

A full-page photograph of a tropical beach. The sky is a clear, deep blue. The ocean is a vibrant turquoise color, with gentle waves lapping at the shore. The water is crystal clear, revealing the sandy bottom. The overall mood is peaceful and idyllic.

WHERE DO  
YOU GO  
WHEN YOU  
REALLY  
WANT TO  
GET AWAY  
FROM  
IT ALL?

To the lesser-known islands of Tanzania, says Claire Gervat, who finds empty beaches

**O**URS ARE THE ONLY FOOTPRINTS. The icing-sugar sand is so soft that the outlines are indistinct, but the line definitely meanders from the water's edge to a rudimentary shelter and the remains of a picnic lunch. On every side, the balmy sea stretches away in ragged stripes of cobalt, jade and every shade in between, sparkling under the equatorial sun. It is the perfect castaway fantasy, made all the more precious because this particular 'island' is actually a pristine sandbar that vanishes under the Indian Ocean at high tide.

These twice-a-day refuges are one of the many little-known treasures of Mafia, a tranquil archipelago of sandstone-and-coral islands about 12 miles off the coast of southern Tanzania, which takes its name not from Italian gangsters but from either the Swahili for 'healthy dwelling place' or the Arabic for 'group'. To the north, 125 miles away, is Zanzibar, Tanzania's far more famous cluster of islands. But while the biggest of the Zanzibar group, Unguja, has all but lost its character under a flood of new resorts, Mafia remains barely touched by tourism, or by any development at all.

The airport runway is just an apricot streak of earth, and the terminal building looks like a corrugated-tin-roofed bus shelter with pretensions. Grandly labelled 'Airport', it has hand-painted signs for 'departure lounge' (12 white plastic chairs) and 'arrivals' (standing-room only). None of the few roads has tarmac, there are far more bicycles than cars, and mobile phones are still an exciting novelty. Most of the population – around 40,000 people – continue to make their living from fishing or boat-building, supplemented with a little coconut cultivation and general farming.

If Mafia's unspoilt landscape above ground is easy on the eye, that's nothing to the beauty that lies below the surface of the sea. Covering an area of 317 square miles around the south of the island, Mafia Island Marine Park is one of the largest and most diverse protected areas in the Indian Ocean. Within its boundaries there are coral reefs, sea-grass beds, mangrove systems and intertidal flats, teeming with all kinds of underwater life: five species of turtle, the



endangered and very strange dugong, seahorses, 48 genera of coral and 400 species of fish. The beaches may not be magazine-cover fodder, but the diving and snorkelling is some of the best in the world – and you'll have it almost entirely to yourself.

Of the handful of tiny resorts, grouped in the south-east on the fringes of Chole Bay, two have only seven rooms and the other two are barely larger. I spent my first night on Mafia in **Pole Pole** (which means 'slowly slowly' in Swahili), one of the smaller places, a collection of rustic-chic, palm-thatched huts among coconut trees overlooking a narrow golden beach.

Everything about it – the local antiques and fabrics in the rooms, the broken clocks that encourage guests to forget about time, the absence of piped music, the low-key eco-friendly projects – reflects the tastes and ethos of its owner, Massimo Lancellotti, an elegant and cultured Roman prone to saying things such as, 'Of course, everyone is always quoting Machiavelli, but...'

In such a place, it seems almost bad manners not to relax. No one will care if all you do between meals – a delicious fusion of local and Mediterranean flavours – is laze on your terrace daybed with a good book, enjoying the birdsong and frangipani-scented breeze. That said, guests are encouraged to explore. One popular excursion is to the waters off the west coast of Mafia Island to see and, hopefully, swim with whale sharks. Sightings aren't guaranteed, unfortunately – on my trip we saw just two, only one of which rose to the surface to give us a better look – but even that was memorable.

Otherwise, tides permitting, you can take to the waves for snorkelling, diving or lounging around on sandbanks such as that crescent-shaped one we visited.

It's hard to believe that somewhere so wonderfully sleepy could have any historic sites worth visiting, but Mafia is full of surprises. One afternoon, at high tide, Ali of Mafia Island Tours took me in a dhow to the ruins of Kua, on the west side of Juani Island, the southernmost of the Mafia group. Thought to have been founded at some point between the 13th and 15th centuries by Shirazi sultans from the city state of Kilwa on the east African coast, Kua was obviously once a prosperous settlement. As we wandered between crumbling walls smothered by the roots of strangler figs, we passed several mosques, a cemetery, a

once-fine palace with a large strongroom, a dispensary and a school, all funded by the then-lucrative trade in cowrie shells. Vervet monkeys scampered among the fallen buildings, while the haunting cry of a fish eagle circling overhead added to the mysterious atmosphere. It was almost a relief to return to the boat and nature's other pleasures: crab plovers perched on mushroom-shaped rocks along the channel; the tiny beach that marks the path to a crystal-clear coral grotto; and the extraordinarily clean tidal waters of Chole Bay itself, dotted with the dhows and outrigger canoes of local fishermen.

There are more ruins on Chole, another diminutive island to the east of the bay. The best way to see these is to spend a few nights at **Chole Mjini**, where tree houses are draped around the baobabs at the edge of the mangrove, interspersed with the remains of centuries-old walls. Here the subtle, back-to-nature feel of Pole Pole is even more intense. There's no electricity, so in the evening staff line the paths with lanterns, leaving two at the foot of the steps to each tree house. The loos don't flush and the hot water for the outdoor showers comes courtesy of a Heath Robinson arrangement of kerosene-soaked wadding and metal pipes. In the bedrooms, the only barrier between you and the outside world is a sturdy mosquito net, and in the dry season the mice have a habit of eating all the soap.

It's not for everyone: big-game hunters have been known to flee after finding a baby bat roosting in their eaves, and it's not unheard-of for the owners Jean and

Anne de Villiers to gently redirect guests to Pole Pole. But for those, like me, who relish the peeps, trills and chirps of a tropical night, who regard bats in the eaves as a mosquito-eating bonus in spite of the loud squeaks they make at dawn, and who think that being able to watch Comoros flying foxes coming in to roost as you take your evening shower is something to be treasured, there's nowhere quite like it.

The man-made delights start early in the morning, with the gentle sound of a tray with a flask of tea or coffee being placed on the steps of your tree house. As I sat in bed, clutching my hot cup and enjoying the tranquillity and the soft dawn light over the trees and the bay, I felt like the only person in a prelapsarian paradise. I could have lounged there for hours, but hunger drove

