

QUINTESSENTIALLY QUIRIMBAS

Palm-fringed beaches, gin-clear waters and multicoloured reefs: it's tough to avoid talking in clichés when describing the Quirimbas in northern Mozambique. **Aaron Gekoski** and **Gemma Catlin** have a go at describing paradise.

PHOTOGRAPHS XXXXXXXXXXXXX



It's hard to believe that less than 20 years ago, Mozambique was declared the poorest country in the world. A savage civil war swept through, the nation imploded and nearly a million people lost their lives. But Mozambicans are amazingly resilient and in a remarkable turnaround, it is now one of Africa's fastest growing tourist destinations.

Visitors return from these shores with tales of giant peri-peri prawns, washed down with ice-cold 2M beers. They wax lyrical about a horizontal lifestyle, the lively historical capital and a rapidly improving infrastructure.

Yet, the secret behind Mozambique's success lie off nearly 3 000 kilometres of coastline. Marine behemoths simply love it here. Humpback whales return to these shores year after year to nurture their young. Off Inhambane Province, congregations of whale sharks (up to 40 strong) compete for space with giant manta rays; a species first identified in these waters. And further north, there are whispers of coral reefs so intricate, so buzzing, so vibrant, that they have been nicknamed the 'African Caribbean'.

QUIRIMBAS

Let's sail back a thousand years or so, to a group of islands known as the Ilhas de Sao Lazaro (that's the Islands of St. Lazarus to you and I). Other than some small indigenous fishing communities, the islands were largely untouched and life went on as it had for centuries.

At some point during the 10th Century, Arab merchants arrived and opened trading posts, creating a commercial identity for the islands. Paradise prospered, and continued to do so under Portuguese rule from 1500 to 1975, when Mozambique gained independence. A period of isolation during the civil war followed. And it wasn't until 2002 that The Quirimbas National Park was born.

The blueprint was to bring together a handful of high quality low impact resorts. Local communities would work with not just for the lodges. Given Mozambique's antediluvian attitude to tourism, this was real blue-sky thinking.

Today, the National Park spans 7,500 square kilometres of forests, savannah and woodland. There is a raw and untamed beauty to it, unlike almost anywhere on Earth. 80% of the Park is on the mainland, where you can see four of the Big Five, along

with wild dog, hyena, crocodiles and enough birdlife to keep the fussiest of spotters happy. The other 20% consists of mangroves, coral reefs, islets, atolls and 32 - mostly uninhabited - islands

DIVING THE QUIRIMBAS

If southern Mozambique is synonymous with megafauna, then northern Mozambique is all about corals and reef systems. Whilst there are limited opportunities for that 'once in a lifetime' dive, the Quirimbas serve up a dependable dish of satisfying scuba. The water temperature rarely falls below 24 degrees, and can reach a bath-like 28 degrees in summer. Reliable visibility and shallow reefs make it a great destination for aspiring photographers.

Macro snappers, in particular, will be in heaven. They will find nudibranch (of every size, shape and colour); shrimp of the cleaner, boxer, hinge-beaked, mantis and Durban dancing variety; porcelain and hermit crabs galore; leaf fish, dwarf zebra lionfish, and hundreds more scaly superstars.

These theatrical inhabitants are all housed in the most spectacular settings imaginable. Sprawling beds of hard and soft coral form vibrant gardens of texture and colour. There are giant whip corals and brain corals, green tree corals and lettuce leaf, plus swathes of other impressive polyps.

The reef fish flourish here. Expect to feast (metaphorically of course - please don't eat the pretty fish) on triggerfish, lionfish,

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parrotfish, angelfish, boxfish, sweetlip, pufferfish, surgeonfish and pipefish. And then there's the wonderfully named Valentine's toby, circle-spine surgeonfish and wedge-tail crocodile fish.

