

Photographs **Tommaso Sartori**

AFRICA'S EDEN

With dramatic volcanic landscapes and one of the most biodiverse rain forests on the planet, the tiny archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea is like nowhere else on earth. Carsten Jasner visits the larger island, São Tomé, and discovers its beauty belies a dark yet fascinating history



Without warning. Paolo steps off the path. With a couple of strokes of his machete he hacks his way into the bushes on the edge of the track and returns with a fruit the size of his finger. It looks like a gherkin with an orange stem. He splits the thing lengthwise, scrapes away the seeds, and pops a quarter of it into his mouth. It's called *ocami*, he explains. It fortifies the stomach and aids healthy digestion. It can't do any harm, I think, as I suck on a piece. It tastes lemony and slightly bitter. The following day, a few miles farther on, I shall be glad to have taken this natural precaution.

We are trudging over the mountains of the volcanic island of São Tomé, through one of the world's most biodiverse rain forests. São Tomé and Príncipe, its sister island, together make up the second smallest nation in Africa. The archipelago, which lies in the Gulf of Guinea 150 miles off the mainland, has had the evolutionary good fortune to be left in peace and seclusion to pursue its own development. The first settlers arrived around 550 years ago. The islands are Africa's answer to the Galapagos.

Paolo's family originates from Cape Verde. He is a wiry young man, a bandana securing his long pigtailed, another piece of cloth wrapped around a swollen finger. He is treating the angry-looking wound with a local herb. Even as a child, he wandered through the forests of São Tomé, developing a love of birds found nowhere else on the planet. He never fails to spot shimmering blue plumage, a twitching orange tail, or a white eye ring amid the dense foliage. Paolo helps me to discover the natural riches of this extraordinary island.

Previous spread: Pico de São Tomé is the highest mountain on the island. Mist and rain often hide the view from walkers who have climbed the 6,640 feet to the summit.

This spread: one of the plantation houses in the north of the island (left), an example of São Tomé's colonial past; a plant nursery chalkboard (right). The island is

bursting with flora and fauna, with 130 endemic plant species; in the 19th century, São Tomé was one of the largest producers of cocoa (below right) in the world

At the crack of dawn we set out on our two-day journey. From the capital, São Tomé, in the northeast, our vehicle makes its bumpy way uphill. Our first objective is the crater lake, Lagoa Amélia. At an altitude of 3,600 feet we shoulder our backpacks and disappear into the forest. From the outside it looked dense and impenetrable. From the inside it proves to be surprisingly spacious. Most of the trees are young, their trunks no thicker than a man's arm as they point upward. Even the trunks of those 50 or 60 feet high measure no more than the circumference of a professional footballer's thigh. A bat twists and turns around the trees, then suddenly heads in my direction. For a fraction of a second I find myself staring into tiny, beady eyes, then quickly duck out of the way.

Sunlight ripples down through a cascade of leaves. A scattering of white flowers gives off a jasmine-like perfume. Our way is blocked by a fallen tree. Perching on it, caught in a shaft of light, is a black butterfly as big as the palm of my hand, which every so often flashes the underside of its wings, revealing flecks of yellow.

Every hundred or so steps, we encounter the buttress roots of a rain forest giant towering far above the crowns of the surrounding trees. Paolo tells how the smoke from the leaves and bark

of this species burned on a home fire will drive away the jealous feelings of the husband of an unfaithful wife.

Gnawing the bark soaked in alcohol increases a man's libido. Does Paolo believe this? He looks at me with a serious expression. Of course! He doesn't need it yet,

but in 15 or 20 years' time...

