

A quiet beauty beneath Mozambique's scars

The African state's war-torn history has left its mark, but tourism is aiding the recovery, reports **Lisa Grainger**

anding at Nampula airport, it is difficult to believe that Mozambique is one of the five poorest countries in the world. Parked beside the runway are two sleek Gulfstream V jets and alongside them a private seaplane into which linen-clad tourists climb.

Although in the south and centre of the country there is still unrest, in the north there is little sign of the country's former Marxist ideology, of the scars of the civil war that ended 21 years ago or of its poverty. In this Cabo Delgado region, gas deposits have resulted in a mini-boom, with new housing, paved roads and improved airports and port facilities. In 2012, the country's economy grew by 7 per cent. And in 2010 more than 1.7 million tourists visited. Half were from neighbouring South Africa, keen to explore beaches, reefs and islands even more beautiful than those at home. An increasing number are from Britain, lured by the promise of sunshine, Portuguese rose, and some of the biggest lobsters on Earth.

Flying over Mozambique's northernmost territory in a small plane is one of life's greatest treats. Over the grasslands, fires rage towards the horizon as farmers prepare the bush for cultivation. Wide rivers snake their way through mangroves, spilling into crescent beaches. Sandbanks and islands litter the 1,550-mile (1,850km) coastline, with clear turquoise waters revealing deep walls of coral and an occasional passing whale. Every now and then, a blob of cream stands out against the blindingly blue water: the cotton sail of a dugout or a row, riding the trade winds of the Indian Ocean as they have done for centuries.

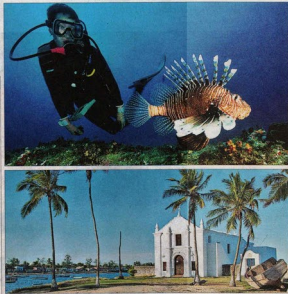
Although foreign explorers have landed on these shores for more than 500 years, it was not the interior that interested them but

the deep-water ports at which they could collect gold, ivory, amber, mahane indigo cloth and captured men and women, and take on fresh supplies. In Mozambique, two islands were popular docking spots for the slaves: Ilho and Ilha de Moçambique. The latter became the country's capital after Portuguese explorers annexed the territory in 1605.

You can sail to it from the mainland on a rustic, single-sailed dhow from the boutique Coral Lodge. The views can't have changed much for centuries. At one end, the Fort of San Sebastian looms over the channel, cannons bristling through walls that protect the southern hemisphere's oldest church, Nossa Senhora de Beluarte, built in 1522. The wharves are lined with large, eerie coral-block warehouses, now thankfully empty of human cargo. A newly painted church spire – its restoration a result of the island's status as a Unesco World Heritage Site – provides a bright visual beacon from the sea. And at the other end of the half-mile spit of land, the crescent and star of a mosque rise above the thatch of an African village.

While the Portuguese were initially successful in converting the population to Roman Catholicism, when Arab slave traders refused to take Muslims, Islam became popular. Today, more than 95 per cent of the coastal population is Muslim: when we visit, during Ramadan, hundreds spill from the mosque at sunset, women swathed in bright capriote fabrics, and calls to prayer echo over the small town.

At one end of the island, the traditional thatched housing is packed with residents. But at the other end, colonial double storeys lie in ruins. Once the port had become too small for big modern ships and the capital had moved to Maputo, the trading



Clockwise from above: the Church of San Antonio; delights of the deep; boats moored off Vamizi Island; high spirits on one of Mozambique's many beaches; traditional painted dhows

families from Portugal, India, China and Oman who once lived here departed, leaving the pastel porticoes and gables to crumble or be invaded by stranger lights. A few buildings have been renovated. Some have been bought by entrepreneurial remnants seduced by the island's gentle dhow, who stayed to create guesthouses, a couple of bars, and the island's first boutique hotel, Villa Sands. Marcus Antman, the Swedish architect and part-owner of Villa Sands, was on a mission to visit all of the world's Unesco World Heritage Sites when he found one he couldn't leave. The island has changed remarkably in eight years, he says. "Then, the only public light was in the bank and if a car came on to the

island, you wondered who it was. Now you hear music, motorcycles, there's an ATM. It's quiet, but not deathly silent any more." But then, part of the joy of visiting Mozambique is that it is not perfect – and tourism is still in its infancy. On Ilho and Ilha de Moçambique, the northern coast is relatively unexplored (hence the state of the roads: the 240-mile (418km) journey from Pemba to Coral Lodge took almost nine hours, with a stop-off to change a stripped tyre).

