



Sue Watt wanders through the old colonial heart of Mozambique. Pictures by Will Whitford

THE SPIRIT OF STONE TOWN

WE ARRIVE AT THE ILHA DE

Mozambique by speedboat, bouncing on the surface of the Indian Ocean. From the mainland, the island looks tiny, a speck on the horizon that seems far too small to have harboured its turbulent history, too fragile to bear the burden of its past.

Now that the boat and the breeze that accompanied it have stopped, the midday heat hits me, and we paddle to the shore, grateful for the coolness of the shallow water. I have only a day to explore the island, but already it feels like it won't be enough. Despite its tiny size, just 3 kilometres by 500 metres, the Ilha was the capital of Portuguese East Africa for 400 years, and its history of affluence and influence, of cruelty and colonialism, hangs heavy in the air.

A statue of Vasco da Gama overlooks the shore by the Governor's Palace, a striking red building that today houses the island's museum. Abdul rushes to meet me despite the heat. Looking much younger than his 24 years, he studied music in Lisbon but had to return when his scholarship ended. Now he guides its occasional visitors.

"Sadly, there's not much call for a classical musician on the Ilha," he says, smiling wistfully.

Inside, we see remnants of the island's prosperous past, a legacy of its location along former Arab trading routes. They include delicate Portuguese silverware,

ebony furniture from India, and Ming dynasty porcelain found in a shipwreck. Fancy rickshaws used to transport the Governor take centre stage in the entrance hall, and an ostentatious copper-plate altar from Goa dominates the chapel. In each room, red velvet curtains fall to dark wooden floorboards so polished we almost slide along them.

But modern life intrudes occasionally in the form of plastic buckets big enough to bathe a pair of toddlers in, to catch rainwater from the roof, which was damaged by a mini-cyclone two years ago.

"It'll be repaired sometime – Africa time," Abdul says, more in hope than in jest. "We don't know when that will be."

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THERE ARE FEW PEOPLE IN STONE TOWN – AND EVEN FEWER TRAVELLERS. THIS IS HOW ZANZIBAR'S STONE TOWN WAS TWENTY YEARS AGO

Once a wealthy hub for Arab and Portuguese traders, Stone Town has suffered a creeping neglect since the Ilha lost its capital status more than 100 years ago. The dusty, sleepy streets are broad and open, their once graceful buildings slowly crumbling. Yet, amidst their shabbiness, a certain dignity shines through, in the elegant archways and balustrades and ornately carved doors and window frames, the trademark of Omani opulence long since departed.

The sound of the *muezzin's* afternoon call to prayer resonates from a humble thirteenth-century mosque, the first ever built in Mozambique. A few men pass us by. The island's history radiates from their faces, an exotic mix

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of Portuguese, Arab, Indian and African blended together, and they nod or smile quietly, a couple bidding us "Boa tarde" ('Good afternoon' in Portuguese) as they head for prayer.

For an island of 14,000 residents, there are few people in Stone Town – and even fewer travellers. Some say that this is how Zanzibar's Stone Town was, maybe 20 years ago. It is utterly still, the streets exuding an air of melancholy, of ghosts struggling with the past – a past of slavery and cruelty inextricably bound with colonial prosperity.

Nowhere is the burden of the past more tangible than in the sixteenth-century Portuguese fort of São Sebastião, on the western tip of the island. I don't need to

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**BELOW THE
RAMPARTS
STANDS
A SMALL
CHURCH,
THE OLDEST
EUROPEAN
BUILDING
IN THE
SOUTHERN
HEMISPHERE**

delve far into my imagination to picture the scenes – São Sebastião has largely withstood the ravages of time and war, to survive as the oldest complete fort in sub-Saharan Africa.

We walk past cannons that once wreaked havoc in battle, resulting without exception in defeat for the garrison's attackers, among them the Dutch, British and Omanis.

We see the slave tunnel running from the bleak underground prison and leading out to craggy rocks, from where captives would board the ships to their next incarceration, the immense fort walls offering the last, tragic view of their vanishing homeland.

And we visit the executioners' square that bore witness to the





**Previous pages
(left to right):**

A solitary dhow off the shore of Ilha de Moçambique. The Governor's Palace.

These pages

(clockwise from top left): The church of Nossa Senhora de Baluarte (this picture by Sue Watt). A quiet moment outside a Stone Town hotel. A cross on top of fortress ramparts. Local women congregate in the street.



final, unforgiving punishments handed out to pirates and errant slaves desperate for freedom.

On a promontory just below the ramparts stands a beautiful small church, the oldest European building in the southern hemisphere. Its beauty lies in its simplicity, with whitewashed walls and glassless windows in the shape of crosses, which allow the sunlight to stream through.

The Church of Nossa Senhora de Baluarte marks the spot where sailors would stop to pray for a safe voyage on the last landing point of the passage from Portugal to India. It houses ancient gravestones and an unadorned stone pulpit. The uninterrupted views of the ocean all around create a soothing tranquillity

here that makes me want to linger for hours.

