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Hoodlum fly-fishing

Vamizi Island off Mozambique could give you a world record – if you are brave enough to tackle leviathans such as giant trevally on the fly. Words and pictures by **Jonathan Young**



THE bumper cars braked at the sound of my footfall. A minute, another, and then the click-clacking kicked in as dozens of hermit crabs struggled to find second gear or reverse to continue their beach-side shuntings. Choice of vehicle was limited by size and shell species. The majority had opted for the Ford Fiesta, a small top-shell suitable for the leaner, learner crabs, while the Mr Bigs cruised past in stately fox conches.

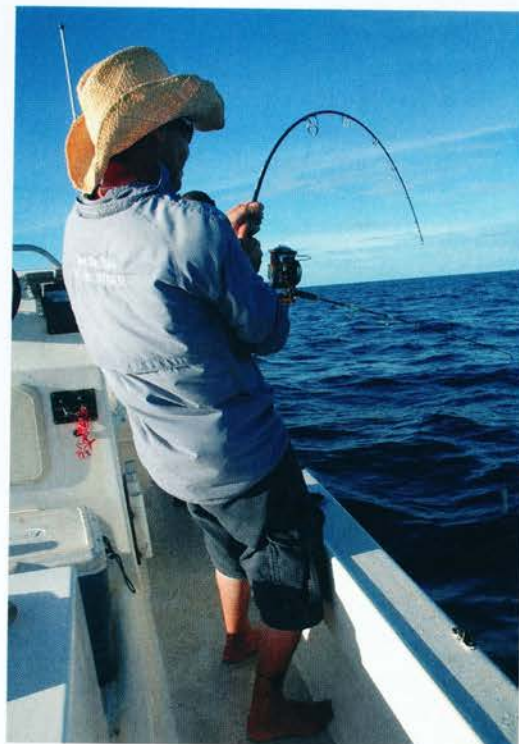
We stepped past the crashing crustacea and paddled along the tideline, 30yd from our beach villa, towards Vamizi's bar, nodding to a couple of land crabs and giving a respectful "good evening" to their cousin, the coconut crab. He was just a teenager but politeness doesn't hurt with an animal that can grow to 9lb and a metre across. He continued his walk through the restaurant, which was reasonable given that the tables and chairs were set out on his sand. Another member of his extended family was, however, refused safe passage: grilled lobster was top of the menu.

We broke open beers and discussed tactics with Stuart King, Vamizi Island's head fishing guide. This was to be a bit of a grudge match: me versus giant trevally, the pitbull of the tropical seas. So far, they'd busted me everywhere from Cuba to Kenya but Vamizi Island seemed the perfect place to boat a brute and even the score.

Lying off the north coast of Mozambique, 12km long and a kilometre wide, it's a glossy bolt-hole for millionaires. But it's also a true desert island with no fresh water; the local population of 1,500 has to buy it from dhow traders at 20 litres a dollar, while a de-salination plant meets the needs of visitors. Samango monkeys survive on this blister of coral rock, sharing the mangroves with sun-birds, wood ants and a confetti of butterflies. Across the achingly white strand into the blue, life is not just abundant it's record-breaking.

"We've had a 175lb giant trevally here," says Stuart King, "and just today the boys and I had two GTs around 50lb, a yellowfin tuna at 32lb and a dogtooth tuna of 60-plus pounds. And just to put that into context, most of the dogtooth run to that sort of size round here – and the world record on fly gear is just 16 kilos. We could break that. Tomorrow."

His enthusiasm was warranted. Before setting out, I'd checked out the island's potential with Ben Granger, owner of the eponymous fishing store next to South Ken Tube and an authority on big-game saltwater fly-fishing. "Vamizi, eh? So far, the Brits haven't really cottoned on to it but it's going to become a hot destination. Those 12wt Orvis rods and reels you've got are great, but I'm going to add



Kevlar loops to your lines and straight-through leaders of 120lb breaking strain. I'm also going to put a really fast sinking line on one of the reels because there is another type of fishing you can do – I call it 'hoodlum fly-fishing' and I have had many big grouper and other species using this technique. Using the fast sink line, get the skipper to trawl slowly along the reef edge. It's a lottery what you catch but make sure you hold on!"

Granger's technique found favour with King. "There are masses of baitfish here and the topography is just right. One minute you're in 10 metres of water, the next it's a kilometre deep. Both the GTs and the dogtooth tuna patrol that drop-off, so if we can get your flies down to them we've got a real chance. The best tides are the day after next. See you then."

This blue-water, hard-core sport is Vamizi's speciality and in May to June they are visited by "huge numbers of yellowfin tuna", according to King. "It's ironic, but the best conservation measure for the yellowfin tuna has been the Somali pirates. The Japanese and Chinese fishing fleets were making huge inroads into the tuna, but they haven't been around for seven years and fish numbers have bounced back. The tuna are great for family trips. I can pick up flocking birds on the satellite, steam

Clockwise from above left: Stuart King bends into a giant trevally; Vamizi's restaurant; a weaver bird weaving; a scuttling hermit crab

straight to them and have five or six people hook-up into tuna at the same time."

The favoured technique round here is "popping", and it is especially effective on giant trevally. A popper the size of a cucumber is retrieved at warp speed on a fixed-spool reel, creating maximum water disturbance. "The GTs think it's panicking baitfish. It's like banging a huge dinner gong – they cannot resist."

