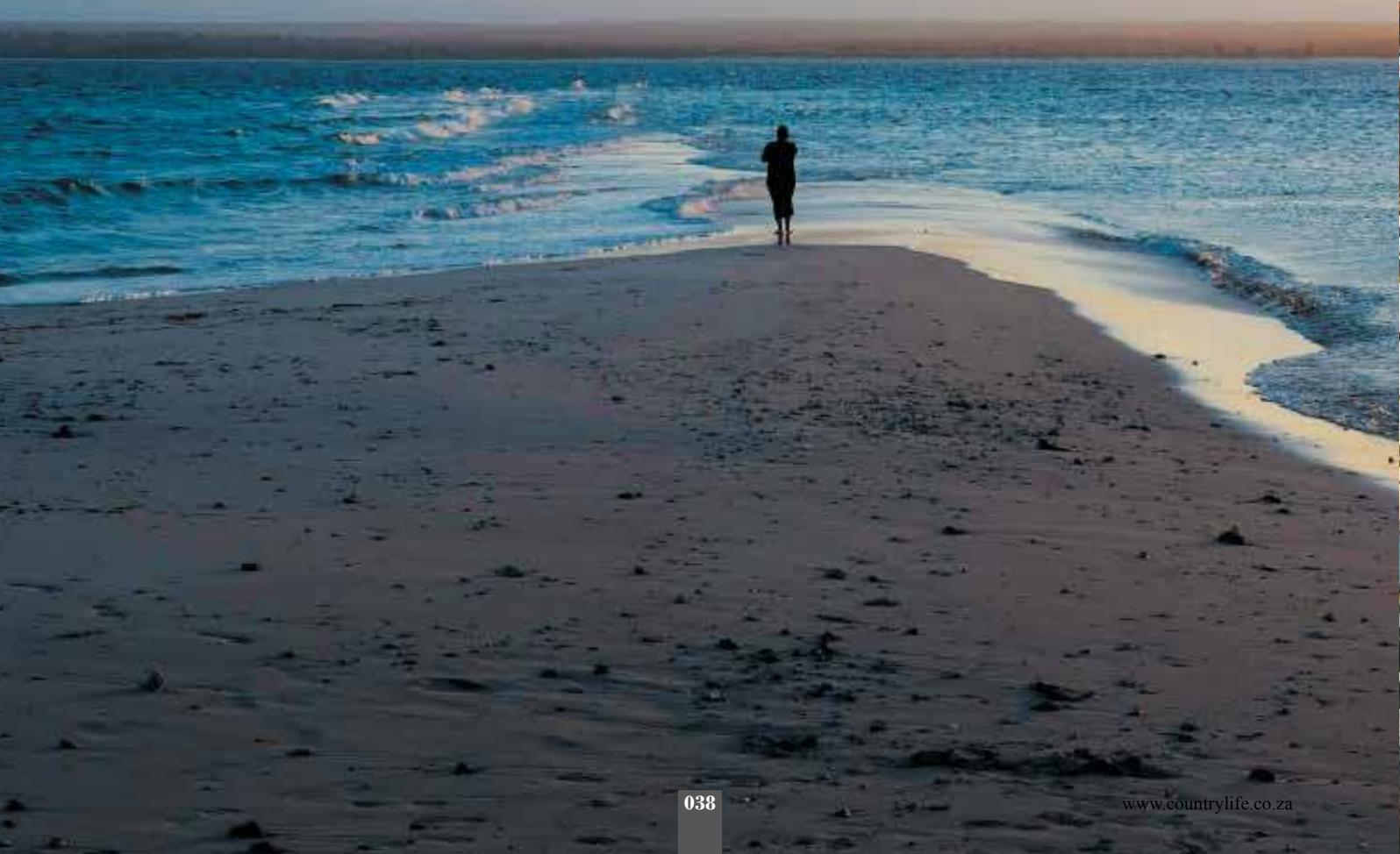


# *East Coast Odyssey*

A dhow safari in Mozambique's Quirimbas archipelago is a taste of old Africa. And of snorkelling, sandspits, *suki*, seafood and taking it slow

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OPPOSITE: Incoming tide at the sandspit of Mogundula. At high tide waves hit each other head on and there is no sand to be seen. ABOVE: A fishing dhow from the deck of ours, with Ibo Island in the background. BELOW: Sunset on high at Mogundula campsite.





