

**C**LEARING IMMIGRATION AT Mocimboa da Praia in northern Mozambique is an eerie experience.

There is nothing here: no other aircraft, no passengers. House martins and swallows circle a solitary control tower. A predatory hawk wheels high overhead.

It is hard to register that this embracing silence is relatively new. Only 20 years ago, this derelict military airfield, an hour and a half's flight from the border with Tanzania, was a hotspot in a 15-year civil war that witnessed a million deaths in Mozambique and millions of people fleeing their homes.

Now, though, the sound of an aircraft coming in to land over the empty red roads sends only wild animals running for cover. Children wave from village paths and women look up casually from their gardens.

The 1992 peace accords have ushered in nothing short of a miracle. The country is stable and slowly beginning to prosper. Tourism – a key mover in the economic recovery – is flourishing, drawn by the undeveloped beauty of Mozambique's coast and a burgeoning number of South African-inspired luxury lodges.

Fifteen minutes' flight from here, in the Quirimbas Archipelago, is Vamizi, one of the most remote and most remarkable of all Mozambique's luxury destinations.

Vamizi Island greets us with a welcome of butterflies. It has been raining and the dense vegetation is celebrating with a kaleidoscope of uttering colours. The air itself,



# Get ready for the dive of your life

**MOZAMBIQUE** From the school pool to the spectacular waters of the Indian Ocean: not bad for a pair of learner divers, says **Isabella Tree**, as she and her family fall for the barefoot luxury of lush Vamizi Island

thick with transpiration, smells green. We bump along safari-style in a reconditioned Land Rover, with boxes of supplies in the back, for the 40-minute drive to the lodge on the far side of the island. On either side of us, sour plum and fever trees erupt with the echoing booms of samango monkeys. The samangos' forest habitat is rapidly disappearing in Africa, and during Mozambique's civil war they were hunted to within a hair's breadth of extinction. But on Vamizi, away from the rattle of AK-47s, nature was safe. With their long, elegant tails and distinctive white throats flashing through the trees, samangos share the island with 140 bird species (a third of them indigenous),

**Top left, diving off Vamizi, which has some of the world's best dive sites. Above, many goods are ferried to the island by dhow**

two species of turtle and three varieties of snake.

The island's untouched wildlife is one of its prime draws, but it's the marine world, in particular, that we want to see. With exceptional reefs and clear waters in two square kilometres of community marine reserve, Vamizi has some of the best diving in the world. Our two teenagers, halfway through their PADI diving courses in the school swimming pool, are set to take their first open-water plunge in the Indian Ocean.

'Hi, I'm Hungry.' Vamizi's manager was waiting to greet us. He was not, thankfully, complaining about the provisions, but introducing himself. It's the ➤



► name the well-nourished white South African had been given by Zulus, impressed by his apparently insatiable appetite.

Hungry had originally come to Vamizi to work on the construction of the lodge. All the buildings are made on-site from materials sourced in Mozambique. Where other tourist developments down the coast resorted to the ease of prefabs delivered in flatpicks from South Africa, Vamizi opted for the infinitely more challenging route. The result is spectacularly stylish and idiosyncratic. Beneath the vast, vaulted makuti-thatch roof of the main lodge, supported by gigantic timber posts, hand-tooled sofas piled high with linen cushions seem tailor-made for long evening sundowners.

Everything is open-air and the wildlife mingles with the guests. Dangling from the eaves, the peculiarly testicular-shaped nests of weaver birds emit an incessant burble of domestic squabbling. As Elizabeth, our personal housekeeper, leads us to our rooms, a harmless green snake eyes us cautiously from a hibiscus shrub beside the dining room. Along the beach, she steers us carefully around the green turtles' nests. Vamizi runs a turtle-monitoring programme and as the hatchlings emerge, guests will be invited to help count, tag and release the tiny reptiles into the sea.

Like the other 13 rooms, ours is an impressive timber-floored villa

on stilts, hidden in the trees just off the beach. Under high thatch roofs, the bedrooms spread like wings either side of an open-air sitting room. The beds are gigantic, under gently rotating ceiling fans that send mosquito-net curtains billowing like the sails of a dhow. Even the marble in the open-shower bathrooms is locally sourced. Our veranda has deep sofas, double sunbeds strewn with kikois and sunhats, a library of coffee-table books and a well-stocked mini-bar.

Yet despite the creature comforts, there are aspects the well-heeled traveller would find disconcerting. There is no swimming pool, room service, air-con, television, sound system or in-room wireless internet. With dinner served on the beach under the stars, 'barefoot luxury' is taken to its literal extreme.

The children are desperate to get into the water, but since it's too late in the day to organise a dive, we make do with a short boat trip out



*Clockwise from above: a villa at Vamizi Island lodge; a samango monkey; Isabella Tree and her son catch supper*

to the reef for a snorkel. Overboard, the magic of the marine world springs into life. Gigantic coral bommies like ectopic brains power up from the sandy seabed. Around them billow clouds of refracting colour – curtains of clownfish, soldierfish and oriental grunts. Our guide, Paulo, leads us through them, seal-like, tiny bubbles trapped in his dreadlocks, pointing out sea cucumbers, giant clams, moray eels, puffer fish and fantail rays.

