once there, it's US\$25 plus two more photos for an initial 30-day stay.

Visa Extensions

The bureau of immigration is also where you'll need to go to extend your visa beyond this initial month's stay.

Visas for Onward Travel

In Liberia, you can get visas for Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Guinea. Embassies are open for applications from 9am to noon and visas are generally issued within two days.

TRANSPORT IN LIBERIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For information on getting to Liberia from outside West Africa, see p830.

Entering Liberia

Although getting a visa for Liberia has become somewhat more bureaucratic these days, it's not particularly difficult. Once you have this, plus proof of yellow fever vaccination, entry is usually straightforward, though if you don't look like you're on official business, you can expect some questioning on arrival.

Air

All flights arrive and depart from **Roberts International Airport** (Robertsfield), 60km south-east of Monrovia. Airlines include the following. Karou Voyages (see p470) can assist with bookings.

Brussels Airline (Map p472; SN; ☎ 06-590 991, 06-512 147; www.flysn.com) Hub: Brussels. Three flights weekly between Brussels and Monrovia via Freetown (Sierra Leone).

Slok Air International (SO; ☎ 06-590 178) Hub: Banjul. Three flights weekly to/from Dakar via Freetown and Banjul; three flights weekly to/from Accra

SN Bellview Airlines (BLV; ☎ 06-543-133, 06-553 928) Hub: Lagos. Three flights weekly to/from Lagos via Accra and Abidjan.

Weasua Air Transport (Map p472; WTC; ☎ 06-556 693) Hub: Monrovia. Three flights weekly to/from Abidjan.

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure tax for all flights is US\$25. There's also a US\$15 security tax. Both must be paid with exact change, US dollars cash only.

Land CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Border crossings with Côte d'Ivoire are just beyond Sanniquellie, and east of Harper, towards Tabou.

There's a bus several times weekly from Monrovia to Abidjan and on to Accra via Sanniquellie (US\$40 to Abidjan, US\$60 to Accra, plus approximately US\$20 for border fees).

Daily bush taxis go from Monrovia to Ganta and Sanniquellie, from where you can continue in stages to Danané and Man (12 to 15 hours).

In the south, a road connects Harper with Tabou; you'll need to cross the Cavally River in a ferry or canoe. Once across, there are taxis to Tabou, from where there's transport to San Pédro and Abidjan.

GUINEA

For Guinea, the main crossing is just north of Ganta. There are also border points at Voinjama and Yekepa, though public transport is sparse on both routes.

Bush taxis run daily from Monrovia to Ganta (US\$15), from where you'll need to walk or take a moto-taxi the remaining 2km to the border. Once across, there are frequent taxis to N'zérékoré. Allow a day for the journey, and expect many checkpoints. The Monrovia–Conakry stretch (US\$35) takes two to three days.

It's possible to go in the dry season via Voinjama to Macenta, changing vehicles at the border. The road from Gbarnga north to Zorzor and Voinjama is in bad shape, though rehabilitation work is underway; allow two days for the entire stretch.

From Yekepa it's a few kilometres to the border, from where there are Guinean vehicles to Lola (US\$1.50, one hour).

For information on boats between Conakry (Guinea) and Monrovia (at least 36 hours), inquire at Monrovia's Freeport. Fishing boats run sporadically between Harper and San Pédro (Côte d'Ivoire).

SIERRA LEONE

The main Sierra Leone crossing is at Bo (Waterside), with other posts at Kongo and northwest of Kolahun (currently closed).

There are frequent daily bush taxis between Monrovia and the Bo (Waterside) border (two hours), from where it's easy to

find onward transport to Kenema (about eight very rough hours further), and then on to Bo and Freetown.

The crossing at Kongo is rarely travelled by bush taxi; allow a full day from Tubmanburg, and confirm first that the border is open.

GETTING AROUND

Air

There are no regularly scheduled flights within Liberia. Weasua Air Transport (see opposite) does charters.

Boat

Fishing boats link coastal cities, and while slow and often dangerous, are sometimes faster than road travel. There are also charter boats from Monrovia that sometimes have room for passengers; see p474.

Bush Taxi & Minibus

Independent road travel is not currently recommended outside Monrovia. Once things settle down, the main form of public transport is bush taxis, which go daily from Monrovia to Buchanan, Gbarnga, Ganta, Sanniquellie and the Sierra Leone border. Several weekly bush taxis link Monrovia with almost everywhere else, although many routes (especially those connecting

Zwedru with Greenville and Harper) are restricted during the rainy season. Minivans (called 'buses') also ply most major routes, although they're more crowded and dangerous than bush taxis, and best avoided. Sample journey times and fares: Monrovia to Buchanan (US\$5, three hours, 150km); Monrovia to Bo (Waterside; US\$5, 2½ hours, 140km); Monrovia to Sanniquellie (US\$16, six hours, 305km). The luggage surcharge shouldn't exceed US\$1 for a standard backpack.

Car & Motorcycle

Vehicle rental can be arranged through better hotels and sometimes through shop owners; prices (including driver) average about US\$100 per day for 4WD.

ROAD CONDITIONS

Most roads are dirt and many are impassable during the rainy season. Exceptions include the tarmac routes connecting the capital with Bo (Waterside), Tubmanburg, Ganta and Buchanan, although there are some deteriorated stretches on the Buchanan road.

Driving is on the right. Road hazards here are similar to those elsewhere in West Africa; see p845. Expect frequent stops at UN security checkpoints.

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