Time is against us, however, and as evening falls, we head to the Reliquias bar for a sundowner. Inside, among eclectic artefacts that include an old piano and an incongruous disco mirror-ball, are black-and-white photos of the Ilha's heyday. They show buildings rich with colonial grandeur; ladies in long, fancy dresses walking with parasols along busy streets; and servants pulling Mozambique's dignitaries in the rickshaws that we saw earlier in the museum.

As darkness descends, Stone Town starts to slumber. Sometimes dim lights shine from windows and we see shadows moving slowly in the unlit backstreets. Despite the ghosts of the past, there's nothing to fear here. Men lie on pavements, quietly enjoying a beer in the cool night air. They raise their bottles, saying hello as we walk by. A mother sits outside a doorway braiding her daughter's hair as the smell of their evening meal, a spicy stew, wafts outdoors. She smiles and says goodnight. And barefoot children in ragged clothes gaze at us inquisitively, too shy or too tired to say anything at all.

Reluctantly, I have to leave, but I know I'll be back. I feel I have only scratched the surface of this island's spirit. The Ilha may have lost some of the glamour and grandeur of its golden days, but it has lost none of its grace or soul.

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WHEN TO GO

April to September is the best time to visit, as the coast stays mainly dry and mild thanks to a refreshing sea breeze. Rainfall is at its highest between January and March, while temperatures reach their peak between October and March.

HOW TO GET THERE

Flights from London to Nampula, the closest airport to Ilha de Moçambique, take approximately 14 hours. Fly with British Airways to Johannesburg and take a connecting flight with LAM to Maputo and then onto Nampula. South African Airways and Kenya Airways are other options, again transferring via Maputo.

WHERE TO STAY

CORAL LODGE 1541 This new beachside lodge on the mainland opposite the Ilha has 10 chic villas overlooking the sea, a first-class restaurant and bar, spa and swimming pool, plus a dive centre.

INDIGO BAY RESORT Located on the idyllic Bazaruto Island, this resort of understated luxury blends in with its tropical surroundings. It was built using natural materials and consists of 30 beach chalets and 14 luxury villas. The island is among Africa's best diving destinations.

DUGONG LODGE Accommodation is in 12 luxurious chalets, each with a walkway to the beach, at this lodge in the Vilanculos Coastal Wildlife Sanctuary. Activities include sailing, kayaking and wildlife walks.

MATEMO RESORT Situated in the Quirimbas Archipelago, a 20-minute flight from Pemba. It comprises 24 palm-thatched chalets on the beach. Activities include diving, snorkelling and visits to historic Ibo Island nearby.

MEDJUMBE RESORT A small, private island within the Quirimbas Archipelago. Countless coves, as well as beaches, can be discovered nearby. Each of the 13 beach chalets features refreshing plunge pools overlooking the Indian Ocean, as well as indoor and outdoor showers.

PEMBA BEACH HOTEL AND SPA

This Arabian-styled resort on the northern coast offers 102 rooms with sea views and private balconies. Whales can be sighted here between August and November.

MORE TO DO IN MOZAMBIQUE

GETTING THERE, STAYING THERE, BEING THERE



“South Africans and Southern Rhodesians troop to Mozambique on holiday. ‘Of course it wouldn’t seem much to you,’ they often said, ‘but for us it seems marvelously continental.’”
Richard West,
The White Tribes of Africa, 1965

SUGGESTED HIGHLIGHTS

Ilha de Moçambique is the former capital of Portuguese East Africa and colonial influences are easy to spot, particularly in the **Fort of São Sebastião**. The area around it is now commonly known as **Stone Town**, with its red-blushed colonial mansions and churches. Visit **St Paul’s Palace**, which claims to be one of the island’s most impressive buildings, and you’ll see why the island became a World Heritage Site.

Further north is **Pemba**, capital of the Cabo Delgado province. Again distinctive for its colonial architecture, it was founded by the Portuguese as a commercial centre

in the early twentieth century. Pop down to **Wimbe beach**, which is slowly becoming the main attraction for tourists.

If you’ve time, take a boat out to the **Quirimbas Archipelago** (which stretches from this part of the coast all the way north to Tanzania), an area known for its dive sites.

Inland from Pemba, and close to the Tanzanian border, is the **Niassa Game Reserve**, a 42,000-square-kilometre park that contains the largest concentration of wildlife in Mozambique. **Lugenda Wilderness Camp** is the only tourist camp located inside the reserve, and you can easily fly there from Pemba in a light charter aircraft.

Further south is **Gorongosa National Park**, a wildlife reserve with a miserable history but which is now finding its feet again. During the civil war, the park was abandoned and much of it destroyed by bombing and gun battles. As much of 95 per cent of the park’s mammal population disappeared during this time. Now, an enormous attempt to restore the park to its former glories is having positive effects. **Chitengo Safari Camp**, within the park, is a good base from which to explore.

Further south still and back to the coast is the stunning **Bazaruto Archipelago**, a group of six low-lying islands formed by sand deposits from the **Limpopo River** – a perfect place to end your trip.



To discuss your Mozambique travel plans with an Africa specialist please call **020 7838 5968**. For more Mozambique holiday ideas visit www.wexas.com/Mozambique/holidays.