

Travel

A WORLD OF INSPIRING HOLIDAY IDEAS



THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY
1 November 2009

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Perfect peace in Mozambique

Sarah Barrell visits a country reborn as Africa's newest luxury eco-tourism destination

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From grim battleground to sparkling playground

Mozambique has survived a bleak past to become a hot destination for the well-heeled, says **Sarah Barrell**

"I'm going to take you the scenic route," says our pilot. It's 24 hours, a bus. Tube and two international flights since I left home in London, so this statement should be met with consternation, if not a riot.

Instead, I nod and grin. I can't imagine how much more scenic things can get. We're flying out of Mozambique's palm-fringed Vilanculos airport by helicopter, over the turquoise, green and azure waters of the Indian Ocean, marbled with white sandbanks and water so bright, so clear and, in turns, so dizzyingly deep blue it's more dream-like abstract painting than landscape. Nine miles ahead of us is our final destination: Azura, a newly opened beach retreat on the coral-ringed island of Benguerra.

We hover over Azura's grass-thatched villas spread discreetly along the warm waters of the Mozambique Channel, before zipping across to the windward side of the island and out over open ocean like a frigate bird, swooping down close enough to the surf to see a hundred-strong army of goggle-eyed crabs retreat into their sandy holes. Then it's back up again over towering dunes to follow an impossibly long white beach until it fades like a hallucination into the merged blue of sky and sea. When we finally land at Azura's helipad there's a welcoming committee of staff waving keenly at us. Despite being exhausted (and English, so of course embarrassed by this level of enthusiastic service), I wave back at them like a demented cheerleader.

Mozambique is increasingly leading "hot new destinations" lists for well-heeled travellers who are drawn by a burgeoning crop of lodges offering an enticing balance of back-to-nature escapism and conservation-conscious luxury. The long journey and high prices seem a happy trade-off for staggeringly pristine beaches, rich marine life, and the sense of going where few holiday-makers have gone before. Of course, tourists have been here before. Azura itself, now a collection of 16 immaculate beach villas, started life as a simple backpackers' retreat. Tourism isn't so much new as newly recreated. Before the war that won Mozambique independence from its Portuguese colonisers in 1975, and the

more recent civil war, the country attracted more tourists than neighbouring South Africa and the then Rhodesia combined.

Two decades of gruesome fighting saw an end to that. Today, some tourists may still be wary of visiting a country that has an AK-47 rifle on its flag and is more synonymous with landmines than landscapes. But since the war ended in 1992, tourism has gradually become one of Mozambique's key resources.

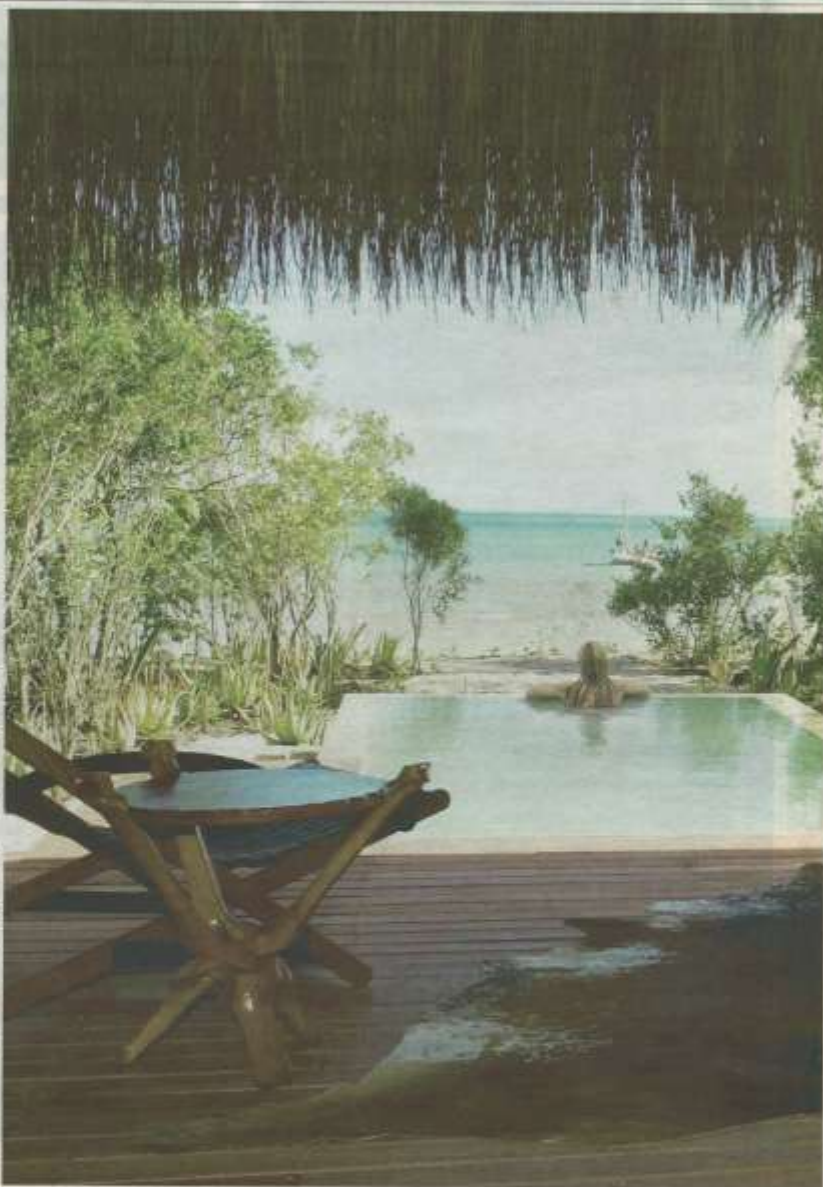
"Mozambique is in its infancy compared with other Indian Ocean tourist destinations but it has so much to offer," says Azura manager, Richard Johnston. "People here are tremendously positive and tired of violence and disruption. They dearly want tourism."

