



# BACK TO THE ROOTS

A NATURAL EDEN IN A REMOTE ARCHIPELAGO  
OFF WEST AFRICA, THE ISLAND OF PRINCE  
IS THROWING OFF A TROUBLED COLONIAL  
PAST TO TELL NEW STORIES

BY CATHERINE FAIRWEATHER,  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRAYDON HERRIOTT



Clockwise from top left: Príncipe airport; entrance to Belo Monte hotel; Eclipse Suite bathroom at Roça Sundry hotel; the suite's bedroom; fisherman on Banana Beach. Opposite: man collecting tree sap in the jungle for palm wine. Previous pages, from left: Boi Beach; view of Banana Beach from Belo Monte



Today I am where I want to be, strolling along almond-fringed beaches that, like cuffs of lace, fall from the dark sleeve of the jungle. Steam rises after a recent downpour and morning sunlight glances off cresting waves silver-threaded with the shoals of sardinella that ride their swell. Coconuts drop with a thud around me and begonia blossoms spiral slowly. This is a fecund forest of vastness that's so alive you can practically hear the sap rising. I have been walking for more than an hour from my tented suite at the Sundry Praia retreat and seen no one. I have padded across sandbanks in the flipper trail of turtles who have come to lay their eggs on these northern shores, and clambered over rocky headlands. I've scaled the

gained its independence from the Portuguese. The archipelagic islands of São Tomé and Príncipe are mere grace notes on the vast score of the Atlantic, perched near where the equator and the zero longitude meridian cross paths. They are reminiscent of Middle Earth: improbable fingers of phonolitic rock erupting from mists and preternaturally green forest. I came to hike this loop of horseshoe bays, arriving at Ribeira Izé to visit the ruins of the island's first Catholic church and its abandoned capital.

Being alone in this *Jurassic Park* wilderness is an exceptional and eerie experience. I think of the story of the island's "Tarzan boy". He was seven when he disappeared into the forest. When rescued almost a year later, he was miraculously unscathed, apparently well-fed by the

## PRINCIPE IS REMINISCENT OF MIDDLE EARTH: A FINGER OF PHONOLITIC ROCK ERUPTING FROM MISTS AND PRETERNATURALLY GREEN FOREST

heights – and pushed through the insect drill – of the forest, into the shade of the towering oka. These trees have a presence not unlike Tolkien's ents, those humanoid-like tree creatures. In Príncipe, it is customary to bury a newborn baby's placenta beneath a trunk, so that everyone has a tree they consider their own. The forest is venerated and it is sacrilege to fell a tree, a belief embedded in law.

If the idea of heaven were as simple as a deserted beach and the freedom to roam safely, then Príncipe, a remote island in the Gulf of Guinea, is that lost Eden. During the pandemic, I dreamed of returning to this poor but paradisiacal island that I first heard about from my father, who was absentee British ambassador there during the 1980s, after it

mona monkeys and protected by the benign climate and remarkably sustaining cradle of the jungle. Without predators, wildlife here has not needed to develop venomous powers and toxic deterrents. Untethered from the West African mainland 200 miles away, across deep sea troughs, and 100 miles apart from its twinned island state of São Tomé, this so-called African Galápagos evolved its own unique species.

As I approach the mouth of a river, I spot one such endemic beauty: a sapphire-backed Príncipe kingfisher balancing on a palm frond. And there, in the shallows, the famous mudskipper. I had been told to keep an eye out for this creature. In the morning of the earth's creation, 385 million years ago, before Príncipe's fist of rock punched up from



the ocean floor, the fish walked out of the sea on its fins. In the untrammeled Unesco-protected biosphere that makes up this island, that first walking fish has been able to continue to exist.

Such glorious isolation is inevitably hard to reach. It has taken days to get here, with a layover in Lisbon, a touchdown in Accra and a night in São Tomé, but with no time difference from London. The 45-minute flight into Príncipe culminated in an alarming swallow dive down to a new runway that jutted into a jagged shore. The shack of an airport terminal smelled, promisingly, of sun-warmed mango and jasmine. Príncipe has a population of less than 10,000. It was uninhabited until the 15th century, when it became a place of exile for the desperados of Portuguese society:

## ROCA SUNDY'S VIBE IS MARINATED IN THE LEVE-LEVE: THAT RARE SENSE OF UNHURRIED TIME THAT DEFINES PRINCIPE AND IS ITS CHARM AND CRUCIBLE

convicts, heretics and outcasts. Then it grew into the hub of the Middle Passage slave route and the epicentre of the profitable cocoa trade.

