

THE TINY WEST AFRICAN ISLAND NATION OF  
SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE ENSNARES THE  
VISITOR, BOTH WITH ITS UNSPOILED NATURAL  
BEAUTY AND WITH THE HEAVY MEMORIES OF  
ITS COLONIAL PAST. **SOPHY ROBERTS** GOES  
WANDERING THROUGH ITS JUNGLES,  
RUBBING SHOULDERS WITH THE GHOSTS.  
**PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBBIE LAWRENCE**



*Flowers blossoming in a yard on the island of Príncipe, one of the most biodiverse places on the planet. Opposite: The popular Banana Beach, on Príncipe.*

pellbound





◀ From left: The National Museum of São Tomé and Príncipe; the terrace at Roça Sundry, a hotel in two former plantation houses on Príncipe; the pool at Sundry Praia, a resort on Príncipe.

▼ A prep cook at Roça São João, a restaurant in a restored colonial plantation house on São Tomé.



As THE PLANE tips its wing toward the airstrip, I can see several volcanic towers rising out of the forest, like giant standing stones. The largest, the Pico de Príncipe, dates from when the island of Príncipe was formed, some 31 million years ago. Farther off are flat-topped mountains. The turquoise, jade, and storm-blue water is dotted with a few lonely pirogues, the banana-shaped dugout canoes used by traditional fishermen. Around rocky headlands, the water is white with spume from the surge and swell of the Atlantic. The scene is heart-stoppingly cinematic, like something out of *King Kong*.

I like airports where the locals hop into the backs of friends' pickups for their ride home. There is no taxi stand to make use of, just informal solutions to the island's lack of public transport. The terminal is nothing more than a little building in the bush—how I imagine the Caribbean to have been before the jets showed up. The drive to my hotel is a bumpy ride along a red-earth road. On all sides, the forest canopy reaches up toward the Atlantic light. Orchids tumble out of crevices in the tree trunks.

Príncipe, the little sister in the two-island West African nation of São Tomé and Príncipe, is a lost world. The country, the second smallest in Africa in both area and population, lies in the Gulf of Guinea, roughly 150 miles off the northwestern coast of Gabon. The islands are separated by 90 miles of water. Most flights in come from Accra, the well-connected, oil-rich capital of Ghana. Then, from the town of São Tomé, the nation's capital, you pick up a second, 35-minute flight

to Príncipe. (Traveling by water is not advised; during my visit, one of the local ferries sinks.)

I wouldn't dally on São Tomé: the beaches I saw don't have anything on Príncipe's, and while the old Portuguese colonial buildings are beautiful—and the churches a spectacle of song and prayer during Sunday Mass—they are mostly too dilapidated to be worth lingering for. Príncipe is the prize—a sweat to get to, but a place that's hard to leave.

Gibson, a Príncipean waiter I meet, has no desire ever to step off his island, even to go to São Tomé. Leandro, a basket weaver, happily rolls his tobacco in the pages of a dictionary. The pace of life is so slow it can feel as if this is the still center of our rapidly turning world. In a way, it is. Príncipe is located just a few hundred miles east of the intersection of the equator and the prime meridian—the zero lines of latitude and longitude. The island is also emerging as an interesting new frontier in eco-tourism: off the edge of the African continent, with that alluring mix of risk (the challenge of getting there included), unspoiled nature (so abundant, you cannot access half the island because there simply aren't any paths), and some good new hotels that offer real comfort among the wildness.

It is still so undeveloped, in fact, that even the locals can get lost. In the back of the island's fish market, I meet the mother of a boy, nicknamed Tarzan, who disappeared into Príncipe's old-growth forest. He reappeared a year later, having survived on a diet of coconuts and crabs while sleeping on the forest floor. In Príncipe's main settlement

▼ Fishermen pulling in their nets at Mikolo Beach at Sundry Praia.



► From left: A terrace at Sundry Praia; breaking open a cacao pod; forest fruits and garden produce at a market on Príncipe.



of Santo António, there are hardly any shops and just one supermarket, a place called Lusocash, which one local I meet calls Lose Your Cash; by the time any provisions get all the way out here, they are prohibitively expensive. Twice a year, a cruise ship might drop into São Tomé, but never Príncipe. The crime rate is so low, there are only 12 policemen, and no prison—only a single holding cell.

“Almost everybody knows each other,” says Estrela Matilde, executive director of the Príncipe-based environmental nonprofit Fundação Príncipe. “They more or less police themselves.”

