

Equatorial Guinea

With the difficulties of getting a visa and the shakedown you receive as you walk in the door of this tiny tropical former Spanish colony, you might think that Equatorial Guinea would rather just not have you. The government collects plenty of American oil money, and the leaders fear foreign mercenaries plotting coups, so what, really, do they need with travellers?

But for those who live on the edge, Equatorial Guinea offers true adventure. On Bioko Island, beyond the startling build up of the oil-soaked capital, Malabo, are volcanic views, rainforests full of endangered primates and shores of nesting sea turtles. On the mainland, Bata is a pleasant colonial town undergoing an oil-fuelled face-lift, the wildlife-filled rainforest of Monte Alen National Park is a hidden treasure, and the remote island of Corisco offers truly deserted white-sand beaches and small communities of traditional cultures. But be prepared to hack and bribe and hold tight to bush taxis – and don't forget to pack all the patience you can fit in your bag – you'll be stopped often by the military and government officials wanting something.

Note that all travellers need both a travel and photography permit, available in Malabo and Bata. Your papers will be scrutinised often, so make sure you have them in order.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 28,050 sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Cameroon and Gabon
- **Budget** US\$90 per day in town, US\$40 per day in the interior
- **Capital** Malabo
- **Languages** Spanish, French, Fang, 'Pichie'
- **Money** Central African CFA; US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 540,200
- **Seasons** Bioko: dry (December to February), rainy rest of the year; Rio Muni: dry (May to September)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 240; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visa** Required by all except Americans; must be acquired before arrival



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Malabo** (p572) Gasp at the unnatural wonder of the oil tankers and platforms as you touch down.
- **Cogo** (p575) Pierce the border by *pirogue* at this southern frontier village.
- **Monte Alen National Park** (p576) Whisper during forest walks in search of gorillas, elephants, and chimps.
- **Isla Corisco** (p576) Delight in the glory of the island's deserted white beaches.
- **Bata** (p574) Watch the city grow vertically with new-found oil money.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Equatorial Guinea is hot, humid and tropical. The mainland, Rio Muni, has a dry season from May to September while Bioko is dry from December to February. The dry season is the best time to go.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Spend a few days in Malabo (p572), take a day trip to Luba (p574), and then fly to the mainland to see Bata (p574). Take an overnight trip to trek in Monte Alen National Park (p576).
- **Two Weeks** Spend a few days in Bata (p574), then head down to Acalayong (p576) to catch the boat to Isla Corisco (p576) for a few days relaxation on the beach. On the way back stop in Cogo (p575) for the afternoon. Wind your way back up to Monte Alen National Park (p576) to trek through the forest, and then head back to Bata. Finish up with a few days on Bioko Island (p574), exploring Malabo and Luba.

WARNING:

Equatorial Guinea is barely ready for travellers. Tourist permits are mandatory for moving around the country, and even if you have the proper paperwork, police and military harassment is the norm. While violence is not likely, taking money off you is. Speaking out against the leadership can lead straight to jail. Be very careful taking photographs: a permit is necessary for cameras. Always travel with your passport and a copy of your passport and visa. Have the number of the nearest embassy handy.

HOW MUCH?

- **Overloaded pirogue to Corisco** US\$20
- **Traditional dress** US\$10
- **Boxed red wine** US\$1
- **Trek in the jungle** US\$10
- **Meal in the jungle** US\$15

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.60
- **1L bottled water** US\$1
- **'33' beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$7
- **Chicken and rice** US\$2

HISTORY

The discovery of large oil reserves in the mid-1990s has brought about dramatic change to Equatorial Guinea. One of the world's poorest countries quickly became one of the richest; its per capita income is now second only to Luxembourg's. But government corruption has kept most of this wealth from the people, who still live as they did hundreds of years ago, more often than not on the edge of poverty if not right in it. The government's human-rights record is abysmal, with little hope of reform.

Rule by force is nothing new in Equatorial Guinea. The Pygmies who originally inhabited the mainland now occupy only small pockets in the north. Starting in the 12th century, Bantu tribes, including the Bubi, came to the mainland. It's believed that somewhere around the 17th century the Fang, a branch of the Beti, moved in and quickly became dominant through war and intermarriage. The Bubi are said to have fled to Bioko to escape the Fang (though other legends have it that the Bubi were indigenous to the island). The Fang still dominate, now institutionalised through military force.

