



PERHAPS THE
WORLD'S MOST
PERFECT BEACH.
WAITING FOR YOU
OFF IBO ISLAND

PADDLES & PALM TREES

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ARAB TRADERS,
A SEA KAYAKING ADVENTURE EXPLORES
MOZAMBIQUE'S CALM, TURQUOISE WATERS
SURROUNDING IBO ISLAND

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THE MUEZZIN is calling in the last days of Ramadan. His summons to prayer wafts across Ibo Island, echoing down faded streets lined with crumbling ruins. Trees grow through doorways and roots inhabit rooms once home to Portuguese traders.

Time on Ibo, adrift in the Quirimbas Archipelago in far northern Mozambique, seems to have stopped somewhere in the 1970s; in the early days of independence when foreigners fled, or were forced, from the country. Pack up and go in 24 hours, they were told, leaving behind their lives and livelihoods.

"*Allah bu akbar!*" The muezzin's call jolts me back to the present. The hurried evictions of the 1970s are a distant memory now; one of many stitches in the turbulent tapestry of Ibo's history. The island's mosques are a reminder of the days when Arab merchants controlled these

waters. They arrived with Islam and ambergris, sailing home on the trade winds with gold, ivory and – occasionally – slaves.

The Portuguese were here too. Forcing the Arabs from the island, they entrenched their position with the Fort of São João Batista. The cannons are long silent, but the thick white-washed walls of the star-shaped fortification still guard one of the island's treasures.

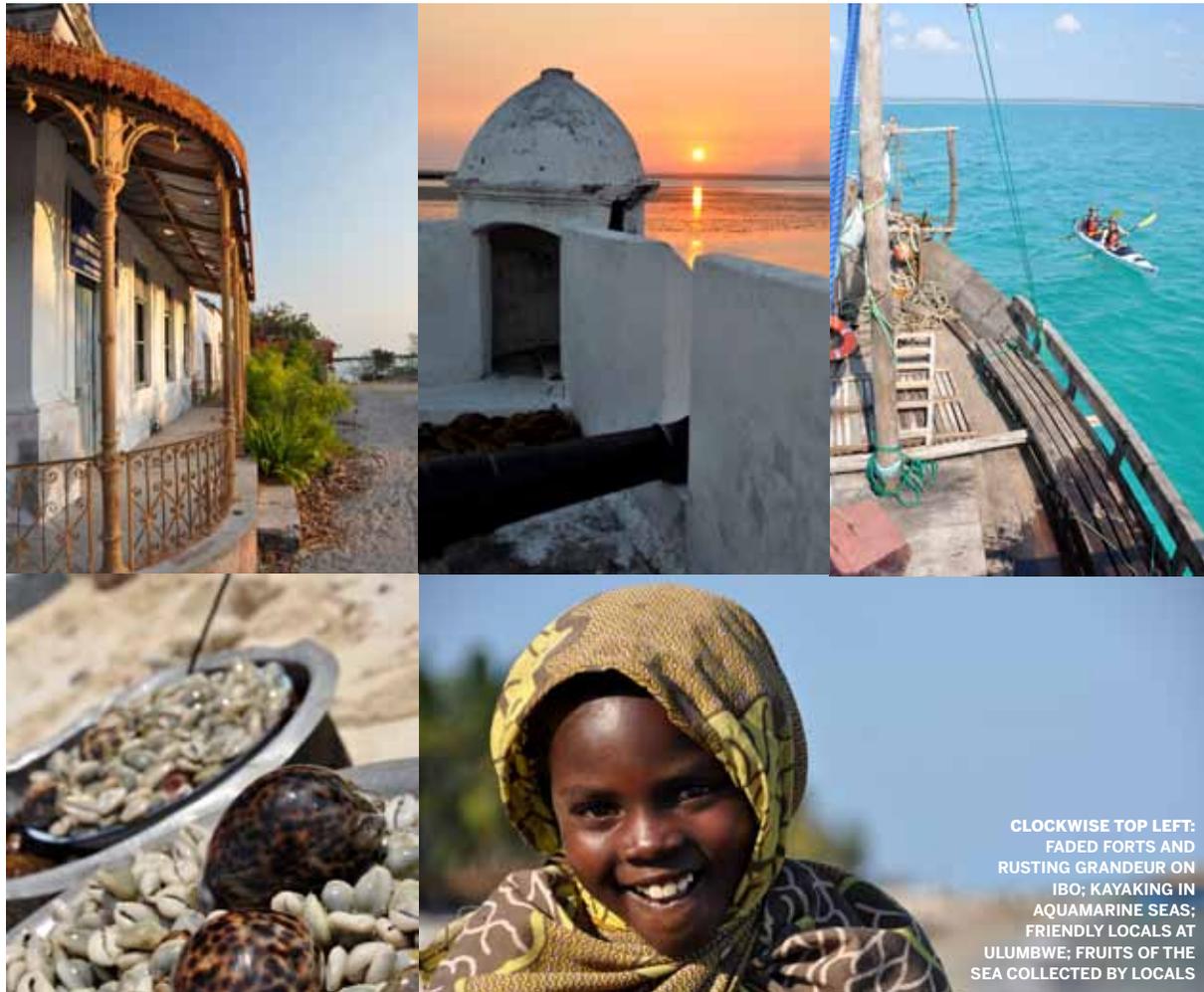
Ibo is famous for its silversmiths, a craft said to date back over 800 years to the first Muslim traders. On the cool flagstones of the fort a dozen jewellers patiently fashion molten silver into delicate bands, while in the old kitchen a wizened artisan uses a makeshift bellows to heat the small furnace, melting raw silver.