Most of the community, which numbers fewer than 9,000 people, are either subsistence farmers or fishermen who will happily fling open their homes to welcome you in for a plate of banana fried in coconut oil or a shot of palm wine. Their stilted huts occupy groves of pineapples, soursops, and pepper plants. The smell of ylang-ylang, an essential oil that comes from the cananga tree, is soporific. Most people walk or bike.

Had Charles Darwin stopped here, Príncipe would have told him all he needed to know to develop his theory of evolution. According to the global conservation nonprofit Fauna & Flora International, the island, a UNESCO-protected biosphere reserve, is home to some of the most biodiverse forests in all of Africa, with more endemic species per square mile than the Galápagos—or anywhere else. Last year, Matilde tells me, the organization helped to discover a new species of owl.

If Darwin had visited, however, he would also have witnessed human beings’ astonishing capacity for cruelty.

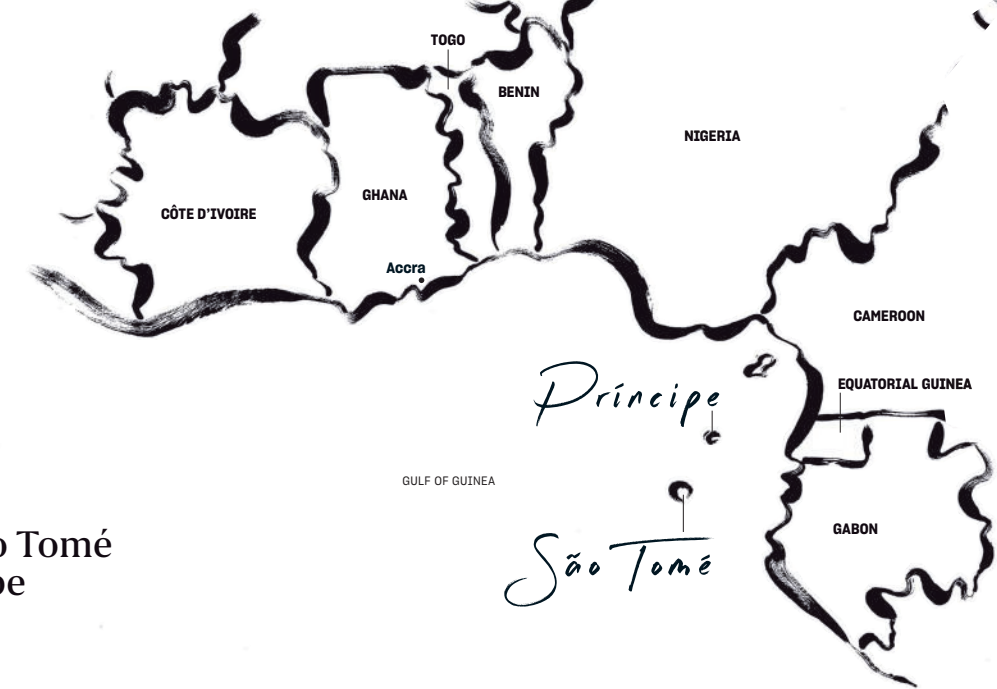
Though Príncipe is ravishingly beautiful, the island has a dark history. With no indigenous population, it became the place where Portuguese colonizers in the early 16th century brought enslaved Africans to work the rich volcanic soil for sugarcane and, later, cacao. To entice farmers in Portugal to run plantations and populate the island, the crown offered slave women to anyone who would live here. Príncipe also became the place where slave ships would stop to pick up food and water en route from West Africa to the New World.

Slavery was officially outlawed in 1875, but nearby Cape Verde and Angola soon provided São Tomé and Príncipe with a new source of labor under exploitative contracts, helping the islands become the largest producer of cacao in the world. Still more Cape Verdeans migrated to find work on Príncipe’s farms in the 1940s and 50s, when their own country was experiencing famine. After independence, in 1975, São Tomé and Príncipe’s fragile economy fell apart, and the *roças*, or plantations, were abandoned, leaving behind laborers who today still occupy the old *senzalas*, or worker houses, on the estates. These crumbling ruins, a palimpsest of Príncipe’s colonial history, give the island a haunted feeling.

