

## Local Destination: Quirimbas Archipelago

## THE TIME TRAVELLER'S LIFE

Whether you like your tropical islands drenched in history and culture or devoid of bothersome humans, two Quirimbas isles — Ibo and Matemo — have you covered, writes **Janine Stephen**



**DONT BANK ON IT:** At low tide, a sandbank emerges in the middle of the ocean off Ibo Island. Guests travel here by dhow to snorkel and swim — and are served a meal afterwards  
Pictures: CONNOR CULLINAN AND JANINE STEPHEN

**T**HE dhow is like a time capsule. Sails flap and crack overhead; woven palm-leaf panels, lashed to the sides of the vessel with hand-made coconut fibre rope, offer protection from sea spray. The timbers creak and sigh like old gossip. If it wasn't for 10-odd brightly clad tourists with various degrees of sunburn and an incongruous outboard motor, we could have been some 500 years back in time, when Arab traders still controlled the coasts and channels of Mozambique's Quirimbas Archipelago.

Back then, the cargo was turtle shell, ivory, amber and woe-begone slaves. All we're after is a golden crescent of sand that emerges phoenix-like from the waves as the tide recedes. It's prospectively known as the Sandbank, and it's one of Ibo Island Lodge's many treats. When tides permit, lodge guests clam-ber aboard a dhow and head for this immaculate patch of private beach that appears mid-ocean, some 45 minutes away.

Once deposited on the sun-kissed curl, everyone takes to the water to eyeball the marine life that frolics around pristine coral "bommies": from Picasso triggerfish and spotted sweetlips to the bookers attire of squirrelish. When we finally surface, it's to find that lodge chefs Joshua and Mary-Ann (who'd sailed ahead on another boat with supplies), had brewed coffee and beaten eggs; breakfast is served on a sweep of lincen-clad tables and chairs on the sand. Then we bake and swim

until the tide eats up the sand once more. This superlative moment is one of many in a visit to Ibo, one of 32 islands in the neon-blue waters of the archipelago, and one of 11 that make up the Quirimbas National Park. Covered in a shaggy coat of tropical vegetation, Ibo has considerable natural beauty, but it is not a simple beach destination. Instead, it is surrounded by reefs and groves of mangroves — the park has one of the largest mangrove forests in Africa — and its charm resides in village life, and a rich cache of ancient stories.

Ibo, set to attain World Heritage Site status soon, has a total of three cars and a ramshackle shoal of motorcycles. It also has a smattering of generators (no grid electricity). The past is reflected in the decaying villas and crumbling architecture of the Old Town — all flamboyant trees, sandy streets and kids playing old-fashioned games like spinning tyres, Arab, Indian and Chinese influences abound (there are graves that bear ancient Chinese script). It breathes history. Much is said about the 1500s and 1600s, when Arabs initiated the slave trade and the Portuguese enthusiastically took over. But the recent past is as dramatic.

In the shadows of a veranda, João Baptista, a local historian getting on in years, waves us

over for a quick lesson. Frelimo (the liberation party that has ruled Mozambique since independence) posters adorn the walls of his home. Our Portuguese is rusty, but we get the basics. Baptista is known here as the first black child to be admitted to the local school; he later worked as an administrative clerk. He speaks of the war; of a book he is working on, and of independence. "The Portuguese were bad, so bad," he says.

The evening before, we'd wandered the town on an historical tour with a guide named Al. The standout landmark is the Fort of São João Batista (1791); a pentagonal building with a sun-drenched courtyard and some seriously eerie rooms (our tour also took us to grid electricity). The past is reflected in the decaying villas and crumbling architecture of the Old Town — all flamboyant trees, sandy streets and kids playing old-fashioned games like spinning tyres, Arab, Indian and Chinese influences abound (there are graves that bear ancient Chinese script). It breathes history. Much is said about the 1500s and 1600s, when Arabs initiated the slave trade and the Portuguese enthusiastically took over. But the recent past is as dramatic.

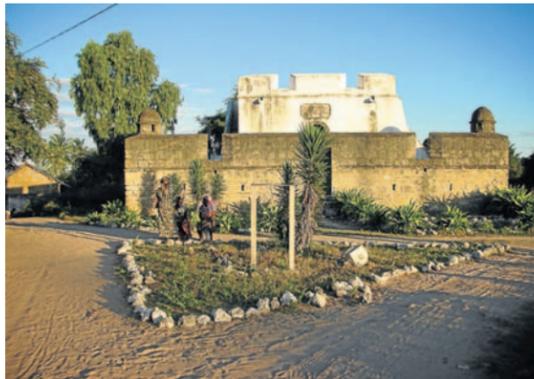
Nowadays, the fort is full of silversmiths. All day long they turn old Portuguese coins into gossamer threads of metal; then fashion the silver into jewellery in a poignant ode to beauty. The turbulent past is responsible for Ibo's ghostly air. Post-

independence, the Portuguese were ordered to leave within days; later many of the abandoned villas and mansions were plundered. Some are ruins; shells topped with the odd stranger fig. Money to buy and restore the old buildings, some dating back to the 1700s, is scarce. Most Ibo locals — there are about 4 000 on the island — still live outside the Old Town, contributing to its spooky, forgotten charm. As do wisps of stories — like the wife who decorated the facade of her home with cowry shells, one for every time her husband travelled abroad; or another devoted wife who refused to believe her dead husband had truly departed; for years she placed food alongside his coffin, which was inevitably consumed by needy villagers.