One of the war's casualties was wildlife. Mozambique doesn't have the big game bounty of South Africa, but its beautiful coast and spectacular marine life are enticing. South Africa is channelling aid and investment into its rustic next-door neighbour, funding new railways, hotels, gas pipelines and, by next year's football World Cup, a mammoth highway connecting the two countries.

Mozambique's new lodges are mostly foreign-owned but many have community-minded mission statements that should spell good news for locals: commitments to local employment, training, trading opportunities, and long-term investment in community development. On my first morning at Azura, I turn my back on the beach and hop into a jeep to bounce over sandy tracks to the local primary school, built and funded by Azura money, home to 200 students.

The island is so peaceful, its neat communities of round thatched huts so tucked away, it's hard to imagine 200 is the total population. But there's no overlooking the classes of noisy kids who pull faces for my camera and about times-tables in a singsong Portuguese that reminds me of Brazil. Sharing Benguerra Island with Azura are Marlin and Benguerra lodges and the hotly contested Sunday football matches between lodges and locals illustrate a lively community spirit.

Mozambique's government is backing its commitment to eco-tourism with hard cash, and the local mayor's policy of upmarket, low-impact tourism means Benguerra is careful-



ly developed. The Bazaruto archipelago, of which Benguerra is one of five islands, was the country's first national park. And Azura is now its first carbon-neutral resort.

Azura has come a long way since its backpacker beginnings, not least in the past few years when, just as Mozambique was finally leaving behind years of turmoil, the resort was facing its own horrors. In early 2007, the island was devastated by Cyclone Favio. A year later, Azura was back up and running, only to be razed to the ground when a fire broke out. Miraculously, no one was injured, and with the help of the local community Azura was rebuilt brick by brick – literally, with hand-made bricks and sustainable local wood.

The result is rustic yet utterly refined: four-poster beds are draped just so with mosquito netting, local crafts complement the contemporary furni-

COMPACT FACTS

HOW TO GET THERE

Package prices to Azura are from £2,995 per person, based on two sharing, including return flights from London to Vilanculos (via Johannesburg), return helicopter transfers to Benguerra Island and five nights' accommodation on an all-inclusive basis. Booked through To Escape To (020-7060 6747; toescapeto.com), Azura's nightly rate is £339 per person, all-inclusive (flights and transfers extra).

ture selected by GDF Designlab, a two-woman team from South Africa. Each villa has its own plunge pool, indoor/outdoor showers and enough cushions and loungers to ensure that Azura's honeymooner client-base need never leave the beachfront bolthole.

After a superb massage in the spa villa, glossy with African oils, I finally give in to the elemental nature of the place and slide on to my daybed. Through the curtain of thatch rustling in the ever present trade winds, I dozeily watch women wrapped in patterned sarongs navigate the beach, balancing babies, firewood bundles and huge bottles of water. Across the shallow Mozambique Channel, flying fish scatter around wooden dhows that come and go with the day's catch.

Later, I watch the dramatic equatorial sunset from Azura's own dhow, while being treated to fresh fishy hors d'oeuvres and chilled glasses of South



African wine. A private barbecue, set up by Nello, my personal host/butler sends the sweet smell of Simbiri wood across the beach. Some say you must adjust your expectations in Mozambique, where locals are yet to master slick hotel service. Nello is flawless, interpreting guests' needs (a cocktail, another cushion) like a fantasy British butler, only more charming.

