

Luxury travel

African secret: the remote isle A-listers love

Vamizi, off the coast of Mozambique, is where Hollywood stars go to relax in peace, says
Helena de Bertodano

As night falls on the island of Vamizi and the moon gains definition, a tiny green turtle hatchling starts heading towards the Indian Ocean, flippers whirring as it propels itself awkwardly across the coral sand. Aiming instinctively for the light of the moon, its odds of survival — at 1 in 1,000 — seem absurdly low.

The group of children on the shore, my three included, are rapt. “Shhh,” they hiss at each other, willing the baby turtle to find the water with no distraction. The tide laps at it, then the warm water envelops it and a small cheer goes up. Suddenly there is a collective gasp. The turtle has been flung back on to the shore by the next wave. Undeterred, it begins its journey again and this time is successful, its head bobbing for a second before vanishing into the marine underworld. “If it survives, it will return to this beach in 30 or 40 years to lay its eggs,” says the turtle monitor, one of a group employed to help in the conservation of the species.

Elated, the children head back up the beach to Suluwilo, an elegant villa with long outdoor tables laid ready for dinner and romantically lit with flickering candles. I wonder if they realise how lucky they are. In decades of travels I have never visited a place as magical as this.

The crescent-shaped island of Vamizi is part of the Quirimbas archipelago, a jewel-like chain of 32 coral islands off the coast of Mozambique that have been described as the new Maldives. Yet this does not really do Vamizi justice. Its intrinsic beauty is more raw and real than the Maldives. The sand is pure, soft, the water clear, the sea traffic limited to only the occasional billowing white sail of a dhow or a dugout canoe. And it is far more exclusive; its remoteness and privacy are part of its attraction.

We fly in from the mainland in a small charter plane, my 11-year-old daughter sitting up front next to the pilot. Beneath

us coral islands peek out of the water, ringed by fringes of pure turquoise and flanked by long untouched beaches.

We touch down on the small landing strip, surrounded by dense vegetation. A trestle table is laden with the accoutrements of tea. There are no formalities or paperwork, just a cup of Earl Grey in the sunshine and a finger of shortbread.

In 1891 the British did something right. Heading a consortium that took control of the northern part of Mozambique, they decided that Vamizi and its neighbours were of no strategic or commercial interest. So for the next 100 years the islands remained isolated and undeveloped, allowing the wildlife to flourish undisturbed. On Vamizi there is a population of about 1,500, spread through three fishing villages, and, on the other side, six luxury villas that attract a steady stream of high-profile guests.

Prince Albert of Monaco chose Vamizi for his honeymoon, and other recent visitors include Tom Hanks, Daniel Craig and Bear Grylls. The night before Emma Watson arrived with her mother, the villa staff were shown a Harry Potter movie — they had never heard of her. Bono visited last year and was so enchanted that he promised to write a song about the island and his housekeeper, Josie. There have been other, even higher-profile guests, whose names are a closely guarded secret.

Yet Vamizi is far more than a bare-foot luxury getaway. About 20 years ago a conservation project



Daniel Craig and Emma Watson have stayed on Vamizi



Suluwilo's elegant interior

was launched to protect the turtles and to encourage sustainable fishing. A lodge was built and in 2006 it was opened by Nelson Mandela and his Mozambican wife, Graça Machel. Henry Pitman, an inspired British investor who, among others, had become heavily involved in the island's conservation, built the first villa, which opened in 2010. It was a labour of love; the building materials had to be sourced from mainland Mozambique and South Africa, and transported by dhows to Vamizi. He trained more than 200 local Mozambicans,

setting up joinery workshops on the island.

The result was Suluwilo, a Kimwani word meaning “forest weaver”, the bright yellow-breasted island bird, which occasionally pops into the villas for a peck at the lavish breakfasts.

Travelling down the bumpy road towards our villa in an open-topped Land Rover, we scan the overhanging trees for Samango monkeys. Lovemore, our driver, radios ahead and as we pull up outside Suluwilo there is an eruption of hearty Shona song as the villa staff — headed by



Kipila, one of the luxurious villas on Vamizi



A bedroom in Kipila

the warm-hearted housekeepers Beauty and Josie — emerge to sing and dance their welcome.

Nothing can quite prepare you for the magnificence of Suluwilo. Set behind large Balinese doors, it has an open-air sunken Arab courtyard, a nod to the island's Muslim roots. The palm-thatched makuti roofs are inspired by the sails of a traditional dhow, set at windswept angles.

The villa, which comprises several smaller villas, fans out in every direction. Ahead is a modern African colonial

drawing room, which opens out on to hardwood decking and a swimming pool, which overlooks the sea. Wooden walkways connect the outbuildings and paths meander through trees down to the beach. Each mini villa affords privacy to couples and families. Four families can easily spread out in Suluwilo.

