



# PARADISE

## Rediscovered

THERE'S FAR MORE TO MOZAMBIQUE THAN GIANT PERI-PERI PRAWNS AND BOXED WINES. **AARON GEKOSKI** AND **GEMMA CATLIN** HEAD OFF FOR SOME WINTER SUN, IN SEARCH OF THE COUNTRY'S HOTTEST PLACES TO EAT, DRINK AND SLEEP.



PHOTOGRAPH AARON GEKOSKI | SUPPLIED



travel.







IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE that less than 20 years ago, Mozambique was declared the poorest country in the world. A savage civil war had swept through it, the nation imploded and nearly a million people lost their lives. But Mozambicans are resilient, and in a remarkable turnaround, it is now a fast-growing tourist destination.

These waters are brimming with marine behemoths: whale sharks, humpback whales and manta rays that have helped turn many small indigenous towns into world-class diving and snorkelling destinations. The coastline has become dotted with 5-star island resorts, eco-lodges, backpackers and campsites. And believe it or not, the food isn't bad either.

The question is not should you visit this enchanting land, but rather, where to start. It's no surprise that the best eateries and places to stay are a short meander from the ocean. Good food comes at a price, but if you know where to look, there are also some little-known gems worth seeking out. Here's our list of Mozambique's top 10 places to check out this winter.

#### **BEST HISTORICAL VENUE: THE POLANA SERENA HOTEL**

MAPUTO

No article about dining and dozing in Mozambique would be complete without mentioning The Polana. The 'Grande Dame of Africa' has recently had a little nip and tuck and undergone a much-needed facelift. The results are impressive: whilst the hotel maintains its old-school luxury, it manages to contain every modern facility imaginable and includes three restaurants.

The relaxed Varanda Restaurant offers buffet, à la carte and live grill bar menus. Their coffee shop serves perhaps Maputo's finest filter coffee and a decadent afternoon tea. If you're feeling flush then head for the swish Delagoa, which adds a Mozambican twist to some excellent classic French cuisine. The open-air Aquarius

Sushi Bar has stunning views over Maputo Bay and yummy, although slightly pricey, sushi.

Maputo may belie the rest of the country's chilled-out style, but it's still a city sadly lacking in top-notch restaurants and hotels. Nevertheless, The Polana would stand out anywhere.

Also worthy of note in the capital is Zambi, whose king prawns could just be the best in Mozambique. Costa do Sol, with its picturesque seafront location, is a great place for a few sundowners before joining the local specialty: partying. For a wild weekend night out, Coconuts rocks: the dancing doesn't stop until you do.

**INFO:** They're currently running a weekend special for R1 800 per room per night (minimum two-night stay), bed and breakfast included / [www.serenahotels.com/serenapolana](http://www.serenahotels.com/serenapolana)

#### **BEST EXCURSIONS: INDIGO BAY** BAZARUTO ARCHIPELAGO

Indigo Bay is another flagship hotel in Mozambique, located on beautiful Bazaruto Island in the Bararuto Archipelago. The island can be reached from Vilanculos, which is a springboard to the best resorts. If you absolutely have to stay in this unprepossessing town for an evening, Pescadors is an uncelebrated cracker of a restaurant, serving simple food at reasonable prices.

Bazaruto is the archetypal tropical island destination and popular with honeymooners. Indigo Bay is famous for its array of activities, which include dune-boarding, horse riding, sunset cruises, traditional dhow excursions, water skiing, tennis and an imaginatively named Qolf course, which is a unique take on recreational golf. Although the diving isn't quite up to Tofo's high standards, there's still plenty to see and the clear warm waters make it accessible to all. The resort is also a standout destination for quality of service and food; the cheese board is worth a special mention alone. Their Wellness Centre has been rated in the Best 101 Spas of the World. Believe the hype: this hotel, if you don't mind splashing out, really does have it all.

