

# Atlantic aspirations

São Tomé and Príncipe, which make up Africa's second-smallest country, are just what tropical islands should be: lush, green havens of sun, sand and surf. However, as Emma Gregg discovers, they are so, so much more.

The sun was sinking fast over the Gulf of Guinea as Hipólito Lima hurried me towards his vehicle. Climbing in, I plonked myself down next to a bucket of tiny, restless reptiles: three-day-old turtles. Lima, one of São Tomé and Príncipe's turtle conservation officers, had invited me to witness their release.

Lima had rescued these turtles as eggs, taking them to the safety of his hatchery at Morro Peixe, away from predators and hunters. Back on the beach where their mother had nested, we gently lowered the hatchlings onto the sand and watched as they staggered into the surf. It was a genuinely moving moment and I felt privileged to be the only visitor to witness it. In fact, as the only non-local on my inbound flight, I felt it a privilege to be on these equatorial islands at all.

Together, São Tomé and Príncipe make up a nation so tiny that some world maps ignore it altogether. Google Earth almost does: the best view it can muster of the remoter parts is a fuzzy glimpse from way, way up in cyberspace.

In reality, at ground level, the overwhelming impression is of rampant fertility. Green all year round, with a permanent sparkle from recent rain,

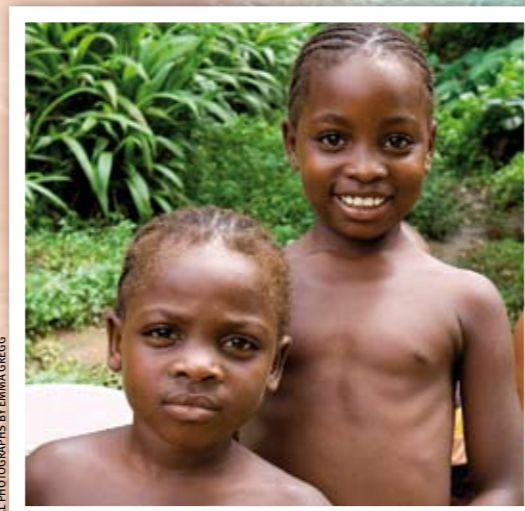
it's the kind of place where a seed dropped today could be sprouting by tomorrow. Fat, healthy piglets and ducklings potter through thick undergrowth. Bright-faced village children crowd out of school and slam huge coconuts onto the road to break them open. Fishermen haul massive swordfish and marlin out of the sea. Even the topography suggests ripe fecundity: São Tomé's most distinctive natural landmark, a tower of volcanic rock called Cão Grande (Big Dog), is thoroughly phallic in shape.

Sweltering humidity forces everyone and everything to take life at a laid-back pace. It's no surprise that the favourite local motto – *léve-léve* on São Tomé, *móli-móli* on Príncipe – roughly translates as 'chill, dude'. It's partly because of this that the islands do a fine impression of a nation treading water. History also plays a large part. After granting their African colonies independence, the Portuguese cleared out hastily, leaving nothing behind; this scenario was played out in São

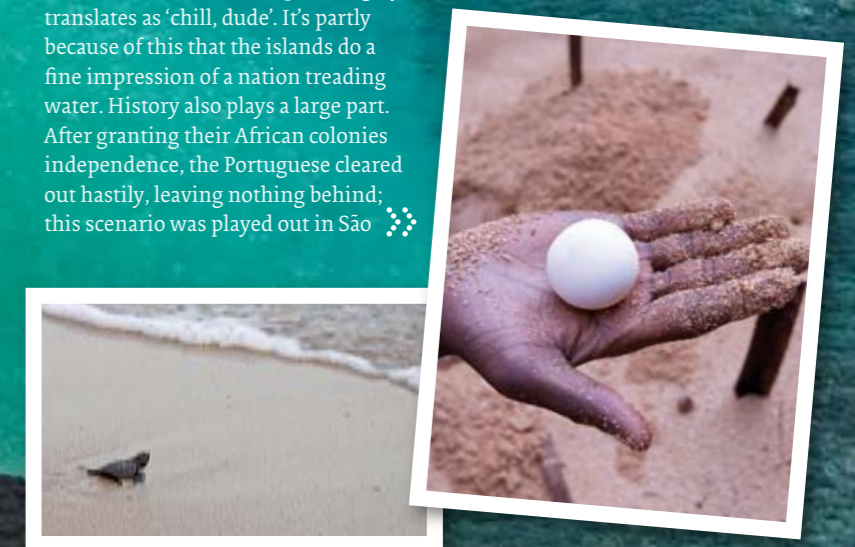
**Main image:** Príncipe's shores are ripe with attractive activities: scuba diving, canoeing, swimming, or simply a remote beach picnic

