

Tiwai Heritage Trail

Discover South-Eastern Sierra Leone's Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage



Try your hand at paddling upstream



Hike through wild scenery

Basic information

Dates: 26th – 30th November 2014; 25th February – 1st March 2015; 27th – 31st May 2015

Price: \$200 (w/ personal vehicle) - \$300 (w/ rented 7 seat van) - \$400 (w/ rented 6 seat 4x4) per person

Included: Transport & accommodation (on trail), food, water, guides, activities, community development funds.

Not included: Snacks, soft drinks, personal pocket money (estimate \$30-50 each), tips

Duration: 5 days

Group size: 4 maximum (or more if couples share beds in guesthouses)

Keywords: Guided Tour, Mild Adventure, Mild Trekking, Mende Culture, Unspoilt Nature

Description

The Tiwai Heritage Trail will introduce you to the fascinating Mende culture and history, as well as the rich and unique flora & fauna found in the remnants of the ancient Upper Guinea Rainforest, in South-Eastern Sierra Leone. Explore the region's heritage by hiking on bush trails, crossing rivers by dugout canoe and hiking through thick tropical forest. A perfect mix of adventure, culture and nature!

- ✓ Camp at the [Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary](#), home to 135+ bird species, 11 primate species (7 of which are rare), 700+ plant species (many of which are medicinal), as well as the wild West African Chimpanzee and elusive Pygmy Hippo.
- ✓ Visit and stay in local communities to interact with the villagers, learn about their daily lives and try your hand at traditional activities (e.g. country cloth weaving, basket making, wood carving)
- ✓ Explore ancient settlements, 'devil' worship stones, libation pouring sites, caves, resting places of legendary Mende warriors, and other fascinating local cultural and historical sites
- ✓ Enjoy the area's relaxing pace by lying in hammocks, listening to the birds chirp, watching the butterflies flutter by, and by immersing yourself in your natural surroundings.
- ✓ Travel the traditional way by hiking along winding bush paths, through rice fields and over bamboo bridges. Paddle across rivers and tributaries, trek through dense jungle and rest by small waterfalls.



Meet the local characters

Sample Itinerary (activities will be similar)

Day 1: Travel from Freetown to Bo, and stop off at 'Samie house' for a light lunch before continuing your journey to [Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary](#). When you arrive, in the early afternoon, you have a choice of a guided forest tour, to view the primates and other wildlife, or a relaxing canoe ride up river. In the evening, there will be a briefing session with cultural orientation, dinner, and a "get to know each other" session over a few cold drinks (soft & alcoholic).

Day 2: Early in the morning, when the mist is rising from the river, try your hand at paddling upstream with the help of local boatmen, to the Northern tip of Tiwai, where you will disembark to visit the first community of the trail: Jene. There you will be introduced to village life, learn about the history of this small community, have breakfast, and visit one of the ancient Cotton Trees where the Bondo Society (women's secret society) conduct ceremonies and pour libations.

You will then continue your journey, by crossing the Moa River, to your next destination: Giema. There you will have the opportunity to learn about traditional hammock making before making the journey along a short bush trail (45 mins walk) to your overnight stop-over: Mapuma.

In Mapuma, you will have the chance to go swimming in beautiful settings to cool off, before being taken to Kabagwama, a cultural site of legend where a 9ft tall ancient hunter/warrior was interred. After getting back to the village, watch the wood carver skilfully produce crafts that you can then purchase. Dinner will then be served, and you may be lucky to come across an impromptu cultural dance.

Day 3: From Mapuma, you will head to the 'gateway' to the Gola Forest National Park (some of the remaining forest that made up the ancient and magnificent Upper Guinea Rainforest that once covered most of Sub-Saharan West Africa): Segbewema. This remarkable village is only accessible via bush trails, and has kept a lot of the mystic qualities of remote Sierra Leone villages. Here you can learn a traditional dance with the help of the local cultural performance troupe led by local youth, Foday, and visit 'Kotomasun': an ancient stream where legends of Genies and Spirits live on. You will spend the night in Segbewema, in home stays, in which you will have a chance to interact with the people who make this region so special.

