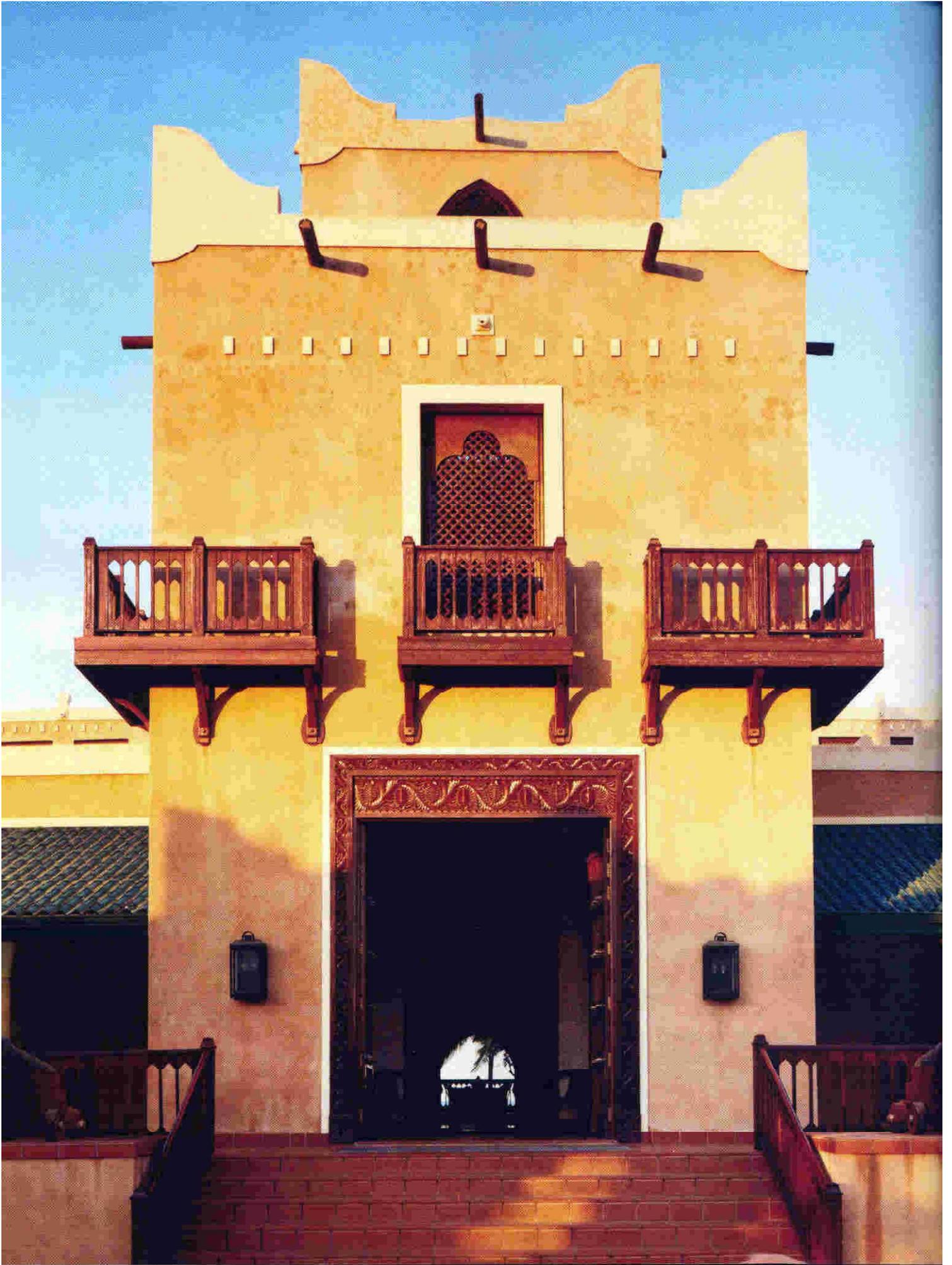
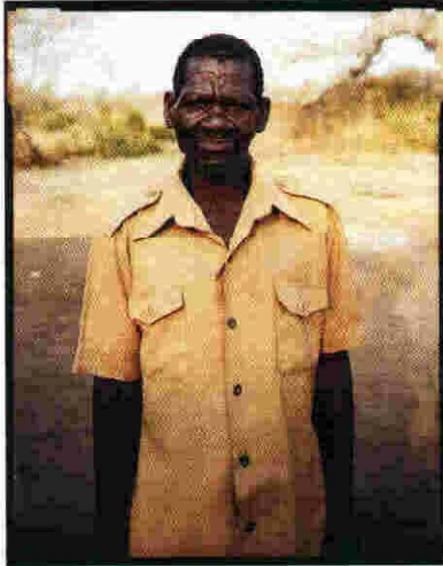


