

# The Islands Of Middle Earth

Sao Tomé and Príncipe are two small African islands in search of balance on the Equatorial line. This island nation is tiny in size but carries big dreams: Príncipe Island is home to a unique and unprecedented experiment in sustainable development. Due to their exposure to South Atlantic swells the islands hold promise for surfers, but *Carine Camboulives* and *Manu Bouvet* have much more to share than the waves they found.

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Maybe you'd be as relaxed as Manu if you found a wave like this in the garden of your next holiday rental

Some days we all feel Mother Earth's despair, today that couldn't be clearer. As we embarked on our trip to the Chocolate islands (a nickname due to the islands' cocoa-producing past) news headlines declare that the US has decided to withdraw the country from the "Accords de Paris", the international symposium on environmental change. It's such Ironic timing that I am writing these words directly following the devastation of the Gulf Coast of Texas by hurricane "Harvey"; meanwhile hurricane "Irma" is busy destroying Florida. Back to back, Hurricanes Jose and Maria are heading towards Puerto Rico...Don't think it is a cause and effect relationship, it has nothing to do with global warming, it is a coincidence says ex-French President Nicolas Sarkozy, "One has to be arrogant like men to think we have changed the climate" (14th September 2016).

Such a slap in the face of the environmental cause stuns me, but excitement and good mood reign on our departure. My wife Carine, our two daughters Lou and Shadé (comfortably sat on a pile of board bags) and I are en route with our friends - photographer Pierre Bouras who had his equipment stolen by United Airlines at the SF airport a few months ago but is still in high spirits and film director David Georgeon, acrobat Buddhist and vice versa!

We're off to discover "Sao Tomé... and...how do you say it?" is the usual question asked, even by the most seasoned travelers. I take this as a good omen since it was Christopher Columbus who wrote in his log book "We never go as far as when we don't know where we are going."

The spirit of Columbus is in the air at Lisbon airport as we board the plane to the unknown...except we're not boarding since Carine and Shadé are nowhere to be found at the baggage check. I ran all over the airport to finally find them trying on headbands in a boutique downstairs... "The pink one or the blue one?" asks Shadé to her mum who is completely naive to her reveries' impact on the expedition. She sees me arriving flailing like a psychopath. "What is wrong with you? You seem pretty stressed." Forgetting about the Dalai Lama's precepts of Anger being the real destroyer of our good human qualities, I am transforming into a Donald Trump, red with anger, to inform them about the emergency, with a minimalistic vocabulary dear to Donald.

The ticket counter agent is formal. "You are not seriously thinking about checking this mountain of luggage one hour before take off? Go to the counters to change your tickets" he tells us. "However, there are only four flights a week and they are often full. Obrigado" are his last words.

- "De nada!" The news distresses me and I see our trip falling apart. David, fresh from a Buddhist retreat, is delighted. "It will be a great part in the movie because people think that your little getaways are quiet and easy." Pierre is happy to see his equipment secure next to him. Lou, who had a hard time waking up at 4 am, went to sleep on a board bag. Carine keeps a low profile. I am processing the bad news, sitting on a cart. Shadé slowly comes to me. A nice hug from my baby girl will cheer me up, I think.

"Come on Dad! Are we buying the pink one or the blue one?"

### Mama Africa

It's not as hot as I imagined when we land on the equator at the end of the day. The atmosphere outside the airport is not as frantic as expected either. A small group of porters stands out against a sparse crowd to quietly offer their services. This scene describes the rhythm of life in Sao Tomé and Principe: the words "leve-leve" literally translate to "light-light", explaining the calm, indolent and general laid-back attitude. It's the local Aloha.

Our landing here won't change this immutable pace. Apart from the kids - who are often given sweets by tourists, sometimes begging for them - nobody will beg nor try to sell us anything during the whole trip. Ten years ago, Sam George, Surfing's magazine ex-editor in chief, came to Maui to present his movie. "An African surf story" related his trip to Sao Tomé and his surprise to discover that surfing was already widespread in the island. Images showed that surfing was a part of the local culture; they were using boards shaped directly from trees and the activity seemed to go back as far as islanders' memory can remember. However, there was no possible connection with the Polynesians, the official custodians of the DNA of the sport of kings.

That is about all I know about surfing in Sao Tomé as I wake up the first morning in our rental house, on a widescreen terrace perched over the ocean.



