

Travel Island escapes

AS I bury my toes deeper into sugary-soft sand, a deafening screech followed by a flash of red disappearing around the jungle headland forces my gaze skywards. It's a Príncipe grey parrot—a bird that's failed to thrive nearly anywhere else but here, on an island of which few have heard.

Roughly the size of the Isle of Wight and home to only 7,000 people, Príncipe is the wilder half of Portuguese-speaking São Tomé and Príncipe (STP): Africa's second-smallest country. The equator-skimming, twin-island state is cast 200 miles from the continent's west coast in the Gulf of Guinea.

Separated from its sibling by 100 miles of roiling Atlantic Ocean, Príncipe is typically reached by twin-propeller plane. The final five minutes of the 40-minute journey are the most spectacular, a *Jurassic Park*-style panorama every shade of green, the entirety of which is designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve.

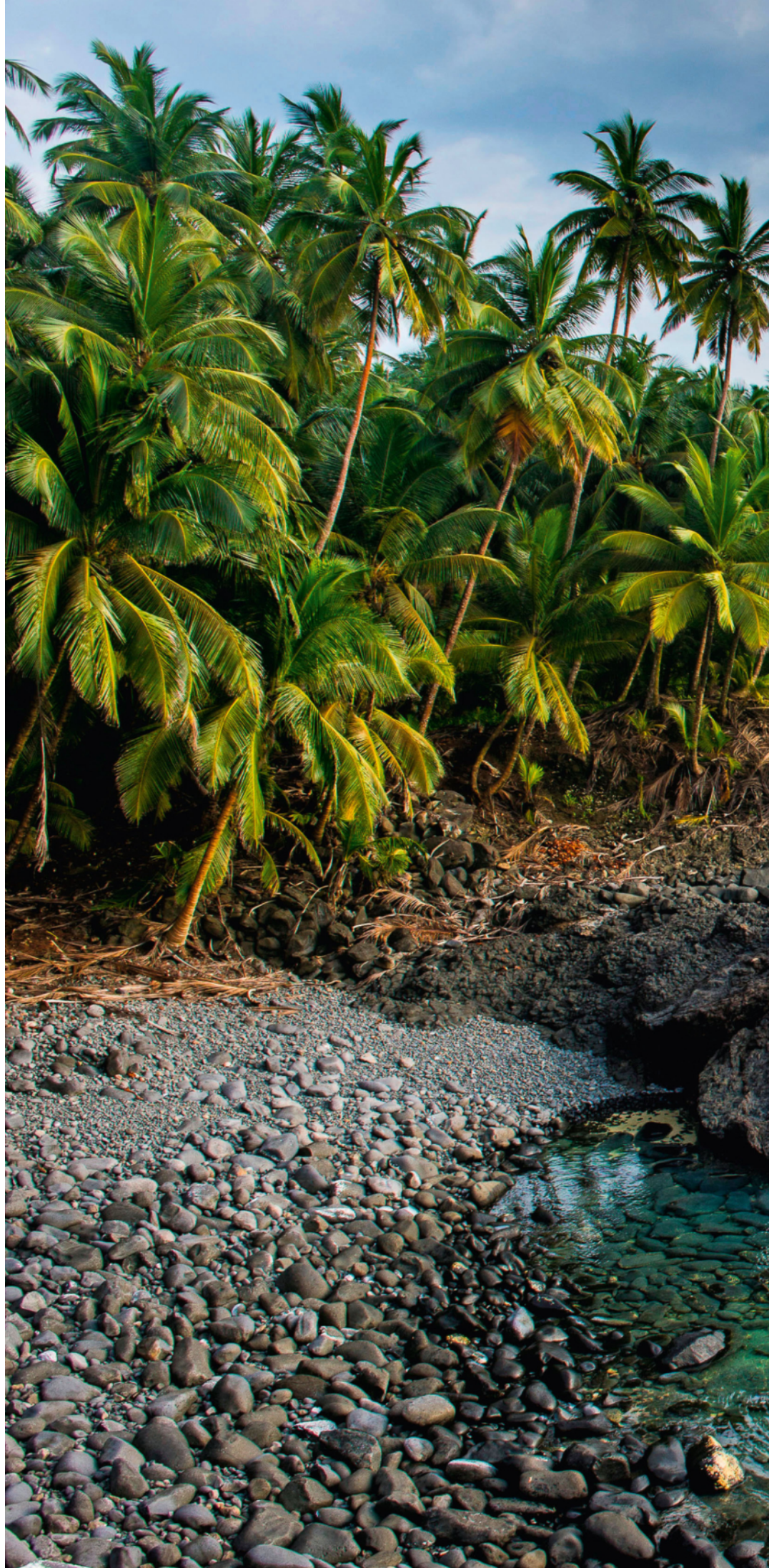
‘Obô National Park is home to 100 larger-than-life orchids’

The sheer remoteness of this volcanic twin island is its USP. Species evolved in splendid isolation over the course of 30 million years, until Portuguese navigators washed up on its shores in 1470, plunging the island into 500 years of colonial rule. Thankfully, the STP still bristles with biodiversity, home to more endemic species per square mile than the Galapagos Islands (which are eight times larger). Take, for example, STP's Obô National Park, home to 700 plant species, including 100 larger-than-life orchids.