# UNDER AFRICAN SKIES

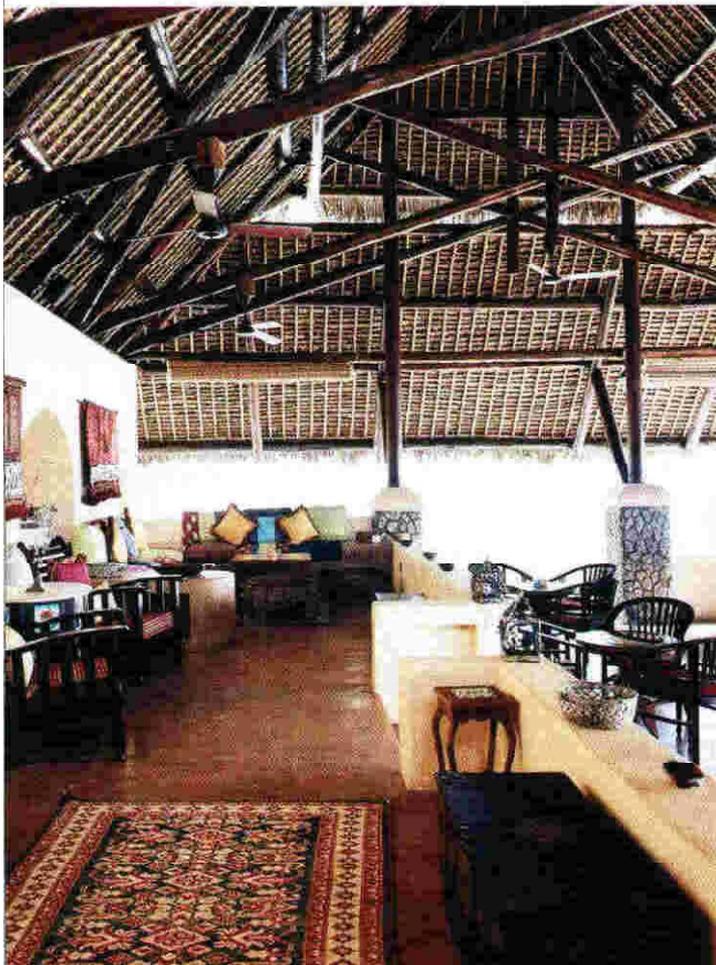
AS MOZAMBIQUE EMERGES FROM DECADES OF TURMOIL AND ISOLATION, TRAVELERS ARE RETURNING TO ITS NOW TRANQUIL SHORES, AMONG THE MOST ENTICING IN EAST AFRICA. EXPLORING THE LITTLE-KNOWN QUIRIMBAS ARCHIPELAGO—AND ITS GATEWAY CITY, PEMBA—*DOUGLAS ROGERS* UNCOVERS A BURGEONING RESORT SCENE. PHOTOGRAPHED BY ZUBIN SHROFF

Looking westward from Matemo Island, toward the mainland. Opposite: The entrance to Pemba Beach Resort Hotel.





**East of Eden** Above: Jacul Amadé, a former Londo village chief. Below: Matemo Island Resort's lobby lounge. Opposite, clockwise from top: A fisherman's shack on Matemo; inside one of the 24 beachfront villas at Matemo Island Resort; baobab trees in the fields outside Pemba



