

IN SPLENDID ISOLATION

Angola's closest cultural ties are with the tiny archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe, which is now becoming a paradise for tourists. **Sarah Monaghan** reports →

I am in a fairytale scene. Abandoned colonial buildings surround me, the jungle having wretched its way around them like Mayan temples. A banana tree has invaded the hall of the *casa do patrão* (the master's house) and lianas are clamoring across its peeling ceilings. Is Sleeping Beauty lying upstairs?

A shutter flaps in the wind. I climb a marble staircase. From a balustrade balcony onto which the sun spills comes the reflected sparkle of turquoise waters and the view of a palm-fringed beach below. The chlorophyll green of the jungle leading down to the shore is lit by the hot orange of flame trees and the flash of a yellow-breasted sunbird.

Time seems to have stopped on Príncipe. I am part of a living history lesson. This plantation, Roça Sundi, encircled by turreted walls, was once the island's biggest cocoa estate and a former home to the Portuguese royal family. In its grounds a rusting steam locomotive still sits on corroded tracks. Until 40 or so years ago, it would have carried fresh cocoa beans through the jungle to the coast for export to Lisbon.

It is little wonder that São Tomé and Príncipe give a sense of being a tear in the fabric of time. Positioned off the West Coast of Africa, the islands are, in geographical



terms, at the centre of the world – the closest land mass to the point in the Atlantic where the imaginary line of the equator crosses the zero meridian. Older geologically than the Galapagos Islands, they are so isolated that many plant and bird species are endemic.

Slaves

Carlito is my guide. He, like many islanders, speaks Lung'ye, a Creole tongue, as well as Portuguese. His ancestors came from Cape Verde and were part of the import of thousands of slaves brought in by the Portuguese from the 15th century onwards from its African colonies. Toiling a six-day week, with only the songs of their homeland to break the monotony, their efforts meant that by the early 20th century the islands had become one of the world's largest cocoa producers. Carlito's father was still working for a Portuguese plantation owner in 1975 when independence was declared.

Today, oil exploration has begun offshore, and tourism and investment are bringing a new optimism. Cocoa and coffee production is restarting and many of the old plantation houses are being restored as rural hotels, attracting adventurous travellers keen to trek the rainforests, lounge on the deserted beaches and explore the crumbling colonial splendour.

In the capital city, São Tomé, a Portuguese chain has just opened a five-star hotel complete with infinity pool over the

bay where the first Portuguese ships landed in 1470. Along the coast, the prettiest beaches dotted by fishermen's shacks are earmarked for holiday developments.

On Príncipe, I base myself at Bom Bom Island Resort. Pagoda-style bungalows sit on a shoreline overhung by coconut palms. Each evening I cross a long wooden pier, through which the waves splash, to a forested islet and a simple restaurant where tables are decorated with tropical flowers.

The other guests are a group of Portuguese, an Englishman and his grandson here for the excellent sports fishing, and two adventurous tourists from Paris, Oscar and Ludwig, who have spent the past week trekking on São Tomé, staying in restored roças, the old feudal plantations.

It is so delightful here that it would be easy to simply sit on my veranda with a novel, watching fallen coconuts wash in and out, and that is exactly what I do on my first day. The next day, I go scuba diving. The volcanic ocean floor and the mix of equatorial currents make for a fantastic underwater show of fan corals, turtles, barracuda and rays.

Oscar, Ludwig and I set off on quad bikes the following day. We rumble past clapboard houses painted tropical turquoise, fuchsia or yellow. Their residents wave and call a welcome good morning: "Bom dia!" We reach Roça Belo Monte, another example of tumbledown splendour high on a hill. "It's gorgeous. I ▶

The Angolan connection

Roça Agostinho Neto



Angola's historical, economic and cultural links with São Tomé and Príncipe are so strong that they even feature on the back of the 5,000-dobra note, which depicts São Tomé's most impressive plantation, Roça Agostinho Neto. Originally named Rio do Ouro, it was renamed Agostinho Neto in 1979 after the first Angolan president and poet (1922-79) to celebrate the political, military and financial help his government gave to the young republic. His bust still greets visitors on arrival at the roça, where there are plans to convert the former hospital building into a university campus for the island.

Historically, Angola's most significant role in the history of São Tomé and Príncipe is perhaps found at the fishing town of São João dos Angolares in the east of São Tomé. The Angolares, a fishing people populating the coastal stretches from Santa Catarina in the west down to Ilhéu das Rolas in the south, have fascinated the local imagination for a long time.

