

Kicking back in the  
*Quirimbas*

Take a balmy, tropical climate with uninhabited islands (such as Mogundula, right) covered in palms and surrounded by crystal clear waters. Throw in a dhow, kayaks, snorkelling, fishing and camping gear, and stir in ancient culture. Add amazing birdlife, seafood galore and a bottomless bucket of ice-cold beer, and what do you get? An epic island-hopping adventure. By Dylan Kotze.



## Mozambique Quirimbas Archipelago

There's plenty of time for fun to be had above and below the water (opposite). The shallow coral reefs provide spectacular snorkelling.



**H**er name is *Vagabundu*, said our guide, Harris Mupedzi, with a wry smile. She was a beauty. Handcrafted in Tanzania, her beams and keel were made from light but strong mangrove wood, with a teak and mahogany finishing. The design and operation are simplistic, but far from simple, while her craftsmanship

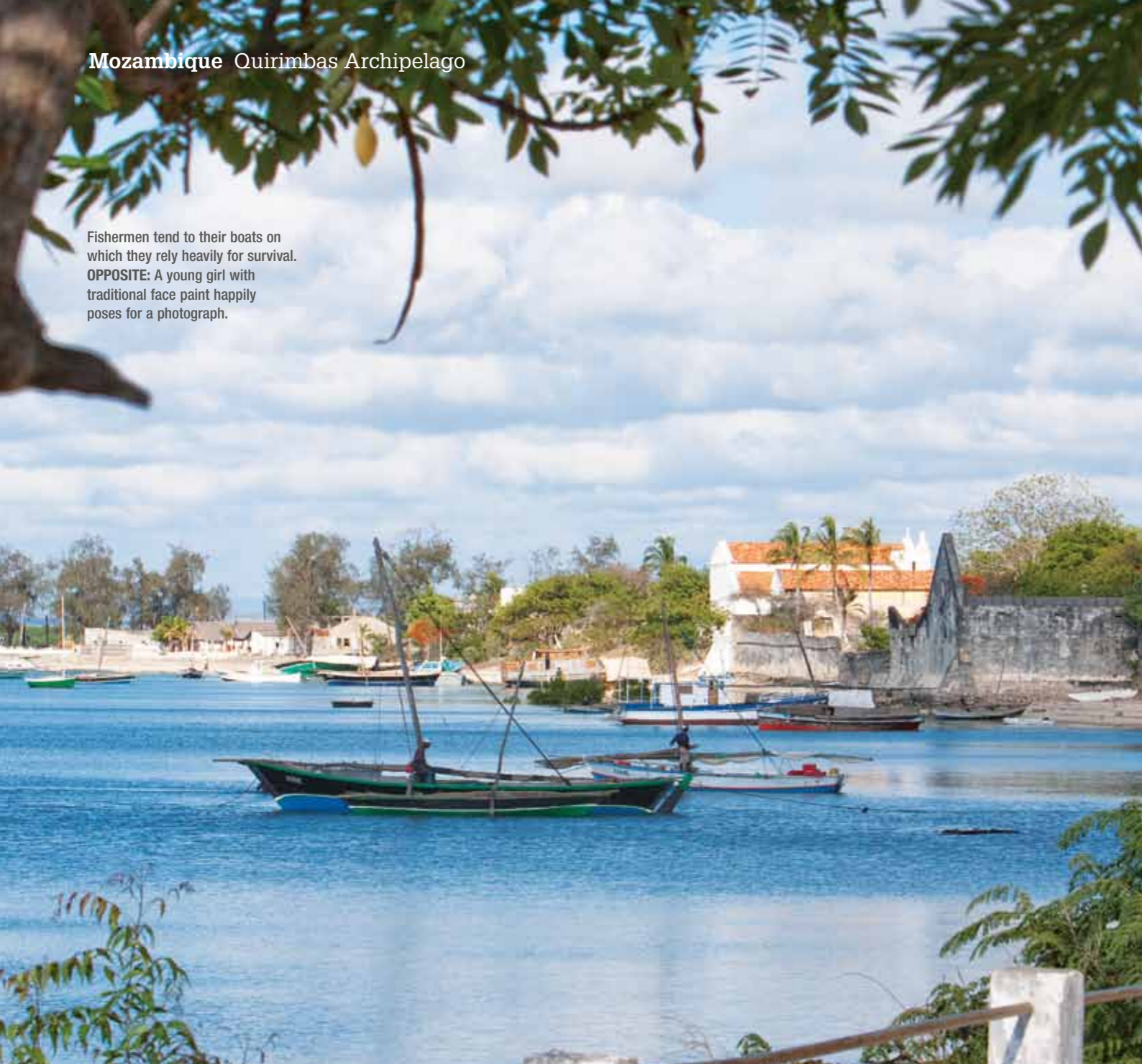
embodies an ancient knowledge of the ocean that flows through these East African waters and into the lifeblood of the men and women who inhabit this region. Our skipper on our eight-day dhow safari along Mozambique's northern coast, Juma Chande, or Capitao as he became known, and first mate, Iassine Selemane, demonstrated

this knowledge as they unleashed *Vagabundu's* sail and guided her out to sea.

