

**W**HERE DOES OUR WORLD begin? Where on Earth is the map reference 'nought, nought'? The answer lies in the waters of the Gulf of Guinea, West Africa. Here the zero lines of longitude and latitude – the Greenwich meridian and the equator – bisect. The closest island nation to this point, slap bang on the equator, is the tiny country of São Tomé and Príncipe.

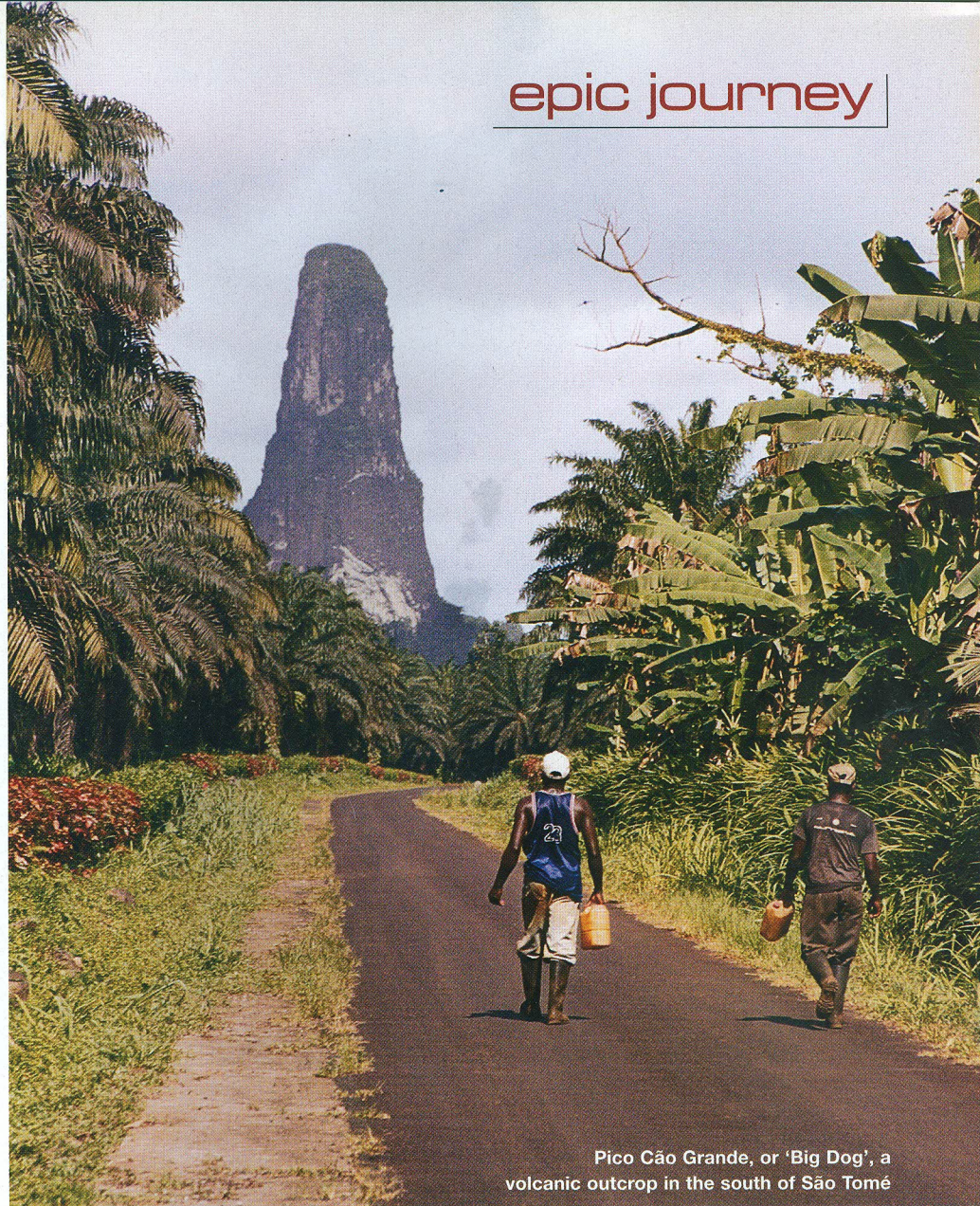
It's less than 30 years since the Portuguese colonial powers left this tropical archipelago, and in their absence it is the plant kingdom that has been busy recolonising. Cobbled roads that were being forged across São Tomé – the larger of the two islands – are now thick with foliage. The 19th-century plantations, once a major source of the world's coffee and cocoa, are being strangled by the wild. Ferns sprout from mossy lintels and trees reach for the sky from the small, now-roofless rooms that were the living quarters of slaves. In one such place – not much more than stone stables – one end of the building is ruined, reclaimed by the vigorous growth of the rainforest. Yet at the other end of the 10-room block, a couple in their fifties live in a dark, dank room.

