

Exotic Quirimbas Archipelago, Northern Mozambique



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Sue Segar, recently travelled to the remote and exotic Quirimbas Archipelago in northern Mozambique.

What do Daniel Craig, David Rothschild and Tokyo Sexwale have in common? Well, one thing, I gathered on a recent trip, is that they have all discovered Mozambique. In particular, they have been captivated by the remote Quirimbas Archipelago, a vast chain of 32 offshore coral islands which runs for some 250 km along the country's northern coastline.

In fact, so captivated is our new Human Settlements minister that he recently bought his own island, called Quilalea, in this relatively little-known paradise. Till recently, the small island of Quilalea boasted the most expensive luxury resort in Mozambique, but Tokyo, who reportedly bought it for \$20 million, will keep it for the private use of his family and friends.

Flying over the islands in a small plane recently, it was easy to see why this compelling archipelago is increasingly being described as the "New Maldives". And why the Rothschilds bring their friends and have invested hugely in the area. It explained why Dave Coetzee, a pilot for the Rani group of luxury lodges, threw in his job as a manager in the freight industry to fly small planes in the Quirimbas.

Flying over the islands is, in itself, an experience of wonder. Think of a vast ocean made up of a hundred different shades of blue and green, punctuated by a long string of largely undisturbed pale islands and islets, with just the occasional white-sailed dhow, sailing, fragile and alone in the watery expanse.

The islands, which begin about 70 km north of the historic port of Pemba and continue up to the Tanzanian border, are mostly uninhabited and tourism has made little mark on them.



They are known by discerning divers

for their jaw-dropping vertical drop-offs, some up to more than 400 metres. And for the extraordinary size of their reef-fish — including parrotfish, angelfish, cave bass and morays. Bird-lovers come for the lilac-crested rollers, coconut vultures and fish-eagles.

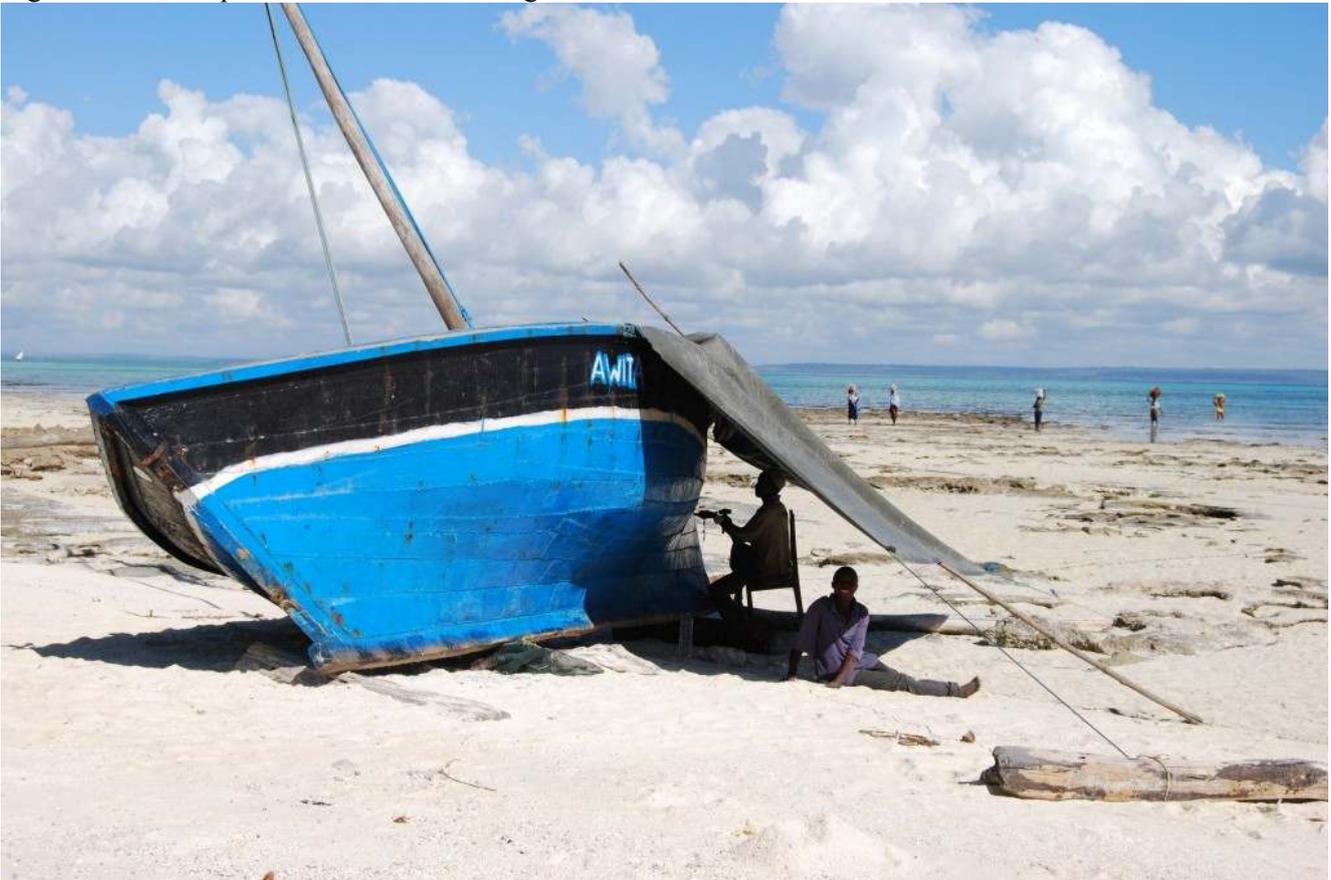
Knackered from a spate of bad news, I decided to pack my bags and regroup in the most remote spot imaginable. Where else then, but Mozambique, a place which has always fascinated me.