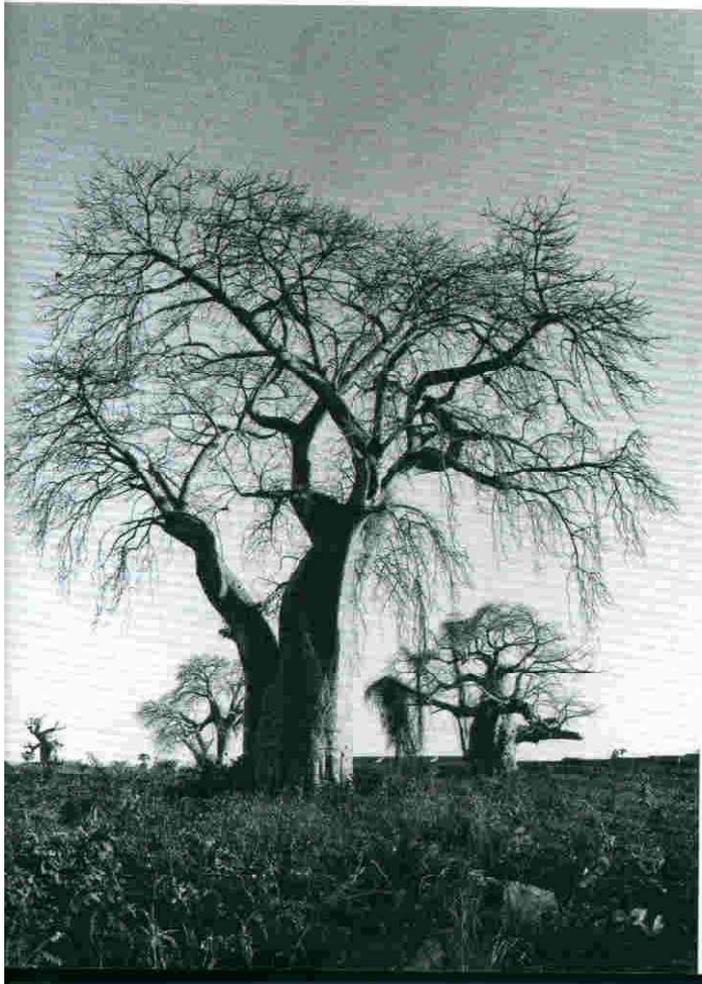
THE WATER BELOW IS SO transparent that even from 2,000 feet, flying beneath low-lying clouds, I can make out the silvery flash of dolphins and sailfish corkscrewing through the waves. Stretching to the horizon is an exquisite ribbon of palm- and mangrove-studded islands, each rimmed by a halo of ivory sand. To the west, plying a maze of tidal waterways, are dozens of creaking dhows, sails billowing, atavistic reminders that this was once a remote outpost of the Arab spice route and slave trade. Seen from my vantage point—an eight-seat Islander plane—the Quirimbas archipelago recalls the South Pacific. In fact, this 200-mile-long chain of coral islands—32 in all, only half of which are inhabited—lies off the northern coast of Mozambique. And if certain entrepreneurs and tastemakers are right, the Quirimbas may become Africa's answer to the Maldives.

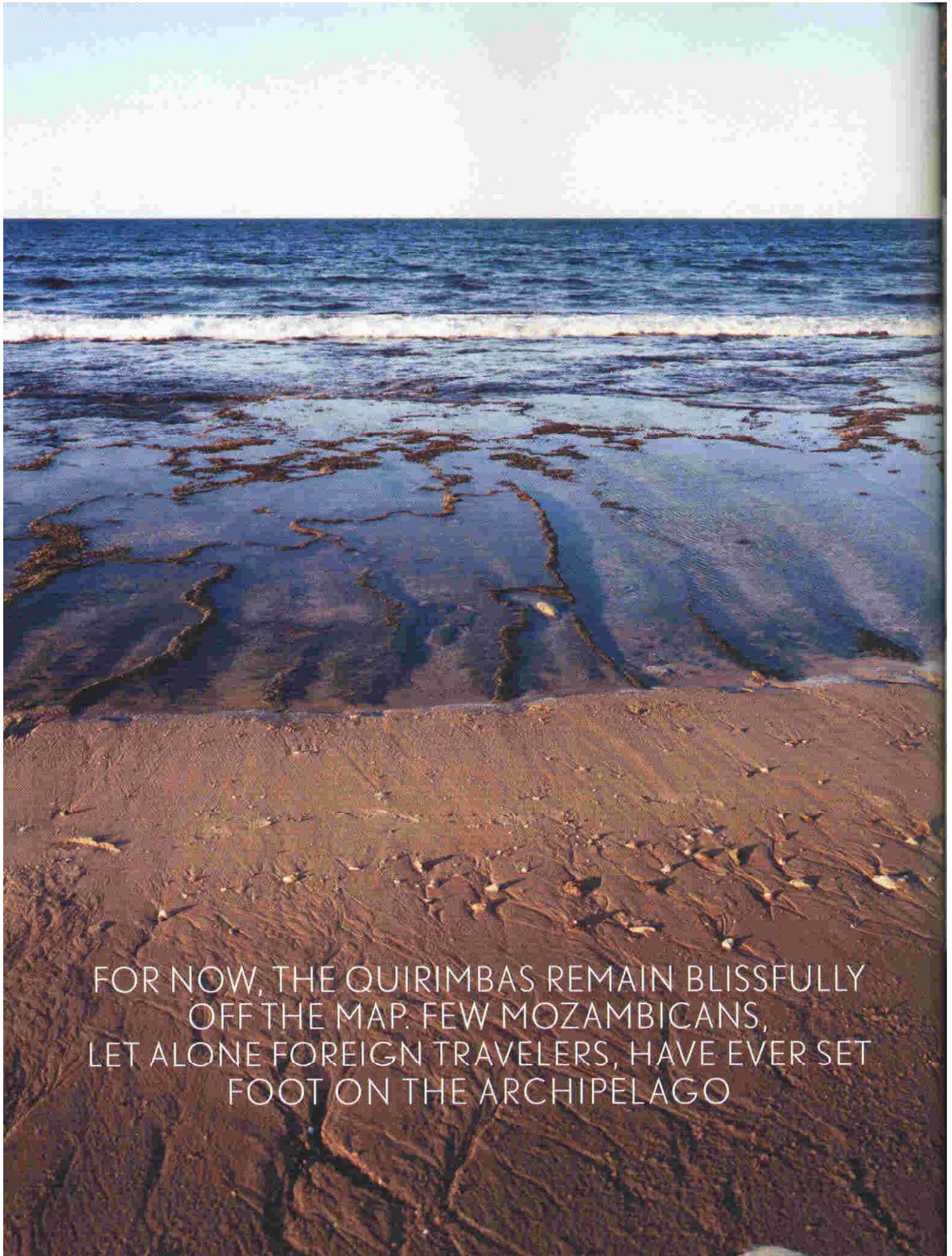
For now, however, the islands remain blissfully off the map. Few Mozambicans, let alone foreign travelers, have ever set foot here. And though I come from neighboring Zimbabwe, I hadn't heard of the archipelago until two years ago. Even during Mozambique's brief tourism heyday—the swinging 1950's and 1960's, when rich white Africans and Europeans filled the cafés, nightclubs, and colonial hotels of Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) and the glittering Bazaruto Islands—the Quirimbas remained cut off, as if preserved in aspic.

