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Mozambique

Step outside time on the lost islands

Quirimba is where delicate ecosystems combine with a fractious history, says *Jill Crawshaw*

You get your own immigration officer if Vamizi is your first stop in Mozambique. A two-hour flight from Dar es Salaam, the Tanzanian capital, in your tiny charter aircraft decants you on the derelict military airfield of Mocimboa da Praia — a graphic reminder of the civil war that raged on and off for 30 years until 1992.

Eventually, a four-wheel drive trundles

up to the small crumbling terminal, an official painstakingly examines your passport, asks for \$30 for your Mozambique visa and stamps in your right of entry. You then fly for another 15 minutes over a shoal of sunbleached islets before landing on the grassy airstrip of Vamizi itself, where there are no immigration facilities.

The track from the airfield was too rugged for the island's only vehicle, so I arrived at Vamizi's lodge by boat, wading ashore on a 4km beach, where I was greeted by Kim, the manager, and Alex, the barman (carrying a hibiscus juice for me) and a Jack Russell called Chinga. Welcome to Vamizi and the Quirimba islands.

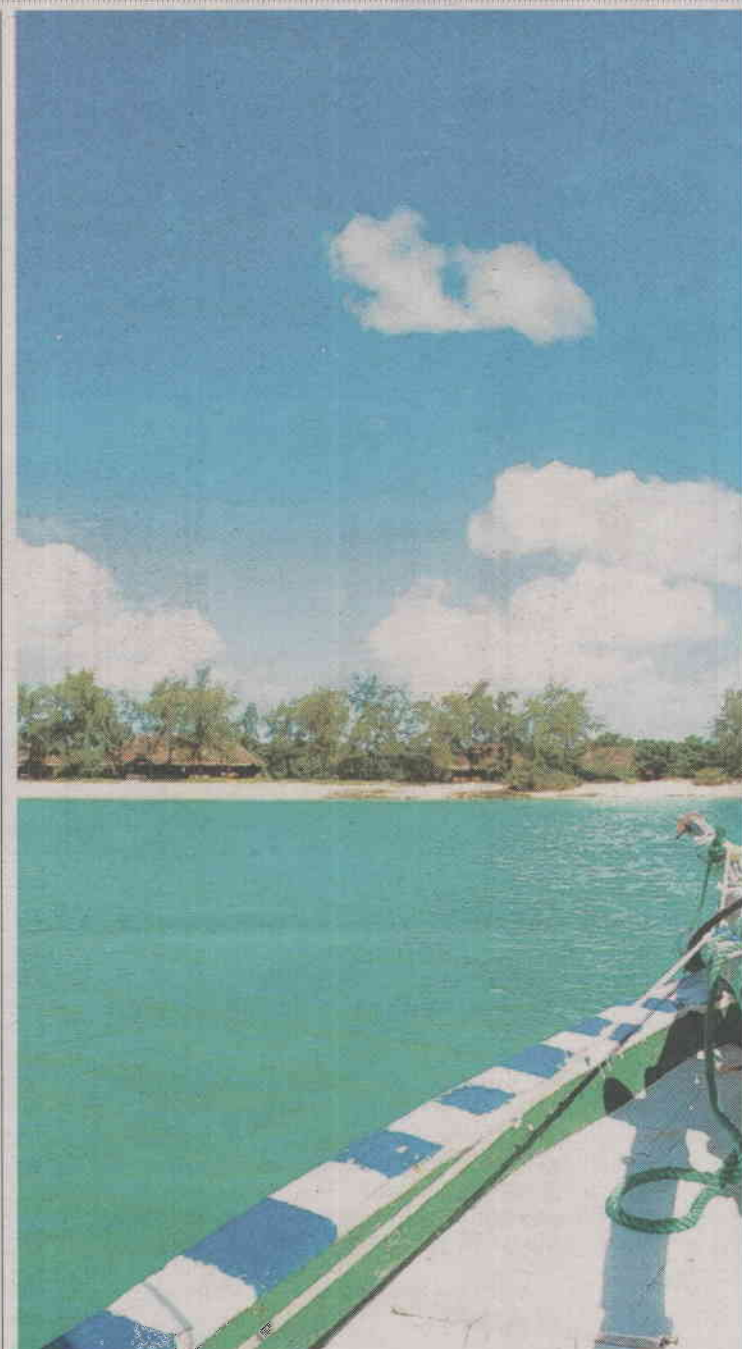
Time and civilisation seem to have passed by this archipelago of 32 dots scattered along a stretch of Indian Ocean at the northernmost end of Mozambique, but the islands are rich in natural resources, with a thriving marine ecosystem. Vamizi, the jewel in the Quirimbas' crown, wasn't even on the radar until a British couple, Christopher Cox and Julie Garnier, fell in love with the island on a visit in 1998. They founded Vamizi Lodge, which opened in 2005, to provide work for the islanders, who are among the poorest in the world. They were also determined to preserve the island's biodiversity.

From the beach there is no sign of the lodge's 12 luxury villas on stilts. To avoid disturbing nesting turtles, these are set 70m back from the sea and 100m apart. With their makuti thatch roofs, beautifully carved lattices and billowing drapes, they blend seamlessly into the island canopy of casuarinas, mangrove and hibiscus. All the materials, even the marble in the bathrooms, are locally sourced. My own ultimate chill-out zone was the whopping great veranda, with fan, double sunbeds, white linen sofa, books and a well-stocked mini-bar (prices are all inclusive).

