

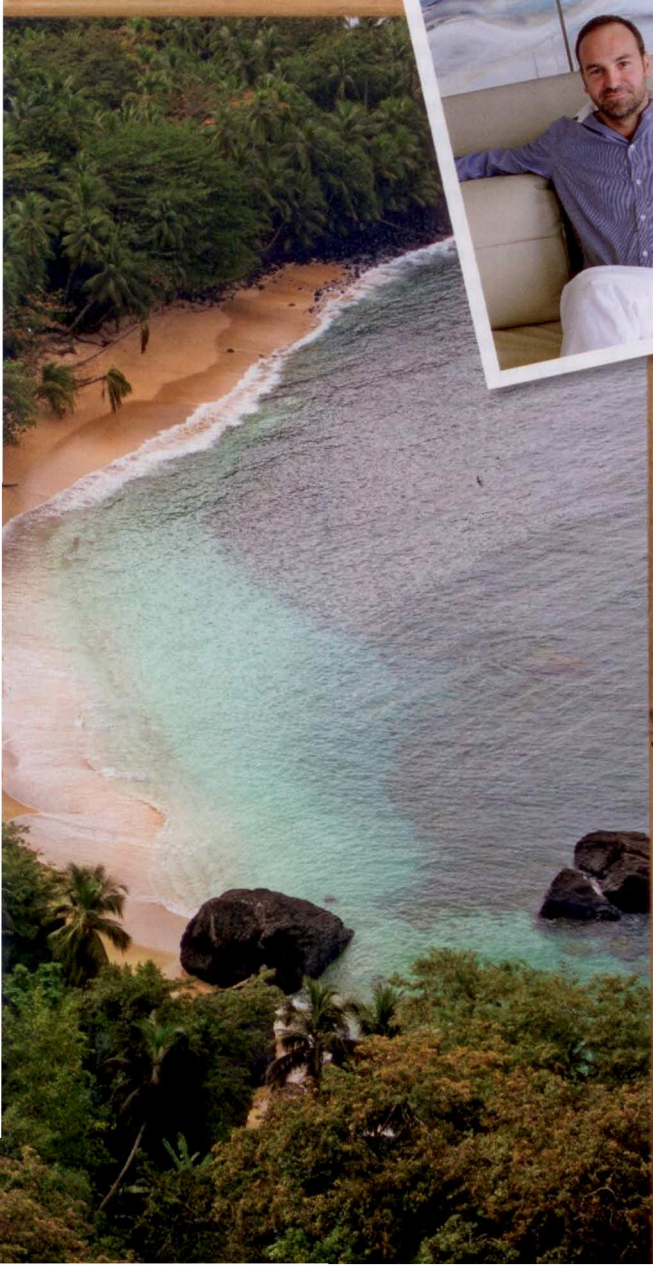
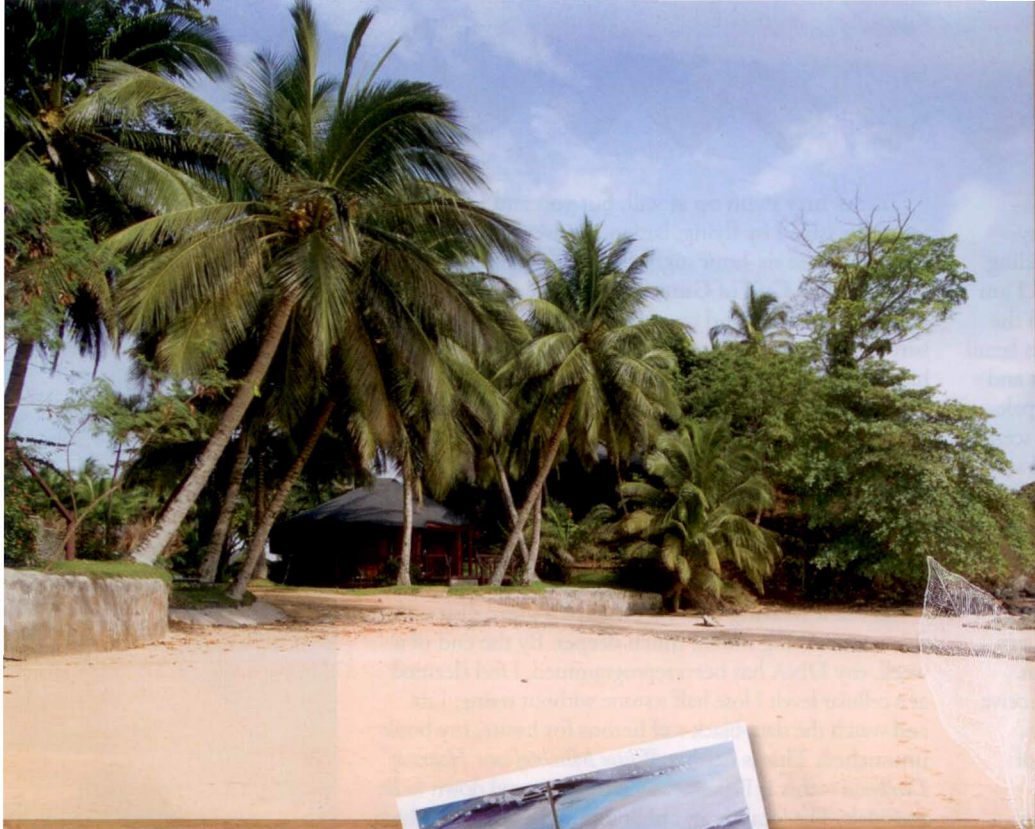
TIDDLY OM BOM BOM!