Day 4: You will start early this morning so that you can cover as much ground as possible to reach your next destination: Nainiahun (Sand Village). After a hearty breakfast will descend through the bush, following old local trails, to the Moa River (the river that surrounds Tiwai), where you will jump into a local dugout canoe and cross over to Naniati (Sand Island). Naniati is located South from Tiwai and therefore much of the wildlife is the same. Recently we came across some Pygmy Hippo footprints and trees that had marks from the local wild Chimps. There will be opportunities for swimming to ensure that you don't get too hot walking under the Sierra Leone sun.

In Boma, unique because of their chief being a woman (ask about the story – it is fascinating!) we will rest a little before taking part in a 'Country Cloth' weaving workshop organised by Pa Foday. Using his traditional loom, he will show you the ropes before letting you have a go. In the afternoon, you will walk a short distance to Nainiahun where you will stay the night in the community guesthouse.

Day 5: The next morning, take a stroll with the elders to 'Semegoti', a magical place where there are legends of fairies living in caves and evil dwarf like people hiding in the forest.

After returning to Nainiahun (if you don't get kidnapped by the dwarves), you will make your way passed rice fields, over meandering streams, and through kola, coffee and cacao plantations to Kambama village. There you will learn about how Cassava is processed into 'Gari' and then spend a relaxing time walking around Chief Hinduwa's cacao plantation, before spending a relaxing afternoon at 'Gewubae' (Top of the Hill in Mende), a community-run campsite overlooking Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary and the Kambui Hills, where you will spend your final night.

NOTE: Bring small change with you (500 - 1000 - 2000 leones) to buy snacks and other community based purchases.



Visit hidden beauty spots



Witness cultural performances

What to bring

You will be walking along bush trails in humid conditions for about 1-2 hours on average. There will obviously be regular rest/rehydration stops between the villages you will be visiting, but it is worth bearing in mind that the lighter your bag is, the more comfortable you will be so that you can appreciate the experience as much as possible. Also, some of the villages may sell small arts & crafts; therefore you may want to leave some space for souvenirs. Here is a general guide to the items we recommend you put in your rucksack (you can tick):

Essentials

- 1 x pair of walking shoes/boots
- 1 x flip-flops (for relaxing and showering)
- 1 x medium rucksack (45l max.)
- 1 x water carrier (1.5l recommended)
- 1 x small first aid kit (for possible blisters)
- 1 x medium sized dry-bag (for river crossings)

Clothes

- 2 x t-shirts (one day-time, one evening)
- 1 x thin long sleeve shirt (for real bush walking)
- 1 x hiking trousers (to stop the insects biting)
- 1 x hiking shorts (or trouser/shorts combination)
- 4 x underwear
- 4 x hiking socks
- 1 x Sun hat or cap (against the sun or to fan)
- 1 x swim-wear (for impromptu swims)

Sleeping

- 1 x pair of earplugs (no disturbance)
- 1 x light clothes
- 1 x torchlight

Hygiene

- 1 x small toothpaste & toothbrush
- 1 x small toiletry bag (soap, flannel, shampoo)
- 1 x small towel
- 1 x small medical kit (anti-malarials, other essential medication)
- 1 x toilet roll (if you don't just want to use water)
- 1 x drinking cup
- 1 x Mosquito repellent (preferably DEET)
- If available:* water purification tablets (we will be drinking local well water – it is very nice and clean, but for peace of mind you may want these)

Creature comforts

We will be bringing small amounts of coffee, sugar, tea and a flask so that you can have hot drinks in the morning, but you may want to stock up on 'creature comforts' before you embark on this journey of discovery. The usual rule of thumb during the development of this tour was '1 x luxury item'... We look forward to learning what yours is.



Responsible Tourism

Why did we choose to develop a heritage trail? Well it is simple really. First, we want to share the fascinating Mende culture with you, and introduce you to the Sierra Leone rural way of life; we want to give you the opportunity to experience the area's natural beauty, an area that has recently been put on the tentative list to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site; and we want to raise your adrenaline levels up a bit with some mild adventure through ancient lands rich in culture and history.

Second, our goal is to make the area surrounding [Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary](#) a better place to live in for the local communities by creating opportunities for development and net benefit gains (economic, social and environmental), and to make the area a better place to visit for future visitors by using sustainability principles; all this through tourism.

Responsible Tourism works on a simple principle: take responsibility for your actions whilst learning and sharing knowledge through unforgettable experiences. Remember, this land is the land of the Mende people, and you are their guests.