By the mid 1970's, of course, most of Mozambique itself was off-limits. In 1964 the country was wracked by a violent Marxist revolution, culminating in the 1975 overthrow of Portuguese rule; this was followed by a brutal civil war that would claim an estimated 1 million lives before its end in 1992. "I like to spend some time in Mozambique," Bob Dylan sang on his 1976 album *Desire*, but in those days—and for the two decades that followed—no one else wanted to be anywhere near the place.

And yet, and yet.... It has now been 13 years since the civil conflict ended and, astonishing as it may seem, Mozambique has reinvented itself as the most seductive destination in East Africa. In Maputo, those Mediterranean-style cafés and boîtes that drew comparisons to Lisbon's are again bustling. No doubt you've heard that the Bazaruto Islands are thriving once more, with a slate of luxurious beach lodges and exclusive diving resorts. But the real frontier, and the greatest rewards for travelers, can be found up north.

My reason for visiting the Quirimbas is twofold: this remote corner of Mozambique could well become my parents' new home. As second-generation white Zimbabweans, they are essentially under siege by the increasingly deranged government of Robert Mugabe, which has designated their game farm in eastern Zimbabwe for "resettlement" (Mugabe's policy of seizing white-owned farms to relocate landless peasants). Their animals are being poached, and their tourist business, along with Zimbabwe's economy, has collapsed. It is now likely that they will have to flee the country. In anticipation of this, my sister, a London-based real estate dealer, recently bought—over the Internet, for a song—a five-acre plot of beachfront in Pemba, the mainland gateway to the Quirimbas. The plan is to make this the setting for a guesthouse, which my parents would help to build and to





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manage. Indeed, at the end of my journey through the islands, my father will be flying from Zimbabwe to join me in Pemba, where both of us will see the property for the first time.

The irony of this is not lost on us. When my sister and I were growing up in Zimbabwe, Mozambique was a forbidden zone, forever at war. My parents, however, had known the country in a different era, and would regale us with tales of louche Mozambique weekends of sun, sea, sand, and Portuguese wine. In 1962, they had actually spent their honeymoon on Bazaruto Island; they still have the grainy Super-8 footage to prove it. Zimbabwe's collapse, and Mozambique's coincident renaissance, speak volumes about the pain, the promise, and, above all, the unpredictability of Africa.

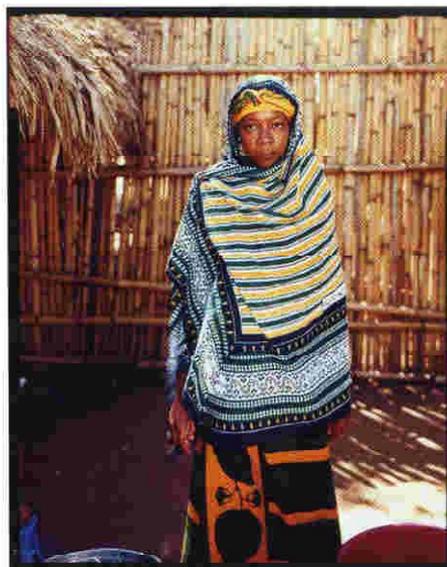
LESS THAN A HALF-MILE WIDE, the island of Quilála is too small for an airstrip. It's too small for much of anything, in fact; its only tenant is the nine-room Quilála Island Resort. Owned by a plummy white Kenyan colonial and his blond Belgian wife, this chic and intimate retreat, the first high-end hotel in the archipelago, has been the talk of South Africa's fashion set since it opened, in 2002. To reach it, you fly to the neighboring island of Quirimba, which gave its name to the archipelago, landing on a fairway-smooth swath of grass in the middle of a coconut forest, from there, it's a 20-minute speedboat ride to Quilála.