The Big Trade-Off

Europeans made their first contact on the island of Anobón, which was visited by the Portuguese in 1470. Portugal subsequently settled Anobón and the other islands in the Gulf of Guinea (Bioko, São Tomé and Príncipe). In the 18th century Bioko, Anobón and

parts of the mainland were traded to Spain in exchange for regions in Latin America. Bioko subsequently became an important base for slave-trading for several European nations during the early 19th century, and later a naval base for England, which by then was trying to stop the slave trade. Cocoa plantations were started on the island in the late 19th century, making Malabo Spain's most important possession in equatorial Africa.

On the mainland, the Fang made foreign occupation attempts a dangerous venture, but they were forced to retreat from the coastal region during the centuries of slave trading by the British, Dutch and French. With the abolition of slavery they once again reoccupied the coast.

Independence

It wasn't until 1959 that Spain granted Africans full citizenship. By that time, a nationalist movement was already well underway. Equatorial Guinea attained independence in October 1968 under the presidency of Macias Nguema. Several months after independence, relations with Spain deteriorated rapidly when it was discovered that Equatorial Guinea had almost no foreign currency reserves. The new government declared a state of emergency, setting the stage for a brutal, 10-year dictatorship. Thousands of people were tortured and executed, or beaten to death in the forced-labour camps of the mainland. Much of the violence was tribally motivated, and Bubis were particularly

targeted. By the time Nguema's regime was finally toppled in 1979, only a third of the 300,000 Guineans who lived there at independence still remained.

With the country in a mess and bankrupt, even Nguema's closest colleagues began to suspect that he was insane. In August 1979, Nguema was toppled by his nephew, Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who had his uncle executed a month later. Obiang continues to rule to this day, and has carried on human-rights abuses.

In 2004 Sir Mark Thatcher, former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's son, was arrested for helping to plan an alleged plot to overthrow Obiang and take over the oil-rich nation. Though he got off with a fine, South African mercenaries accused of taking part in the conspiracy have been imprisoned in the country ever since.

Equatorial Guinea Today

Oil is still the name of the game in Equatorial Guinea. And with the US relying increasingly on sources outside the Middle East for fuel, the country is bound to be crawling with Americans and cash for some time. Perversely, Equatorial Guinea still ranks near the bottom on the most recent UN Human Development Index. The US government's 2006 Human Rights Report reported torture, arbitrary arrest, judicial corruption, child labour, forced labour, and severe restrictions on freedoms of speech and press, and while Obiang stores up tens of millions of dollars in US bank accounts, most of his citizens still live below the poverty rate (most of the 500,000 subjects subsist on less than a dollar a day).

CULTURE

You'll often be told to be careful whom you speak to while in Equatorial Guinea, and this fear is pervasive. With shifting laws and rules, the population is continuously kept off-balance and nervous.

Daily life revolves around the oil industry in Bata and Malabo. Otherwise people live a very traditional African lifestyle, in small villages of mud-wattle houses, with agriculture the main occupation. People work sunrise to sunset, drinking starts early, and talking continues until sleep comes. In many rural villages there's a noticeable absence of males aged 12 to 30, who go to the city for school and work.

PEOPLE

On the mainland 80% of the population is Fang, while on Bioko the Bubis are the most numerous group, making up about 15% of the total population. Smaller tribes, including the Benga, inhabit the other islands. Oil has brought many Americans, and many Chinese have started to set up shop in Bata and Malabo.

The majority of the population is Roman Catholic, owing to 400 years of Spanish occupation, but traditional animist beliefs are still strong and often intermixed with Catholicism. Witchcraft is still practised but is stigmatised, and kept under wraps.

ARTS & CRAFTS

In small villages traditional Fang crafts including masks are still kept and collected. However, most crafts in the cities are imports. Traditional rituals including dance are still performed, including the *balélé*, which is accompanied by drums, wooden xylophones, *sanzas*, and bow harps.