Their names are Luis and Beladina and they are plantation workers. Each day they toil in the hot and humid fields; keeping the jungle at bay or picking cocoa prized by French chocolatiers for its 'subtle grassy and liquorice notes'.

Beladina has never tasted chocolate, let alone French-made 'pure São Tomé' chocolate. She cooks flying fish and *taro* on an open fire in their porch, and uses empty tins for saucepans. In their one small room there is nothing but a bed and a radio playing upbeat Brazilian rhythms.

Beyond Luis and Beladina's medieval hovel, down a few miles of the cobbled road navigable only by four-wheel-drives, is an old plantation house where, back in the early 20th century, the colonial owners lorded it over their workers on another plantation, or *roça*.

The house is large and rickety – balustrades are broken, plumbing erratic, electricity non-existent – yet it has faded grandeur and a view to the black-sand bay of São João dos Angolares. This village is so named because it is inhabited by the *Angolares*, descendants of Angolan slaves washed ashore from a shipwreck in the 15th century and possibly already well-established on the island when the Portuguese 'discovered' São Tomé in the 1470s.



Pico Cão Grande, or 'Big Dog', a volcanic outcrop in the south of São Tomé

## After the coffee rush

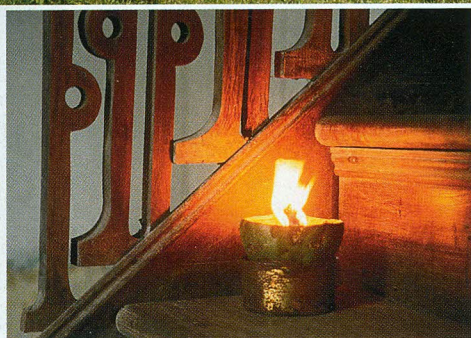
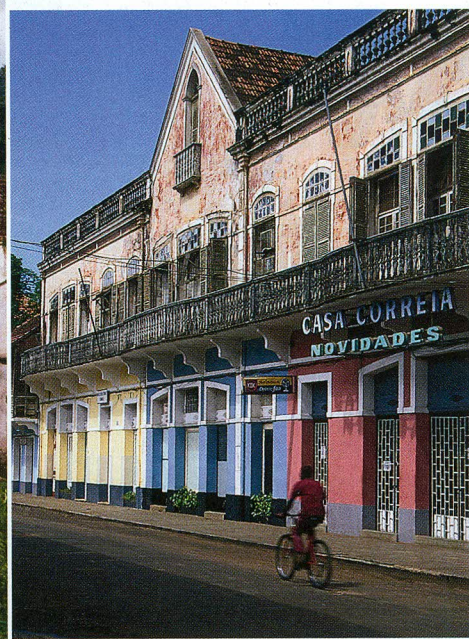
**São Tomé and Príncipe** Jungle is reclaiming the grand plantation houses, and a perfect resort setting is deserted. But Paul Miles sees potential in the West African islands

Tourists can stay in the plantation house as long as they are prepared for the basic conditions. Forget luxuries such as the choice of feather or foam from a 'pillow menu': you'll be lucky if you get a pillow of any description. Meals, cooked and served by the young male staff, are simple and use only local produce: fresh fish, caught by fishermen from their dug-out canoes, and breadfruit from nearby trees, all spiced up with a dish of nose-tingly hot chilli. The house is still being restored, and when I visited as part of a tour group the

nicest bedroom was distinctly Latin, with its ochre walls, plain, colonial bed, pea-green door and lilac shutters framing a view of the sea.