Although I am the flight's only passenger, I still half expect to be greeted upon arrival by reed-skirted island girls proffering garlands and froufrou cocktails. Instead, I get a grizzled 75-year-old German in a battered truck carrying a .22 rifle. "I'm your lift to the boat," he mutters. "Put your bags in the back."

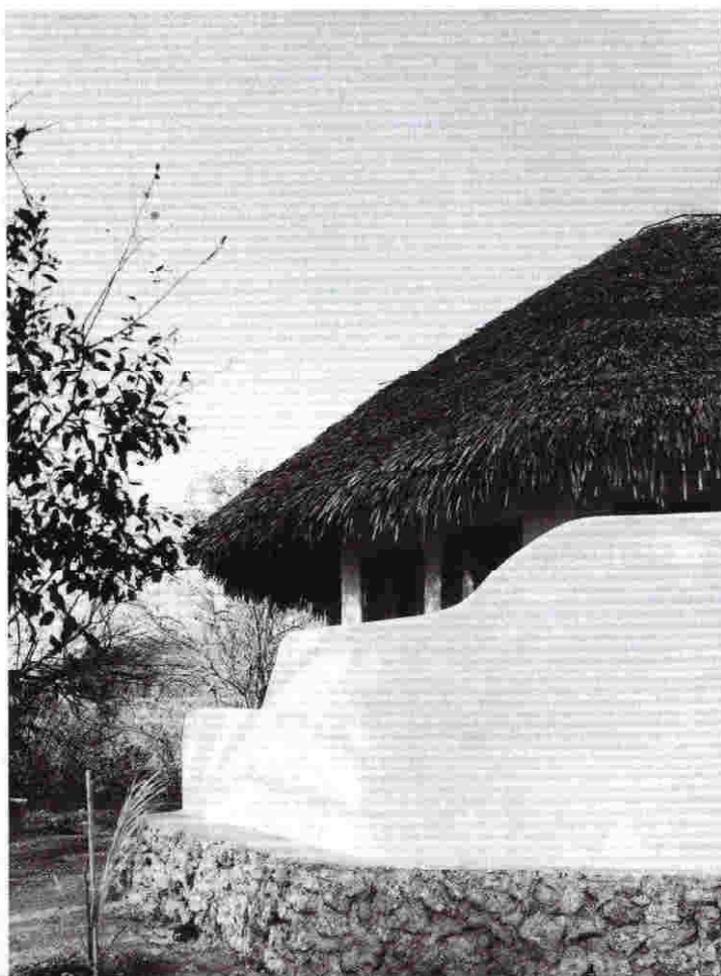
His name is Joachim Gessner, and the gun is "to shoot the monkeys that steal my coconuts." On the drive to the harbor I learn that Herr Gessner and his wife own a plantation on Quirimba, where he has quietly farmed coconuts since the 1940's. I ask what he did during the revolution of '74-'75, when many of Mozambique's white settlers fled in terror. He shrugs. "We listened to it on the radio," he replies. Herr Gessner tells me about the *National Geographic* journalist who came to write about this long-lost paradise. "When was that?" I ask. "Nineteen sixty-four," he says. "Nineteen sixty-four."

The hotel's speedboat is crewed by three jolly locals in navy-blue sailor suits, former fishermen from Quirimba. (Money is scarce on the archipelago, and jobs at the resorts are in high demand among the islands' Quimvani and Macua tribes.) After a four-mile ride to Quilála we pull into a secluded cove; stone-and-thatch pavilions peer down from higher ground. My bags are whisked away by uniformed porters—and, yes, here comes that froufrou cocktail, served in a coconut, which I sip in an open-sided, tile-floored bar decorated with tribal wood sculptures and chess sets. A dugout canoe hangs from the ceiling. On a stone-and-mahogany deck overlooking the beach, a saltwater pool glistens in the sun. It seems I'm sharing the resort with just one other guest, a sunburned executive from British Airways.

Quilála's nine thatched-roof villas were hewn out of rock, teakwood, and mahogany and furnished with ornate wooden »



**Out of Time Above:** At the market in Pemba. Below: Outside a guest villa at Londo Lodge. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The Church of Our Lady of Rosaria on Ibo Island; a view of the Indian Ocean from Londo Lodge; fossilized coral on Pemba Beach; inside Pemba Beach Resort Hotel.



## MOZAMBIQUE

carvings by the Makonde, a tribe from the northern mainland. Each villa opens onto a small private beach; from my sprawling king-sized bed, through flowing white cotton curtains, I can gaze over the mirror-like surface of the bay.

