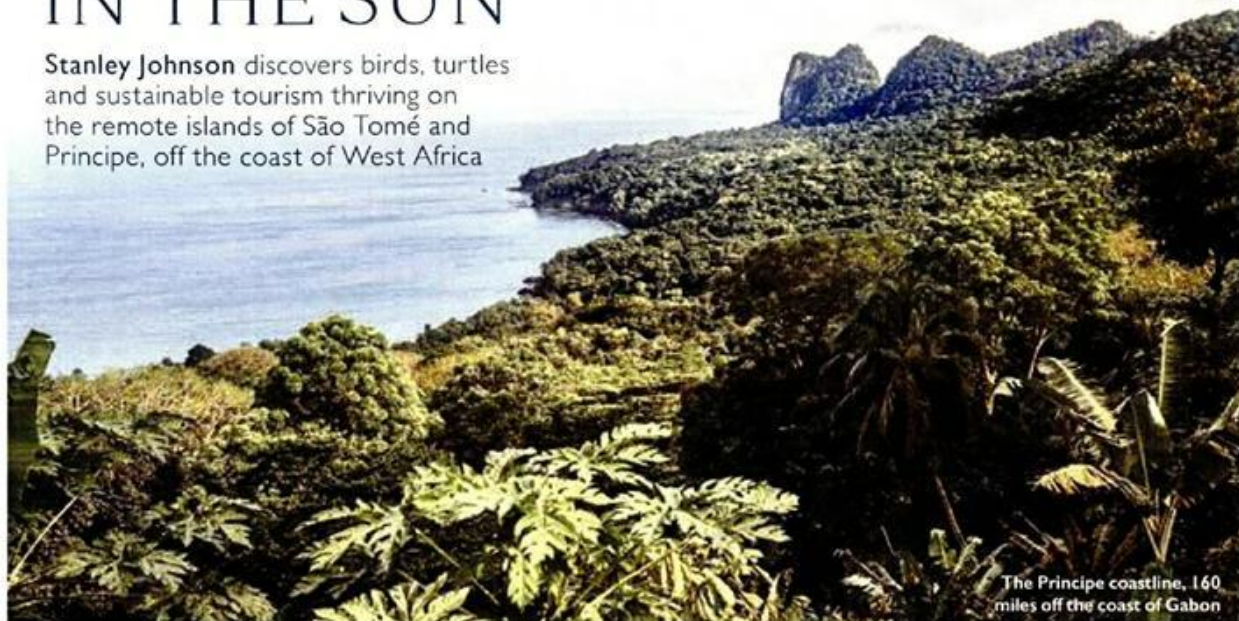


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Travel

ISLANDS IN THE SUN

Stanley Johnson discovers birds, turtles and sustainable tourism thriving on the remote islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, off the coast of West Africa



The Príncipe coastline, 160 miles off the coast of Gabon

I must admit, I thought long and hard before booking the trip to São Tomé and Príncipe – a republic of two small, remote islands that lies off the coast of West Africa and was once part of the Portuguese Empire.

The calls from Extinction Rebellion and others to change our lifestyles, and our patterns of production and consumption, have been growing ever more resonant. Increasingly, people like me, who've spent our lives jetting off to far-flung corners, are going to have to question the necessities of our journeys. Yes, there are schemes for carbon offsetting and some of them may work. But, realistically, we need to make more of an effort than we usually do to weigh the pros and cons of our next flight to some remote destination.

Something that swung it for me in this instance was the effort being made to create a truly responsible form of tourism on São Tomé and Príncipe. This initiative is led by Mark Shuttleworth, a South African tech entrepreneur (and sometime space tourist), who has ploughed millions into developing

There were times, at dawn and dusk, when the birdsong eclipsed the sound of lapping waves

a handful of small, sustainable eco-residencies that work with the natural environment, rather than destroying it. His developments include the magnificent Praia Sundy, Roça Sundy and the Bom Bom Island Resort on Príncipe, as well as Omali Lodge in São Tomé.

With Shuttleworth's help, the future for São Tomé and Príncipe, constituting Africa's second smallest country, certainly appears brighter than its bleak past. Uninhabited until its discovery by the Portuguese in the 15th century, the islands served as victualling stations supplying slave ships well into the 19th century, while sugar and cocoa plantations sprung up that were themselves reliant on slavery.

The current population of just under 200,000 is mainly descended from those enslaved or indentured workers.

Years of stagnation under a hardline Marxist government followed a peaceful independence in 1975. But today, São Tomé and Príncipe's relative obscurity is one of its main attractions.

The islands seem to be in a state of almost permanent slumber. Abandoned cocoa plantations; whitewashed Portuguese churches; thick, tropical forest and winding, single-track roads combine to create a sense of peace, if not prosperity, uncommonly seen in modern West Africa.

The whole territory has been designated a World Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO. Príncipe's forests alone shelter no fewer than eight endemic bird species, and it shares another three endemic species with São Tomé. Staying at the Praia Sundy Lodge on the island, we were, quite literally, situated between the forest and the ocean, and there were times, at dawn and dusk, when the birdsong almost eclipsed the rhythmic sound of lapping waves.