EQUATORIAL ATLANTIC



Carine, shimmering on Sao Tome



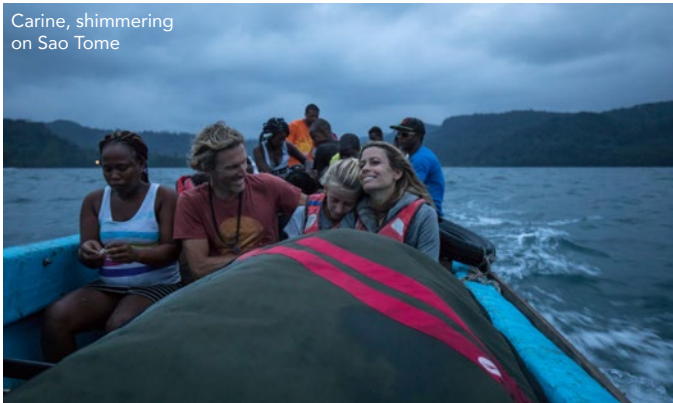
I am surprised to see under my feet a very pretty right hander wrapping into a little bay, next to the village. We rarely find random waves, usually we work hard to search for them. This is a wave that boards our boat unexpectedly and we don't take it for granted. To get into the water, I walk via a steep trail to a little beach on the right of our house. On my way, I run into a woman carrying a tray on her head while I carry my board on mine. She says hi without really paying attention to me. After half an hour alone in the water, Lou and Carine show up. Two young local surfers paddle towards the peak at the same time. I notice that they don't ride wood surfboards, but brand new shortboards. They introduce themselves with a big smile: first Gégé then Zitu. Then they go towards Carine and Lou to welcome them. We start a conversation that will last the whole session, suddenly and regularly interrupted each time one of us catches a wave, to be resumed, where it was left, at the peak. Zitu and Gégé are the best surfers of the island. They left their country a little while ago for the first time to enter the world team championships in the Azores, thanks to a Portuguese patron. There, a shaper gave them a new surfboard each. They came back as two Messiah. The four other surfers who join the session ride broken-down boards from another age. One of them uses a cord as a leash, another one rides a wood board. The third one can see through his board by a hole as big as a fist and he only has one side fin. The session is refreshing and spontaneous. The younger ones scream and laugh at each other in a loud and friendly way. Their surfing is totally free from the codas of modern surfing which have standardized the sport, making it a victim of globalization. The surfers give free expression of their creativity being more spectacular, unexpected and as stylish as possible.

We enjoy the show. Lou, the only surfer girl in the water, rapidly becomes the mascot and is happily cheered and encouraged. That motivates her to take off on beautiful waves breaking close to the rocky point.

“We, as citizens can also do a lot. Even if sometimes **the fight** seems unbalanced between us, the Davids, against the Goliaths of globalization, as consumers we have a tremendous power.”



Carine, shimmering on Sao Tome





Finding myself a little out of the limelight, I come back with a joker and grab my foil. Modern surf has been appearing here, little by little for the last 10 years; sup is still very new, so imagine the foil...While I rise above the surface of the water and go through the peak, perched high, eyes pop out. When I fall on the rail, almost slashed by the foil, I get a well deserved ovation.

The east coast is full of waves, so we go explore, often accompanied by the boyz, happy to share their playground. We are the only tourist surfers during the month of June. The reason may be the lack of sun during this season or the continent's unstable reputation in recent years. However, we are delighted to drive all over this beautiful island's coastal roads; here the lush vegetation reminds us of the North shore of Maui, where we live. But, there's a fly in the ointment: the formidable trash mounts littering the beaches before ending up in the ocean. During her last kite session, Carine had a hard time after she crashed her kite. It relaunched with dozens of pieces of plastic hanging from it like clothing line. As opposed to what we saw on Easter Islands located in the middle of the two North pacific plastic gyres, here it was from local consumption. Joao, a Portuguese expat, a manager of an outdoor activity business on the island for 10 years, certifies that this is a recent phenomenon. Due to the sudden rise of population and the massive flow of imported goods, he saw the proliferation of garbage soar within five years, no more! The lack of education in the field, and the lack of a collection of waste has led to a situation that seems out of control today.

Hope for Principe

It is on Principe, Sao Tome's sister, located a hundred kilometers to the North that we may have found a global solution to the waste management crisis that all islands share. This is where the second part of our trip takes place, on a tiny island that nobody seems to know about. Except perhaps UNESCO, who built a biosphere reserve there. The sup is the ultimate weapon to discover the island, since more than half of it is inaccessible by land. That was enough to convince us.

The story around this unique project in sustainable development is a beautiful one: Once upon a time, a young South African invented a computer software that made him a billionaire. After his hard work he took a trip in a space station which seems to be a trendy habit within young successful entrepreneurs. Up there, face pressed to the window, he told himself that before worrying about outer space, it would be nice to preserve our small blue planet which from up there looked really fragile. Halfway between his hometown and his host country England, he found a little piece of the planet with all the prerequisites for his experiment to try sustainable development as a way of growth. The project would concern all economic and social aspects of the island: agriculture (permaculture aiming at self-sufficiency), tourism (controlled and beneficial), education (train future staff for the project), craftsmanship (jobs sources), waste management (value trash and transform it on the spot) etc... To do so, he needed a land rich in wildlife, a territory at peace politically and socially and also needed to act wisely with leaders to not trigger any devastating workings of corruption.

We were lucky to witness first hand this tour-de-force led by Mark Shuttleworth. After flying above the canopy of a jungle wrapped up in blankets of mists, we land our tiny plane carrying two Air sups and one Surf Earth 5'8, the biggest the luggage hold could allow. Right away, we notice the total absence of plastic garbage on the island. Even though Principe has only 7,000 inhabitants, compared to 200,000 on its sister island, the contrast is striking. We settle in a little house without running water in the heart of the capital. There are only a few roads yet we count a multitude of recycling bins! We are the only travelers in the village, but the locals pay us no more attention than in Sao Tomé.

