

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

Written by

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“The inequalities persisting between human beings in many regions of the world characterized the century ending now. Fortunately, at the eve of the 21st Century, we are convinced and we unanimously agree that civic, political, economic, social and cultural rights of all peoples are interdependent.” ***President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo at the occasion of the Millennium Summit at the U.N.***

Equatorial Guinea is a pleasant place, but it is not always an easy place to live. Dealings with the Guineano on the street can be fascinating and satisfying; however, the somewhat constant battle with officials can be frustrating and time consuming. Equato-guineans (also known as Guineano) can look curt, but are quick to smile and chat.

Equatorial Guinea is made up of five islands, the largest being Bioko and Annabon. There is also a mainland area, Rio Muni, which is referred to as the Continental Region, placed between Cameroon and Gabon, very close to the Equator. The country's total area is less than 11,000 square miles.

The capitol, Malabo, is somewhat run down but still shows some signs of its Spanish colonial past. Some of the government buildings have been renovated and look beautiful, especially around the Presidential Palace. Other buildings, unfortunately, look somewhat neglected. The town is comprised of Bahia del Puerto, and extends to a natural border with the Rio Consul. The streets are not in good condition and get worse in the wet season, when the

drainage there actually is, overflows down to the bay. The Central Market borders the Rio Consul.

There are plans for a "new" Malabo which the government expects to be the center of the oil industry. Oil and oil service companies are being encouraged to relocate to this area. A main road is being built and extends from the airport to the Luba Road, which runs parallel to the airport road, and will be a six-lane highway when it is completed.

There are few road or rail networks on the island, although the airport has recently been upgraded. Annobon offers the opportunity for deep sea fishing and scuba diving; however, there are no actual facilities that support these except local fisherman's boats. Air tanks for diving are not available locally. The nearest hyperbaric chambers are in Capetown, South Africa or Sharm el Sheik, Egypt.

The population of Equatorial Guinea is just over half a million (official estimate of 523,000 as of July 2004; however, some unofficial reports have the population as one million) with an annual growth rate of 2.41%. The population is made up of mainly Fang, who migrated from Cameroon and Gabon (fang ntoumou and fang okak respectively) between the 14th and 19th century to Rio Muni. The Fang make up 80% of the population and is broken down into 67 clans. Fang make up most of the government.

Family is important in African society and loyalties are strong to extended families. Children learn to take responsibility for younger siblings at an early

age. It is common for a wealthier member of a family to take in a less fortunate family member. Machismo is still very much the way of life, and it is common to see men gathered at bars or in casinos while the women take care of the family.

The predominant religion is Roman Catholic. Some other Christian religions are also present with traditional African and animist beliefs, which make up the remainder. There is a small Moslem population on Bioko. There is a beautiful Catholic cathedral in Malabo with services in Fang, Bubi and Spanish. Religious freedom is tolerated under the present President.

Spanish and French are the official languages, with English becoming more common. Most of the dealings with the government, however, are in Spanish. Fang and Bubi, which are both Bantu languages, are the main dialects locally.

Equato-guineans, or Guineanos, often have both a Spanish and African Christian name followed by two African surnames, one of which is the father's first name followed by the mother's first name. On Bioko it is not uncommon to come across names such as Barleycorn, Jones and Thompson who are all descendants of the early Europeans.

Equatorial Guinea has shown substantial economic growth in recent years due to considerable oil and gas reserves found in the mid-1990s. Oil production has increased from 81,000 barrels per day in 1998 to 350,000 barrels per day in 2004, and accounts for nearly 90% of the value of total

exports. The three fields, Zafiro, Ceiba and Alba account for the majority of output. There are approximately twelve oil companies currently present in the country.

The agricultural sector as well as the economy in general was devastated under prior administrations. Equatorial Guinea used to produce over 36,000 tons of cocoa, but in 2004 only produced 2,906 tons. Coffee production has risen from 67,000 tons in 1997 to 126,000 tons in 2002. Timber accounted for two percent of the total export earnings and reached 789,000 cubic meters in 1999, but this dropped markedly in 2002. This however dropped to the more sustainable level of 530,500 cubic meters in 2002. Timber, predominantly Okoume, is exported principally to China and the industry is controlled by the ruling family.

There are small though unexplored deposits of gold, manganese, bauxite, tantalite and uranium on the mainland.

The Government of Equatorial Guinea has a policy of openness to the outside world, and therefore has the need to provide the country with a means of information on current affairs and access to the world beyond their borders.