

YOUR DOWNTIME

MAKING LIFE MORE LEISURE-ABLE

Kayak the *Quirimbas*

For a true mind, body and soul workout there's nothing quite like kayaking among tropical islands, says **Richard Holmes**.

As arrivals terminals go, Ibo Island's is... well... let's call it humble. The windows, if they were ever there, are long gone. The white paint has been battered by decades of tropical heat, and goats wander nonchalantly across the runway. Emblazoned in jaunty 1970s-style lettering across the doorway "IBO" looks like it's expecting a 737 of holidaymakers to jet in at any moment.

Happily, it's just our little Cessna Caravan that drops down low over the mangrove forests and bumps onto the grassy runway. Ibo Island is a little off the beaten track, and that's just the way tourists in the know like it.

Harris Mupedzi, the head guide from Ibo Island Lodge, greets us on the runway. It's been three years since I was last here, but he greets me with a warm smile and friendly handshake: "Welcome back to Ibo!"

A short flight from Pemba, in northern Mozambique, Ibo Island is making a name for itself as a tropical getaway for those after a little more than pearly white beaches and impossibly blue water. The village on Ibo is home to centuries of dramatic history,



Calm, clear waters off Mogundula make for a paddling paradise.



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and the lodge is a low-key hideaway that makes the most of the gentle atmosphere. Silversmiths handcraft filigree jewellery in the 16th-century Fort of São João Batista, seafood feasts are served on the rooftop terrace and coral reefs beg to be explored.

I've already fallen in love with Ibo's languid ways, but this time I'm here to work a little harder. There'll be no airy rooms and four-poster beds. No pool, or ball-and-claw baths. Our group is here to get up close and personal with the islands of the Quirimbas Archipelago; paddling our way on kayaks across kilometres of Indian Ocean, camping on deserted islands, snorkelling empty reefs and exploring far-flung villages.

Well, that's what we've been told, and as we gather on the roof terrace of Ibo Island Lodge that night I'm eager to hear more. Platters of seafood make it tempting to simply settle in at the Lodge for the week, but the watery road ahead sounds exciting.

Two to a kayak we'll paddle from camp to camp, with a tender boat shadowing us for safety. What if we get tired? No problem, either take a break and float with the current, or hop in the boat... there's no rush.

Don't feel like paddling the long stretches? The dhow carrying the tents, food and crew has a rooftop deck, so just climb aboard and we'll sail to the next island camp.

Food? Don't worry, smiles Harris, the crew will take care of that. Ablutions? A discreet long-drop is on hand, and a hot bucket-shower is ours for the asking. Dome tents pitch themselves each evening, complete with stretchers, mattresses and pillows. Sundowners? Taken care of; just help yourself from the well-stocked cooler-box.

Any trepidation evaporates and we turn in for an early night... we'll be up at sunrise to catch the tide. The next morning dawns mild and clear, gentle southerly trade winds looking favourable for our first day of paddling. Our first stop is one of Ibo's secrets; a mid-channel sandbank that only shows its face at low tide. After breakfast and a swim we ready our shoulders for one of the longer paddles of the trip; four hours across to the village of Ulumbwa.

Within a few strokes the water turns from crystal blue to deep navy, dropping away to 30, 40 then 60 metres as rays of sun tumble into the depths.

One of the joys of open-water crossings is that the paddling becomes a meditation. Your arms fall into a rhythm and the only sound is the suck of the paddle and gentle gurgle of following seas. We see distant splashes of fish on the hunt, but there's no sign of the dolphins and humpback whales often found in these channels.

Conversation ebbs and flows, offering plenty of time adrift in our own thoughts. The prick of salt and sun on my winter-whitened forearms feels like a resurrection. Exercised, warm and salty from the sea...

My butt, on the other hand, is only too happy to hear the scrape of the kayak on the sands of Ulumbwa. After three hours on fibreglass it's eager to explore the village. We pull the kayaks away from the tide's sneaky fingers and take a stroll.

In this remote corner of Mozambique the locals are a delight, and tourists a novelty. Fishermen proudly show off their catch, women offer a shy “*bom dia*” and a gaggle of village kids follow us everywhere.

“*Mzungu! Mzungu!*” they taunt happily, only to scatter in squeals and smiles when we turn around and surprise them. They



Opposite page: A low-key airport terminal greets arrivals on Ibo; wandering around Mogundula during lazy days on the island. This page, clockwise from top: Harris Mupedzi and a guest paddle into the mangrove forests; a dome tent is home-sweet-home; our trusty support dhow, *Vagabundo*; friendly locals are eager to have their photo taken.



