

LOVING THE BBC

(that's bush, beach and culture)

Sue Watt tries out a new bush-and-beach combo in Mozambique, first venturing into the rejuvenated Gorongosa National Park before descending to the coast for some sand, surf, culture and history.

Dusk was falling when I arrived in Gorongosa National Park. As we walked through the bush towards our camp in the dim light I bumped into something hanging from a tree. I was startled until I realised I'd collided with a wicker basket chair, a welcome if incongruous sight that became even more surreal when a gin and tonic was thrust into my hand as I sat down.

"We deliberately hung the chair in people's way so that they stop, leave everything behind and relax," Rob Janisch told me, smiling broadly. His ploy worked brilliantly. Rob and his wife Jos set up Explore Gorongosa two years ago as a low-impact, tented camp with conservation and community involvement at its core. With only four sensitively designed en suite tents, personal service is guaranteed. As Jos served our delicious dinner by the camp fire on the banks of the Msicadzi River, my partner Will and I felt like guests in their home.

Explore is currently the only private camp within Gorongosa National Park, once the place to go for safari-loving affluent expats and Hollywood stars of the 1960s. Crammed with wildlife, which included thousands of elephants and buffalo, the Park became an innocent victim of the bitter 16-year civil war after Mozambique gained independence from Portugal in 1975. It was the flashpoint for battles, massacres and kidnappings on the human front, and both sides of the conflict plundered the park's wildlife, killing elephants for ivory

to fund arms and decimating the game population for food. Today, in a unique partnership between the government and The Carr Foundation – established by US philanthropist Greg Carr – a restoration project to protect the park's unique biodiversity is embracing sustainable tourism to ensure Gorongosa's survival.

The morning after our arrival we saw the beauty of Gorongosa for ourselves. As we strolled along the riverbank, a cautious waterbuck family scurried away and a hippo submerged itself in the water. Butterflies fluttered around us as two bushbucks skipped into shrubs and a fish eagle scoured the river for food. We reached a derelict building pockmarked with bullet holes that was once a smart restaurant built by the Portuguese – it was easy to imagine thousands of buffalo roaming the vast plains it overlooked. With some 200 buffalo now in the park, the restoration work is already evident.

"They've brought in hippos, a whole bunch of elephants and impala numbers have literally quadrupled since we've been here," Rob explained. "Now we're watching lions hunting at night and see regular sightings of quite relaxed elephants. Even in the two years we've been here we're seeing results, and that's exciting."

Our walk the following day, to the summit of Mount Gorongosa, was far more challenging than our riverside stroll. We trekked past villages and mud huts, past people tending their crops of maize and bananas, and past tragic evidence of slash-and-burn farming. The abandoned plots whose soil no ▶



After falling in love with Africa on a gap year in 2004, Sue Watt became a freelance travel writer. She is a regular contributor to *Travel Africa* and newspapers such as *The Independent*.



The all-important waters captured by Mount Gorongosa's rainforests cascade down the Murombodzi waterfall



▷ longer sustained its produce were left withering on the hillsides in place of vital rainforest that could have been feeding Gorongosa's lakes and rivers. Replanting the rainforest, another crucial element of the restoration project, is providing much-needed local employment. It is also raising awareness in the surrounding communities of the important role the forest plays in the survival of the entire park.

But what sets it apart from mainstream lodges is that it doesn't just give patrons the chance to visit the local community, it offers them the chance to get to know it

On the mountain's slope we had an arduous climb through refreshingly dense, dripping rainforest before making camp below Gogogo peak. The night was spent beneath a full moon. In the morning, having been woken by young children smoking out protein-rich bugs like huge grasshoppers, we scrambled up a rocky crag and eventually reached the 1900m summit. Beneath the wispy clouds we could see Gorongosa spread out like a vast green blanket for miles around, revealing its special, vulnerable, beauty.

On our descent we heard the rare, green-headed oriole, one of over 400 bird varieties in the park. It sounded like it was laughing at us as we searched in vain for it in the verdant rainforest canopy. The chuckling continued as we slid inelegantly down along the muddy paths – we never did see it. Later, we relieved our aching muscles in the chilling water of Murombodzi waterfall.

