



deep within

The remote two-island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe is as close

Words by Kerryn Fischer
Photography by Elsa Young Production by Frank Features



the tropics

as any of us will ever get to Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*



‘The night had been exceedingly still, but as I advanced I became conscious of a low, rumbling sound, a continuous murmur, somewhere in front of me. This grew louder as I proceeded, until at last it was clearly quite close to me. When I stood still the sound was constant, so that it seemed to come from some stationary cause. It was like a boiling kettle or the bubbling of some great pot. Soon I came upon the source of it, for in the centre of a small clearing I found a lake – or a pool, rather, for it was not larger than the basin of the Trafalgar Square fountain – of some black, pitch-like stuff, the surface of which rose and fell in great blisters of bursting gas. The air above it was shimmering with heat, and the ground round was so hot that I could hardly bear to lay my hand on it. It was clear that the great volcanic outburst which had raised this strange plateau so many years ago had not yet entirely spent its forces. Blackened rocks and mounds of lava I had already seen everywhere peeping out from amid the luxuriant vegetation which draped them, but this asphalt pool in the jungle was the first sign that we had of actual existing activity on the slopes of the ancient crater. I had no time to examine it further for I had need to hurry if I were to be back in camp in the morning.’

– *The Lost World* by Arthur Conan Doyle

Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (published by Hodder & Stoughton) is a classic adventure novel that is set in a lost, prehistoric world. It is in this book that readers are introduced to Professor Challenger for the first time, lauded by many as one of the most finely drawn characters in science fiction. In the book’s introduction, *Jurassic Park* author Michael Crichton acknowledges, ‘Just as Sherlock Holmes set the standard – and in some sense established the formula – for the detective story... so too has *The Lost World* set the standard and the formula for fantasy-adventure stories.’

Right This is nature at its most fantastical. Far removed from the complexities of modern life, these volcanic islands are improbably dramatic and untouched and boast more endemic species per square metre than anywhere else on earth.



Blessed with one of the most dramatic geological landscapes on earth, flying into Príncipe is a lesson in the profundity of nature. From the air, the islands look like tiny explosions of green adrift in the infinite Atlantic blue, but as you descend, towering domes and volcanic needle peaks come into view, thrusting up and out of the lush carpet of rainforest and cacao plantations that cling precariously to their flanks. This is nature at its most fantastical.

Formed by volcanic activity over 30 million years ago, the rich geology of the islands, together with the heavy equatorial rains over millions of years, has ensured super-fertile soils. Imagine the thrill the first Portuguese navigators must have felt back in the 1500s when they stumbled upon this wild archipelago of immense possibility. They went on to establish successful sugar plantations (with São Tomé being the world's largest producer of sugar at one time), as well as coffee and cocoa plantations, becoming known as the 'chocolate islands' and the world's largest cocoa producers.

However, by the time the island gained independence from Portugal in 1975, the cocoa industry was in decline and the islands had once more turned in on themselves, leaving the forests to metabolise deserted manor houses, warehouses, schools and hospitals. Today, these ruins (all that remain of two centuries of industry) have trees growing in and through them, while bromeliads, air plants and orchids colonise walls, and enormous tree roots cover railway lines. This is what South African tech billionaire Mark Shuttleworth – the first African to travel to space in 2002 and the second space tourist ever – encountered when he first visited Príncipe in 2011 whilst island shopping. What he found not only fell way beyond his wildest dreams but he saw an opportunity to create a sustainable, eco-tourism model. For despite its enviable beauty, the islands are a developing nation with a third of its 200 000 citizens (just over 7 000 on Príncipe) surviving on less than \$2 per day.

A year later at Mark's initiation, and in partnership with the local government, Príncipe was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. This in recognition of the island's biodiversity and the occurrence of many endemic and rare terrestrial and marine species. With most of the island impenetrable, there is still much to be discovered.

Today, Mark's investment (reportedly north of \$100 million) on Príncipe boasts two accommodation offerings – Roça Sundy, a beautiful plantation house that has been restored and transformed into a five-star hotel, and Sundy Praia, a five-star tented camp whose restaurant Oca Sundy is an award-winning marvel of architecture with stellar service and world-class cuisine. Future plans include a sustainable housing development for local villagers and refurbishing another hotel, Bom Bom.

Under the auspices of his private company, Here Be Dragons (HBD), Mark's vision to contribute through sustainable tourism is taking shape. With the Fundação Príncipe Trust, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to conservation and social initiatives, they work to ensure that investment is in accordance with the government's social development priorities and the conservation of the environment and the UNESCO Biosphere Trust. Today HBD is the main employer on the island and supports local enterprises. Here, the creation of everything from toiletries (ylang ylang oil is a must buy!) to jams and tropical muesli is in process. And while Príncipe no longer produces huge quantities of cocoa, its cocoa is organic and Fairtrade approved.

