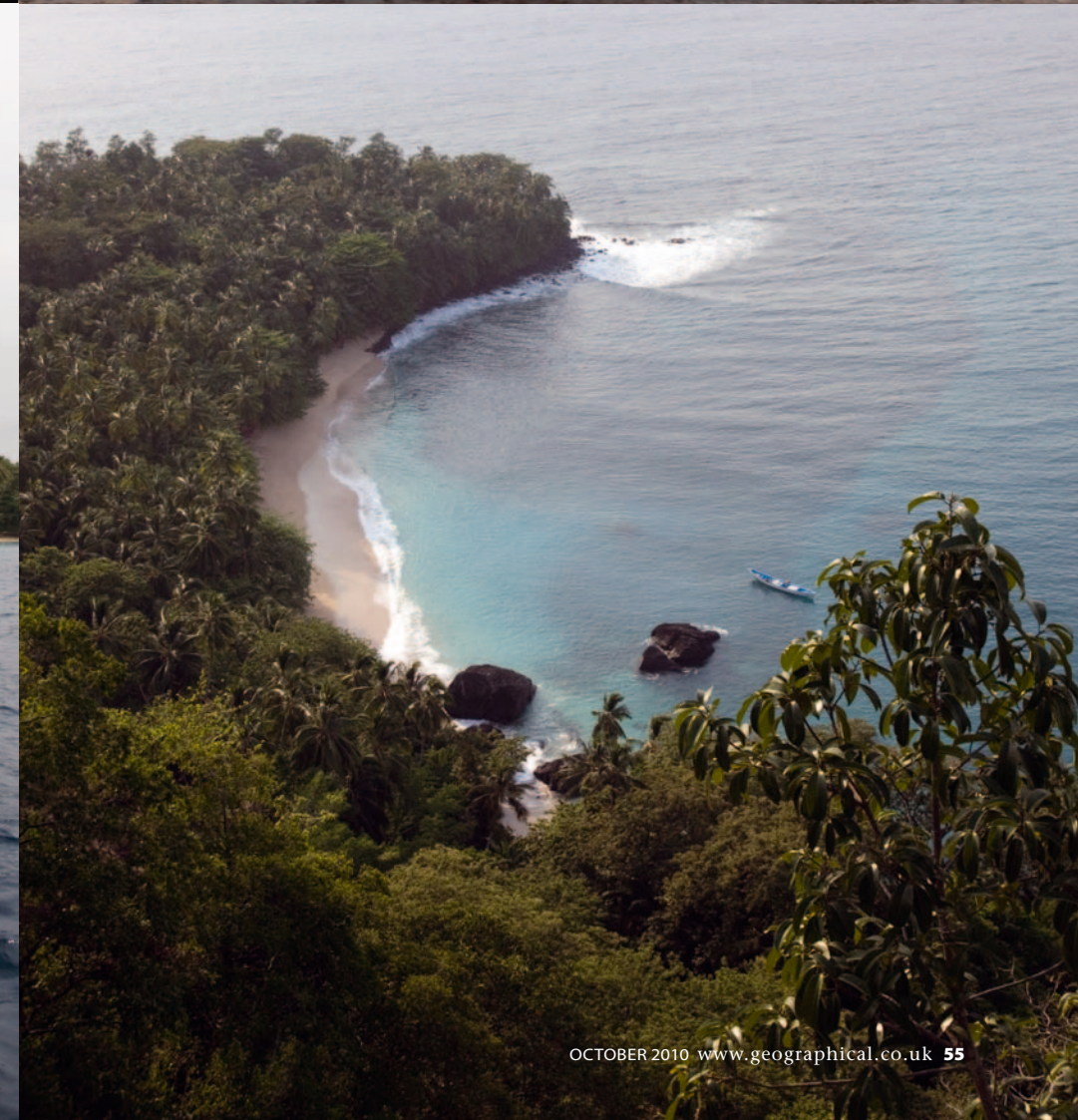


Africa's OFFSHORE ASSETS

Nestled just above the equator in the Gulf of Guinea, the tiny island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe has striven to forge a new identity since independence from Portugal in 1975. Its crumbling coffee and cocoa plantations speak of its colonial history, but tourism and oil are set to shape its future, writes **Nick Haslam**

PHOTOGRAPHS *by* NICK HASLAM

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: the forests of mountainous southern Príncipe. Much of this area forms part of Obô National Park, which covers 300 square kilometres across both islands; cyclists on São Tomé. Cycling is a handy way to get about the islands due to a lack of heavy traffic; overlooking Banana Beach from Roça Belo Monte on Príncipe's north coast. A television advertisement for a brand of rum was once filmed on the beach; fishermen sail in a dugout off the coast of Príncipe





In direct line of fire of the 18th-century Portuguese cannons on the crenellated ramparts of São Tomé's lime-washed fort, the silhouette of a huge oil exploration platform, like some ghostly square rigger, can dimly be seen on the horizon. With oil-rich strata recently discovered close offshore, the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe are poised at a vital crossroads. International tenders for the rights to drill on the seafloor have fetched high prices, leading to speculation that the islands would make the perfect permanent platforms for oil processing and transhipment.