The only thing missing? Mammals. They're thin on the ground, save for the São Tomé shrew, but the skies are routinely studded with 27 species of bird and 25 of butterfly. The Galapagos, where hotel development has exploded over the past decade and 250,000 tourists visit every year (versus STP's modest 35,000), serves as a cautionary tale.

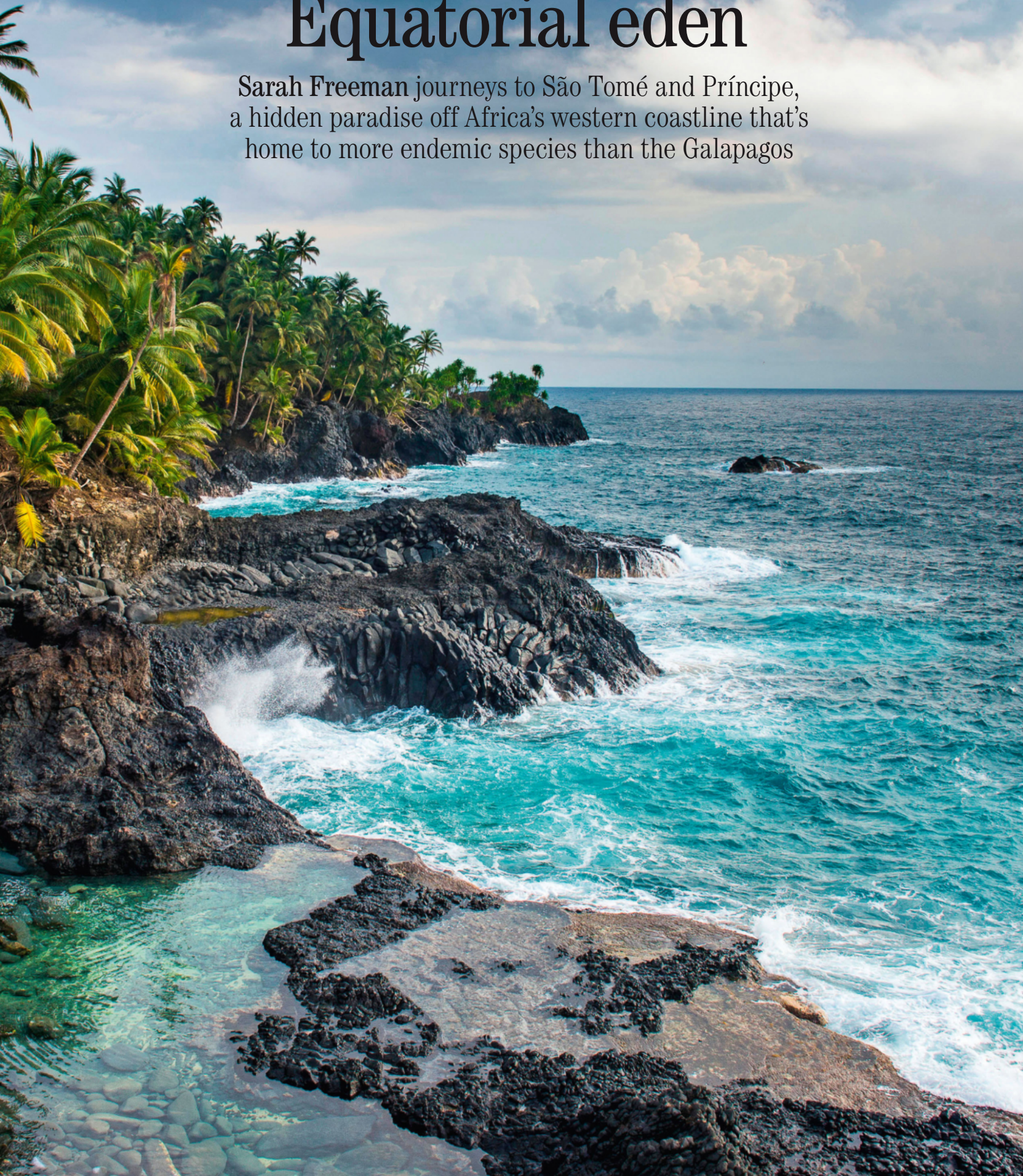
In 2010, South African technology entrepreneur Mark Shuttleworth founded HBD (an acronym for Here Be Dragons), the aim of which is to protect STP's unique flora and fauna. Working in partnership with the Príncipe government and various NGOs, HBD has been central to STP's social and economic development, operating a quartet of properties, including Roça Sundy, and employing →

There is every shade of green as far as the eye can see on the remote island of Príncipe



Equatorial eden

Sarah Freeman journeys to São Tomé and Príncipe, a hidden paradise off Africa's western coastline that's home to more endemic species than the Galapagos



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about 450 local people. *Roça* is the local name for plantation estates, built by slaves trafficked from the mainland, totalling 150 at the turn of the 20th century. A lot of them grew cacao, in such quantities that the two islands were quickly nicknamed the Chocolate Islands. After the country gained independence in 1975, many of the *roças* were reduced to crumbling ruins.

