



Boats built with available resources have barely disturbed this part of the Indian Ocean for generations. As barriers are broken, change is bound to follow.



O N T H E E D G E O F
F O R G O T T E N

A 30-YEAR CONFLICT COULD HAVE WIPED OUT THIS GROUP OF ISLANDS OFF MOZAMBIQUE. BUT NATURE SAVED ITSELF, PROTECTING AN AMAZING PLACE WHERE FEW HAVE GONE.

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ISLANDS
WE NEVER
KNEW
africa



Mainland Mozambique is no stranger to the rest of the world (right), but the tides have left a unique, if not miraculous, mark on islands like Magaruque (left).

THE ISLANDS MUST NOT WANT ME.

In an open-air bar at what feels like the end of the Earth, a man named Track Armor is plying me with fiery piri-piri chicken and chips, the de facto national dish of Mozambique, as a thunderstorm on the Indian Ocean clatters palm fronds overhead like bowling pins. We were supposed to cross over from this coastal town of Vilankulo to Magaruque Island. But then came the rain, and the wind. A boat ride would likely end badly on a sandbar, so Track, the island caretaker who is also reopening the historic Hotel Dona Ana here, insists on putting me up.

“Pity to miss a night on Magaruque,” Track says.

For another 12 hours, the Bazaruto Archipelago

will remain where it’s always been: out of reach.

A thin man with wire spectacles and proper Queen’s English, Track grew up in neighboring Zimbabwe when it was still Rhodesia and survived the country’s infamous Bush War. Now he travels throughout Africa setting up lodges for his boss, John Bredenkamp, a Zimbabwean tycoon. Also at the table is John Mellet, a cinder block of a man who fought in the Special Air Services during the war. He is Magaruque’s handyman.

The fact that shrewd hands like these from old Africa are driving Mozambique’s travel industry speaks to the country’s place as a tourism newcomer.

While nearby countries do booming safari business, Mozambique might as well be blacked out on the map. Its islands are even more mysterious. When I heard whispers about the raw beauty of the Bazaruto Archipelago, I had to see firsthand how a place with so much to offer could be such a void.

The answer starts to be revealed at the dinner table. The men tell me how the country was devastated by the three-decades-long war that erupted in the 1960s with its fight for independence from Portugal, and how a subsequent civil war took a million lives, reduced the country to rubble, and turned wildlife to bones and ghosts. The country is still trying to rebound from its own history.

“Mozambique is a country of broken dreams and promises. It’s slow and unpredictable,” Track says.

“On the other hand, there’s so much free space, so much potential.”

And with that the question for me changes: How can a place this isolated shed such a difficult past?

THE SUN IS SEARING LIKE A BROILER NINE HOURS later as we motor 6 miles from Vilankulo out to sea. In the distance, a giant, partially submerged sand dune shimmers like a mirage on a cerulean plain. The speedboat cuts a shallow trough in waters as glassy as a bottle of Bombay gin. From time to time, manta rays drift under our path like passing cloud shadows.

Pedro Naif Cuinhane, the caretaker who’s been working on Magaruque for 26 years, meets me at the water’s edge. Before I can turn to thank the boat captain, he has sped off in a burst of urgency.



IF YOU'RE CURIOUS
The Bazaruto Archipelago was once on the cusp of glory. The rocky islet of Santa Carolina, aka Paradise Island, was the site of a palatial hotel built in the early 1950s. Bob Dylan is said to have written the song "Mozambique" on the hotel's grand piano, which has since been moved to Anantara. The hotel itself was shuttered in 1973 at the outset of the war, and all that remains is a spooky bombed-out shell.

IF YOU'RE SERIOUS
Getting here is neither complicated nor quick. Fly to Johannesburg from major U.S. hubs on South African Airways (saa.com). Then it's a direct flight to Vilankulo, Mozambique, and a memorable ride to one of the islands. Large groups can rent all of Magaruque (magaruqueisland.com). Anantara (bazaruto.anantara.com) offers horseback riding on the dunes and snorkeling too amazing to describe. And Azura Benguerra (azura retreats.com) fronts some of the most incredible beaches imaginable.

Pedro shows me the property, which consists of a large thatch-roofed villa and three smaller bungalows set behind an infinity pool. The island has been open to the public for barely a year.