There are no TVs, phones, high-tech hardware, pools or even air-conditioning — but no hair-shirt, either. There is a surprising amount to do on Vamizi; it has fantastic diving, though I opted for snorkelling over its reefs, where 350 species sashay among 30 types of coral. I could have gone deep-sea fishing with François, who stocks up the lodge's larder daily with tuna, barracuda and mackerel, or hiked to the old lighthouse to spot Samango monkeys.

I did take a sunset cruise in the lodge's creaking old dhow, feasting on sashimi and chilled wine, and spent lazy hours beach-combing among the clam shells and cowries, the only footprints in the sand my own. A mix of Europeans and Brazilian families were staying at the lodge; we gathered in the open-sided dining room for chef Ismaï's curries or fresh fish. In the evenings, we were often joined in the bar by members of staff.

Over drinks I met Isabel Marques da Silva, the Portuguese marine biologist who oversees the Maluane conservation project from a shack beside the lodge. The charity is a partnership between the Zoological Society of London, the



Clear horizon Villas at Vamizi Lodge are set back from the beach to avoid disturbing nesting turtles

Mozambique Government and the locals, and aims to preserve the environment of the Quirimbas through low-impact tourism. Its turtle satellite-tagging programme is the most successful in East Africa.

Da Silva is followed everywhere by the guests' children. She will wake them if they want to watch turtles laying clutches of up to 100 eggs, and help them to release tiny hatchlings into the sea. "We don't sell conservation," she says. "We just hope it will be a nice surprise."

In the south of the Quirimbas, Ibo is a different story. The Bradt guide to Mozambique says this island is "one of Africa's best-kept secrets". As I bump over the ruts from the airstrip, I imagine an East African World Heritage Site (the club Ibo hopes to join). Instead, I glimpse a brooding shell: a lost city, walls pockmarked with damp and decay, and trees sprouting through terracotta roofs. On closer examination I can see the remains of a more prosperous past: fine filigree wrought-iron, classical façades, pot-holed boulevards, and a vast shady main square.

The island has history, not all of it pleasant. From about the 7th century Muslim traders exported indigo and ivory from the island; under Portuguese rule in the 18th and 19th centuries Ibo was used as an entrepot for slaves en route to the French sugar plantations in Mauritius. Its population reached almost 40,000; today it is barely 5,000. Three hundred years after wealthy wives of traders used to raid Indian emporiums for silks and satins, the local population has no running water or electricity.

I stayed at Ibo Island Lodge, which was



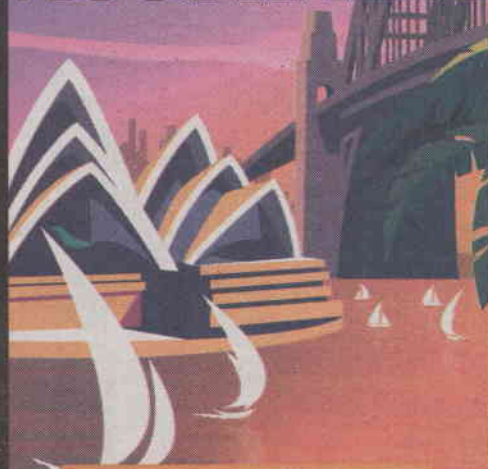
Getting there

Jill Crawshaw travelled with Kenya Airways (020-8283 1818, kenya-airways.com), which has daily flights to Dar es Salaam via Nairobi starting at £460 return. The Premier World service (with flat beds) is about £1,940.

Staying

Journeys by Design (01273 623790, journeysbydesign.com) offers eight-night holidays from Dar es Salaam with four nights on Vamizi Island, three on Ibo Island and a night in Dar at Oyster Bay, a new boutique beachside hotel, from £3,600, all inclusive (except for diving in Vamizi and drinks in Ibo). Safari options can be added.

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converted from three derelict mansions on the seafront. It has nine rooms and two small pools, and the accommodation is by no means luxurious, but the sunsets and the chef's curries are to die for. The lodge will arrange historical tours, kayaking and bird-watching among the mangroves, or even maroon you for half a day on a sandbank with a picnic. As at Vamizi, I felt safe wandering around alone day and night. People are curious, but there is no begging or hustling.

Slowly, Ibo is waking up after years of solitude and neglect. Thanks to funding from the Aga Khan, the fort has become a workshop for silversmiths who fashion intricate jewellery, often from melted-down escudos; a women's co-operative also makes artificial flowers and sarongs there.

A Spanish religious foundation is helping to restore the church of Nossa Senhora Rosaria, and US aid is tackling the once-handsome public buildings on the main square. One of them, the Alfandega, the old customs house, will be restored as a museum. Hundreds of beautifully written documents listing cargoes, crews and dates of ships that visited Ibo lie torn and rotting on the shelves and damp floor.

As I'm about to leave, the annual festival is beginning, with football, music, dancing and dhow racing. The build-up is feverish — disco music booms from the tiniest shack, returning locals pour in by ferry, and women soften their skin with white masks made from ground bark. The people who at first seemed to me so passive become vibrant, friendly and joyous. Time may have forgotten these islands, but I will not.