Whilst shark fishing has taken its toll on these waters, it is still possible to see reef sharks. And if they're a bit too tame, the occasional dugong and dolphin pod should provide some excitement. Other major draw cards include migrating humpbacks and their calves, which pause here from July to December. The islands are also feeding and nesting grounds for green and hawksbill turtles. Hatching occurs in February.

If you're as interested in eating the fish, as you are ogling them, then large schools of game fish, including barracuda, kingfish, tuna and wahoo keep diners and fishermen hooked. Just don't forget the lemon.

WHERE TO GO

PEMBA

The capital of the Cabo Delgado, Mozambique's northernmost province, is a port city renowned for its beautiful, crumbling buildings and Portuguese architecture. Try not to be distracted by the potholed, litter-strewn roads and slightly dilapidated centre; Pemba's mish mash of perfect beaches, picturesque mosques, quaint reed-hut villages and chattering markets provide a hot and dusty attack on the senses: and if you live behind a lens, you'll lose yourself there.

Accommodation ranges from camping to 5-star resorts. The baobab-infused Pemba Dive Bush Camp, a nature reserve overlooking the bay, is a fantastic option for the budget conscious. The upmarket Pemba Beach Hotel is in a transitional period, however it has a decent Spa and excellent beachfront location. www.pembadivecamp.com or www.pembabeachresort.com.

DIVE SITES:

THE GAP (12-45M): This deep dive site's main attraction is a gap that runs through the middle of a coral rock outcrop. But don't forget to lay off the seafood platters and breathe in - this swim through is a bit of a squeeze. Less advanced (or cuddlier) divers can bob around at the top of the drop off (around 15m) where big game fish can be seen.

PLAYGROUND (5-18M): On this shallow wall dive, check out the cute little cave where you can see dusky sweepers, shrimps, crayfish and scorpionfish. A cheeky pod of dolphins frequent the area and are often seen from the boat.

WILLY'S REEF (10-16M): If you like coral, you'll love this dive.

Plus, it has a funny name. There are lots of big coral bommies to check out on this flat, shallow reef, plus a small overhang with lots of mantis and cleaner shrimps. Keep your eyes peeled for action at the cleaning stations.

IBO ISLAND

For all you culture vultures, the world-famous Ibo Island is a great place to acquaint yourself with some romantic relics. Strangler figs, palm trees and bougainvillea flourish amidst a culturally rich atmosphere, steeped in Arabian, Portuguese and African influences.

Silversmiths meticulously craft their produce at the island's famous So Joo Batista fortress. Elderly men, faces strained with years of concentration, magic their pots of molten coins into intricate pieces of jewelry. There are three forts and a church to explore on land, and mangroves and coral gardens a short paddle off shore.

Well furnished, with lovely grounds, Ibo Island Lodge is a great place to base yourself when exploring the island, it offers a number of activities and dinners are a sumptuous five-course affair. A 25-minute charter flight from Pemba gets you there. www.iboisland.com.

DIVE SITES:

IBO LIGHTHOUSE (7-18M): This dive site features a shallow wall, only about 5m high, which drops off to 10m in places. The light is fantastic, so macro enthusiasts get your camera at the ready: eagle-eyed divers may find paperfish and scorpionfish. On a good day you can encounter small black tip reef sharks and turtles.

IBO POINT (8-18M): This drift dive is on the northwestern side of Ibo Island. The coral life here is superb and full of goatfish, hermit crabs, moray eels, garden eels and many more chirpy chappies. Listen out for dolphins swimming above, along with giant schools of barracuda and other game fish.

MATEMO ISLAND:

Matemo Island, just a short boat ride from Ibo, is a 2400-hectare slice of heaven. The island has everything you'd expect from the Quirimbas; countless palm trees, idyllic beaches and great diving. Its showpiece is the hotel Matemo Island, part of the illustrious Rani Resorts. It is the quintessential upmarket tropical island getaway. One recommended highlight is the village tour onboard

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their magical multicoloured bus.