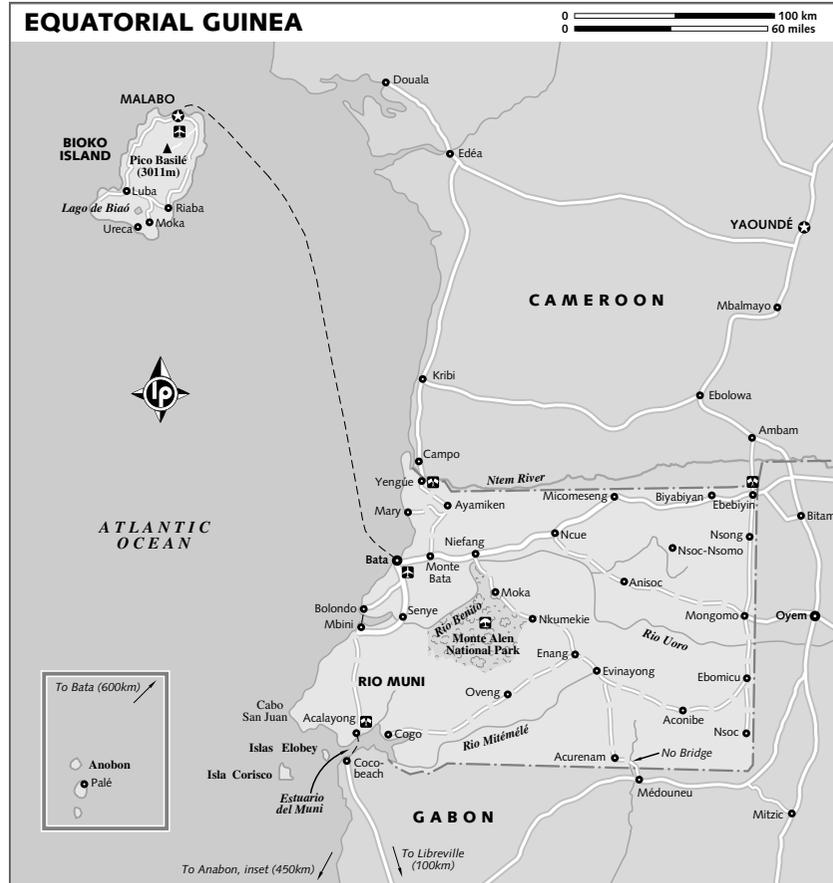
The culture has a strong oral tradition, with stories passed down through the generations, often involving the same cast of famous characters such as the grumpy tortoise and the wily monkey.

ENVIRONMENT

Equatorial Guinea is composed of two separate landmasses – the main land of Rio Muni and the island of Bioko which contains Malabo, the capital city – plus a series of even smaller islands off the coast.

Rio Muni is a roughly rectangular area of Central African rainforest with abundant wildlife, including gorillas, chimpanzees and forest elephants. Large sections of the interior have been set aside as protected areas, including Monte Alen National Park, which covers much of the centre of Rio Muni and offers some amazing treks. Logging is being more carefully controlled than in the past, but deforestation and the bushmeat trade that follows logging operations are still problems.

The island of Bioko, which is formed from three extinct volcanoes, has a steep rocky coast and a mountainous, wooded interior notable for high biodiversity. It contains over 65 known mammals, many of which are endangered. Much of Bioko was previously more than huge plantation; thus cacao now grows wildly throughout the island.



MALABO

pop 100,000

As you fly in to Malabo you will see oil platforms scattered around the harbour, tankers steaming and coastal refineries shooting off flames night and day. Malabo is an oil town and, in many ways, it's a cosmopolitan place where expatriates kick back at the end of the day before heading back to work on the platforms.

Like many African city-towns, Malabo is also desperately third world. Downtown you'll find evidence of the colonial past, when Malabo was first the British naval station of Port Clarence on lease from Spain, and later

renamed Santa Isabel when it was returned to Madrid.

ORIENTATION

Malabo is a small city on the northern side of Bioko Island, and is centred on the new port. The airport is located about 6km west of Malabo.

The heart of town is situated along Ave de la Independencia, where you'll find the main bank, shops, hotels, restaurants and, further east, the main square, which is undergoing major renovation including the building of a top-end hotel. Calle de Argelia, containing the other big hotels in town, has some excellent views of the busy port and the harbour.

MALABO

0 300 m
0 0.2 miles

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INFORMATION

Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program (BBPP); ☎ 267876, 267112; contact@bioko.org) Might be able to offer you some information.

GETESA (cnr Calle de Rey Boncoro & Calle de Mongomo) Those travelling with a SIM-technology mobile phone, you can pick up a SIM card here.

Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Information (Ave 3 de Agosto) Doesn't have much info, but it's a mandatory stop for tourists because of the travel and photography permits (US\$40) that you'll need to show at the many roadblocks.