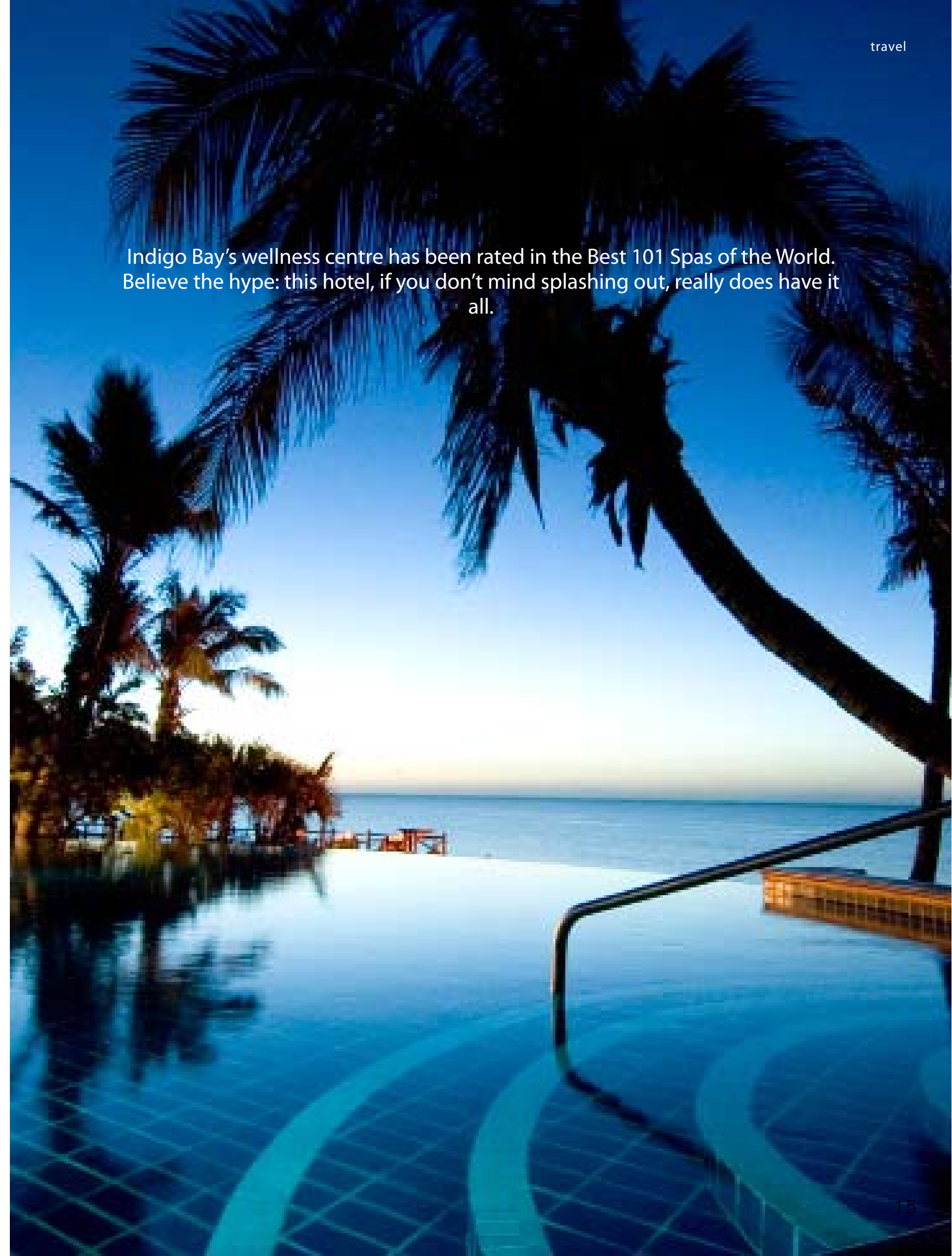
**INFO:** Beach chalets start from R4 300, fully inclusive / [www.indigobayresort.com/](http://www.indigobayresort.com/)

#### **BEST FOR CAMPING: EXPLORE GORONGOSA** GORONGOSA

Mozambique's not just about beach resorts. For somewhere a little different, head to Gorongosa. This was once one of Africa's best safari destinations: game was so plentiful, it was rumoured that Noah unloaded his ark here. But by the end of the civil war, large mammal populations had been decimated by up to 95 percent. Today, the park has become something of an African safari success story. The plains have replenished and visitors are slowly returning to take in ecological features that are found nowhere else on earth.