Was this episode of dark history initially written here in the stronghold and first city of Ribiera Izé, whose ruins, amid a tangle of ferns and palms, I finally stumble upon? The roça (or estate) and its church were built by Maria Correia in the 19th century. Known as the Black Princess, this mestiza (mixed-race woman) was feared as a landowner of various estates and hundreds of slaves. But today, only vicious Maria Miranda wasps inhabit the crumbling apse of her church. For all Correia's wealth, power and two marriages, when she died and was buried here she left no heir, epitaph or grave. While hers is only one of many roças that existed at the

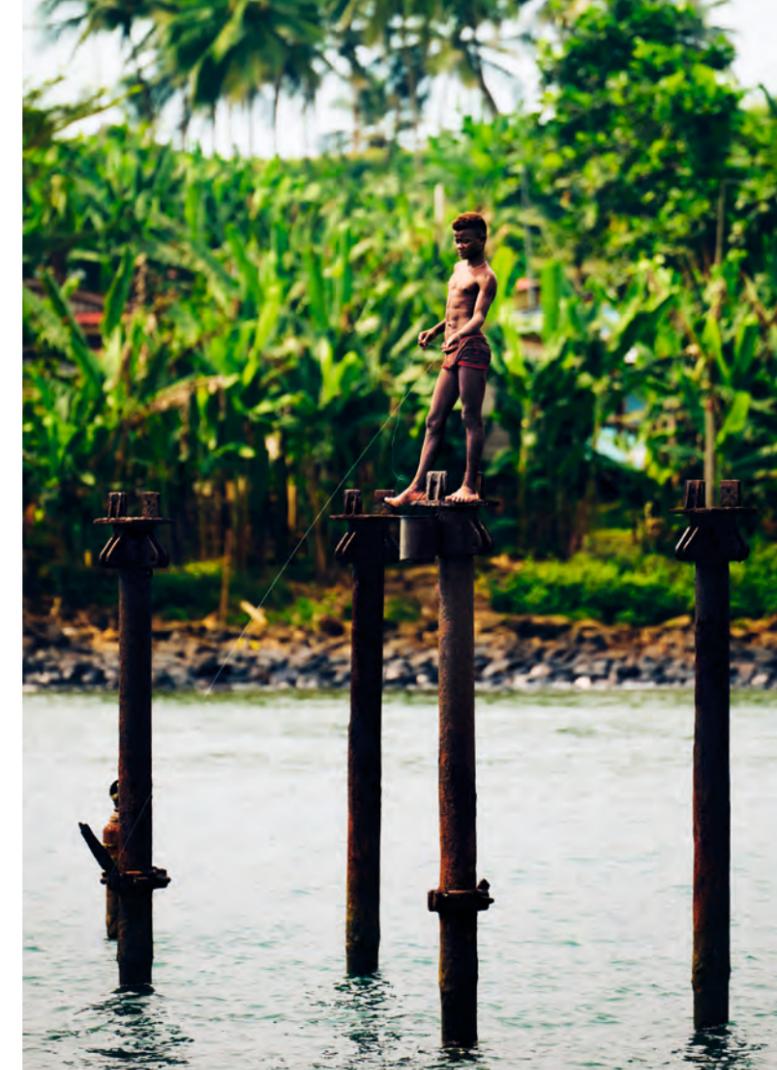
turn of the 20th century, it is the most atmospheric. They were self-contained universes with hospitals, nurseries, lodgings and railway termini attached, and they shaped the island landscape and determined its political outlook. When the Portuguese empire disintegrated in the 1970s, the jungle reclaimed the roças. A haunted and raw beauty hangs over Ribeira Izé, ceiba roots wrapping round the walls and strangling the foundations.

In recent years a handful of roças have been rescued from obliteration and turned into working cooperatives. Paciência Organic produces soap and oil from medicinal plants, resuscitating the traditions of natural healing prevalent before centuries of Catholicism and decades of communism stamped them out. The lovely Belo Monte and historical

Roça Sundry have become hotels. Staying at the latter, the biggest plantation on the island, sensitively restored six years ago, is to get under the skin of life here, sharing the rambling, faded grandeur of the compound with a resident community. About 400 local creoles of Cape Verdean origin still live here in the workers' quarters, or sanzalas. They gather to shoot the breeze in the grassy square, shaded by aphrodisiacal micaco trees. The vibe within the battered crenulated ramparts of the estate is marinated in the leve-leve: that rare sense of unhurried time that defines Príncipe and is its charm and crucible.