It is the best way to holiday here. Twelve of us stay in Suluwilo, with another 12 a few hundred yards down the beach at Kipila, Pitman's second villa. The dining room, which can seat up to 24, lends itself to long

Need to know

The best package

The Africa specialist andBeyond has a seven-night full-board holiday, including flights from London from \$9,410pp (£7,276), based on a minimum of four people travelling. The villas of Suluwilo or Kipila are available for rent through andBeyond (andbeyond.com) for \$950pp a night (with a minimum four-night stay). The price includes all meals, charter flight from Pemba to Vamizi and many activities

The beach near Suluwilo villa



leisurely dinners, catered by the in-house chef Papi, who prepares sashimi from the day's catch, followed by grilled fish or lobster, homemade sorbet and ice cream. Lunches are served outdoors in the beach gazebo or taken elsewhere on the island at one of the exquisite picnic areas. A lookout tower above the courtyard provides views over the treetops to the sea.

Kipila, meaning "sandpiper", is equally spacious, but subtly different, more modern in style and with a larger swimming pool. Like Suluwilo, its en suite bathrooms are private, but outdoors, incorporating beautiful gardens with bougainvillea and frangipani. Although open to the elements, the villas are very safe. No one goes there uninvited. There are not even mosquitoes because there is no fresh water on the island. Apart from a carefully cultivated herb garden and abundant fish, all food and water arrives by dhow, the menus often planned months in advance.

Since the construction of Suluwilo and Kipila, four other investors have built villas, all different in style, but adhering to strict low-impact design criteria. Together they have helped to set up the Friends of Vamizi Trust, a UK-registered charity aimed at protecting this ancient oasis. Those who visit can become involved in every aspect of the island — our children are invited to help to construct a mosque in one of the villages.

We spend 16 days on Vamizi — and still it feels too short. Days unspool into a pattern of fabulous meals, snorkelling, kayaking, kite-surfing and long walks; if you time it right, you can walk for three hours along the beach from the Portuguese lighthouse at the island's eastern tip back to the villa. Three of us time it wrong, attempting the walk one afternoon as the tide creeps in. It becomes an adventure, a lesson in the essential wildness of Vamizi. We end up hobbling over sharp coral, then diverting into dense mangroves, which are too thick and thorny to walk through. We swim in the sea for the last mile under the stars as shoals of fish

leap out of the water around us. The gong is sounding for dinner when we finally arrive back at the villa.

One of the highlights of each day, at least for my sons, is the sunset football match, played on a pitch made of crushed coral, with villa staff and locals challenging the guests to a game. In our party there are eight Etonian 17-year-olds, including the school's rugby captain. The locals — some playing football barefoot — beat them hollow every time, even when the housekeepers Josie and Beauty stand together in the makeshift goal, laughing nonstop, but still managing to keep out the rare shot that comes their way.

The real beauty of Vamizi lies underwater, as shown in a recent National Geographic documentary, *Cradle of Coral*. Just off the coast is a mother reef, teeming with life, which provides a habitat for thousands of species, including humpback snappers, neon fusiliers and a massive grouper known locally as Nuisance. Humpback whales travel from Antarctica to give birth here and the endangered grey reef shark has found a sanctuary in nearby Neptune's Arm, whose plunging walls mark one of the top ten diving sites in the world.

My daughter and older son, aged 11 and 15, take a Padi diving course at the island's diving centre — a picturesque shack by the beach, so laid-back that people turn up for their morning lessons in pyjamas. The instruction, though, under the expert eyes of Leo and Rodriguez, is second to none.

My younger son, 13, who prefers to be above water, experiences the best fishing of his life. For once you can fling your arms out wide and say, "I caught a fish this big," and be telling the truth. Under the guidance of Stuart King, a Zimbabwean who looks like a benign pirate, he catches yellowfin tuna, kingfish and giant trevally — proof that the sustainable fishing methods have been successful. The giant trevally is returned to the sea, but they keep the yellowfin tuna, to the delight of Papi.

On our last evening on the island, as the sun sets, I am swimming in the sea when Beauty rushes to the water's edge to tell me that I have to go to the dive centre now for "a surprise". Is it optional, I ask, already knowing the answer. No, she replies, laughing at me. I find my two sons staggering off a boat hauling the largest fish I have seen: a giant wahoo. Held upright, it is almost as tall as my 6ft son. The obligatory photos are taken and posted on a board. It is without doubt the proudest moment of their lives.

Near the photographs a handwritten note is pinned to the board. "A piece of my heart remains on Vamizi," writes one Daniel Craig. It is a sentiment shared by anyone lucky enough to visit this unspoiled Eden.