

São Tomé & Príncipe

It won't be too long before you come on and feel the *leve-leve* in these two tiny islands that comprise Africa's second smallest nation. As soon as you touch down amid the palm-fringed beaches, crystal-clear water and barely explored jungles, you'll become infected with the pervasive national mood that translates to 'slowly, slowly' and loosely means 'it's all good, take it easy'.

And because you'll have this Portuguese-Creole flavoured tropical paradise almost to yourself (only about 20 tourists per week venture here), you can sip some of the world's best coffee, eat fresh fruits and seafood, delight on gourmet chocolate, stay in the crumbling *roças* (houses) of the old colonial plantations, dive and snorkel in uncharted waters, trek the endlessly biodiverse jungles and explore sleepy fishermen's villages at your own, leisurely pace, away from anything that resembles hustle and bustle. And in Príncipe, with one town and a total population of under 5000, you might be tempted to check your own pulse every few hours.

On these shores, the only way to raise your heart rate is to participate in the astoundingly sensual pelvis-mashing moves danced nightly in bars across the islands. São Tomé is the kind of place you may never have heard about, but once you visit, you just might never leave.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1000 sq km
- **ATMs** There are no ATMs; come with cash
- **Borders** Gabon lies 300km to the east
- **Budget** US\$85 per day
- **Capital** São Tomé
- **Language** Portuguese
- **Money** Dobra; US\$1 = 6740Db
- **Population** 193,000
- **Seasons** Dry (June to September), wet (October to May)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 239; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visas** Required by all; costs around US\$50



HIGHLIGHTS

- **São Tomé town** (p601) Wander amid the faded colonial buildings of this charming, sleepy capital town.
- **Roça São João** (p605) Dine on gourmet feasts and stay the night in this ethereal, rejuvenated plantation estate.
- **Banana Beach** (p606) Dive into the warm, crystal-clear waters of this deserted beach, one of many ringing the island of Príncipe.
- **Praia Jalé** (p605) Witness nesting sea turtles in this ecotourist haven at the southern-most point of São Tomé.
- **Ilhéu das Rolas** (p605) Straddle the equator and sun yourself on the divine white-sand beaches of this tiny islet off the south of São Tomé.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

São Tomé is an island of microclimates; at any time of year you're likely to find areas of cloudy and rainy skies and areas of sun. From March to May, though, the daily rains generally yield to blue skies and hot temperatures for beach goers, while trekkers might prefer the cool, dry air and cloudy skies from June to September.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** You can explore much of São Tomé in one week. Heading south, eat well and spend the night at Roça São João (p605), camp for a night at Praia Jalé (p605), take in a mangrove tour and then jump on the boat to Ilhéu das Rolas (p605) for a night or two. Head back to São Tomé town (p601) and day trek in the forest, stay the night at Bombaim (p606), and then head north to hit Neves (p605) for crabs and a night at Monteforte (p605).
- **Two Weeks** Follow the above itinerary and then fly on to Príncipe (p606) and chill out for at least a week in a deserted island paradise.

HISTORY

Before being 'discovered' and colonised by the Portuguese in the late 15th century, the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe were comprised of rainforests dense with vegetation and birdlife, but, most likely, no people (though there is a legend that present-day Angolares were really the first inhabitants of the land). The islands'

HOW MUCH?

- **A day's jungle trek** US\$50
- **Cup of good coffee** US\$0.80
- **Seed necklace** US\$1
- **Mangrove tour** US\$7
- **Fresh grilled con-con fish** US\$3

LP INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.20
- **1L bottled water** US\$1.20
- **Bottle of Creoula beer** US\$0.80
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$15
- **Grilled corn** US\$1

volcanic soil proved good for cultivation, and, under Portuguese rule, by the mid-16th century the islands were the foremost exporter of sugar, though the labour-intensive process required increasing amounts of slaves from Africa. When the price of sugar fell and slave labour proved difficult to control, the islands increasingly looked towards the slave trade to bolster the economy, becoming an important weigh station for slave ships heading from Africa to Brazil. In the 19th century two new cash crops, coffee and cocoa, overtook the old sugar plantations. By the early 20th century São Tomé was one of the world's largest producers of cocoa.

In 1876 slavery was outlawed, but was simply replaced with a similar system of forced labour for low wages. Contract workers came in from Mozambique, Cape Verde and other parts of the Portuguese empire. During these times there were frequent uprisings and revolts, often brutally put down by the Portuguese. In 1953 the Massacre of Batepá, in which many Africans were killed by Portuguese troops, sparked a full-fledged independence movement. Portugal held on, however, until the fall of the fascist government in 1974, after which it got out of its colonies in a hurry. São Tomé & Príncipe achieved independence on 12 July 1975.

The Portuguese exodus left the country with virtually no skilled labour, an illiteracy rate of 90%, only one doctor and many abandoned cocoa plantations. An economic crisis was inevitable. Manual Pinto da Costa, who

was the first president and, until then, a moderate, was forced to concede to many of the demands of the more radical members of his government. The majority of the plantations were nationalised four months after independence, legislation was passed prohibiting any one person from owning more than 100 hectares of land, and a people's militia was set up to operate within workplaces and villages.

The country remained closely aligned with Angola, Cuba and communist Eastern Europe until the demise of the Soviet Union, when Santoméans began to demand multiparty democracy. The first multiparty elections were held in early 1991 and led to the inauguration of the previously exiled

Miguel Trovoada as the new president in April of that year.