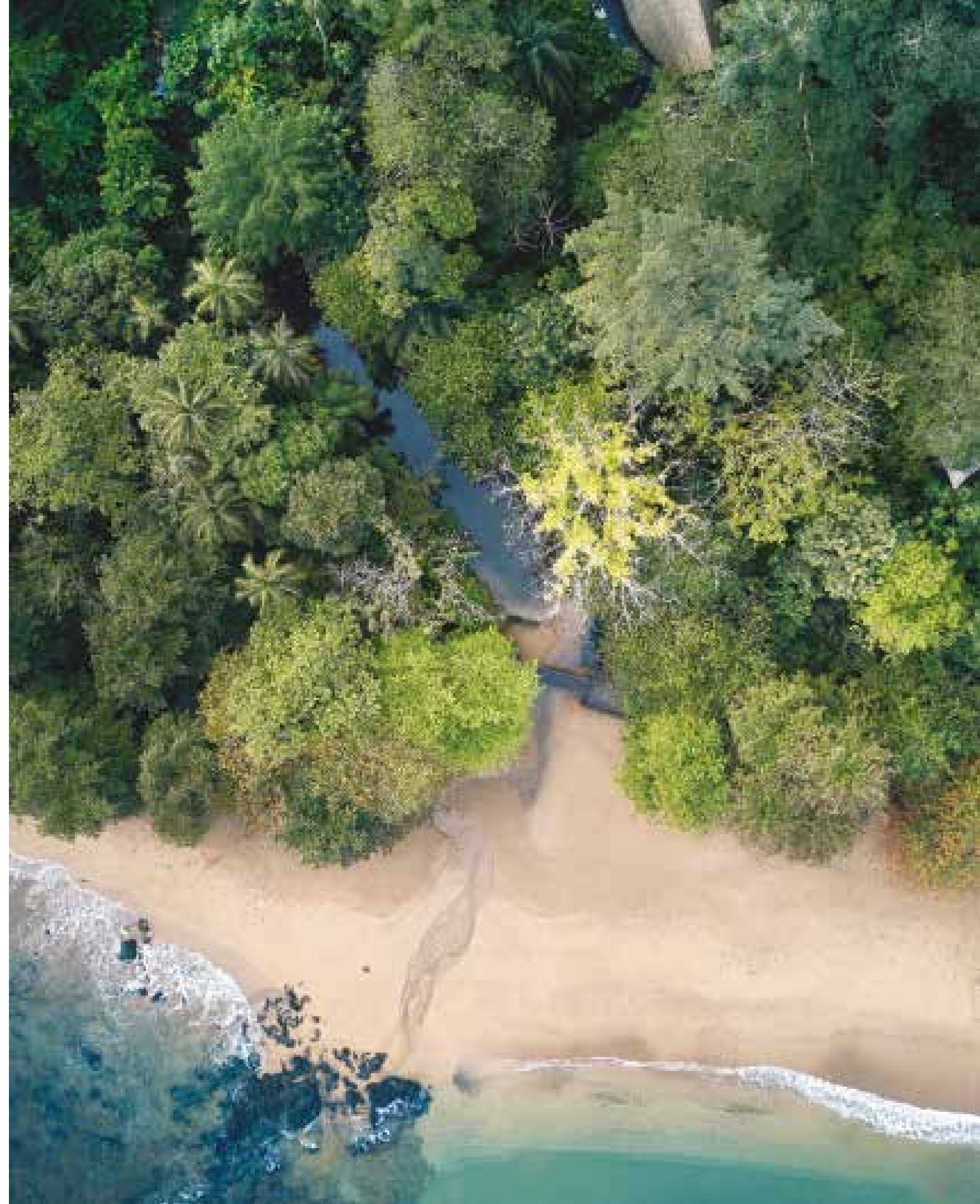
With its geographic obscurity, abandoned cocoa plantations, whitewashed Portuguese churches, impenetrable rainforests, fascinating history, otherworldly landscape and unique wildlife, the island is the very definition of a brave new world. We should all be so lucky. ●

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The fascinating animals of Príncipe and São Tomé

While the national animal is the unassuming shrew, the island nation is rich in diverse wildlife, with many species endemic to the region, including the São Tomé giant tree frog, the ocean tree frog, São Tomé cobra, the São Tomé leaf-nosed bat, the guinea lidless skink, the giant sunbird (world's largest sunbird) and the dwarf olive ibis (world's smallest ibis) among many others. With 114 bird species found on the islands, there are 26 endemic species, including the São Tomé prinia (whoses eggs look like watercolour paintings), the blue-backed Príncipe kingfisher and the São Tomé scops owl (who stands just over 17cm tall). In 2006, according to a marine survey, 10 previously undiscovered specimens were found on the reefs. Thanks to minimal human interaction, sealife is prolific in these parts, and visitors can expect to see whales, sharks and stingrays, as well as plenty of fish, including the African rainbow wrasse and the West African butterfly fish.

Right On the coastline, forests of mangrove are the ecosystems in which fish, crabs, birds, mudskippers and a host of other creatures live. With visibility up to 20m and water temperatures of 28°C, there is little to deter visitors from getting into the idyllic ocean.





This spread Snorkelling anywhere along the coastline of Príncipe will deliver all kinds of discoveries and the dual-pinnacle reef dive at Pedra de Adalio just off its coast is great for spotting huge barracuda, eels, octopus and nurse sharks. Diving is hugely popular thanks to the volcanic rock and hard coral that provide safety for many fish.





This spread Marine life abounds with deep, whale-friendly waters close to shore allowing humpback whales safe harbour, while four of the world's endangered turtle species (leatherback, green, hawksbill and olive ridley) have breeding grounds on the protected beach of Praia Grande.