To complete our recovery from the climb we headed to a new beachside lodge in Cabaceira Pequena, near the former capital Ilha de Moçambique. Coral Lodge 1541 offers barefoot comfort with ten breezy villas looking out to sea, a pool alongside its private lagoon and a restaurant that creates miracles from local produce. But what sets it apart from mainstream lodges is that it doesn't just give patrons the chance to visit the local community, it offers them the chance to get to know it.

Driving up the sandy path that passes for a road in Cabaceira Pequena, we were almost mobbed by kids. Refreshingly, they weren't badgering us for sweets

Top to bottom: The UNESCO World Heritage site of Ilha de Moçambique; the support crew climbing Mount Gorongosa; the tempting waters of Coral Lodge's lagoon

or money, but were simply excited and inquisitive, proudly displaying toys made from scraps of wire and wheels, making eye-masks out of leaves, or chasing each other around the massive baobab tree in the centre of the village.

Everyone seemed to know Alex (one of the lodge's owners), and the village chief, Amade, came to say hello. Tall and slim, with distinguished grey hair and tortoiseshell glasses, he welcomed us warmly in Portuguese. A woman sat in the shade wearing the traditional powdery-white facemask called *musiro*, which acts to protect her skin from the sun. We then bumped into Essyace, the lodge's gardener, with the friendliest grin I've ever seen. He invited us into his spotless, single-storey house made of mud, coral bricks and thatch – it is typical of homes here. His four children followed our every move around the sparsely furnished rooms while others stood outside, peering in through the windows. But it didn't feel like we were peering into their lives or being voyeuristic – we felt genuinely welcomed into their home, their school and their mosque.

Wandering around the village, we saw crumbling remains of larger, grander houses overlooking the sea, built for rich Arabs who came here long before Portuguese colonialists sailed to its shores, their influence still evident today in its Muslim culture. Nearby, women gathered water from the well purportedly used by Vasco da Gama's men over 500 years ago.

The Portuguese influence is far stronger on Ilha de Moçambique, the atmospheric UNESCO World Heritage site that was the capital of Portuguese East Africa for 400 years. Coral Lodge offers dhow trips here, but, short of time, we opted for their speedboat. The historic island is home to the indomitable fortress of São Sebastião, the oldest complete fort in sub-Saharan Africa, and the tiny, peaceful church of Nossa Senhora de Baluarte, the oldest European building in the southern hemisphere. Browsing around Stone Town, once a major centre for slave and ivory traders, we felt a palpable air of mystery and melancholy. The neighbouring village of Makuti was more frantic, being home to most of the island's 14,000 residents. Although measuring just 3km by 500m, the island has much to see, including several shipwrecks just offshore, a legacy of its prime location along former Arab trading routes. Divers can explore these with the lodge's dive centre and even snorkelers can see them from the surface.

In just a week, our trip to Cabaceira Pequena and Gorongosa had covered everything: bush and beach, culture and communities, walking and wildlife. What more could you want? Just a bit more time, perhaps...

* Sue Watt's trip was organised by Africa specialist To Escape To (www.toescape.to). She flew with TAP Portugal (www.flytap.com) and LAM (www.lam.co.mz).



One of the many smiles in the village of Cabaceira Pequena, this one framed by the traditional sun-blocking paste known as *musiro*

Plan your trip

Getting there

TAP Portugal (www.flytap.com) link London with Mozambique's capital Maputo via Lisbon, while South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) and Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) connect the two via Johannesburg and Nairobi respectively. Flights linking Beira (for Gorongosa National Park), Nampula (for Cabaceira Pequena) and Maputo are operated by LAM (www.lam.co.mz).

When to visit

The rainy season from December to March is best avoided since many roads, particularly in Gorongosa, become impassable.

Visas

Tourist visas for Mozambique cost £40 from the Mozambique High Commission (www.mozambiquehighcommission.org.uk), but are also available upon arrival at Maputo International Airport (US\$82).

Books

Lonely Planet's *Mozambique* (3rd ed, 2010) by Mary Fitzpatrick and Bradt's *Mozambique* (5th ed, 2011) by Philip Briggs are both good choices for trips to Gorongosa and the coast.

Find out more

Coral Lodge
(www.coralodge1541.com)
Explore Gorongosa
(www.exploreorongosa.com)

Author tip

Although development plans in Gorongosa and Ilha de Moçambique are being managed with great sensitivity, if you like undiscovered destinations visit here sooner rather than later.

