TATLER

Edited by ISSY VON SIMSON *and* MELINDA STEVENS

PRIVATE ESCAPES

Wouldn't it be completely awesome if somebody just whipped together a list of the prettiest, loveliest, smartest, coolest houses to rent, all over the world? From the ones you need at your fingertips right now (the British weekender cottages and the villas in the Med) to the ones you don't even know you want yet, but you will (a little Goan colonial number or a Canadian heli-skiing whopper). So here it is. Ta-dah! The most unbelievably helpful feature you will read this month – in fact, probably this year. These are the crash pads that will actually make your holiday feel like a holiday. Please cut it out and keep it, every page. Pin it to the fridge. Staple it to your son's forehead. Tattoo it up your arm. Hiring a house can be a gamble, so we've taken away the risk and tried the very best, you lucky, lucky people...

SULUWILO HOUSE, VAMIZI, MOZAMBIQUE

LEFT, SULUWILO'S SUNDECK AND POOL. *RIGHT*, DRINKS SERVED AT SULUWILO. *FAR RIGHT*, CREW PREPARE THEIR DHOW FOR A DAY TRIP

OFF THE MAP

Want to know something super-cool? There's a new mini-Mustique on the horizon – a tiny, far-flung isle that's all barefoot fabulousness and IMPOSSIBLY smart villas. By Agnes Simpson

Photographs by CHRIS CALDICOTT

Vamizi Island is a dot of sand and jungle in the middle of the Indian Ocean, in Mozambique's Quirimbas archipelago, miles and miles away from anything at all. Solitude of this degree even extends to the technology: wi-fi is nothing but a capricious flirt; try phoning someone and you sound 15 feet underwater. But isn't it lovely to be so remote? When every spare scrap of the Maldives is bestridden with stilted villas, and the Seychelles is rampant with honeymooners, it's heaven to find a patch of unexplored paradise, a place so untouched and deliciously off-map that your friends couldn't spell it. And even better to call it home.

Because Vamizi – in all its castaway glory – is setting down markers to become the new, eco-friendly, mini-Mustique. Using the Caribbean island's model (privately owned and fastidiously regulated) as a blueprint, the plan is to build private villas at a rate of just two or three a year, selling them off-plan and hush-hush via a strict vetting process to hideously successful, low-profile types who then rent them out during the months of the year that they're not in residence. In fact, Vamizi is already so oversubscribed that the books have been closed. Of course, it's not quite like that Caribbean glitter ball. Far, far from the madding crowd, and a conservationist's dream, this island is a very different fish altogether – 7.5 miles long, just over half a mile wide, surrounded by pristine coral reefs and with some of the best deep-sea fishing and diving on the planet. It was stumbled upon in 1998 by businessman Christopher Cox and his wildlife veterinarian wife Julia Garnier. Staggered by the area's natural beauty, they managed to secure the Maluane Concession, a group of three islands in the archipelago, of which Vamizi is the largest. It opened as a fantastically upmarket eco-lodge in 2005, with 13 freestanding thatched rooms scattered along the beach (a tremendously tricky undertaking, considering that the place had no fresh water, roads or building materials).

Ecology colours every thought at Vamizi. The new private villas are being built under strict regulations, working to particular dimensions and within set designs. As Ryan Pape, the operations manager, says: 'It is a wilderness haven and the people who are looking to buy a villa get that. These are not Russian oligarchs who are going to bring their megayacht.' If your idea of purgatory is listening to the incessant whine of water sports, or a boom box on a cruiser moored next to what was, until half an hour ago, your very own desert island, then this will be music to your aggrieved ears. 'This isn't going to be a playground for people just to go on their boats,' adds Ryan. 'There will be no jet skis.'

Which is why Vamizi has garnered a starry following to rival Mustique's (this might be an eco-lodge but it ain't cheap). Recent visitors include Prince Albert of Monaco, Lady Helen Taylor, Daniel Craig (who left a signed photo in the dive centre that reads, 'A piece of my heart remains on Vamizi'), the Qatari royal family, and Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana. When I visited, one of the Wildenstein scions dropped by on his private plane. And Emma Watson had just skipped off back to London. The two existing villas here are already sold – to Vamizi's shareholders – and the island's management is being awfully secretive about who has put their name down for the rest. They are selling via word of

mouth rather than flashy marketing – the stealth approach is far chicer.

