

the hawaii of africa

The surf scene on remote São Tomé – one of the smallest island nations on earth – is as extraordinary as its setting is exotic, finds Michael Scott Moore.

The plantation house at São João dos Angolares was a white wooden mansion with fanlight windows, perched on a hill over the town and sagging in the constant rain. A young African woman with long braided hair was sleeping on a sofa in the lobby. “Desculpe,” I said, but she didn’t stir. “Excuse me...”

I had no reservation and had hauled my baggage and surfboard up the hill from the centre of town. I had just spent two nights in the rainforest, surfing on the southern beaches of São Tomé – half of the tiny twin-island African republic of São Tomé and Príncipe, the smallest country in Africa after Seychelles, 300km off the coast of Gabon. São João dos Angolares represented comfort, rest, civilisation... or so I hoped.

I was here to surf, not because the waves in São Tomé were legendary but because the way they surf here is so different. The islands present themselves to the world as an African Hawaii, which to some extent they are, with volcanos, pristine beaches and a handful of ostensibly luxurious hotels, patronised mostly by wealthy Portuguese. But São Tomé is also one of the poorest nations on earth: the roads are terrible, electricity is scarce. And though its cacao-and-coffee economy is shifting perhaps towards oil, tourism remains an afterthought, which makes it all the more intriguing to visit.

“Desculpe,” I said again. Portuguese is the language they speak here – after looking around for anyone else.

The Roça São João dos Angolares belongs to a Santoméan artist and chef who uses local seafood in the lavish meals he prepares. As a hotel, it’s a comfortable antique. The old timber floors were damp and pliant, like turf. Everything about the place felt both durable and evanescent, like a house in a recurring dream. It seemed as if you

could arrive without warning, move into a draughty, soft-timbered room, sleep under a mosquito net, eat a meal on the veranda, and leave without meeting anyone. This strange stillness was part of its charm.

Eventually the woman stood up, and when I asked for a room she led me upstairs to a veranda, where six empty rooms were lined up behind French doors overlooking a forest of banana trees. “Lunch is at two o’clock,” she said, and left. I seemed to be the only guest.

Earlier I’d been to a fishing village down the coast called Porto Alegre, where I had tracked down one of the island’s only local surfers. With a translator named Quintino and another surfer called Sean, I had found a kid named Chum (pronounced “Shoom”), who had learned to ride on his feet after a Californian surfer, Sam George, paid a visit in 2000. George first came to São Tomé intending to “pioneer” its waves; instead he found an indigenous surf-riding culture.

Kids on São Tomé, especially in Chum’s village, had ridden hand-carved bodyboards on their bellies and wooden surf boats for as long as anyone could remember. George returned to make a film about them in 2006 (*The Lost Wave: An African Surf Story*), and found that Chum had carved his own long surfboard out of wood and learned to ride on his feet. George was delighted. He and his film crew left modern boards behind, and now there was a (very small) stand-up surf community on São Tomé; one of the youngest modern surf scenes in the world.

In the film, Chum rides a long *tambua*, a rough board hacked from the bottom of a dugout canoe. Most kids in this community had ridden shorter *tambuas* on their bellies until George came to the island. “Sam taught us to surf on our feet,” Chum told me. He was a stolid, unsmiling 19-year-old with wide-set eyes and cropped hair. “Now



Silhouetted in the sunlight, a lone surfer heads out for the waves.



I surf Sam's board every day," he said. "I am very happy he gave it to me."

The blue and yellow board from California leant in a corner of his shack in the village. I asked if Chum saw many foreign surfers, Americans or Europeans. The waves on São Tomé had the potential to be excellent in the summer, when storms from the southern hemisphere wrapped the island in swells. (I had arrived in October, the start of the rainy season.) But Chum said the few surfers who came to São Tomé went across to Ilhéu das Rolas, an islet just off the coast with a luxury resort called Pestana Equador.

Instead of staying on Rolas I had made a reservation at an eco lodge near Porto Alegre. It was even more rudimentary than it sounded, just a clearing at the end of a forest trail with three double wooden cabins and a public lavatory. The only amenities were candles and mosquito nets. But Jalé Beach was one of the remotest, most pristine I had ever seen, and my shack was on a palm-fringed stretch of sand with reliable surfing waves. Grilled-fish meals arrived from Porto Alegre by motorcycle. For two days, Chum's village three miles distant was my metropolis.

By comparison, the old plantation house at Angolares felt luxurious. But something nagged me when I went down for lunch. The young woman introduced me to the owner, João Carlos Silva, a large man with a small grey beard. He sat behind his table with a drink and a slow-burning cigarette. "Bienvenue," he said. "Sit anywhere you like." The tables all overlooked the smoking, clamouring village of Angolares and a slope overgrown with bananas and palms.