In the evenings we dined by candlelight, and the moon rose over the bay to shine through the breadfruit trees; musicians came to play and sing songs of love and longing, songs borrowed from Cape Verde, from where many plantation workers were recruited. Two of the musicians were also artists, and in the plantation house itself one room has been turned into ➤





► an art gallery. There was a surprising mix of bright Chagall- and Picasso-style paintings and sculptures: colourful, magical images inspired by youthfulness and freedom. With the coffee and cocoa industries dying, perhaps hospitality, music and art will be the beginning of a new way of life for the present generation.

One Saturday evening in São Tomé town, which was quiet but for the occasional hooting of horns from trucks loaded with people going to a wedding reception, a group of lads beckoned me to join them on the street corner. A CD player on a table was belting out Angolan *culuro* and Brazilian samba. Some boys were dancing on the wide pavement. They had decided to have an 'official launch' of their 'street youth place' – their weekend street-corner rendezvous. They had collected money among themselves to buy food and offered me a plate-full from a big pot. It smelled delicious. 'Shellfish,' they said in Portuguese. 'But from the ground, not the sea.' What I saw when they took the lid off was a stew of large, brown mushrooms. They were piquant and oily and combined well with breadfruit cooked in the fire; but they weren't mushrooms, they were chewy snails, called *busio*, from the forest. We ate

and drank and danced to music from around the world and they told me about their lives. 'We don't have any drugs in São Tomé,' said Adinex, a 19-year-old boy who spoke English. 'There's no crime either, never anything like a bank robbery or a mugging.' When I asked about tourism, he was adamant that there was none in São Tomé. I explained that there was a little, and that I, for instance, was a tourist. He looked shocked. It was when he said that São Tomé would never be like Afghanistan that I realised he had misunderstood.

Although free from terrorism, slavery and forced labour, the new generation has problems of its own. 'It's hard for people to find jobs when they leave school. I want to go to university and then join the oil companies,' said Adinex. Oil is destined to be the country's next big money-spinner. Exploration is beginning in the Gulf of Guinea, in partnership with Nigeria, and in

**With the coffee and cocoa industries dying, perhaps hospitality, music and art will be a new way of life for the present generation**

**Clockwise from top left, the crumbling Roça Bombaim plantation; São Tomé town; old coffee-bean wagons on the plantation; two views of the interior of Roça São João**

the next 10 years or so President Fradique de Menezes reckons oil platforms will surround the islands. There are those who hope that this won't be the start of just another short-lived boom period in the country's history. 'We're trying to convince the government to develop other sectors, such as tourism, and not just depend on oil,' says Alejandro Diz Rodriguez, a Spaniard working in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The UNDP has drafted a strategic plan for tourism development. Among other things, it lays down guidelines for dealing with any overseas investors who want to restore plantation houses, currently wasting away and being chopped up for firewood. But the guidelines may lie gathering dust for a few more years. 'The government is focused on oil,' says Rodriguez. 'It's a shame because the country is perfect for tourism – it's a mix of Seychelles and Cuba, with amazing beaches, and lovely old towns and buildings.'

At night, the capital's wide roads are more or less deserted. During the day ►





Above, bamboo trees form a natural canopy over a road in Obo National Park. Above right, Augustino Neto plantation once grew cocoa



➤ there is some bustle around the market, where people sell corn, vegetables and herbs from the forest. The streets are full of yellow taxis and bicycles avoiding muddy potholes. But just a stroll away from the commerce, goats and pigs amble down the roads, foraging in garbage or tugging at grass sprouting from the pavement. Fallen leaves are swept into heaps only to be blown away again, and large palm fronds and tree branches litter the Tarmac. It wouldn't take too long for São Tomé town to revert to jungle, too.

Fewer than 5,000 visitors from Europe went to São Tomé and Príncipe in 2000, and only a handful of those were tourists. It's the kind of place where, if you sit with an espresso at the only pavement café on the seafront outside the Hotel Miramar, you find yourself being invited along to the expat parties, so rare are visitors. The country doesn't seem to realise how much it has to offer; the selection of postcards at a dollar each depict a cocoa tree, the modern office block on the seafront, cars on a road. But the potential for tourism is everywhere: beaches, rainforests and rivers and the pastel shades of crumbling colonial elegance.

