

an oasis in the Atlantic

São Tomé and Príncipe,
the verdant island
nation off the coast of
West Africa, is becoming
one of the world's leading
ecotourism destinations

Photographs by Graydon Herriott





you feel as though you are in a botanical garden,” says photographer Nikole Herriott. “Butterflies are everywhere, soaring trees that are over 100 years old, and red, yellow, and green cocoa pods hang under canopies of orange flowers. The fragrance of ylang-ylang trees and breadfruit hangs in the air.” These twin islands in the Gulf of Guinea also have biodiverse rain forests that support more endemic species than the Galápagos (in 2012, Príncipe was designated by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve), as well as million-year-old mountains, pristine waterfalls, and untouched tawny beaches reached only by boat. Their history is harsh: Portuguese rulers turned much of this bountiful land into sugar and cocoa plantations, worked over by enslaved people. A rise of democratic reform following the end of colonialism has introduced some stability, allowing São Tomé and Príncipe to emerge as an ecotourism pioneer. That’s thanks in no small part to the hospitality brand HBD Príncipe, founded 13 years ago by South African tech entrepreneur Mark Shuttleworth. With four properties—Sundy Praia, Roça Sundy, and Bom Bom (reopening in 2024) on Príncipe and Omali on São Tomé—it is now the tiny nation’s largest employer, devoted to community empowerment through tourism-driven economic growth. The company has turned much of the land into concessions to preserve fragile wildlife like sea turtles. Now travelers don’t just reap the rewards of exploring these protected virgin areas; they do so knowing that their dollars are benefiting the islands’ rightful custodians. **MARY HOLLAND**

Julie Palo Hayes can arrange bespoke tours to São Tomé and Príncipe. A six-night trip starts at around \$4,000 per person; [smartflyer.com](https://www.smartflyer.com)

Clockwise from top left: Strolling Praia Boi, a secluded beach on the northeast coast of Príncipe; former stables next to the main hotel at HBD’s Roça Sundy; João Dias Pai peak rises 834 feet on Príncipe; buying yellow cocoa pods at São Tomé’s Mercado de Bobo Forro; orange-flowering *Erythrina* trees were brought to the island to provide shade to cocoa pods; many details in HBD Sundy Praia’s bamboo-heavy dining room are from local artisans