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ONE FOR ALL, ALL FOR ONE...

In Mozambique, **Sue Watt** discovers how a country once ravaged by war is being transformed by insightful tourism entrepreneurs





Face the future: the view from the fortress on Ilha do Mozambique; (below) a Cabaceira woman with traditional adornments

Barefoot children follow us around the village of Cabaceira Pequena – from the crumbling 13th century Lapani Mosque, still in use today, to the well where Vasco da Gama is said to have drawn water for his voyages over 500 years ago, to the huge baobab tree whose shade provides the venue for village meetings and doubles as the local playground.

As we continue our walk, people invite us proudly into their homes, mostly made of mud, coral and thatch. The teacher shows us around his school (one classroom, two blackboards and 298 pupils).

It may seem far removed from the luxury of Coral Lodge 15.41, Mozambique's newest beach lodge just a 10-minute drive away, but the two are inextricably linked. Most of the lodge's staff come from this village and its owners, Dutch couple Bart and Alex Otto, are keen to ensure that the local community benefits

from their business. Theirs is the latest in a line of community-based tourism initiatives in Mozambique that began in the late 1990s with pioneers Ibo Island Lodge and later Guludo Beach Lodge, both within Quirimbas National Park.

Ibo Island Lodge was the dream-child of Kevin and Fiona Record, a Zimbabwean couple who fell in love with Ibo Island back in 1995. Establishing several community-linked projects, they worked closely with local people to restore not only three waterfront mansions that form the lodge but also the island's silversmith industry, setting up a distribution network and a training facility for younger islanders to learn neglected traditional skills.

On the mainland, British couple Amy and Neal Carter-James, winners of the Responsible Tourism Award for Poverty Alleviation in 2009, support health initiatives and education, focusing on women and children, through Guludo Beach Lodge and ➤

Will Whitford





'Just shout when you're ready for dinner – there are a few lions around here, so someone will escort you. Better safe than sorry.'





Home sweet home: the village of Cabaceira Pequena (above); a little luxury at Coral Lodge 15.41 (top left); the impressive Murombodzi waterfall near Mount Gorongosa

their charity, Nema. Both lodges are perfect examples of how travellers can indulge themselves with luxurious facilities while simultaneously salving their conscience by giving something back to the local communities.

Coral Lodge 15.41, directly opposite the historic and atmospheric former capital, Ilha do Mocambique, has 10 luxury villas overlooking either the sea or the hotel's private lagoon.

'I'm getting to know Mozambique through our people, learning about their lives and history, and I love it,' says Alex, who has trained most of her team from scratch and provides English and Portuguese classes for them and other villagers who want to learn. Local women are also being taught to give spa treatments.

The excellent food served in the restaurant is predominantly sourced locally, and villagers are learning how to grow the fresh ingredients required. They are also involved in the conservation of mangroves and reefs, and guides will be trained to

share their fascinating history on tours of the village and the Ilha.

The Ottos have also set up a community fund that will receive a percentage of guest fees and will be invested in sustainable projects chosen by the community.

It's early days yet, the lodge only having opened in May, but if the warm welcome on offer from the Cabaceira people is anything to go by, then the partnership between luxury and local life here looks to be a positive one.

It's not just beach lodges that are reaching out to communities through responsible tourism. In the heart of the bush, at Gorongosa National Park, Zimbabweans Rob and Jos Janisch are doing just that with their tented camp, Explore Gorongosa.

It is dark when we arrive after a pot-holed three-hour drive from Beira.

'Just shout when you're ready for dinner – there are a few lions around here, so someone will escort you. Better safe than sorry.' Rob's parting shot after he'd

shown us to our tent is one to concentrate the mind. I'm tempted to head straight for the inviting double bed complete with teddy bear, but the temptation of a gin and tonic at the bar proves stronger.

We accomplish the 100-metre walk to the mess tent without incident but, that night, as I lie in my tent, two male lions break the silence, roaring under the moonlit sky. It's strangely reassuring – this is exactly how Gorongosa should be.

Gorongosa national park has had a turbulent history. A one-time game-spotting favourite for Hollywood A-listers such as John Wayne and Gregory Peck in the 1960s, it was once teeming both with wildlife and visitors. But after Mozambique's independence from Portugal in 1975, Gorongosa became embroiled in its fearsome 16-year civil war between government forces Frelimo and Rhodesian-backed rebels Renamo.

