

São Tomé & Príncipe

If you adore quietude, take a trip to São Tomé & Príncipe, Africa's second-smallest country. These two tiny volcanic bumps anchored off the Gabonese coast easily win the hearts of foreigners with their Portuguese-Creole flavour and relaxed vibes, and it won't take too long before you're infected with the pervasive *leve leve* (which loosely means 'take it easy') mood.

The sublime laid-back tempo is enhanced by a wealth of natural attractions. These green specks offer all that an island getaway should: miles of heartbreakingly perfect palm-fringed beaches, huge swathes of emerald rainforest, soaring volcanic peaks, lush valleys suspended in time, and cute-as-can-be fishing villages. The birdlife is excellent, and endemic plants (especially orchids) plentiful. In season, turtle- and whale-watching opportunities abound.

But it's not all about nature and cool vibes. This two-island nation has its cultural gems as well, with a surprising number of heritage buildings dating back to the colonial era, including impressive *roças* (plantation estates) that can be visited. And *bons viveurs* can sip some of the world's best coffee, feast on fresh fruits and seafood, and delight in gourmet chocolate.

Tourism is still low-key and is being developed in a carefully controlled, ecologically minded way. There are no tacky resorts, just a number of locally run, enticing, nature-oriented lodges and hotels – no wonder that some have already dubbed São Tomé & Príncipe the 'Galápagos of Africa'.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1000 sq km
- **ATMs** There are no ATMs; come with cash
- **Borders** Gabon lies 300km to the east
- **Budget** €70 per day
- **Capital** São Tomé
- **Languages** Portuguese, Portuguese-based Creole
- **Money** Dobra; US\$1 = 16,624Db, €1 = 24,356Db
- **Population** 200,000
- **Seasons** Dry (January to February and June to September), wet (October to December and March to May)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 239; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** Required by all; costs €40 to €50



HOW MUCH?

- **A day's jungle trek** US\$44
- **Cup of good coffee** US\$0.60
- **One night in a plantation estate** US\$44
- **Mangrove tour** US\$14.50
- **Fresh grilled con-con fish** US\$5.80

LP INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.50
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$1.20
- **Bottle of Creoula beer** US\$0.90
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$14.50
- **Grilled corn** US\$0.70

HIGHLIGHTS

- **São Tomé town** (p624) Wander amid the faded colonial buildings of this charming capital town.
- **Roça São João** (p629) Feast on gourmet eats and stay the night in this ethereal, rejuvenated plantation estate.
- **Banana Beach** (p630) Dive into the crystal-clear waters of this deserted beach, one of many ringing the island of Príncipe.
- **Praia Jalé** (p629) Witness the nesting sea turtles in this ecotourism haven, located at the southernmost point of São Tomé island.
- **Ilhéu das Rolas** (p629) 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 hikers 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 (p629), camp for a night at Praia

Jalé (p629), take in a mangrove tour and then jump on the boat to Ilhéu das Rolas (p629) for a night or two. Head back to São Tomé town and day hike in the forest, stay the night at Roça Bombaim (p629), and then head north to hit Neves (p628) for crabs and a night at Roça Monteforte (p628).

- **Two Weeks** Follow the above itinerary and then fly on to Príncipe (p630) and chill out for at least a week in a deserted island paradise.

HISTORY

Before being 'discovered' and colonised by the Portuguese during the late 15th century, the islands of São Tomé & 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' 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 numbers 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 ended by the Portuguese. In 1953 the Massacre of Batepá, in which many Africans were killed by Portuguese troops, sparked a fully fledged independence movement in the country. Portugal held on, however, until the fall of its fascist government in 1974, after which it got out of its colonies in a hurry. São Tomé & Príncipe achieved its independence on 12 July 1975.

The Portuguese exodus left the country with virtually no skilled labour, an illiteracy