

TRAVEL



# A Taste of *Mozambique*

By Verne Maree



Halfway through a platter of barbecued prawns and another ice-cold *Dos M*, the local beer, I'm thoughtfully licking the buttery peri-peri sauce off my left wrist when it suddenly occurs to me: Soon after I met him nearly 20 years ago, Roy promised to bring me to Mozambique to eat peri-peri prawns at the *Costa do Sol* in Maputo, but he never got round to it.

Instead of the *Costa do Sol*, however, we are among the first guests at **Santorini**, also known as **Bazaruto Views**. This stunning villa is perched at the edge of a cliff a few kilometres north of the coastal town of Vilankulo, 600km north of the capital Maputo. Sweeping, shifting views of the Indian Ocean, sleepily shallow here, are marked by sandbanks, little fishing vessels and the islands of the Bazaruto archipelago in the distance. We flew in on a private plane, a dazzlingly scenic way to arrive.

Mozambique has become a hugely popular destination for well-heeled South African investors and tourists, who in the past decade have been coming here in increasing numbers.

"A luxury villa in Mozambique?" one of my colleagues asked before I left, and with fair reason. Ravaged for 100 years by greedy Portuguese and British colonisers, the country endured 10 years of anti-colonial fighting before achieving Independence in 1964, then 15 years of civil war between the Russian communist-backed Frelimo and the US and South Africa-backed Renamo. That Cold War-inspired conflict left things in total disrepair; this is still one of the world's poorest countries.

In fact, coastal resort towns such as Maputo, Beira, Nakala and Xai Xai have long been magnets for especially South Africans and Zimbabweans

(then Rhodesians), particularly during the Portuguese colonial heydays of the fifties and sixties. Seduced then by the novelty of continental architecture and a sophisticated café culture, they're now lured by magnificent sport-fishing grounds, endless beaches and an atmosphere that is at once completely African and intriguingly foreign. For one thing, Portuguese is the official language.

As is the case in other parts of Africa, Chinese investment is filling the vacuum left by the retreating Russians, and then some. After stopping at the glossy new Maputo airport, we saw scores of Chinese labourers at work on the domestic wing. "They never go back to China," our friends tell us.

They also built the shiny new airport at Vilankulo. Once past the beautiful, Chinese-built brick road that leads from airport into peaceful **Vilankulo town**, it's a different matter: the roads are of dirt and the potholes are numerous. About 300 mainly Zimbabwean and South African expats live here, almost all involved in some way in the burgeoning resort and hospitality industry.

On the half-hour drive from the airport to the villa, you follow a seaside road; not bad at first, but soon a treacherously sandy track for which a 4X4 is essential. Fortunately, you'll be doing it in style in the villa's guest Landrover.



### The Villa

One might think that a Greek-inspired villa would be somewhat out of place on an East African coastline, but in fact it works splendidly. Sweeping views from the main external door take the eye across a huge courtyard with an atmospherically lit pool, through various seating and dining areas and straight through to the mesmeric blue of the Indian Ocean.

Built by South African partnership (Roger) Hooper and (John) Low Construction, the five-bedroom masterpiece easily sleeps 10 in great comfort.

It's constructed mainly of cement, including the floors; the blue domes are made by hand, and the white roof-pebbles were brought in from Indonesia. In fact, much of the furnishing and artwork has come from Bali: the cream-painted wrought-iron outdoor dining table, chairs and pool loungers; the curved occasional tables, pebble lights and pebble pots in the courtyard; lights, coconut matting and knickknacks of all descriptions.

The master suite is nothing short of palatial, but all bedrooms are spacious with bathrooms en suite, private patios, air-



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conditioning and mosquito nets to remind you where you are. Children are made welcome with bunkbeds, toys and other paraphernalia, and there's even accommodation for an au pair.

### The Food

**Chef George Nhalingue** may just be the villa's greatest asset. Born just down the road, he spent his childhood afternoons in the kitchen of his uncle's restaurant, then trained and worked in several of Mozambique's top resorts before being poached by the villa's owners. He buys directly from the local fishermen who, with their traditional nets and dhows, ply their ancient trade right opposite the villa.