Need to know

- ▶ For more information on Ibo Island Lodge and the kayak adventures, visit www.kayakquirimbas.com or call 021-702-0285.
- ▶ Airlink flies twice a week from Johannesburg to Pemba. For reservations visit www.flyairlink.co.za.
- ▶ South African passport-holders do not require a visa for Mozambique.





Far left: Dhows such as *Vagabundo* have sailed these waters for centuries. Left: A room with a view... my cosy tent in the shade of a common star chestnut tree.

come running back to have their picture taken, shrieking with delight when we show them the photos.

The rest of the afternoon is spent lazing around; reading, taking photographs and keeping a beady eye on birds coming in to roost on the nearby sand spit. Crab plovers, dimorphic herons, mangrove kingfishers... Harris is a keen birder and is quick to point them out.

We're up before the wind the next morning, and paddle off into the mangroves. It's low tide, and easy to get stuck on the muddy banks, but we meander slowly deep into the forests. Harris shows us the myriad crabs, birds and plants that create the delicate mangrove ecosystem.

"When the seed pod falls off the tree it must sprout roots within two hours," he says, "otherwise the tide will simply wash

it away." We let ourselves be washed downstream too. A long paddle is ahead of us; to Rolas Island and on to tonight's desert island escape.

We're here to relax though, not win any medals, so while half the group start paddling

the rest clamber on the dhow as it chugs gently out to sea.

The gentle rise and fall of the keel lulls us to sleep under the tropical sun. Sun lotion is slapped on and hats pulled low. The kayakers tire and join us on deck... tempting as it is to be paddling, the rising wind makes sailing a better option.

The engine cuts and the dhow's lateen sail flaps into life, shaking itself off like a husky reporting for duty. It catches the southerly trade winds and we're off, sailing north as dhows have done here for centuries.

There's a line and lure out the back, but the fish aren't biting. We stop for a mid-ocean swim and it's mid-afternoon before the sands of Mogundula Island hove into view – today it's our place to play Robinson Crusoe. With a few home comforts in camp, of course.

Mogundula is our playground for two days. We spend them wandering the paths, swimming off the sand spit, exploring tidal rock pools and kayaking around the island. Coral bommies in the deeper water offer some wonderful snorkelling.

A chattering of local *Kimwani* pricks up our ears one morning; women from the mainland have sailed over to hunt in the rock pools; a seaside supermarket whose shelves are stocked with octopus, sea cucumbers and cowries. These crazy camping *mzungus* are as entertaining to the women as they're exotic to us. The fisherwomen might not understand why we choose to sleep in tents on a deserted island, but just one sunset under the boughs of the common star chestnut trees that line the shore is reason enough for me.

The islands of the Quirimbas stretch to the south and north, the shoreline is dark to the west and only the Indian Ocean lies behind us. Tomorrow is another day of paddling, this time to the mainland for our ride home. A three-hour drive to Pemba returns us to airports, traffic and deadlines. Despite my tired shoulders and sunburnt arms, I think I'd rather keep running away to sea. ☺

Park off!

For a local camping holiday, South Africa's national parks have some of the best campsites on the planet. Don't miss these...

► **Storms River Mouth Rest Camp:** With the ocean pounding metres from your tent, this is as spectacular as seaside campsites can get. Enjoy

swimming, snorkelling and forest walks just a stone's throw from the front flap. Visit www.sanparks.org.

► **Royal Natal National Park:** Bag a front-row seat to the dramatic Amphitheatre by pitching your tent in the Royal Natal National Park. Mahai Camp has plenty of room and excellent facilities, while Rugged Glen is a little more, well, rugged. This

northern section of the Drakensberg offers wonderful fly-fishing and day walks. Visit www.kznwildlife.com.

► **Letaba Rest Camp:** Avoid the crowds of southern Kruger by migrating north to Letaba. With a name meaning "river of sand" it's no surprise that the dry riverbed is excellent for game viewing. There are 60 camps sites on offer, so the kids

will have plenty of friends to keep them busy. Visit www.sanparks.org.

► **Marakele National Park:** This "place of sanctuary" is the ideal base for exploring the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve. Shady well-equipped campsites and clean ablutions welcome you home after a day spotting the region's endangered wildlife. Visit www.sanparks.org.