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Malta.

More than we could ever tell.



Malta
Gozo & Comino

If you are yet to discover the English-speaking Maltese Islands, it's time to book a trip and visit the small archipelago situated in the heart of the sparkling Mediterranean Sea.

Just a short three-hour flight away, the Maltese Islands are perfect for a family holiday or city break.

The colours of Malta, Gozo and Comino are breath-taking: honey-hued architecture compliments the deepest of Mediterranean blues. Stroll through the narrow meandering streets of the towns and villages while basking in over 300 days of sunshine a year.

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The big trip

Journeys too good to leave on your bucket list

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SAO TOME
AND PRINCIPE
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Fishy business:
tapas-style at
Rosita's in Santo
António. Opposite,
the paradisaical Boi
Beach, Príncipe



São Tomé and Príncipe



Dig in!

Soft-sand beaches, zingy African flavours — and yet the delicious little islands of São Tomé and Príncipe are still almost empty. Fill your boots, says **Stanley Stewart**

Photography: **Jon Attenborough**



S ometime past midnight, with little but starlight to guide us, we crept along the sands of Praia Grande in search of a miracle.

'We have several every night,' our guide was saying. 'Many have come thousands of kilometres to get to this beach, some from the other side of the Atlantic.'

Somewhere behind the line of waves we found a green turtle. She had created a nest by digging a hollow in the sand and laid a cache of eggs like a collection of white marbles. Now she was trying to hide them, her back flippers slowly flicking sand. She seemed exhausted, and must have felt clumsy and heavy on this beach. She worked in fits and starts, pausing after each exertion to catch her breath, until the eggs began to disappear. The guide located a tracking tag and checked the details. She was over 100 years old, born when men were still dying in the trenches of the First World War.

The long peregrinations, the return to their place of birth, the danger, the courage... The whole sea-turtle story was what had brought me here. It appealed to my romantic instincts. For millions of years, they were the

Oh sandy baby: above, clockwise from top left, deserted Praia Grande, São Tomé; Santo António, Príncipe; service with a smile at Roça Sundry; sea turtle on Praia Grande; at work on São Tomé. Opposite, poolside cabana at Sundry Praia; chocolate fondant at Roça Sundry; the welcome committee

chief visitors to São Tomé and Príncipe, two small islands roughly 150km apart, lying in the Gulf of Guinea, 320km off the coast of West Africa.

The lush, verdant islands were a terrestrial paradise – an Eden without Adam and Eve to bugger things up. No one lived here until colonisation began in 1470, when the islands became an outpost of that creakiest of enterprises, the Portuguese empire – powered by the sweat of slaves imported from the African mainland.

They may be two small outcrops in the mid-Atlantic that few people have heard of – yet, sure enough, with their gorgeous natural assets, São Tomé and Príncipe have begun attracting barefoot-in-the-sand paradise-seekers in recent times, the kind of escapees who've fallen for Thailand and Goa in the past, but now fancy a couple of weeks of tropical R&R untainted by burger bars, nightclubs and suave-mixologist-dominated hangouts. And all without stinting on stylish, comfy, world-class places to rest their heads.

São Tomé and Príncipe have beaches that would impress a Brazilian; dance steps (the *kizomba*, the *tarrachinha*) that would make a Cuban blush; vegetation more riotous than the Amazon's; the world's best chocolate; and a fascinating bird – sadly only seen by a

handful of people and known by locals as a goo-goo, which apparently eats eggs and poos gold. Oh, and did I mention the sprinkling of elegant boutique-y hideaways?

In São Tomé they say '*Léve-léve*' – literally 'Softly-softly', in the sense of 'Take it easy'. It makes sense. Disembarking in São Tomé after my six-hour flight from Portugal, I was soon immersed in a leisurely swirl of life: mothers carried 50kg of bananas on their heads and babies on their backs, 'commuters' pushed bicycles uphill with fish hanging from the crossbar. Dogs slept in the middle of the road. Goats jaywalked. Pigs snuffled along the verges. But this stopover was merely a taster – it was Príncipe that delivered me to heaven. All it took was a half-hour onward flight by propeller plane. In Príncipe they say '*Móli-móli*' – advice for people who find '*Léve-léve*' just that little bit too rushed. Unsurprisingly, I was soon drowsing in a haven of hammocks and tropical plants, empty beaches and islanders living in rural tranquillity.

I checked in at Roça Sundry, an old plantation house reworked as a boutique hotel of high-ceilinged rooms, four-poster beds and polished floorboards, where I slipped effortlessly into a less brutal version of the colonial lifestyle. By the first evening I had established

something of a routine: sipping rum Daiquiris on the terrace and dining alone in candlelit splendour, as if I were a hill-station planter.

