

TREASURE ISLAND



Famed for its silversmiths, Mozambique's Ibo Island is a paradise for tourists who prefer not to follow timetables, writes globetrotter Richard Holmes

Pristine sands and cobalt waters on the Ibo sand spit.



There's a charming mix of decay and development on Ibo.



Private gardens and cool passageways.



Harris gets to grips with the catch of the day.



Local colour on Ibo.

“Right over there,” says Harris, pointing at a glistening patch of blue water a kilometre or so off the bow of our boat. “That’s where the beach is.” I shoot Harris a sideways look, wondering if he’s having me on, but he simply lets out one of the big belly laughs that have punctuated the last few days and promises me that we’ll be there soon enough.

And of course, I should have known better than to doubt Harris. When he promises bird-filled mangroves, the forests are teeming in the boughs above

our kayaks. When crab is on the menu the platters overflow with heavy-clawed crustaceans. And when he says there’s a beach, the most glorious stretch of sand imaginable appears magically from beneath the waves. Such are days spent on Ibo island, one of a few dozen islands that make up Mozambique’s northern Quirimbas Archipelago.

As the keel of our traditional dhow hisses to a halt on the sands of a mid-ocean sand spit, it’s a beaming Harris who jumps ashore first to welcome us. Like a latter-day Moses, he has parted the warm waters of the Indian Ocean

to reveal an impossibly perfect beach. Washed clean by the high tides and revealed in all its glory at low tide, it’s a private beach like no other.

“The bar is open!” beams Harris, rattling the ice blocks in the cooler box as a honeymooning couple wander off to find a private corner of our idyllic isthmus. The keen fisherman in our group pulls his floppy hat down low and heads for the drop-off where wary kingfish hunt, while a father and son grab their snorkels and flap away to explore the shallows. For a few minutes I simply stand rooted to the spot, a broad

TEXT RICHARD HOLMES
PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD HOLMES AND IBO ISLAND LODGE

smile on my face, turning in circles to soak up this piece of paradise.

The waxing sun is fierce, but a Bedouin-style tent is quickly hoisted and a table is set for lunch in the shade. Beach umbrellas and swimming towels are laid out and – after a few hours – the braai fire is lit. The kingfish reeled in on the way over is soon sizzling away. Before we know it though, lunch is served, the fish is finished and the tide is coming in. It’s time to head back to Ibo.

As tropical islands go, Ibo is a little different. There are no gleaming white beaches; that’s what the glorious

sandbank is for. There are no sanitised resorts and no golf carts buzzing overweight tourists from the buffet to glass-bottomed boat trips. No timetables and no tour buses. Instead, you’ll find just a handful of visitors congratulating themselves on discovering this quiet corner of the Quirimbas, and an island that’s very much alive.

Carpenters repair boats on the water’s edge, while in the distance a dhow tacks against the falling tide, its lateen sail slatting in the southerly trade wind known as the *kusi*. Goats wander about on their own while village children smile for your

attention and squeal with delight when they get it. Local men wander back from the distant mangrove forests with sacks full of crab, perhaps destined for our dinner table this evening.

It’s a scene that hasn’t changed much in centuries. Men have repaired and sailed their dhows here since the 1500s, and it was those same southerly trade winds that took Arabian trading dhows as far afield as Zanzibar and Oman; their cargo of spices exchanged for ivory, amber and – sometimes – slaves. When the Portuguese sailed into these waters in 1522 they decided they wanted this goldmine ▷

for themselves and seized the island. They built forts, established trading posts and set the stage for 450 years of colonisation. That is all a distant memory, but in the heart of the village Ibo Island Lodge is preserving a piece of the area's fragile history while providing a homely base for visitors from across the globe to soak up the unique atmosphere of the island.

"This main building of the lodge was once the old registry office for the island," explains Harris, after we've washed off the salt from our sand spit adventure. "And the bedrooms next door where you are staying was the house for the governor of the island." Happily, unlike many of the island's crumbling buildings, Ibo Island Lodge is exquisite; restored to its former glory and furnished in a style the governor would have enjoyed back in the day. High ceilings soar above spaces filled with loved and lived-in furniture, either handcrafted on the island or brought across the seas from India, as the Portuguese would have done.

Four-poster beds and cool screed floors grace the lodge's fourteen en suite rooms that lie scattered around tranquil gardens. Thick walls of coral brick keep the rooms cool and airy, while on the deep veranda a hand-carved wooden bench beckons with superb views out over the channel. Tealights flicker in Arabesque lanterns and a jug of iced water beads condensation invitingly. Lush grass carpets the gardens surrounding the lodge's two pools, one set back under the shade of private palms, the other a rim-flow pool with village and sea views. From the rooftop terrace – where dinners are served under star-spangled skies – the island curves away to the village on one side and the Fort of São João Batista on the other.