Yet for the moment, the determination of Santomeans, as locals are known, to protect the unspoilt beauty of their remote islands from destruction remains consistent. 'Oil,' says São Tomé's prime minister, Rafael Branco, as he looks out over the shimmering expanse of the Gulf of Guinea, 'is a source of great wealth, that's true. But how long will it last – 30 or 40 years? Here in the islands, the pristine nature of our beaches and rainforest can last far longer. It is in our interest to ensure it stays that way.'

FORMER COLONY

Africa's second-smallest independent nation, with a population of nearly 200,000, the two tiny islands of São Tomé and Príncipe sit just north of the equator, 200 kilometres off the shore of

post and depot for the transatlantic slave trade, but it wasn't until coffee and then cocoa were introduced during the late 18th century that the economy began to boom.

By the mid-19th century, São Tomé had become one of the top cocoa producers in the world, and its arabica coffee was famous in the coffee houses of Europe. Huge patrician estates, known as *roças*, each with a church, school, hospital and stately manor at its centre, were set up, farmed by thousands of slaves, to be replaced by bonded labour from Mozambique, Angola and Cape Verde when slavery became illegal in 1875.

The 20th century brought stirrings of unrest from the immigrant workers, who found that conditions had little changed since the time of slavery. Portuguese colonial governors ruled with a rod of iron, brutally suppressing resistance and punishing revolt leaders with forced labour in work gangs. But it wasn't until 12 July 1975, following the end of the dictatorship in Portugal, that the islands finally gained full independence. Portuguese land owners and colonial administrators fled en masse, fearing reprisals. The large *roças* were seized and occupied by the workers and the islands went through two turbulent decades, supported by Soviet, Angolan and Cuban aid until perestroika during the 1980s.

'Oil is a great source of wealth, but how long will it last? Our pristine beaches and rainforest can last far longer. It is in our interest to ensure they stay that way'

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: arabica coffee flowers and fruits growing at Roça Monte Café, São Tomé. Located 500 metres up in the hills near Trindade, it once produced most of the island's coffee; an abandoned traction engine at Roça Sundry, which was the only coffee plantation on Príncipe; today, about 400 people live within the 1,657-hectare grounds of Roça Sundry; the staircase of the hospital at Roça Água Izé, a 2,600-hectare cocoa plantation on São Tomé that today produces palm oil

Gabon. The mountainous, thickly forested islands are of volcanic origin, lying on the Cameroon fault line, which extends to Lake Chad, far to the north on the African mainland.

They were uninhabited when they were first discovered in 1470 on the feast day of Saint Thomas by explorers Pedro Escobar and João de Santarém, who claimed the islands for their native Portugal. Within half a century, large numbers of slaves had been brought in from nearby west African countries to plant and harvest sugar cane, which flourished in the humid climate and rich soil. Over the next 200 years, the colony became a trading

Today, the country has a stable democratic multiparty system in place, but although small amounts of coffee and cocoa are still exported, the economy is moribund, with an average per capita wage of little more than one euro a day. Most of the *roças* have fallen into disrepair, the vast plantations engulfed and overgrown by the encroaching forest.

But sitting on the sidelines of Africa may prove to be the key to the future for Santomeans. With fertile soil and seas that teem with fish, islanders never go hungry, and their slow, easy-going approach to life – known locally as *léve-léve* – gives these remote islands a special and unique charm. Old *roças*,

with grand plantation houses now roofless and decaying, are home to the second or third generation of descendants of the bonded labourers who once worked on the land.

PLANTATION NATION

On a clear, sunny morning, I drive south from the eponymous capital of São Tomé, on the principal highway, a rough road that winds through small fishing villages with dugout canoes pulled up onto the beaches. The 40-kilometre journey to the pretty village of São João dos Angolares takes more than an hour, with the occasional stop to tip enterprising young boys who have filled in the many potholes by hand.

