

Sleepy islands in the sun

In the Gulf of Guinea are two tropical islands you'd miss if you blinked. Together, they're one of Africa's smallest countries, but with loads of history and no shortage of rain forest. By Don Pinnock.

The island appeared suddenly under the aircraft's wing as it banked for landing. I'd been watching whales when suddenly there was jungle, coconut palms, vertical volcanic cones and wave sets flopping onto white beaches. All around, to the horizon, was the turquoise tropical sea dotted with cloud shadows.

Bom Bom on Príncipe is a small island with a dense forest and a restaurant reached by a long bridge.

São Tomé must have been just as surprising to the Chinese, who are thought to have discovered it around 1421, and Portuguese sailors who dragged their boats ashore in 1470.

The Europeans soon turned it into the largest sugar-producing area in the world, but in 1530 a slave revolt scared the plantation owners off to try their luck in Brazil.

The island then became a staging post for the slave trade between West Africa and the Americas, as well as a source of coffee and cocoa. Even when slavery was abolished in 1875, it was replaced with forced labour. It took until 1975 for the locals – descendants of slaves and sailors – to gain independence.

Any way you view it – from the air, from the sea or on foot – São Tomé is dramatic, with sheer sea cliffs, steep lava cones poking out of the tropical forest, rushing streams, waterfalls and both black and white beaches. When the aircraft doors opened, it turned out the sweaty, 30°C-plus air was also pretty dramatic and had me heading for the Omali Lodge in search of a cold beer to get my bearings. The icy liquid was Castle and the manager was Afrikaans – Africa is full of surprises.

When the Portuguese left, the country had virtually no skilled labour, an illiteracy rate of around 90 per cent and only one doctor. It's come a long way since then, but the capital, also named São Tomé, is still full of sadly neglected colonial buildings. The parks, though, are well maintained and both the National Museum (originally Fort São Sebastião) and the local markets are well worth a visit.

The little country has a rich culture of dance, music, art and food – you just need to ask around about

what's happening, where and when. The countryside and the more remote beaches are the real drawcard and it's worth negotiating a taxi or hiring a car to explore the network of potholed roads. Buses from Mercado Municipal market also connect the capital with most towns. Another possibility is to hire a boat to do some snorkelling in the warm waters, and check out the strange, volcanic rock formations and waterfalls plunging into the sea. If you're an orchid lover, you'll be in paradise. >

A plane hop to the nearby islet of Príncipe had me glued to the window. On the volcanic highlands, vertical rock cones rose up out of the rain-forest like giant cucumbers and, from the air, the airport looked like a school ruler thrown down in a jungle clearing. There are plans underway to upgrade the airstrip and buildings and to turn Príncipe into one of the world's most protected wilderness areas.

Around 70 per cent of the island is forest and its capital, São António, is a small town at the foot of towering peaks. The jewel in the jungle crown is undoubtedly Bom Bom Island Resort. Accommodation is on Príncipe in elegant, air-conditioned bungalows, but the restaurant and bar are on nearby Bom Bom Island. You get there across a wooden foot-bridge that spans a 230-metre channel of aquamarine water.



You can hike or explore the island by 4x4 or quadbike. With clear water allowing wonderful visibility, diving around the resort is exhilarating and the Bom Bom menu is never without marlin, sailfish, dorado, kingfish or wahoo. I joined friends on the restaurant deck watching the sun replaced by a phosphorescent sea, then turned my attention to the difficult choice of

which grilled fish to choose, served with breadfruit, bananas, salads and some malagueta, an extremely hot peri-peri sauce, to give it all a kick.

The beach next morning had no footprints and just the track of a single coconut on its way from a palm to the sea. The only sound was the chunter of an African grey parrot. Even the waves were taking a rest. ■

ABOVE: On São Tomé fishers trawl the Gulf of Guinea in dugout canoes. You can buy from the boats or in the marketplace.

BELOW LEFT: Príncipe Island consists almost entirely of dense jungle and beetling insulbergs.

footnotes

When to go

Temperatures are consistently high; the rains fall between October and November and from March to May. It is dry from December to February and from June to September.

How to get there

There are flights from Lisbon, Gabon and Angola to São Tomé, from where you can fly to Príncipe. Fly from Johannesburg to Libreville in Gabon with SAA (two flights a week, R9188 return, including airport tax) or Ethiopian Airlines (R6232). Africa's Eden collects clients in Libreville.

Who to contact

To book at Omali Lodge on São Tomé and Bom Bom on Príncipe, telephone +31-26-37-5567, e-mail reservations@africas-eden.com or visit www.africas-eden.com.



What it costs

An eight-day itinerary on São Tomé and/or Príncipe is from €1720 a person (about R19000).

Health

Malaria is present and a yellow fever vaccination certificate is essential. Drink only bottled, filtered or boiled water. Travel insurance is a definite requirement.

What to pack

Keep your luggage down to the basics. Long-sleeve shirts and trousers are advisable to avoid mosquitoes. Avoid blue clothes. For ease of carrying, soft bags or a medium sized suitcase are preferable.

Language

The lingua franca is French. ■

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