PREVIOUS SPREAD (clockwise from top) The lodge on Matemo Island in the Quirimbas Archipelago; grand old buildings at Matemo remind visitors of Mozambique's heyday; deep-sea fishing at Indigo Bay; a buffet staff member serving cocktails on the beach at Indigo Bay; kayaking around Coral Lodge, in Nampula. ABOVE The local prawn speciality served at Coral Lodge. RIGHT Infinity pool at Indigo Bay in the Bazaruto Archipelago.

Indigo Bay's wellness centre has been rated in the Best 101 Spas of the World. Believe the hype: this hotel, if you don't mind splashing out, really does have it all.



Boats belonging to local fishermen line Tofo's rambling beach.



An aerial view of Benguerra Island, where the resort of Azura lies.



Nestled deep in the rugged terrain is Explore Gorongosa, the area's first private ecotourism initiative. The lodge runs by a modest, yet effective formula – excellent guiding and flexible schedules in a breathtaking part of the world. Simple, hey? It's clearly working: they were crowned Best New Safari Camp and Best Ecological Safari Property in Africa. Tatler even voted it as one of the best 101 places in the world.

The accommodation is basic, yet elegant and comfortable; tents with communal hot water bucket showers and eco-loos. An evening or two in the 'sky-beds' – sited on secret big-tree-covered spots around the camp – is a must.

Food is, like the rest of the camp, simple but delicious. The chefs use local seasonal ingredients and conjure up mouthwatering three-course meals. There's also a surprisingly eclectic wine list, featuring a good mix of South African and Chilean offerings. And you can dine almost anywhere you like – including next to a nearby hippo pan.

**INFO:** Explore Gorongosa is only open from 1 April to 30 November. Rack (all-inclusive, as well as activities) is R3 800 per person sharing per night / [www.exploreorongosa.com](http://www.exploreorongosa.com)

#### **BEST OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK DESTINATION: POMENE**

INHAMBANE

On initial inspection, Pomene could be easily dismissed as just another beautiful waterfront lodge, with stilted chalets. But a trip to Pomene is about escaping into the wild. The journey there is an adventure in itself: a challenging 54-kilometres section of 'road' that requires a 4x4 with good clearance. However, brave the drive (or arrange a transfer with the lodge) and you're rewarded with a divine stretch of untouched paradise. Pomene sits on a narrow peninsula, with the Indian Ocean lapping at its front doorstep and a spectacular mangrove estuary on the other.

The diving is exceptional, too. Dive site Playstation is home to magical swim-throughs and deep caves. As you enjoy the boat ride there, keep your eyes peeled for whale sharks and manta rays. The resort is also popular with game fishermen, who catch wahoo, kingfish, tuna, couta and more. Many nomadic fishing communities have set up camp nearby: watching the men brave the volatile shore breaks in their tiny wooden boats is a sight to behold.

Once you've enjoyed the fish in the ocean, you can sample them from your plate. The crab is particularly good, steamed, with melted butter, or in a curry. Due to Pomene's isolation, wine is mainly of the boxed variety, but palatable nonetheless. Pomene also has cheaper 'fisherman chalets' and self-catering dens for those on a budget.

**INFO:** Water chalets start at R960 per person per night; includes dinner and bed and breakfast. Self-catering from R290 per person per night / [www.barraresorts.com/pomene-lodge-home-of-pomene](http://www.barraresorts.com/pomene-lodge-home-of-pomene)

#### **BEST ECO-LODGE: NUARRO** NAMPULA

The owner's passion for the local environment has sculpted Nuarro into a real ecotourism delight. The lodge has incorporated genuine

ecological awareness and social responsibilities into their business. Nuarro was constructed on land co-owned by local communities, by local people, using local materials.

