



Mozambique Mystique

Endless deserted beaches, aquamarine lagoons and emerging safari parks make Mozambique perfect for an African adventure. Lisa Grainger flies in



SWINGING IN A PALM-SHADED hammock at Nuarro Luxury Eco Lodge, looking out over a pale turquoise lagoon fringed with creamy sand, it's hard to believe I'm in a country once ravaged by civil war. Out in the bay, hand-painted dugout canoes bob in the water, backed by the silhouettes of palms and thatched huts set against a pink sky. It's picture-perfect, as beautiful as the Maldives or Mauritius, but raw, unspoiled and utterly African.

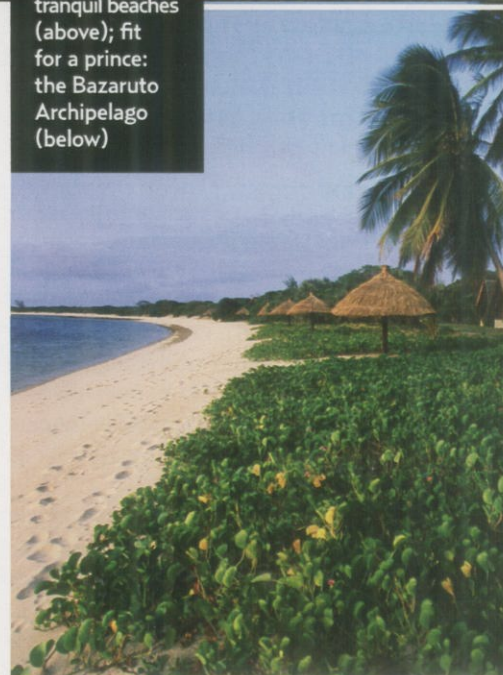
Twenty years ago, no tourist would have been safe here. From 1975, when the Frelimo party launched its war of independence against the country's Portuguese colonisers, until the end of the ensuing civil war in 1992, Mozambique was a no-go zone. Cities were wrecked by mortars and bullets and the countryside was littered with landmines that killed or

maimed hundreds of thousands of people. In 2000, Mozambique was officially listed as one of the poorest countries on earth.

But today, around the beach town of Vilanculos, plots of land are being snapped up by investors. Models and fashion editors check into chic resorts while private planes whizz across to the islands, jetting the well-heeled to luxury retreats. In the capital, Maputo, jazz cafes and colonial-style B&Bs sit alongside markets selling mangoes, lobsters and crabs the size of frisbees. Even royalty's been to stay: Prince Harry jetted into Bazaruto Island for a getaway with his girlfriend, Chelsy Davy.

Looking out from the top of a lighthouse with Lóla Carneiro, the Brazilian co-owner of Nuarro, it's obvious why she and her British partner, Steve Hodges, came here on holiday five years ago and never left. Beyond a clump of {continued}

One of Mozambique's tranquil beaches (above); fit for a prince: the Bazaruto Archipelago (below)





Explore the historic Ilha de Mozambique with its crumbling, Unesco-listed colonial town

massive baobab trees, 30 kilometres of coast fringes an almost endless pale aquamarine lagoon, swirling with vanilla-hued sandbars and inky pools. 'It's paradise,' says Lóla happily. 'Although the country is very poor, the people are lovely and we knew that, if we built a lodge here, we could make a difference to their lives while still living in the way we wanted to.'

Along with their Dutch business partners, using labour from the community, the couple built a charming lodge from local wood, rope and thatch. The staff are all villagers and power is generated by sun and wind. Menus vary from fish with local salads to chicken curries and fire-baked chapattis, followed by mango mousse, all whipped up by New York chef Michelle Gilardi.