Proser (☎ 093163; www.proser-guinea.com; 85 Ave de la Libertad) The best Internet connection in town.

Santa Isabel Clinic (Carretera de Luba) Most foreigners who need medical attention head to this clinic on the way out of town past the university.

SGBGE Bank (Carretera del Aeropuerto)

Spanish Cultural Centre (☎ 092489) Has decent info.

Viajes Guinea Ecuatorial (☎ 092074, 270303; Ave de la Independencia) Try this travel agency for travel-specific information.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Be careful of roadblocks with corrupt officers. Taking photos in downtown Malabo is an easy way to get your camera confiscated, but you can always ask a nearby police officer for permission. Maps are theoretically illegal so don't carry one in an obvious way.

Crime rates aren't huge, but take all the precautions you would in a big city.

SIGHTS

Many colonial buildings remain, including the **Cathedral** (Ave de la Independencia) and **Town Hall**. The gorgeous **Plaza de España** (Calle de 12 Octubre) is a great place for a stroll.

Two markets are worth a visit, **Mercado Central** (Calle de Patricio Lumumba) and, a 10-minute walk outside of town, the bustling **Mercado Semu**.

ACTIVITIES

Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program (☎ 267876, 267112; www.bioko.org) is a conservation and ecotourism organisation run jointly by Universidad Nacional de Guinea Ecuatoria (UNGE), the local university and an American university. It runs guided trips to **Moka** and **Crater Lake** among other destinations, and has a yearly expedition to **Grande Caldera**, which has the highest concentration of primates in the area, including many endangered species.

Arena Blanca, an hour south of town on the way to Luba, is the only white-sand beach. It's packed on weekends.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The **Spanish Cultural Centre** and the **French Cultural Centre** both have lectures, movies, bands performing and other events. Check at the centres for the schedule.

In Moka there is a yearly **festival celebrating the royal family** held during the first week of November.

SLEEPING

Hotel rates have skyrocketed since the oil boom, and cheap rooms are nearly impossible to find. Check with the BBPP for open rooms in their house.

Residencia Ana Jose (☎ 92786; Ave de la Independencia; r with/without bathroom US\$30/20) This place offers budget accommodation in the centre of town in an old house with a lot of character. Ana speaks little English, but she will be very excited to have you as a guest.

Pizza Place (☎ 093450; Ave de la Independencia; r US\$50) Offering comfortable rooms, Pizza Place is over a popular restaurant. Ask for Ali.

Hostal Residencia Morenita (☎ 091026; r US\$70) This hostel has nice rooms with good views.

Hotel Yoly (☎ 091895; Calle Hipolita Eworo; r US\$80; 🚽) Featuring clean rooms with tvs and balconies overlooking the ministry buildings in the town centre, this hotel also has a restaurant, internet access and a defunct pool.

Hotel Bahia (☎ 090649; Calle de Argelia; r US\$100) This is the best high-end choice in town with a lovely view and a good restaurant overlooking the harbour.

Paraiso (☎ 254033; Carretera del Aeropuerto; r US\$180) On the road to the airport, Paraiso is popular and often full of expats and oil men.

EATING

Martínez Hernández (Ave de la Independencia) This is a Western-style grocery.

Aunt Betty's (☎ 511519; Calle de Acacio Muñe) Aunt Betty will cook for you in front of her home. Call ahead to tell her what you want.

Café Kristiania (Calle de Rey Boncoro) In the centre of town, this upscale bakery café is great for breakfast.

Treasure Island (Ave de la Independencia; meals US\$10-14) Possibly the most Westernised of all the restaurants with prices to match and a tremendous view of the new harbour and a casino below.

In the centre of town, EGTC is a Lebanese food market with a good liquor selection. Bantu serves Chinese food with an African

twist while the Spanish Cultural Centre has a lovely restaurant with reasonable prices and Spanish dishes.

Other small restaurants with good food include Cookies Restaurant near the Santuario Claret church, and the 4 Ases Restaurant. Top-end restaurants will be found at the big hotels; Hotel Bahia has one of the nicest.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

Bahia Sound (Calle de Argelia) The nicest bar in town with live musicians dropping in on the weekends, an art gallery showing local artists, and a lovely back garden area. Alberto, the proprietor, is a fountain of information for the area and can point you towards anything you might need.

Hotel Bahia Club (Calle de Argelia) Swanky and popular with expats.

Sports (Calle de Ácacio Muñe) Late-nighters head here to dance until sunrise.

