

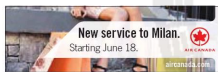


THE GLOBE AND MAIL

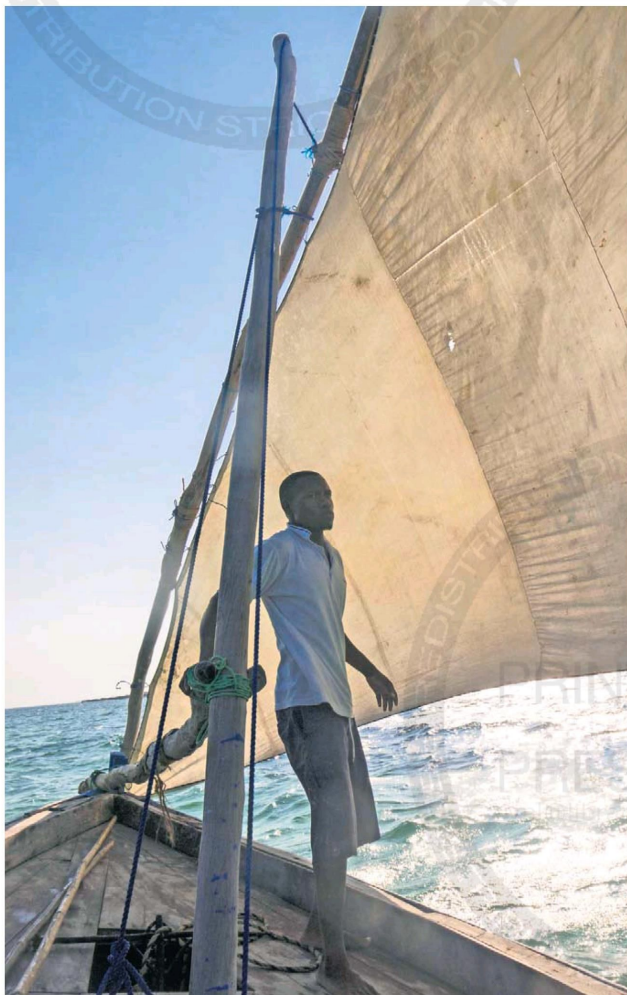
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SECTION T

Globe Travel



EDITOR: DOMINI CLARK



Locals from Ilha de Mocambique still use wooden dhows to go fishing. MARK SISSONS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

THE ESCAPE

ETHEREAL ISLAND OUTPOST

Off Mozambique's northern coast lies a UNESCO treasure. Feel the centuries slip away on Ilha de Mocambique, a living museum of Portuguese colonial architecture, traditional ways and pristine beaches

MARK SISSONS
ILHA DE MOCAMBIQUE, MOZAMBIQUE

Squinting in the cavernous darkness – through a cross-shaped slit chiselled into the foot-thick stone wall – I can see nothing but dazzling Indian Ocean azure. Nearly 500 years ago, a Portuguese priest likely stood in this exact spot within the Chapel of Nossa Senhora de Balaarte, yearning for the arrival of a caravel from Lisbon – dreading the sight of a Dutch warship or Arab pirate dhow.

Perched on the eastern edge of Ilha de Mocambique (Mozambique Island), this masterpiece of Manueline vaulted architecture is considered to be the Southern Hemisphere's oldest still-intact European building.

Behind it looms impregnable Fortaleza de Sao Sebastiao, where thousands of colonial troops once manned one of the largest fortresses ever built south of the Sahara. Together, these remnants of colonialism tell part of the fascinating story of this crescent-shaped speck of coral barely four kilometres long just off Mozambique's northern coast.

Seized shortly after Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama came ashore in 1498, the island that gave Mozambique its name was for centuries the capital of Portugal's African empire. But after the colonial government relocated in 1908, Ilha de Mocambique slid into obscurity, forsaken by the 20th century. Mozambique, Page 3

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FROM PAGE 1

Mozambique: Dusty and quiet, Stone Town feels like a shuttered movie set

It wasn't until 1991, when UNESCO awarded it World Heritage Site status for its remarkable architectural uniformity, that Ilha de Mocimbeque began to emerge from isolation. Today, it still welcomes relatively few visitors, but those who do venture here have an historic island as exotic as Zanzibar virtually to themselves. They discover a living museum, where the centuries melt away and where wooden dhowes set sail every morning before dawn — as they have for 1,000 years — and their crews of Muslim fishermen chanting timeless tribal songs.

Most visitors to Africa come for a safari, but a trip to Mozambique is not about ticking the Big Five off your list. It's about exploring a rich culture and country re-emerging after decades of post-colonial struggle and civil war. One boasting a 2,500-kilometre-long coastline sprinkled with pristine, empty beaches, abundant marine life, superb diving and islands such as Ilha de Mocimbeque that time forgot.

Last year, increased violence between Mozambique's ruling party and the opposition prompted the Canadian government to advise against non-essential travel to some of the country's provinces. But cooler heads are prevailing and both sides pledge a peaceful run-up to the presidential vote in October, easing fears of continued unrest.

My introduction to Ilha de Mocimbeque was Stone Town, site of the original dhow settlement, now connected to the mainland by a narrow single-lane causeway. Today a sleepy fishing village, it is made of silty, rubble-built cobblestone alleys that converge on palm-lined town squares fella like a surreal, shuttered movie set. Decaying yellow, blue, terracotta and pink colonial-era limestone mansions, their wooden handcarved entrances carved with Arab, Indian and Oriental motifs, broil beneath the African sun.