"Until then," Pedro says, "it was Mr. Bredenkamp's personal family getaway."

After getting settled, I return to the pool patio with a glass of rosé and almost drop it at what I see: The ocean, the one I just crossed to get here, has vanished. The tide has rushed out, leaving a patchwork of turquoise wading pools and snowy dunes to the horizon.

"It's possible to walk back to Vilankulo at low tide," Pedro says. He explains that in 2000 the cyclone Leon-Eline shoveled the channel, once 80 yards deep, almost full of sand. It's problematic for boats, which explains my captain's hurry to leave, but it's also one of the most extraordinary views I've ever beheld, like watching an impressionistic painting in progress. The panorama isn't unlike Mozambican tourism in general, devastatingly raw and beautiful but still so new that it's unclear how it will turn out.

There's not much to do on Magaruque besides relax and study the sea. It takes only an hour to walk around the entire island, which, like the channel, is composed of blown-in sand. That makes for broad, sugary beaches the entire way, with thousands of flamingos poised like a field of pink lollipops. When I pass through a tiny fishing village along the way, the people keep their distance, ducking into thatch-roofed huts as I draw near, and I have the feeling they're watching me from the darkened doorwells.

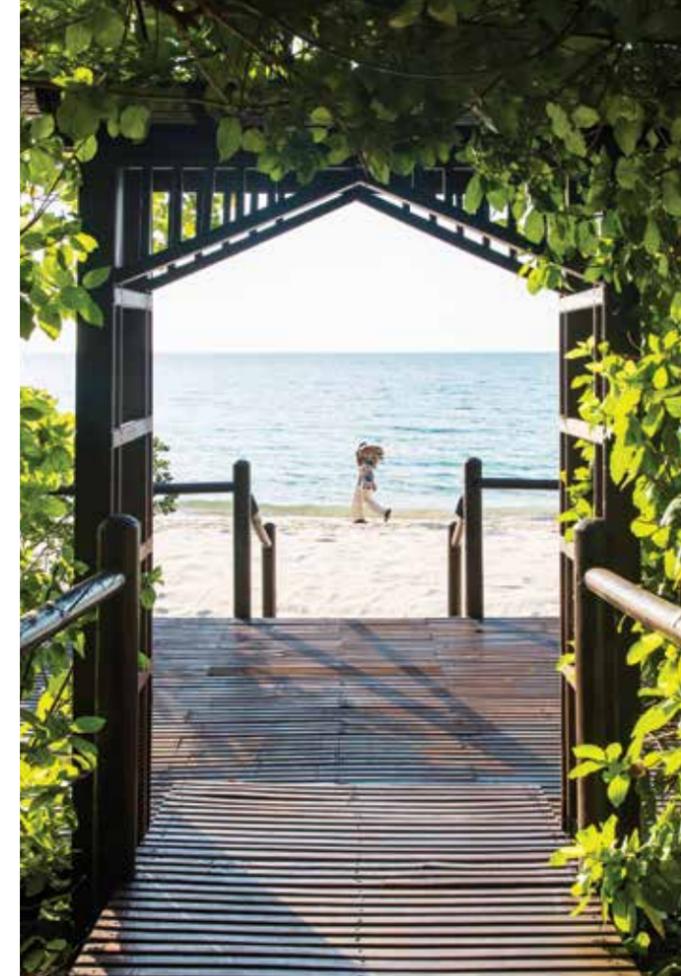
Over dinner, a platter of grilled lobster and fish, I ask Pedro why the villagers seemed so ... unfriendly. "Not unfriendly," he tells me. "Cautious."

He says that Mozambicans have suffered through a lot in the recent past. "Not many years ago, we could sit on this beach and hear the guns, see the bombs," he says, "but the war never came here."

It's no wonder that the locals might be protective of this place. Had the channel between the mainland filled with sand during the war as it had earlier today, soldiers would likely have walked over at low tide and the islands would have been lost. As it happened, the will of the ocean protected them.

FEW EYES HAVE SEEN THIS. OUT THE WINDOW of a four-seat Cessna en route to the eponymous Bazaruto Island is an aquamarine kaleidoscope. It might as well be a mirage, because the flight to the largest island in the chain lasts only 10 minutes.