Isolation has been an ecological blessing for the Quirimbas: the marine life here is among the most exotic on earth. In 2002 the Mozambican government, with endorsement from the World Wildlife Fund, declared Quilála a marine sanctuary; the lodge offers deep-sea diving excursions over the island's protected reef. Manta rays, hawksbill turtles, and humpback whales populate the waters here, not to mention the exceedingly rare dugong, a near-extinct mammal with human-like breasts, from which the ancient myth of the mermaid likely derives. The sanctuary protects a two-mile radius around the island. Beyond that are the storied fishing grounds. Predictably, dinners at Quilála are feasts of exquisite seafood, all of it caught by Quirimba fishermen: yellowfin tuna, steamed in a banana leaf; spiny lobster, stuffed with crab; and tiger prawns, grilled in the Portuguese *piripiri* style with spicy chiles and olive oil.

On my second morning I follow a sandy path through a dense mangrove forest teeming with birds, to snorkel the waters off Turtle Beach. I spot neither dugongs nor turtles, but the bay still recalls a Darwinian paradise. Schools of exotic fish glitter against pink coral; snakelike moray eels devour crabs right in front of my nose.

Mostly, however, I take Quilála at its word—or, rather, its name, which comes from the Swahili *lala*, meaning sleep (the island's cove was a resting place for Arab ships). In the course of two days I nap on the beach, by the pool, and, during languorous deep-tissue massages, in a candlelit treatment room perched on rocks over the water. My new friend from British Airways does much the same. Over a poolside game of chess I ask him whether BA is considering flights to Pemba. Flushed by fine wine, he gives me a blank look that suggests he's lost all interest in the outside world.

THE PORTUGUESE CAME TO Mozambique in 1498, but for centuries before and after their arrival, Arabs sailed these waters and

settled the islands, trading in cloth, tortoiseshell, and slaves. To this day, the Islamic influence endures in the north: coastal tribes speak Arab-influenced Swahili, not Portuguese, and the majority are Muslims. (Mozambique is said to be named for a 16th-century sultan, Mussa-Bin-Tiki.) Today, the north is being transformed by a modern-day sultan of sorts—a Saudi tycoon, Adel Aujan, president of Rani Resorts. In 2001, Aujan erected a \$20 million hotel on Pemba Bay when the town was little more than a backwater. Now his company has opened two exclusive resorts in the Quirimbas archipelago, on Matemo and Medjumbe islands—both decidedly flashier affairs than the Quilála Island Resort, and perhaps a sign of things to come.

Getting to Matemo requires another 20-minute puddle-jumper flight. The drive to the resort passes through seaside villages of thatched mud huts shaded by swaying palms. The hotel car draws stares from beautiful Quimvani women standing along the roadside, their faces masked in white: paste from the *muširo* plant, used to moisturize the skin. The shoreline is patrolled by bare-chested men wielding miniature bows and arrows, hunting fish. I've stayed in dozens of resorts in Africa where a depressing, faux-tribal scene is served up to Westerners; there is nothing ersatz about this village or these people.

My first glimpse of the resort is breathtaking. Framed through the sweeping Moorish arch of the entrance is a crescent-shaped beach fronting water so radiant it hurts the eyes; for a moment I'm convinced I'm staring at a *trompe l'oeil* painting. The resort's man-made elements are equally stunning, all Afro-Arab opulence: a thatched-roof lounge is brightened by Zanzibari daybeds piled high with colorful Moroccan cushions; stained-glass lanterns line the walls. Persian rugs and teak four-poster beds outfit the 24 identical wooden villas, all of which are set along a private beach. Villa bedrooms are a little too dark and busy for my taste, but the sliding glass doors open onto a private porch equipped with a sea-facing hammock.

Matemo's good looks are not yet matched by the service. Upon my arrival, a porter escorts me to my villa, then real-

izes he's forgotten the key. "Shit!" he says, before running back to get it. At the hotel's restaurant, few of the waitstaff speak English. Such teething problems will likely be solved in time—and, in any case, they don't seem to bother my fellow guests, among them a well-dressed Middle Eastern gentleman and a glamorous Austrian couple who spend their days windsurfing and diving the oceanside reef.

Over beers in Matemo's lounge I meet David Rissik, a South African environmentalist employed by Rani Resorts as a consultant for its conservation programs. Rissik is well-versed in anthropology as well, and he speaks with wonder about the Quimvani people. "I've seen fishermen catch eight-hundred-pound blue marlin—in dugout canoes, with hand lines! They'll hook this huge fish and be towed out to sea for sixteen hours." Rissik explains that those tiny arrows used to spear fish are similar to those used by San Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert, and are likely related, and that the local dugout canoes, with their single outriggers, may have been modeled on Madagascan warships, which raided the islands for slaves in the 19th century. The archipelago is a living, breathing museum.