The instruction notes on travelling to the Quirimbas islands said any luggage weighing more than 15kgs would be left behind. So, armed with the Bradt Travel Guide to Mozambique, as well as my battered copy of Alec Garland's cult classic, *The Beach* and Lisa St Aubin de Teran's compelling book, *Mozambique Mysteries*, I packed my lightest clothes, my goggles and a notebook and turned my back on the bleak Cape winter. "Very, very far north in Mozambique," was all I said, when people asked where I was going.

An Airlink flight from Johannesburg had me in Pemba at lunch-time. Pemba, which is situated on the tip of a peninsula on the southern side of Pemba Bay, is the capital of Mozambique's most north-easterly province, Cabo Delgado. (It's a town which I later explored after my trip to the island and which carries an intrigue all of its own.)

The Italian diplomat sitting next to me couldn't contain his enthusiasm for the view of Pemba Bay, which he said is one of the deepest and most protected bays in the world.

"Did you know that Pemba is the third-biggest natural harbour in the world — after Sydney and Rio," he said. I had not known that — but was equally gobsmacked by the view of the enormous bay with its wide, sandy, palm-lined beaches. This diplomat, on his first visit to this part of Mozambique, had done his homework — and told me that, despite being off the beaten track, Pemba — with its coral reefs, safe swimming and excellent snorkelling — has enormous potential as a tourist destination. There's just the small problem of reasonable flights — it's cheaper for South Africans to go to Mauritius.



My exotic itinerary told me to wait for a light aircraft transfer with CFA Charters from Pemba to Matemo Island — and within minutes, a small group of us were making our way in the heat onto a very light aircraft. The more remote the island, the smaller the aircraft that takes you there, (and the more fascinating the pilot) it seemed. (Dave, apart from having flown in the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone of countries like Gabon, Benin, Liberia and Sierra Leone (think horrific thunderstorms with cloud heights as high as 55 000 feet), also managed to take a plane full of people out of Gabon during the coup d'état in 2003.) He's also flown in Sudan and carried numerous heads of state and celebrities.



An hour or so later, after a breathtaking flight over the seascape — at times lime green and at others a rich indigo — we landed on the singular island of Matemo on an airstrip that could not have been more than ten metres from the sea.

Matemo is one of the few inhabited islands in the expansive archipelago, which falls under the protection of the Quirimbas National Park. Tourism is carefully managed and the tourism developments are, in the main, exclusive. Think ice-cold cocktails on arrival, a welcoming committee of all the staff — and crayfish curry in coconut served outside under the stars at supper time.

Things were looking up. Maybe the guy who wrote *The Beach* was right: "Escape through travel works."

Matemo is also one of the few islands in the region with an upmarket lodge, owned by Rani Resorts founder, the top Saudi Arabian businessman, Adel Aujan. He founded Rani in the early 1990s, after being overwhelmed by the region's breathtaking beauty and wilderness. His luxury lodges on Matemo and the nearby island of Medjumbe, as well as one in Pemba — the Pemba Beach Hotel and [Spa](#) — offer world-class luxury service and have hosted numerous famous personalities: Not least Gil Sander and the people who own Lacoste. And even our own former Finance Minister, Trevor Manuel, who chose Matemo as the spot to take his bride, Maria Ramos on honeymoon not so long ago.



After a stroll on a white beach scattered with bleached cowries, and a swim in the sea, I took up the offer of an island tour of Matemo and learned from our guide, Eliseu, that the Quirimbas Archipelago — and particularly Ibo Island, which was nominated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO — has a rich history, made up of a mix of African, Arabian and Portuguese influences.

The islands were originally mainly made up of fishing settlements. Later, Moslem traders settled there and the area became part of a commercial network which originated in the Gulf of Oman and went down the East African coast. Dhows, bearing goods to barter, would sail down the coast making use of the so-called "trade winds".

