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Sao Tome and Principe: The African island paradise that time forgot

An exclusive series of photographs captures the spirit of the islands marooned in the past with a seductively slow pace of life

By Catherine Fairweather

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Principe's runway is a narrow cuff of fresh Tarmac. It edges the deep-green, velvety jungle, above which fingers and knuckles of volcanic rock punch the sky. Staggering out of the small 10-seater plane, blinking in the African sunlight of a new day, we are a motley crew. There's a trickle of tourists, including myself; a besuited prodigal son in shiny shoes bearing gifts for his long-lost cousins; a brace of Portuguese former colonists; some pensioners who worked for the great Benguela railway in Angola; and their geographer grandson, whose T-shirt reads, "Null Island: Like no Place on Earth".

Like any curious travellers venturing off-piste, the geographer and I exchanged tips and chat on board. "Null," he answered when I pointed at his chest, "is the imagined centre point of the globe, where the zero meridian meets the equator, and the closest piece of land to this golden cross is Principe."

It was fanciful to imagine, looking down at the tiny knot of an island, that we were about to reach the belly button of the world. It felt more like a place that time forgot.

It had taken us three days to reach this former Portuguese colony 130 miles off west Africa, via a night in Lisbon, a stopover in Accra and a sensational introductory crab soup supper at Omali Lodge on the big-sister island of Sao Tome. At the corrugated shack that passes for an international airport in Principe, we were met by a welcoming committee of a few tethered goats and an austere medic who checked passports and temperatures, to maintain control over the diseases that outsiders can bring unwittingly with them (Covid-19 is of current concern, of course, though there have been no reported cases; malaria has quite recently been eradicated on the islands).

The terminal/shack also smelled, promisingly, of ripe mango and rain-soaked earth. There were posters all around vaunting the beauty of this forgotten Eden and its "food of the gods" – the best chocolate in the world.

These islands were once the epicentre of a cocoa trade that fed an insatiable global appetite. But the industry was built on the backs of conscripted workers, and, with questionable conditions on the plantations, the lucrative export became one of the great colonial scandals of the early 20th century.



The islands were once the epicentre of a cocoa trade | CREDIT: getty

Quaker chocolatiers Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry, social reformers who had campaigned against slavery, demanded a boycott of cocoa beans from Sao Tome in 1909. This contributed to the ruin of the island plantations and the beginning of the end of Portuguese rule. They left, unceremoniously, in the mid-1970s.

Today, the jungle has mostly reclaimed the 800 or so plantations, or rocas, that were the backbone of island life. These were self-contained universes with their own hospitals and nurseries, and operated outside the law.

Today, they are silent and ghostly. Lianas and ivy twist up around the balustrades and choke the bells that once called slaves to work. Tropical almonds push roots through the once-magnificent Oporto tiled floors. Woodlice attack grand staircases and furnishings disintegrate in the heat. The jungle takes over, camouflaging these reminders of the islands' darker past.

But there is a brighter, alternative future too; some estates have been reclaimed by islanders and turned into co-operatives, and a handful have been repurposed as elegant hotels such as Roca Belo Monte, where we were staying. One of the best examples of

early 20th-century plantation architecture, the main manor looks down over flame trees and jungle canopy to the coastline. There is a cocoa bean drying plant and museum that showcases the hotel's efforts to protect a unique island biodiversity; there are more endemic mammal, bird and butterfly species here than in the Galapagos.

Belo Monte has the rare and precious sense of unhurried time that defines Principe. Staff gathered for amused chit-chat every morning under the shade of a magnificent tree, the leaves of which make an aphrodisiac potion that they counselled my husband to enjoy. They smiled at my impatient desire to hike every mountain in the area. My eagerness was contrary to the easy-does-it, “moli-moli” pace of life. They pointed me in the direction of the beach. I agreed; what better way to immerse oneself in this languid island vibe than from a hammock strung across the palms?



Principe's beaches are a remote paradise | CREDIT: Getty

My 20-minute stroll from the house to Banana Beach took me through towering rainforest that could not have felt more benign. Scented pink begonia blossom fluttered down like confetti, a coconut tumbled with a thud, and fat drops of water plopped from glossy fronds and ferns after a recent downpour. Comic-book, semiwild piglets snuffled

in the undergrowth, and a troupe of capuchin monkeys with clinging babies swang high up in the canopy. The world felt both newborn and ripe.

Banana Beach is the stuff of a Bacardi ad, a perfect creamy crescent of soft sand lapped by safe, warm, turquoise water, fringed by palms and book-ended by granite boulders. And it is only one of several idyllic coves that you can walk to from Belo Monte.

I was alone except for some boys fishing out to sea in a piroga, the simple canoe hollowed from the trunk of the towering oka tree. They waved, then approached the shore to scramble up a palm tree for coconuts. They offered me one and turned cartwheels in the sand.

The abiding sense of vitality and joy, despite the very real poverty of the place, was never more vivid than in the raise-the-roof singing and exultation of a Sunday service in the church of the world's smallest capital, San Antonio. It was evident in the hilarity at the market when the female stallholders squeezed my husband between the legs and directed him to the aphrodisiac stand. It was in the smiles of the children who are never left alone to cry, and it leaked, at the weekend, from the discotequa shacks that rocked to the lilting rhythms fusing the island's Angolan, Cape Verde and Portuguese heritage and sounds.

Even after ladles of palm wine, drunken punch-ups at the disco never happen. Cursing and swearing, I was told, are the most common offences for which islanders are booked, as they are for the discourtesy of splashing a pedestrian from their bikes.