The main mansion at Roça Sundry is an elegant time warp of slow-whirring ceiling fans and hardwood floors, with a veranda perched above

Terrace at Belo Monte. Opposite, clockwise from left: Sundry Praia's restaurant; dining terrace at Roça Sundry; suite balcony there; private house nearby



Clockwise from above: schoolgirls in Santo António; cocoa beans on a market stall; bowl of octopus at Beira Mar in Santo António; Belo Monte. Opposite, from left: Santo António grocery shop; fishing near Cão Grande Peak



the verdant jungle canopy and sea. It's where Einstein's Quaker emissary, the astrologer Arthur Eddington, proved the German scientist's theory of relativity during the historic solar eclipse of 1919. Today, the complex is the headquarters of Here Be Dragons (HBD), the conservation, agroforestry and hospitality arms of a company altruistically dedicated to preserving everything that makes Príncipe special: the natural world.

With three hotels (and a fourth, the legendary Bom Bom, built around two bays, due to reopen this year), HBD is the biggest employer on the island, with 500 people on its payroll. Its creator, South African software mogul Mark Shuttleworth, has managed to hold off the continuing threat of the palm oil conglomerates and their environmentally destructive

## ON THE BACK OF THE STUNTED AND UNREMARKABLE-LOOKING COCOA SHRUB, BATTLES HAVE BEEN FOUGHT, EMPIRES FOUNDED, FORTUNES LOST

monoculture, by buying up swathes of forested land to protect. A new sustainability director, Emma Tuzinkiewicz, a New Yorker at home in the back of beyond, drives through initiatives to cut waste, recycle and reduce plastic, while working to ensure the entirety of the guest dollar is ploughed back to the community, into education and conservation.

Roça Sundy is also on a campaign to reverse the negative implications of producing cocoa, a crop long associated with colonial enslavement. In their "heyday", the islands produced 35,000 tons a year; that has now been reduced to 3,000. The cocoa and chocolate here are considered some of the best in the world, and are now potentially profitable boutique craft produce, sought after in the realm of slow, fair-trade luxury.

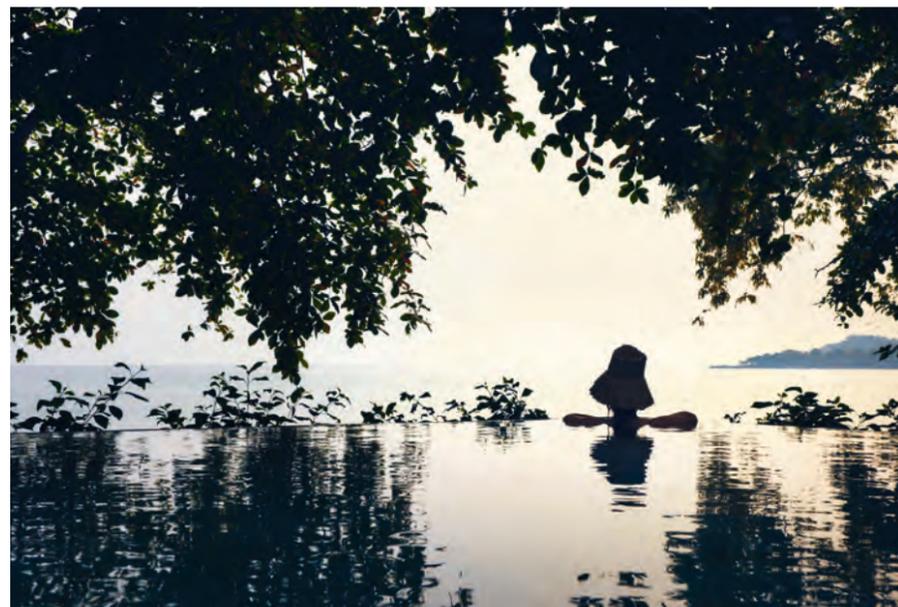
I interrupt the chocolate workers from their siesta in the fragrant packing factory, where the leve-leve has time moving in slow motion.

With a chocolate bar in hand, I follow the cocoa trail down the old rail track to what would have been the packing jetty on the shores, from where the black gold was transported to Lisbon and beyond. My HBD guide, Vander Santo, offers me a segment of the fleshy pulp of cocoa bean to taste. The seedpod is a prima donna fruit, he says, that only thrives in sufficient rain, in a narrow equatorial belt around the globe, growing best under the speckled shade of a flame tree. On the back of this stunted and unremarkable-looking shrub, battles have been fought, empires founded and fortunes lost.

