

São Tomé and Príncipe

with Luiz Rocha

When one thinks about dive destinations, names like the Red Sea, Great Barrier Reef, Indonesia and the Caribbean among others come to mind, however, rare jewels outside the main traveled path can provide pleasant surprises.

Completely outside of the main diving and tourists destinations, the small country of São Tomé and Príncipe lies in the Gulf of Guinea (eastern Atlantic) about 240 km (150 miles) off West Africa, and is formed by two main islands that give the country its name. São Tomé is the largest island (about 859 sq km; 330 sq miles), covered by a dense mountainous jungle. Príncipe (about 142 sq km; 40 sq miles) consists of jagged mountains. About 95% of the population lives on São Tomé and the official language is Portuguese.

The country has one international airport that receives weekly flights from Lisbon and a few cities in mainland Africa. Accommodations are modest, but there are two hotels with air-conditioning and TVs in rooms. The more adventurous can rent a house downtown for a fraction

of the price. The country is located in tropical West Africa, and sanitation is poor, so prophylactics and vaccines against yellow fever are obligatory and against hepatitis and malaria are highly recommended. However, if you use common sense by not drinking tap water, avoiding uncooked food and using mosquito repellent you will be safe from most diseases.

The island of São Tomé lies exactly on the equator (between 0°19'N and 0°03'S), and it is not uncommon to cross it when you go to dive sites! The water temperature hovers around 28°C but can reach 30°C on the beaches or near the surface. Visibility ranges from good to spectacular, and the marine life is abundant and unique. All of these factors make this an excellent dive destination.

Our first dives were at Ilha Rolas, a relatively distant site,



Gorgonian at Diogo Vaz. Nikon D2x in a Subal housing and Nikkor 10.5mm; two Ikelite SS200.



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(Above) Hawksbill turtle at Sete Pedras. Nikon D2x in a Subal housing and Nikkor 10.5mm; two Ikelite SS200.

(Top right) Looking back from inside the cave at Ilheu Santana. Nikon D2x in a Subal housing and Nikkor 17-55mm; two Ikelite SS200.

(Right) African Angelfish at Lagoa Azul. Nikon D2x in a Subal housing and Nikkor 105mm; two Ikelite SS200.

about one hour from the capital (but there is a resort there if you intend to stay long on that side of the island). On this site we found perhaps the best visibility, and the largest and most abundant fish. Moray eels, sea turtles and eagle rays are common sights, but there are very few live corals (true for the entire region of West

Africa, which is naturally poor in corals). The dive guides are friendly, and the diving is relaxed and not very demanding.

About two thirds of the way between Ilheu Rolas and the capital São Tomé, there is a site called Sete Pedras. The name in English means Seven Rocks, and that's exactly what





(Above) New species of Parrotfish common in São Tomé waters. Nikon D2x in a Subal housing and Nikkor 105mm; two Ikelite SS200.

(Top right) Close up of a spotted moray (Muraena melanotis) found only in West Africa and the Central Atlantic. Nikon D2x in a Subal housing and Nikkor 60mm; two Ikelite SS200.

(Right) Top view of a Cerianthus during a night dive at Lagoa Azul. Nikon D2x in a Subal housing and Nikkor 60mm; two Ikelite SS200.



it is, a group of seven large rocks that surface from the shallow shelf in the region. On the seaward side of the rocks there are a few pinnacles that offer some of the best diving in the region. Very large fish and turtles are common sights. Among the sites closer to the capital, Ilheu Santana is

one of the best. There is a cave that completely traverses the island and you can dive in one side and arrange with the boat diver to pick you up on the other side.

I was part of a National Geographic expedition that was studying the biodiversity in the



Lagoa Azul, on the northeast coast of São Tomé.

region, and one of the by-products of our expedition was the discovery of several species that are new to science. One of them is a large and very common parrotfish, and the soapfish, a small sea bass and a handful of gobies are also awaiting scientific names.

