

SIERRA LEONE FIELD GUIDE | 2026 EDITION

Little Hippo, Big Country

The world's rarest hippo lives in the forests of Sierra Leone, and almost nobody has seen one. Here is where to look, what it costs, and 30+ places of adventure around it, from famous beaches to corners most itineraries miss.

Meet the pygmy hippopotamus (*Choeropsis liberiensis*).

Roughly a tenth the weight of its famous cousin. Shy, solitary and mostly nocturnal. Fewer than about 2,500 remain in the wild, in a few pockets of West African forest. In Sierra Leone it survives in the **Gola Rainforest**, on **Tiwai Island** and in the **Loma Mountains**. Even researchers mostly meet it through camera traps, so seeing tracks and dung trails on a guided walk, or catching one in a torch beam on the Moa River, is a story your guests will keep telling.

How to use this guide. Sierra Leone changes fast: fares, schedules and park fees move. Every price here is dated and sourced, and anything we could not confirm is marked **[VERIFY]**. The **Little Hippo Trail** (section 3) is a ready-made itinerary idea. Travel writers and tour operators are welcome to use it in their own words. Found something out of date? Tell us and we will correct it.

Inside: 1 What changed in 2026 | 2 Price snapshot | 3 The Little Hippo Trail | 4 Peninsula & islands | 5 Wild interior | 6 North, south & hidden corners | 7 When to go & entry rules | 8 All links in one place

1. What has changed (the developments worth updating)

Development	What we found	Confidence
Gola-Tiwai UNESCO World Heritage listing	The Gola-Tiwai Complex (Gola Rainforest National Park + Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary) was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on 13 July 2025. It is the best single reason to update any Sierra Leone article.	High: reported by RSPB, Discover Wildlife, Wikipedia
National park entrance and conservation fees	The Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism ran a public consultation and adjusted park entrance/conservation fees from 1 April 2026 . We could not open the official schedule, so the per-park figures in section 2 are pre-April numbers.	Date: high. New amounts: [VERIFY]
Lungi-Freetown crossing	Sea Coach Express water taxi is now reported at about US\$45 per person one way (recent traveller reviews say it rose by \$5); older sources say \$40. The public SLMA ferry remains the budget option (about NLe 18 first class, reported).	Medium: traveller reviews. [VERIFY]
Lungi Bridge	A 7 km bridge linking Lungi to Freetown has been planned for years; one source says construction is expected to start in 2026. We cannot confirm that construction has begun. Do not tell readers the ferry is being replaced yet.	Low: treat as planned only
Peninsula road	The Freetown Peninsula road is reported rebuilt from Lumley to Sussex, with smooth paved road from the Tokeh junction. That makes River No. 2, Tokeh and Bureh far easier day trips than older guides suggest.	Medium. [VERIFY current state south of Tokeh]
Currency	The new leone (NLe, redenominated 2022) trades at about NLe 23 per US\$1 (28 Sept 2026: 1 NLe = US\$0.0436). Any article still quoting old-leone prices in the tens of thousands needs correcting.	High
Tourism momentum	Sierra Leone will host the 3rd UN Tourism Regional Forum on Gastronomy Tourism in 2026, and government and private investors are upgrading accommodation and roads in priority tourism zones.	Medium

Sources: [RSPB Gola World Heritage](#) | [Discover Wildlife](#) | [ATTA park-fee consultation](#) | [Lungi Bridge](#) | [Airport transfers](#)

2. Price snapshot, late September 2026

US\$ figures are the anchor; leone conversions at about NLe 23/US\$. Sources are public web listings and traveller reports, not quotes. Everything marked [VERIFY] should be confirmed with the operator before publication.

Item	Price	Note / source
Visa (single entry) / multi-entry	US\$80 / US\$160	e-visa or on arrival, ~30 days. Passports and Visas listing
Airport security fee	US\$25	Arriving or departing an international airport. [VERIFY]
Yellow fever certificate	Mandatory	Checked at Lungi Airport; strictly enforced
Lungi to Freetown, Sea Coach Express	~US\$45 pp one way	~30-45 min crossing; traveller reviews 2026. [VERIFY]
Lungi to Freetown, SLMA ferry	~NLe 18 (about US\$0.80)	First class ticket, reported. Slow, crowded, schedule varies. [VERIFY]
Freetown private taxi	~US\$5 per hour; short trips generally under ~US\$4	Private hire ~US\$50 per day. Agree fare first. [VERIFY]
Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary tour	US\$15 adults, US\$5 children (foreign)	Tours 10:30, 12:00, 14:00, 15:30; ~60 min. Pre-April 2026 figures [VERIFY]
Tacugama eco-lodges	US\$90-150 per night	Breakfast + tour included. Tacugama website
Bunce Island entry	~US\$10 per foreigner	Plus boat charter from Freetown. [VERIFY]
Banana Islands day trip	from ~US\$65 pp	Boat from Kent, ~30 min. visitsierraleone.org