Like to be beside the seaside? Of course you do – and you're in for an epiphany on the barely touched, teeny-weeny tropical African island of Bom Bom.

Go soon – but keep shtum, says Judith Woods



Photographed by MATTHEW WRITTLE

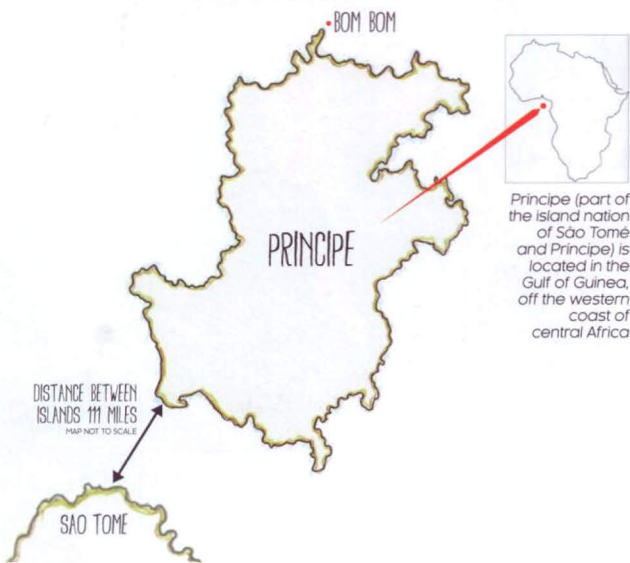


Opposite page, Bom Bom, viewed from Príncipe. Above left, the beach on Bom Bom. Above, a young woman cheerily balancing a machete on her head. Centre, Mark Shuttleworth. Below left, Banana Beach. Below, a mother and son at Santo António, the colonial capital of São Tomé and Príncipe

It's raining in paradise. Raining and raining; jungle-fat droplets are bouncing off the glossy green foliage, soil-saturated rivulets are cascading down the slopes and pooling in red puddles. I am on a deserted beach on a lush island right on the equator. It is perfect: wide African skies, lapis lazuli sea, dark pulsating rainforest, alive with hoots and shrieks and bird whistles, stealthily encroaching on pale virginal sand. It is *Lost*, it is a *Jurassic Park* mise en scène of ancient landscape and hushed expectation. And as the rainy season pours down its blessings, I do what any right-thinking person would do – I slip my dress over my head and leap into the sea, whooping with delight.

Here's the astonishing thing – virtually nobody has heard of my island-nation retreat. Nobody. Not my friend, who does South-East Asia for six weeks every summer. Not my sister, who lives in the Caribbean. Not the receptionist at the travel clinic where I receive my yellow-fever jab. In travel one-upmanship terms, I have hit pay dirt with the ultimate trump card of dinner-party destinations; see how the club-class cognoscenti struggle to guess where on earth I can be talking about. Don't you know it? Why, São Tomé and Príncipe, a nation of two islands, is the second smallest country in Africa after the Seychelles. The former Portuguese colony was founded in 1485, granted independence in 1975 and is right on GMT. It's pleasingly remote – oh so remote! Achingly unspoiled – oh so unspoiled! You really must go. Except, after a week on Príncipe, the smaller of the two islands, I'm not sure I want other people to go.