SHOPPING

Hotel Ureca (Carretera del Aeropuerto) and **Tropicana** (Carreta de Luba), two top end hotels, have souvenir stands with imported goods for fair prices. Some bargaining is expected, and they will change dollars at good rates.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Flights to/from Bata take about 30 minutes on either **Euroguineana Airlines** (☎ 099336; Calle de Enrique Nvo) or **General Work** (☎ 084096) and cost around US\$90.

Many international flights from Europe now do weekly trips to Malabo. See p578.

Share taxis leave from a small market about 4km past the university where you can get rides to Luba (US\$4, one hour) and Moka (US\$7, two hours), or hire one from town.

Taxis around town cost about US\$1 for most locations around town during the day, and US\$2 at night.

BIOKO ISLAND

LUBA

Luba is a small town with yellow colonial buildings, gorgeous views and a sweeping coast. But with the new construction of the Luba Freeport, a deep-water port used by giant oil companies to bring large cargo ashore and to refuel, this formerly sleepy town is changing overnight.

A few hotels are popping up. Hotel Jones is on the main drag. Next door is the restaurant **4 Ases de Luba** (meals US\$6-10), popular with the construction workers. Nearby is Isla Mujeres with a nice outdoor dining area.

South of Luba is the lovely town of **Batété**, well worth a visit to see the wooden church and to pick the old cocoa pods off the roadside trees from the forgotten plantations. It's one of the only towns still untouched by the oil boom, and is quite beautiful.

MOKA

A small town in the southern highlands nestled between volcanic peaks, Moka is a jump-off point for a variety of great treks to tree-fern forests, spectacular waterfalls and crater lakes. You can stay at the Moka House (the first house when you come into the village), run by the BBPP, or the South African House, further along. You must be introduced to the president of Moka upon arrival. A trip to Moka is best arranged through BBPP in Malabo, which can also coordinate a trip to **Ureka**, a tiny beach town on Bioko's southern coast where nesting sea turtles are protected.

Moka can be most easily reached through the BBPP but can also be attempted (with some bribing at the checkpoints) via taxi from the taxi stand outside of Malabo for about US\$7.

RIO MUNI

BATA

Bata is a town under construction. The influx of American oil money has finally reached Rio Muni's shores, and electricity, new roads, streetlights, a manicured (and somewhat sanitised) waterfront, and plenty of American oilmen are there to prove it. Dozens of new buildings are going up in expectation of a richer, more Westernised future.

There's still plenty of traditional Africa to be seen in Bata, including many small markets selling the usual second-hand clothes, African dresses, fruits and vegetables, fish, and, of course, plastics.

Still at times the place can feel a bit like a ghost town – years of a low birth rate in Equatorial Guinea has kept the population small – but at night the streets come alive. Take a disco nap if you're planning on hitting the nightspots, as they don't start jumping until late.

Don't forget a stop at the snail-paced **Ministro de Turismo** for your requisite tourist papers (around US\$50).

Bomé is a popular beach, full on Sundays with oilmen and other Westerners.

Orientation & Information

The airport is a few kilometres north of town (taxi US\$1 to US\$2). New street and landmark signs make it easier to navigate this sprawling African city. Bar Centrale is a good, central place to orient yourself around. Proser has the best internet in town. Both BGFI and CCEI banks are just up the road from Bar Centrale on Calle Patricio Lumumba.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Yessica (☎ 083974; r US\$26/40; ☺) Near the hospital. This was once an upscale place for African politicians and businessmen but has slid into decline. Still, it's a decent deal in a lively neighbourhood. It has televisions and at night the streets teem with people frequenting food stalls and hole-in-the-wall bars including Roca, next door.

Bar Centrale (r US\$60) This place offers comfortable, midrange rooms with many amenities above this popular and central restaurant. It caters to an upscale local clientele and the food is tasty.

Crysta (r US\$60) Offers accommodation similar to Bar Centrale. Both places have good food and comfortable surroundings with upmarket prices catering to local businessmen, politicians and the elite.

High-end hotels include the weathered, waterfront **Pan African** (☎ 083240; r from US\$85), the new, upscale **Plaza** (r from US\$140), and the **Hotel Carmen** (r from US\$112) on the way to the airport.

For a cheap breakfast, grab a *zatar* – a Middle Eastern spice mixture served (in this case) on baked doughlike pizza – from the little bakery next door to Bar Centrale (US\$3).

