

SPRING/SUMMER 2025

DEPARTURES



Getting Real

Denim and Diamonds – Art in Bangkok – Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul

TERRA



Swathed in vast tracts of untouched nature, a slow but seismic evolution is underway for the pristine island of Príncipe – and ecological sustainability and its people are at its heart.

INCOGNITA



The jungle-covered island of Príncipe, some 220 kilometres off the coast of Gabon in the Gulf of Guinea

By Ann Abel
Photographs by Scott Ramsay

Back when the world was still mysterious, cartographers used the abbreviation “HBD” to denote uncharted regions. It meant “here be dragons” because, for all they knew, there may have been.

Now, HBD is the name of the largest – the only, really – travel outfitter on the West African island of Príncipe. It’s a fitting name, because the island, the afterthought half of the tiny nation of São Tomé and Príncipe, remains largely unexplored by the outside world. It’s home to only about 8,000 of the nearly 240,000 people in the country, which is the second-least populated country in Africa and one of the least-visited places in the world.

The island was something of a blank slate when HBD’s founder, South African (one-time) billionaire Mark Shuttleworth, came across this speck of land in the Gulf of Guinea about 15 years ago. (“One-time” because he used a chunk of his wealth to become the world’s second-ever space tourist, says HBD spokesperson Diana Relêgo, an experience that likely made him appreciate the fragility of the Earth.)

There were no roads. What little infrastructure was left from its colonial era had largely crumbled in the years since the Portuguese left in the 1970s. The islands had once been a significant producer of cacao, the raw ingredient in chocolate, and the dwindling vestiges of plantation production were still hanging on.

Nature, meanwhile, was thriving. While there were (probably) no dragons, there were many other creatures, enough to earn the island the nickname “Africa’s Eden”. Its 142 square kilometres are home to some of the highest levels of endemism found anywhere on Earth, including more than 40 unique animal species. Its volcanic peaks are dense with forest, and its golden sand beaches are lapped by crystal-clear water.

What you see here is nature – lots and lots of it: thundering waterfalls, vivid-red ginger flowers and gaudily plumed birds. You'll also come across a small but friendly community.

When Shuttleworth first visited the island, all of that was under threat. Palm-oil cultivation had already taken root in São Tomé, and the conglomerates were eyeing Príncipe. The islanders were resisting, having observed the deforestation of the larger island and nearby Cabo Verde, to which many residents had family ties.

The Príncipe found a supporter in Shuttleworth, who was willing to bet on sustainable agriculture and a form of luxury tourism that's not based on exploitation. Now the largest employer on the island, HBD worked with the government to invest in conservation and preservation from the beginning. In 2015, it established the nonprofit Príncipe Foundation, which today has a team of more than 50 employees, virtually all of them local, overseeing projects related to turtle conservation, migratory and resident whale and dolphin research, and community development.

Shuttleworth is working to strengthen environmental protections on the island, even though robust efforts to preserve its natural treasures are already in place. The entirety of Príncipe was designated a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve in 2012. The efforts now are to "sensitise, educate and empower communities to preserve local biodiversity through the creation of alternative income opportunities that reduce pressure on natural resources". That's pretty standard NGO-speak, but it also implicitly supports HBD's new Natural Dividend programme. The company is establishing a trust that will pay quarterly cash dividends to the people of Príncipe to reflect the value of local natural ecosystems, further incentivising responsible land use and ecosystem preservation.

But the lovely thing about visiting Príncipe is that absolutely none of this is in your face. What you see is nature – lots and lots of it: thundering waterfalls, giant taro leaves as big as your torso, vivid-red ginger flowers and gaudily plumed birds. You'll also come across a small but friendly community, particularly in the one town, Santo António, where the church is the prettiest building in sight and where locals and visitors gather in simple restaurants like Beira Mar by Juditinha, where grilled fish and fried plantains are served with a hot sauce made from Angolan chillis whose name aptly translates to "hole in your pants".





Above: a blissfully secluded three-bedroom villa at Sundry Praia, in the island's northwestern reaches; *facing page:* a time-worn chapel at Roça Sundry, a former cocoa plantation-cum-resort

And what you experience is a particularly gentle, yet stylish, form of hospitality. HBD renovated the largest cacao plantation on the island into the historic Roça Sundry hotel, whose restored 18th- and 19th-century buildings have a graceful back-in-time feel (and some fun-fact historical bona fides: Einstein's general theory of relativity was proven here in 1919, when British astrophysicist Arthur Eddington chose it for its geographical coordinates and pitch-dark night sky).