"Will you give me your bottle when it's empty?" I didn't even see this little girl come closer to us, almost as tall as Shadé. Estrela, the young Portuguese lady, head of the NGO Principe Trust funded by our South African in orbit, explain to me that each person able to collect fifty used plastic bottles will get a stainless-steel water bottle. This bottle gives access to one of the 20 filtered water fountains installed by the foundation.

Manu pulls out the joker in the pack



“ **The younger surfers** scream and laugh at each other in a loud and friendly way. Their surfing is totally free from the codas of modern surfing which have standardized the sport, making it a victim of globalization.”





“People even bring us bottles that were buried and full of dirt“ adds Estrela with a big smile. I understand now why the place is so clean as well as the motivation to collect the bottles. Here, more than anywhere, clean water is life. The same kids regularly attend workshops on sustainable development teaching them the foundation’s initiative and the interest for them to be a part of it.

In an interesting side-quest Estrela takes us on a tour to show us the mechanics of the island’s refuse and recycling system. I find a certain beauty to it, because without efficient waste treatment, pollution wins over the environment, hitting the marine world at the end of the chain.

On the site, we are welcome by Henry. This cheerful giant from Zimbabwe is a specialist of waste management. He got hired by Mark Shuttleworth to solve the garbage crisis on Principe.

“Waste processing is a real pain all over the world. On a poor island, especially in African, it’s almost mission impossible!” he said, facing a compost station “Until now, we exported our trash to whoever wanted it, which means barely anybody, because we don’t produce enough trash to attract waste treatment facilities. And nobody wants trash from Africa! The key to success is to value the garbage. It can only work if there is a financial gain,”

After the composting section and an ingenious glass recycling project, it is time for last but not least, the plastic dump. The cancer of all oceans. “You really have to be imaginative to find beauty there”, I think, contemplating the mountain of bottles above the fence surrounding it. But Henry with his biggest smile introduced us to his new creation: a furnace oven. “In there we mix plastic bottles with sand to make transparent construction blocks. With this, I can pave the roads or build houses where light will finally enter, without opening shutters! Do you realize the improvement? Here everybody has an interest in protecting the ocean from that plastic!”

How about the riding? You may ask. Well, you’d be right because it wasn’t all dumpster diving. Two-thirds of Principe island are only visible by sea; UNESCO effectively transformed it into a biosphere reserve inaccessible by land. Only a sup can get us close without renting an expensive (and rare!) boat. Before our eyes rapt with wonder, a succession of immaculate ochre sand coves is followed by jungle falling into the sea. Far above and away, a huge waterfall surges over the towering canopy of ancient rocks. There is not a soul nor a building around. Contrary to her neighbor Sao Tomé, Principe was able to stand up against the evil promises of palm oil culture and its resultant deforestation, helped by Mark’s threat of withdrawal. On Sao Tomé, business mogul Vincent Bolloré’s excavators (through his subsidiary company the SOCFIN) counted on a few hundred jobs to gloss over not only the destruction of biodiversity and the natural food supply. Besides being responsible for 30 % of greenhouses gas emissions, deforestation also leads

to the slowdown of rain in the water cycle by decreasing the natural transfer of humidity from the soil to the atmosphere. From our boards, we gaze at an immaculate landscape as old as the hills, saved by Principe inhabitants’ high struggles, and a good Samaritan who came down from his spaceship.

Together they are very invested in their new vision of a sustainable future. They stood up against short-term solutions that would only satisfy multinationals’ greed. We, as citizens can also do a lot. Even if sometimes the fight seems unbalanced between us, the Davids, against the Goliaths of globalization, as consumers we have a tremendous power. Each time we buy, we vote; our dollars count more than our vote. It either goes to the companies offering environmental respectful produce or...to the others. As the old saying states “It only requires people stop buying so that it does not sell anymore! “ Beach clean ups start at home, far away from the ocean!

So, in the end, who cares if Donald turns his back to the planet, his position can do nothing against the millions of people in the world who have already started the green revolution. Whether you’re a billionaire like Mark or penniless like the little girl who asked for my bottle, or somewhere in between, we are everyday more and more numerous to make the right choice: putting mother earth first. Moving on, one initiative at a time, awareness after awareness, we become conscious of our common destinies, way beyond borders. For the first time in history, we, as a whole, face a common danger that threatens not only our future as a species but all life on this planet as we know it. Isn’t it now time to unite? After our trip to the center of the world, I want to believe. **SUP**

The film of our adventure is on [Spicee.com](http://Spicee.com). I you’d like to visit Sao Tomé and Principe, contact Joao Camara [point.zero.stp@gmail.com](mailto:point.zero.stp@gmail.com) and Ondas Divinas [peladeauyves@gmail.com](mailto:peladeauyves@gmail.com)



Lou finding her place in the pack