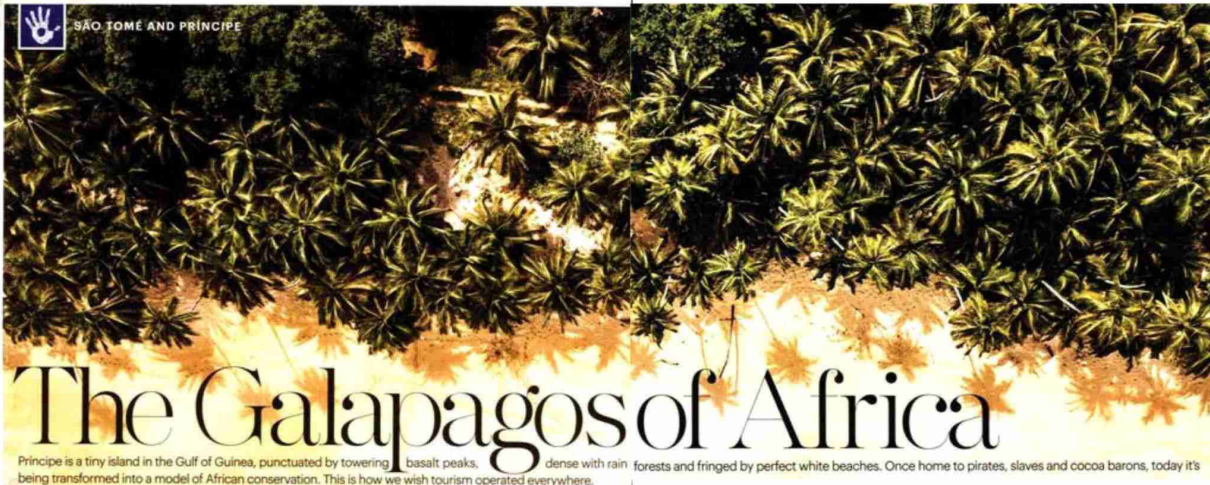


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BY JUSTIN FOX

The aircraft banked through low tropical cloud and there it was: an emerald island in luminous, azure water. Oddly shaped volcanic peaks thrust from the forest canopy, forming an other-worldly skyline. Swooping lower over reefs, beaches, palm trees... our wheels squeaked on tarmac: we had landed in the 'Galapagos of Africa'.

The twin islands of São Tomé and Príncipe were discovered by the Portuguese in the 15th century and transformed into a network of *roças* (plantations), becoming the centre of the world's cocoa production. After independence in 1975, the islands suffered economic collapse and many *roças* fell into disrepair or were abandoned.

Príncipe is a smaller version of São Tomé, with a port capital in the north and vast, wild forests in the south. Due to its smaller population, it's more unspoiled and feels more remote. Nature rules on this enchanted isle. Recognising its natural bounty and high density of endemic species, UNESCO declared Príncipe a World Biosphere Reserve in 2012.

Today, the island offers visitors sublime beaches, scuba-diving and snorkelling, fishing, jungle exploration and bird-watching. It has a handful of accommodation options with a minimal tourist footprint. Due to forward-thinking politicians, developers and conservationists, the island is being transformed into a shining example of how to protect a wilderness area.

I'd come to Príncipe to stay at the two newest establishments and to learn more about island conservation. South African astronaut-entrepreneur billionaire, Mark Shuttleworth, has opened a number of eco-lodges and pioneered various initiatives seeking a sustainable, holistic approach to tourism. The three pillars of the philosophy of his company, HBD (Here Be Dragons), are conservation, tourism and agriculture.

I stepped from the plane into sticky, tropical heat. Príncipe's phonolite cones of rock rose up out of the rainforest all around. I was met in the terminal by Diana Relego and Miguel Madeira, a Portuguese wife-and-husband team working for HBD. They would play gregarious hosts during my time here. We drove along a bumpy track through thick forest to Roça Sundy, a major plantation estate during colonial times, now restored as a boutique hotel and working farm.