São Tomé is an old slave island, desperately poor, and almost every town is a former plantation—a teeming village with a house on the hill. Life under Portuguese rule had been brutal until independence in 1975. Nothing could make up for that, though things were better now that São Tomé governed itself. I did ask Chum what they needed in Porto Alegre. Surprisingly, he focused on surf equipment. "The ropes that you have for your leg," he said. "We don't have all of those any more. And a kind of soap that you put on the board..."

"Tell him I have wax," I said to Quintino. "I should have thought about leashes."

Chum was quiet, almost truculent, in the village. But when we carried our boards past the dugout canoes and paddled into the waves, he became a different person—confident, relaxed, eager to show off his local break. We paddled through a channel in the currents to a spot where the waves were shoulder-high and nicely formed.

We surfed for two hours, and it was terrific fun. Soon, a boy of about 12 paddled out on a tambua. He was mischievous, round-headed, almost bald, with a quick, brilliant smile. While we traded waves I realised I wanted to try his board. When I asked him to swap, Chum told him to cooperate with the tone of an older brother saying, from personal experience, "You're crazy if you don't. He might give you his board."

This had not been my intention. I happened to like



As we paddled into the waves, Chum became a different person – confident, eager to show off his local break.

my surfboard, and I'd started to plaster it with stickers from every part of the world. But I was happy to switch. For half an hour we all tried each other's boards. Surfing the tambua was as awkward as I expected. I floated on it, barely. I paddled for a wave, lamely. I tumbled in the whitewash. The board was a curved section of a canoe's hull, splintery and waterlogged and rough.

"How is it?" said Sean, the other surfer who worked in São Tomé city.

"Like trying to surf driftwood."

The local kids could ride it; Chum could even steer it with his feet. But when the 12-year-old, whose name was Dende, returned our boards, he made a point of saying he liked mine because of the size. To make sure I understood him, I pointed to Sean's smaller board and said, "It's better, or no?"

He said instantly, like a cat complaining, "Não." It was impulsive and affectionate, with a gentle, mischievous aggression that stayed in my mind. In fact, it had been nagging me all afternoon. Because now I was here in Angolares, still in possession of the board. I'd left it up to fate: if I saw Dende on my way out of town, I would give him the board. If not, never mind. No need to

force it. Gifts could help people or insult them, and Africans needed other stuff besides surfboards. I didn't see Dende, so no big deal. In Africa the thing to do

is spend money in the local economy and then donate to decent charities.

Later, over lunch on the terrace in Angolares, Silva and I conversed in French.

"Why São Tomé?" he said, and I told him.

"I didn't know the surf was good on this island," he said. "Rich Portuguese come here to relax. The hiking and birdwatching can be very good. But we don't see so many surfers. Tourism is not what it could be."

Which meant that Dende might not see another modern board for years. Not that he needed a surfboard the way he needed other things. But a circuit felt incomplete; suddenly, my board seemed like a cheap thing to own. I ordered a taxi to Porto Alegre.

It was three hours there and back in the rain. In the end, we traded. I offered Dende my tri-fin for his tambua, and the last I saw of my board it was walking down a muddy path on a parade of happy children's hands. ♦

BEACH, BED AND BOARD

The best time to go surfing in São Tomé is in the dry season (about 25°C) from May to September, when swells come up from the southern Atlantic. **Navetur-Equatour** (www.navetur-equatour.st) in São Tomé city can book accommodation, treks and car rental; it also offers package tours with return flights from Lisbon and seven nights' B&B, from €1,069. **Black Tomato** (020-7426 9894; www.blacktomato.co.uk) offers six nights half-board in Omali Lodge, São Tomé plus flights, from £2,499. **Roça São João dos Angolares** (www.rocasaojoao.com), B&B €39.90, plus €15 for lunch or dinner, or €25 full-board. **Jalé Ecolodge** (www.praiajale.free.fr), B&B €25, plus €5 per meal. **Pestana** (www.pestana.com) operates four local resorts, rooms from €133. There are no ATMs on the islands so it's smart to pay for lodging in advance. Euros and dollars serve as secondary currencies and can be exchanged at most banks for Santoméan *dobras*. Banks will give a cash advance on a credit card, but traveller's cheques can only be cashed at the main bank. São Tomé requires a tourist visa, arranged in advance, for visitors from most countries (€50-€60) and charges a cash departure tax of about €15. You must also have a valid yellow fever certificate. **STP Airways** (www.stpairways.st) and **TAP Portugal** (0845-601 0932; www.flytap.com) fly from Lisbon to São Tomé, from €866.

Above: a Santoméan boy stands up to surf on a hand-carved board. Below: a surfer with his collection of local, hand-made boards and a "modern" version.