The fine filigree jewellery was originally made from colonial-era Portuguese coins, melted down and

refashioned into the delicate bracelets, rings and necklaces. Today, the silver is flown in from South Africa; a touch less romantic, perhaps, but the quality of work is still outstanding.

This taste of living history is what draws most visitors to Ibo. It's an island that steers clear of the stereotypical beach holiday of sun, sea and sand. You'll find those here, certainly, but also a peek into the island's rich history and daily life in the Quirimbas.

Ibo Island Lodge's 14 en-suite bedrooms, housed in the old governor's residence with its thick walls of coral bricks, are exquisite. Restored to their former glory they're filled with rustic wooden furniture either imported from India, as the Portuguese would have done, or handcrafted on the island. Cool screed floors spill out onto private terraces with views of the dense mangrove



CLOCKWISE TOP LEFT: FADED FORTS AND RUSTING GRANDEUR ON IBO; KAYAKING IN AQUAMARINE SEAS; FRIENDLY LOCALS AT ULUMBWA; FRUITS OF THE SEA COLLECTED BY LOCALS

forests. Dhows are moored safely on the mud flats, waiting patiently for the tide to return. However, I'll be leaving all of this behind.

It was nice while it lasted, but our small group of travellers wasn't here to savour languid days at the lodge. We had following seas and fibreglass kayaks in our future. Dome tents and deserted islands. Starlit nights and coral reefs.

For travellers who can't bear to sit still on holiday the new kayak adventure on offer at Ibo Island Lodge is ideal. You spend a few days on Ibo shaking off the city malaise and enjoying the lodge's home comforts, before setting off on a journey towards the blue horizon.

We're up early to catch the tide; our sleek sea kayaks are lined up on a nearby sand spit. Guests at the lodge use this idyllic beach – only exposed at low tide – for lazy days under sun umbrellas, but we stand on it staring wistfully across the waters, our destination somewhere out there in the haze.

"We sometimes have to change where we paddle depending on the weather," explains Harris Mupedzi, the head guide from Ibo Island Lodge who'll be leading us north. "But the weather is perfect for us today, a nice gentle wind from the south, so we'll head for Ulumbwa."

That would be the village of Ulumbwa over on the mainland, some

eight kilometres away. With the wind behind us it's a fairly easy paddle that shouldn't take more than four hours. The tropical sun is already warming up the day though, so we take to the kayaks. A few swift strokes and the crystal waters off the sandbank drop away into the deep. Below us lie 50 metres of ocean, a deep channel where whales and dolphins can often be seen.