The next morning, after a languid morning paddle in Matemo's warm water, I flew on another small airplane to nearby Ibo. Our pilot pointed out the striking star-shaped Fort of St Joao Baptista, built by the Portuguese to keep control over local trade, as we flew closer.

Goats scattered from the grass landing strip as we landed. Soon we were driving through the island's old fortresses, its cathedral and the once-grand old homes. The authors of the Bradt travel guide describe Ibo as the most fascinating and atmospheric town in the country after Mozambique Island. "It's a strangely haunting back-water ... the most alluring off-the-beaten track excursion in northern Mozambique."

Ibo became the main hub for Moslem traders in the 1500s, but, after the Moslems on nearby Querimba Island refused to trade with Christians, Portugal attacked the islands in 1523. By the end of the 16th Century, most of the larger islands of the Quirimbas Archipelago were run by Portuguese traders, with Ibo firmly established as the major town on the islands. By the middle of the 18th Century, Ibo was established as the main supplier of slaves to the Indian Ocean Islands. The island declined when trade moved to Pemba in the early 1900s and is now back to being an island of fishermen.



I disembarked at the magnificent Ibo Island Lodge — once the Bela Vista mansion — where a lunch of cold crayfish salad, white rolls and hot coffee awaited.

My hosts offered an array of options to while away the afternoon — I could go for a sail in a dhow or on a beach excursion (tide-dependent, as the little paradisaical beach disappears at high tide). Or I could go snorkelling (“it’s better than Mauritius”) or go for a kayak through the mangroves. (In 1760, the Portuguese made the slaves cut a channel through the mangroves from Ibo to Quirimbas Island.) Else I could take a walk from Ibo to Quirimbas Island when the tide allows. I was particularly interested to do the walk to Quirimba Island — as I had heard about a third-generation German family, the Gessners, who have made their life on the island and who run a successful guest house. But time did not permit this, so I opted for the walkabout historical tour of Ibo.



Our Zimbabwean guide, Harris, described how, when independence came to Mozambique, the Portuguese elite on Ibo put salt in their car engines and drove them into the sea, how they put sugar in their printing presses and other machinery and smashed their expensive crockery — anything to prevent the locals from inheriting their possessions.

Supper back at the lodge was crab curry, accompanied by a couple of cold 2M beers and an early night with Lisa

St Aubin de Teran's book.

I left Ibo the next day, vowing to go back for at least a week to do all the hikes, paddling and suntanning I had not managed to do. But not without a visit to the local Ibo silversmiths. Since the 12th Century, artisans on Ilha do Ibo have been hand-crafting intricate silver jewellery reflecting the African, Arabic, Indian and European influences in their design. Today, about 40 silver smiths on Ibo, some working out of the old star-shaped fort and others operating from an old house on the island, ply their trade, still using the ancient techniques.

Next stop was Medjumbe Island, where the Rani Group has, in my opinion, its finest lodge. Its luxury chalets, with muslim mosquito nets billowing over gorgeous white bedlinen, have their own plunge pools and jacuzzis, virtually on the beach.

At Medjumbe, I jumped at the opportunity to go for a snorkel in one of the coral reefs, after which I went bird-watching and saw a large fish-eagle.

My hosts told me there are at least 54 species of birds on the island.

Supper was crayfish and a choice of other fish straight out of the sea, cooked outside in front of us, beside the pool and overlooking the beach.

I left Medjumbe the next day, not before having swum around the whole island — a girl's got to keep fit.

And then on to Pemba, where I spent one night at Rani's Pemba Beach Hotel, where Patience, a woman from Zimbabwe, gave me an unforgettable facial.



Then, still in Pemba, a few nights of relative roughing it with Brenda — a charming underwater gardener and witch — and her husband, Rudi at the Pemba Dive and Bush Camp, showed me another side of northern Mozambique. Rudi promised me that if he took me out snorkelling on his old boat, I would be swimming with dolphins within ten minutes. I was. By the time my trip was over, I had a new role model — the gorgeous St Aubin de Teran who describes in her book how, after three marriages and a very interesting life, it was only when she arrived in northern Mozambique (the Quirimbe Peninsula to be precise) that she finally recognised what she has been looking for all her life. "On my first visit to Mozambique I was curious. By my second, I was in love," she writes on the cover of her book. I agree.

Information Box:

South Africans do not need visas to visit Mozambique.

It is recommended to take malaria tablets while visiting the Quirimbas Archipelago.

The official currency in Mozambique is the Metical (MT) = 100 centavos. US dollars are widely accepted. Travellers cheques cannot be changed in Pemba and there is no Bureau de Change at the airport.

A US \$3 — \$5 per person stamp duty is required when passing through security at Pemba.

When departing from Pemba, all travellers are asked to open their luggage — and bags are searched by an official. This is standard procedure, and partly to check that no shells or other natural items are removed.

There is a strict 15 kg restriction per person of soft luggage, including hand luggage on all air transfers to the islands.