Here are some common sense practices that can help you be a responsible tourist:

- ✓ Respect the local culture and customs (e.g. try your best to eat with your right hand – more info below)
- ✓ Ask permission to take photos – it could build a relationship and make for a better 'snap'
- ✓ Be mindful of prices and currency – bargaining is part of the culture, but don't go too far
- ✓ Ask the guide for information if you doubt of anything – it's part of the learning experience
- ✓ Stick to the bush trails to not disturb local wildlife or ruin somebody's crops, unless if asked to by the guide
- ✓ Keep your non-biodegradable litter with you - dispose of it in an appropriate place
- ✓ Keep your bad habits to yourself – most of us have them, but we don't want to share them with the kids
- ✓ Give gifts (e.g. sweets or school material) through the right channels – children pick up begging very easily



Adventure across streams



Learn of local history and legends from the elders

Useful websites for more information

www.sierraleoneheritage.org – A media packed web portal full of information about Sierra Leone's heritage

www.tiwaiisland.org – Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary's official website

www.propoortourism.info – An informative website to learn about the concept of Pro Poor Tourism

www.welcometoserraleone.com – The National Tourism Board of Sierra Leone's official website

www.efasl.org.uk – The Environmental Foundation for Africa's (NGO) official website

www.welthungerhilfe.de – Welt Hunger Hilfe's (NGO) official website

Mende culture & customs

The Mende culture is very rich and **it is said that the Mende people travelled from the distant lands of western Sudan**, in waves, between the 2nd and 16th Century, to settle in the East and South East of what is now known as Sierra Leone.

There are four distinct Mende sub-tribes that stretch from Kailahun district, through Kono and Kenema districts, and to Pujehun district, essentially following the course of the mighty Moa River. Each of these sub-tribes have their own dialect, but **the first Mende written language, 'Ki-ka-ku', was invented in a village, called Vaama, just down the road from Tiwai**, by a man called [Kisimi Kamara](#) (c. 1890–1962).

Before the introduction of Islam, the Mende people were predominantly Animists, and remnants of these beliefs still continue to this day in the form of Secret Societies; the two major ones are called 'Bondo' (Women's Society) and 'Poro' (Men's Society). Devil dances are also a part of everyday life, and usually happen around times of harvest (November-December) and community celebrations (weddings, Easter, etc...). However, it is advised not to ask questions about secret societies; **in Mende culture, the greatest sin of all is to divulge the secrets of their society.**

The Mende are farmers and fishermen. They are extremely proud of their land, and rely on it heavily for sustenance and livelihoods. If a harvest is not fruitful, the whole family will suffer as a consequence. On the Tiwai Heritage Trail, you may come across local villagers in their farms; why not ask the guide if you can go and observe their activities. Fishing is also a form of bread-winning, and local fishermen are experts at finding the right places to catch the biggest and tastiest fish. **There are tales of 4ft long cat-fish, for which you need 2-3 fully-grown men to catch!**

The Mende live in hierarchical societies. The town chief has the final word, and is counselled by the Chair Lady and the Youth Leader, along with a number of Elders. Elders are highly respected and their words of wisdom are heavily relied upon for making the final decision. You will experience this society quite closely and will have a chance to interact with chiefs and elders along your journey. **Don't forget to pack a few Kola Nuts in your pack to give to the village authorities; they will greatly appreciate your gesture of respect.**



Group photo at the Moa River



Witness traditional woodcarving



Help 'Pa Foday' weave Country Cloth in Boma village



Try your hand at 'Gari' making at the Kambama cassava processing centre

Useful information

The following tid-bits of information can help you tremendously to immerse yourself into the Mende culture, stay safe along the bush trails and in dugout canoes, and most importantly allow you to experience your journey as much as possible so that you can come away from it having achieved what you set out to achieve.

- ✓ When eating from the same plate as others (this will most likely happen), please remember that eating with your left hand is frowned upon. People do not use toilet paper here, and therefore do not expect you to. The left hand, with water and soap, is the toilet paper.
- ✓ Your guides are just that: guides, and therefore they will be a source of information for your surroundings as well as local customs, and will advise you on your health and safety along the trail. Listen to their instructions, and if you don't understand, ask them questions. They will be happy to help!
- ✓ Gifts are always welcome in this very poor part of the world, but be mindful that there are channels through which these gifts (whether it be clothes, pens & paper, or even tips) should go through to mitigate the development of bad habits (e.g. begging). Always ask your guide for more information.
- ✓ Greetings are part and parcel of the culture, and it is recommended that you learn a small amount of Mende before you start the journey. A Mende Language manual is available to print if you require it (we try and limit our printing), but here are some basic greetings to get you started.