Most astonishing of all, Rissik informs me that although the mainland is easily visible from Matemo's beach, few islanders had ever set foot on it. Now, a luxury hotel has opened in their backyard. Suddenly those teething problems at the resort seem entirely forgivable: islanders who had literally never seen a knife and fork until a year ago are taking my dinner order, mixing me cocktails.

COMPARED WITH MATEMO, whose residents have barely glimpsed the outside world, the island of Ibo seems positively cosmopolitan. This former Portuguese slave-trading post—just 30 minutes by boat from Matemo—is commonly known as a ghost island; in fact, it holds a thriving population of around 3,000, some of whom speak Portuguese and a few even English. True, most of Ibo's Old Town is in ruins or disrepair: goats graze beside a crumbling 1580's Catholic church, and the wrought-iron street lamps—not unlike

## THE FACTS

May through September is the best time to visit Mozambique, with no rainfall and temperatures in the mid-seventies. The hot, humid rainy season lasts from October to April.

Most travelers from the United States fly via Johannesburg. Mozambique's national carrier, LAM, offers two flights a week between Jo'burg and Pemba; on other days you must fly to Maputo, then connect with the daily flight to Pemba. (Another option is to fly to Lisbon and pick up a direct flight on LAM or TAP Portugal.) The resorts will arrange for plane, boat, or helicopter transfers to and from Pemba and the islands. Visas (\$25, cash only) can be obtained upon arrival in Mozambique; consult your doctor about required vaccinations.

WHERE TO STAY  
Quilálea Island Resort

DOUBLES FROM \$690,  
INCLUDING MEALS  
44-131/661-6000 (RESERVATIONS)  
www.quilalea.com

## Pemba Beach Resort Hotel

DOUBLES FROM \$242,  
INCLUDING BREAKFAST  
AVE. MARGINAL, WIMBE BEACH  
800/524-7979 OR 258-272/21770  
www.raniresorts.com

## Matemo Island Resort

DOUBLES FROM \$596, INCLUDING  
BREAKFAST AND DINNER  
800/524-7979; www.raniresorts.com

## Medjumbe Island Resort

A brand-new, exclusive 12-  
suite lodge, accessible only by  
boat. DOUBLES FROM \$686,  
INCLUDING BREAKFAST AND  
DINNER  
800/524-7979; www.raniresorts.com

## GREAT VALUE Guludo Base Camp

This shabby-chic  
tented camp is  
set on an isolated eight-mile  
stretch of beach on the  
mainland, opposite  
the islands. Activities include  
sunset dhow cruises and  
guests-versus-villagers soccer  
matches. DOUBLES  
FROM \$352, INCLUDING MEALS  
44-1323/766-655; www.guludo.com

## Londo Lodge

Opening in November, this  
cliffside boutique lodge  
consists of 10 luxury villas built  
out of stone, timber,  
and thatch, done up in an  
Africa-meets-Asia style.  
Amenities include Belgian  
linens, king-sized beds, and  
designer bathrooms. DOUBLES  
FROM \$550, INCLUDING MEALS  
258-82/699-5070  
www.londolodge.com

## Maluane

A newly created eco-reserve  
conceived in part by the  
London Zoological Society—  
with three luxurious lodges  
on three of the archipelago's  
northern islands: Vamizi  
is already open; Rongui  
and Macaloé are scheduled  
to debut in 2006. DOUBLES  
FROM \$800, INCLUDING MEALS  
44-1647/231-007  
www.maluane.com

## DON'T MISS

The deep channel and long  
reef east of the Quirimbas  
makes for some of the world's  
finest game fishing—the  
catch includes marlin, sailfish,  
and barracuda. All resorts  
offer their own game-fishing  
excursions. In Pemba, an  
even better option is to book  
through **World Charters**  
(27-35/571-0104 [South  
Africa]; www.world-charters.  
com; \$500 for a five-  
hour trip, \$700 for eight hours,  
including boat, fuel, tackle,  
and soft drinks.) You'll find  
PADI-licensed dive instructors  
at every resort as well, but for  
the best diving and snorkeling  
trips (at bargain prices—  
\$30 for a single dive), visit  
**Pemba Dive** (258-82/  
611-530) on Wimbe Beach.

those in the older barrios of Lisbon—have been left to rust in the salt air. Yet Ibo also possesses a surreal beauty. At the star-shaped Fort of San João Baptista, built in 1791, cannons still sit in turrets facing the sea. In the shade of a fig tree in the courtyard, silversmiths craft intricate necklaces and bracelets from old Portuguese coins. During the revolt of the 1970's, the Portuguese turned this fort into a political prison; now it is a gathering place for artisans. From slave island to jail to jewelry market: here is progress!