Roças, as these plantation houses are known, fell into disrepair after 1975, when the Portuguese realised their empire was well past its sell-by date, and packed up and left, taking everything moveable, including all the country's currency. Today, across the northern half of the island, the properties stand largely as overgrown monuments, riddled with dry rot and ghosts. But there are impressive restorations, such as Roça Sundry, a ruin saved and made beautiful by a wealthy South African, Mark Shuttleworth, who spent a week aboard the International Space Station in 2002. On Príncipe they call him the Man on the Moon.

For me, Sundry's seductions went far beyond the Daiquiris. Parts of the roça are still inhabited by Príncipean families, and the *terreiro* – the long central grassy courtyard around which the old plantation buildings were set – was as lively as an Italian piazza in the hour of the *passaggiata*. For a couple of days I was content to do nothing more than watch children chase footballs, twirl skipping ropes and scatter chickens. Toddlers clambered over a defunct steam engine. ▶

FOODIE TIP-OFF

Roça Sundry can arrange lunch at one of the houses in the workers' quarters. Probably the best meal you will have on Príncipe, plus a whole family of new friends, for a tenner

the vast mango trees, while men idled on benches, women bathed children, carried firewood, fetched water, cooked lunch, weeded gardens, planted corn and generally kept the world turning.

Before long I fell in with Manu, a warm and energetic sexagenarian, who farmed pineapples on the slopes beneath his house. His wife brought us coffee and a plate of finger bananas. He grew expansive about the old days under the Portuguese, veering between praise for the economic activity, the enterprise of the *roças* as well as the oppression of the colonial system. He was soon on his feet, telling stories full of theatrical flourish. He was entertaining, certainly, but the tales he told contained genuine trauma. He was exorcising ghosts.

Reducing the stories to anecdotes was his way of coping with a painful past.

His wife returned with a plate of pineapple slices. 'We must live for today,' he exclaimed, throwing his hands up. 'We have the sun, the sea, this beautiful island.' He leant forward conspiratorially: 'And I have the best pineapples on Príncipe.' He was right, although I suspect his wife was responsible for them.

As *móli-móli* as I could, on Sunday morning I set off to explore, following red-earth roads through exuberant jungle. I went to church in the toy-town capital, Santo António, and found myself in a swaying chorus line of God's backing singers as dogs wandered in to have a snooze beneath the high altar. At Praia Abade it was the

villagers who were snoozing in hammocks, while the children, glossy as seals, somersaulted into the waves. One man woke to say hello. Luis was an émigré from São Tomé. He stretched his arms to encompass the long beach with the fishing boats drawn up, the leaning palm trees and the wide, blue bay. 'You know why I stay?' he asked. 'Because time stands still here.'

To say tourism is in its infancy is an understatement. In a week I saw only 20 other visitors. I picnicked on empty beaches. I took mini voyages to remote peninsulas just to laze and listen to birdsong. I was usually delivered to shore by Luis, who turned out to be just one of a bunch of beautiful characters happy to be earning a living helping visitors. There was João the driver, Miguel, the

Green and pleasant:
coming ashore at
Príncipe's Boi Beach

maitre d', Alexander, the ubiquitous barman, plyer of endless Daiquiris. And then there was lovely Leandro...

I found Leandro one afternoon having ventured out to Roça Paciência, a plantation abandoned decades ago. In one of its empty storerooms he was weaving basket lampshades for the resorts, his bony hands looping the reed in and out of the struts. From time to time, he took a break to smoke his way through the dictionary.

'Do you know we are at the centre of the world?' he asked, tearing another page from his old book to roll a cigarette. Through the doorway I could see glamorous birds with long, silky tails swooping across the old plantation lawns. The sound of the Atlantic pounding on the pristine beach drifted our way through the trees. ▶

To me, Príncipe island felt like a lost world halfway between Tolkien's Middle Earth and Gauguin's South Sea paradise

'People say we are far away, that this is a remote place,' he told me as we talked. 'But this island is the closest land to where the equator meets zero degrees longitude. This is the centre. It is everyone else who is far away.'

The old plantations occupy the northern half of Príncipe. The southern half (the whole island is barely 30km long) is virgin forest. To islanders it is as remote as Outer Mongolia. To me, it felt like a lost world halfway between Tolkien's Middle Earth and Gauguin's South Sea paradise. Volcanic towers – spectacular basalt phonolites – thrust their way through the jungle canopy, rising hundreds of metres above the treetops. Flat-topped mesas and mountains dominate the skyline.

