

CRUISE & TRAVEL LIFESTYLES

FLAVORS OF
DUBAI



star
traveller

CELEBRITY CRUISES
TO THE EDGE
AND BEYOND

OCEANIA MARINA
DELECTABLE
DINING

barefoot luxury
**IN NORTHERN
MOZAMBIQUE**

An aerial photograph of a wooden boat with a mast and a small cabin, floating on clear turquoise water. To the right, a sandy sand bar is visible, with a small white canopy tent and a few people on it. The background shows a vast expanse of blue ocean under a clear sky.

Dive into NORTHERN MOZAMBIQUE

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV

Ibo Island Lodge offers snorkeling and lunch
under an open-air Bedouin tent on a sand bar.



ARISTOTLOU / ISTOCK



Snorkeling with dolphins in the wild. A UNESCO-nominated island full of colonial Portuguese ruins. Millionaire hideaways. Northern Mozambique is as far off-the-grid as you can get and perfect for a post-safari idyll.

IN THE SUN-DAPPLED WATER, we see them clearly through our snorkel masks. First one, then five, then a whole pod of more than 30 sleek gray bottlenose dolphins glide past, directly below us. The calves snuggle up close to their moms, tails swishing back and forth twice as fast to keep up. One dolphin hangs back. Turning around, he (she?) digs up a sand dollar with its nose from the sandy bottom and flips it at us, as if to say “Wanna play?”

We’re snorkeling with wild dolphins in northern Mozambique’s untrammled Quirimbas Archipelago. Picture translucent turquoise waters, sprinkled with 32 stunning coral islands (most uninhabited) and say “hello” to the Quirimbas! To see the dolphins, we took a 20-minute speedboat ride from Ibo Island in the archipelago to a spot known locally as a natural dolphin breeding area and nursery.

It seems surreal to be hanging out up-close-and-personal with these free and wondrous creatures. We’ve swum with other dolphins in the ocean before, but this feels different – more raw, more intimate. Except for the dolphins, we’re alone out here – just the two of us, our guide Causemore and our boat captain above.

The only other humans in sight are a couple of fishermen sailing tiny dhows, just dots in the distance. We simply drift on our bellies, kicking a little every so often, and let the dolphins swim up to check us out. Occasionally, Causemore, who’s like a fish himself, free dives down the 20 odd feet to fin alongside them.

In how many places in the world can you swim in the wild, alone, with dolphins that come within touching distance?

PHOTO COURTESY DIAMONDS MEQUFI BEACH RESORT



It's experiences like this – unique, authentic and totally non-touristy – that make northern Mozambique special. Tourism has barely opened up in this part of the world, and visitors are few and far between. Those who do come usually make their way to the handful of mostly exclusive, small and off-the-grid resorts. Many seek a luxury beach break after an African safari. Blessed with secluded white sand beaches, unspoilt snorkeling reefs and prolific marine life, northern Mozambique is ideal for exactly this, but it offers a big dollop of culture too. Ibo Island, for one, is nominated for UNESCO World Heritage status. It's steeped in a rich tapestry of history – wander its haunting colonial ruins, observe the local traditions, and you'll feel like you've stepped through a portal into a bygone world.

We start our journey on the mainland at Pemba, the gateway to this part of the country. From the small airport, a one-hour drive on a sunbaked red-dirt track – past women in colorful sarongs, babies strapped to their backs or with buckets of water on their heads – delivers us to an enormous white-walled property. Inside sprawls the luxurious Diamonds Mequfi Beach Resort.



PHOTO COURTESY DIAMONDS MEQUFI BEACH RESORT

One activity that catches our eye here is horseback riding. The resort has its own spacious air-conditioned stable, housing seven much-pampered horses. Mequfi Bay's endless white sand beach – with not another dwelling in sight – is tailor-made for horseback riding.

If you know how to ride, you can canter freely along the water's edge for miles. We opt instead for a gentle ride late one afternoon. Happy to be led by a rope, our horses plod slowly along as we take in the colors of the sunset turning from blazing neon orange to soft pink.

“Perhaps you also want to try wind-karting?” offers the general manager. “It's a Formula One adrenalin high.” Somewhat dubious about this fast-growing new sport in France, one of us (that would be George) gives it a spin the next morning. Wearing a helmet, he tries to steer a fat-wheeled tricycle attached to a huge triangular sail, as the wind whips him along the sand dunes. Ego bruised when the wind-kart heads for the water, splashing him mightily, he gives up, envious of the expert kite surfer playfully skipping along the waves nearby.

We go bicycling by the full moon and paddle kayaks up a mangrove-lined river, but for the most part, our time is spent relaxing, replenishing our safari-sapped energy reserves. After a few blissful days, we're ready to venture to the Quirimbas.