With both sides needing food and funding for arms, Gorongosa provided both: its elephants were slaughtered for ➤



Back to nature: an Explore Gorongosa tented camp in Gorongosa National Park (left). A local woman shows an enviable sense of balance near Mount Gorongosa

'It'll become a classic game-viewing scenario. In the past 18 months we've seen animals moving in, seen progress.'

ivory and other game was gunned down for meat. When peace finally came, trophy hunters and poachers had free reign to take what was left of the wildlife, leaving it decimated.

It became the forgotten park, 4,000 sq km of beautiful wilderness that's now the subject of an award-winning National Geographic documentary that is appropriately entitled *Africa's Lost Eden*.

The film focuses on the beginnings of Gorongosa's amazing turnaround, thanks largely to the efforts of US philanthropist Greg Carr and a 20-year, \$25m partnership between his not-for-profit organisation, the Carr Foundation, and the Mozambican government.

Carr realised that sustainable tourism was the key to Gorongosa's restoration, providing employment, education and, ultimately, empowerment to the local communities while at the same time conserving and protecting the natural environment that drew the tourists in the first place.

The park and tourist camp Chitengo now employ around 300 locals and Carr is helping the 250,000 people living in its buffer zone to build schools, computer centres and clinics in each village. Local people will be taught the benefits of conservation

of the ecosystem. To that end its new residents: elephants, hippos, buffalo and wildebeest have been transported, mainly from South Africa, and impala populations are blossoming, providing tempting prey for the returning predators.

Explore Gorongosa, a low-impact, luxury tented camp and the only private concession here, works closely with the park and brilliantly exemplifies the philosophy of responsible tourism. Only in its second season, it is already looking to add to its four simple, yet creatively styled tents, each with outdoor bathrooms encircled by bamboo fencing that simultaneously exposes you to the elements while effectively protecting your privacy.

The mess tent/bar lies on the banks of the Msicadzi River, with kingfishers and barbets frequently darting across the water. A candle-lit dinner is eaten underneath an elegant wood and wrought-iron chandelier hanging in a tree and most of the food is locally sourced, from fresh

vegetables to an amazing array of goats' cheeses. Local people also supply the reed mats and hand-carved furniture in the camp and, most importantly, provide the workforce for the lodge.

On a walking safari along the river, Rob explains the future plans for Gorongosa, with tenders for six new concessions currently being considered, each bringing new employment opportunities.

'We came in on a bit of a guinea pig contract, helping the park to see how ecotourism would work out. The impact on the communities is so important – they need to see the reality of the park making their lifestyles better. The minute they don't see that is the minute they'll say why can't we live here and eat the game and grow our crops?'

Gorongosa is exquisitely beautiful, with abundant birdlife. Although wildlife isn't yet prolific, unsurprisingly, there's a feeling of being at the start of something that's really special.

Rob adds: 'It's not the finished product in terms of game viewing, but at the moment we're selling the story of the wilderness. In time it'll become a classic game-viewing scenario. Even in the 18 months or so since we've been here, we've seen animals moving in and breeding, seen the progress – that's the exciting part.'

It's not just a story of the wilderness, though, it's a story of hope and positivity, a genuine desire to improve things all round for communities and conservation. In fact, it's a good news story that seems to permeate the whole of Mozambique and one that will hopefully run and run. ■

HOW TO GET THERE

TAP flies to Maputo via Lisbon
www.flytap.com

Kenya Airways via Nairobi
www.kenya-airways.com

South African Airways via Johannesburg
www.flysa.com

Nampula is the nearest airport to Coral Lodge 15.41, and Beira is closest to Gorongosa.

Mozambique's national airline **LAM** www.lam.co.mz flies regularly between Maputo, Beira and Nampula.

Chimoio is another domestic airport convenient for Gorongosa but flights to Maputo aren't as frequent. **Pemba** is the nearest airport to Ibo Island and Guludo Beach Lodge. Transfers can be arranged by the lodges and involve up to three hours' driving.

WHERE TO STAY

Toescapeto can organise three nights at Explore Gorongosa and four nights at Coral Lodge, all transfers and international flights for £3,400 (\$5,270) per person based on two sharing.
www.toescapeto.com

WHAT TO DO

All lodges encourage visits to their local communities.

Coral Lodge offers excellent diving and snorkelling.

Explore Gorongosa provides walking safaris, game drives, night drives, and trips to the rainforest, Murombodzi waterfall and the summit of Mt Gorongosa.

www.gorongosa.net for more on **Gorongosa Restoration Project**.

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