

A SONG FROM THE TREE TOPS

SAO TOME & PRINCIPE

By

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There are two islands far away in the Gulf of Guinea, bang on the Equator where bird song dominates, high up in the tropical rainforest, the sound radiates and reverberates, demanding your attention. There are no conflicting sounds of people, machinery, cars, modernity in all forms. The tiny birds insistently demand attention...

This is typical of Sao Tome and Principe. Two tiny islands, barely 200,000 souls spread between them. They are a legacy of the Portuguese colonisation and slavery...a trading post of people sent to the Americas... to fuel the early sugar cane then cacao and coffee plantations.

Today the fire, fury and humiliation of slavery is buried under tropical growth which have completely subsumed the plantation buildings.

In its place are a handsome and peaceful people, proud of their independence from Portugal in 1975 and slowly, very slowly building up an economy. Their major export is chocolate, palm oil and coffee.

But quietly and discreetly a tourism sector is emerging. There is everything to go for. The islands are utterly peaceful. There is no civil conflict, there are no menacing threats from neighbouring countries.. No terrorism. A functioning democracy, with smooth transitions to power, religious tensions. No pollution. No traffic jams... And, above all, spectacular unspoilt tropical scenery. Towering peaks, white beaches, flowers everywhere. Be it bird watchers, exploring the varied marine life in the reefs or trekking with a guide in the forests, there is plenty for all to absorb. Orchid lovers have a feast day....

No wonder environmentalists are working hard to protect such beauty.

The TAP plane from Lisbon flies over West Africa and then down over the Gulf of Guinea. Peer out of the window, and the thought comes, 'suppose we miss these tiny' islands?' for they lie off the Congo coast and miles from anywhere. Next stop...heralds westwards to Brazil.

But arrival in Sao Tome is cheerful. The airport is half brick and half a tent. The welcome is all smiles. Immediately the senses are hit by a sensuous tropical smell. The motto is, 'leve-leve', relax. Chill out. Don't hurry. This is paradise, even in the rain.

To enjoy to the full all the islands have to offer, plan for three weeks, just to soak up the environment, its uniqueness of being far away from hefty, noisy modern urbanisation. It has its own character and vibration which cannot be short changed.

The capital, Sao Tome, the world's smallest city, is a sleepy, a port with colonial past in every corner. A fort built by early Portuguese explorers in 1470 stands proudly on a promontory. The town centre is largely faded colonial architecture, painted in pastels. Pink, blue....red. Then interspersed the bright yellow taxis or if you prefer the motorbike taxis zip in and around.

The market places hit the senses. The women carry huge baskets, buckets and whatever on their heads. Never missing a step. A young girl would hurry alongside with her own little cotton circle balancing a small item. The rich colours on the stalls are selling bright chili peppers, yellow turmeric, herbs, plantains of all kinds, glassy eyed fish. And for the discerning, buckets of huge forest snails, 3" long, gathered by hand, shelled and then on display. They are considered a tasty speciality.

The visitor should spend a couple of days in Sao Tome, visit Claudio Corallo's chocolate outlet, a must is the museum CACAU. The powerful history of three centuries of slavery is important to understand for the past makes for the present. At one time it is estimated there were 40 major plantations. Today, land has been given to the locals who work in co-operatives to get their produce to market.

But wander through the town, don't hesitate to stop at a shack restaurant where you are guaranteed superb fish and local beer.

Observe the ornate Cathedral, almost sugar candy with beautiful blue Portuguese tiles. The Saotamians are devout Christians and a Sunday this means best clothes and over flowering churches.

The theme of the country is geared to enjoying the forests, so stout trekking shoes are in order, or diving in the turquoise sea. Walk, walk, walk....keep walking. And if you need a lift, a passing truck will always help anyone.

Away from the airport, the tarmacked road morphs to deeply rutted tracks. And beside them the houses stand out rising proud on stilts and painted all pastel colours.

Head north to Mucumbli, and stay at the eco lodge, set in dense gardens / forest. As with all the hotels, (none had more than 16 rooms at the very most) it was of an excellent standard, good food, Portuguese wine, local beer and friendly management.

You take a guide wherever you go. Impossible without. Highly informative, and in any case he carries a machete which is essential for hacking back overnight growth on a path. He will also chop down a vast banana leaf as an umbrella when it rains. The first outing was to explore the water falls, climbing up and down tracks, gazing over a rich landscape until at last we hear the water, and then see it tumbling down from on high.

Trekking is rewarding with routes geared to all capabilities. The ambitious will set off for an eight hour climb to the top of a peak. For the rest of us, we can take a more moderate route with equal pleasure.

Forest conservation is taken seriously with large areas now under UNESCO protection from development. All for a good cause as the primary rainforests host a range of exotic species.

Head south to stay at the Roca de Sao Joao , one of the few restored plantations. It is perched on the edge of a fishing village, oozing with colonial charm, furniture and style. The treat being the balcony which runs around the house, part of it a restaurant where the owners have a justifiable reputation for the cuisine.

Fishing villages are the lifeblood of the islands, providing the staple diet. The narrow wooden boats carved from a single trunk look fragile, carrying one or two people. A hard and hazardous life as mostly they paddle their way out to sea, while others have small outboard engines. These have been hit by the rising cost of petrol imported from Angola created by the global demand of oil consequent on the Russia Ukraine war. This in turn affects the price of fish.

For all that, fish remains a major factor in the local cuisine. And nothing can be more joyous than enjoying freshly cooked fish using local spices at a small shack restaurant on the beach. Or in one case, stewed octopus of such delicacy and flavour, it is hard to describe.

At the very south of Sao Tome lies the tiny island of Ilheu das Rolas. We stayed at the Inhame Eco Lodge with chalets buried in the grounds just yards from the beach. Hop into one little boats crossing to the island. It is special for straddling the Equator, but equally lovely walks around the island, glorious beaches and a tiny shack restaurant grilling fish to order.

A must is to fly to the even tinier island of Principe in a little propeller plane seating just 16 people with a luggage allowance of 15kilos per person.

If you feel that Sao Tome has been in the fast lane, then be prepared for an even slower and sleepier pace . It stole our heart. When it rained, steam would rise from the thick forest. It is more mountainous and if possible , wilder.

Most of the island is under UNESCO forest protection. This is the ultimate for remoteness and laid-back style. There are very few hotels, two are former plantations. It is red dirt roads all the way. We stayed at one, the Roca Belo Monte, most definitely my favourite.. Set high on a cliff with sweeping views, you descend to the Banana Beach below. The forest reaches the edge of the beach. The sand is pure, the sea is full of fish. From here all sorts of activities can be organised from diving to trekking. And in the evening, sit, enjoy the view, enjoy a cocktail.

There is always plenty to do. But most importantly, you are forced to slow down, drink in the atmosphere. Walk, swim, fish, dive or enjoy some of the simple local restaurants. One was memorable for me was Rosa Pao. Warm, embracing. Every guest is special to her. She was proud of her cooking. No two days menus are the same, but all delicious, fish as ever, washed down with ice cold beer.

Principe is peaceful, tranquil , and where a 4x4 cannot reach, small boats do. Or if you want to stir, climb the Pico Papagio. A mountain in the centre of the island, wild, a haven for bird watchers, as their song rings out over the tree tops. Sharp, demanding, conversing. They sing for their country.

For further information, and support contact: Alastair Walls at Far and Wild Travel, 01768 603715 www.farandwild.travel. Note, plan well in advance as accommodation and flights are limited.