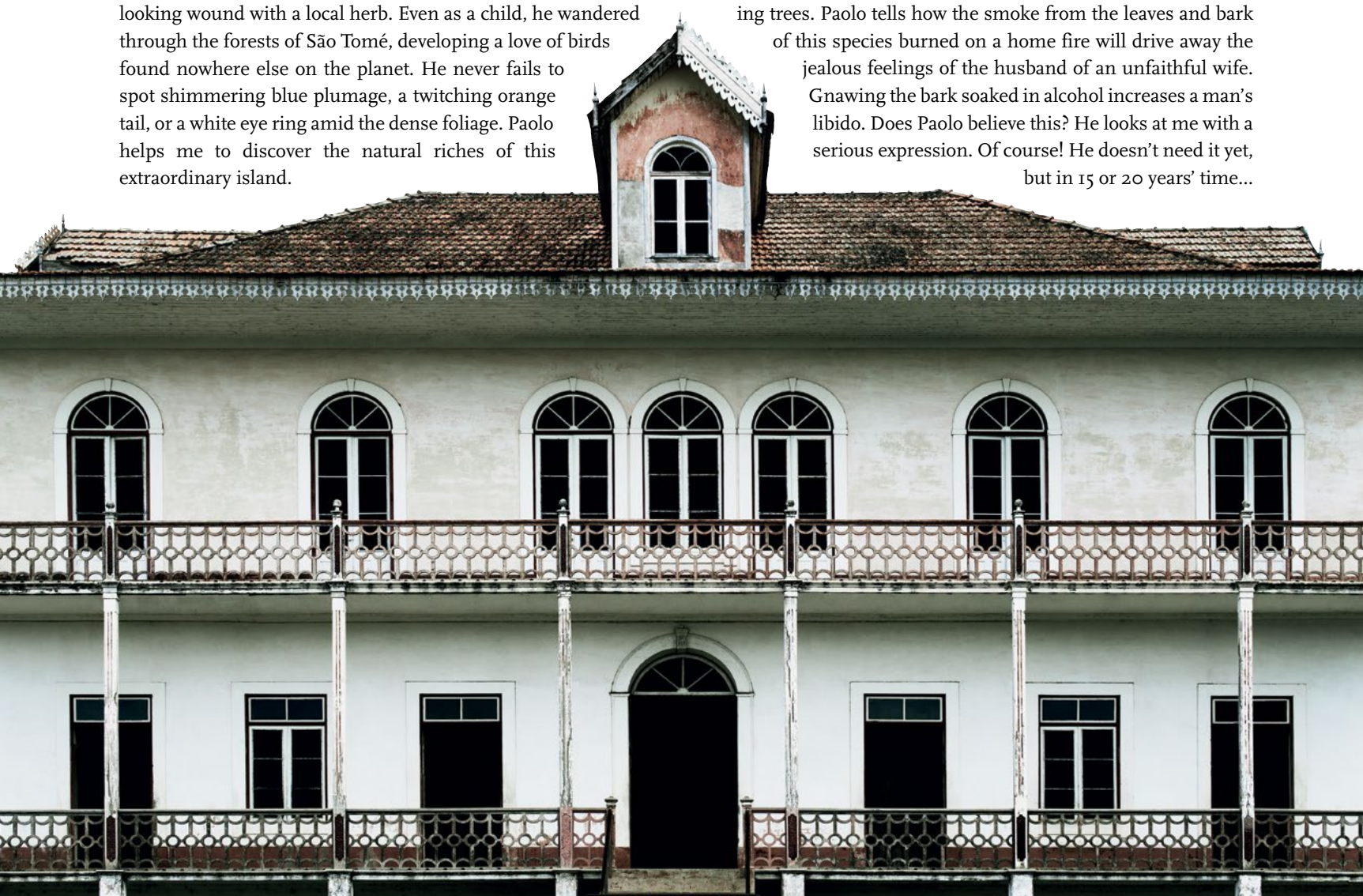
The path is rust-colored and slippery – the rainy season only ended a week ago at the beginning of May. It leads steeply upward, the serpentine tree roots providing us with a welcome series of steps. We duck under elegant loops of aerial roots and dodge shaggy beard moss. The orchids clambering up the trees will, in a month or two, unfurl white tongues from their angular buds. Deep in the forest I catch sight of bright green herbs and ferns, but my gaze lingers on head-high bushes whose dark green leaves are shiny and waxen, like those of a rhododendron.

The climate up here in the forest is pleasant. At around 70° F, it's cooler and less muggy than on the coast. We could move quickly, but I enjoy our moments of rest. When our boots stop squeaking, when we can breathe more easily and there's no need to speak, I listen. To the wind rustling through the treetops, to a bug as big as my thumb buzzing by. I hear the gentle click of thick, yellow leaves as they hit the ground and what sounds like a cricket rhythmically striking the high notes on a xylophone; from a bush comes the raucous rant of a common waxbill. Just above me, I recognize the whistle of a black-headed oriole, while a yellow giant weaver seems to be smooching with his ladylove. In the distance, I hear the deep, melodic cry of the São Tomé oriole.

