



# SUBLIME COLLUSION

Sumptuous developments in the northern islands, a new luxury redoubt on the southern shore; modern beauty and old-world delights conspire together all along Mozambique's coast, says Charlotte Sinclair

If the past is another country, it might well be called Mozambique. In this east African nation, history is an extra element in the atmosphere, a living, breathing part of daily life that intrudes upon and retreats from one's experience of the place like the aquamarine tides. A mural outside Maputo airport gives a quick sweep of events, depicting an unbroken stream of history from the Portuguese colonisation to the slave trade, the war of independence to the recent civil war (represented by stony-faced men in military fatigues). The past is unavoidable – but why would you want to? In a country where an AK-47 imprints the national flag, Mozambique's often turbid, sometimes torrid past lends a fascinating aspect to a refreshed luxury travel destination. Spirited new hotels deliver a cultural fix alongside their castaway chic – plus all the kayaking, diving, boating, beaches, private pools and first-rate cuisine that come as five-star standard in these parts. It's a combination that few Indian Ocean locales can match. The sense of utter dislocation and off-map seclusion – bet on being the only diver on the reef for several hundred miles – the staggering natural beauty and pioneering spirit (a psychic hangover from those centuries-old explorers, now palpable in the discovery of vast reserves of precious stones, ore and gas) makes Mozambique a country for now.

Ibo Island is a jungly tract of sand, palms and mangrove in the northern Quirimbas archipelago, a Unesco protected haven of 32 islands where the sea recedes to reveal vast, crenulated swirls of white sand like marbled paper. It was “discovered” by Arab sailors in AD600, who established fortified trading posts all along the Mozambique coastline, and then were unceremoniously ejected from Ibo by Vasco da Gama's men in the 16th century (part of the countrywide Portuguese colonisation). The echoes of Ibo's past life as a bustling port, dealing in amber, jet, ivory, ambergris and slaves, can still be felt. On the jeep ride from the grass airstrip to Ibo Island Lodge (pictured on next page), I spy a crumbling Catholic church, slowly being choked to death by weeds, and a stone fort built in 1791. Behind an Indian almond tree (a fertile sign of this island's well-travelled past), the walls of an ancient customs house – once as crisply white as a sail sheet – bloom with black mould. Such time-warped dilapidation is as pretty as any ruined Venetian palazzo.

Not every building is a breath away from collapse. Encompassing two 150-year-old properties with walled tropical gardens, Ibo Island Lodge was built from the remains of a Portuguese villa and a private mansion. When I visited, a similar rescue operation was taking place at a former governor's house next door, in which five new rooms will open soon. The lodge faces the sea wall, with the mainland perceived at a smoky distance beyond the mangroves. The tides draw in fast here; at breakfast on the hotel's rooftop eyrie I watch children catching crabs in the mangrove roots where, by mid-afternoon, there are only the tips of branches waving in the current. With its high ceilings, wide verandas, dark wood armoires, rusting iron bathtubs and net-hung four-posters, the lodge has an antique charm. “People are looking to Mozambique for something a little different, unknown, wilder,” says general manager Rob McKenzie. Adventure comes with the territory – there's no beach so a dhow boat (pictured on next page) deposits guests (with chef and waiters) upon a sandbar for lunch.

**Left: private plunge pool and seating area of the cliff-top Villa Quilalea, one of nine villas at the Azura Quilalea resort**

Ibo works its enchantment in light and shadow. Walk around the island on sand paths shaded by casuarina trees and one encounters few tourists. There are plenty of the 4,500 native



population, however, wheeling past on bicycles, children scattering like fish at your approach, women in bright *capulana* sarongs with bundles balanced on their heads. To visit here is to feel adrift from one's own century. The island is haunted by stories (if not actual ghosts – I was assured these left with the Portuguese in the 1970s). One crumbling house is covered entirely in cowrie shells. As the lodge's Zimbabwean guide, Harris, tells it, the shells were placed there by a pining wife, each representing a week that her husband was away at sea. History leans heavily but atmospherically: in a room at the impressive 18th-century fort are stacks of manuscripts, the records of hundreds of years of island life, left to quietly rot.

