

P A R A D I S E F O U N D

After a busy deadline-filled schedule, I was ready for a long-overdue break. I needed a special place that would allow me to switch off from the relentless world that is media. *By Ingrid Hale*

Just once in your life you may be lucky enough to experience a place that is so unique and exclusive, with such raw, natural beauty that it takes your breath away. The Anantara Medjumbe Island Resort is such a place.

Immediate repose

Getting to Medjumbe Island involves a three-hour flight from Johannesburg to the port town of Pemba in Mozambique. (I flew with Airlink, which was reliable and comfortable, albeit in a small plane.) From there one takes a charter flight to Medjumbe Island, which is arranged by the resort and included in the accommodation rate. I had the fortune of overnighing at the Avani Pemba Beach Hotel which, as the name suggests, is located right on the beach.

I was treated to a stunning suite with a private balcony and a panoramic view of the

ocean. This hotel has grand old-world charm, with beautiful Moorish influences everywhere: arches, rattan screens, mosaic tiles in shades of blues and turquoise, and wide, open verandas. I enjoyed an excellent massage at the hotel's spa. I can honestly say that it was the best massage I have ever had. Mercy, my gentle and small – but strong – masseuse, worked wonders on my stressed and tired body. The spa has a stunning

relaxation area overlooking the ocean. There are no windows, just large archways that allow the soft Indian Ocean breeze to float in. There is also a watersport facility with state-of-the-art gear, but I wasn't feeling energetic enough to participate in any of the activities on offer. After all, this was gentle stopover en route to Medjumbe Island, and it allowed me to just take a breath and reboot.



Anantara Medjumbe Island Resort

The charter flight to the island is breathtaking. The Cessna follows a flight path over islets surrounded by turquoise waters, and dense, bright-green mangrove swamps with winding rivers that look like snakes from the air. You can also see the shiny white sails of the dhows below. And then, ahead, all of a sudden, you see a strip of sand in the middle of the azure ocean.

Medjumbe is one of 38 islands in the Quirimbas Archipelago, and is just 10km in length. Resort manager Fernando Silva tells me that Medjumbe was badly hit by Cyclone Idai in March, and repairs have only recently been completed. When you realise how remote this place is, you can only marvel at how they even managed to do this. The logistics must have been incredibly difficult to manage.

Attention to detail

The Anantara Medjumbe Island Resort is well-positioned for relaxation and romantic getaways. Twelve private beach pool villas nestle in the natural vegetation. Spotless, and with a great bungalow feel, they are decorated in cool, crisp, island colours. Each villa overlooks the ocean and features a private veranda and swimming pool, a large hammock, a beach gazebo and a secluded, outside shower. A private butler is allocated to each villa. Mine was a friendly man named Abu, and nothing was too much trouble for him. He greeted me every day with a wide smile and a willingness to help. The little touches in the bathroom were much appreciated – a wooden comb, an emery board, dental and razor kits, ginger flower soap and a large loofah for the bath. I was pleased to see a yoga mat (although I had packed my own travel mat), a skipping

rope and dumbbells.

I practised yoga on the private deck one morning listening to the sound of the water lapping against the sand and watching the dhows sail by after their night of fishing, while birds dropped by to swim in the pool.

Anantara Medjumbe Island Resort prides itself on being as eco-friendly as is possible in such a remote place. They make use of solar power and switch over to a generator at 8pm every night. A desalinator provides fresh water and a sewerage processing plant manages the waste. Recyclables are sent to Pemba via dhows.

The spa is set up in the last villa at the edge of the resort, so close to the beach you feel like you are in the water. I was treated to another incredible massage by the ever-delightful Elsa who I discovered had been trained by my masseuse Mercy in Pemba.



ISLAND TIPS

Remember small change for tips, preferably dollars.

The Airlink planes are small and so are overhead lockers, so take small check-in bags and hand luggage that is light and easy to carry.

No visa is required for Southern African Development Community (SADC) passport holders. I travelled on a South African passport.

A yellow-fever certificate is advisable; however, I wasn't asked for one (only non-SADC passport holders were asked for theirs).

Keep a pen handy for the embarkation form, which is only handed to you on arrival in the airport, and for the visa application should you need one.

Visas can be bought at Pemba Airport for \$50.