Item	Price	Note / source
Tiwai Island day visit	US\$15 non-national (US\$7 national)	Includes boat from Kambama. Pre-April 2026 [VERIFY]
Tiwai overnight	US\$30 tent / US\$40 research lodge, non-national	Includes boat + breakfast. tiwaiisland.org [VERIFY]
Turtle Islands 3-day tour (from Bonthe)	from ~US\$890 pp	GetYourGuide listing 2026
Bureh Beach guesthouse	~US\$44 per night	e.g. Dalton's Banana Guesthouse
Tokeh beachfront resort	from ~US\$120 per night	Tokeh Sands listing
Budget guesthouse, Lumley	~US\$25 per night	Sweet Mother's Guesthouse, listing
Freetown hotels overall	US\$51-233, average ~US\$131	Expedia 2026 listing
Meals	US\$3 local meal / ~US\$10 fast-food combo	Numbeo-type figures; restaurants vary widely
River No. 2 beach entry	NLe 20-30 pp	Community committee fee on our own guide; [VERIFY]

3. The Little Hippo Trail: a ready-made itinerary idea

Package the pygmy hippo as the thread that ties Sierra Leone's best wild places together. It is a hook that photographs well (footprints, a dung trail, a dugout canoe, a night sky over the Moa River), it supports community-run conservation, and it gives readers a reason to go beyond the beach. A 10-14 day shape, dry season:

Stage	Where	The hippo angle	Learn more
1	Freetown + Tacugama	Chimps first: the country's conservation story, then a briefing on why forest species matter.	Tacugama guide
2	Kenema + Kambui Hills	Acclimatise in a forest reserve 10 km from Kenema; white-necked rockfowl and chimps.	Kambui Hills
3	Gola Rainforest National Park	Sierra Leone's largest rainforest (~71,000 ha), 330+ bird species. Pygmy hippos exist here but are rarely seen. Sell it honestly as tracks, camera-trap images and a real chance at the rockfowl.	Gola guide
4	Tiwai Island	Community-run island on the Moa River: 11 primate species, night canoe trips, and one of the best places in the world to hope for a pygmy hippo.	Tiwai guide
5	Loma Mountains + Mount Bintumani	The wild card: pygmy hippos on the lower slopes, and West Africa's highest peak nearby (1,945 m) for the fit and adventurous.	Bintumani
6	Finish on the coast	Banana Islands or Bureh Beach to decompress.	Banana Islands

Honest framing that builds trust: a pygmy hippo sighting is *possible, not promised*. Guests who understand that arrive delighted by everything else and leave as ambassadors. Suggested hook lines for your site: *"The rarest hippo on earth, and where to look for it"; "Sierra Leone's little hippo: 2,500 left, three places to find it"; "Beyond the beach: a wildlife trail through Sierra Leone's first World Heritage Site"*.

Conservation note: visitor fees at Tiwai go to eight surrounding villages via a community committee, and Tacugama's visitor and lodge income funds rescue, vet care and habitat work. That is a story readers respond to.

Sources: [Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, pygmy hippo](#) | [Mammal Watching Sierra Leone](#) | [Rainbow Tours, Gola](#)

4. Freetown, the Peninsula and the islands

Place	What it is / current notes	Guide
Freetown city	Cotton Tree, National Museum, markets, Lumley nightlife. Traffic is the enemy: allow 90+ min to Kent, and start early.	City guide Things to do
Lumley Beach	The city's beach strip: bars, seafood, sunsets. Budget rooms about US\$25.	Lumley
Lakka Beach	Closest peninsula beach to the city, popular at weekends.	Day trips
River No. 2	Deep curved bay where a river meets the sea; freshwater pool behind the sand, child-friendly, community-run. About 40 min south of Freetown.	River No. 2
Tokeh Beach	Long beach, resorts from ~US\$120 a night. Gentler waves for beginners and longboarders.	Best beaches
Bureh Beach	Sierra Leone's surf break: right-hander over sand, best Nov-Mar, ~26-30 C water. Simple guesthouses from ~US\$44. No reliable board rental: bring gear.	Surf guide
Kent + Banana Islands	Boat from Kent, ~30 min. Krio history, snorkelling, a fish lunch, no cars. Day trips from ~US\$65.	Banana Islands