In the absence of any government-sponsored tourism promotion, adventure tourists are beginning to discover the islands for themselves. Travelling with the British company Explore Worldwide, our group of 14 made the two-day hike through the rainforest to Roça São João –

an ecosystem that drenched us in a biblical deluge for hours on end.

Despite steep descents, gushing streams and the fact that not all of us were outdoor types, we survived unscathed except for the odd bruise and ruined hair-do. 'It's a good job I've got waterproof mascara,' said one woman at the end of a day of cataclysmic downpours.

An EU-funded project has cleared paths in Obo National Park, the idea being that small-scale ecotourism will help protect some of the diverse flora and fauna. We hiked for up to nine hours a day, at times over slippery rocks and twisted roots, crossing rivers with the helping hands of local guides. There are endemic white-flowering begonias that reach several metres in height, trees with buttress roots the size of a small house and countless stands of bamboo towering over the path like crashing tsunamis.

We reached the top of a 1,500-metre volcano and spied the peaks of sugar-loaf mountains rising through the mist. We saw monkeys swinging through the tree-tops and a long, black snake slithering menacingly over branches. There were giant sunbirds and paradise-flycatchers – two of the 26 endemic species on the island.

Our guide, Pedro Nobre, one of the

**So rare are visitors that if you sit at the only seafront café outside the Hotel Miramar you'll be invited along to expat parties**

minority of the population who can speak fluent English, pointed out trees used for medicine and magic, mostly to invigorate the sex lives of flagging men, sometimes with priapic consequences. 'A young friend, who didn't really need it, made some very strong tea from the leaves and was in hospital for three days,' smiled Pedro.

At the end of the first day's hike, we wound our way down a dirt road to an open clearing where the evening sun shone golden on the fronts of old, decaying buildings around a large, grassy field. The whole scene, with misty, jungle-cloaked mountains behind and children chasing pigs between the rows of crumbling workers' quarters, was timeless. This was Roça Bombaim, another one of the country's plantations where the *casa grande* is being restored for tourists. Like Roça São João, it has a long way to go before it can be described as comfortable: there is no electricity, poor plumbing, and only the barest essentials in the bedrooms. Our group was too large for the facilities on offer and several of us had to sleep on mattresses on the floor; and there was always a queue for the two bathrooms. But the setting is magnificent and the food was good and hearty, with welcome cold beers and imported Portuguese wines.

I wandered around the workers' quarters opposite. An old man showed me a snake-skin nailed to the wall to dry, and asked if I wanted to buy it for five dollars. Another man, Miguel, then took me into his empty room and produced the head of a snake marinated in an oily liquid stored in an old plastic bottle. 'It's good for rheumatism,' he claimed. He was young and muscular and didn't look as though he suffered from such aches and pains.

Unlike Miguel, the country is ailing – at least until the oil revenue begins to come in – and more than 70 per cent of the nation's income comes from aid. It was not always so. In the 16th century, São Tomé and Príncipe was the world's largest producer of sugar; now the little that is grown is turned into the mind-numbing alcoholic drink *aguadente*. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, coffee and cocoa brought more wealth; but it was a wealth built on slavery, even long after the practice had officially been abolished by the Portuguese. As recently as the 1950s people were still being forced to work on plantations. In 1953, Portuguese troops killed thousands who protested against a 'work brigade'.

In the museum housed in the 16th-century fort on the seafront of São Tomé town, there are photographs of ➤





Banana Beach in Príncipe gets its name from its natural curvature

► some of the bloated, bloodied bodies as well as the bayonets and chains used to kill them. Next door to the 'massacre room' in the 'colonial epoch' room is an elaborate silver tray which was presented by the local chamber of commerce, the *Empregados de Comercio*, to the man who gave the order to kill, Governor Carlos de Sousa Gorgulho, a year before the massacre.

Perhaps to compensate for its harsh rule, a fair amount of aid now comes from Portugal, especially for culture and art. The Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza Vieira plans to restore the ruins of the tiny capital of Príncipe island, with the aim of achieving UNESCO World Heritage status.

