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Liberia's small tourist industry grapples with no tourist visas

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Libassa Ecolodge, south of Monrovia

Paul Donovan is a rarity in Liberia: a foreign investor in the tourism and leisure sector.

The 61-year-old deep sea fishing devotee from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, set up a fishing business, Pirates of the Liberian Sea, on the St Paul river, on the western outskirts of the capital Monrovia, after discovering the country when visiting his daughter in 2012.

And despite the Ebola outbreak in 2014 wiping out a whole season, he says he is making a profit. “I’m not getting rich but I’m not losing money,” he says, sitting alongside his 27-foot boat, the Jesse Lee.

That is, however, because of demand from Liberian residents — mostly diplomats and non-governmental organisation workers — rather than tourists.

“I had a guy who came two weeks ago from South Africa — he travels the world catching marlin,” he says. “And the Salty Dogs fishing group from England came a couple of times but that’s it pretty much.”

The scarcity of foreign visitors is not surprising, and it is not only because of Ebola, which blighted tourism across the whole continent, not just the three west African countries directly affected.

Liberia does not officially issue tourist visas and none of its attractions — such as the 700 square mile Sapo national park and the surfing beaches at Robertsport, have been developed for anyone other than the hardiest of visitors. Moreover, its chronic power shortage, which makes electricity very expensive, discourages entrepreneurs from starting businesses. For example, there is only one in-country tour operator, Barefoot Liberia.

And, beyond the big hotels in Monrovia, there is very little service culture or even understanding of the concept of tourism.

“It’s not recognised in this part of the world that you might want to just come here to travel, so explaining to immigration authorities is sometimes a challenge,” says Alastair Goodridge, a director of London-based travel company Overlanding West Africa who was leading a trip through Liberia earlier this month. “They’re not suspicious, they just don’t understand. They ask: ‘What are you really here for? The Church? Journalists?’”

However, Mr Goodridge did say that the Liberian embassy in London was happy to issue a de facto visa despite them not existing.

Change does appear to be afoot, however. Last month a group of interested people, including the minister of tourism, held their first meeting with a view — once legislation has been amended — to setting up a tourism board.

Barkue Tubman-Zawolo, an events planner who is helping to run the organisation, said she has never seen the government so engaged in the sector. “In the past meetings happened but nothing changed,” she says, during an interview at The Capital Room, a new luxury seafront lounge and bar in Monrovia. “This is the first time there’s a cohesive executive political will to make this industry a priority.”

The to-do list is frightening long. Officials admit Monrovia’s Roberts International airport, which pre-Ebola welcomed airlines such as Delta from the US, Air France and British Airways but now hosts far fewer, is in dire need of an upgrade.

On only a couple of the country’s roads can drivers travel at more than 80kph for more than a few hundred metres, there is the power crisis, few attractions have any visitor facilities let alone accommodation and there is a massive skills deficit.

“A realistic timeframe is five to 10 years,” Ms Tubman-Zawolo says, of how long the transformation is likely to take. “We’re at the stage of formulating an initial strategy and we need to get locals to buy into it first.”

Eugene Nagbe, Liberia’s tourism minister, recognises the challenges but insists “the potential outweighs the stumbling blocks”. “Our low-hanging fruit is that we have a very good location

with great potential with eco-tourism,” he says. “So my strategy is to tap these things first.”

The fortunes of the Libassa Ecolodge, on the coast an hour east of Monrovia and in its fourth year of operations, encapsulates the current situation. The owners have developed a great destination in a stunning location and a competitor has recently opened nearby but, due to lack of demand, it is only open four nights a week.

Mr Nagbe says that despite the government being extremely short of money, the pace of development should accelerate. “When building a home you spend more time on the foundations,” he says. “If you came here 10 or 11 years ago there would have been nothing. There was zero electricity, zero water supply and zero security. We’ve been rebuilding an entire country from below the surface. And then Ebola happened but we are confident we can move on.”

Back at the St Paul river, Mr Donovan believes a lot more development will be needed before there will be sufficient business to justify importing a second boat. “Liberia is a challenge,” he said. “It’s an exotic place, tourists will have a great time here but in the back of your mind you’ll think ‘where will I feel the most comfortable?’”

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- Alastair Goodridge, Overlanding West Africa

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