Local eateries like La Ferme, next to the Ministry of Tourism, Express, near Proser, and La Cubana all are bustling and serve decent food. Akena serves good pizza on the waterfront next to the lovely Spanish Cultural Centre, which has lectures and movie offerings.

Housed in a traditional building right by the seaside, the Miramar serves up fresh fish. This is arguably the best meal to be had in Bata.

Drinking & Entertainment

Small neighbourhood bars are everywhere. Popular late-night clubs include Discoteca La Salsa (aka Beirut) and Araita.

Getting There & Away

Thirty-minute flights to/from Malabo leave daily with either General Work or Euroguineana (around US\$95); tickets can be bought at the airport or in town at the office near the radio station.

Catch share taxis to Mbini (US\$4, one hour) and areas south at the Mercado Grande. For Rio Campo, Monte Alen (US\$6, 1½ hours), Ebebeyin (US\$10, four hours) catch a taxi to Ngolo, and then ask the driver to point you in the right direction of the proper taxi to your destination.

Taxis around town cost 300CFA (around US\$0.60).

MBINI

About 50km south of Bata along the coast on the road towards Acalaya, a quick ferry ride brings you to Mbini. It's a nice little town on the river with a couple of cheap hotels, restaurants, a nightclub and lots of deserted beaches, but there's not much to do or see. There's a colourful old round market in the centre of town, and a few other architectural gems including the Ayuntamiento building. It's possible to rent a *pirogue* near the ferry and take a ride up the Mbini River.

There are a few basic hotels in town that cost around US\$10 a room. Hotel Pastura is near the ferry, and El Parador has cheap food. You can grab a drink at Club Sorrisa (rooms may be available) but many youths hang out at the foosball table at Mama Esperanza.

Minibuses from Bata to Mbini (US\$4, one hour, including a ferry from Bolondo to Mbini), and areas south, run from the Mercado Grande in the mornings.

COGO

Cogo is a surprisingly picturesque colonial town on the Equatorial Guinean side of the river that separates the country from Gabon. Daily life centres around the main street, where you'll find the basic but charming **Hotel Estuario** (r with toilet & bucket US\$10/12), which has electricity at night; look for the bright blue doors. There are a few eateries and bars that can offer food and drink, and some beautiful old churches and cathedrals. Check in with

the Commissar (and pay the requisite fee) before poking around town.

A *pirogue* across the estuary to much smaller **Acalayong** runs all day (US\$1 to US\$4), after which you can get a car or truck to Mbini and Bata (US\$6 to US\$8). The full journey takes about 2½ hours on a decent road through quaint villages. **Hotel Acalayong** (r US\$10) is right next to the estuary if you get stuck overnight. Meals can be arranged for US\$2.

Pirogues also leave for **Isla Corisco** from Cogo once or twice a week for about US\$10 to US\$20. They will be overloaded and will not have life jackets for the two- to four-hour trip.

At Cogo you can cross to Gabon by *pirogue* (around US\$10). You'll need a visa in hand and an exit stamp.

Ask at the port for daily departures.

MONTE ALEN NATIONAL PARK

Monte Alen National Park is one of the hidden gems of Central Africa. A protected area covering 1400 sq km, the tropical forests are home to gorillas, chimpanzees, forest elephants, crocodiles and many other species of wildlife.

The excellent **Hotel Monte Alen** (r from US\$35) offers an affordable way to spend a few days seeing the rainforest up close. Situated on a jungle ridge with a sweeping view of the valley below, the rooms are beautiful and clean with running water and private baths. Meals are good but expensive, as supplies are hard to come by; it's worthwhile bringing some food and water to avoid the high costs.

Excellent guided day treks by trained villagers cost US\$10. You'll see monkeys, a host of birdlife and butterflies, and, if you're lucky, some larger mammals.

To get here, take a route taxi in Bata headed for **Evinayong** (US\$6; two to three hours). They'll drop you at the entrance to 'EcoFac'.

EBEBIYIN

Ebebiyin is the first village of any size in northeastern Rio Muni as you come across the border from Cameroon, 2km away. There are minibuses (US\$8) to/from Bata that take about four hours on the new roads, depending on the number of checkpoints.

Some claim **Hotel Immaculata** (r US\$100; 🍷) is the nicest hotel in Equatorial Guinea, and a pool is under construction. A few smaller

hotels can be found around town for about US\$20.

