

He's a dolphin-whisperer and reads waters rather than books. He knows how to tack through a storm and where rare crab plovers live, and he can sail with his knee while eating lunch. To Captain Juma Chande, the wind is the music and the ocean the rhythm of his life. Since his childhood he's sailed the Quirimbas – now in

his 40s, he knows every inch of its waters and is a true master of his craft.

"Hello. Welcome," he smiles as I hop onto the dhow from a tender boat. The east African dhow, built entirely of wood, is the traditional sailing vessel of this coastline. They come in all sizes, from tiny slivers for fishing sorties to huge vessels that carry heavy cargo up and down the coast. This dhow – *Vagabundo* – is big, with ample space to walk around on deck, even though there is a pile of kayaks on board too.

After a few nights on the tropical island of Matemo, relaxing under rustling palms that fringe the shoreline, we are about to sail for Ulumbwa. Here we will spend the night on shore in a fly camp with private tents, a full tented bathroom and a delectable fire-cooked meal. Then tomorrow we will snorkel to see clouds of tropical fish, swim and play in the welcoming, warm Indian Ocean.

Captain Juma, his red shirt ablaze against the azure ocean, sets sail. The melodic whish-whish as the wooden dhow cuts through the water is hypnotic; the huge white cotton sail in full flight offers a sense of old-world travel that's gracious and soothing. All aboard are silent, lost in thought and gazing out across the ocean, which sparkles like dancing diamonds.

As if keeping time to the rhythm of the water, Captain Juma starts tapping gently against the outside of the dhow. "Suki, suuki, suuuki," he chants softly, yet his gaze remains fixed on the horizon. His tapping continues for a minute or two, his face serene and expectant. Then he cracks a wide smile and points: "Suki," he says, his eyes twinkling, and we watch a school of dolphins swimming and diving alongside the boat. There are at least a dozen of them, risen from the depths and heeding the captain's call. For Captain Juma, the dolphins – suki in the local language – are his old friends, and he just wanted to say hello, as he always does. Nothing more.

The Quirimbas Archipelago is about as far north as you

can go along the Mozambique coastline before crossing into Tanzania. There are around 30 islands forming the archipelago and 11 of them lie within the expansive 7 500km² Quirimbas National Park – which means the marine life is spectacular. So conservation-conscious are the local people that, 10 years ago, they requested the formation of the national park to protect dwindling fish populations. The park also protects the feeding and nesting sites of five species of marine turtle, while on terra firma, park rangers patrol to protect villagers' crops from elephants. Local fishermen and farmers are taught sustainable practices, poaching is combated, and children's education and community tourism initiatives are promoted.

There are plenty of perfectly Robinson Crusoe islands in the Quirimbas. Some offer luxury escapes for tourists, others are home to traditional fishing communities, and some have both, like Matemo. It's home to 2 500 villagers and 10 500 palm trees – because locals use every part of

A SLICE OF PARADISE

The northern Mozambique coast

is washed by warm turquoise waters

AND SPRINKLED WITH ISLANDS SO BEAUTIFUL THEY ARE LIVING POSTCARDS. THESE ARE THE ISLANDS OF THE QUIRIMBAS ARCHIPELAGO, AND SAILING THEM IN A TRADITIONAL DHOW MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE A MODERN-DAY AFRICAN EXPLORER. BUT WITH NO ROUGH EDGES.



TRAVEL ADVICE

Getting there

Mozambique is an all-year-round great-weather destination, though summers can be hot and humid on the coast. Currency: Meticais (R1 = 3Mt)

Visas

None are needed for South African passport-holders.

Getting there

Airlink flies directly between Johannesburg and Pemba, and Johannesburg and Vilanculos five times a week – www.flyairlink.com or 011 451 7300.

CFA Air Charters manages the Solenta Aviation-operated transfers from Pemba to the Quirimbas – www.cfa.co.za; 011 312 0196.

TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

the palm for something. Houses are built from chunks of white coral and plastered with cement from ground coral, and then thatched with palm fronds. When mixed with plant sap, coral powder is also a sunscreen for the men when they go fishing, and for the women as they catch octopus and harvest sea cucumbers. There's a real sense that everyone is happy, though life can also be hard.

On a dhow safari there's nothing hard, though – nothing at all. Aboard Vagabundo there is everything you need and more than enough space to do gymnastics, should you want to. Ibo Island Lodge, which runs the unique dhow safaris, also has two other, even larger dhows at 12m long, plus a live-aboard dhow that can comfortably sleep six. It's an ideal way to spend a family holiday, with plenty to see and do for all ages – active or relaxed of nature.

Time passes quickly as we sail, and the high noon sun has slipped low to the horizon. We anchor offshore of Ulumbwa and Captain Juma points to an open patch of earth. "That is where we will sleep tonight," he smiles. "Just give us a few minutes and it will all be ready." And so it is. An open-sided kitchen tent, another for dining (complete with table and chairs), a private sleeping tent, a bathroom and a toilet tent all appear seemingly instantly, and the fly camp comes to life. After a piping-hot shower, dinner is served – a seafood platter the likes of which have never been seen before. Fresh-from-the-sea crab, crayfish, prawns, calamari and fish, with hot bread, all cooked over open coals. It's half the Indian Ocean on a plate.

Next morning, the first rays of sun rouse us from our tents, but the crab plovers have been up for ages. "There they are," says Captain Juma. "They are very special birds. People come from far to see them." Throughout the Quirimbas there are special natural sights, like the herons, egrets and bee-eaters on Medjumbe island, and the green and leatherback turtles that lay their eggs on the beaches of Matemo, Medjumbe and Vamizi islands.

As quickly as it materialised, the fly camp is packed up and back on the dhow, and we slip back into the ocean, skirting bushy mangroves as we go. Today we will sleep on enigmatic Ibo island, where Captain Juma was born and still lives. The



Accommodation:

Ibo Island Lodge is for families or couples. Mobile, island-hopping dhow safaris in the Quirimbas are operated throughout the year by the lodge. There are set departures for week-long dhow safaris, and tailor-made safaris. Ibo Island Lodge and Dhow Safari reservations: 021 702 0285; www.iboisland.com

Matemo offers barefoot luxury for families, while Medjumbe is decadently designed for couples and adults. Rani Resorts reservations: 011 658 0633 or 0861 77RANI (777 264); www.raniresorts.com



faded splendour of the town, with crumbling Portuguese colonial architecture and coastal forts, is a photographer's dream.

The white star-shaped Forteleza São João has completely transformed from a brutal prison of old to the creative epicentre of Ibo. Here the island's renowned silversmiths sit together and create intricate silver jewellery, which is now sought after around the world. They used old coins in the past; now they use silver. Melted over fire, fashioned with tweezers and files and polished with lemon juice, the jewellery resembles silver lace, and is unique and special to Ibo.

Special, too, is silently sailing on a magnificent traditional dhow along a breathtaking coastline in Mozambique. It's an authentic, gentle way to travel and savour this enchanting area and its diverse offerings. This is a taste of all things good about Africa.

Captain Juma smiles and interrupts my thoughts. "It's good to be home. Ibo is very beautiful," he says, "but, for me, it's better to be on the ocean. My heart lives out there." ■