

# Dune date

*Relatively unscathed by climate breakdown, Mozambique's Bazaruto archipelago is a five-island haven of pristine nature, both above and below the surface.*

BY JOHAN AUGUSTIN

Waves slap the hull, making the speedboat shudder, and I wonder whether this adventure will end before it has even begun.

"The ocean is like a washing machine before we reach the reef," says Tyron Brennon, suggesting the going will be easier thereafter. A dive instructor on Benguerra – the second biggest island in Mozambique's Bazaruto archipelago – Brennon is right, the boat stabilises once we reach 2 Mile Reef.

It's early morning as we begin exploring this wild part of the Indian Ocean. As we descend through clear, azure water towards the reef, we pass schools of darting fusilier and surgeon fish. Consisting of hard and soft corals, the reef lies about 15 metres below the surface. Fishing on the 3km reef is prohibited and life flourishes in this part of the 1,430 sq km Bazaruto National Park.

Established in 1971, the park came under the purview of African Parks, a non-governmental organisation focused on conservation, in December 2017, and is a sanctuary for more than 2,000 fish species and iconic megafauna such as humpback whales, sharks, rays, dolphins and turtles. Top billing, however, goes to the dugong, the mammal believed to have inspired the myth of the mermaid. About 300 graze the beds of sea grass in the channels, making Bazaruto home to the last viable dugong population in the western Indian Ocean.

The reefs surrounding the Bazaruto islands remain relatively healthy compared with the many that have suffered from rising global water temperatures and other effects of climate breakdown.

A pair of one-metre groupers stare with protruding eyes as I glide over 2 Mile Reef. Brennon knows where to look and points to a cliff ledge. Beneath it, a lionfish, its upright spikes reminiscent of a mane, hides in a small cave. A black spotted moray eel juts its head out from a crevice, paying us no attention as we approach.

We rise to the surf to see a blacktip reef shark patrolling its territory, as if reminding us who remains top of the food chain.

We continue on to Pansy Island, a narrow strip surrounded by sea the temperature of a warm bath, its azure hue turning turquoise closer to the deserted sandbar.

The name of the island, which lies between Bazaruto and the Mozambique Channel, derives from the cream-coloured shells that are scattered across the sand; flat discs adorned with five-petalled flower patterns, not fossils but the outlines of skeletons of a type of burrowing sea urchin, called *Clypeasteroida*, that live in shallow water in sheltered estuaries and bays along the coasts of South Africa and Mozambique. Bleached by the sun and left as natural souvenirs, these fragile "pansies" must nevertheless be left where they lay; removal is strictly forbidden.

A shell's throw away lies the largest of the archipelago's islands, Bazaruto, where dunes rise almost vertically to form a natural screen blocking out the view of Pansy Island.

I run up the hot dunes, the wind sandpapering my face, imagining I am in a Star Wars desert scene. At the top, the 360-degree panorama takes in Pansy Island and the rest of the archipelago in all its remote glory.

We return to Benguerra, which lies to the south of Bazaruto, and at the northernmost point, our guide, Carlos, sets up a table covered in a white cloth and shaded by a parasol, beside which he stands two chairs on a woven reed mat. Cushions and beanbags dot the sand, close to the water's edge.

"If you're lucky you might spot some dolphins pass by," says Carlos, while serving us Mozambiquian crab salad and Portuguese bean salad with tuna and coconut dressing.

We see no dolphins, but the isolation is reward enough. Apart from one other boat, my travel companion and I appear to have this part of the archipelago to ourselves.

Further down Benguerra, a trio of horses have the run of a long stretch of beach. Part-Arabian, part-Boerperd stallions, they were rescued after their owners had been forced from their land in nearby Zimbabwe during former president Robert Mugabe's farm reforms, and now belong to Mozambique Horse Safari.

"Do you want to ride bareback?" groom Polly Hughes asks. Of course I do, and I hop up. Vumba, a white stallion, wades into the water before deciding to trot along the beach; I don't have much say.

As the sun sets over Benguerra's western beaches, we





return to our resort, Azura. A table is set up on the sand and we sip the local drink, *dawa*: vodka, squeezed lemon, honey and plenty of crushed ice. “*Dawa*” means “medicine” in Swahili and, at the end of a busy day, it certainly proves efficacious.

A tepid wind rolls in from the Indian Ocean – caressing our senses, as the red sun sinks behind the horizon.

As the medicine begins to take effect, a dhow – the traditional Arab sailing vessel, with triangular sails – approaches the beach. A fisherman jumps off and carries his catch up the sand on his shoulders; a chunking kingfish that soon will be grilled before gracing our plates along with piri piri dipping sauce.

The five islands – which also include Magaruque, Santa Carolina and Bangué – support a population of nearly 6,000 people, most of whom are dependent on fishing and other occupations reliant on the archipelago’s natural resources.

Early the next morning, the beach comes alive again as colourfully dressed women gather nets in a circle close to the beach, trapping fish within. The women laugh and chatter loudly, but are too shy to pose for photos. An egret waits patiently at the water’s edge for its breakfast to swim by while crabs patrol the sand, ducking mole-like into their holes at the first hint of danger.

After a breakfast of pancakes with melted white chocolate and fresh mango juice, a helicopter – the means of transport favoured by most Azura guests – picks us up for the short flight back to Vilankulos (or Vilanculo), on the mainland, the gateway to the archipelago and one of Mozambique’s earliest tourist destinations.

As we pass overhead, the azure and turquoise ocean blends with sandbars rising a few centimetres above the water, painting a priceless natural picture. ■



Picture: Alamy

**Clockwise from top far left:** Bazaruto Island; the coast of Vilankulos; an Azura butler sets the table for dinner as a fisherman brings up the dish of the day; women fish on Benguerra; bareback riding on a Benguerra beach; a “five-leaved” sea urchin skeleton of the type that gave Pansy Island its name. Pictures: Roger Borgelid