São Tomé & Príncipe Today

Elections in 2001 brought Fradique de Menezes to power. De Menezes pledged to use revenues from increased tourism and exploitation of the country's newly discovered offshore oilfields to improve the standard of living and modernise the islands' infrastructure. Grand changes seemed imminent. But complications with extracting the oil in addition to possible overestimations of the oil deposits have delayed economic progress, and there is a palpable growing restlessness in the deeply indebted and impoverished nation. A brief and bloodless coup attempt was peacefully resolved in 2003 while the president was out of the country. De Menezes was re-elected in 2006 in internationally observed, peaceful elections.

São Tomé presently scrapes by on US\$25 million a year of foreign aid and US\$5 million in cocoa exports.

CULTURE

Leve leve is the name of the game in São Tomé. Island life is slow and there's no use in getting all fussed up about anything. This is as evident in daily life as it is in the islands' politics. During the 2006 elections disruptions were rare. The very few villages that protested did so by politely turning vote staff away from their polling stations, saying essentially 'no water, no electricity, no votes, thank you'. It was done very cordially.

A recent influx of young repatriates from Portugal determined to make something good happen here has brought a new energy to the islands.

Outside the capital most Santoméans still live very simple island lives, with agriculture and fishing being the main occupations. In the morning the boats come in and fish are distributed, the market bustles late morning, a siesta is taken to avoid the afternoon heat and then it's time to drink some imported boxes of *vinho*. In the evening people gather wherever there's a TV set and a generator, or a full deck of cards.

PEOPLE

Santoméans are a mixed bunch, consisting of Mestiços, mixed-blood descendants of Portuguese colonists and African slaves; An-

golares, reputedly descendants of Angolan slaves who survived a 1540 shipwreck and now earn their livelihood fishing; Forros, descendants of freed slaves; Tongas, the children of Serviçais (contract labourers from Angola, Mozambique and Cape Verde when slavery was 'abolished'); and Europeans, primarily Portuguese.

About 80% of Santoméans belong to the Roman Catholic Church, though traditional animist beliefs are still strong.

ARTS & CRAFTS

In addition to the traditional crafts of the island (including intricately carved wooden boxes, masks, and seed and shell jewellery) there is a budding arts scene drawing international attention revolving around the Teia D'Arte gallery, which has held several Biennials and holds arts workshops for the local population. Famed São Tomé artist (and gourmet chef/TV host) João Carlos Silva heads up the gallery; his work can be seen at the Roça São João (p605).

Auto de Floripes (performed once a year, by the entire population of Príncipe) and Tchiloli are famous day-long pieces of musical theatre, that have been performed since the 16th century, and can now be seen as distinctly anticolonial stories.

Much of the music and dance of São Tomé is shared or influenced by other Portuguese-speaking nations, including Cape Verde, Brazil and Angola. Abandon preconceived notions of propriety as dancers pair off and dance the sensual *kizomba*, the *kadence* and *kuduru* nightly in bars.

ENVIRONMENT

The islands are of volcanic origin and almost 30% of the land is covered by high-altitude, virgin rainforest, referred to as the Obo, and filled with over 700 species of flora and a stunning array of bird species, some of which exist nowhere else in the world. In the interior are lakes, waterfalls and volcanic craters. Since São Tomé's forests were classified as biologically the second most important in Africa, they have received much attention, and conservation groups have started to set up protection programs and ecotourism outfits.

Outside the jungle the island is comprised of varying beaches, some of which are grounds for nesting sea turtles from October to De-

cember. Whales and dolphins can be observed from July to September.

FOOD & DRINK

Don't miss out on the *con-con*, an ugly, pre-historic-looking fish grilled and served with baked breadfruit. Traditional stews made with more than 20 different plants can take hours to prepare. Other traditional dishes include fish or meat with beans, rice or plantains, and omelettes cooked with endemic spices, some said to be aphrodisiacs. Palm wine, freshly gathered from the trees, is a local favourite.

SÃO TOMÉ TOWN

Once you get the hang of *leve-leve*, you'll delight in this mellow capital town of fading pastel colonial buildings along the seashore. São Tomé town has charm, a budding arts scene, and plenty of activities of its own and nearby, making it an ideal base from which to make day and overnight trips.

ORIENTATION

São Tomé town sits on Baía de Ana Chaves (Ana Chaves Bay). Most of the action takes place in one centralised area a few blocks in from the water, starting at the markets and spreading south to shops, banks and restaurants. The town is easily walkable, and even destinations further out take no longer than 15 minutes by foot. The airport is 4km north of town.

INFORMATION

There are many banks in town that exchange US dollars or euros in cash and travellers cheques for dobras. Better rates for cash can sometimes be found at the Mercado Municipal or in merchant shops. Big bills get better rates than smaller ones. There are no ATMs, but there are many Western Unions.

Café & Companhia (☎ 226622; mjpmbo@hotmail.com; Praça da Amizade; per day US\$4) For great local information, where the foxy and friendly English-speaking MJ can point you in the right direction for anything you may need. The café acts as the centre of the expat community, and in addition to wi-fi, great food and good coffee, there are often flyers for upcoming cultural events and tourist attractions.

Hospital Ayres Menezes (☎ 221222, 221233) Located up the hill towards the airport. Serious cases will be flown out on the next plane to Gabon or Portugal.