One person who knows all about it is Mark Shuttleworth. The dashing South African-born tech billionaire has bought many of Príncipe's beaches and farms, along with Bom Bom, an even tinier island resort, just a short stroll over a wooden footbridge from Príncipe's northern coast. Remember him? He took a commercial space flight with the Russians in 2002, making him the first Afronaut. Now his focus is on planet Earth, unplugged. Shuttleworth, 40, has a great many plans for the area: eco-resorts and chic glamping sites; a small-scale coffee plantation – the Arabica beans grown here are of the finest quality; and artisan chocolate production (the cacao is arguably the best in the world). There was a horrified intake of breath when he acquired Grande Beach, where turtles come to breed. But, actually, he's keeping it safe for them.



Turtles may swim up at will, but you and I must reach the island by flying, late in the evening, to Lisbon then await the six-hour night flight down to São Tomé, nestled in the Gulf of Guinea. You arrive at 5.30am and spend the day and overnight in São Tomé (which isn't worth lingering over) before catching your final half-hour flight the next morning to Príncipe.

Some random facts about Príncipe: there is no culture of tipping and there are no ferocious mammals. If a car splashes a pedestrian, the driver can be taken to court. It covers 53 square miles and is home to just 5,000 people. They speak Portuguese but don't use swear words. There is no electricity between midnight and 6am. If you stay in the rainforest too long, your feet take root.

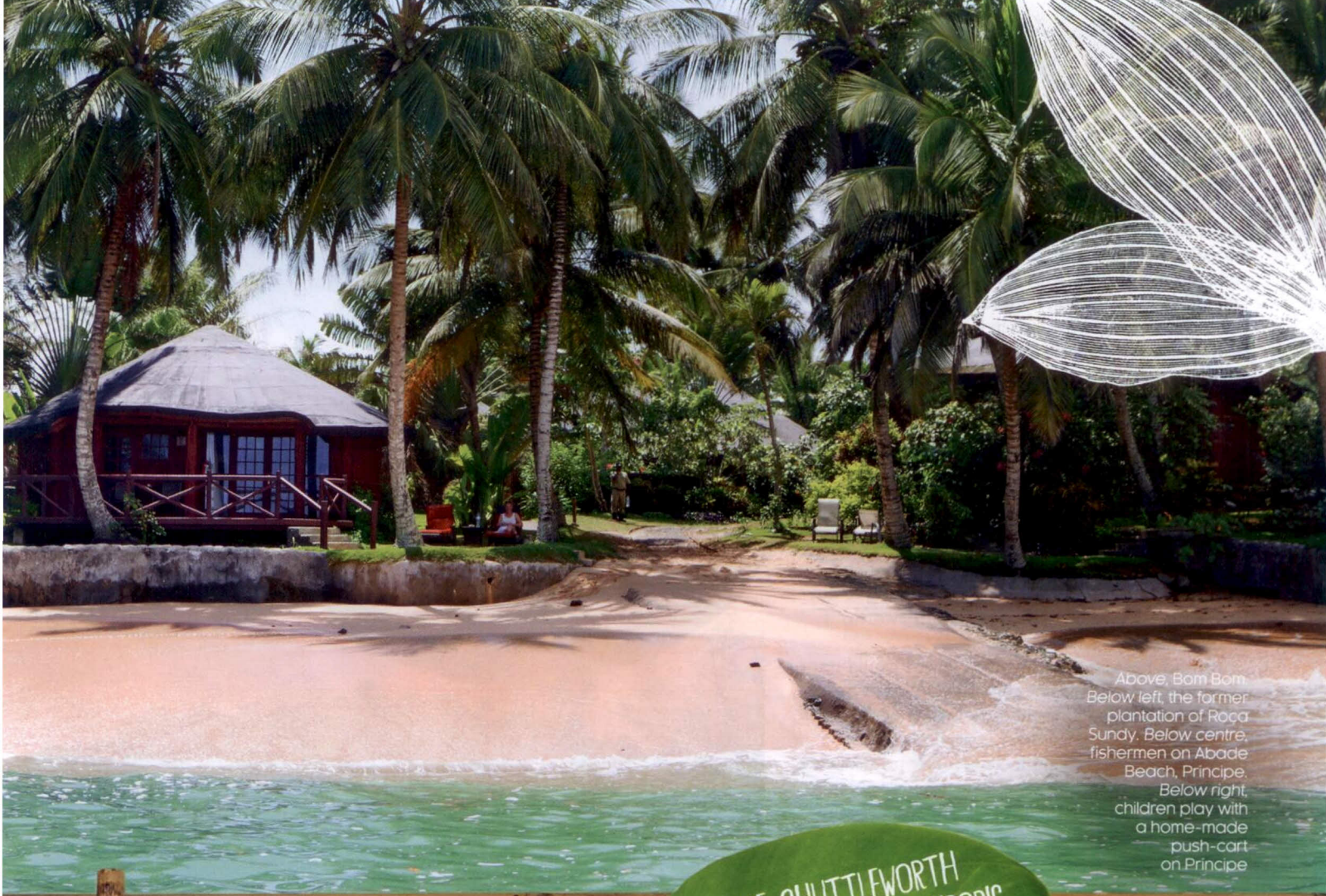
To call it relaxing is to do Príncipe a grave disservice; this is something much, much deeper. By the end of a week, my DNA has been reprogrammed. I feel cleansed at a cellular level; I lose half a stone without trying; I sit and watch the slate-black reef herons for hours, my book untouched. This is neither *White Mischief* nor *Heart of Darkness* – this is Príncipe, where life is pared down to its essentials. The locals have a philosophy, 'Leve-leve' – which translates as 'All in good time, take it easy'. So if you are the sort who wants heated towel rails and flunkies, stay in Europe. If uneventfulness and an elliptical dinner menu of 'white fish' with a wine list shorter than a haiku would drive you crazy, keep away. But if you crave tranquillity and sea spray and sun-dappled forest, then you may come.