**Below:** From a rescued egg to an eventual aquatic escape, it's a story of survival

**Opposite:** This island nation has tropical forests draped on dramatic landscapes, intriguing citizens and no shortage of colourful fishing boats



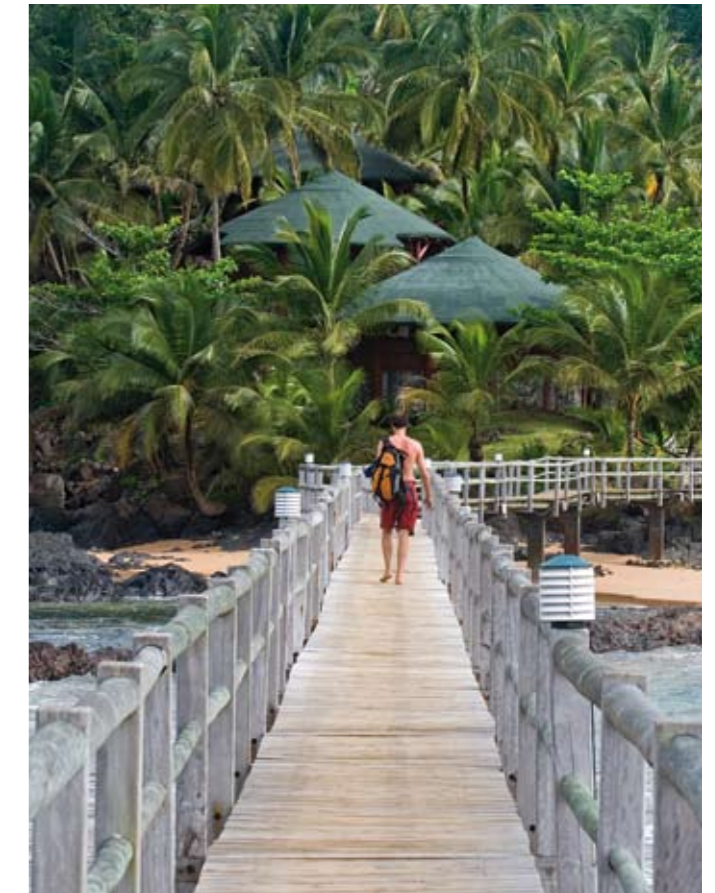
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endemic orchids and tropical fruit, appealing timber-shack and heartbreakingly perfect palm-fringed beaches





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**Main image:** All work and no play clearly does not apply in the fishing village of Abade, Príncipe  
**Top, left:** A happy family, more smiles in São Tomé town  
**Bottom, left:** An abandoned plantation house, Roça Porto Real, Príncipe  
**Opposite:** A long walk to paradise, Bom Bom Island Resort

Tomé and Príncipe in July 1975. In recent years, since the discovery of oil in the Gulf of Guinea, the islanders have begun to demonstrate a new sense of purpose; many, however, are wary of the circus of commerce and corruption that an offshore oil industry might bring. Far-sighted islanders consider low-impact tourism to be a more certain key to the country's future. For now, the infrastructure is basic, but both islands already have comfortable lodges from which to explore on foot, by vehicle or, for the truly hardy, by mountain bike. Príncipe's delightful Bom Bom Island Resort even has its own small, but highly professional, scuba diving operation. Within reach of the lodges are steep hillsides dripping with endemic orchids and tropical fruit, appealing timber-shack villages, impressive remnants of colonial architecture and heartbreakingly perfect palm-fringed beaches. The towns are pleasant, their markets stuffed with colourful, fragrant produce. You would imagine that with all this on offer, tourists would already be flooding in. But on São Tomé and Príncipe, I gradually discovered, nothing is quite as you might expect. My journey to São Tomé began 3700km away in another fragment of lusophone Africa, the Atlantic islands of Cape Verde. Stringing these far-flung

island nations together in one trip promised to be a fascinating experience. Their cultural connections can be traced right back to the fifteenth century, when Portuguese adventurers strode ashore to claim both of them, more or less simultaneously. Neither archipelago had been inhabited in any permanent sense before the arrival of the first slave traders and commodity dealers. On São Tomé and Príncipe, loggers and agriculturalists arrived next, defying disease to tear out timber and plant the fertile terrain with sugar cane. Later, the Portuguese boosted the colonies' populations by using them as dumping grounds for a motley assortment of *degradados*, or undesirables – political dissidents, prostitutes, alcoholics and even Jews. Many of these went on to have children with slaves brought in from mainland Africa, producing the first of many mixed-race generations. The archipelagos are of a similar geological vintage – the first of their brooding volcanoes shouldered their way up from the ocean floor between 13 and 15 million years ago – but the climate of each could scarcely be more different. Much of Cape Verde is punishingly arid, sometimes suffering years on end with no rain at all.