I had arrived in Pemba the previous day and the humidity had hit me like a Tyson right hook. Lazing in the sea to cool off was incredibly tempting, but I had only an afternoon to absorb the sights and sounds. A stroll along the beach

took me past dozens of women ploughing the reefs for periwinkle-type delights. Sailing boats littered the horizon. Dark, ominous clouds were developing and the wind picked up, turning the sea into a choppy mess. I wondered if the seamen would return safely from their fishing exploits, as some vessels carried plastic sails that appeared to be

Fishermen tend to their boats on which they rely heavily for survival. **OPPOSITE:** A young girl with traditional face paint happily poses for a photograph.



patched together with glue. I headed into the village where kids were singing in the streets and a seriously competitive football game was being played on a sandy field with masses of cheering spectators. Outside their mud-and-stone huts, mothers cooked chicken kebabs on the world's smallest braais and the men sat under trees laughing and drinking beer. Apart from the soccer, everything seemed to happen slowly in this region, so I figured why not join in with the vibe? It didn't take long.

Early the next morning, a three-hour drive north took us to our starting point at Mucojo in Quirimbas National Park,

which gave me the opportunity to get to know my fellow travellers. Once the sails of our dhow were raised and we lifted our glasses in celebration, we agreed life wasn't too shabby. Daily existence felt far, far away as we glided across the water. Mogundula Island approached slowly. It's surrounded by snow-white sand and clear water, and is covered in palms and chestnut trees. We dropped anchor and I couldn't help feeling a little like the early Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama. Harris introduced us the chef, Amane Amane, and Pemba, our waiter, who had a permanent, infectious smile. Our canvas quarters were all set up,

along with showers and a long-drop loo with postcard views of paradise. Our dining table, under the gazebo, was lined with bottles of Captain Morgan, J&B and Gordon's Extra Dry and not far away (ever) was a cooler box full of ice-cold refreshments.

This camping luxury had to wait as Harris led us on a walk to a magical inland salt-water lake. It's connected to the sea through underground channels and fills when the tide drops and empties on high tide. Although Harris is a walking encyclopaedia on the area, he had no explanation for this phenomenon. He showed us orange coconut crabs

scuttling around the mangroves and named all the curious birds that chirped, creating a peaceful ambiance around camp. The evening painted terrific skies, making the lobster taste even better, and later the stars twinkled as if glitter had been spilled.

The sun rose at 04h30 and we followed shortly after, splashed our faces with hot water, had coffee and jumped into kayaks for a 25-kilometre journey south to the Ulumbwa River mouth. Paddling soon became hypnotic. The rhythmic splash-splash induced a calming trance, coaxing my mind to wander. I thought about how paddling was a lot

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Ever dreamt of having lunch on a sandbank in the middle of the ocean? Here's your chance ...

**OPPOSITE:** Luxembourgers Katy Fox and Caroline Schmit glide through the glassy water at Ulumbwa River mouth.



like life. When a swell arrives, it becomes easier and you can ride along with it. Then it passes and a little more effort is required to keep going. It's nature's rhythm and I was in sync. I was also getting hungry and the sun started to beat down, so I hailed the tender boat and hopped onto the dhow for a hearty breakfast. Soon the wind was up, sails were set and we were cruising ...

We spent two nights at Ulumbwa, exploring the mangroves on kayaks, reading, eating, drinking and snoozing – Pemba gently waking us with the delightful words, 'Excuse me, *lunchi* is served. Today we will be having tempura

prawns and *saladi*.' When the sun dipped lower, we walked to the nearby local village and watched an unbelievable show. Hundreds of rare crab plovers were forced closer to shore as the tide came in. It was like watching the National Geographic channel and I could almost hear David Attenborough's voice commenting. What a privilege.

By then, I had completely lost track of time, but I knew what the tide was doing, where the wind came from and that it was time to move on. We headed for the southern tip of Matemo Island to dip our heads under the surface and marvel at the amazing corals and colourful fish.

Soon there was an even better surprise – a sand bank, in the middle of the ocean, sticking out at low tide. There were no footprints – just us – and prawns for lunch. Special.

Upon seeing the star-shaped fort and dilapidated buildings, Ibo Island's history and culture became obvious. A fascinating guided tour informed us of ancient times, took us into the homes of locals (including witchdoctors and silversmiths), through schools and across coffee plantations. Although tourism has picked up in recent years and the kids kept asking for photos, the locals were extremely welcoming and continue life staying true to their roots.

Back at the colonial-style Ibo Island Lodge, we lazed by the pool and indulged in a life of luxury, sipping cocktails and staring at the setting sun.