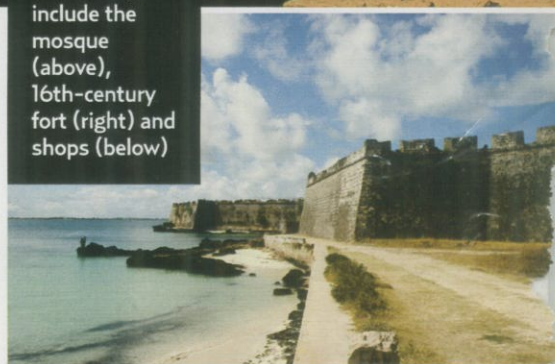
After three days here, I feel completely at home. At night, I sip cocktails and dine on fresh kingfish, listening to the waves and gazing at the stars. By day, I stroll to Nuarró village and play with the local children, who show me their toy dhows. I laze in

my hammock outside one of 12 pretty thatched cottages set by the dunes. I snorkel for hours and, of course, dive. Nuarró's owners are all divers, and it was the reef – just 150 metres from the beach – that lured them here. If you swim out for 20 minutes, the reef descends from four metres to 12. Then suddenly it drops, in parts to 40 metres, in others to a whopping 2.5 kilometres.

Exploring this huge cliff of coral, I can imagine David Attenborough waxing lyrical about the underwater scene. Near the surface, hundreds of multicoloured fish hover and dart among forests of lurid coral and waving sea anemones. Below loom giant pink brains of coral, red man-sized waving fans and black sci-fi spikes. The reef is so unspoilt, I'm told, that most of it has never been mapped. And the nearest lodge is far, far away, so it's an underwater vista you can enjoy practically to yourself.

I gradually realise that you don't visit Mozambique to indulge in man-made delights. This is a country where service is still a new concept. Flights {continued}

Reasons to visit Ilha de Mozambique include the mosque (above), 16th-century fort (right) and shops (below)





An elephant roams in the reed beds and at night, as we return to camp, a lioness darts across the road

are frequently delayed, the roads are pitted with cracks and holes. You go, instead, to chat with people keen to share their world, witness traditional African life and stroll alone on endless stretches of white, talcum powder-fine beaches. To explore the historic Ilha de Mozambique with its crumbling, Unesco-listed colonial town and to marvel at the positive way in which this country is trying to rebuild itself.

At its peak in the 1960s, the 3,770 square kilometre Gorongosa National Park – three hours' drive from the city of Beira – was once considered the most beautiful wildlife reserve in the world. Celebrities such as Cary Grant came to witness the vast herds traversing its grassy plains. But when Greg Carr, the American inventor of voicemail, visited Gorongosa in 2004, he was shocked to see how much had been destroyed. He pledged \$40 million (about £27 million) to help the government resuscitate it. Now Rob Janisch, a South African, and his Zimbabwean wife, Jocelyn, have opened its first private camp, Explore Gorongosa. After the long, hot drive from Beira, I'm pleased to see its six khaki tents set on an

acacia-shaded riverbank, complete with solar lighting and en-suite bush bathrooms.

The reserve has 54 eco-systems, with plants ranging from desert palms and giant fig trees to verdant grasses. Brilliantly hued bee-eaters and turquoise rollers flit in the trees, vultures soar on hot thermals, crested cranes strut elegantly. Herds of rare sable, waterbuck, nyala and kudu bound off into the shade. An elephant roams in the reed beds. And at night, as we return to the camp, a lioness darts across the road.

Don't expect the sort of wildlife-filled safari you can get in Kenya or South Africa – it takes time and money to restore a park like this. But there are different rewards in Mozambique. Go if you like to swim alone in pale blue seas, and dive beside untouched coral walls; to drive across golden, grassy plains, and watch exotic birds preening in flower-tipped trees; to take a hot shower outside under shooting stars before devouring barbecued prawns on a moonlit beach. This was my third visit in three years and, with luck, I'll be back in autumn, trying to spot the humpbacked whales that pass by with their calves. ■



Go wildlife spotting in Gorongosa (left and below) or just admire the view at Nuarro Luxury Eco Lodge (above)

Book now

● African & Indian Explorations (africanexplorations.com) arranges tailor-made tours. An all-inclusive holiday with two nights at Ilha de Mozambique (terracodasquitandas.com) and four at Nuarro (nuarro.com) costs from £2,599 per person, based on two sharing, including flights with Virgin Atlantic via Johannesburg, transfers and meals. An additional two nights at Explore Gorongosa (exploregorongosa.com) costs from £520 per person.

● Mozambique's dry season is from April to September. Visas and malaria precautions are required. Mozambique (£13.99, Bradt) is a good starting point or visit mozambique tourism.co.za.