

BAZARUTO ARCHIPELAGO



Kate Armstrong finds Mozambique's Bazaruto Archipelago lives up to those travel brochure clichés

MIDNIGHT Oil and cambert are on his list; Mozart and chocolate are on mine. My partner and I argue over what we'd take if deserted Robinson Crusoe-style. We have arrived at the archetypal island paradise, yet I'm sceptical about the seemingly endless beach, clear turquoise waters and long lines of swaying trees stretching before us. I'm also not convinced by the small islands and sand cays shimmering in the distance.

My last desertion on a tropical island was in the Pacific and far from paradise: overcast days, choppy waters and a 24-hour stint in bed after eating dodgy lobster. But somehow this already feels different. There are casuarina trees where there should be palms, flamingos and Arab dhows instead of seagulls and catamarans. Nearby, locals go about their daily business, shucking oysters and hauling in fish nets.

This is Mozambique's Bazaruto Archipelago. This is Africa.

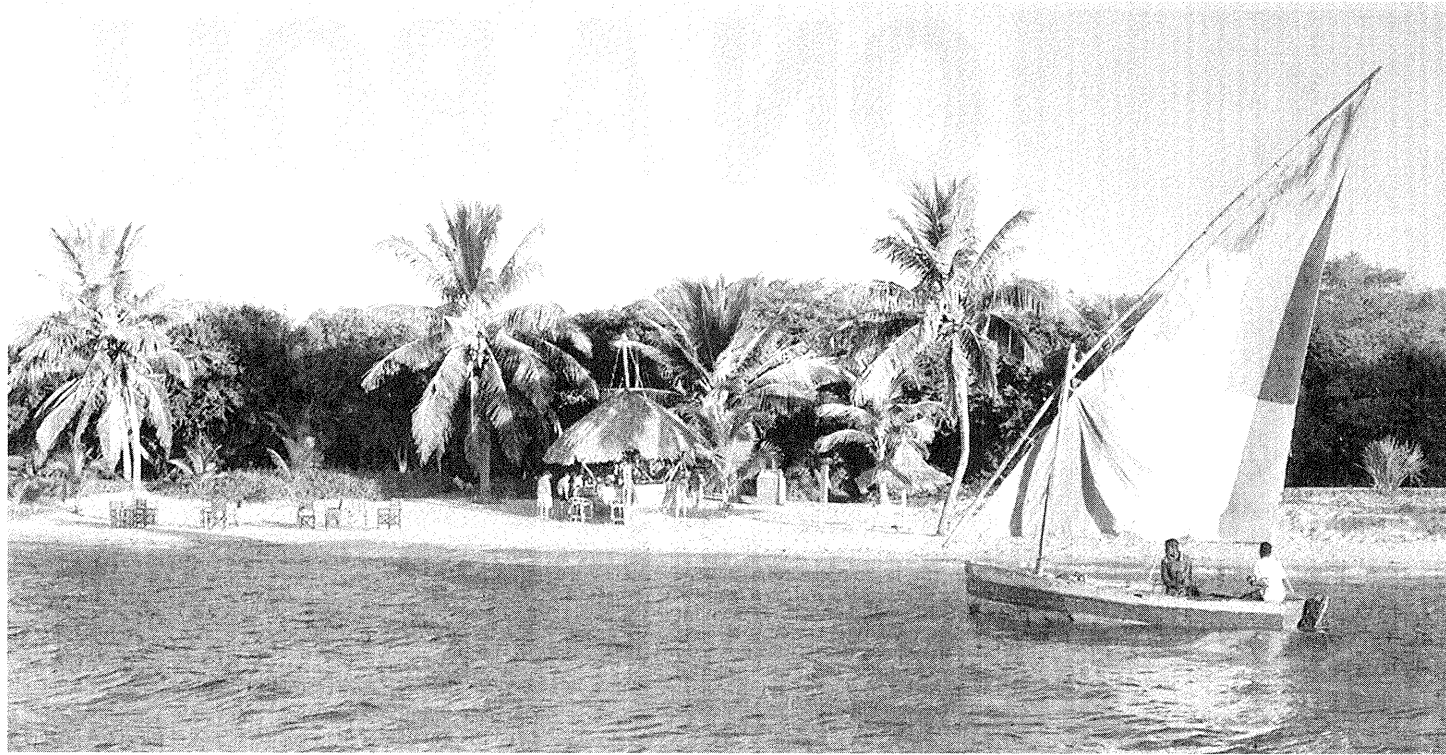
The narrow chain of islands in the archipelago (Bazaruto, Benguerua, Magaruque, Banque and Santa Carolina) sits off the east coast of Mozambique, each island dominated by a ridge of magnificent sand dunes behind which nestles an extraordinary ecosystem of wetlands and savanna. Legend has it the Portuguese colonists disposed of prisoners on the shell-covered sand cays around the islands. With plentiful seafood swimming around them, the prisoners couldn't believe their luck. That is, until several hours later, when water engulfed the sandy islands. In the 1970s, the region was declared a national park and it's easy to see why.

The archipelago's animal species read like a zoologist's directory: whales, marine turtles, rays and dolphins. (Although dugongs feature prominently in promotional literature, spotting them is rare; these creatures, thought to be the basis of the mermaid myth, are threatened with extinction from fishing nets and hunting.) According to the WWF, the park's coral reefs, waters and seagrass beds support more than 2000 species of fish, four whale and five dolphin species, and 20 varieties of crustaceans. More than 260 bird species have been recorded in the archipelago.

It's not surprising the area is a favourite for bird watchers, divers and game fishermen. Birds visit the islands for bee-eaters, sunbirds and boobys. As for the one that got away? It rarely happens. Daily outings from the resorts take game fishermen to hook king mackerel, tuna, garfish and the occasional marlin.