There's an abiding sense of vitality and joy, despite the very real poverty of the place | CREDIT: don mccullin

Who wouldn't fall in love with the quaint, gentle spirit of such a place? Mark Shuttleworth, a young tech billionaire and owner of the islands' best hotels, did. His commitment to protect the surreal, Tolkienesque beauty of the primeval forest was triggered when, as Africa's first astronaut, he was spellbound by the sight of earth's fragility and majesty from space. That sense of responsibility has translated into far-reaching sustainable hotel projects and conservation in Principe, under the umbrella of his venture capital company, Here Be Dragons.

The HBD hotel group includes Bom Bom, the original barefoot island resort, the restored historic plantation house of Roca Sundy (where Einstein proved his theory of relativity by sending an emissary to observe space under a cloudless sky) and the newest and most lavish, the service-orientated tented beach camp of Praia Sundy, built in the shade of giant oka trees. Together, the hotels in Principe, as well as the wonderful Omali Lodge in Sao Tome – at whose bar you can imagine a modern-day Hemingway holding court – are the island's biggest employers. They bring sustainable development to impoverished communities, while helping to preserve and protect the delicate ecosystem. Shuttleworth has the ear of the government and a sympathetic

president to help drive through taxes on plastic next year.

The hotels are the bridge and main channel of communication to the island community, allowing interested guests to get under the skin of the place. We visited the rickety, semi-ruined Pacienca plantation, where former “conscripted workers” now earn a decent wage harvesting the organic farms for the hotels and turning plants into health and cosmetic products that visitors can buy. Recycling plants have been set up where discarded glass is turned into jewellery by a women’s cooperative, supported by HBD. They are great for a visit.

Of course, you could also opt to laze in the shade of tropical almonds on a perfect beach, charter boats to deserted bays, fish, and lunch on banana-leaf-wrapped prawns grilled with amaranth and lime that you eat with your hands. Or you could retreat to your private tented lodge with its huge decked verandas and lava stone tubs, or detox with a coffee-bean massage.



There's a quaint, gentle spirit on the islands | CREDIT: don mccullin

Sundy Praia is good for all this and more. Here, a Tuesday night ritual has guests making the journey down a rutted jungle track – where they may catch sight of the

near-mythical wild lagaya cat – to an outlandish, chandeliered, bamboo-and-thatch cathedral-height restaurant. The Tuesday spread here is an astonishing tasting menu starring the chocolate of top cocoa baron Claudio Corallo. There is a surprisingly savoury cocoa nib tapenade, a gnocchi dish with cocoa and octopus, and a chocolate ganache with papaya.

Next day, we visited Corallo's estate, the tumbledown Terrerio Velho, which has the most beautiful vantage point on the whole island, overlooking the wild and impenetrable primary forest of the southern coastline.

Here, the "Tarzan-boy" of the island found sanctuary. Now a quiet, educated man in his 20s, Fernando Umbelina was seven when he became separated from his village and vanished into the deep jungle. Cocoa planters found him nearly a year later in miraculously good health, well fed on the coconuts, nuts and leaves that the monkeys had apparently collected for him. The story goes that he cringed at the sight of humans, not wanting to leave his wild paradise home.

At dusk, grey parrots and white-tailed tropicbirds stream out of said paradise and across the distant horseshoe bay. The dilapidated mansion gazes forlornly at the world through shuttered windows like half-closed lashes, above the rainforest where the rich volcanic soil offers perfect conditions for cocoa.

It was our penultimate day and we were back in Sao Tome. I was talking chocolate and other island matters with my guide Domenico, a multilingual grandson of a former Angolan conscripted worker. As he soberly said, he could never afford the island's chocolate, so we were snacking instead on fiery beans and rice in the renovated Roca Saudade, the plantation home of Sao Tome's beloved avant-garde artist, Jose Almada de Negreiros.



The mountain peak of Cao Grande is unmissable | CREDIT: getty images

We talked about the islands' fragile status quo, teetering on the cusp of change; the pressures and potential benefits of foreign interest and investment in the crude oil beneath the Atlantic, and the controversial plans for further palm oil plantations which, while an ecologically destructive monoculture, bring employment to poverty-stricken regions.

We also mused upon the overriding culture of acceptance in Sao Tomean society, which embraces all races, all people. "Maybe it comes from our heritage as a place of exile, a place which breaks or remakes fortunes and lives," Domenico said, smiling at the waitress who served us spicy scented coffee, unable to stay sombre for too long. "Show the writer what your apron says," he said coaxingly to her. Woven across the pockets of the pinafore was a quote from Almada Negreiros: "A Alegria e a coisa mais seria da vida" – "to be light-hearted is the most serious thing in life".

That statement encapsulates the upbeat spirit of a nation that will not –despite a legacy of exile, slavery and poverty – allow itself to be cowed. I raise my coffee cup to that.

The details

Rainbow Tours (020 7666 1260; rainbowtours.co.uk) offers a nine-night trip to Sao Tome and Principe, combining two nights at Omali Lodge on Sao Tome with five nights at Sundry Praia in a tented suite and two at Belo Monte in a plantation room, from £4,035 per person. The price is based on two sharing on a half-board basis and includes return flights from London to Sao Tome with TAP Air Portugal and internal flights to Principe.

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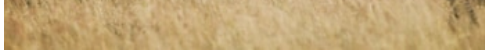
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