For those who prefer fly-fishing from land, Vamizi has a number of private picnic lodges where staff drop guests off with a hamper of cold lobster, salads, wines and beers, all laid out on a white tablecloth. Itineraries are planned so guests need not share with others (visitors have included Emma Watson, Daniel Craig and Tom Hanks) and can be timed to coincide with favourable fishing tides.

Armed with #8 rods, Ryan Pape, Vamizi Lodge's chief operating officer, and I fished the flood, quickly hooking into jack barracuda. "Occasionally, the bigger pelagic species will come right in," advises Pape, "and we have kayaks so that you can follow the baitfish up the creek."

Catching a record-breaker requires more brutal tactics, and at 2pm the following day we were steaming to King's secret fishing marks to nail a dogfin tuna at slack water. King and his boatman, Char, opted for deep-water jigging while I lobbed over a 6in fly attached to a lead-core fly line. Neither method worked, though the jigs were hit twice by unseen ➤

“ ‘We’ve had a 175lb giant trevally, and today the boys and I had two GTs around 50lb’ ”

monsters, the second time by something so big it broke the 80lb line ("possibly a potato grouper," volunteered King). The fly was not a success, as the line could not stay down against the current.

Abandoning the pursuit, we motored to a good mark for GTs and spent the next two hours trying for a take, using both poppers and fly. "I think the problem is the spring tides," said King. "When the giant trevally can, they swim into the mangrove swamps of the mainland and duff up the fry. There's just not the concentration of fish here at the moment. It's been a tough fishing day."

But optimism returns after a couple of GTs (the gin type) and a dish of stewed octopi, the main ingredient winkled out of holes on bent wires by the locals.

The next day, we set off on the afternoon tide to some of King's most reliable marks armed with poppers and steroid-stuffed spinning rods. Chucking slightly against the wind, I managed to boom mine out 60yd but Char and King, casting downwind, were firing their cucumber missiles 100yd plus. Hauling them back against the waves is hard work, but after 12 minutes Char raised an eyebrow. "He's just seen two GTs chase your popper," shouted King, maintaining his own frantic retrieve.

But the fish do not commit and, an hour later, we were contemplating Manica beer, the local brew that matched our growing mood.

We steamed to another spot and this time King has a GT in the boat within 10 minutes. I'd expected a long tussle but he gave it no slack and it came in with ease. "You can't give them any head in the shallow water or they'll cut you on the coral," he explained.

When the fish are present, popping is a devastating technique, with the take often being visible and savage. David Knight, an

investment banker, has chased big-game fish over most of the world and has fished Vamizi with his wife, Jana, for the past three years. Immediately after I'd left, he fished with King for a fortnight, mostly using poppers but also jigging and their tally, according to Knight, included "a 300kg Queensland grouper [a potential world record], a 45kg GT [caught by Jana, a potential world record for a woman], dogtooth tuna up to 40kg, 35kg wahoo, a 15kg blue GT, a 100kg black tip shark on a jig and many smaller GTs, barracuda, red snapper and bonito".

But I still wanted to nail my fish on the fly, so when King boated another giant trevally 20 minutes later, I picked up the #12, hoping that the boys could lure in a GT with the poppers so I could induce the take. It never happened, and while I did catch a couple of yellow trevally they were not the tonic.

But Vamizi cannot be dismissed as a fly-fishing destination. The shoreline sport is enough to transform a swish picnic into an adventure. If we'd hit the neap tides, we'd have caught up with the GTs in numbers. And then there's the lure of being a world-record holder. It's not only the trevally that are giant: pretty much every one of the dogtooth tuna lurking off those reefs would break the world record, if taken on the fly.

That would need time and effort, of course, and absence does not seem to make hearts grow fonder, especially right after the shooting season. But Vamizi Lodge comes with white beaches studded with cowries, chilled and grilled Sancerre and lobster and a battery of beauty treatments. It's rated by a leading travel magazine as a "best honeymoon hotel". Which it might just be, so long as you ensure, as a fisherman, that romance coincides with the right state of tide. ■



MIXING A GT

It costs from £4,187pp for a seven-night stay at Vamizi, including flights from London to Dar es Salaam and internal flights to Vamizi.

The writer's trip was organised by Aardvark Safaris, tel 01578 760222,

www.aardvarksafaris.co.uk;
email alice@aardvarksafaris.com.

It's strongly recommended that you organise all visas before travelling. As you'll be stopping off in mainland Africa, take malaria tablets. For more details about the lodge, go to www.vamizi.com.

If you are staying overnight in Dar es Salaam, book in with Maretha at the excellent Oyster Bay Hotel: www.theoysterbayhotel.com.

To get the local low-down, email the guide, Stuart King, at stuartking77@gmail.com; stuartkingsafaris.com. As well as fishing, he organises wing-shooting and "African Macnabs": a buffalo, a brace of guineafowl and a tigerfish caught with a fly fashioned from the first two.

■ Fly-fishing kit: the writer used Orvis 912-4 Helios and Access rods balanced with Hydros and Mirage reels, which received the guide's approval. Call 0844 557 4188; www.orvis.co.uk. For ancillary tackle, including flies, and first-class, first-hand advice, speak to Ben Granger at Grangers Fishing Tackle, 46 Thurloe Street, London SW7 2LT, tel 020 7584 9666; www.grangersfishing.com.

■ Spinning kit: David Knight (pictured left) recommends big custom poppers from www.saltywatertackle.com with Japanese and American custom-made GT rods with Shimano 18000 Stellas using 70kg coloured braid attached to three-point leader: 150lb hollow cord; 200lb twisted mono; 300lb single mono.