But even if we can't wangle our way onto that list, these villas are still very good news for the rest of us. In the most basic terms, Vamizi is a holiday rental with all the best bits thrown in. This includes a full retinue of staff (private chef, butler, masseur, craniosacral therapist, an ex-E&O food manager), activities like deep-sea fishing, nature walks, diving, kayaking and yoga, and enough beach-barbecued lobster and South African sauvignon blanc to sink a ship. It's the chance to live the desert-island dream – but with a much higher thread count and fabulous neighbours just down the beach.

There are only two private villas on Vamizi at the moment – Kipila and Suluwilo – and a further two were being built when I was there (seemingly by mice with kid gloves, since I heard nary a squeak of building work). Kipila is a house that keeps its secrets. From the outside, the series of white, modernist blocks – topped with grey-wood shingle and a Corbusier-chic lookout tower clearing the casuarinas – give no hint of what's inside. What is inside is a blissful space, more sky and sea than wall and roof. Designed by a Cape Town firm, it's all stylish colonialism, dark wood and floaty muslin.

Facing the beach, the villa is set back in the trees, ensuring the sand and its turtle-hatching sites are protected (Vamizi is the ne plus ultra of eco-lodges – the WWF even has a permanent base on the island). Walkways float above the garden, where palms and tropical evergreens grow out of red soil and sweet little weaver birds swoop through the house from one end to the other, chips of sunlight on the wing. Fever trees weave up through the floor at times, branching overhead to provide shade. Separated by tall, slatted (sustainably grown) umbila-wood panels, the vast living room and dining room have high beamed ceilings, hung with coconut-shell chandeliers and lazily turning fans. Daybeds and squishy sofas are flung with striped blue cushions. This is Africa channelled through a European aesthetic, with tribal maps hanging in frames, and dining room chairs upholstered in snappy local textiles. Outside by the small splash pool, wicker scoops in the B&B Italia mode hang from the trees, inviting you to dangle away an afternoon. There's even a cocktail bar with a louvered opening and stools – perfect for sundowners.

The whole island is about a reduction to bare, environmentally friendly necessities. There's no air-con – the wind through the slatted wood walls does the work for you – nor glass in the windows. The beds have a mosquito net to keep the bugs away (though a large green cricket took up residence during my stay) and the island is malaria-free. Sleeping up to 12, the vast, unfussy bedrooms are reached via walkways off the main house. In each, there's a big white sofa, a driftwood coffee table and an outside terrace for private sunbathing. There's no TV, obviously, or in-room iPads/Pods. And the bathroom at the back of the room reveals yet more surprises – no back wall! The bathtub and shower face a small, enclosed garden; there's another sofa for more lounging and an outdoor shower.

All this inside-outside living takes some getting used to for a city dweller. When you're lying in bed, the urban cacophony is replaced by the sound of crashing waves or the whistle of birds. You become as quickly adapted to island life as a member of the Swiss Family Robinson.

And that's what they want here at Vamizi – families, groups of friends, gangs who respect the island's barefoot ideals, who are looking for a sense of adventure. Exploring Neptune's Arm is a scuba diver's wet dream, with towering pinnacles clouded with every colour and specimen of underwater life. Kayaking up the estuary that slips inland from the wilderness beach at Muntu Nkulu – through smoky-dark water, past mangrove swamps and thick forests where monkeys stare as you glide quietly by – is a magically spooky *Heart of Darkness* experience. Then there are the nature trails, with terrier-sized coconut crabs that skitter into the undergrowth at the sound of your steps, and kingfishers that flirt and flitter. There are miles of beaches to walk, right up to the lighthouse, where whales pass by during mating season, or through shallows where silver eels snap at darting fish. There's not a soul to be seen. No sunbeds, parasols, beach bars or rows of bronzing bodies – and the cleanest, whitest sand you've ever seen. Abandoned by the tide are tiny shards of coral, the jagged smiles of cowrie shells, sea sponges and crooked twigs, all like the upturned contents of a Joseph Cornell box, or a cabinet at Deyrolle.

It's amazing, really, that anyone gets here at all. And yet they do, safe in the knowledge that they're in on the secret. Mustique might have the royals, the Middletons and the Jaggers, but Vamizi has one thing that beats them all – staggering, heart-stopping, wild beauty. Oh, and masses of eco-virtuous bragging rights. What's not to love? ☐

***Sleeps** 12 **Book it** Abercrombie & Kent (0845 618 2162) offers seven nights in a private villa from £4,500 a person, full board, including flights and transfers.*

LEFT, THE LIVING ROOM AT SULUWILO. *RIGHT*, KIPILA'S TERRACE