



Island TREASURE

You may have only considered Mozambique for its beaches, but Ibo Island is a little secret that deserves discovery. Cate Mackenzie explains.

Just off northern Mozambique, a string of tropical coral islands form the Quirimbas Archipelago. Amidst these idyllic islands lies Ibo. Part of the Quirimbas National Park, it has been awarded UNESCO World Heritage Status to ensure protection of its incredible culture and history.

Undisturbed for centuries and isolated from the world, Ibo is now back on the map. Crossing azure seas, my boat slowed as we approached the island's mangrove swamps and hidden sandbanks. Ibo life is governed by tides, and at high tide that morning we rode into the old harbour as the rush hour of fishermen and traders headed out. Jumping from the boat and wading to shore, I felt as if I had stepped back in time as I looked at the crumbling colonial buildings. Eerily quiet after the morning excitement, with just the sound of the waves gently lapping the beach, the salt marsh smell clung to the warm air.

Located on the waterfront, Ibo Island Lodge has superb west-facing views across the bay. The three impressive colonial Portuguese mansions that make up the lodge have been lovingly restored by lodge owners Kevin and Fiona Record, and the

couple are also involved with community development projects on the island, some of which are supported by proceeds from the lodge. The spacious rooms have lofty ceilings and are adorned with old antiques. Beyond the hand carved wooden doors and shutters I ventured onto the wide veranda to rest on a cushion-clad mahogany and teak daybed, and watched dhows sailing on the shimmering sea.

A stay on Ibo Island is not a beach experience, but rather a cultural journey. You can explore the island at leisure but historical tours with local guides are rewarding and provide an insight into Ibo's past and present. As one of Mozambique's oldest settlements, Ibo has a broad and colourful history with intriguing architectural influences ranging from Europe and Arabia to India and China. Muslim traders established the trading post to ship slaves, gold and ivory to the Arab world, and during the 19th century Ibo was one of Portugal's main Indian Ocean ports.

There is a timeless sensation when walking past the magnificent colonial townhouses and commercial buildings that once graced the now



Fort of São João Baptista, Ibo Island



The old harbour

dusty cobbled streets. After the Portuguese departure, the buildings frayed and became faded reminders of past prosperous times. I saw locals go about their business, like shadows through the ruins, slipping away as quickly as they had arrived, while an occasional child's shout broke through the heady hum of cicadas. Ibo provides the ultimate setting to experience a 'real' African culture that is not mass produced for tourism.

Fig trees grow from the roofless and ruined buildings, wrought iron terraces have rusted, and dilapidated walls pocked with mould and moss are strewn with creeping vines. Off the main square is a Catholic church, surrounded by a graveyard of fallen headstones. Behind wooden shutters stand a couple of pews and these days the largest congregation is the residing colony of fruit bats.

Not far from the lodge is the imposing Sao Joao Baptista fort. It was built in 1791 to fend off marauding French Comores. Ancient and rusting cannons still stand proud on the ramparts but the old fort now only echoes with the sound of traditional silversmiths, still using ancient Arabic techniques and tools to handcraft intricate and unique jewellery.

Although Ibo Island itself is without beaches, Ibo Island Lodge has two pools and arranges boat trips for snorkelling and swimming off secluded sand banks, where brilliant white sand is exposed as the tide recedes. Guests can kayak through mangrove ecosystems that support bird and marine life and dive off some of the least explored sites in the Indian Ocean.

I took an enchanting sunset cruise in an old fisherman's dhow with the wind billowing through the faded patchwork colours of the sails. As the sun started to slip below the horizon, I returned to view an incredible sunset from the rooftop terrace of the lodge, and after a delicious traditional prawn dish I spent the evening stargazing from the open air lounge. It was a magical way to end my stay at Ibo.

Ibo Island has so far remained unspoilt with no vehicles and few tourists. It has a wonderful sense of peace providing a great escape from the hustle of the western world and offering a glimpse into the Quirimbas' intriguing past.

Cate Mackenzie
Southern Africa Specialist



House of shells



Ibo Island Lodge



The old town of Ibo Island

FACT FILE

A seven-day trip to northern Mozambique including return flights, a three-night stay at Ibo Island Lodge and four nights at Quilalea costs from £3,200 per person. Ibo Island is also an ideal extension to a safari trip in southern or east Africa. For further details please contact Cate, Matt or Melissa on 01993 838 560.