After an incredible selection of canapés served in the sala, our first dinner offered truffled fresh-corn soup, peri-peri prawns and traditional chicken groundnut and coconut curry. Other standouts during our stay included the best *bacalhau* (traditional Portuguese salted cod) that Roy can remember; and for me, a fat squid delectably stuffed with a mixture of rice, feta and chillies.



Chef George Nhalingue



Breakfast buffets tempted with still-warm granola of freshly candied cashews, fruit and coconut, croissants oozing blue cheese straight from the oven, and a daily hot dish like French toast piled with crispy bacon, avocado and melting Camembert, or scrambled egg with home-smoked salmon.

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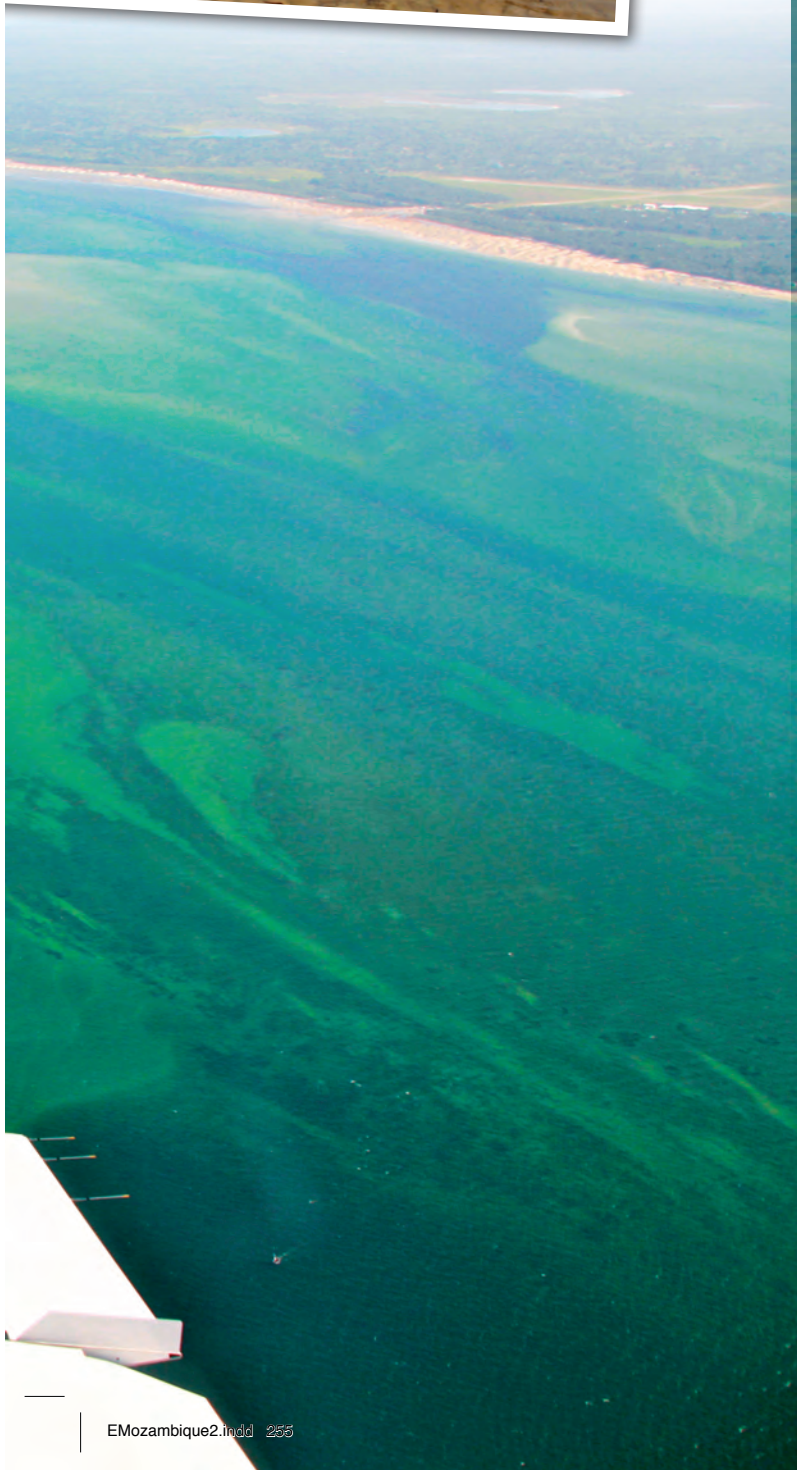