The watersports centre offers fishing, waterskiing, kayaking and of course, diving and snorkeling. If Matemo Island is out of your price range, there's a charming 'backpackers', located a five-minute drive away. Don't expect any frills; just simple reed huts, a mattress and views to die for: Robinson Crusoe, eat your heart out. www.matemoresort.com.

DIVE SITES:

RUSH HOUR (15-30M): One of the Quirimbas best known sites, this sizable reef forms a drop-off where big game fish can be seen, including toothy barracuda. Check out the honeycomb morays on the way down, along with agile ribbon eels and blue-spotted stingrays. But keep looking up for schools of kingfish and other game fish: this site isn't called Rush Hour for nothing.

ROLAS RAINBOW (6-10M): This shallow site is protected by Rolas Island (Matemo's closest neighbouring island). It consists of bommies and coral outcrops, with giant whip coral. It also has a sandy bottom, making it an ideal site for beginners who want to practice their buoyancy (just watch out for the crocodile fish, goatfish, boxfish, flounders and partner gobies).

THE WRECK (2-6M): You can only dive The Wreck when the sea conditions are extremely calm and during high tide. The 30m-long wreck is, well...a bit wrecked, strewn over the sea floor. This does however mean that there are plenty of nooks and crannies to explore. Schools of snapper, surgeonfish and dusky sweepers are all often spotted as well as the occasional kingfish and jobfish.

MEDJUMBE ISLAND

Another Rani offering, Medjumbe Island is a tiny weeny green and white dollop of romantic loveliness. It also contains the southern hemisphere's smallest runway. Medjumbe's honeymoon-saturated clientele aren't likely to go for wild parties, so you can relax with your loved one in peace.

With its pale colours the resort has the feel of a luxurious beach shack. Each of the 13 chalets has its own plunge pool just metres from the beach. The reefs here remain largely unexplored: it's a great feeling diving somewhere you know few have been before. The island is a 45-minute charter flight from Pemba. www.medjumbe.com.

DIVE SITES:

THE EDGE OF REASON (14-UNLIMITED(!)M): One of the most exciting dives in the Quirimbas, this sheer wall drops off from about 14m down to an estimated 800m. The wall has lots of caves and overhangs to explore: big rays and potato bass are often found sheltering inside them, along with one resident named "Cliff".

JOE'S RIDGE (4-20M): This giant reef runs the whole length of the southern side of the island. The shallower section is perfect for snorkelling, and the deeper part has lots of bommies and overhangs to explore. There's a lot to see here, including turtles, nudibranches, small black tip reef sharks and more fish than you can shake your rod at.

OTHER ISSUES TO CONSIDER

No article about Mozambique would be complete - or indeed provide a fair representation of the country - without a grumble or two. Whilst road systems have improved, the north remains difficult to get to, and around. Flying is pricey. When will African airlines cotton on to the fact that cheaper tickets may mean more custom?

Although South African visitors do not require a visa, \$85 for international guests is as ludicrous as the protracted 'fingerprint-scanning' application process at the border. Along with this, calling Mozambique's immigration officials 'obnoxious' would be an insult to obnoxious people.

In general, the lodges aren't cheap and cater mainly for fly-in visitors. Few options in the mid range and backpacker levels exist. Whilst seafood is plentiful, the quality of service - and food - can be inconsistent. And then there are the corrupt police, poor road systems, malaria-bearing mosquitoes and questionable health care should you become sick.

Whilst these irritations are far from negligible, don't be put off. Given time (and a healthy slice of patience) and you may even get used to Mozambique's slightly haphazard ways. Plus, it keeps the crowds out. And isn't that what a visit to the Quirimbas is all about?

THE ESSENTIALS

Best time to visit: May-September when rainfall and temperatures are at their lowest

Currency: Mozambican metical, though dollars are widely accepted

Beware underwater photographers: island transfers only