Bewitchment of the drop-dead romantic variety is to be found at Azura Quilalea resort, a 30-minute speedboat ride north of Ibo. The original Azura opened in 2007 on Benguerra island and was crucial in establishing the country as a luxury contender. Here, the Azura MO – a laid-back ambience buttressed by

From top: the swimming pool at Ibo Island Lodge. A “chill out” lounge at White Pearl Resort. A dhow takes Ibo Island Lodge guests to a sandbar for lunch



*This is castaway living at its most preposterously pretty – at a moment's notice a butler might appear with rum sundowners*

seamless service – continues at Quilalea, which opened last November. The hotel occupies a dot of black coral rock and curling mangrove forest, rising craggily out of the Indian Ocean. Stone paths wind through thick vegetation to nine thatched villas with sunrise or sunset views, of which the honeymoon suite – with private pool, terrace and step-ladder into the sea for a lazy snorkel on the surrounding coral reef – is knockout. The in-villa interiors are Afro-contemporary – Villa Quilalea (pictured on opening spread), for example, has dark wood floors, beaded lamps and a desk with traditional fishing baskets for legs. In the bar, a collection of drums hang as lanterns from the ceiling, while the lair-like sunken lounge is scattered with sequined cushions in mermaid blues and greens. Even the mosquito nets are dip-dyed in oceanic eau-de-nil.

This is castaway living at its most preposterously pretty – at a moment's notice your butler might appear to lead you to a lunch of grilled lobster on a private patch of beach, or for rum sundowners on a spot strewn with frangipani blossom. Even the spa feels set-designed: a thatched hut perched on top of the cliff where waves beat a soporific rhythm below. As Hielke, the puppyish dive master, puts it: “You never see another boat here.” That is with the exception of the tiny fishing skiffs that drift close to the island each morning, their skippers bailing water from the impossibly rickety vessels with tin cups. What you do see are whales (which lumber past from July to September) and nesting turtles (January to March) and Madagascan bee-eaters feathered in the gaudy colours of carnival queens. Not to mention what



can be spied undersea. Together with Vamizi Island, a glamorous resort a 45-minute flight north, Quilalea enjoys world-class diving. (Vamizi recently converted a dhow, *Tusitiri*, into an upscale charter for overnight dive safaris.) Scuba is second to none here; as co-manager Kelly Ricklan puts it: “It's the Maldives 20 years ago.”

Still, purvey high-end tourism in Mozambique is not without its challenges. As Dutchwoman Alex Otto, the enthusiastic co-owner of Coral Lodge 15.41 (pictured on next page), testifies: “There was the nightmare build, tractors falling into the swamp, no electricity, no fresh water, the rampant corruption, training staff who've never had a day in school. Then there are things you don't expect, like the time two staff members were accidentally arrested and I had to break them out of jail...” That she's still grinning is testament to her and

co-owner husband Bart's good humour. (And perhaps the catharsis of her confessional blog.) It could also be the spell of calm cast by Coral Lodge's location: on the tip of a peninsular in the Veranda nature reserve, an antiquity-soaked area where, in the next village, there's a working well built by Vasco da Gama, and a Catholic church – reputedly the oldest in the southern hemisphere still in use – with a thriving congregation of six. (Mozambicans are mainly Muslim.)

The lodge itself is composed of 10 villas, perching on a long, sandy finger of land facing the country's former capital, Ilha de Moçambique, and backed by a mangrove forest of shadowy creeks. Euro meets Afro in thatched, circular suites: print-covered daybeds and sofas designed in Holland were handmade in Zanzibar; a naive mural signed by local artists is balanced by modish copper nightlights.

Among the hotel's activities – the shell-combing, kayaking, termite-hill-clay facials, scuba and snorkelling (in the lagoon) – a visit to Ilha is incomparable. A Unesco heritage site, the island is inhabited by people, stories, alleys and buildings of Lisbon-like grandeur, alongside malodorous slums. Otto makes a delightful, school-marmish guide, hurrying us around, bargaining for 17th-century coins washed up with the tide, doling out fascinating tidbits to guests (lately, the president of the Smithsonian and a Saudi princess), including the disturbing

fact that the Portuguese used to trade beads for slaves: 100 beads would buy you a man. Yet it's not a morose place, walking through the cobbled streets, breathing in the spice-smelling air, catching glimpses of courtyards and gardens through thick wood doors while Alex talks of the divers hunting for treasure in nearby wrecks. (This finally snags the attention of the Italian honeymooners.)