Ibo's harborfront road is lined with three-story colonial mansions, all sorely in need of repair. Yet many are being bought up by pioneers from Cape Town, Lisbon, and London, to be transformed into guesthouses. As I gaze upon these grand fixer-uppers, it occurs to me that

Ibo could someday be a thriving historical destination, the Zanzibar of the Quirimbas. This "ghost island" may well become a boomtown. Perhaps my sister should have invested here instead?

I MEET MY FATHER back in Pemba. While it lacks the serene beauty of the islands—its industrial harbor is jammed with hulking fishing trawlers—Pemba does have a certain frontier-town energy. At beachfront bars, Portuguese returnees, white South Africans, Brits, and Scandinavians speak of the impending tourism boom, hatching plans for game-fishing charters and diving schools. Rumor has it that the Aga Khan visited Pemba recently, that Bill Gates is on his way. Yachts and catamarans bearing South African and Mediterranean registries float in the

harbor. A casino has just opened beside the bay, and Wimbe Beach is now rimmed with trendy restaurants.

None of those places, however, can compare in ambition to the Pemba Beach Resort Hotel. This luxurious hotel, owned by Rani Resorts' Adel Aujan, rises from the western edge of Wimbe Beach, its adobe arches and sweeping lawns reminiscent of an Arabian palace. In the terracotta-tiled lobby, birds sing in palm trees planted in urns. My father and I settle into wicker chairs on the veranda to sip gin and tonics alongside ruddy-faced Europeans, government officials, and foreign-aid workers who've made the hotel into something of a base camp.

Suddenly I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's the Middle Eastern gentleman I met on Matemo. Would we care to join him »

## MOZAMBIQUE

and his brother for a drink? His brother, it turns out, is Adel Aujan himself.

I'd pictured a Svengali-like figure, but Aujan is more an Arab Gatsby: charming, soft-spoken, dressed in pressed beige flannels and an open-necked shirt. "I came to Africa on a hunting trip in the 1980's and fell in love with it," he explains. Drawn to the Arab history of the east coast, he became especially smitten with Mozambique. While Aujan's main business is a soft-drinks company back in Saudi Arabia, Rani Resorts and Mozambique itself remain his true passions. Besides the Pemba Beach, Matemo, and Medjumbe properties, Aujan also owns the Indigo Bay Island Resort on Bazaruto Island and the Lugenda Bush Camp in the far north of Mozambique. In 1998, he built the Stanley & Livingstone, a British colonial-themed hotel at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe; however, the political turmoil and collapse of tourism there have led him to focus on Mozambique instead. It seems my father and this Saudi tycoon have something in common.

THE PROPERTY MY SISTER bought lies across Pemba Bay, on a peninsula called Londo. Just next door to our property is the peninsula's sole development to date: Londo Lodge, a soon-to-open boutique resort owned by a Dutch venture capitalist. We hire a boat to bring us across the bay; rounding the peninsula's southern tip, we glide into a tranquil cove. Even in its unfinished state, Londo Lodge strikes me as the most beautiful retreat of all. A dramatically curved stairway leads uphill to a ring of thatched villas, perched on high bluffs with an eagle's view over the water. A spectacular teakwood deck has been built beside the cliff. My father and I trade looks: These are some neighbors.

Accompanied by a local guide, we hike for a mile along a cliffside path, and I'm struck by how different the terrain is here, compared with the islands. The earth is redder; the vegetation is bush, not mangrove. Thick-trunked baobab trees, more common to the dry African savannah, loom everywhere. Soon we come upon a grassy clearing marked by a stone

boundary. My dad recognizes the place instantly from the photos—this is it.

The plot sits beside the water, fronted by 100 yards of beach and anchored by a giant baobab standing sturdy as a totem pole. My father darts about excitedly; he envisions a thatched villa poised on stilts above the beach, and a larger main house behind that. He has already spoken to contractors in Pemba to work out how to get a water supply connected, a generator set up. He will turn 70 next year, but today he has the energy and ambition of a young man.

We sit on the beach, open the bottles of cold beer we've been carrying, and watch as a wooden dhow appears and a fisherman casts his net directly in front of us. I notice that the plot itself faces west, back to Africa. As we watch a fireball sun sink into the horizon I realize that it is setting over Zimbabwe. But right here, right now, this small parcel of land feels like paradise, feels like new beginnings. +

DOUGLAS ROGERS is a journalist and travel writer based in New York City.



### YOU ARE SO BEAUTIFUL

St. Lucia is an island of lush tropical rainforests, spectacular waterfalls, secluded coves, and our soaring Pitons. This beloved island offers a



diverse range of enchanting places to stay and things to do,



something to satiate all tastes.

