

Although it is one of the world's poorest countries, Mozambique's tourism sector is growing – and well it might, with miles of pristine deserted beaches and value-for-money hotels in this former Portuguese colony, writes **Sean Sheehan**

**M**OZAMBIQUE looks out on the Indian Ocean from its two and a half thousand miles of coastline with pristine and mostly empty beaches. The country rarely appears on people's bucket list of holiday destinations, making it all the more desirable if looking for all-year-around sun but fed up with dashes for sun loungers, familiar food and too many holidaymakers looking just like yourself. Mozambique is an adventure, one in its early stages, where you feel that tourism is bringing in some much-needed cash to locals still recovering from decades of conflict – first the struggle for independence from Portugal and then a civil war fomented by South Africa during the apartheid era.

The best artwork in the capital city, Maputo, is inside the Afrin Prestige hotel where the artefacts you see are made entirely from reconstituted AK47s and other weapons from the deadly decades of warfare.

Maputo is enjoying a flourishing economy, with snazzy modern architecture and classy hotels, the houses of its well-to-do guarded by elderly security men, their rifles leaning against the wall, chinwagging with their neighbours.

More common are gaily clad women, bearing bundled assortments atop their heads, babies wrapped on to their backs and young girls with more elaborate hair weaves than you'll have thought possible. People commute on open-backed trucks,

These hotels have the best restaurants, from fine dining at Polana Serena to superb seafood at the Southern Sun and, with the best chef in town, innovative cuisine at Radisson Blu

■ The ultimate barefoot beach resort, Anvil Bay is on the Machangulo peninsula



# Paradise regained

tuk-tuks wiggle through the traffic, pavement stalls stand in for supermarkets and above you, always, a cerulean sky.

Maputo is an old city with some splendid Portuguese architecture, like the railway station which in 2016 *Time* designated the third most beautiful in the world.

Take in the cathedral, completed in 1944 and designed by a railway engineer. If it's a weekend peek in at one of the weddings – gospel choirs, African drums, jiving and a procession of gifts – cake, fruit, drink. Bride and groom often wear matching outfits, not in any style you'll see back home.

Top marks go to the Southern Sun hotel, perched right on the beach, with a secluded bar by an enormous African fig tree. The Polana Serena, renovated from the colonial era, is all very grand with pretty gardens and a spa with its own lap pool.

The new kid on the block is the Radisson Blu, superbly modern and boasting the best architectural design in the country. These hotels have the best restaurants, from fine dining at Polana Serena to superb seafood at the Southern Sun and, with the

best chef in town, innovative cuisine at Radisson Blu.

Out on the street, Maputo Marina has a bar and tables by the water's edge and live music in the evenings.

Mozambique's currency has not recovered from last year's crash and even in a five-star hotel restaurant a good bottle of South African wine can be enjoyed for £10 and an 18-year old Irish whiskey for £4.50 a glass.

At the Maputo Marina restaurant, a meal for two with a bottle of wine is around £25. For the full paradisaal experience, an hour by motorboat across Maputo Bay brings you to the tip of the Machangulo peninsula and Machangulo Beach Lodge. It's a crafted, tiny resort with secluded rooms set into the hillside, friendly staff and a plethora of activities from game fishing to diving and snorkeling and visits to the nearby village.

If you want to wander or just lounge, deserted beaches stretch as far as the eye can see, empty loungers wait under palm roofed umbrellas and there's no hassles from beach vendors.

The ultimate barefoot beach resort, Anvil Bay is also on the Machangulo peninsula.

A series of huts, half tents and half luxury hotel rooms are hidden from the beach by bush vegetation. An open marquee on the beach is bar, dining room, lounge and activity centre.



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■ TAP Portugal (flytap.com 0345 601 0932) flies from London Heathrow and Gatwick to Mozambique's capital via Lisbon three times a week, from £575 return including taxes and surcharges. To Ibo Island: A flight to Ibo from Maputo with LAM (lam.co.mz) to Pemba and then either a pricey (£364 per person return) 20-minute charter flight with CRA Aviation (craaviation.co.mz) or private car-and-boat transfers for up to four people (£245 per group return) through Baobibo, Miti Mitwiri or (£326 return) with Cinco Portas.

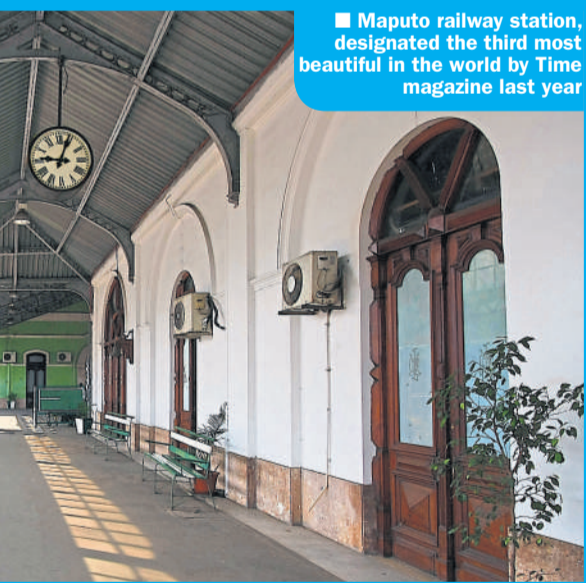
■ Tour operator: Mahlatini Luxury Travel have their headquarters in Belfast (028 90736050, mahlatini.com) and can assist with all aspects of a trip.