Just 110sq km and with a population of about 5,000 people, Príncipe is 'quieter' than São Tomé, according to Pedro, our rainforest guide. And it's true. There are only 29 vehicles on the island. Most people walk, cycle or cadge a lift in someone else's four-wheel-drive. In the 'town' of Santo António, the wide roads are empty but for groups of schoolchildren walking arm in arm. A boy collects discarded cans for recycling and two men spend a good 10 minutes admiring a new pair of flip-flops for strength of sole.

There's only one decent place from which to appreciate Príncipe: Bom Bom Island Resort, owned by Chris Hellinger, a wealthy South African who wanted to find somewhere beautiful and remote to fish for marlin and sailfish with his friends. He certainly found it, and 10 years ago bought his small corner of paradise and built 25 rondavels and a restaurant/bar on an islet opposite. Perhaps because marlin fishing seems to be a rich man's hobby, or because it's so remote, the place is more or less empty most of the

year. During my stay the only other guests were a woman writing the first travel guide to the country and a French engineer working on an aid project.

The topography is something you might sketch on an envelope if asked to draw the perfect resort setting: a rocky knoll on a promontory with long palm-fringed beaches on either side, one for sunrise views, the other for sunset; a rainforested islet opposite the promontory, close enough to walk to when the tide's out, with a back-drop of jungle-clad mountains. Hellinger knows his stuff when it comes to resort locations. I'm not so sure about his interior-design skills though: in the rondavels there are dark-stained tree-trunk coffee tables, frilly lampshades

and bright fabrics. The dubious taste continues in the restaurant and bar on the small islet of Bom Bom, reached by a 230-metre wooden walkway. But the food is good: freshly caught fish that all end in vowels – barracuda and *wahoo*, *bonito* and *dorado* – and local vegetables. There's South African wine (from Hellinger's estate, of course) and strong São Tomé coffee.

Not far from Bom Bom, along the red dirt roads, there are more ruined plantation houses, one of which, Sundry, is still habitable and used by the president as a country retreat. It has wonderful tiled floors and curvaceous cane furniture and conveys how grand the living used to be.

As if the sugar-loaf peaks, jungle and old colonial grandeur were not enough, Príncipe's beaches are, well, perfect. Banana Beach, near Bom Bom, was chosen by Bacardi as the location for an advertisement. Large black rocks at one end, steeply shelving sands and clear water. And the only sign of humanity is the small bobbing boat of the newly settled European plantation owners who live at the top of the hill in their restored *casa grande*. The Portuguese couple are making a go of the plantations again as well as growing chillies and pineapples. They're even starting to develop small-scale tourism.

It seems as if they have decided to fight back against the jungle, for our lifetime at least. Who can blame them when they've chosen to begin anew somewhere so beautiful? Somewhere so original. ①

## São Tomé and Príncipe

### GETTING THERE

**TAP Air Portugal** (0870 240 0033 [www.tap-airportugal.co.uk](http://www.tap-airportugal.co.uk)) flies from London to São Tomé and Príncipe via Lisbon every Friday, from £600 return in November.

### STAYING THERE

**Bom Bom Island Resort** (00 239 251141; e-mail: [bombom@cstome.net](mailto:bombom@cstome.net)) costs US\$175 per person per night, full board. Adventure specialist **Explore Worldwide** (01252 760000; [www.exploreworldwide.com](http://www.exploreworldwide.com)) has a 17-day West African trip to Gabon which includes seven days in São Tomé (but no time in Príncipe). Its 16-day Gabon Primate Search and São Tomé tour costs £2,150 per person, including flights with Air Gabon, plus a €480 'local payment'. There is no national tourist office in São Tomé and Príncipe, but the local tour operator **Navetur** (00 239 222 122; [www.navetur-equator.st](http://www.navetur-equator.st)) will offer advice and arrange tours, local accommodation and inter-island flights (five times a week).

### BEFORE YOU GO

A **visa** to Gabon must be acquired beforehand but the São Tomé and Príncipe visa can be bought on arrival for US\$50 per person. A **yellow fever** certificate is required for entry into both Gabon and São Tomé. Vaccinations for typhoid, hepatitis A, polio and meningitis are recommended, as is malaria protection. The **Bradt Travel Guide to Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe** by Sophie Warne costs £13.95.