Nuarro now employs 80 villagers, and supports over 1 000 more with income: \$2 for every activity purchased and \$5 for every night booked goes directly to the people.

To top it off, the resort's not bad either. The concession runs along three kilometres of seafront, ensuring every chalet has uninterrupted sea views, a private sundeck and the feeling of complete seclusion. The area boasts wreck, drift and wall dives, and during whale season you can lie in bed and watch the humpbacks flip-flopping close to shore!

Hospitable staff can arrange private lunches on nearby isolated beaches and kayaking trips through the mangroves. A variety of other trips are also available, including sailing on dhow boats, birding opportunities and village tours.

Although the food here is quite basic fare, it's always tasty and there's never a shortage of fresh seafood. The owners, of course, take sustainable fishing practices very seriously.

**INFO:** R2 300 per person per night. 25 to 50% discount offered for children, depending on age / [www.nuarro.com](http://www.nuarro.com)

#### **BEST FOR ISOLATION: MATEMO** QUIRIMBAS

Situated in the Quirimbas Archipelago, Matemo's little island is completely cut off from the outside world – accessible only via a 25-minute plane ride from Pemba. The island is perfect for a family, fishing or diving holiday, with a good dose of culture thrown in.

Accommodation is stylishly furnished; well kept and no more than 10 metres from shore. And when it comes to dining, the seafood buffets and copious amounts of crayfish are a must. With tables set on the sand, the beach braais offer alfresco dining at its best.

Another highlight at Matemo is their Ibo Island tour – this coral and palm-fringed island was once a trading post for silver, ivory and slaves and can be reached by a 20-minute boat ride. The area is also home to three forts and a lovely old Catholic church.

For an even more authentic Mozambican experience, you can sometimes stay in local villages on surrounding islands for around \$5 to \$10 a night. It might not have Matemo's luxury, but it'll give you a fascinating insight into the way local people live.

**INFO:** From R3 400 per person per night, all-inclusive / [www.matemoresort.com](http://www.matemoresort.com)

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top) Mist rises over Gorongosa National Park in central Mozambique; the sundeck at Casa Azul, Tofo; the pristine beach at Nuarro's eco-lodge in northern Mozambique; one of the villa interiors at Coral Lodge, Nampula.





**BEST FOOD: CORAL LODGE 15.41 RESTAURANT** NAMPULA

This contemporary beachfront retreat is set in a beautiful privately owned nature reserve. The surroundings are perfect, but it's likely the food will become the focal point of your stay.

Eating at Coral Lodge often becomes an interactive affair. Head chef, Carlos, loves to explain the provenance of each ingredient. He's also adept at turning every meal into a special event. You can learn how to cook their samphire specialty (a type of sea grass gathered from the front of the lodge) or spend time in the kitchen with the effervescent Carlos himself.

This is a lodge that knows how to deliver: if you want guineafowl, you get guineafowl. In fact, you can even go and choose one at the local market. And if you fancy catching your own supper on a fishing trip with locals, you do it. They try to make everything possible and it can be great fun creating your meals with Carlos's help.

If this all sounds a little too taxing, you can always go down the traditional route. Try starting with some of the wonderful local seafood bites: tuna tartar, coconut calamari rings and seared crab claws. And make sure you sample the black olive tapenade lobster and coconut panna cotta. Every dish is infused with the original flavours of Mozambique and can be washed down with a variety of top South African and Portuguese wines. Meals take place at various locations around the lodge and, on request, can be enjoyed on your private veranda or even on a nearby island.