■ Accommodation in Maputo: Southern Sun (tsogosun.com/southern-sun-maputo); Polana Serena (serenahotels.com/serenapolana); Radisson Blu (radissonblu.com/en/hotel-maputo); on Machangulo Peninsula: Machangulo Beach Lodge (machangulobeachlodge.com); Anvil Bay Barefoot Beach Camp (anvilbay.com); White Pearl (whitepearlresorts.com).on Ibo Island: Ibo Island Lodge (ibolodge.com); Cinco Portas (cincoportas.com).

■ Guides: *Bradt's Mozambique* travel guide needs a space in your luggage and, for the colourful bird life, *Robert's Birds of Southern Africa* can be uploaded to your mobile.

The camp sits on a seven-mile stretch of empty white sands which you will have totally to yourself and if you take a walk through the vegetation beyond the dunes, you pass mahogany, amarillo and ndoni

■ Maputo railway station, designated the third most beautiful in the world by Time magazine last year

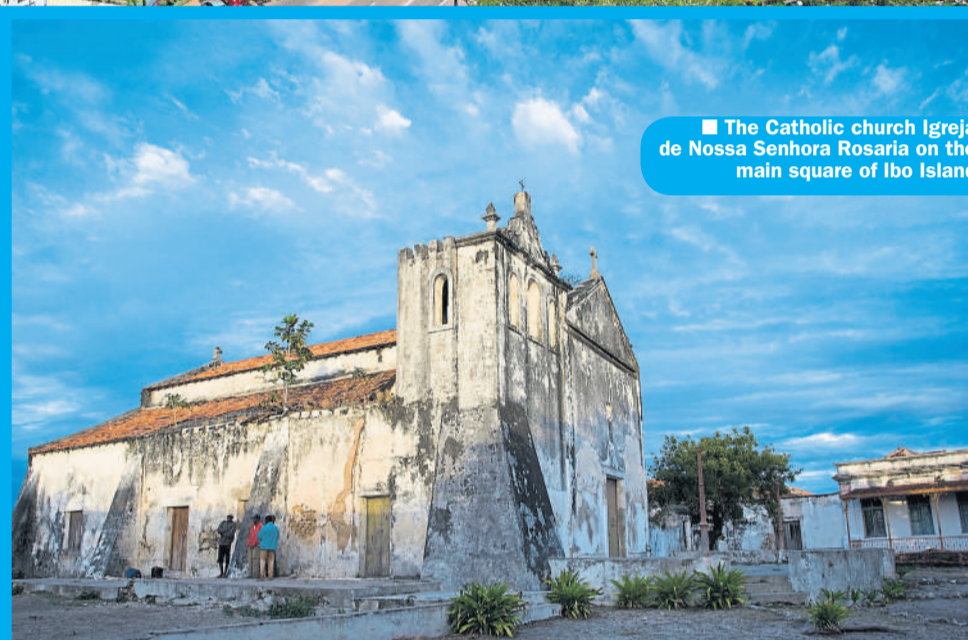


■ Aerial view the downtown area of Maputo, the capital city of Mozambique

trees and the huts where locals try to grow vegetables in a sandy soil. Anvil Bay is owned by a trust and profits are ploughed back into the local community. Solar power provides most of the electricity and a reverse-osmosis well supplies the camp. Here you can have fun on the beach and feel worthy at the same time. If Anvil Bay is too remote for your liking, White Pearl offers straight-up luxury in bungalows, a snazzy pool bar and waiters in the European-style restaurant with little brushes to sweep away breadcrumbs from your table. Turtles come to the beach, horses for riding on the sand and there are boat trips for dolphin watching.

**IBO ISLAND**

For adventurous or jaded souls with a yen for time travel, fly to Ibo Island in the far north east of the country. Ibo village has lain pretty much untouched since the Portuguese upped and left in the 1970s: grand stone buildings crumbling back into the ground, fig trees growing out of what remains of their roofs, goats exploring what was once a grocer's shop or a living room. A few have been renovated into serene lodges, their gardens filled with tropical flowers and their trees filled with weaver birds. The best of these is Ibo Island Lodge and its rooftop terrace overlooking the ocean is open to all. Less expensive accommodation, also with air-con and pools, is readily available. Silversmiths work on the island and jewellery is on sale in their makeshift shops. Ebony woodcarvings and other crafts, plus coffee grown by a workers' collective, are available also. Trips to other islands on the archipelago on dhows, the traditional sailing boats, can be arranged; there are bikes for hire to explore the island and a dive school. Ibo is very special: visit before the developers move in.



■ The Catholic church Igreja de Nossa Senhora Rosaria on the main square of Ibo Island



■ A bar by the beach under an African fig tree in Mozambique's capital Maputo



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