

Weekend long reads

Africa holidays

On a tiny African island, a \$100m experiment in sustainable tourism

Tech entrepreneur Mark Shuttleworth is funding a new future for Príncipe

Richard Woods JUNE 14, 2019

A maverick entrepreneur flew over the Sahara on May 28, carrying a cluster of astronomers and theoretical physicists in his private jet. Though the talk on board was of loop quantum gravity, a hypothesis at the frontier of science, the group were heading for a place far removed from the complexities of modern life.

I watched as a more ordinary sort of gravity brought them down in Príncipe, a tiny green jewel set in the Atlantic blue about 220km from mainland Africa. Out stepped the private jet's owner, Mark Shuttleworth, the South African tech entrepreneur who, in 2002, was the second tourist to go into space. He was greeted at the foot of the plane's steps by Príncipe's president, while local children performed a song and dance — a scene that put me in mind of a papal visit. Following Shuttleworth from the plane were, among others, Professor Mike Cruise, president of Britain's Royal Astronomical Society and Stephon Alexander, associate professor of astronomy and physics at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

Shuttleworth had invited them to the island — which is usually overflowed and overlooked — to mark the centenary of a British experiment staged there during the 1919 solar eclipse. Observations taken then confirmed the general theory of relativity and made Albert Einstein a global star. Not so Príncipe, which afterwards pretty much sank from sight.



Yet the island deserves note for another experiment, one happening right now, to the island itself. Less than a decade ago this volcanic speck, about 18km long and 12km wide, was adrift and poor, its roughly 7,000 people mainly subsisting on what they could harvest from the forest and sea.

Despite the island's natural beauty, few people visited. It was awkward to get there, and even in the tiny capital decent plumbing was harder to find than the Higgs boson. Since then Shuttleworth has poured in a fortune — “north of \$100m”, he told me — hoping to create sustainable, responsible tourism without destroying the natural environment that makes the island special.

“Wouldn't it be amazing if we could set a standard for what's possible in the balance between nature and humanity, and culture and tourism,” he said, as we sat and talked at Roça Sundy, an old colonial plantation house on the island that he has restored and turned into a hotel. “Wouldn't it be amazing if we could do something here that other places are able to be inspired by, to halt the damage globalisation has done.”



Traditional island house

The 45-year-old, who founded software companies Canonical and Thawte Consulting, began his involvement with Príncipe in 2011, when he bought Bom Bom, a collection of beach huts in an idyllic location in the north of the island. Now he has two other projects open: Roça Sundy and Sundy Praia, a cluster of luxury tented villas amid the rainforest on a remote beach in the west.

When I first visited Príncipe six years ago, I stayed at Bom Bom and was captivated by its setting and simplicity. This time, I made my way to Sundy Praia, where previously there had been nothing but forest and a few fishermen's shacks.

You could look at the project as a remarkable achievement, given the logistical challenges — or as a jungle folly brought on by a bout of Tarzanitis. It's probably a bit of both.



Luxury tented villas at Sundry Praia

To get to there, I took a 4x4 for 20 minutes along a bumpy mud-and-stone track through hilly forest of cacao, banana and soaring oka. At its end, I found 15 villas with solid walls and tent roofs hidden among the foliage, some overlooking the sandy beach, others set back. Mine had a giant, curtained four-poster bed — a tent within a tent — and a bath big enough for two, hewn from a boulder. The fabric roofs meant that exotic birdsong and the surf's gentle thunder were a constant soundtrack.

It's the kind of place where you can reconnect with nature, feel immersed in wilderness — yet in an emergency still get a bottle of Louis Roederer Cristal (at €750 a pop). There's also a “wow factor” fine-dining restaurant built of bamboo and palm fronds, created in the shape of a giant fish by Didier Lefort, who co-designed the renowned Datai hotel in Langkawi, Malaysia.

Guests can swim or paddle-board or have spa treatments. In certain seasons, whale-watching is possible and, on a protected beach in the east of the island, turtles come to nest.

I opted first to explore the coast, taking a rib ride south to Agulhas Bay, where the spectacular phonolite mountains give the feel of *King Kong* country (though in fact the island has no venomous snakes and the most dangerous animal is probably the malarial mosquito). Later, I hiked a forest trail to find a great oka, whose trunk spread into magnificent vanes at its base, and an isolated cove with not a single footprint in the sand. All very *Robinson Crusoe*.

Until the Portuguese discovered Príncipe in about 1470, the island was uninhabited by humans. By the 19th century, they had cleared large areas of forest and established coffee and cacao plantations with slave labour. In 1906 Henry Nevinson, a visiting British journalist, wrote a devastating

account of the terrible conditions faced by indentured workers who were still in effect slaves. The island itself, though, remained beautiful: “The place is like a magic land, the dream of some wild painter,” Nevinson wrote. “Points of cliff run sheer up from the sea, and between them lie secret little bays where a boat may be pushed off quietly over the sand.”