Place	What it is / current notes	Guide
Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary	45 min from town, 100 acres, 100+ chimps, national animal since 2019. Eco-lodge nights US\$90-150.	Tacugama
Bunce Island + Tasso Island	Ruins of an 18th-century slave-trade fort up the Sierra Leone River, on UNESCO's tentative list. Half-day boat trip; Tasso adds village life.	UNESCO Excursion
Lungi town + airport area	Where guests actually start. Food, hotels, day trips, ferry timing and late-arrival tips.	Lungi Crossing guide Day trips

5. The wild interior: parks, forests and peaks

Place	What makes it special	Getting there / notes	Guide
Gola Rainforest National Park (East)	71,000+ ha of Upper Guinea forest; 330+ birds incl. 15 endemics; white-necked rockfowl; chimps; forest elephants; pygmy hippo. Now half of a UNESCO site.	~340 km from Freetown, 6-8 h by 4x4. Basic stays near Lalehun. Guides mandatory. Best Nov-Apr. [VERIFY current fees, post-April]	Gola
Tiwai Island (South-East)	12 km ² island in the Moa River; 11 primate species, pygmy hippo and hundreds of bird species; community-managed by eight villages.	Boat from Kambama village. Tents or research lodge. Canoe night trips. [VERIFY fees]	Tiwai
Kambui Hills Forest Reserve (East)	Forest 10 km from Kenema; 200+ bird species incl. white-necked rockfowl; chimps and colobus monkeys.	Day trips from Kenema; easy first taste of the forest.	Kambui
Outamba-Kilimi National Park (North-West)	~1,083 km ² of savannah woodland and riverine forest; wild chimps, hippos on the Little Scarcies, hardly any other visitors.	~300 km from Freetown; Kamakwie is the staging town. Laterite roads; 4x4 essential, impassable in heavy rains.	Outamba-Kilimi
Loma Mountains + Mount Bintumani (North-East)	Sierra Leone's highest peak (1,945 m). Rainforest lower slopes hold pygmy hippos, dwarf crocodiles, rufous fishing owl, many primates.	Remote; needs guides and full expedition planning. Dry season only.	Loma guide
Western Area Peninsula National Park	Forest above Freetown; hiking, birds, and the home of Tacugama.	Day hike or overnight at the sanctuary.	Wildlife

6. North, south and the hidden corners

These are the places that rarely appear in a first-time itinerary. They are where you can give readers something no other guide has. Most have thin visitor infrastructure, so confirm everything locally.

Place	Why go	Practical notes
Kabala + Wara Wara Mountains (North)	Highland grass and montane forest; hiking, birding, waterfalls, cool air. Around 5 h drive from Freetown.	One main guesthouse in town. Tour outline
Bumbuna Falls + Sunkoni hikes (North)	Upper falls drop 120 ft (about 37 m), lower falls about 30 ft; challenging hikes from Bumbuna and Sunkoni village.	Bumbuna Falls
Makeni + the northern road	Gateway to Kabala, Outamba-Kilimi and Bumbuna; the road to Makeni is reasonable, beyond it depends on season.	Overnight here on the way north.
Mambo Waterfall	Listed by the tourist board as a day-trip waterfall.	Tour page [VERIFY access]
Bonthe + Sherbro Island (South)	A former British colonial town of stone churches on Sherbro Island, with tiny fishing communities and long empty beaches.	Reach by boat from the mainland. Turtle Islands
Turtle Islands (South)	Eight low-lying islands off Bonthe: turquoise water, snorkelling, mangroves, birds and turtle nesting.	Speedboat from Freetown or Banana Islands ~3 h each way; organised 3-day trips from ~US\$890 pp.
Freetown Peninsula villages	Krio villages, fishing communities and forest trails between River No. 2 and Bureh: the cultural side of the coast.	Take a local guide; see our photography guide for etiquette.
North-west coast + Northern Sierra Leone	Our regional partner directory lists members and stays in the north-west.	Directory

7. When to go, what to pack, how to get in

Dry season (Nov-Apr) is the classic window: roads open, best wildlife viewing, best beaches. Peak prices Dec-Jan; Harmattan haze Jan-Feb. **Rainy season (May-Oct)** brings emerald landscapes, waterfalls, 30-50% lower prices and almost no tourists, but interior roads (Gola, Outamba-Kilimi, Loma) can be impassable, malaria risk peaks, and boat crossings are disrupted more often. First-timers: January-March.