As we flew back to Pemba, I caught a last glimpse of the glistening sea, the islands, coral reefs, mangroves and locals going about their lives. Dhows sailed past; fishing nets were cast; nothing happened fast. The sailors of the Quirimbas are the history-makers of tomorrow and will continue to cultivate and share their ancient knowledge of the ocean from generation to generation. I was happy to take some of their magic home. ■

→ Travel planner overleaf



CLOCKWISE: A young boy strolls through Ibo Island's old fort with its spectacular architecture; exploring Ulumbwa's mangroves by kayak; hundreds of rare crab plovers take to the sky.



### The enigmatic crab plover

Crab plovers (*Dromas ardeola*) rank high on every keen birder's target list. They're a rarity in South Africa, with occasional vagrants visiting the Richard's Bay area.

One of their favoured feeding grounds is at Ulumbwa, on the Mozambique mainland and a short boat ride from Ibo. There, among the mangroves on the tidal sandy estuary, they flock to feed almost exclusively on crabs and other small crustaceans.

It's fitting that these birds frequent Ibo, once a significant stop-over for the dhows that plied their trade between the Arabian Gulf and the East African coast. The only known breeding grounds of the crab plover are in the Gulf region and so their migration mirrors this ancient route. They arrive on East African and Madagascan shores in late September.

Crab plovers are strange birds in many respects and the only member in the genus *Dromas*. Although in appearance they resemble plovers, their pied plumage recalls avocets and their dagger-like bills are similar in shape to those of terns (but much heavier). They're unique among waders in that they nest in burrows they've

dug and use the warmth of the sand to help incubate their eggs. The young are slow to develop, remaining in the nest for several days after hatching, and require a great deal of parental care before they are fully fledged.

For more information on where to see crab plovers and other birds of the Quirimbas Archipelago, contact Kevin Record at Ibo Island Lodge (see Travel planner on next page) or get in touch with Marje Hemp of Birding Africa, email [info@birdingafrica.com](mailto:info@birdingafrica.com), [www.birdingafrica.com](http://www.birdingafrica.com).

## Travel planner

### Getting there

SA Airlink ([www.sairlink.co.za](http://www.sairlink.co.za)) and LAM ([www.flylam.co.za](http://www.flylam.co.za)) fly from OR Tambo in Johannesburg to Pemba International Airport from R3 600 a person return.

### Where to book

Ibo Island Lodge, tel 021-702-0285, email [reservations@iboisland.com](mailto:reservations@iboisland.com), [www.iboisland.com](http://www.iboisland.com)

### What it costs

An eight-day dhow safari adventure costs from R9995 a

person sharing (SADC rate). It includes all transfers, three days at Ibo Island Lodge full-board (except for drinks), a guided tour of Ibo Island, five days island-hopping kayaking with experienced English and Portuguese crews (which handle all the camp duties) and all camping, catering and activity equipment. Tailor-made itineraries are available on request.

### When to go

From September to April to avoid the monsoon season.

### Visa requirements

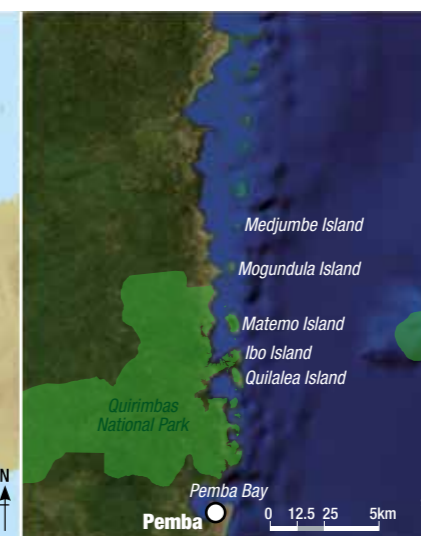
South African passport holders do not require a visa to enter Mozambique, but two empty pages are needed in passports. Carry certified copies of your passport and all travel documents, and always have either your passport or these copies with you. International travellers require a visa for Mozambique, which can be purchased on arrival in Mozambique (currently US\$82 a person). An additional US\$2,50 stamp duty applies for entrance and exit.

### Health issues

The Quirimbas is a malaria area and so prophylactics are recommended.

### Money

The official currency is the metical, but US dollars are widely accepted. There isn't a bureau de change at Pemba Airport and traveller's cheques cannot be changed in Pemba. It's best to withdraw as much money from the bank as you'll need in Pemba, as there are no cash points on Ibo Island.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Canvas tents on the island-hopping kayak safari provide welcome shade in the Quirimbas' searing heat; an early morning paddle through mangrove forests is a great way to see the many bird species; a welcome note rests on the pillows at Ibo Island Lodge; the lodge with its colonial-style architecture; Amane Amane prepares yet another delicious seafood spread for lunch; although the trip is full of activities, there is still plenty of time to relax – especially in the midday heat.

Accommodation price ratings A person a night, usually B&B, sometimes full board under R250 R251 – R499 R500 – R750 R751 – R999 R1000+