

TRAVEL

Mozambique

*If you're looking for the real deal
for old-fashioned island adventure,
you'll find it in Mozambique,
writes Bridget Hilton-Barber*

AN ISLAND ADVENTURE THESE DAYS IS,

sadly, likely to conjure up images from reality TV, images of scrawny, gum-chewing blondes stick fighting with Amazonian brunettes for a million US. Or teams of hefty, sweaty okes wrestling alligators and swashbuckling their way through swamps with GPS devices and hidden microphones.

For those with a little more soul, those who can still remember good old-fashioned things like pirates, coconuts, Aloha girls and coral reefs, Ibo Island in northern Mozambique is an island adventure of note. A real one. Where the winds tell stories of ancient traders, where the culture is mixed and salty; where crumbling forts stand guard over the sea, and the breezes carry the sad songs of forgotten slaves.

Ibo Island is near Pemba (not to be confused with the Tanzanian island) town and part of the Quirimbas Archipelago. There are 27 islands that make up the archipelago, and the 11 southernmost islands comprise the Quirimbas National Park, one of the richest, most biologically diverse marine environments on earth. The 11 islands are – and try saying these when you're full of the local rum – Quipaco, Quisiwe, Mefundvo, Quilalea, Sencar, Quirimba, Quirambo, Fion, Matemo, Ilha das Rolas and Ibo.

Apart from being the easiest to pronounce, Ibo is the most popular and most visited island, its main attraction being the old town, which is a marvellous mixture of Arabian, Portuguese and African influences dating all the way back to the early 1500s. Ibo is one of the most ancient settlements in Mozambique and, during the last 500 years, was an important trading centre for slaves and ivory, and a vital stopover along the coast of East Africa. In 1754 it was a major gateway for the export of slaves by the Portuguese.

Ibo Island is virtually unknown to the outside world and has remained undisturbed for centuries. Which has led many a guide book and brochure

For those with a little more soul

already in your floral island gear and twirling the little umbrella in your cocktail while ankle deep in the Indian Ocean, and not at all pleasant if you're stuck at the airport in Pemba trying to clear customs.

Ibo Island is tiny – a mere three kilometres wide and long – and its 200-year-old ghost town is evocative and historical. The crumbling ruins of once powerful forts, a beautiful Catholic church and assorted, fading colonial homes and trading posts look out across the sea. The main fort overlooks the harbour mouth and was built to protect Portuguese Mozambique from the French Comores to the east. It was built in the form of a pentagon and is one of only three remaining similar forts – one in Mombassa in Kenya and the other in Maputo in Mozambique. Today it is occupied by silversmiths who make jewellery using ancient Arab techniques and tools – blowpipes, charcoal, lemon juice and tiny metal files.

Along with the island's proverbially palm-fringed beaches, kaleidoscopic coral reefs, fresh seafood and humpback whales that frolic in the bay, Ibo has pretty much all the ingredients for a memorable island adventure. Take your own pirate or Aloha girl.

Once accessible only by dhow, today Ibo is a 25-minute flight from Pemba, capital of Cabo Delgado province. Pemba took over from Ibo as the provincial capital in 1998. The Bay of Pemba is one of the

harbour in the world. With twice-weekly direct flights from Johannesburg, Pemba is becoming more and more attractive to South Africans in search of beach and quiet, prawns and Mozambican Zen. The luxury 102-bedroom Pemba Beach Hotel & Spa, built in Afro-Arab style, opened here some five years ago and its Sanctuary Spa is an excellent place to stop and get pampered en route to Ibo Island.

Ibo's indigenous inhabitants, the Macua and Makonde people, have long fished and navigated the island's waters and its mangrove swamps in mokoros or dugout canoes. But increasingly, locals are becoming involved in tourism and conservation. The Quirimbas National Park is a conservation jewel, protecting one of the world's richest coral reefs and providing feeding and nesting grounds for the park's delightful population of sea turtles, dugong, dolphins, sharks and whales.

Island adventurers can explore the fertile channels of the mangrove forests aboard a mokoro, or try sea kayaking in the calm, flat island waters, which are home to mother humpback whales and their calves from August to early November.

For those in search of an underwater experience, there are many wonderful dive sites around Ibo Island, most notable of which is the world-class Lazarus Bank, 42 nautical miles off the coast, an underwater playground featuring incredible drop-offs, walls and coral caves. Here you will see most of the coral species typical

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such as yellowfin and dogtooth tuna, marlin, manta rays, shark, barracuda, kingfish and red snappers, as well as hawksbill turtles. And if you're the sort of person whose idea of exercise is lifting a glass to your lips, a romantic sunset cruise is a fabulous way to end a day on Ibo Island, as is a gentle sail in a traditional Arab dhow. **D**

Bridget Hilton-Barber flew to Mozambique courtesy of Airlink. Travellers can fly from regional centres to exotic leisure destinations on 25 routes throughout southern Africa and the Indian Ocean islands on Airlink. Now flying twice weekly (Tuesdays and Saturdays) return from Johannesburg to Pemba in Mozambique, the unique culture, tropical beaches and indigo sea of Pemba and the Quirimbas archipelago are a short, stylish hop away. For more information, visit www.flyairlink.com or call ☎ 011 961 1700 or your local travel agent. Airlink accepts Diners Club Cards.