Checked bags and hand luggage are scanned for bio-products and alcohol. Stick to the rules here.

Be patient when it comes to immigration and passport control. It is slow and tiresome.

There's a lot of waiting around between flights and for other passengers scheduled for the same transfer. Take a book or download movies to occupy the time.

Beware of unofficial meet-and-greet teams. I was about to be whisked into a taxi, when I was saved by the hotel meet-and-greet team.



your table is set up in such a way that you and your partner always dine alone. You really do feel like you are the only people on the island.

The staff rotate the experiences for guests so that everyone gets a turn to enjoy something different. Dinner can be served on your private balcony or on the beach, breakfast can be set up under an umbrella in a rock pool or under your private gazebo. I enjoyed a breakfast with fresh pastéis de nata served with a hot coffee while seated under an umbrella at a perfectly set table in a rock pool with my feet in the cool water. Heaven!

My first breakfast was served on the open library deck overlooking the sandbanks and turquoise waters in the distance. The sandbanks are 200 metres wide when the tide goes out. I enjoyed an Island Benedict breakfast, a twist on the traditional eggs Benedict served with lobster. Head chef Carlos Azarias came to my table to take my order for lunch and dinner. They catered easily for my preferences of non-dairy milk and being a pescatarian. Which I suppose is a safe bet seeing that fresh seafood is in abundance.

On the first night guests are served a seafood platter, which includes delicious lobster, prawns, calamari and fish. I enjoyed mine on the beach under the most magnificent, starry sky. Twenty-seven little lights danced on the horizon that night. I asked the friendly server Abdul what they were. 'Fishermen,' he said. 'They sail for four hours from Pemba every day to fish and then they sail back in the morning.'

Exclusive dining experiences

'Exclusive' is the key word here. The resort hosts a maximum of 22 guests so the guest-to-staff ratio is very low. According to general manager Anna Tavella, this is what makes Medjumbe a firm favourite for returning guests. When I flew to the island I was accompanied by guests Carlo, Seraphina and their teenage daughter, Bianca, from Spain. Why do you keep coming back here, I asked. 'We want to leave the heat and the busy streets of Madrid,' Seraphina explained. 'Summer in Spain is too busy and too hot. This place is quiet and peaceful.'

When I relay this to Anna, she says that it's a common sentiment among people who leave busy cities seeking peace and quiet. 'We also have guests who book at a time when they know that there won't be other guests here, when the occupancy is low. They want the exclusive experience and the whole resort to themselves,' she adds.

You can tailor-make your stay to suit your needs. It's all about doing what you feel like doing when you feel like doing it. You never eat a meal in the same area twice and

Signature experiences

I was treated to a special outing to Quissanga Island, which is situated just off Medjumbe Island. After snorkeling on the nearby reef with my able guide, Shorty, I enjoyed a delicious picnic under the palms at a beautifully set table, while learning about



the archipelago, sustainability and conservation from Fernando.

Soon this little island will offer the signature Star Bed Experience. Guests at the resort will have the opportunity to be whisked away to this uninhabited, private island for sunset, dinner and to overnight for the ultimate sleepover escape. Blending a Robinson Crusoe-style adventure with Anantara's authentic luxuries, the romantic escapade begins with a 15-minute trip on a traditional dhow boat on the Indian Ocean. After arriving at Quissanga Island, couples are left alone to enjoy a magical sunset, after which a starlit dinner on a deserted beach can be a choice of a formal table setting or a more relaxed style where couples can enjoy a gourmet picnic hamper. Those who prefer a stargazing island BBQ can request a personal chef (at an extra charge) to prepare a mouthwatering feast. Left alone in blissful solitude, couples retire to their luxurious four-poster bed, which is dressed in the finest linens, to sleep al fresco on the beach under a galaxy of stars – cocooned by a warm tropical night and the sound of waves

gently lapping the shore. As there is no fresh water on the island, there are no mosquitoes, allowing guests to reconnect with nature and each other, completely undisturbed and in absolute comfort.

These kinds of experiences remind me of safari resorts that offer unique experiences in nature.

There is an activity centre on Medjumbe: SUPs, scuba diving and snorkelling are on offer, but I was happy with long walks on the beach, lost in my thoughts. My stay was an amazing experience, and one that I won't easily forget.

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