Some distant splashes catch my eye, but otherwise we are alone on the water. The rhythmic rise and fall of our paddles the only sound to break the conversation that ebbs and flows with the swell. Open crossings are a watery meditation where your mind wanders easily as your shoulders find their stride.



CAMPING IS RUSTIC, BUT COMFORTABLE, WITH DOME TENTS AND BUCKET SHOWERS

A tender boat shadows in case any paddlers tire, but with a following breeze it's easy enough to rest when we like, pushed onwards – like the Arab traders before us – by the soft trade winds.

Our support dhow has already set sail, plodding its way north piled high with our dome tents and camp crew. While you may work up a sweat paddling from A to B, that's about the only hard work you'll have to do on this trip. The dhow crew sail ahead, set up camp, prepare meals and provide a welcome bucket shower at the end of each day.

As our keels scrape the sand at Ulumbwa, situated at the mouth of a mangrove-fringed river, we leave the crew to set up camp and wander off to explore the local village.

“ PALM TREES WHISPER SWEET NOTHINGS AT THE WATER'S EDGE ”

It's a simple place, where chickens and goats scratch in the sand beneath the boughs of majestic Common Star Chestnuts. Always following us is a gaggle of local kids, "mzungu" the only word I can pick out of their cheerful chatter of local Kimwani.

Palm trees whisper sweet nothings at the water's edge, where fishermen check their bait before a night at sea. They grin enthusiastically as they show off their tiny dug-out canoes; "Bom peixe! Bom peixe!" I wish them good fishing and wander off back towards our beach camp.

The camp, though rustic, leaves little to be desired. Dome tents with camp-cots provide a comfortable night's sleep, with a bowl of steaming hot water greeting us each dawn. A large



(CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT): LOCAL FISHERMEN DRYING OCTOPUS; THE LAST NIGHT'S CAMP ON MOGUNDULA ISLAND; DOUBLE-KAYAKS MAKE PADDLING EASY WORK

gazebo shades our dinner table, while the canvas screen around the bucket shower leaves a head-sized gap just big enough for ablutions with a view.

We have beautiful vistas aplenty on the next day's paddle across to Mogundula. Except we're all feeling a little lazy, so we take advantage of the dhow's rooftop deck and hitch a ride. We use the strengthening breeze as an excuse, but honestly it's simply too good an opportunity to pass up. The lateen sail draws us gently to the north as we wave to fishermen, stop for a swim and try our luck with a lure out the back.

After a few hours at sea an island emerges from the haze... Mogundula, where we'll spend our last two nights.

The island is uninhabited, but by no means deserted. Most mornings a gaggle of local women arrive by dhow, buckets in hand and spears at the ready to harvest what they can from the exposed coral reefs. These seas are officially a marine park, but still provide a livelihood for the villages that line the mainland.

Our days are spent in more leisurely pursuits; snorkelling the coral bommies that fringe the island, meandering along coastal forest paths, swimming off the sand spit that juts out to the south or simply soaking up the postcard views of the Quirimbas.

This is a kayak adventure where your hand is squarely on the tiller; where your days move to languid local

rhythms, waking with the sun's first glance over the horizon and lulled to sleep by the sea.

Harris and the skipper deal with the tides... all you need do is decide how busy you want to be. Paddle the long crossings, or relax to the creak of the dhow. Spend an afternoon fishing and snorkelling or pull a chair up to the water's edge to watch the world go by.

The camp kitchen keeps busy all day though, with freshly baked bread and plates of rich prawn curry, piri-piri squid and grilled crayfish for dinner. Like the trip as a whole, it's rustic yet indulgent. The only star rating you'll find will be in the night sky above... and that's exactly why adventurous travellers will love it. ✕

NEED TO KNOW

- ➔ For more information on Ibo Island Lodge and the kayak adventures, visit www.kayakquirimbas.com or call +27 (0)21 702 0285.
- ➔ South African passport-holders do not require a visa for Mozambique.
- ➔ Northern Mozambique is a malarial-area. Consult your doctor three weeks before travel for appropriate prophylactics.