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Mozambique's virginal state is cause for only muted celebration, however. There are no hawkers because there are no shops. There are no shops because there is no money. A civil war that raged through the 1980s denuded a destination that was once the continent's most glamorous playground. So the pure shores immortalised in song by Bob Dylan (although, apparently, he has never actually visited) became a forgotten paradise, just as mass tourism began to bite deep elsewhere.

The upside is eco. Having slept through the big-hotel-building of its neighbours, Mozambique has woken up just in time to start from scratch, to a much more ethical template – as the great, green hope for responsible tourism. The country is sprouting stylish, environmentally-savvy lodges, each one garnishing its Robinson-Crusoe beaches with designer details and sustainable ideals that appeal to eco-warrior A-listers such as Leonardo DiCaprio, as well as honeymooners in search of the ultimate hideaway.

It's also a must for the masochists among us, as transport is not a strong point in this corner of the Indian Ocean (it wouldn't be much of an 'ultimate hideaway' if it was, would it?). In fact, getting to and around Mozambique makes London's Underground feel like a limo transfer. There are no direct flights; you must travel via – and usually overnight in – either Dar es Salaam or Johannesburg; and, once in the country, there are no air services connecting the two main tourist areas: the Bazaruto islands in the south, and their northern counterparts, the Quirimbas. So, unless you're up for a second overnighter in South Africa, you have to opt for one or the other.

Happily, it's a bit like having to choose between Daniel Craig and George Clooney – you can't really go wrong. In the far north are the seductive charms of the Quirimbas archipelago: 32 breathtaking bouquets of 1,000-year-old baobab trees, and creamy sands, wrapped up with mangrove ribbons and drizzled across Perrier-clear waters busy with incredible marine life.

Then there's the added draw of the fantastical timewarp island of Ibo. Through the centuries, Chinese, Arabic, French and, most significantly, Portuguese galleons have all negotiated Ibo's protected channel to haggle over everything from silver to slaves. This trading post was so powerful in the 18th century that it was, briefly, the capital of Portuguese East Africa and Goa.

Its influence ended abruptly when independence came in 1974, though, and its Hispanic overlords were given 24 hours to leave the island. That hasty abandonment turned Ibo into an ethereal ghost town, one that might have been lifted straight from the pages of a Gabriel García Márquez novel: crumbling colonial mansions where fig branches prise the red-tiled roofs from the pastel-coloured walls, and a once-elegant square where goats and chickens squabble with kids kicking a ball made from rolled-up plastic bags. Duck into the icing-pink Customs House (now an 'open museum' you can wander through at will) and pick up a leather-bound, age-yellowed shipping ledger for a glimpse of how prosperous this place once was.

These days, there is no electricity, one bat-infested Catholic church, two cars (which managed to crash into each other last year) and three forts, including the star-shaped Sao Joao Baptista, where thousands were butchered by the Portuguese in the months preceding their expulsion. Local women still won't enter it (memory runs deep, superstition deeper) but despite such violent antecedents – and a national flag that features a machine-gun – Ibo feels incredibly safe.

The villagers may be dirt poor (most live on 50p a day) but, as everywhere in Mozambique, they smile shyly as we saunter through streets radiating faded grandeur. Nobody begs. I stayed at Ibo Island Lodge, three sensitively restored mansions close to the harbour, and was told I could leave my door and windows open when I slept. I had to, anyway; Ibo is run along



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commendably eco-friendly principles, so the air-con stops when the generator shuts down – from midnight until 5.30am – to conserve resources and preserve the still of the night.

As soon as the lodge's renovation began three years ago, the owners set about establishing various community projects, among them teaching English and hospitality skills to the locals. Now young men, delighted not to be eking out a living as subsistence fishermen, refer to notes made on a bit of old cereal packet to announce proudly that dinner is crab claws in garlic, followed by crab claws in curry sauce (with a side dish of raw onion to break the monotony).

Only the churlish would object, given that the limited menu results from the lodge's commitment to buy locally rather than fly in fillet steaks from South Africa. Besides, the service is charming, the setting beguiling (the roof-top restaurant is accompanied by a soundtrack of gently lapping waves), there are wind-up eco torches to see you through lights-out, and the nine rooms are comfortable dark-wood, white-walled numbers, with pirate chests that double as in-room safes. The only let-down is that, although it has two small pools, the 'beach' is a sandbank, 20 minutes away by boat.

For a sexy, tiki-hutted beach scene, the private-island resort of Quilalea, an hour's boat ride from Ibo, offers confetti'd couples (under-16s are banned for most of the year) endless photo opportunities. Quilalea is the tiniest dot in the archipelago. It takes little more than 30 minutes to stroll its coves and black-coral outcrops, but the snorkelling, a mere flipper's flick from the main beach, is astonishing. You'll see shoals of pink, turquoise and yellow fishes, and bright blue starfish. It's maximum impact for minimum effort.

In fact it was Quilalea's opening, six years ago, that first put Mozambique on the celebrity radar (past guests have included Mr DiCaprio and Prince Harry). And it's easy to see why. Its nine Kylie-cute villas are built from local rock, topped with makuti thatch, and filled with indigenous teak and mahogany furniture, masterfully carved by neighbourhood artisans. They're soft-focused and feminine, with lots of faded teal and peach fabrics, and a private deck, shaded by African star chestnut trees, where colourful bee-eater birds compete with delicate butterflies for beauty titles. It has a handful of tiny beaches but, most days, they are deserted as guests are out diving, fishing, drifting along in white-sailed dhows or kayaking through mangroves.

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