In the 19th century, just as the São Toméan Portuguese were making history by creating Africa's first commercial cocoa plantations, Cape Verde struck a low, gripped by the first of a long series of devastating droughts. During the famine years of the 1860s, 1900s, 1920s and 1940s, thousands of Cape Verdeans made the arduous journey from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Guinea to seek their fortunes as plantation workers. My flight from Cape Verde to São Tomé took just four hours, and as I stepped off the plane I tried to imagine how those desperate migrants might have felt when they first set eyes on São Tomé and Príncipe's rain-heavy clouds and breathed in the thick, pungent stillness. They must have cried with joy. The contrast between these riotously green islands and the wind-lashed sand, rubble and rock of their homeland is remarkable. But as anyone who has listened hard to the lyrics of a Cape Verdean *morna* will know, São Tomé did not turn out to be the utopia of the migrants' dreams. *Sodade*, the song about bitter homesickness made famous by Cape Verde's great musical ambassador Cesária Evora, is one of many ballads which hint at the truth. Recruitment officers had deceived the eager migrants into thinking that as *serviçais* – contract

workers – they would earn enough to return home wealthy. In practice, however, unscrupulous plantation managers forced the hapless *serviçais* to accept working conditions and rewards that were little better than those of the slaves they had been shipped in to replace. Most found themselves trapped in miserable poverty, far from their families and unable to afford daily essentials, let alone a passage back to Cape Verde. Their descendants still cling to the hope that, one day, they will find a way to make their own homecoming. For now, however, 90 per cent of Príncipeans and a large proportion of the population of São Tomé are of Cape Verdean origin. From my hotel, I rode into São Tomé town on the back of a motorbike, local-style. The *motoqueiros*, or motorbike taxi guys, are São Tomé's super-cool knights of the road. Mine whisked me along the seafront, past rows of bay-view villas streaked with age. Small boys were playing table football outside a chapel shaped like a fishing boat, and knots of women had set up banana stalls under the almond trees on the once-elegant promenade. Turning into the tiny city centre, my motoqueiro wove neatly around yawning puddles, ranks of battered yellow taxis and a man carrying a six-foot-long marlin



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on his head, to drop me at the central motorbike park. Here, his young colleagues were chatting and preening, draped against immaculate machines with gleaming engines and highly-polished chrome. Interested to find out how much Cape Verdean creole has been assimilated into São Toméan *forro*, I tried out a few greetings on them. But my cheery attempts at “*Tudu dretu?*” “*Tud kul?*” and “*Manèra?*” (how are things?) were all met with blank looks.

“Sure, there are plenty of *tongas*, with grandparents who came from Cabo Verde, Angola, Mozambique, wherever,” one explained, “but they mostly live in the *roças*, not in the capital.” It was my first inkling of just how marginalised Cape Verdeans are in São Tomé. Coming from one of Africa’s most egalitarian creole nations, it must have been shocking for the migrants to find themselves in such a stratified society, stuck at the bottom of the heap. The *serviçais* and their offspring, the *tongas*, were wholly confined to the *roças*, or plantation estates. Since then, little has changed.

More secrets of the colonial era are revealed at São Tomé’s Museu Nacional, housed in a stocky 16th-century fort on the east side of town. A room stuffed with vestments, chalices and elaborately gilded madonnas shows how much the Portuguese invested in their churches, while a recreation of a bedroom for *serviçais* demonstrates how little they were prepared to offer their workers.

Completing the picture is a comfortably furnished early 20th-century plantation master’s dining room, complete with *serviçais*-operated fan. Most harrowing of all is a room dedicated to the Batepá Massacre of 1953, in which the colonial security forces used cold brutality to crush an uprising over labour conditions on the *roças*. It was a pivotal event on the road to independence.

Heading inland by car, my driver took me along a road hemmed in by coffee and cocoa shrubs, shaded by gigantic breadfruit, banana and coral trees. Acres of this lush terrain were apportioned to each of the *roças*. In Cape Verde, the colonial-era buildings are largely modest and austere, but in São Tomé and Príncipe everything exudes a confident swagger. The *roças* have sweeping drives, grand homesteads and even grander hospital buildings, all now in various states of disrepair: maintenance more or less ceased after independence. To the workers, the nationalisation of the *roças* felt like a victory, but jubilation soon turned to despair when it became clear that the fledgling government had no idea how to run them. At Roça Agostinho Neto, an enormous estate whose derelict hospital presides over northern São Tomé with all the hauteur of a stately home, the families of *serviçais*, originally from Angola, continue to live in the workers’ quarters. The chickens and pigs which forage in the long grass looked well fed and content; the children, less so.