I am here to rest. Yet my eyes open, unbidden, every morning, long before the electricity wakes up. I snorkel in the reef two yards from my bungalow door, where the starfish are lilac and the parrotfish swim so close I can hear their beaks crunch against the coral. Across the footbridge from the 19 bungalows is Bom Bom island proper (*bom* means 'good'), where the restaurant and bar are located. I breakfast on fruit and magnificent strong coffee and wait for the day to unfold: an adventure through Príncipe's rainforest, a boat trip, a dizzying hilltop panorama where white tropicbirds soar on thermals overhead, their long tail streamers adding even more grace to their aerobatics.

Every perfect holiday comes with a romance, of course. But it is not with Miguel, the brooding Portuguese advertising executive who shares my charming guide Diane and a driver for a week. Miguel is magnificently moody; one moment flirtatious and smiling, the next injured and prideful as a Portuguese ambassador slighted at the Spanish court. He smoulders yet does not ignite, not least because he spends an inordinate amount of time taking photographs of soil and seeds. I ought to feel piqued, but the truth is, I am a little bit in love with Mark Shuttleworth, even though I haven't met him; his benign hand is everywhere. He is *Gatsby*. He is the *Wizard of Oz*. Few have met him, although it is said that when he visits, he plays football with the locals and treks alone for hours in the rainforest, silently feeling the island's pulse.

