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The three-lane highway leading from Malabo to Sipopo was mostly empty of traffic. — AFP photos



A conference hall is one of the attractions, but there is little activity.

## Equatorial Guinea struggles for place in world tourism

Gleaming but eerily empty, the luxurious Sipopo resort with its five-star hotel and exclusive facilities rises from a tropical beach, symbolizing the dilemma of Equatorial Guinea—a notoriously closed country that has turned to tourism to help fill its coffers. The purpose-built town was carved out of an ancient forest in 2011 at a cost of 600 million euros (\$670 million), initially to host a week-long African Union summit and showcase the rise of the tiny oil-rich state.

A 16-kilometre (10-mile) drive from Equatorial Guinea's capital Malabo, the resort boasts a vast conference center, the Sofitel Malabo Sipopo Le Golf hotel, as well as 52 luxury villas—one for every head of state to attend the summit—each with its own swimming pool. There is also an 18-hole golf course, several restaurants and exclusive beaches guarded by police. For almost a decade, Sipopo has been the crown jewel in a strategy to lure high-end visitors to Equatorial Guinea to diversify an economy badly hit by a slump in oil revenue. But the town, visited by an AFP reporter two months ago, seemed quite empty—an impression strengthened by conversations with people who live or who work there.

"It's depressing, there's no-one," said a visiting Gabonese consultant. A worker, who asked not to be named, said the complex was quiet year-round: "You can hear the sound of your own footsteps." The occasional visitors tend to be well connected, rich and in search of privacy, the sources said.

Many are guests of a government described by Human Rights Watch as corrupt and repressive. One of the villas, according to the sources, was occupied by former Gambian dictator Yahya Jammeh after he fled his country in 2017.

### Empty lobby

At Easter, the 200-room hotel's guests included a Spanish couple on honeymoon, a few families and some businessmen, who were all foreigners. In the echoing lobby, a huge black and white portrait of the country's 76-year-old authoritarian president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema-Africa's longest-serving ruler—hung on the wall, watching over the vacant reception area. A 1.5-kilometre (nearly mile-long) beach—an artificial shore secluded from curious eyes—was virtually deserted, in contrast to a public beach near the capital. The three-lane highway leading from Malabo to Sipopo was mostly empty of traffic.

A hospital was added after the villas were built, but is empty, the sources said. In 2014, a mall was built at the resort to house 50 shops, a bowling alley, two cinemas and a children's play area. But a hotel receptionist said the complex was not open yet, adding: "If you want to buy a souvenir, you will have to go to Malabo." At night-time, shiny limousines arrived at a luxury restaurant to drop off diners.

### Tourism hopes

Located on the mid-Atlantic coast of central

Africa, Equatorial Guinea has flooded social media with messages of its allure as a holiday destination. Plans to build a new passenger terminal at the airport in Bata city have also just received a 120-million-euro (\$133-million) injection from the Development Bank of Central African States. Figures for visitors are unavailable, and the tourism ministry in Malabo did not respond to AFP's requests for information. In the latest global compilation of figures posted by the World Bank, the number of tourists for Equatorial Guinea has been left blank.

But much of the tourism in evidence are business people, such as oil company workers, relaxing for a few days, or attending energy or economic conferences. A few travel firms offer trips tailor-made for both luxury and adventure, but they also allude to the difficulties, notably of being allowed to enter the country. "The country has been a mystery to outsiders, who were discouraged from entering by a difficult visa process and a lack of tourism infrastructure," says the website of British tour operator Undiscovered Destinations.

The firm claimed, however, that "things are changing fast... with an excellent road network and numerous hotels springing up seemingly overnight." Few Equatoguineans have the chance of staying in such places. At Sipopo's hotel, a basic room costs the equivalent of more than 200 euros (\$224) a night, while exclusive accommodation tops 850 euros.

The discovery of vast oil reserves off the coast



The swimming pool and the garden of the near-empty Sofitel Hotel in Sipopo.

in the mid-1990s has boosted the country's gross national income to a theoretical annual \$19,500 per person per year, according to the UN Development Program. But that wealth benefits a small elite among the country's 1.2 million inhabitants. More than two-thirds of Equatoguineans live below the poverty line, and 55 percent of the population aged over 15 are unemployed. — AFP



Statue of reggae legend Bob Marley seen on the grounds of the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, Jamaica. — AFP photos



A mural depicting Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, Jamaican Reggae legend Bob Marley and his seven sons is seen on the grounds of the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, Jamaica.



The home of Jamaican reggae legend Bob Marley on the grounds of the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, Jamaica.



Entrance to the home of Bob Marley is seen on the grounds of the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, Jamaica.

## Enjoy the sights and sounds of Marley at the Bob Marley Museum

The museum is situated on the site of the legendary musician's home, which he purchased in 1975. This house, featuring 19th-century architecture, was Marley's home until his transition in 1981. It was converted into a museum six years later by his wife, Mrs Rita Marley. The main museum displays Marley's personal treasures.

The property also features a well-equipped 80-seat theatre, a photographic gallery, a record shop and a gift shop filled with a wide array of Bob Marley memorabilia. Relax and enjoy a sumptuous meal from the One Love Cafe after you've completed your tour which offers a peek into every aspect of Bob Marley's life. — [www.bobmarleymuseum.com](http://www.bobmarleymuseum.com)



A mural shows reggae legend Bob Marley and his family on the grounds of the Bob Marley Museum.