On Stone Town's languid waterfront, fishermen loiter beneath the peeling facades of former Portuguese trading houses, waiting for the high tide to take them back out to sea. In the Old Harbour, grandmothers and children scrob the seabed for shells. Other women, draped in brilliantly coloured *capulanas*, the traditional cloth that Muslim Mozambicans wrap around skirts, scrub laundry along the shore near the wharf. Some have painted their faces with *meisni*, a natural wood-based lotion and sunscreen.

Most of Stone Town's inhabit-



The Chapel of Nossa Senhora de Balaarte is one of the oldest European structures in the Southern Hemisphere.



Water is drawn from the same well that Portuguese sailors used centuries ago. PHOTOS: MARK SISSONS

ants are descendants of Mozambique's original African Muslim population, driven off the island by the Portuguese in the 16th century. They only began to return in significant numbers after the country gained independence in 1975. With the outbreak of civil war in 1977, thousands more flooded in, desperate to flee the inland fighting.

"When I was a child this was a very broken place," says James, a slight man in his mid-30s who offers to show me around. "The local Makua people still call this place Omahupiti, or 'refuge,' because so many of them hid here."

After the civil war ended in 1992, many refugees returned to their ancestral mainland homes. Others migrated to Macuti Town on the south end of the island, and Stone Town once again

became a ghost town.

From Stone Town, I board a dhow and sail to a peninsular headland across the bay. Awaiting me is a swath of white sand beach that Mozambican author Mia Couto described as a place "where the Earth undresses and where the gods come to pray."

My destination is a cluster of airy bungalows on the dunes overlooking the sea. Coral Lodge 15-41 — a reference to its cartographic co-ordinates — is operated by Alexandra and Bart Otto, an enterprising Dutch couple who quit their management jobs six years ago to move here. It is the only luxury lodge in one of Southern Africa's last remaining unspoiled coastal regions.

"We fell in love with the location, which is still largely unexplored, as well as the rich history and culture of the area," says Alexandra over freshly caught lobster with *siri siri*, *niweu* (local spinach), coconut rice and baobab ice cream on a shady deck overlooking the lagoon.

Using traditional African and modern design elements, the lodge was built entirely of endemic wood and other natural materials by local artisans. The Ottos employ more than 40 residents from the adjacent village of Cabacira Pequena as lodge staff and guides. "From the start, our mission was to hire as many local people as possible to ensure that this area would develop," Alexandra says, explaining that many of the townsmen have little access to secondary education or training.

To that end, the Ottos have

financed a primary school and orphanage in Cabacira Pequena, and stand by their staff whenever they can. "Everyone has my cell number and they call me for help when they need it. I've had calls from hospital emergency wards, sprung people out of prison and even helped deliver babies in the middle of the night," Alexandra says. "We're more than just an employer. We are family."

Alexandra and I cross barfoot through a lush mangrove forest from the resort to Cabacira Pequena and visit a group of women drawing water from the same well that Vasco de Gama's sailors once frequented. They greet Alexandra as one of their own.

Later, local boys tag along as we explore the nearby ruins of one of Southern Africa's oldest mosques. Peering through a jagged hole in the mosque's crumbling wall I can see the Chapel of Nossa Senhora de Balaarte across the bay, perfectly framed like a holy relic, where so many prayers were once uttered.

Now, thanks to renewed interest from the outside world and the promise of newfound political stability, prayers for a better life in this remote, largely untouched stretch of Southern African coastline — with its ethereal island outpost at the end of the world — are finally being heard.

Special to The Globe and Mail

The writer was a guest of Coral Lodge 15-41. It did not review or approve the story.

IF YOU GO

Most connections to Mozambique require an overnight stay in South Africa's capital city. Airlink (flyairlink.com) offers daily direct flights from Johannesburg to Mozambique. From there, road transport can be easily arranged for the three-hour ride to Ilha de Mocimbeque. Canadian citizens require visitor visas prior to entering Mozambique. They can be obtained by contacting the Embassy of Mozambique in Washington, or with the assistance of the outfitters mentioned here. There is no nationwide travel advisory for the country, however the Canadian government urges a high degree of caution due to violent crime in Mozambique, a recent significant increase in cases of kidnappings.

WHAT TO DO

The spirits of doomed mariners are said to inhabit Stone Town's Martin Museum, which houses the remains of shipwrecks — everything from navigational instruments to precious Ming porcelain. Wax-in guns, rusted cannons and other artifacts of battle still litter the courtyard of the nearby Palau and Chapel of Sao Paulo, built as a Jesuit College in 1610.

whcunesco.org/en/list/599

WHERE TO STAY

Coral Lodge 15-41 is a secluded luxury beach resort and a great base for exploring nearby Ilha de Mocimbeque. Guests can also go snorkelling, shipwreck diving or fishing, as well as visit the nearby fishing village of Cabacira Pequena. Bungalows from \$700 (U.S.) a night, all inclusive, based on double occupancy.

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OUTFITTERS

The Vancouver-based Heritage Safari (1-888-301-1713, heritagesafaris.com) and Toronto's Kensington Tours (1-888-993-2021, kensington-tours.com) can arrange customized Mozambique itineraries, including visits to Ilha de Mocimbeque.

Mark Sissons

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