### Out and About

South Africans come to Mozambique for scuba diving, snorkelling and legendary deep-sea fishing. As a villa guest, you have access to a 9-metre motorised catamaran, or you can hire a yacht or even a dhow for a full-day or half-day excursion to the neighbouring islands of **Margaruke**, **Benguerra** and **Bazaruto** – or to **Pansy Island**, an atoll covered in fragile pansy shells. If you're *hugely* lucky, say our friends, you may even see a dugong.

You can ride horses on the beach, and kite-surfing is a big thing here; one breezy Saturday afternoon, from the alfresco **Cas Bar**, we watched Roger Hooper and his friends flying across the waves at a breathtaking clip.

If you can tear yourself away from Chef George's inimitable kitchen, there are lots of great little bars and restaurants in the little town, too.



## LM Cuisine

Maputo used to be called Lourenco Marques, and LM cuisine has long been an integral part of the South African food scene. Where I come from, the default way to enjoy prawns is butterflied down the back then grilled with a choice of sauces: fiery peri-peri, garlic butter or lemon butter for the wusses. Whole spatchcock chickens\* are marinated in peri-peri before barbecuing; everything comes with yellow fried rice *and* chips, extra sauces and perhaps a simple Portuguese salad.

Sharp was my disappointment, therefore, when I tried *frangos a pil pil* (peri-peri chicken) on my first trip to Portugal proper. Pallid and dry, it had nothing of the saucy succulence of its flame-grilled African cousin. (The six Nando's outlets in Singapore, franchises of the hugely successful South African chain, keep the cravings at bay until one can get back to the mother lode.)



Courtesy of Nando's


\* Chaffingly known as *Putco chickens*, after the name of the SA transport company whose buses are supposed to have run over them

## TOP 10 Dishes

1. Peri-peri chicken
2. Peri-peri prawns
3. Prego roll – grilled minute steak in a white bread-roll
4. Chicken or crab curry, Mozambique-style
5. Feijoada – bean and pork stew
6. Casquinha – crabmeat-stuffed crab shell; served with metapa (cassava leaves)
7. Crab samosas
8. Rissoles of prawn or crab
9. Lulas – calamari, either whole or in rings
10. Ameijoa – clams



### Getting There

Federal Air operates daily flights between Johannesburg's Oliver Tambo Airport and Vilankulo at four different rates, starting at SAR3,400 (about S\$666) return. South Africans don't need visas; for most other nationalities, it's available on arrival at a fairly steep SAR750. Vilankulo offers a wide variety of accommodation at different prices points; see our recommendations (*right*). 

## Recommendations

The General Safari Company (for any travel bookings or enquiries)  
gensaf.co.za

Icon Villas  
www.iconvillas.co.za or email  
comms.santor@yahoo.com

Casa Rex  
vilanculos.co.za

Vilanculos Conference Centre  
(newly built luxury units)  
Email jcrprojects@teledata.mz  
hooper-and-louw.com

Hotel Dona Ana (newly  
refurbished)  
Email rholmes@iwayafrica.co.zw  
thehoteldonaana.com

#### Island Retreats:

Benguerra Lodge  
benguerra.co.za

Marlin Lodge  
marlinlodge.co.za

Azura Lodge  
azura-retreats.com

Pestana Bazaruto Lodge  
pestana.com

Indigo Bay Island Resort  
indigobayresort.com

In Maputo (the capital):  
Hotel Cardoso  
hotelcardoso.com.mz

Federal Air  
fedair.com