Mende	Krio	English
Ka hui ye na?	Ow di bodi?	How is your health?
Ka in goma.	Tenk god tenki	Thanks be to god
Bi e yi?	Ow yew slip?	How did you sleep? (morning)
Bi e luvei?	Ow di day?	How was your day? (afternoon or evening)
Bi le yi? Or Be da la?	Wat ena yo nam?	What is your name?
Nya la a [your name]	Mi nam i [your name]	My name is [your name]
Bi sie	Tenki	Thank you (said after each greeting)
Bai ka! Or Bai ka we!	Tenki! Or Tenki Padi!	Thank you! Or Thank you friend!
Be va [location]?	Ow di [location]?	How is [location] (Tiwai is most likely)

Note: Most questions are answered by “Ka in goma”. Try it and you will quickly learn how to interact well with the local villagers.

- ✓ This will be a new experience for you, but also for the local communities you visit. Bear this in mind when you journey along the road less travelled. You will be setting precedents and therefore you have a responsibility to set realistic and sustainable expectations.
- ✓ Finally, this tour is supposed to be an experience in itself, and therefore luxury was the last thing that we thought of when organising the Tiwai Heritage Trail. We concentrated more on making you feel welcome, comfortable in the company of others, and to allow you to immerse yourself in the area you are visiting whether you are looking for adventure, culture or nature. Be prepared to feel a little challenged at times, to not always have your beauty sleep, but to feel like you have really experienced something authentic, new, exciting, meaningful and unique.



'Mediwa', your trail tour guide



A sunny day in 'Kambama' village



Children perform in 'Segbewema'

The boring stuff (disclaimer)

Liability

This is not a tour that is organised by a tour operator (yet), therefore the organisers and facilitators cannot be held liable for any injuries, accidents, ailments or misdemeanours that may (even though unlikely) occur during the course of the Tiwai Heritage Trail. Nevertheless, your guide will make sure that your health and safety is considered as the highest of priorities and is trained in basic first aid skills.

Insurance

We expect that all participants in this tour are owners of fully comprehensive insurance policies and will be carrying their details with them in case of any mishaps that may befall them. Your guide will have a list of local emergency numbers to call just in case there is a need.

Malaria

The area we will be travelling through is known for being malarial, and therefore we expect you to be carrying prophylactics with you to ensure that you prevent malarial infections. We will not have any spare anti-malarials on us, so make sure you pack your own.

New experience for all

This tour is a new experience for all involved and therefore we do not expect everything to be perfect. There will be mistakes, challenges and possibly some mishaps along the way; but all in all this will be a learning experience for everyone involved. You will be playing an important role in developing a tourism model that not only allows for meaningful experiences to be had by the participants, but also to create opportunities for local communities in Sierra Leone to reach over the poverty line.

Your experience

We hope that, through the Tiwai Heritage Trail, we meet your expectations in terms of the experience that you are looking for; however our goal is for this trail to be a work in progress in which your feedback plays an important role in teaching the community members, guides and organisers involved in the trail's development about how yours, and future participants' experiences, can be improved. We therefore hope that after your departure, you will be in touch to let us know how it all went.

Fitness

Even though the Tiwai Heritage Trail is not a difficult trekking experience, we are aware that the humid climate makes the walking slightly tougher. We will make sure that there are sufficient rest/rehydration breaks but it is important to be mindful about keeping yourself rehydrated. For this trail, you will require to be able to walk on uneven terrain for 2 hours straight whilst carrying a 45l. rucksack. Please bear this in mind when expressing your interest to join the tour, for yours and others enjoyment and comfort.

And finally...

This trail is about having fun, meeting new people, experiencing new things together, and participating in a model of tourism that aims to be responsible and create opportunities for local communities. We therefore hope that you will come on this trail with open minds, open hearts and open to building new relationships; if not, you probably won't enjoy yourself.