Outside Ebebiyin are many small traditional villages including **Alen Angsok** and **Ngon Eseng** that have rarely-visited falls, lakes, caves and colonial ruins. Check with police before heading out to visit.

MONGOMO

Because Mongomo is the president's home town it has had a recent facelift. **Hotel Ovon-Nfa** (r with fan/air-con from US\$30/60) is the nicest place in town. Other small hotels are popping up. A share taxi to Bata costs from US\$8. Daily taxis are available to Oyem (Gabon), across the border.

ISLA CORISCO

About 29km off the coast of Equatorial Guinea is the island of Corisco – kilometres of stunning white-sand beaches dotted with palm trees, including the long sand bar of **Háká** that stretches out deep into the ocean. If you've ever been looking for a nearly undiscovered, deserted tropical island to beach yourself on, you've found it.

Most of the island's few visitors make arrangements before travelling and stay at the **Hostal Corisco** (📞 212630; r US\$20), a lovely house on the water, run by Pa Santiago Hinestrosa and family.

Activities here include boating around the island, going to see the crocodiles and sea turtles (which, unfortunately, are usually caught and eaten despite a ban), and trekking through the tiny village and old, burnt out cathedrals. Flag down a fisherman with a boat to get an inexpensive and lively tour of the island.

Check in Bata and Malabo for flights to an airport under construction.

Santiago Hinestrosa can arrange boat transfers to/from Acalayong and Cogo (from US\$200 return).

A village *pirogue* leaves for Corisco from Cogo a few times a week as well (US\$10 to US\$20). Be prepared for overcrowding and a jostling passage *sans* lifejackets.

It is necessary to declare yourself to the *commandante* of the island soon after arrival (women travelling alone should go accompanied by a Hinestrosa family member); having your papers in order is imperative.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Hotels in the cities cost from US\$40. In small towns lodging starts at US\$10.

BOOKS

The Wonga Coup: Guns, Thugs and a Ruthless Determination to Create Mayhem in an Oil-Rich Corner of Africa by Adam Roberts will give you a rich history of the failed coup plot and the politics of oil in the Gulf of Guinea.

Tropical Gangsters: One Man's Experience With Development and Decadence in Deepest Africa by Robert Klitgaard is a highly entertaining account of the World Bank's attempt at developing Equatorial Guinea before the oil boom.

BUSINESS HOURS

Daily siesta is from 1pm to 4pm when everything closes down. Normal business hours are Monday to Saturday 8am to 1pm and 4pm to 7pm.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

While violence is not likely, taking money off you is. Speaking out against the leadership can lead straight to jail. Be very careful taking photographs: a permit is necessary for cameras. See p569 for more.

CUSTOMS

Travellers leaving Equatorial Guinea on international flights can expect an extremely thorough search at customs. One of the things

POLICE & THIEVES & VINO

Pretty much all the readers' letters Lonely Planet gets about Equatorial Guinea say exactly the same things: the jungle is beautiful, the people are friendly, and yet the experience is ruined by corrupt officials demanding money at checkpoints every few miles. No matter how good you think you are at avoiding bribes, there will be times when you either pay up or turn around and go back where you came from.

If you have the patience and *cojones*, you can try a few things: hand the officers a copy of your passport first, not letting them have the real thing. If they issue a fine, ask why, and ask for a receipt. Or, wait it out – they may eventually get bored or pressured by the local in the taxi to let you go. If things get tense, a call by mobile phone to your embassy or consulate might be wise. Violence is not the norm at these checkpoints, but it has been reported. Approaching the situation as an adventure, with patience and smiles, will make your journey less frustrating. If all else fails, humility and a few boxes of vino are likely to get you anywhere.

PRACTICALITIES

- Weights, measures and road distances use the metric system.
- Electricity is 220-240V AC, 50Hz (European plug with two circular metal pins).
- Most media is state controlled and in Spanish. There are a few private newspapers and underground pamphlets which publish irregularly. Radio Asonga in Bata is privately owned (by the president's son) and a favourite.

officials will look for is currency, and if they find any you'll face a hefty fine (of course) for not filling out the 'currency declaration form'.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Equatorial Guinea Embassies & Consulates

Belgium (📞 3223462509; 295 1180 Uccle 7, Brussels)
Cameroon Douala (📞 3433435); Yaoundé (📞 237210804)

France (📞 33147664433; 6 Rue Alfred de Vigny, Paris)

