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Career Junction

The Beautiful and Decayed

The Big Story: Mozambique

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Fiona McIntosh does the time-warp on a halcyon island.

Ian was in torment, torn between his wife and his faith. A devout Catholic, he had never missed Sunday Mass, but his beloved was begging him not to go to Ibo's stately church. Eventually a compromise was reached. He could go, but only if he stood near the doorway. It was not God's wrath that they feared, simply that the roof of the ancient structure might suddenly cave in.

The 18th-century, whitewashed church of Nossa Senhora do Rosario is one of a number of magnificent, old structures that grace the island of Ibo — a tropical island in the north of Mozambique that has been nominated as a Unesco World Heritage Site. Once a major Arab and Portuguese trading centre, Ibo is rich in history and culture, albeit with a pervasive air of dereliction and decay. When the Portuguese left in 1974, there were some 37000 inhabitants; today the number is less than 4000. Alighting on the island is like stepping into a time-warp — and thanks to its isolation it has remained unspoilt. Not yet on the main tourist track, Ibo is one of the most beautiful and authentic places I have ever visited. Though it forms part of Mozambique's new tourism frontier, the Quirimbas Archipelago, a string of picture-perfect paradise islands that stretch from Pemba in northern Mozambique to the Tanzanian border, Ibo is the island that bucks the trend. Although it's a popular choice of honeymooners, Ibo is not a clichéd private island with a few luxury villas hidden away in the coconut palms and bougainvillea. The lodge has access to beaches that match any in the region — but it's not a beach resort. Rather, it's a place to which discerning romantics return again and again — to chill, to wander around and to soak up its unique history.

We arrived by boat, following the deep channel that leads to Ibo's sheltered harbour. It seemed the fitting way to visit an island that has played such a pivotal role in ancient maritime trade. Guarding the harbour mouth is the imposing old fort of São João Baptista, built by the Portuguese in 1754 to defend themselves against the Arabs. The newly-opened Ibo Island lodge occupies the prime waterfront site — a magnificent, renovated old mansion that is quite unlike the other island resorts in the archipelago. Owners Kevin and Fiona Record recall sighting Ibo for the first time. "We will never forget that day. Under dhow sail at night, with phosphorus flash bouncing off the warm water, we slipped silently into the ancient harbour of Ibo. The trade buildings reflected off the sea and in the moonlight Ibo appeared to us like a lost city."

Our arrival was also memorable. The management team were all smiles — a bubbly Brit called Mercedes, who'd originally come out to teach English and who'd been seduced by Ibo's charms, and Cassius, a Zimbabwean who'd realised that there was little point trying to make a living from tourism in his homeland and was imparting his experience to local trainees. As they showed us around, they pointed out the enormous care that had gone into ensuring that restoration was in the traditional style, using local stone and limewash. The effect was impressive. The rooms were cool, despite the baking outside temperature, with high ceilings, fans and elegant old-worldie standalone baths emphasising the colonial splendour. The exquisite decorations — with old Indian wooden doors, furniture and colourful glass lampshades — emphasised the ancient trading links between the two regions. Lunch was served alfresco on the roof terrace, a medley of seafood delights with salad fresh from the garden. My favourite tippie, Springfield Life from Stone, was one of the wine specials. I knew that I was going to be happy here.

We visited the fort that afternoon on an historical tour of the island and wandered around its ramparts and thick-walled rooms. The weight of history bears down on you here, much as it does in Ilha de Mozambique further south, or in Zanzibar's Stone Town. A major trading port for ivory, arms and "black ivory" slaves brought from the interior, Ibo was of significant importance to Arab, Indian, Chinese and Portuguese traders.



Shhh: This mound of sand in the sea is one of the area's best-kept secrets



Served with a smile: Lunch on the beach



Photography practice: A dhow at sunset



Through time: The magnificent doorways are testament to the town's former life as a trading post. Pictures: Shaen Adey

“In the tribunal room, a chilling inscription reads, 'Enter Alive, Leave Dead'”

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Slaves were held in this fortress then loaded onto trading vessels. The fort's recent history is also sombre. Dollar, our Ibo guide, explained that during the colonial period São João was used as a prison. He led us to the tribunal room where criminals were brought to be judged and where a chilling inscription reads, "Enter Alive, Leave Dead". It inspires shudders despite the baking sun. Today, however, the fort is buzzing with life. Kids play outside, women with babies on their backs wander past and, in the entrance, local artists smelt and craft silver jewellery. We watched spellbound as they worked, then each bought an exquisite filigree silver necklace to take home.