Until the roads are fixed, it is fun sitting beside the pilot of a small plane and flying low over turquoise lagoons on to tiny islands

and lobster after a day swimming among turtles and giant purple-lipped clams. The real beauty in Mozambique is below the water. Paolo Mazzanetti, the divermaster from Vamizi who accompanied me 70ft (21m) down, pointed out multicoloured creatures ranging from a blue-spotted moray eel with a head as thick as a leg, to finger-stained striped nudibranchs. He told me that divers here see as much in an hour as they might in most other spots in the world. (One site, Neptune's Arm, has been classed as one of the top 10 diving spots in the world.)

The ocean teems with creatures, particularly from September to December, when the marine, sailfish, dorado, king and queenfish launch

themselves above the waters. In June, there are also tuna. I landed my own, having fought it with red and line for 40 minutes, and was later presented with it in the form of sushi (the best ever). When not fishing on Vamizi, we talked conservation matters with researchers for the Worldwide Fund for Nature. We even helped them to release newly hatched turtles into the sea. Two ladies made it from their nest, so we carried them to the ocean side and watched them scot across the sand, then swim into the waves.

They're not the only inhabitants benefiting from tourism in these remote parts. Everywhere we went, people told us how tourism was providing jobs, education,

clinics and information about new fishing practices. "If you came 20 years ago, we had nothing but our recent freedom," said one driver, Ansumane Mahandis, whose skills at avoiding potholes, goats, bicycles and police roadblocks were as impressive as his patriotism. "Tourism is helping us build our country, and for that we have to thank you for helping us." The pleasure, Ansumane, was all ours.

Sheep Travel (01 255 882992, sheeptraveltourism.com) offers a 12-night trip to Mozambique, staying three nights at Coral Lodge, four nights on a dhow safari, two nights at Ilho Island Lodge and three nights at Vamizi Island, for £7,200pp, including full board, a return British Airways flight to Johannesburg and all transfers.



Essentials

When to go
April to September are drier and cooler; around Christmas and in the first two months of the year, rain can be torrential.

Flying time and time difference
Ten hours from Britain to Johannesburg, plus two hours 10 minutes to Pemba. GMT plus two hours.

Getting there
There are several overnight flights, including British Airways (ba.com), Virgin Atlantic (virginatlantic.com) and South African Airways (saa.com). From London to Johannesburg that connect with flights to Pemba and Nampula. Alternative routes are via Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. The national airline, LAM, is notoriously unreliable. Where possible, use Airlink (airlink.com) and South African Airways (saa.com) from Johannesburg. Kempes Airways from Nairobi (kempesairways.com) or Coastal Aviation (coastal.co.za) from Dar es Salaam. International customers can only be cleared in Maputo, Beira and Nampula, so international passports have to be stamped in one of these airports.

Coral Lodge
Contemporary, sleekly designed 10-villa thatched lodge on the mainland opposite the island. Mozambique, alongside acres of beach, with a dhow for sunset trips, spacious romantic rooms for malaria, in water there are few mosquitoes. Dorycycine is a useful prophylactic for this area, as it acts also as an antibiotic.

Vamizi
The most luxurious accommodation in Mozambique, with eight capacious thatched

driving around those areas is not advised (check gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/mozambique for updates).

Where to stay
Ilho Island Lodge
Relaxed, unpretentious, colonial-style 11-bedroom guesthouse, with high ceilings, four poster beds, two big pools and a rooftop terrace. The best rooms are sea-facing (00 258 2696 0549; ilholdelodge.com; double rooms from \$590/£361). A seven-night package costs from \$1,615/£915 per person, including four nights camping on a dhow safari, four nights at Ilho Island Lodge and full board, but excluding drinks).

Where to eat and drink
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Further information
Visit Guide by Philip Briggs and Ross Webster (briggs-travel.co.uk; www.vistamozambique.net).

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