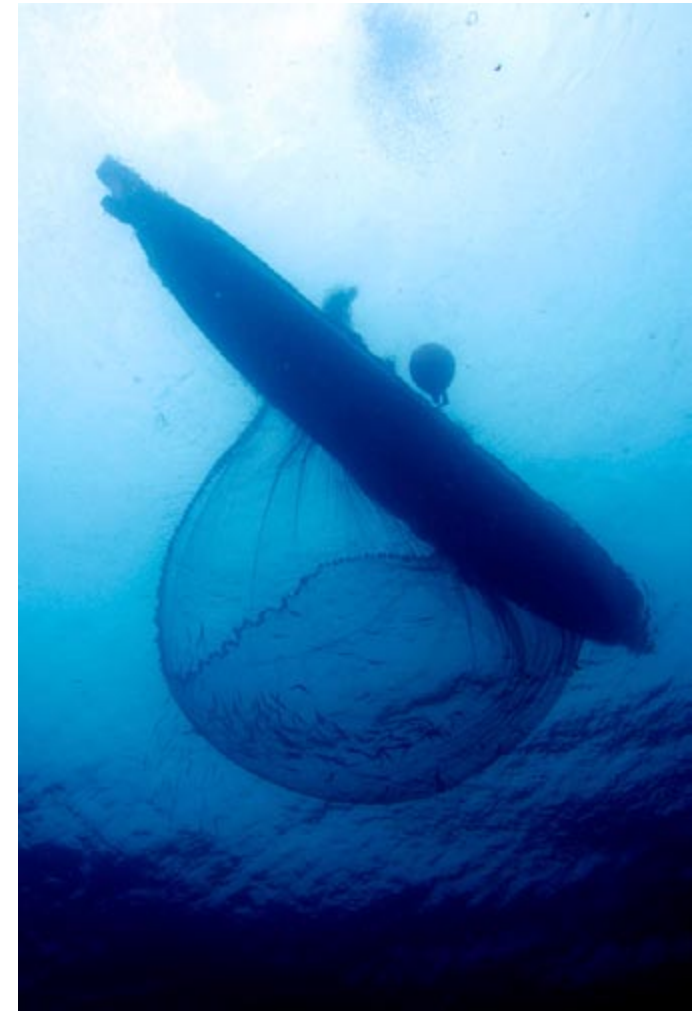
One of the goals of our expedition was to document as many different habitats as possible, and we went to a site called Diogo Vaz, which is on the opposite side of the island. Immediately upon entering the water, the site vividly reminded me of Tulamben, in Bali. The same black volcanic sand and vividly coloured soft corals contrasting with it. Even the sound of the rocks being crushed by the waves was similar. This site was among one of the best we visited, the colours and diversity of the invertebrate fauna were amazing. On the south side of the bay there is an impressive drop-off and the site is recommended only for advanced divers due to unpredictable current changes. The north side offers a calm bay that is good for snorkeling and for less experienced divers. Visibility is not great at



Hawksbill turtle meat and embryos being sold at the fish market in São Tomé. Nikon D2x and Nikkor 17-55mm, no flash.

this site, but the colours and opportunities for macro photography more than make up for this.

Another excellent site for diving is Lagoa Azul. Dives can be done from shore here but a four wheel drive car is needed to reach the beach which



Fishermen using nets to catch needlefish. Nikon D2x in a Subal housing and Nikkor 17-55mm; two Ikelite SS200.

is located about 40 minutes from the capital. Once there, the diving is easy and there are excellent photo opportunities along two small walls on the sides of the bay. The bottom is at about 18 m and the site is excellent for night dives, but be aware of



There is not much information about diving in São Tomé, mainly because the country is not very sought after for diving. However, the main dive operator, Club Maxel, maintains a website with lots of useful information. The diving is really good and a welcome change for those tired of repeatedly going to more popular destinations. I highly recommend it.

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the mosquitoes and remember to bring insect repellent for the twilight hours.

The country is very new, it gained independence from Portugal in 1975, and unfortunately, since they have to deal with so many other urgent problems, the environment is not among their top priorities. Fishing is not regulated, and São Tomé is one of the few places in the world where it is still legal to harvest sea turtles. However, there are several environmental groups starting and the situation seems to be changing for the better.

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