‘We showed that they can make more money keeping turtles alive’

Scores of Príncipe’s jungle trails follow abandoned railway tracks, built to cart cacao down to the coast and onto waiting ships. I follow local carpenter-turned-guide Vander Santo down one such trail: ‘The forest is my greatest teacher,’ he says as he prises open a red cardamom-scented seed called osami. Resting in the buttress roots of an oak tree, our conversation is soon drowned out by a symphony of bird calls. We catch sight of the vivid yellow underbelly of a Príncipe weaver through gaps in the forest canopy. Gigantism and dwarfism is rife among STP’s bird population, the former a biological phenomenon known as island gigantism, once rife across other island states until humans moved in, driving multiple species to the brink of extinction.

Biologist João Carlos Alves, a member of Fundação Príncipe—one of the NGOs partnered with HBD—reels off a list of some of the island’s more eccentric inhabitants: a native peach tree that grows star-shaped fruit; a massive, spiral-shelled snail; five of a total six mollusc species that are relatively



Here be dragons: the array of wildlife on the island of Príncipe, some 200 miles off the west coast of Africa, includes the white forest crab (above) and Príncipe kingfisher

new to science and slither peacefully across the forest floor.

I forgo a trek to the 100ft-high Oquê Pipi waterfall for a lunch of fried fish cakes at Roça Sundry’s sister property, Sundry Praia, under the beady, watchful eye of a Príncipe kingfisher, but later embark on a trip to the Bay of Needles, only accessible by boat. Formed in similar style to St Lucia’s sculptured Pitons, the Bay’s phonolitic spires rise sharply out of swirling jungle mist—a cinematic snorkelling backdrop. Save for a few fishermen in dugout canoes, our party of six has the luminescent parrotfish and barracuda-rich waters all to ourselves.

Come July, migrating humpback whales breach off the north-eastern shores of STP and, in March, turtles begin their perilous journey back to the ocean following a four-month-long breeding season. Three of the five species that frequent STP’s water (green; hawksbill; leatherbacks) like to nest on the palm-fringed Praia Grande. Over a São Toméan-grown coffee, conservation biologist and Alves’s colleague Estrela Matilde tells me that 2022 was a record-breaking year for turtles in the area—a whopping 2,500 nests. A lot of that success is down to her. Last year, she was awarded a Whitley Conservation Award (dubbed the Green Oscars) for her island-wide efforts to stem the tide of plastic pollution and make conservation agents of the community, including turtle poachers. ‘We showed locals that they can make more money from keeping the turtles alive. We almost have a zero-capture island now.’

Fundação Príncipe also runs terrestrial programmes, targeting critically endangered species such as the Príncipe thrush. ‘We even have a bird that’s endemic to a rock!’ Ms Matilde exclaims, referring to Jockey’s Cap, a volcanic mound a 90-minute boat ride from HBD’s beach-bungalow hideaway, Bom Bom, which is scheduled to reopen this year.

A supersized subspecies of Príncipe’s seedeater, a rock-loving, unnamed bird has developed a bigger beak in order to pick the kernels of Jockey Cap’s wild oil palm tree, twice the size of those on Príncipe proper. One more species and one more reason to journey to this naturalists’ Nirvana. 🦅

At a glance

Sarah Freeman’s itinerary

Roça Sundry There are 15 suites spread across two historic houses: twitchers should request one of the rooms with private terraces that almost skim the forest canopy (www.hbdprincipe.com/roca-sundy)

Sundry Praia The hotel’s 14 luxury tents, complete with four-poster beds and granite-hewn bathtubs, are camouflaged by a tangle of banana and almond trees. Good for foodies—the ocean-to-plate fare is served in a cathedral-scale bamboo dining room (www.hbdprincipe.com/sundy)

Omali Lodge This 30-room boutique hotel is where guests normally stop for the night, ahead of their onward flight. It’s a coconut’s

throw from the Havana-esque, colonial-style capital (www.hbdprincipe.com/omali)

Transport Rainbow Tours offers a 12-day trip from £3,795 per person, including three nights at Omali Lodge on a bed-and-breakfast basis, four nights at Sundry Praia on a half-board basis and three nights at Roça Sundry on a half-board basis, including flights and transfers (0208-131 4804; www.rainbowtours.co.uk). One guided experience a day is included at Sundry Praia and Roça Sundry when booked directly through HBD (00 351 21 314 7580; www.hbdprincipe.com). TAP Air flies between London and São Tomé via Lisbon (www.flytap.com); inter-island flights can be booked through STP Airways (www.stpairways.st)

