



São Tomé had the potential to be excellent in the summer, when storms from the southern hemisphere wrapped the island in swells. (I had arrived in October, the start of the rainy season.) But Chum said the few surfers who came to São Tomé went across to Ilhéu das Rolas, an islet just off the coast with a luxury resort called Pestana Equador.

Instead of staying on Rolas I had made a reservation at the eco lodge near Porto Alegre. It was even more rudimentary than it sounded, just a clearing at the end of a forest trail with three double wooden cabins and a public lavatory. The only amenities were candles and mosquito nets. But Jalé Beach was one of the remotest, most pristine I had ever seen, and my shack was on a palm-fringed stretch of sand with reliable surfing waves. Grilled-fish meals arrived from Porto Alegre by motorcycle. For two days, Chum's village – three miles distant – had been my metropolis.

By comparison, the old plantation house at Angolares felt luxurious. But something made me feel uncomfortable when I went down for lunch. The young woman introduced me to the owner, João Carlos Silva, a large man with a small grey beard. He sat behind his table with a drink and a slow-burning cigarette. "Bienvenue," he said. "Sit anywhere you like." The tables all overlooked the smoking, clamouring village of Angolares and a slope overgrown with bananas and palms. São Tomé is an old slave island, desperately poor, and almost every town is a former plantation – a teeming village with a house on the hill. Life under Portuguese rule had been brutal until independence in 1975. Nothing could make up for that, though things were better now that São Tomé governed itself. I asked Chum what they needed in Porto Alegre. Surprisingly, he focused on surf equipment. "The ropes that you have for your leg," he said. "We don't have all of those any more. And a kind of soap that you put on the board..."

"Tell him I have wax," I said to Quintino. "I should have thought about leashes."

Chum was quiet, almost truculent, in the village. But when we carried our boards past the dugout canoes and paddled into the waves, he became a different person – confident, relaxed, eager to show off his local break. We paddled through a channel in the currents to a spot where the waves were shoulder-high and nicely formed.

We surfed for two hours, and it was terrific fun. Soon, a boy of about 12 paddled out on a tambua. He was mischievous, round-headed, almost bald, with a quick, brilliant smile. While we traded waves I realised I wanted to try his board. When I asked him to swap, Chum told him to co-operate with the tone of an older brother saying, from personal experience, "You're



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crazy if you don't. He might give you his board." This had not been my intention. I happened to like my surfboard, and I'd started to plaster it with stickers from every part of the world. But I was happy to switch. For half an hour we all tried each other's boards. Surfing the tambua was as awkward as I expected. I floated on it, barely. I paddled for a wave, lamely. I tumbled in the whitewash. The board was a curved section of a canoe's hull, splintery and waterlogged and rough.

"How is it?" said Sean, the other surfer who worked in São Tomé city.

"Like trying to surf driftwood."

The local kids could ride it; Chum could even steer it with his feet. But when the 12-year-old, whose name was Dende, returned our boards, he made a point of saying that he liked mine because of the size. To make sure I understood him, I pointed to Sean's smaller board and said, "It's better, or no?"

He said instantly, like a cat complaining, "Não." It was impulsive and affectionate, with a gentle, mischievous aggression that stayed in my mind. In fact, it had been nagging me all afternoon. Because now I

was here in Angolares, still in possession of the board. I'd left it up to fate: if I saw Dende on my way out of town, I would give him the board. If not, never mind.

**Above: a Santoméan boy stands up to surf on a hand-carved board. Below: a collection of local, hand-made boards with a conventional surfboard.**



No need to force it. Gifts could help people or insult them, and Africans needed other stuff besides surfboards. I didn't see Dende, so no big deal. In Africa the thing to do is spend money in the local economy and then donate to decent charities.

Later, over lunch on the terrace in Angolares, Silva and I conversed in French. "Why São Tomé?" he said, and I told him.

"I didn't know the surf was good on this island," he said. "Rich Portuguese come here to relax. The hiking and birdwatching can be very good. But we don't see so many surfers. Tourism is not what it could be."

Which meant that Dende might not see another modern board for years. Not that he needed a surfboard the way he needed other things. But a circuit felt incomplete; suddenly, my board seemed like a cheap thing to own. I ordered a taxi to Porto Alegre.

It was three hours there and back in the rain. In the end, we traded. I offered Dende my tri-fin for his tambua, and the last I saw of my board it was walking down a muddy path on a parade of happy children's hands. ♦

### BEACH, BED AND BOARD

The best time to go surfing in São Tomé is in the dry season (about 25°C) from May to September, when swells come up from the southern Atlantic. **Navetur-Equatour** ([www.navetur-equatour.st](http://www.navetur-equatour.st)) in São Tomé city can book accommodation, treks and car rental; it also offers package tours with return flights from Lisbon and seven nights' B&B, from €1,069. **Black Tomato** (020-7426 9894; [www.blacktomato.co.uk](http://www.blacktomato.co.uk)) offers six nights half-board in Omali Lodge, São Tomé plus flights, from £2,499. **Roca São João dos Angolares** ([www.rocasaojoao.com](http://www.rocasaojoao.com)), B&B €39.90. **Jalé Ecolodge** ([www.praiajale.free.fr](http://www.praiajale.free.fr)), B&B €25. **Pestana** ([www.pestana.com](http://www.pestana.com)) operates four local resorts, rooms from €133. There are no ATMs on the islands so it's smart to pay for lodging in advance. Euros and dollars serve as secondary currencies and can be exchanged at most banks for Santoméan *dobras*. Banks will give a cash advance on a credit card, but traveller's cheques can be difficult to cash. **STP Airways** ([www.stpairways.st](http://www.stpairways.st)) and **TAP Portugal** (0845-601 0932; [www.flytap.com](http://www.flytap.com)) fly from Lisbon to São Tomé, from €866.