Seventeen endemic bird species live on São Tomé, while 130 plant species are unique to the island. Strategically situated only a few miles from the point at which the equator (0° latitude) and the prime meridian (0° longitude) intersect, the island is a perfect example of how a habitat can be created out of nothing and of the ways in which evolution can occur completely independently. Some 30 million years ago, the African continental plate was under so much tectonic stress that it took only the slightest buckling to tear it apart and send lava shooting upward. The volcanic chain, which now extends from the still active Mount Cameroon in the Atlantic to the southwest, produced four islands, including São Tomé.

The island is roughly 30 miles long and 20 miles wide. The volcanic soil is fertile, and rainwater forms streams that sweep it down from the mountains. Seeds blown across from the mainland help to feed newly arrived birds. The African continent is far enough away for any exchange of flora and fauna to be limited, enabling species to develop independently on São Tomé. Land animals can't reach the island. There are no lions, rhinos, giraffes, or elephants wandering about. There are a few macaques brought by the Portuguese, along with cattle, pigs, and dogs.

São Tomé is no place for "big five" safaris. What makes the island so spectacular is its volcanic origin and all that arises from it. Wind and rain have eroded the basalt from some volcanic cones, leaving only the vents formed by phonolite rock protruding above the vegetation. The rock that spewed out from deep within the planet has gradually piled up along the cordillera. The valleys and cauldrons carved deep into the mountainsides have laid the





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The island's awe-inspiring landscape takes in exotic jungle (left), palm-fringed beaches, dense rain forest, rugged mountain peaks, and once-active volcanoes

foundation for an assortment of landscapes. This is because extinct volcanoes create a dividing line between two weather systems. The windward-facing southwest of the island offers an extremely humid habitat for flora and fauna, while the land extending northeastward beyond the mountains is dry and savannah-like. In the island's interior, rain forests in the lowlands and at intermediate altitudes stretch upward to meet drifting clouds rising to the foot of the 6,640 feet-high Pico de São Tomé. We won't be climbing it today. Even experienced mountain hikers find it a challenge, and so much depends on the weather. The higher you go, the more densely epiphytic plants, such as orchids, grow on the trees and the more light spreads through the forest. With luck, at the end of the journey, walkers have a fantastic view above the treetops and across a sea of green. The not unlikely alternative is mist and rain.

I find out what this means when we reach the edge of the crater. Above us, the tops of the trees are lost to view, and their trunks dissolve into the fog. We find ourselves at 4,600 feet, and my head is touching the low clouds. Paolo leads us down a slope and out of the mist, and suddenly we are standing on the edge of a clearing. All around us are three-foot high begonias (the endemic *Begonia baccata*) with white flowers and leaves similar in size to those of rhubarb. In front of us is an extraordinary patch of grass. It is round and level with neither hollows nor bumps.

The surface is like that of a lake. Indeed, it was once a caldera lake, which over time has become marshy and overgrown with grass. It looks harmless enough, but anyone who steps on it risks joining Amélia and her horse languishing on the crater bed. Paolo launches into a legend. After a violent quarrel with her husband, the wife of a Portuguese colonial master rode off on her horse. Losing her way in the forest, she is said to have arrived at this clearing at exactly the same time as her husband and his entourage. Although her horse held back, Amélia spurred it on to cross the clearing. The men looked on helplessly as she sank.

From now on, every step of the way we shall be following colonial history. Paolo points to a tree, known locally as the "broken axe." Its wood is extremely solid, and in colonial days it would have taken several months to chop a fallen trunk. The Portuguese used the wood to build bridges and track beds on which to lay railway lines to carry the harvest from the plantations to the coast. I find it hard to imagine how many wide, paved roads and rail tracks once crisscrossed the island, running through this same seemingly unspoiled countryside across which Paolo and I are struggling on a track two feet wide.