I check in at Anantara, the archipelago's biggest resort, with 44 villas tucked into the tangled



New resorts have helped fund schools, medical clinics and, on Benguerra Island (left), a dhow so the people can take their goods to the mainland for bartering.

hedgerow of cashew trees and coconut palms. The resort was acquired recently by the Bangkok-based luxury hotel group Anantara, another sign of momentum in the region. On this day, vacationing Europeans and expatriates from Mozambique's capital, Maputo, fill nearly every seafront cabana.

At dawn I meet Alberto Chionisse Massame and Alberto Henrique Zivane at the dock, where they've prepped a boat for a day of marlin fishing. Neither speaks much English, so their redundant names are helpful. We motor around the north side of the island and into the rough Mozambique Channel, where 5-foot swells kick the boat around like flotsam.

Once the outriggers are baited and strung, something strikes and I spend half an hour playing tug-of-war with what turns out to be a 60-pound bigeye tuna. I'm impressed, but the Albertos just shake their heads — back it goes. Next comes a yellowtail, then another tuna. My hosts keep tossing the fish overboard with no emotion. They only become animated when they hear the radio crackling with word that a guy on another boat is fighting a 600-pound blue marlin.

The heat is rising and I want a swim. “No,” one of the Albertos says. I take off my shirt to go in anyway, but both guides block me. It’s clear they want to tell me something that language isn’t permitting. I eventually give up and keep fishing.

On my next catch, the fight stops when the line suddenly goes limp. I reel in a tuna that’s sawed almost in half by tooth-mark serrations.

“Shark,” says one Alberto.

“Good thing you didn’t swim,” Conrad Oosthuizen, Anantara’s South African activities manager, tells me later. Bull sharks, the hyenas of the sea, prowl the channel. “I’ve heard of a guy reaching into the water to rinse his hand and losing an arm.”

Tomorrow, I tell Oosthuizen, I’ll be happy to spend the day lounging under one of those beach

Tourism is so young that no one is certain what it will bring to Bazaruto in the long term. For now the people anchor their livelihood on what they know best: the sea.



palapas and cooling off in the pool. But neither plan will happen. Not here. Not anywhere in the chain.

THE FISHERMEN ARE UNEASY TO SEE ME APPROACH on Benguerra Island. I’d been planning to lounge in my seafront villa when I spied the fishermen in the tidal flats. Wanting to know more about everyday life here, I waded out in warm, waist-deep water to reach the group, all men and boys from a single family.

But as I come closer, they begin moving off. I ask two boys, the only ones who speak English, about the small catch in their boat. After my experience in the Mozambique Channel with the Albertos, these fish don’t look big enough to be used as bait.

“For dinner,” Luis Joao Mandane, 16, tells me. His brother, Phillip Luis Mandane, around 10, pulls a sardine from the net. The boys tell me about their village and the one-room bush school they attend. Others in the group eavesdrop, and before long we’re all standing around the boat yammering, the boys translating and the walls crumbling just a little.

To see the Bazaruto islands with no barriers whatsoever, I take a boat ride with Jayson Bamberger, the dive master at Azura Benguerra Resort. He buzzes me to nearby Pansy Island, a 200-foot-high sand dune that becomes an island when the tide is out. Rose-hued pansies, or sand dollars, for which the place is named, litter the flour-soft beach. At the base of the dune are pottery shards, some of which Azura’s staff estimates to be 800 years old. Every few steps I reach down to touch them because they remind me of doubloons from a lost treasure.

“It’s like this from Tanzania in the north down to South Africa in the south,” Jayson says.

Mozambique’s challenge, I realize, isn’t escaping its checkered past; it’s embracing an unknown future, a future that will include more inquisitive visitors like me. For the traveler, there are obstacles — shifting sandbars, wary locals, laborious travel and a fledgling infrastructure. But get beyond those things and you wind up in an unknown destination like Pansy Island. A place you cannot fake or duplicate.

When it’s time for us to leave, I consider pocketing one of the pansies as a souvenir, but Jayson admonishes me. He reaches down for a sand dollar that’s partially broken and, on picking it up, splits it in half with the nonchalance of snapping his fingers. Promise is as delicate as beauty, it seems. A fine, pink dust filters down from the broken pieces, but before it hits the beach, the wind sweeps up the falling remnants and carries them into the warm Indian Ocean.

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STEPS I REACH
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