Magaruque Island is close enough for a day visit from Vilanculos on mainland Mozambique, a sprawling town and the gateway to the region, but most visitors head via light aircraft or motor boats to the resorts on Benguerua and Bazaruto islands. Because of my low expectations (and because we are living in Mozambique) we opt for Gabriel's Lodge on Benguerua Island, the most modest of its three resorts. We discover our error during the next few days, when we visit Marlin Lodge and Benguerua Lodge, both luxury options with beachfront chalets.

Benguerua Lodge, with its tasteful beige and white décor and beds with billowing mosquito nets, is African chic



Barefoot cocktails: Guests kick off their shoes at Benguerua Lodge's beach bar and enjoy built-in views of the passing parade

IN THE PICTURE



Jewel-bright Bazaruto Archipelago: Benguerua North Point from the air

at its best. There are no marble steps and sterile lobbies here: this is your eco-friendly luxury hideaway. The resorts serve ocean platters: lobster mornay, fried prawns with lime seasoning, grilled tuna, marinated garfish. For those with a taste for action, there are fishing charters for cuda, tuna and kingfish, as well as deep-sea diving at coral reefs with names such as Manta Ray, Rainbow Runner and Turtle Ridge. Then there are horse-riding

treks, snorkelling and dhow cruises. My partner and I are lazy. A plate of fresh prawns and garopa lures us to 'our resort's semi-open dining cabana, set on the edge of the beach.

Afterwards, the sun still relentless, we opt to spend our first afternoon under the shade of our cabana's broly.

We watch a dhow sailing slowly past and a fisherman mending his net on the beach. Most guests have disappeared to escape the afternoon heat. Disappear-

ing, too, is the traditional culture of the local Tsonga people. As one of 16 Mozambican tribes, the Tsonga are believed to have been in the south of Mozambique since the 15th century.

They once lived in small independent chiefdoms and relied on fishing for subsistence. Today, while many still make a living from fishing, others grow coconut palms and cashew trees. The younger islanders are eager to leave the islands for Vilanculos to find work in the resorts. But while the islanders try to maintain their lifestyles, environmental groups (including the WWF, South African National Trust and Endangered Wildlife Trust) attempt to be balanced in their conservation efforts. They control long-line fishing, sales of shellfish and traditional fishing methods while protecting the interests of the locals. With a growing number of resorts and visitors, this will be difficult.

But life's easy for resort guests. One morning we take a dhow to nearby Bazaruto Island where dunes soar high above the beach and, from the top, the blues of the sea and sky rival a paint company's colour swatches.

Even my partner, who struggles with the concept of watermelon pink, admits that multiple synonyms for azure are necessary. We return to our dhow and sail lazily to Two Mile Reef (nothing is done quickly here), the deckhand snoozing until we must anchor. We don masks and snorkels and slip overboard, and come face-to-face with vivid aqua, orange and yellow-striped fish.

Back at our resort we feast on the colour of dusk: fiery orange and reds (the unbeatable archetypal African sunset). At Benguerua Lodge, a 1km saunter up the beach, we sip on a cocktail at the beach bar, a cleverly renovated dhow. The next day we hike to the opposite side of the island. It's hard going; the temperature soars as we head inland. After walking over the airfield — a crude strip of clumpy grasses featuring a white pole with a torn wind flag — we enter the long-grass plains of the savanna. A few minutes later we climb through lush tropical growth. From the highest point we look longingly at the saline lakes below, but not too longingly as they are full of small crocodiles.

The tracks lead us to small villages that are strangely deserted, the locals presumably attending to their chores: collecting water, fixing fishing nets. Huts feature brightly painted crude wooden doors and neat shell gardens. We pass by the flamingo flats, where flocks gather to feed before taking off in a pink fluffy haze.

Back at the cabins we are roused by loud voices. An Austrian film crew is staying at our resort; they have been filming all day and are basking on the sand. Next to them a camera is set up on the beach. The turquoise water and white beach stretches behind and a boy walks past with a dozen fresh fish on a stick slung over his shoulder. The cameraman jumps up and runs to his camera. He's seen the perfect clichéd image and he's not going to miss capturing it on celluloid. His mobile phone goes off just as he's poised to film. While he juggles his two technological gizmos, he gesticulates urgently at the boy to stop so as not to miss the perfect shot.

The young fisherman, on his way to deliver his catch to a nearby resort, looks anxiously at the fish but does what he's told and waits uncomfortably. Finally the camera rolls. The cameraman nods his head and the boy is free to move on.

I am furious at seeing how the cameraman treats the boy but can see, too, the appeal of this scene. For this really is *the* image of the Bazaruto Archipelago. Forget Mozart and chocolate. The cliché of a tropical paradise can be true after all.

www.bazaruto-archipelago.com

THE BEST CASTAWAY LODGINGS

Benguerua Lodge, Benguerua Island: A barefoot, eco-friendly hideaway, pictured, with 13 thatched-roof chalets nestled amid milkwood and acacia trees with views of beach and Benguerua Bay from their verandas. Separate lounge, dining room and bar housed in main lodge. More: www.benguerua.co.za.

Indigo Bay Resort, Bazaruto Island: The most luxurious of options with 24 beach chalets and all services, from sunset cruises and diving lessons to cocktails by the piano bar. Facilities include satellite television, airconditioning and telephones. More: www.indigobayresort.com.

Pestana Bazaruto Lodge, Bazaruto Island: Prince Harry and Chelsy Davy were recent guests at this hideaway with four-star A-frame thatched bungalows, each with a section of private beach. Resort services are on tap in the main lodge. More: www.pestana.com.