Gabon (📞 241751056; Haut Gue-Gue, Libreville)

Nigeria (📞 23412691211; Lagos)

Spain (📞 34914352215; Coello No 91, Madrid)

USA (📞 12025185700; info@equatorialguinea.com; 2020 16th St, NW, Washington, DC)

Embassies & Consulates in Equatorial Guinea

Countries with diplomatic representation in Malabo include the following:

Cameroon (📞 92263; Calle de Rey Boncoro)

France (📞 92005; Carretera del Aeropuerto)

Gabon (☎ 93180; Calle de Argelia)
Nigeria (☎ 92487; Paseo de los Cocoteros)
São Tomé & Príncipe (Calle de Acacio Muñe)
Spain (☎ 92020; Parque de las Avdas de África)
USA (☎ 098895; usembassymalabo@yahoo.com; Carretera del Aeropuerto)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

On August 3 the Liberation Day festival is celebrated in a different town.

HOLIDAYS

As well as those listed in the Africa Directory (p1106) the principal public holidays in Equatorial Guinea are the following:

- 1 January** New Year's Day
- 1 May** Labour Day
- 25 May** Organization of African Unity (OAU) Day
- 5 June** President's Birthday
- 3 August** Liberation Day
- 12 October** Independence Day
- 10 December** Human Rights Day

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is available in Bata (p575) and Malabo (p573).

MAPS

Maps are currently illegal; be careful carrying one around in public.

MONEY

The local currency is the Central African CFA franc. There are no ATMs in Equatorial Guinea and credit cards are not accepted. Travellers cheques and cash can be changed at the banks in Malabo and Bata, but this is time-consuming and the rates and commissions are steep, so it's best to bring the cash you'll need in CFA.

Bargaining is expected at the markets but won't get you much in hotels or shops.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Equipment and developing are available in Malabo and Bata. A permit is needed to take photos; don't photograph anything connected with the military or government buildings.

VISAS

Visas are required for all with the exception of Americans, though many embassies outside the country are not always aware of this exemption, and officers on the ground will be suspicious.

Visas can be purchased in neighbouring countries (see p577 for embassies) for up to US\$70. Obtaining a visa can be a long process and may require having an invitation from an organisation in the country. Expect many trips and long waits.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for Cameroon and Gabon are available from embassies in Malabo (see p577 for addresses). Equatorial Guinea is one of the best places to get a Gabonese visa: 30-day visas cost US\$60 and take about three days to process. Three-month visas for Cameroon cost US\$50 and are generally issued the same day. Visas to Cameroon are available at all border crossings.

VOLUNTEERING

Check with the Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program in Malabo (see p573).

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Travellers of any kind are rare in this country, and women travellers in particular will attract a lot of attention, especially in Malabo, which is teeming with (male) oil workers.

TRANSPORT IN EQUATORIAL GUINEA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Air France (www.airfrance.com) Flies from Paris to Malabo three times a week.

Iberia Airlines (www.iberia.com) Flies from Madrid to Malabo three times weekly.

KLM (www.klm.com) Flies from Amsterdam to Malabo a few times a week.

Swissair (www.swiss.com) Flies once a week to Malabo from Zurich.

When it does fly, **Euroguineana Airlines** flies to/from Douala (Cameroon) and Libreville (Gabon). Inquire at embassies for tickets.

DEPARTURE TAX

You may be asked on departure to leave a small amount of money. Be wary of carrying too much currency out of the airport as it could be confiscated.

A rotating cast of airlines fly to/from regional capitals. See p1121 for more information.

Land

GABON

Crossing to Gabon can be done from Cogo/Acalayong to Cocobeach by *pirogue* (p575), and via Mongomo (p576) or Ebebiyin (p576) to Oyem and Bitam. Visas for Gabon must be purchased in advance, and be sure to get an exit stamp.

CAMEROON

Travellers can always cross to Cameroon at Ebebiyin; the border at Rio Campo (two to

three hours from Bata) isn't always open, so check before you head there. The rules change all the time so you need to be careful.

GETTING AROUND

General Work (☎ 084095; info@generalwork.net) flies between Bata and Malabo. A cargo ship heads weekly to Anobóón. Ask around at the port for details. It's possible to get a *pirogue* to some of the smaller islands, including Corisco.

Share taxis and over-packed minibuses are the only way to get around outside of Bata and Malabo. Rental cars may be available in Bata at Segani on the road to the airport.

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