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FOR CULTURE-CASTAWAYS: THE QUIRIMBAS ARCHIPELAGO, MOZAMBIQUE

Where is it? Off the coast of Mozambique: A string of 32 desert islands and sandbar stretching for 100km.

Why go? To tick off the kind of picture-perfect beaches and first-rate hotels you'd find in the Maldives, all culminating in a real adventure. Much of the Quirimbas is national park, meaning tiny lodges, wild landscapes and a spectacular display of protected reef. Combine a few of the islands for a real mix of experiences.

The beaches here are knockout expanses bordering a neon-blue sea flecked with traditional white-sailed fishing *dhow*s. A menagerie of rare birds and animals are the star attractions on nature walks. But the highlight is the diving. The pristine coral reefs harbour rainbow-hued fish, giant turtles, dolphins and humpback whales.

More into culture than beach lounging? Base yourselves on Ibo Island: once a diamond in the Portuguese trading crown, and later, home to a controversial slave trade. Today it's a sleepy outpost of dusty streets, crumbling 15th-century mansions and empty beaches. You can feel its haunting history on a twilight amble through the atmospheric Old Town. The locals know plenty of stories, and will happily help you explore, taking in the 16th-century fort of São João Batista where the slaves were once imprisoned. Recently restored, it is

now home to a small silversmiths' project selling intricate filigree jewellery crafted from melted-down Portuguese coins.

Don't miss: A couple of days at Ibo Island Lodge (020 3355 7765, www.iboisland.com; doubles from £360, full board). It has a private spit of sand revealed only during ebb tides, and staff ferry you there by boat to a breakfast in the shade of a Bedouin tent.

Where to stay? Ibo Island Lodge (as before); it runs tours and fishing trips in conjunction with the island community.

It's all rustic luxury on the tiny private island of Quilálea (0131 476 8822, www.quilalea.com; doubles from £410, full board), which has nine villas decked out in swathes of muslin and local textiles. More luxurious, in a wicker-and-teak kind of way, is Vamizi Island Lodge (00 255 272 563829, www.vamizi.com; doubles from £670, full board), on one of the prettiest islands, bordered by bleached sands. Stay here and you'll get the chance to participate in community projects such as turtle-tagging.

Get me there: Rainbow Tours (020 7226 1004, www.rainbowtours.co.uk) has a seven-day trip with three nights at Ibo Island Lodge and four nights on Quilálea island, from £2,895pp including both international and regional flights, transfers, all meals and most activities. Or try Expert Africa (020 8232 9777, www.expertfrica.com). >