I’VE COME TO SEE Príncipe’s tortured past and optimistic future for myself, drawn by a number of conversations I’d had in the course of my reporting on travel and conservation in Africa. I’d heard that the President of the Regional Government of Príncipe, António José Cassandra—Toza for short—has rejected offers from the big palm-oil companies to plant the cash crop that is destroying so many other equatorial rain forests, from Benin to Borneo. To cut



◀ The footbridge at Príncipe's Bom Bom resort, which connects the beach bungalows to a restaurant on a tiny island.



## Visiting São Tomé and Príncipe

### GETTING THERE

There's no getting around it; flying from the U.S. to this two-island nation takes a while. It requires a day's travel and at least two stops—the second of which will likely be Accra, Ghana—to reach the capital city of São Tomé. Spend a day there before the half-hour flight to Príncipe.

### HOTELS

Mark Shuttleworth's development company, HBD Príncipe, owns four hotels on the islands. Bed down on São Tomé at **Omali** ([omalilodge.com](http://omalilodge.com); doubles from \$280) before continuing to Príncipe. Once there, choose from among **Bom Bom** ([bombomprincipe.com](http://bombomprincipe.com); bungalows from \$460), a collection of 25 dwellings linked by a wooden walkway to the tiny, forested Bom Bom Island; **Roça Sundry** ([hotelrocasundy.com](http://hotelrocasundy.com); doubles from \$245), in two historic plantation houses in the jungle interior; and the new **Sundy Praia** ([sundyprincipe.com](http://sundyprincipe.com); villas from \$785), São Tomé and Príncipe's most luxurious property yet.

### TOUR OPERATOR

Alice Daunt at **Daunt Travel** ([daunt-travel.com](http://daunt-travel.com)) can organize a bespoke itinerary to São Tomé and Príncipe. She recommends combining a five-night stay with a wider West African itinerary, including either Ghana or Senegal. \$5,250 per person for two people on an eight-night trip. —S.R.

down one of the big trees, you need his permission. Toza also won't allow construction of any hotel in excess of 50 rooms. Next year, he intends to ban plastic bags. Príncipe, remarkably, is also the only country on the West African coast with coral monitoring.

I'd also heard talk of a mysterious South African philanthropist, Mark Shuttleworth, who has spent more than \$100 million to create high-end sustainable tourism in the country. Locals refer to Shuttleworth, who in 2002 became the second-ever space tourist, as the Man of the Moon. He is Príncipe's biggest private employer, paying salaries that start at more than double the minimum wage. He is not without his critics. A local complains to me that Shuttleworth's hotels have led to property inflation, and increased migration resulting from (Continued on page 100)

HAD CHARLES DARWIN STOPPED HERE,  
PRÍNCIPE WOULD HAVE TOLD  
HIM ALL HE NEEDED TO KNOW TO  
DEVELOP HIS THEORY OF EVOLUTION.

▶ Nossa Senhora da Conceição, a church in Santo António, on Príncipe.





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(São Tomé and Príncipe, continued from page 85)

the work opportunities he has created has put pressure on the island's infrastructure. But he is more responsible than anyone for Príncipe's emergence as a travel destination.

In 2011, Shuttleworth bought Bom Bom, his first hotel in Príncipe, a modest resort on an immodestly beautiful beach. The following year, he acquired a small hotel on São Tomé, Omali, which most visitors use to break up the journey. In June 2017, he opened Roça Sundy, a pair of restored plantation houses in Príncipe's interior, where cacao, coffee, pineapples, and bananas are still farmed. Last December, he unveiled his Príncipe flagship: the beachside Sundy Praia, comprising 15 luxury tents hidden in trees along the shoreline, a lively bar, a run of tasteful wooden sun loungers along a two-mile beach, and a forest-fringed pool. Given the complexities of remote hospitality in the Gulf of Guinea, this was no easy feat. "São Tomé is at the end of a logistics chain," explains Chris Taxis, the CEO of Shuttleworth's development company, HBD Príncipe. "In Príncipe, we have to make it up."

A hotel with an old soul and a contemporary polish, Sundy Praia is the perfect place to wash up bone-tired and in need of a refuge, as I am. I could stay for days, swimming in a balmy sea as flat as a mirror, under a silver moon; eating farm-picked salads under the vaulted ceiling of the enormous dining room; reading in a bird's-nest chair suspended from

a tree branch, the forest rustling with parrots. While other beach resorts need umbrellas for shade, Sundy Praia has wide-spreading fig trees. Land crabs scuttle determinedly up and down the sand, leaving trails. There are rich seabird colonies—sooty terns, brown noddies—and healthy whale populations (humpbacks pass through from July to September). Three species of turtles nest on the island's empty beaches. Turtles need to be guided by moonlight, not bar lights, if their breeding is to succeed; they thrive here because no electric illumination muddles their returns to lay eggs.