Roça Sundy has an elegant manor house set in a vast courtyard surrounded by workers' accommodation, agricultural buildings, stables and a church. Work on an in-house chocolate factory was underway. As a guest, you're completely immersed in farm life, waking up to the sound of cockerels, getting to know the children playing soccer on the square and visiting the roça's cocoa, vanilla and pepper plantations.

I sat on the terrace with Diana and Miguel, enjoying a long drink and listening to African grey parrots in the trees overhead. Diana filled me in on some of the terrestrial conservation projects. "Founded by Mark



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Shuttleworth, the Fundação Príncipe Trust (FPT) is a conservation NGO based on the island," she said. "It aims to ensure that our natural and cultural biodiversity is protected and that Príncipe has a sustainable economy."

FPT works with local, national and international partners to meet the island's UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve goals. It's involved in many projects, one of which is botanical sampling. Surveys are conducted on Príncipe's species in order to fill knowledge gaps, aid in the management of Príncipe Natural Park and evaluate the conservation status of species, notably the Ôbo giant land snail and Príncipe thrush. These surveys have resulted in the discovery of seven new species or potential new registrations.

From Roça Sundy, I explored the island with Diana and Miguel. First we visited the old plantation estate of Roça Paciência, where I learnt about organic farming. There were gardens filled with aromatic herbs, medicinal plants, fruit and vegetables that feed the lodges and are used to make jams, tropical muesli, toiletries and beauty products. Flour was being produced from dried breadfruit, and cosmetics from essential oils distilled from local flowers.

"Beeswax is another important product," said Diana. "FPT has created a programme for training local beekeepers. The honey can be

sold to hotels and tourists; the beeswax is used for cosmetics."

I learnt that the Bumbu d'lê bee project promotes both beekeeping and agroforestry as an income alternative that also encourages better forest management. The FPT-initiated Beekeepers Cooperative has been responsible for the formation of four new swarms of bees and the installation of bait boxes for attracting even more swarms.

Next morning, Diana suggested a spot of hiking. The creation of biosphere trails is another FPT venture, undertaken in collaboration with the Príncipe Biosphere Reserve and the Natural Park. This trail network, which is added to each year, creates opportunities for sustainable tourism and provides work for local guides.

We drove to the island's tiny capital, Santo António, where we collected a local guide, Brankinho. The road petered out at a parking lot and we proceeded on foot along a muddy path, making for O Que Pipi Waterfall in Ôbo Natural Park. The forest was thick with jackfruit, cacao and mighty oka trees, their hoary trunks fluted like flying buttresses.

Parrots squawked overhead; the baritone honking of mona monkeys echoed through the trees. Brankinho pointed out two snakes: one of them a blind species, the other a thin green beauty called a sua-sua. "Neither of them are poisonous," he said. "We also have two →

### **So far, 37 endemic plant and eight bird species have been discovered on Príncipe**





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1 The reception area at Praia Sundry. 2 More than 1300 turtle nests have been identified on Praia Grande beach. 3 Going to great lengths at Praia Sundry. 4 Admiring an oka tree in Obo Natural Park. 5 Cooling off at Que Pipi Waterfall. 6 Nearly everyone in the tight-knit community is invested in some way in the success of the tourism enterprises. 7 The restaurant at Sundry Praia, ribbed like the inside of a vegetable whale. 8 Time out on the beach Praia Sundry. 9 At the Waste Valorisation Cooperative, ten families derive their income from recycling glass into jewellery. **Previous spread** Pristine beach at Sundry Praia

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species of legless skink and a tree frog."

The forest pressed in around us. "So far, 37 endemic plant and eight bird species have been discovered on Príncipe," said Diana. "All life on Príncipe - other than the monkeys, civets and shrews imported by humans - arrived as wind-blown pollen, passengers on floating foliage or flying creatures blown off course."