I took a boat to this outback, flying fish darting beneath the bows, and went ashore to trek along jungle trails, keeping an eye out for the elusive goo-goo. The astonishing birdlife (there are 28 species on Príncipe) was as tame as in the Galápagos, lending a strange, dream-like quality. A kingfisher perched a mere metre

away, cocking its head to get a good look at me. Finches gathered about me, settling on nearby branches. A golden weaver alighted near my elbow, a piece of grass in its beak, ready to slot into its nest.

I donned a mask and snorkel and the dream continued. With warm currents and excellent visibility, Príncipe's seas are as pristine and as little explored as the land. An expedition here in 2006 discovered 60 new fish, including 10 from completely unknown species. I gazed down at nurse sharks 2.5 metres long, hovering over beds of sea grass in aqueous light. I watched silvery barracuda, stationary with the merest flick of their tails. Beyond a reef of pale rock, I spotted a spectacular Atlantic sailfish, its huge dorsal fin hoisted to the currents. With a turn of my head, I saw colourful parrotfish grazing on algae, bloated pufferfish comically struggling to keep themselves upright in the wash above the reefs, and shoals of yellowtail sardinella, wheeling this way and that like well-drilled regiments.

And finally, in Mosteiros Bay, I found the sea turtles, swimming earnestly towards their birthplaces, their little startled faces gazing up at me through shafts of refracted light. On these islands, turtles are creatures of legend and myth. They are seen as heroic, symbols of loyalty and determination. On Príncipe people speak of someone with courage as having the heart of a turtle.

On that beach at Praia Grande, just after midnight, the heroism was evident. Having covered her eggs, my green turtle began the trek back to the ocean. It wasn't that far unless you were an exhausted 110kg turtle trying to walk on flippers after a 1,500km swim having just produced 100 eggs. It took her half an hour, levering herself forward a pace at a time, pausing to recoup her strength.

I spent a couple of hours at Praia Grande with a guide from Marapa, a marine-conservation charity protecting the nesting sites. Half a dozen turtles were laying their eggs that night, after making the epic trip up the beach. The largest was a leatherback probably two metres across. Its offspring, hatching weeks later, would need that turtle heart. Not many would even make it to the ocean; fewer than 1% would live to maturity. But those that did would eventually return to this same beach on São Tomé and Príncipe: paradise found – for all discerning travellers. ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jesson

Go independent

TAP Air Portugal flies to São Tomé, via Lisbon, from £742 return. Daily charters between São Tomé and Príncipe cost about £168 return (stpairways.st).

Where to stay

São Tomé: At the simple, charming **Omali** hotel (omalilodge.com) prices start at £222 a night, B&B. To get a flavour of the old colonial lifestyle, try the **Roça São João dos Angolares**, a delightful plantation house further down the coast, which has been transformed into a lovely, rustic-style boutique hotel with restaurant. Make a reservation through booking.com (doubles from £60, B&B).

Príncipe: The old plantation house **Roça Sundry** (hotelrocasundry.com; doubles from £186 a night, half board) offers contemporary elegance and style, and has a restaurant that serves dishes made from its own homegrown organic gardens. It organises a selection of 4WD and boat tours of the island,

exploring the plantations, National Park, beaches and, of course, monitoring the laying and hatching of the sea turtles (September to April). Villas at **Bom Bom** (bombomprincipe.com) start at £367 a night, half board, while luxury tented villas at the five-star **Sundry Praia** resort (sundryprincipe.com) start at £580 a night, half board.

Go packaged

Steppes Travel (steppestravel.com) has a 12-day itinerary to São Tomé and Príncipe from £4,495pp, half board, including international and internal flights, staying in some of the best accommodation (featured) on the islands (Omali, Sundry Praia and Roça Sundry). Or try **Rainbow Tours** (rainbowtours.co.uk).

Further information

Visitors from the UK can currently stay for up to 15 days without a visa. For longer breaks apply for a visa online. For more information on the islands, see the São Tomé and Príncipe tourism website at turismo.gov.st/en.

EASY EXPLORING

Boat trips aren't only the best way to reach the southern jungle, they'll take you to some gorgeous, less accessible beaches, too (£45pp). Head for Campanha, Macaco or Boi, as well as idyllic Banana Beach. You'll be alone with the palm trees

The sea turtles swam earnestly towards their birthplaces, their little startled faces gazing at me through shafts of refracted light



Rolling on: opposite, child at play; Praia Grande at sunset; burger Roça Sundry-style; Luis with his boat by Boi Beach; pool at

the five-star Sundry Praia resort; the landmark needle-shaped Picoão Grande. This page, me time on Boi Beach