One evening I meet Toza, the regional president, for a cocktail at Sundy Praia's bar. He is aware that, despite his native island's beauty, its indirect flights and far-flung location are a hurdle to development. "When you can go to the Caribbean or Bora-Bora, why come to Príncipe?" he says. "We need to stay special, to remain pristine, for people to want to make the effort."

To see what Toza means, I take a boat out to explore the fringes of Obô Natural Park, heading for the Baía das Agulhas, or Bay of Spires. It's called that because the coves are punctured by more of those raw volcanic spikes and arches poking out of the sea. I walk on beaches not even St. Bart's can outperform. One, a comma of white sand called Banana Beach, is seared in my memory from a Bacardi ad that ran on British TV in the 90s. I find its paradise vibe a bit unsettling, not only because I'm encountering such a familiar sight in such an unfamiliar place but also because of its history: from the cliff above Banana Beach, plantation owners used to push slaves to their deaths, or so the story goes.

I walk into a stone building hidden in the forest—a former storehouse, perhaps, or a church. The tree canopy is sliced by shafts of golden light. Raindrops sit caught in

the giant waxed leaves like pewter-colored balls. The building is so entangled with vines that it's almost as if it is trying to disappear. The roof has fallen in. Roots drip over the broken walls. Palms burst like giant shuttlecocks from the loamy floor. Through a narrow arch, I catch a glimpse of a woman in white: she is making her way along the shore, the edge of her world marked with a thread of surf. I feel like I have seen a ghost.

PERHAPS I HAVE.

The haunted feeling comes and goes over the next few days, not only because of the evocative power of the forest, but also because of the country's history, which is symbolized by the old plantation houses. In one, I find the six-room Colonial House, part of the 15-room Roça Sundy. A tasteful conversion with Portuguese tiled floors and lazy fans whirring overhead, the building is a significant historic landmark. It was here, on May 29, 1919, that the English physicist Arthur Eddington proved Albert Einstein's theory of relativity by photographing a total eclipse of the sun. Flanking the hotel are the *senzalas*. A community still lives here: old men talk beneath the trees, children play in the alleys, multiple generations of women cook in small, charcoal-stained kitchens, their fish and vegetables piled in baskets at their feet.

The Príncipe regional government and UN-Habitat, the United Nations' agency for socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements, want these 136 families to voluntarily resettle in a newly built village, which would provide clean water, electricity, a functioning sewage system, a school, a health center, and a market. They call it Promised Land. But not everyone wants to leave. The *senzalas*, however decrepit, are the homes they know. Wandering among

these people, talking to them, is both moving and discomfiting. The paradise myth—so perfectly rendered on the rest of the island—is blown apart by the shoeless children, the purposeless men who aren't lucky enough to have a tourism job.

But does this make me like Príncipe any less? At first, it feels somehow wrong to come here on holiday, especially at a moment when we're grappling with the legacy of slavery more than ever. I can't quite work out if I should be encouraging people to visit this island, which tourism is already giving a better future, or withdrawing quietly, as if I haven't seen the ghosts. Then I meet a Cape Verdean schoolteacher and guide named Emmanuel Bettencourt, who has lived in Príncipe, Boston, and Moscow. "The smell of slavery has nothing to do with how the people feel," he tells me. "It is how you interpret the symbolism. Slavery is not in the psyche of the people. It is in the psyche of you, the visitor."

Instead of closing the door on Príncipe's history, Shuttleworth, the government, and other investors are saying to visitors: *Here, this is how it is—we are trying to do something to change it by bringing you here and energizing this economy, even if there are some formidable peaks to climb.* Day by day, I become more convinced. Like the Príncipean waiter, Gibson, I don't want to leave. When I finally do depart, I find myself admiring this authentic attempt to preserve a little piece of paradise without trying to pretend that paradise can be without flaw. ♣

Content in this issue was produced with assistance from Bom Bom, The Broadmoor, Gasthaus Adler, Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo, Hotel Traube Tonbach, Omali, Roça Sundy, and Sundy Praia.



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