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Come sunset on one evening we saw the last amber streaks of sunlight slowly fading from the sable-coloured sands as the palm trees swayed like green metronomes beyond. Our guide broke the quiet with a rapid-fire instruction: "Look there!" he exclaimed. "Can you see there's one over there?"

A sea turtle, having just laid its eggs, was retreating back into the ocean, using her flippers to make headway on the sand before hurling herself into the blue. Green turtles and leatherback turtles (plus many more of the solitary hawksbill turtle we saw) all call Príncipe home, with more than 2,000 green turtle nests having been counted by local conservation groups around Praia Grande.

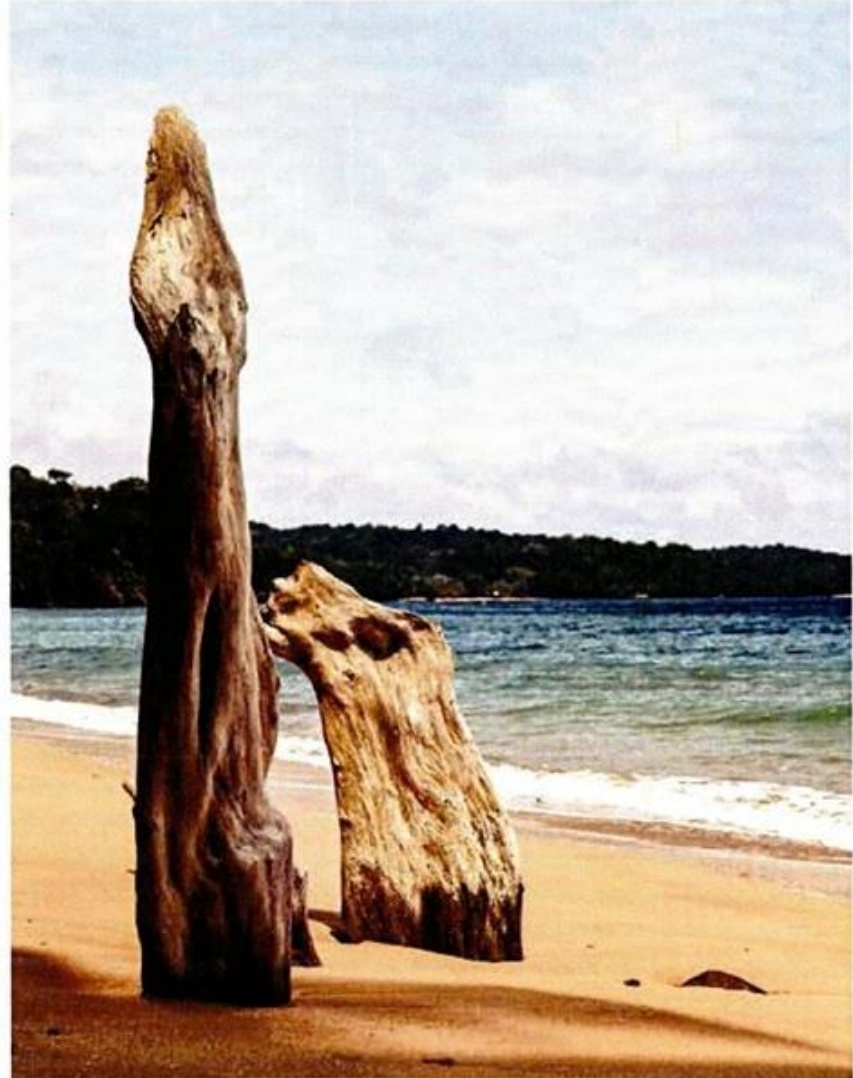
While eggs were being laid on one part of the beach, hatchlings were making tracks elsewhere. I saw hundreds of miniscule babies clumsily claw and hack their way out of their nests, with no small degree of haste and a precision sense of timing and direction. They scuttled towards the cerulean waters, leaving nothing but broken shells and some Lilliputian track marks as a trace that they were ever here at all.

Perhaps their alacrity is because they're entering a particularly harsh Darwinian lottery. "Only one in a thousand will survive," Orfeo tells us. "And if they do, they won't come back to mate or lay eggs for a quarter of a century."

Leaving Príncipe for more rambunctious climes back home poses a complex question. Given the relative poverty of the populations on both islands; given the pressure on the native forests and wildlife; is there still a need for the revenue that 'high-value sustainable tourism' can bring?

Personally, I think so, though I could be wrong. Others will take a different view. There are no easy answers to these kinds of questions. But if there is one thing that Extinction Rebellion and similar movements have taught us, it is that we have to come up with some answers soon. 

Far and Wild offers seven nights at São Tomé and Príncipe, combining three nights at Omali Lodge with four at Sundry Praia from £2,699 per person, including flights. Visit farandwild.travel for more information



Above: Driftwood on the beach at Praia Grande on Príncipe
Right: A beachfront suite at the Praia Sundry hotel with a private pool
Below: Turtle hatchlings on Príncipe head for the ocean