We are about to walk through what is known as secondary rain forest, Paolo explains. If he hadn't told me, I wouldn't have known. Until 70 years ago, cocoa and coffee were grown on the island. The fast-growing tropical vegetation has since clawed



Hikers will be glad they made the journey when they stumble across jungle clearings with waterfalls cascading into azure blue waters (left); São Tomé is

a biodiversity hotspot with 230 fish species recorded so far, including blue marlin, snapper, sailfish, yellowfin tuna, dorado, and barracuda (right)

back the land. It's difficult to tell the difference between primary and secondary rain forest, especially as the erstwhile plantation owners didn't cut down the native trees because they provided welcome shade.

We clamber over a decaying tree, then Paolo says, "There's a hospital right here." I think I've misheard. But suddenly there appears right in front of me a rough hewn stone wall, the gable end of what was once a shelter for sick workers. Steps lead down to the entrance. Large parts of the moss-covered walls have collapsed. Instead of the roof, brushwood from the secondary rain forest, or *capoeira*, has been woven crosswise and lengthwise on top of the stone. These same plants straddle the surrounding land, creating arches and colonnades, which once offered hiding places for runaway slaves. Here, they practiced a martial art, which they made to appear no more than an innocent dance, named after the bushes that gave them shelter – capoeira.

The Portuguese first brought slaves here from present-day Angola and Mozambique in the late fifteenth century. More slave labor came from Cape Verde, where Paolo's family originated. The colonizers planted sugarcane until around 1650 when São Tomé's production paled into insignificance beside the much larger plantations in Brazil. Nevertheless, the Portuguese returned two centuries later to cultivate cocoa and coffee. Large areas of lowland rain forest had been cleared, especially in the drier north and east of the island, to make room for around eight hundred plantations. São Tomé became one of the world's largest cocoa producers. Slavery had officially been abolished, but the workers continued to live in appalling conditions. The 20 or so hospitals were designed to present a superficial humanitarian face rather than provide genuine healthcare.

We sit under a crumbling archway to eat the picnic we have brought with us: cassava salad with tuna and herbs, all produced in São Tomé. For dessert, Paolo plucks a cocoa pod from a tree. It's shaped like a rugby ball, only smaller. He uses his machete to cut around the husk, which is at least an inch thick. Inside are the beans. Embedded in a delicate white pulp, they resemble garlic cloves. We can't wait. We suck them like hard candy, licking away their sticky white coats. They taste wonderful, sweet, and refreshing.

BANANA PLANTS WITH LEAVES THE SIZE OF A WINDSURFER'S SAIL GROW AMID MANY OF THE ORIGINAL RAIN FOREST GIANTS



We aren't far from our overnight stop when the sky turns dark gray. A young man comes running toward us. As rain threatens, he wants to rescue the day's harvest. He loops a rope around a palm tree and then around his hips before nimbly shinning up to a bucket into which trickles the sap from an incision in a palm flower. The sap will ferment to become palm wine.

We pass by a waterfall and then along an old, overgrown cobbled street, meeting locals on their way to their plantations. Women carry baskets of bananas and papayas on their heads. One woman balances a machete. After independence from Portugal in 1975, the new government shared out the land between the citizens of São Tomé. Now they all have their own plots of land. Growing amid banana plants with leaves the size of a windsurfer's sail and cocoa trees as high as cherry trees are many of the original rain forest giants, as well as specially planted shady *Erythrina*, or flame trees, with bright orange flowers.

My overnight accommodation turns out to be a hundred-year-old, two-story wooden manor house with wraparound balcony, art nouveau glass and parquet floors. Its name, Bombaim, Paolo tells me, means something like "good guide."

Six o'clock. The sun has disappeared, and it is now pitch dark. I stretch out on the veranda and look upward. It is as though someone has scattered sackfuls of cut rhinestones overhead. Tomorrow I shall make my way back to the capital, coming across mountain villages of brightly painted wooden huts and a man who will offer me palm juice. The cup in which he serves me the milky liquid can't exactly be called clean. Even so, curiosity gets the better of me, but I also remember the ocamí fruit, believed to aid digestion, that Paolo dosed me with as a precaution. I will experience no more than the drink's sweet-

and-sour taste and have reason to be grateful for that snippit of information.

Now, the night before, I consider whether when witnessing a glorious display such as this I should think noble thoughts or simply let myself be blown away by the sheer beauty of our tiny planet's tropical greenery and by the immeasurable vastness up there where perhaps nothing else grows – much less a paradise like this. ♦

Translated by Isabel Varea-Riley

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