A distinct socio-cultural group of several thousand, they speak their own language, N'gola. For centuries, mystery surrounded the question of how the Angolares came to be on the island. Legend tells that the Angolares are the descendents of a slave ship from Angola shipwrecked here, whose Rei Amador led the most successful slave uprising in 1595. He remains a national hero and is very important to the Angolares and Santomean identity. The Angolares' Creole culture remains alive in language and rituals, in bulaué music and the work of local artists. The dramatic works of Fernando de Macedo (1927-2006) focus on Angolar history giving voice to this history of Santomean society. Macedo, a Portuguese writer who styled himself as a descendant of the last Angolan king, celebrates the landscape and the force of tradition on the island. You can impress the locals here with a few words of their N'gola language: *Ma vira-ó? Everything ok? N' sabóá! Everything is fine!*





His **Impressionistic** work of **exuberant colours** and **local scenes** sells for **high prices** in Lisbon and is on display at the city's Teia D'@rte Gallery

want to buy this house and restore it to a boutique hotel," sighs Oscar. He is too late. A Portuguese company has had the same idea...

Footprint

The sun has come out. Below is Praia Banana, a curve of white sand with gin-clear water that was once the setting for a Bacardi rum commercial. There's not a single other footprint in the sand on this picture-perfect beach. We run to dive into the sea.

It is a 40-minute hop in a propeller plane across the 150km of ocean that divides Príncipe from São Tomé and its 'international' airport – grass grows between the cracks on the runway and goats and hens roam outside. Two hulking rusting 1950s propeller planes sit on a slipway.

In São Tomé's tiny capital I wander the streets, making small talk with money-changers with battered briefcases, and admiring colonial-style buildings with ornate wooden balconies that would not look out of place in Havana. Overlooking it all is the lumbering white fortress of São Sebastião, built by the Portuguese in 1576 and now the national museum. The curator moves a stone trap door. Rebellious plantation workers used to be placed in the dungeon beneath and dealt with by the tide.

Swarming the capital's main square are saffron-yellow taxis alongside a raucous market where women sit with pyramids of limes, tomatoes and chillies, or piles of spiny breadfruit and pockmarked jackfruits. Others have enamel bowls, balanced on their heads, from which poke the jagged tails of *peixe voador* (flying fish).

Three hundred and sixty degrees of ocean mean that fish is always on the menu and during my stay I eat plenty, from sharing a simple meal of grilled fish and breadfruit with fishermen over a beach fire to an elaborate tasting menu of traditional San-

tomean cuisine at Roça São João.

This restored roça is the perfect example of a successful rural ecotourism venture. Run by celebrity chef João Carlos Silva, whose TV series *On the Plantation with Moustaches* has been hugely popular in Africa, it has six simple but elegant guest bedrooms with views over the forest down to the fishing village of São João dos Angolares.

Spices

The six-course tasting lunch uses spices that echo a heritage stretching from Mozambique to Angola and to Cape Verde. I savour rice fish balls with saffron and coriander; grilled tuna with vanilla seeds; omelette de micoco, a thyme-like herb, and the national dish calulú, a stew made from smoked chicken and fresh herbs.

On my last evening at Café e Companhia, a bar where tables spill into the street, I meet a young Santomean painter, Kwame Sousa. His Impressionistic work of exuberant colours and local scenes sells for high prices in Lisbon and is on display at the city's Teia D'@rte Gallery that exhibits work by native artists and those from former Portuguese colonies.

"Life is so real here and the colours are so unreal," enthuses Kwame. In recent years, he says, the islands have become an artistic mecca. To prove the point, he invites me to a street party near the gallery where we see more innovative work on show and where a kizomba band plays a sensual but stomping rhythm that has its roots in the music's Angolan heritage.

I leave São Tomé and Príncipe in a blur of colour: from the bright yellows and purples of cocoa pods; to the pink of the porcelain-like rose endemic to the isles; to the cobalt waters that shine through the palm trees, this is a dazzling country that offers a very warm welcome. ■

How to get there

Sarah Monaghan travelled to São Tomé and Príncipe with Africa's Eden (www.africas-eden.com). Activities depend on the season and include guided island-exploration tours, plantation visits, trekking, birdwatching, whale watching, sea turtle night viewing, quad biking, sports fishing, kayaking, snorkelling and diving.

From Europe: You can travel to São Tomé and Príncipe directly from Lisbon with TAP or via Gabon with Air France, Gabon Airlines, Royal Air Maroc or Lufthansa, with a connecting flight to São Tomé (one hour from Libreville) with the Equatorial Guinean airline CEIBA on Mondays and Fridays. Africa's Eden's own airline Africa's Connection connects São Tomé with Príncipe.

From Angola: STP Airways flies each Wednesday to and from Luanda; The Angolan airline TAAG flies twice a week, Sunday and Friday.

The local currency is the Santomean dobra (\$) although euros are widely accepted. Portuguese is the lingua franca; French is also widely spoken, and some English.