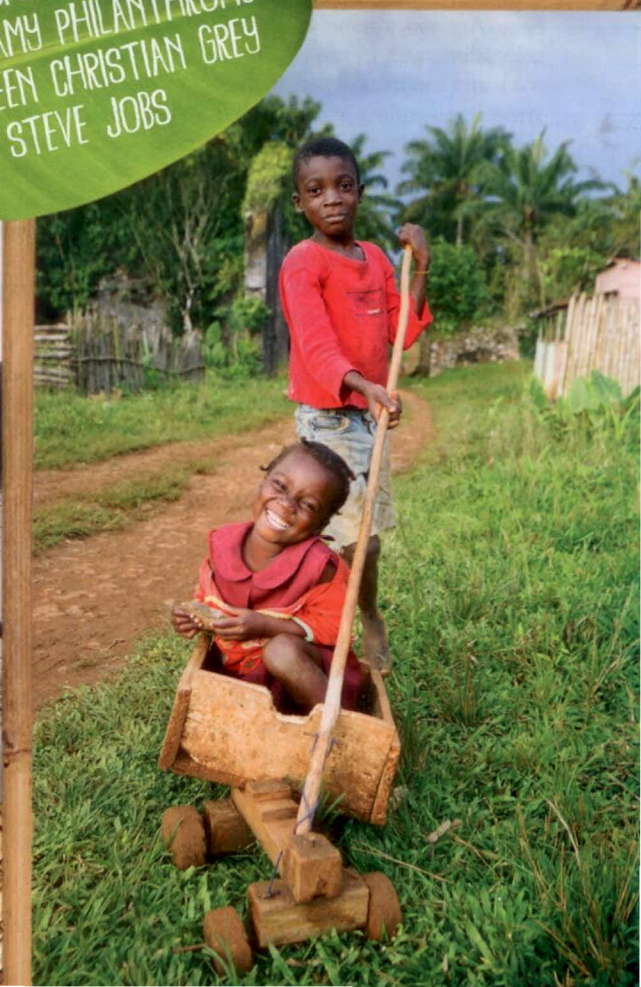
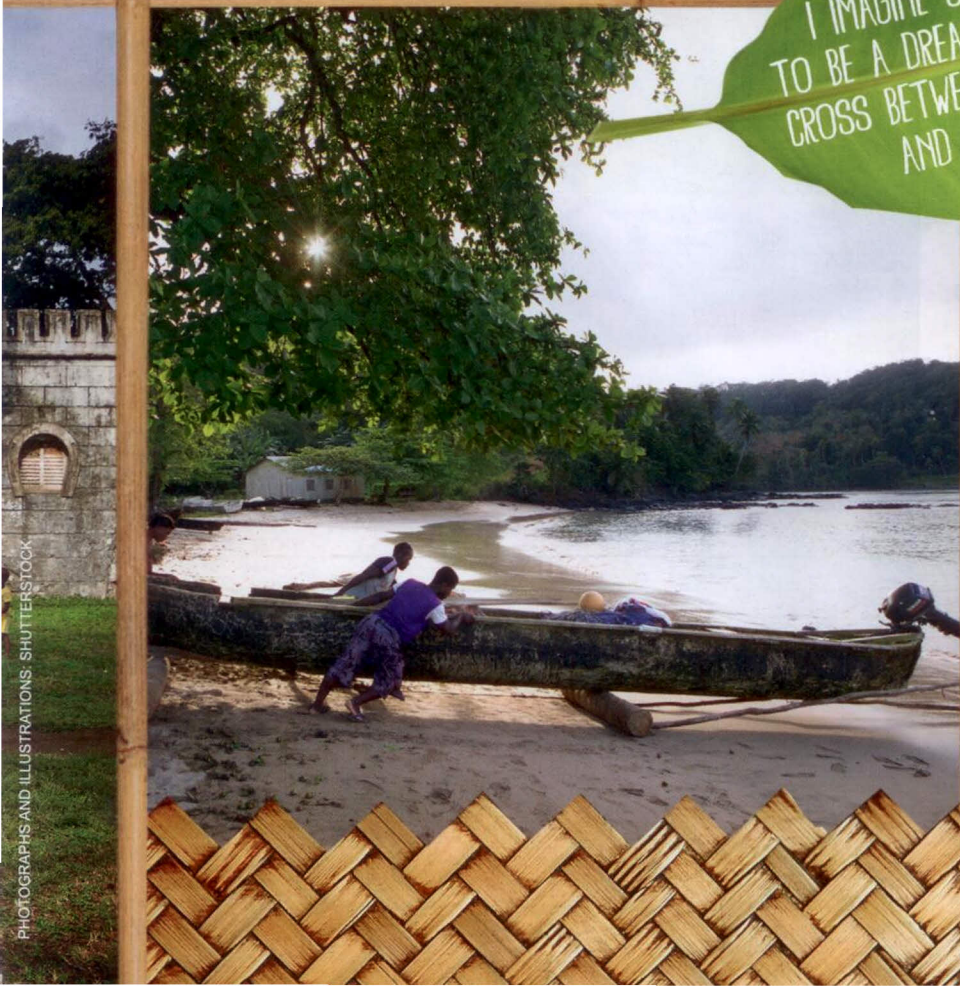
At São Joaquin, an eerily deserted Portuguese farm abandoned when the colonial power left 40 years ago, I meet 16-year-old Tita, carrying bananas on her head that she will cook for the family supper. She looks blank at the name Shuttleworth. But ah yes, 'The Man of the Moon' she knows. He is a good man, a Bom Bom man.