Of the disused homesteads, some, like Príncipe’s Roça Belo Monte and Roça Porto Real, are still just safe enough to permit exploration. Decorative staircases, moulded ceilings and tall, shuttered windows languish in elegant decay, while rampaging plant life reclaims courtyards and takes root among terracotta roof tiles. Located in fine countryside with stunning views, these abandoned treasures have an irresistible romance: I defy any visitor who has ever paused over images of a grand colonial mansion in the glossy pages of a lifestyle magazine not to hear the walls and windows of each house whisper “restore me”.

So far, only a handful of plantation houses have been brought back to life. In central São Tomé, I visited Roça Bombaim, which has a relatively modest homestead, set apart from the decrepit buildings in which ex-workers still live. Visitors can stay in its simple, sympathetically-restored guest rooms, and spend their days hiking or birdwatching in the forests of Obo National Park, visiting waterfalls or just scrumping cocoa pods for their sharp, tasty pulp. The place was empty, and when I asked my guide why he thought this was, he blamed it on the government and its reluctance to spend money on publicity, reducing airfares or mending the roads.

Near the boundary of the estate we were stopped by a grizzled and grubby wisp of a man we took to be the local eccentric. He saluted us with twinkling eyes and asked me where I’m from. I told him, and asked the same.

“From Cabo Verde,” he said.

“Ah, whereabouts?”

“Praia.”

“So is that where you were born, on Santiago?”

“Yes!” he confirmed with a delighted grin,

“I came here from Santiago 60 years ago.”

“Tudu dretu?” I asked

And his face melted with happiness.

Back in São Tomé town, I dropped in at Café e Companhia, a little pocket of Portugal on Praça da Amizade os Povos. Close to the Portuguese cultural centre, this arty café is a favourite expat hangout; everyone from teachers and volunteers to UN officials comes here to sip *bicas*, tiny cups of coffee, to a soundtrack of Cape Verdean mornas, Angolan jazz and Portuguese rock. It was once a roasting house and the décor, which makes much use of whirring fans and vintage coffee bags, suggests the aroma of coffee even in those rare moments when the espresso machines aren’t in action.

I chatted with a trio of Portuguese visitors who were inspired to travel here after reading *Equador* by Miguel Sousa Tavares. This colonial love story, set in the 1900s among São Tomé’s cocoa plantations, is a Portuguese bestseller; a lavish 26-part adaptation launched on primetime TV last Christmas. But when I remarked that this must be great news for island tourism, they looked a little doubtful. Many Portuguese feel uncomfortable about visiting the former African colonies, they said – it’s a problematic combination of guilt, mixed with sheer frustration that things just don’t function as they should.



Above: Working her wares, a hairdresser in São Tomé town  
Opposite: A fisherman in his pirogue off Banana Beach, Príncipe

Others are more optimistic, however. One man who heard a *roça* whisper “restore me” and couldn’t resist is João Carlos Silva of Roça São João dos Angolares. I headed down the coast to visit for lunch, a sumptuous gastronomic event consisting of course after course of tiny, delicious delicacies, expertly cooked over a wood-burning stove and served on a high verandah with views of luxuriant foliage.

Up a rickety but elegant staircase, six guest bedrooms exude the essence of calm. Original art hangs everywhere – Silva, a contemporary art expert, owns a superb gallery in São Tomé town. He and his partner also run several community outreach programmes. “This *roça* was once a place of exploitation and sickness, both physical and mental,” Silva explained. “Our vision is to exploit it ourselves, using our creative intelligence to transform it into a place of education, culture and health.”

The sanctuary Silva has created is staggeringly lovely. And as I finished my lunch with a strong, dark, São Toméan coffee, I was reminded of a line from another Cape Verdean morna, Cesária Evora’s *São Tomé Na Equador*. “*Bô fui lugar di sofrimento*,” she sings, “*ma ligria bô podê dá*.” You’ve been a place of suffering, but joy can still come.

■ Emma Gregg travelled with *Africa’s Eden*, Cape Verde Travel and TAAG Angola Airlines. Specialist tour operators *Africa’s Eden* ([www.africas-eden.com](http://www.africas-eden.com)) organise a variety of trips to São Tomé and Príncipe, some also including time in Gabon. Cape Verde Travel ([www.capeverdetravel.com](http://www.capeverdetravel.com)) offer bespoke itineraries with flights from the UK via Lisbon or Cape Verde.