A visit to the gleaming-white star-shaped Fort – built by the Portuguese in 1791 – is a highlight of the daily walking tours that will tear you away from the cool confines of the lodge to

explore the island. The fort's ramparts offer fine views north across the Quirimbas, but it's the steady tap-tapping of metal on metal that will draw you into the belly of the building. On the cool flagstones the island's famous silversmiths melt raw silver in a makeshift furnace, producing rivulets of molten metal that are patiently fashioned into fine filigree jewellery

"The craft is said to date back more than 800 years," says Harris as we marvel at the detailed work. "There are more than 40 men working as silversmiths here on Ibo. The silver first came from Portuguese coins, but today we buy the raw silver in South Africa and it is brought here for the craftsmen." We leave the silversmiths to their work – our pockets filled with delicate jewellery to appease wives at home – and wander off into the village. Despite the rows of run-down buildings, there's a sense of renewed prosperity here. Churches are being rebuilt, walls are whitewashed and children cavort happily in the town's square.

We walk past more forts built by the Portuguese to keep trading competition at bay and on past the colonial Customs House. On my last visit here reams of historic ledgers lay open to the elements, but today the doors are locked and windows shuttered. Perhaps the evidence of this area's rich trading heritage is finally being preserved.

In the mid-1800s Ibo was the centre of trade for Northern Mozambique; a fashionable and prosperous outpost of Portugal. It was a time before trade routes shifted, slavery was abolished and the island began its slow decline into tropical torpor.

From fishermen to traders, Ibo has always been a seafaring island, so it seems only fitting that we take to the waters ourselves. We've sailed a dhow to a deserted island and snorkelled off Ibo's coral reefs, so as the sun marches to the west we don our lifejackets and join Harris at the water's edge.



Harris leads a walking tour of the village.



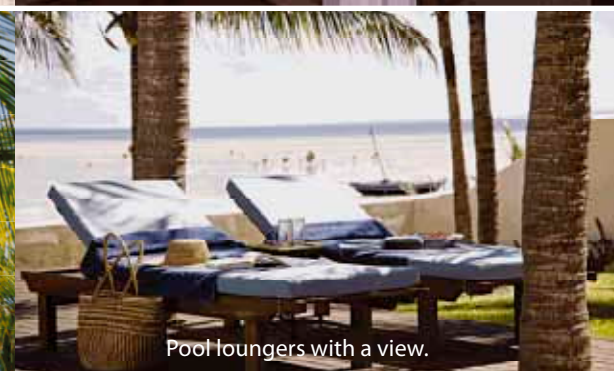
Island romance with mozzie nets and four-posters.



Traditional dhows ply the island's waters.



Relax under shady palms.



Pool loungers with a view.



Casting a line for kingfish.



Sunset from the Fort of São João Batista.

Our kayaks are lined up, bows pointing towards the mangrove forests across the water. With a few solid strokes of the paddle we're into deeper water and up into the forest-fringed waterways. For centuries these mangrove forests have protected and provided for the islanders, shielding the shoreline from storms, providing wood for their dhows and a nursery for the fish that are their livelihood.

As if on cue, a shoal of fish explodes from the water at the tree line. "Probably being chased by a Mangrove Snapper," says Harris, who brings the mangroves to life as our kayaks glide silently through the

forests. "Mangroves can live in both salt and freshwater, but when the seed pod falls off the tree it must sprout roots within two hours," he explains, "Otherwise the tide will simply wash it away."

Right now, it's the inevitable ebb and flow of the tides that is washing us away downstream and out of the forests back towards the lodge. As the sun dips, the lanterns on the lodge terrace will start to flicker and I can almost smell the rich aroma of steaming crab. Harris mentioned something about crab for dinner. Once again, I knew I shouldn't have doubted him. **GH**

TRAVEL TIPS

- For more information on Ibo Island Lodge, visit www.iboisland.com, e-mail reservations@iboisland.com or call 021 702 0285.
- Linhas Aéreas de Moçambique (LAM) fly three times per week from Johannesburg to Pemba, via Maputo. From Pemba, it's a 20-minute transfer by light aircraft to Ibo Island. For reservations, call 011 615 9588 or visit www.flylam.co.za
- MozambiqueTravel.com can assist with flight bookings and packages to properties throughout Mozambique. Visit www.mozambiquetravel.com
- Northern Mozambique is a malarial area. Consult your doctor for prophylactics three weeks before you travel.
- South Africans do not require a visa for Mozambique.
- The currency of Mozambique is the Metical (R1=3,27MZM), but US dollars are widely accepted. There are no ATM or credit card facilities on Ibo Island.