At night, the weekenders from Nampula fill the lodge's beach shack restaurant. NGO workers in linen shirts and their attractive wives eat calamari salad and watch a distant lighthouse blink in the darkness. It's distractingly beautiful here, the light seems to say, but heed the warning or risk becoming the next treasure hunt.

Tumbling all the way down the country, past the capital Maputo to Ponta Mamoli, a coastal spot 30km north of the border with South Africa, and one discovers





a different Mozambique. Gone are the tropics, the palm trees: here the landscape is bigger, wilder, the light brighter, the sand golden not white, pounded by the kind of swell that makes you think twice about taking a dip. White Pearl Resorts’ debut opening at Ponta Mamoli (pictured on previous page) sits in the sheltered bay, away from the winds that barrel up and down this ribbon of coast, which unravels for miles without a speck of human life. I say this with certainty since White Pearl is reached via helicopter from Maputo, a joy ride over the wide grassy expanses of an elephant reserve and a muddy reservoir dotted with hippos, before cresting the dunes and following the coast up to the hotel: 22 ocean-facing chalets, tin roofs winking through the undergrowth.

With 18 dive sites within reach of Ponta Mamoli, until now the area has been a diving destination only for the

informed and adventurous. White Pearl is a game-changer, opening up this virgin area of Mozambique to a new guise of customer. Owned by Mozambican Florival Mucave, a former consultant at De Beers, the idea was “to give something back to the country”, says one of the hotel’s managers, Samantha Dias. But also, one imagines, something new: the white beach bar, for instance, hung with a variety of mirrors, chill-out tunes playing on the sound system, is more reminiscent of Nikki Beach than southern Africa. It is a fashionable place.

The public spaces – the restaurant set with leather lattice chairs, lounges with deep, white settees, two swimming pools and a sunken bar – are connected to the bedrooms via wooden walkways. Propped on stilts over tangled vegetation, the suites are white and bright; a glamorous version of a classic beach hut, with glass

**Left: the outdoor restaurant at the 10-villa Coral Lodge 15.41**

sliding doors, wood-clad exterior and wraparound deck – Cape Cod meets Cape Town. Inside, the all-white, sun-bleached effect

is softened by a pale blue linen sofa and sage green curtains, coconut-shell lanterns and driftwood sconces. There’s an outside shower, a splash pool and – for suites one to six – direct access to the beach. From my terrace, I watch bottlenose dolphins move past the breakers.

On one of the hotel’s regular, strictly regulated (no touching) reconnaissance trips I get even closer to those dolphins. Motoring around the bay in the resort rib, we find a pair of youngsters (a few metres from where we circled a Hammerhead shark), and jump in. Peering into the depths, the water lasered with sunlight, I spot the creatures briefly before the slip off, unfussed, unhurried, into the current. Affecting, beautiful, imbued with magic: a truly Mozambican encounter. ♦

## BEAUTY AND THE EAST

Charlotte Sinclair travelled as a guest of **Journeys by Design** (01273-623 790; [www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com)), which offers a 12-night Mozambique safari with seven nights at Ibo Island Lodge, Quilalea and Coral Lodge from £4,750 per person, including international flights, all full board accommodation, internal flights and transfers. **Ibo Island Lodge**, Ibo Island, +25826-960 549; [www.iboisland.com](http://www.iboisland.com), doubles from \$670 per night, including all meals, beach excursion, history tour, some watersports. **Azura Quilalea**, Quilalea Private Island, Quirimbas Archipelago, +27767-050 599; [azura-retreats.com](http://azura-retreats.com), doubles from \$1,250 per night, including all meals, some alcohol, butler services, some watersports. **Coral Lodge 15.41**, Veranda deposto 9, Cabaceira Pequena, Distrito Mossuril, Nampula Province, +25826-660 003; [www.corallodge1541.com](http://www.corallodge1541.com), doubles from \$850 including all meals, some alcohol, guided tour to Ilha de Moçambique, some watersports. **White Pearl Resorts, Ponta Mamoli**, Zitundo, +2735-592 8100; [www.whitepearlresorts.com](http://www.whitepearlresorts.com), doubles from R5,980 (£453), including breakfast and dinner.

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REVISED LONG ARTICLE

Title

Timeless beauty  
and modern luxury  
in Mozambique

Summary

Old-school cultural delights and  
sumptuous new hotels play gor-  
geously together

HOMEPAGE

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