

A faraway fantasy

Remote Mozambique lodge offers a dozen ways to dine and diminish stress

The approach to Nampula Airport in northern Mozambique is one of the more striking in southern Africa. After countless miles of what looks like uninhabited flatlands, there is suddenly, like paint rippled under a cosmic heat gun, a proliferation of huge rock domes (inselbergs, if you're keen on your geology) that make the area look like an African Yosemite; a possible climber's delight, if extreme athletes are looking for a new hotspot.

For more information, go to corallodge.mozambique.com.

From Nampula – mostly litter-free, its busy main thoroughfare lined with colourful roadside clothing stalls to Ilha De Moçambique, which tourists can explore or pass through to get to the beach resort of Coral Lodge beyond that – it's a two-and-a-half hour drive, during which tourists can gain an insight into the region's culture.

The highway to the coast has a single lane each way, meaning your driver will have one hand on the hooter more or less all the way. This is not because the locals are bad drivers, but because much of the traffic comprises buzzing 80cc motorcycles with more than one passenger

but less than one rearview mirror, meaning that without a polite warning, they'll get a heart-stopping fright every time a larger vehicle passes. Narrow footpaths head into thick scrub, where small homes are hidden from sight. There are more stalls – pyramids of oranges, large pumpkins, cashews bought according to the size of container you have, with enthusiastic vendors risking their wellbeing to draw your attention with brightly coloured bucket lids. Nobody has a unique selling point; it seems they simply hope that you'll pull over in their vicinity.

Trucks from the huge port at Pemba pass in one direction; trains full of coal from mines in the interior head the other way en route to ships waiting at Nacala. Baobabs are regular natural milestones and the rivers you cross are in full flow after the heavy rainfalls associated with the violent cyclones that devastated territory to the north and south, but largely spared Nampula Province.

Making an entrance

Excitement regarding arriving at your holiday destination begins when, after passing through the coastal town of



Lumbo, you set out across the 3.5km bridge that links the mainland to the country's original colonial capital, Ilha De Moçambique. It's even narrower than the road – now you can literally high-five pedestrians as you drive. Pass through the centuries-old town and you will begin the final leg of the journey – across the water to the lodge. Take their powerful rubber duck, and it takes 10 minutes; if that's in for a service, there's a traditional dhow to do the job at a more leisurely pace.

Arrival at Coral Lodge is at a jetty in a serene lagoon. The first feature guests see is a saltwater pool that co-manager Ricardo Freitas explores needs to be drained and refilled regularly so that they don't end up with an unplanned aquarium on their hands. The elegant common area – restaurant and bar – is also the only spot on the property where there's WiFi, so you may want to pause there to send a slightly gloating 'I'm here and you're not' message.

The villas are huge and generous in the clutch of different ways they offer to simply get off your feet and relax: there's a day-bed (inside), a large couch, sunbeds



Destination Nampula

- Museu Nacional de Ethnologia: Masks, musical instruments and other fascinating traditional and historical artefacts from the area.

- Rock climbing: Test your skills on the 1,801m Serra Inago.
- Catedral de Nossa Senhora da Fatima: Elegant Catholic cathedral built between 1941 and 1955.

and Adirondack chairs on the deck outside and an enormous four-poster cloaked in a mosquito net. There's a lockable door, but all that's needed most of the time is a screen door with a wooden catch. And the potentially stifling heat (if you're there in summer) is mitigated by a clever system of louvres that allow you to keep the air flowing through your room – and mean that passers-by can hear if you're singing in the shower.

Making shore

There are two rows of villas – one along a low bank above the beach and one looking onto the lagoon and the lush vegetation on its banks. Either way, you're only a very short walk from the beach – soft white sand, occasional rocky patches, mostly small shells (bar the occasional clam, the size of two cupped adult hands) and a range of crabs in different sizes and carapace patterns.

In-house tailor Zé creates bespoke garments for guests.



Enjoy a romantic breakfast under a baobab tree.

Dhows – so emblematic of Mozambique that it’s a cliché of the best sort – meander back and forth beyond the sandbanks and solo fishermen patch up their wooden canoes on the beach before heading out with hand-lines, or masks if they’re planning on diving to pluck something off the bottom.

You can wander north up the strand for ages – the next village, Chocas Mar, is 8km away, so you can figure out the sort of round trip you want to commit to. Or you can hang out at the lodge and get in all your beach resort needs met within a space of about 40m². This is worth noting, particularly if you’re travelling with your family. On the point of the peninsula occupied by the lodge is the aforementioned pool, a hop and a skip away from the bar and whatever drinks and snacks you need (the venue’s caipirinha is a wonder). Or take a couple of wooden steps down to the beach, where some sheltered sunbeds allow you to laze around or read while burning to a crisp. Or grab a mask and a snorkel and wade – you don’t even need to swim – into the lagoon just metres away, where hundreds (no hyperbole) of large fish, including young barracuda and grouper, mill around in touching distance, retreating into a small reef should you get too frisky. Or you can appropriate a canoe or waveski and paddle in the calm waters of the lagoon or the small waves of the incoming tide. Such an arrangement is rare – most similar venues offer all the same options, but hardly within such proximity.

How to get there



Airlink connects Johannesburg with Nampula. Go to page 75 for flight schedules. www.flyairlink.com

Conspicuous consumption

Much of the rest of your stay may be taken up with eating – and in an unexpected range of surrounds. The Coral Lodge staff have an inventive array of ideas to make your dining experience memorable – beyond the food, which is uniformly excellent, whether you’re sampling the plentiful local seafood or prefer the many other options on offer. You can have your meals on the deck of your villa, or at a private table under two baobabs just outside the main lodge building, your discretion assured by draped mosquito netting. There’s also a spot – a favourite of co-manager (and Ricardo’s wife) Filipa Freitas – called the Miradouro (loosely translated, ‘great view’), which is a swept area under a shady tree overlooking the entrance to the lagoon, and accurately named.

Or there is the top end of this eating out extravaganza – a private picnic on Ilha de 7 Paus, a short boat journey away, where you can have an entire island (almost) to yourself as you nibble lovely treats (how the chef assigned for your outing manages such wonders with so little support is a mystery) in the shade of a gazebo, tended to by a butler who has made the journey with you.

The solitude is not quite complete in that, some distance down the beach, there is a shelter occupied by a handful of soldiers who have been assigned to the island to ensure that it is not sold out from under national government’s noses by the authorities on the mainland. Sound bizarre? Suffice to say it wouldn’t be the first time... This experience also comes with a more extravagant snorkelling experience – some beautiful live corals and dozens of species of small fish, including cow- and boxfish in the sort of gorgeous patterns designers win awards for in Milan and Paris.

And it seems fitting, particularly if you leave it for the final day of your stay, to have sundowners at the Sacred Tree (actually two trees, but don’t be a pedant), a short walk from the lodge and a special spot under a pair of baobabs where the sinking sun is filtered by stark branches that reach almost to the ground. The site used to be visited regularly by locals who would pray for their myriad needs and then leave offerings of thanks – often lovingly prepared food – when their prayers were answered.

If you are stressed, jaded and in need of some bodily and emotional TLC, a stay in this remote corner of Africa, under the care of the gentle, gracious team at the lodge, may feel like just such a remedy.

Text and photography | **Bruce Dennill**