

## Ecotourism Eden

### Tiny island nation seeks a place in Africa's growing boom

By **Barry Hatton**  
Associated Press

**BOMBOM**, Sao Tome and Principe — Flying into the tiny island of Principe off Africa's west coast brings a sense of traveling back in time.

Seen from over the Atlantic, the dense tropical jungle coats the volcanic terrain down to a turquoise sea and golden beaches reachable only by boat. It looks like a prehistoric land that time forgot.

Principe is one of the poorest spots on Earth in dollar terms. But in terms of virgin tropical landscapes, it is one of the wealthiest, says Rombout Swanborn, a Dutch businessman and conservationist.

Swanborn recently purchased two hotels on Principe and, backed by local authorities, aims to plug this island of about 6,000 people into the ecotourism boom now spreading across West Africa.

Ecotourism took off in eastern Africa in the early 1990s. Underdeveloped countries such as Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya discovered they had what vacationers from developed countries sought — raw wilderness rich in animal life.

Now the business is gaining traction in the western part of the African continent, too.

Ecotourism is flourishing in Gabon and Ghana. Angola and Nigeria also are signing up. Sao Tome and Principe, a twin-island nation in the Gulf of Guinea, aims to be next.

"The people here are sitting on a pot of gold," said Swanborn, who also operates four ecotourism developments in Gabon.

The Madrid, Spain-based World Tourism Organization in October described Africa as the industry's "star performer." Growth in visitors is predicted to be around 10 percent this year, more than double the world average. "One can safely say that the growth we observe in Africa ... is mainly based on ecotourism growth," Eugenio Yuris, head of the WTO's sustainable tourism section, said.

The United Nations and international conservation bodies such as the World Wildlife Fund are backing the ecotourism trend. They view the development of sustainable tourism as a way of wedding local needs and care for the environment.

There are potential pitfalls, though.

Neel Inamdar, a senior adviser at Washington, D.C.-based Conservation International, a nonprofit organization, points out that Kenya has fought hard to recover from the damage wrought by high-volume, low-cost ecotourism.

"You need a strong regulatory environment, with bodies that will stand up to the industry," Inamdar said.

Principe island, just north of the equator, fits the bill of a tropical paradise.

Just a few hundred people live in its seaside capital, Santo Antonio. The rest are scattered across small communities of clapboard houses and tumbledown former plantation buildings. The jungle spills down to



GEORGE OSODI/Associated Press

Children run on the beach as people look on at Sao Tome in July 2005. The tranquil scene is one of many to be had in palm-fringed Sao Tome and Principe, a remote pair of volcanic islands smack dab on the equator whose attraction lies in what this undeveloped corner of the world lacks: no mass tourism. No traffic. No terrorism.

beaches, where you can spend an entire day and the only footprints in the sand are your own.

The thick Atlantic rainforest is sprinkled with colorful birds, including rare species, and waterfalls. In certain seasons, sea turtles lay eggs on the beaches and whales come within view of land.

Despite its charms, this country is not all that it could be as a vacation destination.

There are few international-standard hotels.

But tourism development is gathering pace.

Portugal's Pestana Group, which runs a resort on Sao Tome island, is building a development in the capital, also called Sao Tome, that includes a five-star hotel, a casino and villas.

Arlecio Costa, local director of the Falcon Group, is developing a huge project on

the northern tip of Sao Tome island called Lago Azul with South African investors.

The \$380 million development, still at the planning stage but scheduled to open in five years, includes a quay for cruise liners, an 18-hole golf course, a conference center and a hotel with a health spa.

"It looks like a dream," Costa said.

Sao Tome and Principe was

a largely overlooked country until it found major oil reserves, estimated at 11 billion barrels, in its offshore waters a few years ago. That discovery brought foreign governments and international oil companies knocking at its door.

Costa, though, reckons tourism is the way forward. "The oil will run out one day," he said. "Tourism can be forever, if you take care of it."

If you go . . .

**Sao Tome:** National tourism Web site: [www.saotome.st](http://www.saotome.st)

**Traveling to Sao Tome:** Foreign passport holders require visas and a yellow fever vaccination to enter Sao Tome. Flights leave from Lisbon, Portugal (TAP Air Portugal); Luanda, Angola (TAAG); and Gabon (Air Sao Tome).

**When to go:** The equatorial islands have a steady temperature between 72-86 degrees. The October-May rainy season brings sporadic heavy showers and higher temperatures.

**Where to stay:** In the capital, Sao Tome, there are two main hotels. The Marlin Beach Hotel — [www.marlinbeach.com](http://www.marlinbeach.com) — is on the bay and the Hotel Miramar —

[www.sao-tome.com/hmiramar/index—english.htm](http://www.sao-tome.com/hmiramar/index—english.htm) — is located in the city's embassy area. On the Ilheu das Rolas, an islet off the southern tip of Sao Tome island, the Pestana Equador Hotel —

[www.pestana.com/hotels/en/hotels/africa/SaoTomePrincipeHotels/Equador/Home/](http://www.pestana.com/hotels/en/hotels/africa/SaoTomePrincipeHotels/Equador/Home/) — offers beaches and diving.

On Principe island, the Bombom Resort — [www.bom-bom.com](http://www.bom-bom.com) — has beachside bungalows and organizes trips into the rainforest.

**Tips:** Portuguese is the official language. Few speak English; more can speak French. The local currency is the dobra, though euros can be widely used. Visitors should take precautions against mosquito bites.

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