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travel

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ITALY 2011

Fabulous Italian adventures — from wine trails through Piedmont and wild nights in Bologna to sexy Sicilian villas and luxury camping in Umbria

PLUS: AA Gill in Mozambique

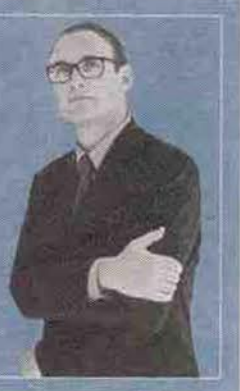
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'WHAT A FUNNY, BLISSFUL PLACE THIS IS'

If you leave your expectations of efficiency and punctuality at home with the rain, the East African coast serves up seclusion, beauty and mighty, monstrous fish

AA GILL



The fisherman got stroked by a Portuguese man-of-war. The passively poisonous and potentially fatal jellyfish traced its long, gossamer tail across his face. The pain must have been unspeakable, but he's tough. When he's not spear-fishing, he takes bow-hunting safaris to skewer buffalo, like Robin Hood in shorts. He dragged himself back on board, hoping the adrenaline and the fear would stave off the anaphylactic shock, screaming for his two Mozambican deckhands.

One of the things that can mitigate the agony of oceanic poison is urine. Piss is the palliative, the guide explained to me as we sat in the long, open lounge at Vamizi Island Lodge, while the full moon shattered in the waves and the waiter uncorked another bottle of Cape wine. "So I had to wee on myself" — and he did a little mime to show me how, crouching and bending over, apparently trying to kiss his bum goodbye.

I was struck by two thoughts. First, how typical of a white South African to do it the hard way, and not work out that the ergonomically most efficient way to wee on your own face is to lie on your back with your legs in the air and let gravity fix it; and second, what a wonderfully funny, sybaritic and blissful place this was; and that I must go fishing. That's three thoughts.

There is a trick to travelling through Africa. It's not kit, or cash, or pills, or planning, it's all in the expectations. Don't carry any. Leave them behind with the weather. Don't expect to get anywhere at any time. Don't expect to get anywhere specific at all, and you'll be perfectly content in this big beef rib of a continent. My mistake was to imagine I could wrest an extra beach day by flying overnight to Nairobi, rather than taking the daytime flight to Dar es Salaam, thereby adding an unnecessary airport and an extra country to the rickety suspension of probability.

We landed on time, but the connection to Dar, to meet the small plane to Mozambique, wasn't there. Possibly had never been there. I like Nairobi airport. I've spent a lot of time in it, listening to the muffled Tannoy announce that yesterday's flight to Kigali has been postponed till tomorrow, that the flight to Bujumbura will now depart at midnight and land at Kisangani instead. It's built in a circle, appropriately, the gates radiating off like the spokes of a flat tyre. There are lots of little tourist shops selling kikois and carved rhinos and

safari books with photos that are a whole lot better than yours. There's a mosque with a glass wall and a couple of the faithful wrapped in prayer blankets, fast asleep. Because there aren't any seats in this place for the hundreds of stranded would-be passengers who sag and expire on the floor: a marvellous mixture of American students do-gooding for God, Germans wanting to shoot and mount things, adventure trekkers with rucksacks bigger than five-year-olds, and grounded African high-flyers clutching their NGO conference bags advertising sleeping sickness, glaucoma, Aids and illiteracy.

All the ills of Africa can be seen in complimentary laptop cases and T-shirts in Nairobi airport. And the poorer the passenger, the better dressed they'll be. Europeans on 10-grand adventures look like khaki washing baskets. The children of subsistence herdsman wear neat suits and ironed shirts, with their hair combed and plaited. It is a lesson in expectation. I could spend all day watching the Europeans perspiring into their expensive great expectations and dumping their tempers on the faces of Africans, who absorb white fury and moneyed entitlement the way Africa absorbs good intentions and aid without any perceptible improvement in circumstances.

By the time a plane was found with both engines working and a confident pilot, it was already evening in Dar es Salaam, too late for the connection to Mozambique, but just in time for the rush hour. Dar es Salaam is not a memorably beautiful city, but it is a busy one. It's the main port not just for Tanzania, but for a handful of landlocked countries, and it has a road system designed for three donkeys and an Austin-Healey. The roads are like horizontal rock climbing, and twice a day it all comes to a heaving, belching stop for three hours. The government thought about fixing it, then decided it would be easier simply to move the capital to Dodoma. Nobody knows where that is, so nobody goes there, and the streets are presumably blissfully empty.

Dar's choked pavements are lined with thousands and thousands of workers who wait, with limited expectations, for hours and hours, for the crawling sardine buses to take them to shanty suburbs. Then again, if we hadn't had a forced night in Dar, we would never have discovered the Oyster Bay Hotel: startlingly elegant



and comfortable, with sophisticated food, expansive rooms and a pool. The perfect place to stop after travelling through the Serengeti or the Selous before the flight back to Europe.