Above, Bom Bom.
Below left, the former
plantation of Roca
Sundy. Below centre,
fishermen on Abade
Beach, Principe.
Below right,
children play with
a home-made
push-cart
on Principe

I IMAGINE SHUTTLEWORTH
TO BE A DREAMY PHILANTHROPIC
CROSS BETWEEN CHRISTIAN GREY
AND STEVE JOBS



Back in the resort, I am sleeping in the Man of the Moon's bed – bungalow number three, where an impossibly pretty turquoise and orange kingfisher alights on my veranda by morning and where crabs scuttle and dig furiously by evening. Maybe it's the humidity, but I imagine Shuttleworth to be a dreamy, philanthropic cross between Christian Grey and Steve Jobs. Weirdly, he lives on the Isle of Man.

On Príncipe, the days stretch languorously, although nothing much happens: a brood of Muscovy ducklings waddles across the road, a breadfruit crashes to the rainforest floor, a fisherman hauls his catch onto the beach. I have changed money into the local currency, the dobra, but have since discovered the people of Príncipe don't have anything to sell – no trinkets, no carvings, nothing. They have enough to eat and wooden houses on stilts to shelter from the rain; a few, where there is power, have televisions. But money for its own sake is meaningless. One pound is worth 28,900 dobra; I am a millionaire in a place where there is nothing to buy (in a flash, I empathise with Mark Shuttleworth). I could, I suppose, buy some fish.

Instead, I give the local women what I would want visitors to give me: fulsome compliments about their rounded babies and little children, larking in the water. An ebony Buddha of a toddler is wearing a pair of underpants, the waistband incongruously printed, over and over, with a single word: Obama. A little girl in a cartoon T-shirt has no inkling that it's Mickey Mouse – the islanders' clothes are bought from middlemen who peddle second-hand garments from Germany. New items are worn with the price label ostentatiously on display.

We drive along deeply rutted roads to the biggest town, Santo Antonio, a grandly faded remnant of Portuguese colonialism, with its sun-bleached façades, wide empty roads and a municipal park in the centre. Its controlled symmetry is entirely at odds with the wild, blossom-strewn profligacy of the surrounding rainforest. We take lunch at Rosita's, a café-cum-bar, and order Cokes to wash down our fried fish, but Rosita has only one can, so three of us share it. If this would irritate you, rather than make you smile, then please, accept that Príncipe is not for you.

A gentle, pale dog with light amber eyes sits patiently, hopefully, beneath our table. Her pup is indoors.

'Can we see it?' Diane obligingly translates.

Rosita laughs so much she has to hold onto the door lintel to support her. 'A puppy? A puppy! You want to see a puppy?' She rolls her eyes at the crazy Europeans but gets her son to fetch it and stands shaking her head and dabbing her eyes at the sight of us cooing over a puppy, of all things.

I head back to Bom Bom for my final evening and an air of sweet melancholy descends as the stars – so many stars – burst through the canopy of darkness above me. Gripped by nostalgia, even before the day is out, I take a final swim. And as I splash in the sea, the water lights up with thousands of bioluminescent plankton, glittering and shimmering around me.

Paradise. Found. Extraordinary marks the spot. □

Book it Africa Travel (africatrael.co.uk/tatlertravel; 020 7843 3580) offers five nights at Bom Bom Island Resort from £1,845, half board, as part of a seven-night trip, including flights and transfers.



ROSITA LAUGHS
SO MUCH SHE HAS TO
HOLD ONTO THE DOOR
'A PUPPY? A PUPPY! YOU WANT
TO SEE A PUPPY?'

Above left, Abade Beach. Above right, a fisherman carves a new boat on Abade Beach. Below, the bridge at Bom Bom