Big, old cannons still grace the ramparts and you can wander along the sea-facing wall watching the dhows ply by. From the other aspect we had a grandstand view of the weekend soccer match, a lively, noisy affair. The tour continued through the village centre, past old Portuguese villas with magnificent doorways to the marketplace. It is relaxed, unspoilt; the people are poor but they seem happy and unaffected. Dollar stressed the role that we could play in keeping it this way, by buying only from the "official" outlets and not handing out sweets, pens or money and encouraging the irritating "gimme sweet" culture that is all-pervasive elsewhere.

Then it was time to hit the beach. We boarded the dhow and headed out to one of the Quirimbas's best-kept secrets, a mound of white sand rising out of the open sea. By the time we'd walked around the sand bank, the chef had the fire going. Four huge, multi-coloured lobsters stared accusingly at us but we avoided their gaze and headed off to snorkel in the warm lagoon of our private island. When we emerged our trusty crew had set up the lunch table and the 2Ms were on ice, waiting to be cracked. Stir-fried vegetables in fresh coconut milk, fresh bread and a colourful salad accompanied the lobster feast.

At dinner that evening we could sense the excitement of our waiter, Anlie. It was Friday night, disco night, it transpired. "Would you like to come to the disco?" he shyly inquired. Why not. As soon as he'd cleared up, we found ourselves wandering through the moonlit streets. Strobe lights lit up the sky from a long way off and the thump of the music guided us in. Though the clientele was almost exclusively male, there was clearly some considerable status attached to being able to pay the entrance fee — those who had the wherewithal had dressed up in their finest jeans and walked tall past those who could only afford to drink outside in the bar. Beyond the terrace were the biggest crowds — the streets were humming with impromptu parties. By 10pm the lights started flickering. "No more diesel, time to go home," announced the boss, though the crowds took no notice and carried on drinking, laughing and jiving to an imaginary beat. "When I was a boy, there was just one central generator for the island and it was even more fun," said Anlie. "If you wanted power you bought diesel — and everyone who was connected to the system got light 'til the gas ran out."

The pub was still busy the next day — this time a lively foosball game drawing the crowds — when we passed on the "Ibo of today" tour. We photographed the exquisite doors of the villas and the wrought-iron lamp posts; checked out an elephant skull and a few local artefacts in the little museum; and enjoyed Ibo coffee beans being roasted and ground at the home of a wonderfully hospitable old man. Dollar explained the white faces of the young women: a powder ground from the bark of the nciro tree acts as a sunscreen and moisturiser. Kids rolled hoops along the street, played marbles in the dust and kicked around footballs made from blown-up condoms or plastic bags. They smiled and waved then giggled when we showed them their photos on our cameras and begged to be snapped again.

The days went by too quickly. We kayaked among the mangroves as the sun rose, admiring the birds and searching for the Nile crocodiles that reputedly still live in the swamps. We saw leaping dolphins and scanned the sea for the humpback whales and calves that frequent Ibo's calm waters in spring. We were spoilt rotten with massages and gourmet cuisine — seafood platters, crab curry and other treats — and we read on the cushions of the verandas and sat on the rooftop terrace, watching the world go by and composing classic photos of dhows framed by a red sun sinking into the sea.

Ian survived Mass, waiting outside with a herd of grazing goats until the appointed hour, then hovering in the doorway under the fruit bats. His presence doubled the size of the congregation: most of the remaining islanders are Muslim. Though the main square is quiet now, you can imagine the island in its heyday — a prosperous trading post and the provincial capital of Cabo Delgado. Despite their needing a lick of paint, the buildings are remarkably well-preserved. But part of Ibo's charm is that it has fallen into decline and its history and secrets are there to be explored. Go soon, before the secret's out. — **McIntosh was a guest of Ibo Island Lodge**

If you go ...

Getting there: Airlink operates direct scheduled flights from Johannesburg to Pemba every Tuesday and Saturday. Phone 011-961- 1700 or visit www.flyairlink.com. Mozambican national airline LAM also flies to Pemba daily from Maputo, as well as daily from Johannesburg. Transfers to Ibo are by light aircraft or, if coming from one of the neighbouring resorts, by boat.

Health: Northern Mozambique is a malaria area so consult your doctor before travelling.

Tip: Take everything you need with you. Although Ibo Island Lodge is luxurious, there are no shops or banks.

Activities: A range of watersports is available and, if all goes as planned, scuba diving and deep-sea fishing will be on offer by the end of the year.

Special reader offer

Four days Ibo at Island Lodge, Friday to Monday, valid until December 1: R7850 per person sharing includes all meals, accommodation, air transfers to Ibo Island and flights to and from Johannesburg, excluding taxes.

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