The next evening, we boarded a Cessna Caravan — the Airbus of Africa — to Mozambique and the island of Vamizi, set in the Quirimbas Archipelago, a chain of 32 islands that arc into the Indian Ocean. These coral plinths were once home to slavers and smugglers. They just make it to the surface of the deep Indian Ocean. Flying over them, you see the characteristic pale, eau-de-nil sea, like a startled iris dropped into the saturated viridian of the deep water. The Indian Ocean coast of Africa is one of the least

exploited and most beautiful stretches of beach in the world.

Vamizi Island is a pearl in a thousand miles of crushed shell. Those who wear rubber and walk backwards in flippers say the archipelago is one of the top 10 diving sites. Personally, I get claustrophobic in a bath cap and only fill the sink halfway. Vamizi Island is as remote as you could wish a beach holiday to be. You can see that as either good or bad. For me, it's perfect. I like the slobby, faux adventure of getting here, and when you arrive, they lay before you the great invisible magic carpet, the oxymoron of the travel brochure: barefoot luxury. This island is a nature reserve, the whole deal is low-impact and pale-greenish. The island has no fresh water, so no mosquitoes, but the local villagers have to import theirs daily by dhow. The hotel desalinates. Everything you eat has to be flown from South Africa, the shopping ordered three months in advance. That there is anything on the table is an African miracle. Lunch is made with panache and occasional brilliance, and there's plenty of fish. But this is not the marble-and-gold-tap opulence of Mauritius.

The things that are here are ideal: the wooden and woven suites of rooms are self-contained and spread so far apart you can't even hear the honeymoon couple. They have what you want — airy verandas, huge beds, generous showers and a fridge — and they don't have the stuff I can happily holiday without: telephones, televisions, wifi, room service. You're on your own with the sea and the masked weaverbirds, which construct their beautiful nests in the fringe of thatch, like speculative starter homes. They look like wickerwork penises and scrotums. The males fuss and flutter, hanging upside down on the grassy bellends to attract picky females,



"Everything I caught, you could have won throwing darts at a fair. Everything she hauled in was the size of an American child"

who will occasionally deign to disappear up a urethra and inspect the mod cons.

Travel writers tend to be snooty about beaches and time spent on them: serious travellers are about more than this mindless meandering, the self-basting and novel-skimming. But I think they miss — or aren't open to — the deep therapeutic mystery of beaches, all of which are in most respects the same, and that is rather their point. This one is made of coral and shell, ground by the sea. It never gets too hot to walk on. The water lolls, cool and clear, flashing shoals of fish. The horizon boils clouds that slowly build to great towering nimbi, which pass on to the north. The pleasure of a beach is in being with yourself, at peace, without expectation. Collecting shells is one of the most underrated and pleasing occupations: the beauty and the engineering, the amazing construction, the profligacy of their manufacture. It is an antidote to incontinent consumption, these handfuls of ingenuity of such metaphysical worth, but free of any value. Walking on a beach is just engaging enough to prevent you obsessing ahead or behind, mulling troubles and worries — but not demanding enough to stop the serendipity of bubbles from the unconscious and the chaos of free association. There is, in the margin of the land, a particular

freedom, a specific contentment, a time out of time at the border of the three great elements of the earth: land, sea and air.

My girlfriend, Nicola, loves fishing. Her dad, a great African, taught her to cast a line, so we took the fisherman and his boat into the blue, set the rods with their gaudy, malingering lures and trolled around a submerged volcano, taking it in turns to grab a screaming line. Everything I caught, you could have won throwing darts at a fair. Everything Nicola hauled in was the size of a fat American 10-year-old. I like catching barracuda: they are psycho killers, too hard and cool to put up a fight, daring you to reel them in, but once on deck they go ripper-mental, chewing chunks out of everything, mad eyes sparkling with terminal malevolence. Then Nicola grabbed a rod that was keening line, and for 20 minutes fought a fish that bent the fibreglass as if it were straw. Finally, she landed a giant trevally, one of the finest, toughest, most energetically determined game fish. It was a once-in-a-lifetime fish, a fish to bore dinner tables and send children to sleep, a screensaver fish. And for one, beaming moment she held it, then let it slip back over the side.

For me, for us, any day spent in Africa is worth two anywhere else, and a day on an African beach is worth a week.

AA Gill travelled as a guest of Journeys by Design

Travel details: Journeys by Design (01273 623790, journeysbydesign.com) has nine nights, all-inclusive, with six at the Vamizi Island Lodge (vamizi.com) and one at the Oyster Bay Hotel, in Dar, from £2,945pp, including Kenya Airways flights from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam via Nairobi, light-aircraft transfers to Vamizi, and drinks. Other operators include Cox & Kings (020 7873 5000, coxandkings.co.uk) and The Ultimate Travel Company (020 7386 4646, theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk).

By dhow along the coast and, top right, Nicola and her giant trevally
Mike D. Rock/Getty/AA Gill