This profusion is extraordinary. The reefs around Vamizi and the other 31 islands in the Quirimbas Archipelago sustain 46 genera of coral and more than 400 species of fish – more than half the number of reef-associated species in the whole of Mozambique. Surveys recently identified the Quirimbas coral reef ecosystem as one of the healthiest in the world, abundant with 'indicator' species – the ones most sensitive to the effects of over-fishing, pollution, temperature and changes in pH. The effect on the surrounding waters of the Indian Ocean is crucial. The islands' mangroves and fields of seagrass are nurseries for fry and marine invertebrates that go on to replenish the seas off Mozambique, areas already intensively over-fished. Ironically, one of the contributing factors to marine decimation in the country stems from Bill Gates' anti-malaria campaign: fishermen are using the fine-mesh mosquito nets donated by his foundation to scoop up even the tiniest fry. ►

➤ Exploring the archipelago over a decade ago, Vamizi Lodge's founders – Jean Louis Masurel, a French former banker; Christopher Cox, a British marketing executive turned conservationist; and his wife, Julie Garnier, a French wildlife vet – realised they had stumbled on a remarkable wilderness in need of protection. In 2001 they set up the Maluane Project, an enterprise bringing together private investors, the Zoological Society of London and the local community.

Villagers on Vamizi and the surrounding islands now patrol the reefs, protecting them from predation by fishermen coming in from outside the area. Of the 135 people employed directly by Vamizi Lodge, 74 are local, and many more villagers are involved in providing handicrafts, baking bread, or ferrying goods by dhow. The project runs a village school, a women's group, and community development programmes.

But the founders' original aim of establishing a 'deep green' eco-lodge on Vamizi has, perhaps inevitably, been compromised by the quite considerable logistics of operating out here, miles from anywhere. There is no fresh water on the island and, while this means it is blissfully untroubled by mosquitoes and malaria-free, the lodge has to rely on its own hefty desalination plant. Drinking water is supplied to guests in small plastic bottles – the lodge goes through 6,000 a month – though there are plans to set up a bottling plant using recycled glass. Power is provided from diesel generators, with fuel ferried from the mainland every week in big drums.

Sourcing food of a standard dictated by a five-star enterprise can also be a problem. There is fish in abundance, of course – yellowfin tuna, wahoo, mahi-mahi, dorado, kingfish. Guests can cast for their supper in the open seas beyond the reef (the chef is a wizard with sashimi), and a community project has been set up on the mainland to grow fruit and vegetables specifically for the lodge. But supplies can be unreliable and exotic ingredients, including meat, have to be flown in 3,000km from South Africa.

However, the project is still in its infancy. The lodge was opened in 2005 (and a short time later visited by Nelson Mandela and his wife, Graça Machel, a native Mozambican and widow of an ex-president of the country), and hopes are that as local businesses and infrastructures develop, Vamizi's dependence on long-distance supplies will diminish.

Cédric, the French dive master, is an underwater mime artist. His eye contact and hand gestures, as expressive as Marcel Marceau, communicate a sense of calm, measured awareness. Before long, the children are preparing for the big one, where the diving – he assures them – will be 'crazy, crazy'.

Neptune's Arm is consistently nominated as one of the world's top 10 dive sites. A vertical wall descending thousands of metres to the deep ocean floor and swept by strong rips, the site is not usually for the novice; but we are lucky. We have a neap tide, which means minimal currents, and though the 40-minute ride out in the open boat is far from smooth – 'Sheet, eet's wuff' becomes the catchphrase of the holiday – once we tip backwards into the water, all is calm.

We drop down to 30 metres and Cédric and Paulo lead us between towering pinnacles waving with soft corals, shedding incessant waterfalls of long-nose emperors, snappers and batfish. Starbursts of goldies

punctuate clouds of hallucinatory bannerfish and oriental sweetlips. Gardens of anemones harbour designer flatworms and exotically patterned nudibranchs. For a while, a hawksbill turtle flaps languorously alongside us. Against the deepening distance ghostly patrols of barracuda flit back and forth. For a few brief seconds, a grey reef shark materialises from the blue, then shimmies back into oblivion.

We celebrate our breathtaking dive by gorging on barbecued rock lobsters at Muntu Nkulu, the spectacular, Robinson Crusoe-style pavilion built by Hungry from driftwood and sun-bleached, upside-down casuarina trees on the south of the island. We're not the only ones in a feeding frenzy. Metres offshore, a pod of humpback dolphin is diving for flatfish hidden in the sand. Squadrons of dragonflies – nature's fly repellent, according to Hungry – zigzag over the beach. They are swooped on, in turn, by olive bee-eaters.

On our last evening the children head off to hunt for Vamizi's giant nocturnal coconut crabs, the only rare creature we haven't yet seen on the island, though their burrows are much in evidence in the mangroves behind our rooms. The crabs are regarded as a delicacy elsewhere, but the locals here leave them alone. Tradition has it that if you eat one, you will never leave the island. 📍

## VAMIZI THE LOWDOWN

### STAYING THERE

A villa (sleeps four) on Vamizi (01285 762218; [www.vamizi.com](http://www.vamizi.com)) costs from US\$1,672 per night all-inclusive.


### GETTING THERE

**Africa Odyssey** (020 7471 8780; [www.africaodyssey.com](http://www.africaodyssey.com)) offers a nine-day trip from £4,480 per person, all-inclusive, including internal flights and transfers to and from Dar es Salaam.


**Audley Travel** (01993 838000; [www.audleytravel.com](http://www.audleytravel.com)) offers seven nights (six nights in Vamizi and one night in Dar es Salaam) from £4,410 per person (based on two sharing).

including full-board accommodation, flights, transfers and some activities.

**British Airways** ([www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) and **Kenya Airways** ([www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) both fly from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam. Vamizi has a private plane from there, with times linked to the BA schedule.

 **Journey time** 9 hours 50 mins to Dar es Salaam and about 2 hours 30 mins to Vamizi.

### WEATHER TO GO

 The warmest months are October to April, with average temperatures of between 27 and 30°C.

