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### **IBO ISLAND AS A TOURISM DESTINATION NOW IN THE 20TH CENTURY:**

Ibo Island Lodge, the lodge Fiona and I have dreamed of for all these years, has been a labour of love. Not only by ourselves, but by the local people. This is the pioneer tourism initiative on Ibo Island.

We had a huge responsibility on Ibo. To show the local community the power that sustainable eco-tourism could have on their island, on their lives and on the lives of their children. We were not just building a lodge. We were constructing hopes and dreams for a future. One of the first things we did was build a community school, and during 2007 and 7 it was free of charge to anyone from the community who wished to attend.

At times the project threatened to overwhelm us. Work was excruciatingly slow. And there were also huge expectations from the community. There were virtually no building skills or hospitality skills to speak of on the island. So a mammoth training exercise was needed before we could even start. We selected 120 strong men and women from Ibo and trained and mentored them. One of the challenges we faced was that very few of the islanders had ever had a job before. They had little understanding of the need to come to work every day. If the fishing was good they just didn't pitch. Upon returning they had no idea what they had done wrong. The fishing was good - so surely we must realize that everyone had to eat!! We soon realized that we had to supply regular meals to keep people on site - Meal times were often more important than the wage in the early days..

The men from this region are some of the finest and hardest individuals I have come across in Africa. They go to sea in dug-out canoes for days on end. It is not uncommon for them to fight and land game fish bigger than their own canoes. The women are equally as special. Whenever we had to do anything physically challenging like clear an area by hand we would rely on the women.... we called it capalana power, capalanas are the wrap around skirts the women of Ibo wear. Often with their babies strapped on their backs this mighty team of women could clear a site of rubble in a morning - by hand. The lodge was truly built by the pride of the people of Ibo.

#### **Rehabilitating in a traditional manner:**

While rebuilding we wanted to restore the original character of the buildings, no matter how challenging. It's part of the special atmosphere of the lodge. The buildings were originally built out of lime and coral stone - very fragile materials to work with. Lime has been used in the traditional manner both inside and outside of the buildings, it's tricky to work with - but it is how Ibo would have been all those years ago and we wanted to stay true to it.

#### **Training**

We're often asked how we trained the people of Ibo to deliver the service they produce in the lodge. We were determined to populate the lodge with the people of Ibo. Most of the Lodge staff come from our original construction team. We discussed with them the importance of education and training - in particular learning English and hospitality skills.

We started giving free English and hospitality lessons to all comers. After work all day in the hot sun building and plastering, most of the team eagerly picked up their books to go to school. The women grabbed at the opportunity. Very few of them had ever had the chance to go to school.

**Change on Ibo:**

Ibo today is no longer an economically depressed island with a shrinking population. Things are a changing! This is the most rewarding part of the project to date. For the first time in many years Ibo is full of young people who are working and undergoing training in a range of skills. From English literacy, hospitality, guiding, market gardening, cooking, and of course heritage rehabilitation and construction.

There is an atmosphere of hope and excitement. They have begun to see a clear future for themselves on the island. Our pioneer tourism project has kick started off other tourism investments on Ibo. It's an inspiring time to be visiting Ibo Island. Ibo Island Lodge finally opened in December 2006.

Our only hope is that we have created a place as magical as the island itself.

