

ON TRAVEL

São Tomé and Príncipe: The Sweetest Escape

How a self-made billionaire is reviving the Chocolate Islands' past to preserve its future.

by MICHELLE JANA CHAN

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Henrique Seruca

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 and 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 refurbishments, and the other two showstoppers. One, a decaying plantation house, Roça Sundry, has been converted into a guesthouse; the second, Sundry Praia, is a beachfront tented camp. Next year they open an organic chocolate factory, saluting São Tomé and Príncipe’s legacy as one of the world’s largest producers of cacao. Life doesn’t get much sweeter.

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