Entry: visa about US\$80 single entry (e-visa or on arrival); yellow fever certificate mandatory and checked at Lungi; US\$25 airport security fee. Guides: [visa](#), [safety](#), [health](#), [packing list](#), [mobile money](#), [SIM and data](#).

Money: cash in small US dollar notes and new leone is normal; card acceptance is patchy outside Freetown hotels; mobile money is widely used locally. **Getting from Lungi:** water taxi (about US\$45, fast) or SLMA ferry (cheap, slow). Land after dark? Pre-book a transfer or sleep near the airport.

Responsible-travel points readers appreciate: pay park and community fees directly; use local guides (mandatory in most parks); never buy bushmeat or pet primates; ask before photographing people; keep to trails in wildlife areas.

8. Every link in one place

All clickable. Our own guides (globe2me.com / yogistay.com) are free for you to reference; external sources are listed so you can check our facts.

Our guides: arrival and planning

- Lungi to Freetown crossing guide: <https://globe2me.com/blog/lungi-freetown-crossing-guide>
- Freetown travel guide: <https://globe2me.com/blog/freetown-travel-guide>
- Lungi town guide: <https://globe2me.com/blog/lungi-town-guide>
- Airport transfer options 2026: <https://yogistay.com/blog/freetown-airport-transfer-options-2026>
- Best hotels near Lungi Airport 2026: <https://yogistay.com/blog/best-hotels-lungi-airport-2026>
- Dry vs rainy season: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-rainy-dry-season>
- Budget travel guide: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-budget-travel-guide-2026>
- Travel tips: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-travel-tips>

Our guides: places

- Best beaches 2026: <https://globe2me.com/blog/best-beaches-sierra-leone-2026>
- River No. 2: <https://globe2me.com/blog/river-no2-beach-guide>
- Lumley Beach: <https://globe2me.com/blog/lumley-beach-guide>
- Surf guide: <https://globe2me.com/blog/surf-guide-sierra-leone>
- Banana Islands: <https://globe2me.com/blog/banana-islands-day-trip>
- Tacugama: <https://globe2me.com/blog/tacugama-chimpanzee-sanctuary>
- Gola Rainforest: <https://globe2me.com/blog/gola-rainforest-birdwatching>
- Tiwai Island: <https://globe2me.com/blog/tiwai-island-wildlife>
- Outamba-Kilimi: <https://globe2me.com/blog/outamba-kilimi-national-park>
- Wildlife overview: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-wildlife-guide>
- History: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-history-guide>
- Photography: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-photography-guide>
- Food: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-food-guide>
- Freetown city guide: <https://globe2me.com/blog/freetown-city-guide-2026>

Our guides: practical

- Visa: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-visa-guide>

- Safety: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-safety-guide>
- Health: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-health-medical>
- Packing list: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-packing-list>
- Mobile money: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-mobile-money>
- Telecoms: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-telecommunications>
- Public holidays 2026: <https://globe2me.com/blog/sierra-leone-public-holidays-2026>

External sources and official pages

- RSPB: Gola joins World Heritage: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/gola-world-heritage>
- Discover Wildlife: Gola-Tiwai UNESCO: <https://www.discoverwildlife.com/environment/gola-tiwai-complex-unesco-world-heritage-site>
- ATTA: 2026 park-fee review: <https://atta.travel/resource/consultations-on-the-review-of-the-park-entrance-conservation-fees--2026.html>
- Tacugama eco-lodges: <https://www.tacugama.com/ecolodges/>
- Tiwai Island prices: <http://www.tiwaiisland.org/Site/Visit/prices/>
- Visit Sierra Leone (tourist board): <https://www.visitsierraleone.org/>
- Tourism Sierra Leone: Freetown: <https://tourismsierraleone.com/where-to-go/freetown/>
- UNESCO: Bunce Island (tentative list): <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5745/>
- Species Conservation Fund: pygmy hippo: <https://www.speciesconservation.org/small-grant/pygmy-hippopotamus/609>
- Mount Bintumani: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Bintumani
- Turtle Islands: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turtle_Islands,_Sierra_Leone
- Visa fees and rules: <https://www.passportsandvisas.com/visas/sierra-leone/>
- Sea Coach Express reviews: https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g293833-d12946711-Reviews-Sea_Coach_Express-Freetown_Western_Area.html

Keep it accurate together. If you notice a different fare, a new departure point or a closed road, message Uday on WhatsApp **+232 72 120 659** or pandyauday@gmail.com. We check the same things from the Lungi side and will send you anything we find. Please use, adapt and credit freely.