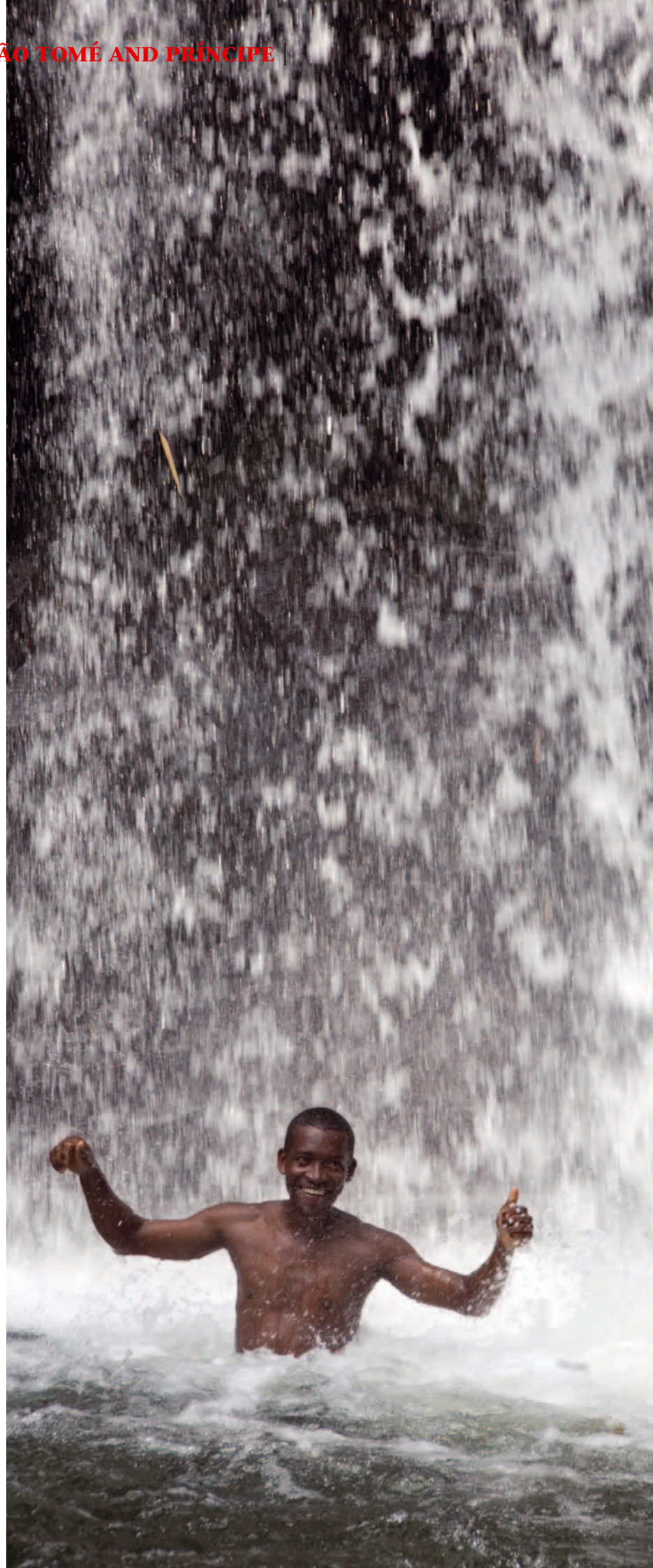
Founded by a group of runaway Angolan slaves during the 16th century, the village of timber shacks is

‘There is a peacefulness you won’t find elsewhere in Africa. It really is a forgotten paradise’

tucked beneath a small headland. Above, on a small hill, a beautiful old *roça* has been restored as an ecotourism venture by local NGOs to provide simple accommodation and a restaurant. Here, the redoubtable João Carlos Silva, a chef well known for his TV cooking programmes in both São Tomé and Portugal, holds court on the shaded veranda overlooking the fishing village below, serving up delicious meals of local produce – from fish balls mixed with saffron to grilled tuna and sardines marinated in lime juice.

‘São Tomé,’ he tells me, ‘is a tiny place, but with an extraordinary history. Our blood is a mix of European and African, our people are generous and giving, and there is a peacefulness here you won’t find elsewhere in Africa. It really is a forgotten paradise.’ Over a small cup of arabica coffee grown on the island, Carlos Silva gestures up to the luxuriant trees and hanging lianas above. ‘These places, so important in the past, will play a vital role in our

A local man bathes under Cascata São Nicolau, a waterfall close to Roça Monte Café on São Tomé



Cascata São Nicolau São Tomé © Nick Haslam 2010 (1)

future. Where else in the world can you stay in such an atmospheric location, set amid unspoilt nature?’

In the centre of the island – which is some 50 kilometres long by 30 wide – above the town of Trindade, lies Roça Monte Café, once one of the largest and most productive of the island’s plantations. It sits just below the central massif, which rises to the cloud-covered peak of Pico São Tomé – at 2,024 metres, the highest on the island. In its heyday, thousands of workers toiled here, producing the world’s best coffee; but today, beneath the vast, empty mill sheds, children play in the wide, cobble, weed-covered drying yard.

