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From The Sunday Times

April 9, 2006

The monsters of Africa's islands

Brian Schofield meets the whale sharks when he snorkels off the coast of Tanzania

It's the largest fish on earth, and with its piercing dorsal fin, blank eyes and permanent yawn, it's doing a better than average impression of the beast that bit Robert Shaw in half with 10 minutes to go in *Jaws*. Whale sharks — they might have the disposition to match their Christian names, but when it comes to their demeanour, their accompanying mental soundtrack and their instant impact on your fight-or-flight response, they're undoubtedly all shark.

This disconcertingly close encounter with 30ft of cartilage and charisma wasn't, in fact, what had drawn me to the Mafia archipelago, a tiny and little-visited cluster of islets and sandbars off the tropical coast of Tanzania. I'd taken the one-hour ride on a bouncy, jittery single-propeller plane from Dar es Salaam (landing on a runway that looked, to be charitable, as if it would give plenty of help to the spinners on the fifth day) in search of smaller fry — bats, in fact. Mafia is home to Africa's only protected fruit-bat colony, and I had arrived with high hopes of witnessing a Wayne Manor-style frenzy of screeching aviators pouring from their roosts at nightfall — only to be bitterly disillusioned.

Required to hunt nothing more manoeuvrable than a papaya, African fruit bats have evolved neither vigour nor ferocity, cultivating instead the bickering indolence of a sink school — so when news emerged that whale sharks had been spotted loitering off the islands on their annual cruise up and down East Africa, the decision to snorkel up and head out was made in an instant.

Heading out to sea from the pungent, shambolic little fishing town of Kilindoni, Mafia's sole metropolis, we motored to where the sharks had been spotted that morning and scanned the horizon, with a convincing display of enthusiasm, for dorsal fins. As very little is known about these solitary beasts — we don't know how many there are, how big they get (59ft is the largest report), how they breed, exactly where they migrate to or how long they live (it might be as much as 150 years) — predicting their behaviour for the benefit of tourists is a fiddly business. But, today, the gods were smiling and we soon drew close to a dark shadow flapping gradually through the swell, and we leapt in to say hello.

At which point the tricky logic of swimming with whale sharks revealed itself — they're only here for the plankton, which gives the water a comparable clarity to miso soup; so unless you're fleet of eye and flipper, you'll actually see more from the boat than in the brine. Three times I leapt in next to a shark, took four paddles in the wrong direction and was reduced to spinning in the water like a top, yelling for directions while the monster glided out of sight.

Finally, though, the largest of the creatures we'd been pestering took pity and swam straight for our boat. Desperate for a proper sighting, I dived in.

If the face of a whale shark can register surprise, I'm sure that's what I saw in the eyes of the monster whose personal space I so

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sharply invaded, landing in the water no more than two feet from its prodigious, squared-off nose. I was less restrained, my entire field of vision filling with white flesh and gaping, man-sized mouth, and emitted a trumpet blast of panic through my snorkel as I turned tail and fled. Then, realising this was as close as I was going to get, I gripped tight to the harmlessness mantra and turned back to chase the shark as it curved away — to be rewarded with a wildlife encounter that must rival any in the natural world.

Like a tropical iceberg, the whale shark's staggering bulk is in its depth — its flanks drop away into the gloom, speckled with stunning pattern and clustered with smaller fish, feeding on its parasites or hiding in its shade. It moves soundlessly, but also without grace, the entire body joining each sluggish stroke as the mouth sweeps ahead for food. I kept pace for as long as I could before stopping to let the full length of the beast glide by — I'm guessing 30ft-35ft, but whale sharks don't hang around to get measured.

THEY CAN be bothered in other ways, though. Although stunningly beautiful, lush and rich with natural life, the Mafia archipelago is no paradise for most of its human inhabitants (the last lucrative industry to invest around here was slavery) and some understandably desperate fishermen have taken to throwing nets around the sharks to harvest their passenger fish — last year, one giant was even harpooned, by a skipper who thought the fins might raise a black-market price for making Japanese soup.

Persuading the locals that the sharks are worth most if unmolested is a top priority for the handful of barefoot hoteliers on this archipelago, whose presence here was my other reason for coming. With tourism the only currently conceivable route to relative prosperity for Mafia, and with the small choice of beautiful resting spots showing a genuine dedication to the communities that surround them, it seems this is one of those few places where you might not be kidding yourself — your decision to come here on holiday might really make a difference.

I stayed at Chole Mjini and Pole Pole — Mafia's two honeymoon havens, divided by 1,300ft of water and very different philosophies of hospitality, but united in a commitment to employ only locals, to build local health and educational facilities and to keep Mafia's visitors manageably rare. Pole Pole has more style and creature comforts (if you think it's important to have a masseuse on call at all times, this is your choice), while Chole offers an easygoing, earthy eccentricity and simply magical treetop accommodation — though devoted fans of the 21st century, with its attendant advances in electricity and plumbing, might feel they need a stay here like they need a hole in the ground.

From both launch pads, Mafia proved to be the perfect place for post-safari beachcombers (almost everyone who comes here has been in the Selous or Serengeti first) who've got more ambitions than simply a hammock and a mango juice — the snorkelling is outstanding, the diving world-renowned, there are ruins of Persian and German slave-trading empires to explore, monkeys and birds to spot, sandbanks to take a fleeting lunch on before the tide reclaims them, and you can even get lessons from the locals in sailing a hand-carved dhow. With such a natural bounty, and with a fraction of the visitors that clog up hotter spots on the Swahili coast, such as Zanzibar, the carefully managed future of Mafia looks bright. Especially if the dark star of the show sticks around offshore — gliding through the surf like a supertanker, grazing the oceans with the insouciance of a friendly giant.

Brian Schofield travelled as a guest of Expert Africa
Travel brief

Expert Africa (020 8232 9777, www.expertafrica.com) offers seven nights at Pole Pole from £1,388pp, based on two sharing, with flights from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam with British Airways, transfers and all meals. The same package to Chole Mjini is £1,409pp. Four nights on safari at the Rufiji River Camp in

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