First island stop: Ibo, where we swim with the dolphins. Arab, Indian and Chinese gold traders and slavers all dropped anchor at Ibo. The Portuguese then arrived in the early 1500s, building forts, slave quarters and colonial mansions. The remnants remain today, whispering tales of both grandeur and the cruel peddling of human flesh.



PHOTO COURTESY AZURA QUILALEA





JULIAN LOVE/PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY

On a walk of Ibo town, we soak up the atmosphere. Much of it seems stuck in the past (electricity only came in 2012). There are no paved roads, just sandy paths on which islanders walk or ride rusty bicycles. Sunlight streams through open arches of empty white stone buildings. Graceful Romanesque-style columns stand proud and tall amid piles of coral rubble. Goats scramble around palm trees sprouting up through crumbling church ruins; monkeys hop on chipped red-tile roofs.

A house covered with cowrie shells is intriguing. “The owner was a trader who was often away,” explains Causemore (he does double duty – guiding us on this cultural

tour as well as on our dolphin swim). “Every day he was at sea, his wife would walk the island and collect one shell, which she’d glue to the outside wall.”

We pass by a dig on which a couple of Italian archaeologists have been working. Causemore tells us he often finds centuries-old objects lying about. We pick up pieces of blue-and-ivory china by the water’s edge at low tide – did they come from the dinner set of a wealthy Portuguese manor wife? At the well-preserved Sao Joao Batista Fort, built in 1791 in the shape of a star, we admire intricate silver bracelets and necklaces hand-crafted by the island’s aged silversmiths.

Facing page:
Mequfi Bay’s endless white sand beach is tailor-made for horseback riding.
Left: A woman pauses in front of a crumbling Portuguese colonial villa on Ibo Island, part of the Quirimbas Archipelago Mozambique.
Guests of Azura Quilalea enjoy a cruise aboard a traditional dhow.



GEORGE MICALOV



PHOTO COURTESY IBO ISLAND LODGE



GEORGE MICALOV



PHOTO COURTESY IBO ISLAND LODGE

(Clockwise from top left):

Flying over the Quirimbas Archipelago.

The women of Ibo Island decorate their faces with mussiro (a white paste made from tree sap), protecting their skin from the sun.

Ibo Island children.

Relaxing after a kayak safari.

The people are exotic to us Westerners. The island is over 90 percent Muslim, and the sound of the Muezzin wafts through the fragrant warm air throughout the day. The women decorate their faces with mussiro (a white paste made from tree sap), protecting their skin from the sun. Many people live pretty much as they have for centuries – carrying water from the well, pounding peanuts in wooden bowls, which they stew with cassava leaves and coconut to make matapa (delicious!), weighing market items on old-fashioned scales.

Change, though, is coming. Historic old houses are slowly being restored. A new Spanish-owned bungalow resort (rumoured to be five-star) is nearing completion, and we check out a boutique B&B that has just opened. “Ibo is on the verge of being discovered,” Causemore muses.

We still have more of the Quirimbas to discover, and Quilalea Island, our final destination, beckons. Like a couple of other small Quirimbas islands, Quilalea is a private island, home to Azura Quilalea resort. Think uber-luxe – but in a carefree, barefoot kind of way. Before Pippa Middleton married recently, *Vogue* touted Azura Quilalea as a perfect paparazzi-free destination for her honeymoon.

Quilalea has what Ibo Island lacks – beautiful, soft, white sand beaches. You come here to chill, perhaps snorkel and dive, and forget about the outside world. We loll about in our beach chairs, rising every so often for a dip in the calm water. Sometimes we take

out stand-up paddleboards for some light paddling. At dusk when it’s cool, we walk the twisting, shady path around the island, gazing up at ancient Baobab trees and drinking in the wild coastal vistas.

We dive Quilalea’s house reef. Quirimbas National Park is a marine and land park stretching for 70 miles along the northeast coast of Mozambique; it protects the fertile coral reefs around 11 of the islands in the Quirimbas, including Quilalea. Sea turtles, moray and garden eels, stingrays, big-lipped potato bass and huge schools of brilliant red wrasse patrol these waters. Our dive whets our appetite. Now we want to dive the deep channel that curls in behind Quilalea where white-tipped reef sharks hang out! Our impending onward flight, alas, prevents this.

Still, we’ve set foot in more of northern Mozambique than we ever imagined. We’ve seen it in all its natural untouched beauty, before tourism has had a chance to change the landscape – and that is a gift. ■

IF YOU GO: Getting to your destination in northern Mozambique requires effort. To reach Ibo Island, we flew from Pemba by small plane with CR Aviation. Azura Quilalea Private Island arranges transfers on its own helicopter. For a multi-island holiday, flights can be arranged between the Quirimbas islands.

New hotel gem
sparkles in Mozambique:

Diamonds Mequfi Beach Resort

WITH 50 SEA-VIEW ROOMS and suites far from civilization – surrounded by nothing for miles but grass-covered sand dunes and the occasional mud-brick village – Diamonds Mequfi Beach Resort is an ambitious new hotel, but this member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World is run with such spit and polish that it outshines all expectation.

