

Oil Comes to Eden

Off Africa's coast, a "last paradise" faces petro wealth: the island microstate of São Tomé and Príncipe. Also, Andorra tames its building boom.

By Jonathan Tourtellot

IMAGINE THIS: YOUR country has been called "the last island paradise." Your people are poor, but offshore oil wells are soon going to change that. You know it would be wise to diversify your economy. Tourism is a logical choice.

Ah, but what kind of tourism?

That's the issue facing São Tomé and Príncipe, a tiny island nation in the equatorial Atlantic off Africa. It's now being wooed by various big hotel chains.

Jan Hartman discovered "STP" when she was a U. S. State Department officer in Gabon. "It was like Bali Hai, that mountain in the mist," she says. "Empty volcanic beaches, lush vegetation. A place caught in time, with charming, welcoming people, so safe you could leave your wallet in the town square."

She came to love the old cocoa plantation houses, the unique island culture, the cuisine rich in fresh fish and fruit. She learned the

local Portuguese. Retired now, she has gone back, hoping to help STP plan its future.

It's not easy. Islanders face dazzling proposals that could turn their parrotfilled rain forest into a tropical version of Portugal's overdeveloped Algarve (which rated a poor 46 on our March '04 Destination Scorecard). One chain plans to replace São Tomé's ruined 16th-century Portuguese fort with a casino and hotel tower. Unaware of the tourism value of history, some islanders ask, "Who wants that old fort anyway?"

STP's appeal to people like Hartman calls instead for a profitable system of boutique beach resorts, ecolodges, and inns in restored plantation houses—all more suited to its charm and heritage.

Oil will flow within a few years. STP can still get this right. Stay tuned.

Geo-savvy Tip To see the islands now, Hartman suggests the Miramar hotel on the edge of town: www.miramar.st.

Andorra wises up, but late

Perched over every village and valley, the national bird of the minuscule principality of Andorra last summer was a crane—the construction crane. Amid the Pyrenees between France and Spain, Andorra has been undergoing a building boom for years, fueled by downhill skiing and tax-free shopping. Now, there's a

moratorium.

A fifth the size of Aspen's Pitkin County, Colo. and just as rugged, the principality at first ruined its main valleys with ugly shopping malls. Lesson learned, Andorra now requires rural construction to be clad in rough native stone, to blend with the landscape.

In the upper valleys, where cowbells mix with ski lifts, limited building sites and Pyrenees-high real estate prices have given birth to an odd new category of human habitation: the midrise hamlet. New buildings faced with rustic rock climb several stories high. Handsome yet peculiar, these tall, narrow, rectangular outcrops pocked with windows look as if bands of mountain shepherds were building under the direction of Donald Trump. Still, this "sustainable urbanization" beats the sprawl of other big ski areas, as remaining rural land is protected.

Now, all you Andorran Trumpkins, how about fixing those shopping malls?

Geo-savvy Tip For a taste of the old Pyrenees, hike into Andorra's newly listed World Heritage landscape: the unpaved, unspoiled Madriu-PerafitaClarorValley. see www.andorra.ad.