



ROMANCING THE ISLE

FIONA MCINTOSH FINDS MOZAMBIQUE'S LOST PEARL

It's nearly midnight. Young men glistening with sweat jump over the glowing embers of a fire. Today marks the anniversary of Ibo Island, the somewhat decaying, grandiose former capital of Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province. I've escaped the Cape winter to join the festivities, feasting on fresh seafood and coconut rice, watching traditional dancing and dhow-sailing races and revelling with colourfully dressed islanders at noisy street parties.

Though part of the Quirimbas Archipelago – the string of picturesque islands that stretches from Pemba in northern Mozambique to the Tanzanian border – Ibo is not your typical tropical escape. There's not even a beach, though I had earlier travelled on an elegant wooden dhow to a golden sandbank lapped by the warm Indian Ocean. Rather, Ibo is somewhere for romantics and discerning travellers, those who want to wander around and soak up its history.

We arrived by boat, following the deep channel that leads to the sheltered harbour. It seemed a fitting way to visit an island that has played such a pivotal role in ancient maritime trade. Guarding the harbour mouth is the grand, imposing old fort of São João Baptista, built by the Portuguese in 1791 to defend themselves against the Arabs and Madagascan pirates.

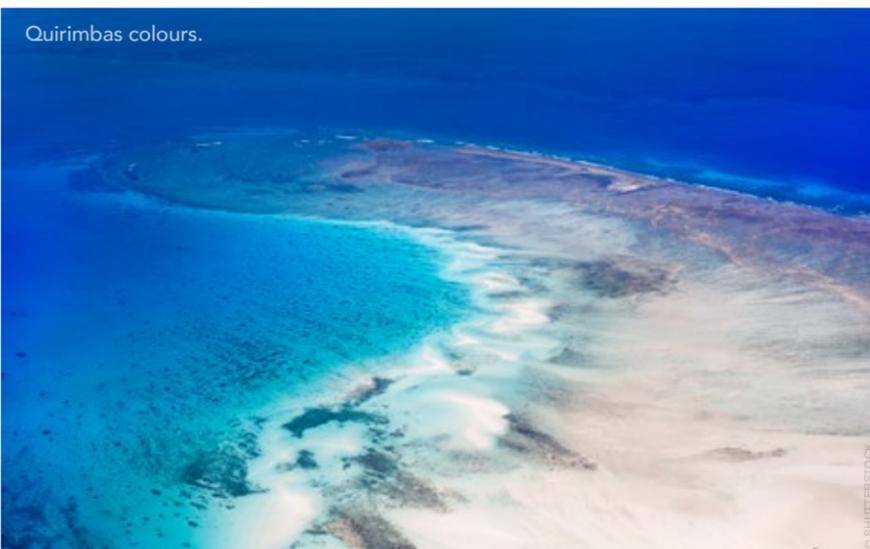
After checking in at Ibo Island Lodge, a collection of renovated old mansions splashed with colourful bougainvillea, we headed out on a guided tour of the island. Goats grazed outside the 18th-century whitewashed church of Nossa Senhora do Rosario; most of the lovely Portuguese villas here have changed little over the centuries. Once a major Arab and Portuguese trading centre, Ibo's population fell from 37 000, when the Portuguese left in 1974, to under 4 000. It's now a peaceful backwater where tourism is growing slowly and sustainably.

Wandering around the ramparts and thick-walled rooms of the fort, the weight of history bears down on me, much as it does in Zanzibar's Stone Town. A major port for ivory, arms and "black ivory" – slaves brought from the interior – Ibo was of significant importance to Arab, Indian, Chinese and Portuguese traders. Slaves were held in this fortress during the colonial period leading up to independence and São João was used as a prison. A chilling inscription in the tribunal room reads "Enter Alive, Leave Dead". It makes me shudder despite the baking heat. Today, however, the fort buzzes with life. Kids play outside and local artists smelt and craft silver jewellery. I admire their skills and choose an exquisite filigree silver necklace to take home.



© IBO ISLAND LODGE

Below: Remnants of the Fort of São João Baptista. Above: Dinner time at the Ibo Island Lodge, a low-profile jewel in the Quirimbas.



Quirimbas colours.

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“ THE INTOXICATING AROMA LEADS US TO A ROASTER, WHERE I SAMPLE THE DELICIOUS LOCAL BREW. IBO COFFEE GROWS WILD ON THE ISLAND AND IS HIGHLY SOUGHT AFTER ”

Our tour continues through the town centre, past gnarled trees whose roots have engulfed derelict buildings and small galleries displaying the arts and crafts of the Makonde people. The intoxicating aroma of coffee leads us to a roaster, where I sample the delicious local brew.



© IBO ISLAND LODGE

Ibo coffee grows wild on the island and is highly sought after.

Our final evening is spent on the roof terrace, sipping G&Ts as the sun sinks into the shimmering sea. Dhows sail quietly under a full moon. Festivities over, the serenity of the island has returned, leaving us to reflect on its fascinating past. 🌿

✈ TRAVEL PLANNER



A TOUCH OF HISTORY:

Arab traders established forts and settlements on Ibo Island more than 1 400 years ago, trading gold, slaves and ivory with ancient African kingdoms. Portuguese sailors arrived in the 1500s, and the remarkable star-shaped Fort of São João Baptista, built in 1791, still stands proudly in the north of the island. At Ibo Island Lodge, daily guided walks unpack the rich history of the island.

DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT:

A visit to the silversmiths of the Fort. Silversmiths have worked here for centuries and their delicate handcrafted filigree jewellery makes for a memorable gift or souvenir.

DID YOU KNOW? Ibo Island is one of 11 islands within the Quirimbas Archipelago National Park, which helps to conserve the sensitive marine habitat that is home to whales, dolphins and the endangered dugong.

WHEN TO GO: The winter months of June – September are best: it's the dry season with mild temperatures and clear skies. Migrating whales can also be seen during this time.

BOOK IT: Thompsons Holidays has a range of affordable packages for Mozambique, or ask your Sure Travel consultant to quote on an Ibo Island holiday. Visit www.suretravel.co.za or call 0861 47 48 49.