HBD's follow-up was the lavishly tented Sundry Praia, a beachside enclave of 15 canvas villas within the rainforest and beside the sea whose top-notch design, service and cuisine earned it a place in Small Luxury Hotels' collection of stays. And last year, the group wrapped up a four-year renovation of its crown jewel, Bom Bom, Shuttleworth's first project on the island. Originally conceived in the 1980s, when it was developed as a simple lodge for marlin fishermen, the renowned French interior and architectural design agency DL2A oversaw the reimagination of its 18

hillside and beachfront bungalows. Now, they're subtle and simple but also spiced up with African textiles and artworks inside.

There's a new restaurant and bar between the two golden crescents of beach, but it's not the sort of hotel where guests are meant to stay put. There are excursions galore: by boat, to see the island's beaches and coves, by foot, to pass by the waterfalls, or just visit town for lunch. And, as with all HBD hotel guests, those staying at Bom Bom can opt for visits to the small museums of Eddington's work and remnants of the island's plantation architecture at Roça Sundry.

And cacao production is back, albeit in a much different way than in the past. The working conditions are dignified, the environmental precautions are solid – it's labelled bird-safe, which makes you wonder about the rest of the chocolate shop – and the product is delicious. It's another way in which HBD and the people of Príncipe are not out to erase the past. Instead, they're working to do things better. hbdprincipe.com

THE ESSENTIALS

Príncipe

Príncipe ◦
São Tomé ◦



When to Go

The rainy season lasts much of the year – no surprise given the green of the rainforest – but there are often breaks in the clouds. We recommend April and May for relatively good weather, fewer tourists, and turtles hatching on some beaches, but other seasons have their charms as well: August to October for whale-watching, December to May for orchid-spotting, or November to February for photogenic blue skies.

Island Exclusive

The magnificently plumed Príncipe kingfisher is endemic to the island, and can be found stalking its prey – small fish and insects – along freshwater streams and ponds.



MADE IN PRÍNCIPE

Cooperativa de Valorização de Resíduos is a collective of ten local women who turn glass and plastic waste into beaded jewellery.



Checking In

Bom Bom is the oldest hotel in the Príncipe Collection, but also the most fresh from a renovation, with 18 freestanding bungalows lined up in front of a golden sand beach (book the delightfully secluded room 19, perched by itself on Santa Rita Beach); **Rocha Sundry** is a history-steeped plantation hotel, with graceful verandas, period furnishings and a museum of old implements used in chocolate production (pictured above); **Sundy Praia** offers high luxury, with 15 gorgeous tented villas, some with private pools, and an elegant restaurant under a dramatic bamboo-and-thatch ceiling; **Belo Monte Hotel**, set on an erstwhile cacao plantation, will join this clutch of Príncipe Collection properties later this year. principecollection.com

Up, Up & Away
4,550km

... is the length of the only flight to the nation from outside Africa, a journey from Lisbon to São Tomé on TAP Air Portugal. The short hop from São Tomé to Príncipe can be taken with the national carrier, STP Airways, or via AfriJet.



THE SÃO TOMÉ Stopover

Because the international flights arrive and depart from São Tomé (and tourism logistics are still in their early days), you'll need to spend at least one night on the larger island. Also part of the Príncipe Collection, the OMALI hotel is ideal for that layover, with an excellent restaurant, a serene swimming pool, and an easy location between the airport and the main city (also called São Tomé). It's worth venturing off-campus to see the SÃO SEBASTIÃO MUSEUM in a 16th-century fortress and the art exhibitions at CACAU (Casa das Artes Criação Ambiente Utopias), or have a drink at one of the waterfront cafes, such as O PIRATA (+239 992 6420) or NOVENTA GRAUS (+239 998 0520).

COCOA CONFIDENTIAL

Must-have morsels from São Tomé and Príncipe

CLAUDIO CORALLO has two thriving plantations spanning both islands, churning out acclaimed 70-80 per cent pure-chocolate bars, raw cocoa nibs and the signature Ubrioc 1, uniquely flavoured with cacao-pulp distillate, claudiocorallo.com; DIOGO VAZ's beans, organically grown in a 420ha cocoa forest on São Tomé, give way to multi-award-winning bars, which you can also pick up at its outpost in the buzzy Mercado da Vila, just outside Lisbon, diogovaz.pt

