

Below the veranda, beyond the lush forest canopy, the sea glistened in the soft light of a late tropical afternoon. A pirogue with three paddling figures breasted the swell breaking on the beach and set off for the night's fishing, its tiny triangular sail tugged strongly by the trade wind. I was in the south of São Tomé, which lies some 250 kilometers off Gabon on the west coast of Africa, a remote island in the Gulf of Guinea little touched, it seemed, by the twenty-first century.

Two tiny volcanic peaks rising out of the Atlantic just north of the equator, São Tomé and Príncipe is the smallest nation of Africa. The islands were uninhabited when Portuguese explorers Pedro Escobar and João de Santarém first sailed in beneath the towering pinnacles of black rock in 1470. Within a century, sugar plantations were established, worked by slaves shipped over from Africa's west coast, the Portuguese owners living in considerable style in stately plantation houses known as *roças*. Over the next 300 years, São Tomé became famous for producing some of the best cocoa and arabica coffee in the world, and huge fortunes were made. But following independence in 1975, plantation managers fled and the country's economy collapsed, the huge *roças* falling into disrepair as the encroaching forest reclaimed once more the groves of cocoa and coffee.

Today, the descendants of bonded laborers brought in from the Cape Verde Islands and Mozambique when slavery was abolished in 1875 have squatted in the old working quarters of the big plantations and even the *roças* themselves. They eke out a subsistence living by farming the fertile land and fishing the ocean, which teems with marine life. Despite an average income of barely a dollar a day, islanders never go hungry, and their easygoing approach to life is known locally as *leve-leve* (slowly, slowly), or simply "Let's take it easy."

That day, I had left the small sleepy capital of São Tomé and traveled south, skirting the high, mist-shrouded massif of the central part of the island, with waterfalls cascading down its sides. The narrow potholed road, which is the principal highway, wound through palm plantations and small fishing villages of simple timber shacks, with dugout canoes pulled up on

beaches, where children waved as we drove past. My destination was the small town of São João dos Angolares, formed, according to local legend, by runaway slaves from Angola in the sixteenth century. It is only 40 kilometers from the capital, but the journey took more than an hour as we bounced from pothole to pothole, stopping occasionally to slip a few *dobra*, the local currency, to enterprising groups of young boys, who, in exchange for filling in the worst holes by hand, would wave us down expecting some reward.

São João dos Angolares lies beneath a rocky headland, and the old *roça* above the town has been restored to its former glory and transformed into a hotel by local people under the leadership of João Carlos Silva, a São Toméan chef who has gained international acclaim for the excellence of his cuisine. We drew up in front of the two-story house, which resembles an old European manor, with beautifully proportioned high-ceiling rooms, polished timber floors and magnificent views over the forest to the sea.

On the wide veranda, I find Silva, a genial man in his 50s, wearing a white apron and preparing lunch on a wood-burning range with his small team of assistants. "São Tomé is a tiny place, but it has an extraordinary history," he tells me, stirring a delicious-smelling stew. "Our blood is a mix of European and African. Our people are generous and giving, and there's a peacefulness here you won't find elsewhere in Africa. It really is paradise." Silva's cooking blends the cultural heritage of those who have lived on the islands, from Portugal to Cape Verde and Mozambique. I sample the tasting menu of fish balls flavored with local saffron and coriander, tuna grilled with vanilla seeds and an omelet flavored with *micoco*, a local herb resembling

thyme. Silva gestures up to the luxuriant trees and hanging lianas, which shade the terrace. "Where else in the world can you stay in such an atmospheric situation, set amid unspoiled nature and be with such friendly people?" he asks enthusiastically.

There suddenly comes a call from below the terrace, and Silva goes to look down. A group of women with baskets of fish stand below. "It's the flying-fish season," he says. "They're simply delicious." I leave him laughing and joking with the fisherwomen and climb into the jeep for the slow journey back through the warm tropical dusk. ©