**INFO:** from R3 300 per person per night, all-inclusive / [www.coralodge1541.com](http://www.coralodge1541.com)

**BEST BUDGET VENUE: CASA AZUL** TOFO, INHAMBANE

Tofo is a pretty seaside town packed full of delightful eateries and places to stay. In fact, there are so many to choose from, we couldn't just pick one. For great budget accommodation head to the higgledy-piggledy Casa Azul. Laura, the owner, has put her heart and soul into the lodge-come-shack-come-backpackers. It's a charming mishmash of hammocks, loungers, brightly coloured cushions and local arts and crafts. Despite its slightly chaotic interior, it's one of Tofo's more serene lodges, located at the quieter end of the beach. They are yet to include a restaurant, but there are plenty nearby.

Casa Barry is a short amble away and serves enormous peri-peri prawns and impressive seafood platters. A couple of kilometres further is Mango Beach, a more isolated venue with fantastic food, like their prawn bisque with wasabi.

Tofo is a world-class diving destination, with high concentrations of manta rays, whale sharks and, during winter months, humpback whales. So if you're saving your pennies for the underwater action, then head to Black and Whites. This local market eatery offers giant portions at tiny prices. Try the calamari, it's delicious.

For a topnotch 'foodie' day out, head towards Barra Beach. Just don't forget to stop at Chilli's Deli en route for great sandwiches, cheeses, fresh coffee and, if you're lucky, a slice of banoffee pie.

Next, go straight to Barra's Green Turtle. French couple, Joelle and Francois, cook fresh local ingredients to perfection.

**INFO:** from R275 per person per night / [www.casa-azul-tofo.com](http://www.casa-azul-tofo.com)

**BEST ALL ROUND EXPERIENCE: MAPUTO FISH MARKET**

Maputo fish market mirrors its host city. It's manic, untamed and slightly claustrophobic. But, like Maputo, spend enough time digging and you can unearth some gems. The market can be a lot of fun, what with vendors shouting, chefs hunting, crabs and crayfish writhing and piles of bizarre-looking, brightly coloured fish blinking. It's like being in a giant aquarium: except that you can eat everything on offer.

After selecting your fish, you'll be leapt upon by eager stall owners offering to cook it for you. They'll also supply chips, rice, vegetables and salad. Compliment this with a local beer (2M is a winner) and you'll be one happy punter. Just a word of warning: be vigilant - there have been a few reports of vendors taking customers stock into the kitchen and cooking up older produce instead. So insist they cook it in front of you.

So long as you're careful, this is a hugely enjoyable experience and offers the chance to eat great fresh fish at fantastic prices.

Tip: take a Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative (SASSI) booklet with you, because it's not uncommon to see critically endangered species on the stalls. Try and buy responsibly; consider that there's around a 90 percent by-catch rate as a result of prawn trawling and don't purchase undersized/baby crayfish as local populations are struggling.

**BEST FOR HONEYMOONERS: AZURA ON BENGUERRA ISLAND** BAZARUTO ARCHIPELAGO

Azura on Benguerra Island is one of Mozambique's most famous (and pricey!) resorts. It successfully offers all the 5-star activities and amenities whilst remaining carbon neutral. There's great diving and snorkelling, private pools, spa treatments and a watersports centre. The villas are beautiful and even come with their own private host. Their fine dining restaurant offers magnificent views out to sea. The signature dishes include wok-fried Schezwan blue swimmer crab and grilled painted lobster tail. The attention to detail is stunning; the owners have even flown wine in from their chateau in France.

Azura's spa is also well worth a visit. Treatments include a ground coconut shell or diamond dust body scrub, a head to toe mask of tamarind and aloe, and a warm amarula-oil massage.

Not only is your carbon footprint zero at Azura, but your stay is also helping local communities. Initiatives include rebuilding the village after Cyclone Favio and developing a new school and teacher accommodation. They also provide ongoing English lessons for staff and local national park wardens.

**INFO:** [www.azura-retreats.com](http://www.azura-retreats.com)

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The view from Villa Amizade's private pool at the resort of Azura, on Benguerra Island in the Bazaruto Archipelago.