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WISH YOU WERE HERE

... on the petite island of Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea



One day, not so long ago, self-made tech billionaire Mark Shuttleworth looked at Google Maps. A South African by birth, then living on the Isle of Man, he wanted to find somewhere “small and perfect—to get away completely from everything” and that was also roughly halfway between his two homes. Cast out in the Atlantic, he spotted a speck—São Tomé e Príncipe—bang on the equator, off the coast of Gabon. Even on paper, he was seduced. So began his next project, as he’d just checked off his previous—becoming one of the first commercial astronauts in space. He originally wanted his own private island, but perhaps it was something about seeing our planet from space that brought Shuttleworth down to earth. After visiting this archipelago with its volcanic ridges, primeval forest and endemic species, and his encounters with the brutally colonised, yet stoical, people, it was no longer about seclusion for him but immersion. He’s initiating conservation and community projects, creating livelihoods and building traveller retreats—in what was once one of the world’s poorest (and tiniest) countries. He’s opened four small hotels: two are refurb, and the other two showstoppers. One, a decaying plantation house, Roça Sundy, has been converted into a guesthouse; the second, Sundy Praia, is a beachfront tented camp. Next year they open an organic chocolate factory, saluting the islands’ legacy as one of the world’s largest producers of cacao. Life doesn’t get much sweeter. ■ MJC

HENRIQUE BERUCA