There is much to do on Ibo, and much of it is aided by Ibo Island Lodge. The hosts tempt you out of its beautiful rooms with treats like sunset cruises, bird walks, kayaking among the mangroves, diving and (for those with deep pockets and plenty of time) tailor-made trips to private islands. (Full dhow and canoe safaris are also an option.) By sunset, replete guests trickle back for drinks on a balcony overlooking the mangroves. We sleepily sip beer, dine in the warm dusk, and listen as a guide named Cosmo points out the constellations wheeling above us. General manager Rob McKenzie tells us to listen for distant rhythmic beats at night: humpback dol-

phins slam their tails on the water's surface in a sophisticated group hunting method. Of course, there are times when the less there is on an island, the better. Just north of Ibo is Matemo, where an arc of palm-thatched chalets decorate a sandy shore. This Rani Resort property is pure indulgence: just right for honeymooners, families and others seeking time out and extreme cossetting — this time with a beach. We arrived with two young Italian honeymooners, whose suitcases had somehow been left behind in another African city (yep, blame OR Tambo). Within hours, they were scampering along the beach scantily clad, the loss forgotten: Matemo is not the kind of place where one worries about dressing up — or about anything much at all. The only creatures dragging around baggage are the countless hermit crabs (just about every roomy exotic shell walks away unexpectedly as you approach).

Matemo's pleasures revolve around sun and sea. We floated off a reef in teeming clouds of fish, like vivid, live confetti. On land, we admired gigantic island baobabs and spent a glorious evening cycling up and down the airstrip, in search of pippits and other birds. I bet many feel no urge to leave the beach, but it's possible to go further than the resort's borders. It was on a tour of some of Matemo's seven villages, where homes are built with blocks



**WAR AND PEACE:** The Fort of Santo Antonio, on Ibo Island, above, once served as a jail. It has been partially restored. Ibo's forts hint at the island's turbulent history. Besides fishing, inhabitants of Matemo Island, below, grow coconut palms and cassava

of coral, that it struck home quite how remote the Quirimbas are.

In the villages, soccer is hugely popular and local teams vie for the Aujan Cup — named after Rani founder Adel Aujan (he has built both schools and mosques on the island).

But otherwise, most people live as they always have: fishing and bartering; growing cassava and gathering local fruit. Villagers stared at us, fascinated. One lovely young woman had painted her face white with pounded bark from a local tree, a beauty treatment favoured by those about to get married and an effective sunscreen. After due congratulations on her engagement had been exchanged, she fixed the honeymooners with a candid stare and asked what the drawing was on the man's skin. She'd never seen a tattoo. "It's decoration, like your face paint, or earrings," the Italians explained.

The woman laughed. "I think I prefer earrings."  
— Stephen was a guest of Rani Resorts and Ibo Island Lodge



## IF YOU GO ...

**GETTING THERE:** LAM ([www.lam.co.mz/en](http://www.lam.co.mz/en)) flies from Johannesburg to Pemba via Maputo on Fridays, Wednesdays and Sundays. From Pemba, CFA charters will fly you to Matemo or Ibo for about R1050 one way. SA Airlink also offers Saturday and Wednesday flights between Johannesburg and Pemba. Go to [www.flyairlink.com](http://www.flyairlink.com) or call 011 451 7300.

**NEED TO KNOW:** Take precautions against malaria. You may have to pay an \$8 Quirimbas National Park entry fee to the first hotel visited, plus a small Ibo development tax. Keep a few dollars spare for airport departure tax. **ACTIVITIES:** Matemo offers waterskiing and other sports, sunset cruises, diving (including beginner's courses), snorkelling, cycle hire, plus fishing and cultural tours to either Ibo or villages on Matemo. Ibo offers most of the above plus historical and village tours, tours to a

silversmith and other community projects, kayaking and birding walks. Ibo also offers trips to private islands, sleep-outs and island-hopping dhow cruises in the Quirimbas. **ACCOMMODATION:** Ibo Island Lodge has huge rooms filled with antiques and four poster beds in two sea-facing mansions and some garden rooms. A third mansion is set to open in December and can be rented for sole use. Rates start at \$335 (R2 345) per person a night and climb to \$360 per person in high season. Rates include meals, some activities and use of snorkel gear.

Matemo has 24 palm-covered chalets along the beach. Rates range from \$437-\$522 per person sharing and include meals, laundry, park fees and non-motorised water sports. **CONTACT:** For Ibo Island Lodge, call 021 702 0285 or visit [www.iboisland.com](http://www.iboisland.com). For Matemo, book through Rani Resorts on 011 650 0633, or visit [www.raniresorts.com](http://www.raniresorts.com).

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