Air-conditioned accommodations are in white-washed, duplex beach bungalows with soaring thatch ceilings, all scattered wide apart for privacy. Each has a covered stone terrace facing the turquoise Indian Ocean. Inside, we were blown away by the solid quality of construction and serene beachy décor. A four-poster, king-size bed dominates the bedroom, where polished tree stumps serve as night tables. In the bathroom, wood-framed mirrors hang from the ceiling by jute rope, and an indoor glass shower opens onto an outdoor stone shower. Welcome discovery: small jars of mosquito gel and sunscreen in faux-pearl-studded amenity boxes. Housekeeping is immaculate too – our whole room was virtually redone at turndown each night and despite the remote location, we could catch up on world news on our flat-screen satellite TV and surf the Internet via high-speed Wi-Fi.

The grounds are expansive but you can grab a bicycle to navigate the concrete paths meandering around the sand dunes with newly-planted palm trees. When it's windy (kite-surfing season May to September), a giant oval-shaped pool set back from the beach offers respite and whether you choose the half-board or all-inclusive option, meals whipped up by a talented Indian head-chef are delicious.

We tried all manner of activities from horseback riding on the beach to stand-up paddle boarding along a mangrove-lined river but we were happiest lounging on our terrace – napping, reading and listening to the waves.



PHOTOS COURTESY DIAMONDS MEQUFI BEACH RESORT



A trip back in time at a restored colonial mansion: Ibo Island Lodge

THE YOUNG COUPLE was looking for “paradise” on the Quirimbas islands after traveling through then war-torn Mozambique. When they sailed into the ancient harbor of Ibo Island, they were smitten by the island’s 16th century crumbling forts and ruins of once-grand houses. Ibo had been forgotten by the outside world for almost a century, and they were virtually the first tourists. They decided to renovate what was once the governor’s mansion, restoring three side-by-side coral and limestone buildings, and so in 2006, Kevin and Fiona Record became the owners of Ibo Island Lodge, the island’s first hotel in “modern” history.

It oozes character like no other place we’ve stayed. Each of the 14 rooms and suites is different – but all have beamed ceilings at least 20 feet high, polished gray stone floors, dark wood antiques, embroidered silk bedspreads, and brass knobs and switches. From the swinging daybed on our porch, framed by bougainvillea, we gazed out at mangroves and weathered wooden dhows stuck in the sand at low tide. You can expect dim lighting and almost non-existent Wi-Fi, but there’s air-conditioning.

Must-do: Daily complimentary boat trips are offered at low tide to a sandbar for breakfast or lunch and snorkeling. Under an open-air Bedouin tent, surrounded by brilliant blue sea, we sat at a table with our toes in the sand. Breakfast – coffee, porridge, scrambled eggs and sausages – was cooked over a coal fire. The experience was priceless! Staff set up everything from scratch as the sandbar is completely covered by water each day at high tide.

Back at the lodge, creative seafood lunch salads and candlelight dinners kept us happily stuffed (meals are included) and its rooftop bar is the best place on Ibo Island to watch the dramatic sunsets.



PHOTOS COURTESY IBO ISLAND LODGE

Barefoot, celeb-worthy escape: Azura Quilalea Private Island

Ready to feel like a rock star?

A gun-metal gray helicopter whisks you off to Azura Quilalea Private Island. Greeted by the manager, you walk along a shell-and-coral path to reception. The view encompasses a postcard-pretty beach in front of the resort's PADI dive center (top-notch, you discover later).

You're then shown to your hand-crafted villa – one of just nine. Facing the sea, it has coral stone walls, soaring makuti thatch roof and stone floor inlaid with shell mosaics. Your king-size bed is swathed with a cloud of mosquito netting (not needed, you happily realize). The rain-shower has swinging shutter doors opening onto a timber deck, furnished with couches and cushioned teak loungers under an umbrella. Louvered doors and windows, all wide open, let the cooling sea breeze in. There's no key (slide a wood latch to open and close the carved front door) – but you can lock valuables in a built-in, shell-encrusted box. A bottle of French Champagne from the owners' chateau in the Loire Valley, waiting in an ice bucket, begs to be popped and enjoyed. Such was our introduction to the sublime Azura Quilalea.

What really makes the Azura unforgettable is the bespoke service. Every evening, you gather for sun-downers at the convivial bar, where you discuss with the manager your preferred activities for the following day – spa treatment, helicopter sightseeing, private beach picnic? Dinner follows, perhaps by the pool or on the beach (each couple at a different private location) and fresh lobster is often featured.

The last evening, our butler (yes, you have a butler) surprised us with a scented bubble bath in a copper tub on our deck plus two gin-and-smashed-lime cocktails – a singular treat – which we loved.



PHOTOS COURTESY AZURA QUILALEA PRIVATE ISLAND