ABOVE: Zazu the tender boat trails behind our dhow. ABOVE RIGHT: Hoisting the sail as we leave Ibo Island, heading for Matemo Island. BELOW: Inshallah, our ocean-going dhow, is entirely of wood with canvas awnings for shade from the sun. It looks a little like a pirate boat. RIGHT: Captain Abdul Shakuru has all the navigational instruments he could wish for but doesn't need them. He can sail this stretch of coastline with his eyes closed.



Captain Abdul Shakuru has saltwater in his veins and a depth finder deep in his brain. He's been sailing this stretch of the East African coastline for more than 20 years, most recently as the captain on bespoke dhow safaris from Ibo Island. Life for him has always been about tides.

Before becoming dhow captain, he skippered boats carrying sea cucumbers to Tanzania and electronic equipment back to Mozambique. He says an old man taught him to sail when he was a youngster, and now he feels more comfortable on the ocean than on land.

We're just an hour into our three-day dhow safari from Ibo to Matemo, Mogundula and Medjumbe islands in the Quirimbas archipelago in far northern

Mozambique. The tiny islands of the archipelago – there are 32 in all – have skirts of bright turquoise Indian Ocean. The sea here is tepid and twinkling, home to magnificent, tropical marine life, including dolphins and turtles that are protected by law.

The massive cotton sail has been hoisted by the nimble crew of six, and the dhow cuts through the water in silence, but for the wish-whish of sea lapping at the sides of the boat. The capable crew of vice-captains Challi and Amissi, assistant manager of Ibo Island Lodge, Harris, along with helpers Richard, Jordan and Anli, is reclining on the deck. Life jackets are threaded on a pole in the centre of the deck and rustle softly as the dhow tilts gently in the water.

Crafted in Kenya by master-dhow

builders in the traditional East African style, the 14-metre dhow is made entirely of wood and is sturdy and stable, carrying cargo of up to 20 tons. Everything you can imagine for comfort is on board – all the supplies for the trip, a fridge, stove, water, diesel and petrol for Zazu the tender boat trailing behind us – and solar panels to power the lights and electrics on board.

Perched on a high stool with one hand on the wheel, Captain Shakuru has a mischievous face and a distant look as he scans the ocean. "We're about halfway to Matemo," he says staring straight ahead, "we'll be there for sunset. The tide will be low and it will be beautiful." For the next hour we are gently rocked and lulled. The dhow creaks as we tilt and the captain smiles and reads our minds. "No, it's in perfect condition. It has to move a little.

... now life is serene and lived according to the tides. Locals are fishermen and palm farmers; tomorrow we'll venture to the village and meet them

A big boat that's rigid is not good."

It seems that just a minute later the crew is dropping sail and rolling it up on a horizontal mast. Captain Shakuru edges the dhow closer to Matemo Island. The dhow needs just three metres of water and he's getting as close as he can to land. He switches on his depth finder to double check himself. We're at three metres exactly, but he knew that all along and simply wanted to reassure us.

Into Zazu we step, carrying just our day bag and camera, and putt our way slowly to shore. The tide is low and it soon becomes too shallow even for Zazu, so we walk the last stretch through warm water. Matemo is a big island with working villages. In the old days it was a stop over for slave trading in East Africa, but now life is serene and lived according to the tides. Locals are fishermen and palm farmers; tomorrow we'll venture to the village and meet them.

On the dhow safari guests do nothing but enjoy themselves. So we watch the

natural theatre of sunset and light a fire of palm fronds on the talcum powder beach that is sprinkled with delicate white pansy shells. In the background, tents are pitched and dinner is prepared without fuss. It's seafood, Mozambique style – fresh, fire-fried and finger-licking.

Fishermen are up early next morning and we meet them returning to sell their catch. Some spearfish using ingeniously handcrafted masks, and snorkels of inner tubing and plastic piping. When we arrive in the coral rag village of neat huts in the sand, the day's catch is already available for sale from twig racks under the palm trees. Trade is swift and prices always fair.

For us the day will be spent sailing to Mogundula Island, stopping en route to snorkel from the dhow. Marine life in the Quirimbas is vibrant and typically tropical. As we bale off the back of the anchored dhow, we're greeted by rainbows of marine life just below the surface. A mask and snorkel is enough to be transported into

a world of wild colour and curious creatures. It's playland down there.