One of those points on the island’s east is known as the Precipice. Here you can look down a steep drop of maybe 200ft to a crescent of golden sand known as Banana Beach. But it’s more than just a picture-perfect view: locals say that plantation owners used to bring troublesome slaves here and throw them off. These days it’s a picnic spot.

Later the cacao trade shifted elsewhere, plunging the plantations into ruin, with derelict remains still visible amid the regrown forest. In 1975, after Príncipe and the much bigger São Tomé (160km to the south) won independence from Portugal, the island reverted to a simple way of life. In some ways it was a healthy one, insulated from the poisons of the modern world. People were poor, but lived longer than those in nearby mainland African countries.



Shuttleworth with a team of experts, overseeing plans for a proposed new housing project

Modern transport and communications meant that insularity could not last. Change was unavoidable, says Shuttleworth. Better that it be done sensitively than not. “I’m here because I think there is an opportunity to help this community better their circumstances in a way that ultimately they will be extremely proud of,” he said. “Ten years ago here there was an extraordinary dignity in poverty. But it was still poverty; and I feel obliged to be part of helping people. But I am also very mindful of the fact that most people who have tried to make that transition have lost something. They may have got McDonald’s, but they have lost their soul.”

At the same time his involvement generates its own problems, as he admits. “I look at plastic [on the island] and I know that I provided the salary that imported the bottle...so I feel accountable,” he said.

Shuttleworth’s involvement goes beyond the resorts. He has entered a partnership with the local government on infrastructure projects too. Six years ago, on my last visit, the track to Bom Bom

was mud and gravel; now there's a road and minibus shuttles. Six years ago, a track that led to Roça Sundy went straight across the island's modest airstrip. Now there is a new runway and a new road (one that helpfully doesn't cut in front of aircraft taking off). Ruts in the old mud tracks have given way to speed bumps.



The restaurant at Sundy Praia, built of bamboo and palm fronds

Some locals have mixed views of these developments. "It's getting busier," said Marnie Saidi, a British-Lebanese woman who runs a café in the capital. The population has risen to an estimated 8,000 or 9,000, as São Toméans have arrived hoping for work in construction. There are more jobs, especially for women, but also more vehicles. "There's been a big increase in cars," Saidi said disapprovingly.

To put that in perspective: the island has few roads and one fuel station (which nearly ran dry in May when one of the two regular supply ships from São Tomé sank and the other caught fire).



Shuttleworth talking to a local

The improvements have made getting to and around Príncipe easier. And people are still marvellously open and friendly. Little boys clustered around me at Roça Sundy, eager to play. Walking along one quiet forest road, I waved at a passing car driven by a local woman, who stopped and gave me a lift though she and her friends spoke no English.

Yet it was also noticeable that some houses along key routes have put up metal fences for privacy. Yes, the island has lost a little of its innocence; but, in comparison with so many places, it retains a rare magic and has so far dodged the Big Macs.

Ahead lie many challenges. At Roça Sundy, for example, about 150 impoverished families still live in the dilapidated *sanzalas* — the slave quarters — of the abandoned plantation in conditions that contrast starkly with the new hotel nearby. There is a plan to resettle them at a site several kilometres away optimistically known as the Promised Land. The project was initiated by Shuttleworth and the government, who later called in UN Habitat, an NGO, to handle the process. Still, the community faces upheaval, and during Shuttleworth's visit, some locals confronted him demanding more compensation under the resettlement plan.

The island's president, José Cassandra, is also seeking a partner to build a port. "This is a very small island and we are open to investment from anywhere," he told me. Luckily, he shares Shuttleworth's vision of sustainable development, of organic agriculture, protected fisheries and no high-rise building. "The population wants things quickly," he said. "But in the long run they will benefit from responsible policies."



Here Be Dragons, one of Shuttleworth's companies, already employs hundreds of people on Príncipe, and ultimately wants local people to run the projects it has started. He has at least two other sites where he might develop hotels, and told me he might collaborate with the government on the new port, as long as the project set sustainable goals.

Is he hopeful of recouping his investments in the island? "No chance."

So why does he do it? "I'm in a position to. I've chosen not to have children. I'm interested in figuring out what impact I can have in the world, and I've chosen that this should be one of the places where I try to pull off the impossible."

He added wryly: "I do feel vulnerable. This thing could all go tits-up, right? And it could go tits-up for lots of different reasons. But if you didn't try..."

For now, though, the island remains a little corner of the world where stunning natural habitat combines with compelling history. As Sir Arthur Eddington, the British astronomer who led the expedition to observe the 1919 solar eclipse, wrote in his report: "The climate is very moist, but not unhealthy. The vegetation is luxuriant, and the scenery is extremely beautiful."

Like his solar sightings, it was another observation that still proves true.

Details

Richard Woods travelled as a guest of HBD Príncipe (hbdprincipe.com).

Double rooms with half-board cost €220 per night at Roça Sundry and €755 per night at Sundry Praia

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