Eventually, we reached the waterfall, tipping over a volcanic lip to a dark pool into which we dunked our weary limbs.

**N**ext, I moved my accommodation to Sundry Praia. This spectacular lodge comprises high-end bungalow tents set on a perfect beach and is a short walk down the hill from Rocha Sundry. Its centrepiece is a remarkable thatched restaurant whose interior is ribbed like the inside of a vegetable whale.

From here we visited the island's Waste Valorisation Cooperative, started by a group of women from Porto Real. FTP has invested in training and the acquisition of equipment and materials. The Cooperative has ten families whose income derives from the production of compost, valuing 80 per cent of the island's waste, and transforming glass into jewellery.

We also made daily boat trips along the coast. On one occasion we headed east, past Bom Bom, a resort tucked into the forested shoreline and also owned by Shuttleworth. Our ski-boat stopped at the idyllic beaches of Boi, Burras, Macaco and Banana (made famous in a Bacardi rum advert) where we swam in warm, turquoise water.

Sailing south, we anchored off the feral shores and secluded bays of Príncipe Biosphere Reserve for hours of snorkelling in pristine coves, the Jurassic landscape of the Bay of Spires providing a surreal backdrop.

On my last evening, we made our way to Praia Grande beach. As part of FTP's marine-conservation project, more than 1300 turtle nests have been identified and local guides trained to lead tours. Brazilian researcher Vanessa Schmitt showed us the turtle museum and turtle nesting sites. She explained how her team were involved in collecting data, monitoring and protecting the green, hawksbill and loggerhead turtles that nest here.

I crouched beside Vanessa as she dug in the sand for eggs. Weak, straggler turtles were helped to the surface, their blinking eyes taking in the long scramble that awaited them to the water's edge. I watched as a green turtle struggled from an egg, into Vanessa's hand, through her fingers and onto the sand. We herded it protectively down the

beach, keeping predatory crabs and yellow-billed kites at bay. Then we sat on the sand as the sun slipped behind the palms and into the darkening drink.

"You know, on Príncipe, between eight to ten people depend on each wage earner," said Diana. "So, with a population of less than 6000, our projects support nearly every single person on the island. This means everyone here has some level of investment in the preservation of the natural environment. It's a most unusual situation."

A tropicbird with long, feather-hoax tail swooped by. A Príncipe kingfisher called from a branch. I looked back at the forest, painted in every shade of green. It was all fecundity, beauty, wholeness. I felt its preciousness and vulnerability as though it were an ache.

Another baby turtle shrugged its way to the surface in front of us and made off down the beach. This garden of Eden off the coast of West Africa had opened my eyes to a compelling, and most particular, form of total conservation in which the community element was the key. May it grow, mature and become unassailable in its rightness.

#### SAFARI PLANNER



##### WHEN TO GO

The tropical climate is warm year round. There's usually some rain mixed with sunshine. The rainy months are October, November, March and April.

##### NEED TO KNOW

We recommend you take Euros to exchange for Dobras, the local currency. Malaria protection is recommended. Yellow-fever documentation is required if you're travelling via another African country.

##### HOW TO GET THERE

International flights come into São Tomé, from where you can fly to Príncipe (daily return flights).

##### WHERE TO STAY

On São Tomé, the author stayed at Omak Lodge, DBAB from £170 pp sharing. On Príncipe, he stayed at Rocha Sundry (DBAB from £175 pp sharing) and at Praia Sundry (DBAB from £180 pp sharing). Any island stay can be tailor-made, but we suggest the 7-night, DBAB package, which costs £2,700 pp sharing, including accommodation at all three lodges, domestic flights between São Tomé and Príncipe, airport transfers and island tours.

##### RESEARCH & BOOKING

[www.fourcornerspublicrelations.com](http://www.fourcornerspublicrelations.com) or [www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk](http://www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)



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