Mogundula is unusual. It's an elevated island with the welcome mat of a sandspit at low tide. At high tide, waves meet each other head on exactly where we'd strolled on dry sand just hours before. After a short climb past a little beach strewn with starfish, bamboo-lined paths edged with giant conch shells welcome us as we reach the highest point. Our views are forever, and tucking in to fresh seafood, under a sky of a million stars, is what awaits.

For the past two days we have been sailing between the mainland of Mozambique and the islands, roughly 5km from shore. Sailing is easy in these calm waters, with land in sight. Today *Inshallah* – 'God willing' in Arabic – will head out into open sea en route to the remote and tiny Medjumbe Island. It's a swathe of white sand 800m by 350m and marked on the tip by a derelict lighthouse. And with it



Watching sunset in Africa is magnificent; over water is even more relaxing. This is the elevated ocean view from Mogundula Island.



ABOVE LEFT: The dhow safari involves camping, but it is non-participation, so the crew takes care of off-loading the dhow and setting up camp. ABOVE: Waiter Jordan Jamali serves us a full English breakfast on the beach at Matemo, before we head out in the direction of Mogundula Island. LEFT: Medjumbe Island is just 800 metres long and marked by a derelict lighthouse. It's our final stop on the safari.

comes a barefoot luxury lodge experience hard to match – and the ultimate way to finish up an East African sailing odyssey.

Anantara Medjumbe Island Resort & Spa has a lodge with a handful of idyllic beach villas that offer a luxurious Robinson Crusoe existence, living by the tides, swimming and snorkelling in the warm ocean – or dipping in your private plunge pool with sea views. We plan to swing in the deck hammock, secluded and cocooned with a good book – between enjoying fresh seafood prepared by superchef Lino. But first we have a day of sailing to do.

In open ocean, the dhow tilts a little more and we lie back against giant cushions and enjoy the ride. “I can hold my breath for a minute,” says Captain Shakuru breaking the silence. “Underwater.” And then he tells us of his spearfishing escapades with giant kingfish. “I have a wife and seven children at

home,” he says with a smile, “and they like eating fish.” As he says this we cast our eyes seawards and a cloud of newborn flying fish break the ocean’s surface like a shower of crystals – and drop back into the water. We’re still open-mouthed when the captain points in the opposite direction and says, “Suki. Look.”

Swimming alongside the dhow are dolphins, or *suki* in local lingo, seemingly escorting us to Medjumbe. “They’re late,” says Shakuru, smiling. “They almost missed us.” But they didn’t. Playfully the dolphins circle the boat as we drop anchor off Medjumbe and wait for high tide and to jump ship to the idyllic tropical island, that’s a mere punctuation mark of sand in the Indian Ocean.

It’s here, in remote and scattered islands, that the soul of the Indian Ocean lives. Far from mainland madness and close to the tides. Listening for news carried along on the trade winds. ■

### Plan Your Trip

- It’s a year-round destination with very hot, humid summers and warm, balmy winters.
- Dhow safaris run throughout the year – scheduled and customised – and South African guests are given preferential rates.
- Travel arrangements can be made independently, or Ibo Island Lodge can arrange your trip for you, which is strongly advised. If travelling independently, there are daily return flights on LAM, and on SA Airlink five times a week, from Johannesburg to Pemba. CR Aviation operates return charter flights direct to Ibo Island from Pemba. Alternate routes are also possible from Medjumbe to Ibo.

### Handy Contacts

- **Ibo Island Lodge** and dhow safaris  
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[www.iboisland.com](http://www.iboisland.com)
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[www.medjumbe.anantara.com](http://www.medjumbe.anantara.com)
- **LAM Mozambique airlines** (Johannesburg to Pemba return daily) 011 622 4889,  
[reservations@airmozambique.co.za](mailto:reservations@airmozambique.co.za)  
[www.lam.co.mz](http://www.lam.co.mz)
- **SA Express** (Johannesburg to Pemba return five times a week) 011 451 7300  
[www.sairlink.co.za](http://www.sairlink.co.za)
- **CR Aviation** (Pemba to Ibo Island)  
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