The local guide talks enthusiastically about machinery installed a few years ago, financed by the African Development Bank, but then adds that the overgrown plantations today don’t produce sufficient coffee to make it worthwhile to start up the plant again. ‘We hope to have the land cleared in a couple of years,’ he says, a trifle optimistically, as he looks up at the luxuriant forest beyond the walls of the *roça*.

But not far away, at the neighbouring Roça Nova Moka, a new agricultural initiative, created by Italian agronomist Claudio Corallo, is producing coffee and chocolate once more. Under a shady roof, workers wearing white gowns are hand-sorting cocoa beans brought in from his plantations on Príncipe and coffee beans grown on the newly cleared slopes above. Claudio’s son Niccolò tells me that their chocolate is now in high demand in the best gourmet shops of Europe and the USA. ‘The cocoa introduced here so long ago is some of the best in the world,’ he says. ‘With careful preparation by hand, we don’t need to blend in vanilla or other products. It has a flavour that really shines through.’

SMALLER BROTHER

A 45-minute flight north on a twin-engined Dornier over 100 kilometres of empty blue sea lies Príncipe, São Tome’s far smaller brother, only ten kilometres long and with a population of barely 6,000. It has a semi-autonomous status, and in the tiny capital of Santo António, a colonial building overlooking a wide bay is the seat of the elected council.

Two kilometres away, on a bumpy unpaved track busy with islanders on



When to go

With hot (averaging 27°C), humid weather all year round, the islands can be visited at any time. There are two rainy seasons: March–May and October–November.

Getting there

Flights from Heathrow are available through TAP Portugal (www.flytap.com) via Lisbon, Gabon Airlines (www.gabonairlines.com) or Air France (www.airfrance.co.uk) via Paris and Libreville, or Lufthansa (www.lufthansa.com) via Frankfurt and Libreville.

Further information

Africa’s Eden (www.africas-eden.com) offers an eight-day stay on the islands, which includes inter-island flights, full-board accommodation at Bom Bom Island Resort on Príncipe and half-board accommodation at the Omali Lodge on São Tomé, from €1,665 (£1,368) per person on a sharing basis.

their way to church dressed in their best, lies the huge old *roça* of Sundy, Príncipe’s biggest plantation. We stop to give a lift to an old woman, who tells me that she came to Príncipe from Cape Verde during the 1960s with her husband to work on the plantations. ‘It was different then,’ she says with a smile. ‘There was electricity, water and we had work.’ Does she want to go back to Cape Verde, I wonder. ‘No! There’s nothing for me there – and here, at least we have land to farm and the soil is good!’

At the *roça*, a young girl shows me around the warehouses and mill sheds, where a rusty steam traction engine stands, still connected to a system of fan belts that haven’t turned for more than 40 years, its smoke stack jutting through the gaping roof. On the imposing sweeping staircase of the former plantation manager’s house, an enterprising woman has set up a vegetable stall. With little regular paid work on the island, most people live outside the cash economy, farming and fishing to supply their families’ needs.

Next morning, I set off in a high-speed launch from Bom Bom (literally ‘Good Good’ in Portuguese), the only tourist resort on the island, to visit the rugged southern capes. Flying fish dart from the rough sea as we skirt the dramatic coastline, past virgin beaches and dense forest that rises to mist-shrouded mountains.

Anchoring off a rocky cove, we swim ashore to walk through the jungle, watched closely by a troupe of monkeys playing in the canopy high above our heads. It’s difficult to believe that this area was once busy with plantation workers harvesting coconuts from palms now long engulfed by the returning forest. Our guide, Ramos, points out a trail that leads along the coast for a mile and then climbs to a deep, clear rocky pool of fresh water where we dive and swim, startling a vivid kingfisher into flight from its perch.

PRESERVING THE JEWEL

Back at Bom Bom, I barely have time to change into the long trousers demanded by island protocol before my interview with Toze Cassandra, the genial president of the regional government of Príncipe. ‘The island needs two or three resorts like this,’ he says with an expansive gesture that encompasses the empty golden beach and breaking surf, ‘but no more.’

I ask him about the results of surveys off Príncipe that indicate that significant oil reserves may be found close to the island. ‘This island will never become an oil depot or processing platform,’ he says firmly. ‘We will use revenue from the oil, if it is found, to redevelop the infrastructure here, and invest in sustainable tourism, fishing and farming. Oil is temporary money for today – we must use it to keep this place the jewel it is for centuries to come.’

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