The trail leads to Sundy Praia, Roça Sundy's sibling beach resort of 15 glamorous tented villas designed by Didier Lefort, architect of The Datai Langkawi in Malaysia. His concept was living close to nature, the Príncipe way, albeit in vast comfort. The footprint is gentle, each villa camouflaged by hardwoods and tropical almonds. Low lighting protects the turtles, and the menu offers only seasonal choices, including gluten-free breadfruit pancakes that promise to be the next Manhattan superfood craze, with chocolate nib tapenade as a sweet treat. Only the wine and meat is imported. I order a second bottle of the local Beer-With-No-Name at the picturesque infinity pool. Its alcoholic content veers from 5 to 10 per cent, depending on the batch and date of the brew, but it always packs a punch.



Clockwise from above: villa at Sundry Praia; lunch on Boi Beach; Sundry Praia's pool; HBD guide Wuilber Tavares. Opposite, from left: Judite Afonso, owner of Beira Mar; bar in Santo António



HBD is a pioneer in empowerment, equipping local staff to become guides, managers and entrepreneurs on an island where unemployment a decade ago was near to 80 per cent, and Santo António, Africa's smallest capital, was in decline. Now there's a beat, with nine noteworthy restaurants. These are simple places, sometimes shacks, but all lively and serving great food cooked by formidable doyens, grandmothers such as Lu. I like her place, Romar, which has a handful of tables. To eat at Lu's you need to call a day in advance, so she has time to source and kill the main ingredient. For little more than 10 euros, we feast on an elegant tuna, finish with homemade coconut ice cream and get chatting to the president, Carlos Manuel Vila Nova, who's eating at another table. Facilitated by the front desk at my hotel, he agrees to meet me for a coffee the next day. He doesn't actually show up, but in Príncipe, that's the way it goes. I enjoy even the unfulfilled promise that a hotel can organise access to a head of state.

I content myself instead with the other things it arranges for me: boat trips to remote and sensational beaches; a barbecue on the peerless and deserted Boi; snorkelling off the cinematic Bay of Needles; visits to healers, medicine men and rum-shack entrepreneurs; and a cocktail at Banana Beach below the Belo Monte roça, immortalised by a Bacardi advert.

Ultimately, conservation is all about community, and I know I am lucky, when Amadeu Vila Nova, the charismatic front-of-house manager and hotel driver, offers to take me to his church on Sunday. The congregation, in hats and finery, make room for me on their pews. Vila Nova tells me there is nothing to be gained from looking back at yesterday when you could be looking forward to what tomorrow will bring. Together we belt out praises to Jesus and Mary like there is no tomorrow. 📍



## WHERE TO STAY

### BELO MONTE

This former cocoa plantation house dates from 1922, with immaculate gardens and restored crenulated ramparts. There are two private villas, while the main building and former laundry and stables accommodate 15 bedrooms. Belo Monte is the epicentre of a wildlife conservation project, Forever Príncipe, and has a museum detailing the natural history of the island. There's also a bar and kitchen for grilled fish lunches, and a pool. The trademark bell is back in situ, perched high over the mist-cloaked jungle canopy, and the property is within walking distance of the island's most beautiful beaches. The most photogenic, Banana Beach, fringed by palms and bookended by granite boulders, is a 20-minute stroll away – a fantasy tropical beach safe to swim off and explore with complimentary kayaks. *Doubles from about £425; belomontehotel.com*

### ROCA SUNDY

A stylish and romantic old Portuguese-style colonial plantation complex that has recently been redesigned as a hotel, with 16 bedrooms across two mansion houses. The cocoa-drying sheds and vintage machinery of the Victorian era still lie dotted around. A swimming pool is on the cards, along with a market, once the community has successfully been rehoused. *Doubles from about £235; hbdprincipe.com*

### SUNDRY PRAIA

The long drive past historic oka trees and jungle landscape to reach Sundry Praia is rough, but an incredible introduction to the island's best asset: the natural world. The hotel is designed to feel more like a jungle sanctuary than a beach retreat – the crescent of gently shelving sand is not the main event and doesn't attract the afternoon sun.

Air-conditioned beach tents come with granite egg bathtubs and cocktail bars, some with deck pools. The spa is a slice of heaven, with cocoa body wraps and detoxifying coffee scrubs. The infinity pool and bar is a social hive, and the hotel has some of the best breakfasts on the island, with homemade granolas, fresh guava juice and jams. Excursions with knowledgeable guides, such as Vander Santo, are authentic and expert. *Rooms from about £590 per person; hbdprincipe.com*

### HOW TO GET THERE

Nine-night private trip to São Tomé and Príncipe with Africa specialist Journeys by Design from about £6,230 per person; *journeysbydesign.com*