Food here, from barbecued Mozambique shrimp to accomplished seven-course tasting menu, is cooked to equal perfection by Azura's head chef, Edmund Vilojen, a South African, formerly of Heston Blumenthal's Fat Duck at Bray. At his side is George, an island boy of barely 20 who has worked his way up through the kitchen with such talent that Edmund is grooming him for a spot in Jamie Oliver's London restaurant.

Other rising stars and some shooting ones are in evidence in the night

Beach treats

Clockwise from left: Azura's beach villas have private infinity pools; a local woman makes her daily commute; maths class at Benguerra Island's new school; an egret roosts poolside.



sky. Oliver Yuen, Azura's self-confessed "science geek" guides me around the constellation-heavy Southern Hemisphere sky with a powerful telescope. He follows this impressive act in daylight with a nature drive to uncover medicinal native plants and a snorkel trip around the "aquarium", the archipelago's two-mile reef, home to densely packed tropical fish, sea turtles, dolphins, and rarest of rare dugong (sea cow).

He even manages to conjure up a lavish lunch on Pansy Island, a sand-bank where fast shifting tides are said to reveal ancient pottery from the Queen of Sheba's voyages. Oliver shows me a Pansy Island Shell (or "the calcium carbonate remains of an invertebrate") so symmetrically perfect and intricately beautiful that it beats any monarchal relic. If you've got a royal budget, natural treasures like these abound in Mozambique.

SIX OF THE BEST

Where luxury meets nature

Prices are all inclusive, unless otherwise stated. Flights extra.

Coral Lodge 15.41

Opening this December, a barefoot luxury beach retreat in the La Varanda nature reserve, northern Mozambique. This privately owned reserve of pristine beaches, dunes and mangroves, is near the Unesco World Heritage Site of Ilha de Moçambique (Mozambique Island), the former capital. Ten dune-top villas by Dutchman Edward Van Vliet catch the trade winds and combine traditional Mozambican architectural style with modern comforts. From \$295/£180 (motorised activities extra). coralodge1541.com

Nuaro Luxury Eco Lodge

A new solar and wind powered eco-lodge on the Blaxo do Pinda Peninsula, northern Mozambique, built using local materials and constructed by the local community, who have co-ownership. Nuaro's owners give \$10 (€6) back to the community for each night booked and have introduced safe fishing practices and local health clinics. Snorkelling, sunset dhow cruises, local villages tours plus a fully equipped dive centre lure guests off their rustic cut sun-loungers. From \$250/£153 (alcoholic drinks and motorised activities extra). nuaro.com

Matemo Island Resort

One of several retreats across Mozambique built by Rani Resorts, set on the Matemo island in the southern Archipelago das Quirimbas, a sprawling string of 32 tropical islands in northern Mozambique. The Quirimbas' first protected area, the Quilalea Marine Sanctuary, was created in 2002 and is backed by the World Wildlife Fund. Stay within the reserve in one of 24 palm-thatched cottages that have decorative touches like white marble bathrooms, ornate doors from Zanzibar, and furniture from Dubai. From \$460/£282 (motorised activities extra). matemoresort.com

Guludo Beach Lodge

An established Mozambique lodge (right) with fantastic eco principles, overlooking 12km of white-sand beaches in the northern Quirimbas National Park.

Excursions focus on wildlife both above and below the ocean with game drives and marine activities. Built using strict ethical principles, Guludo recently won an award for its innovative design, which develops on local architectural styles, using exclusively local materials guaranteeing minimal environmental impacts. From \$245/£150 (park entry fees, alcoholic drinks and motorised activities extra). guludo.com

Vamizi Lodge

Mozambique's granddaddy luxury eco lodge, set within Maluane, a large conservation area in northern Mozambique. Maluane comprises three Indian Ocean islands, 30km of beach, and opens on to the rich Messalo Wildlife Area of virgin inland safari terrain and untouched coral-ringed islands.

Maluane's wildlife conservation projects are backed by the Zoological Society of London, and Vamizi (above) is the first of several planned retreats, a luxurious 24-bed lodge in traditional palm-thatched cottages. Lodges on neighbouring Rongui and Macaloe islands along with a tented lakeside safari camp are in development. From \$560/£342 (motorised activities extra).

Ibo Island Lodge

This pioneering Mozambique eco-tourist outpost (below) in the Quirimbas archipelago, set in three beautifully renovated colonial mansions, now offers kayak safaris and a private tented camp on an uninhabited island. Ibo

Island, with its 200-year-old ghost town and 16th-century fort, is nominated for World Heritage status and the lodge offers visitors cultural excursions plus kayaking, birding and mangrove forest trips. Camping safaris to

Mogundula island include low-tide walks through caves, rock pools and coral outcrops. From \$2,490/£1,522 for four nights at the lodge and three nights in camp. iboistland.com

