

Dive travel

Pemba
Mafia

Kenya

Manado



Tsunamis, sunbirds



The unique Pemba flying fox.



and scuba



A view of the Pemba Njao gap from the plane.

The Indian Ocean islands of Pemba and Mafia offer affordable, exciting and unique holiday destinations, not only for divers, but for their non-diving companions too
BY LAWRENCE DALE

MAFIA

No-one is exactly sure how this island got its name. The most commonly cited explanation is that the word 'mafia' is derived from an old Arabic phrase meaning 'nobody there'. While this certainly has none of the connotations usually associated with the word, a first-time visitor may be forgiven for thinking as much.

The beach on Mafia

The first person we met was our dive instructor Mario – an Italian. We later met another Italian, Massimo. Massimo is a partner in Mafia Island Lodge – the largest resort on the island – and owner of Pole Pole Resort, undoubtedly the quaintest and most romantic island hideaway I have ever seen. Yet both men were charming and hospitable – definitely underwater and not underworld types.

The old Arabic version of the word 'mafia' is certainly more appropriate. Although we arrived only a few days after New Year and during the peak season, Mafia Island seemed deserted. Any other guests seemed lost in the vast expanse of white beaches and coconut palms. And to complete the Robinson Crusoe image, we were greeted by a wooden dhow moored offshore, waiting to take us diving the following morning.



Our first dive was at Dindini Wall. Because of the current that morning, we covered not only the north and south walls, but also the extension off Jina pass and reef. But Mario's dive-briefing notes more than adequately describe these sites:

'Dindini wall north: This is a rock wall from eight metres down to 28 metres, with caves, caverns, overhangs and an archway. This is the only true rock wall so far discovered and it makes a spectacular and exciting dive. Large groupers, sharks, guitarfish, turtles and basket sponges are features. We have also seen many large pelagics here, including sailfish, very large tuna and dolphins, as the wall lies close to great drop-offs. There is lush growth of sedentary filter feeders and algae on the upper part of the wall; sea fans and whip corals lower down.'

An amazing feature of the dive was the swim-thru. A small tunnel – just big enough to accommodate one diver safely – went into the solid-rock wall, made a gentle U-turn, then came out a few metres further on.

Another thing that amazed me was the size of the fish. I saw the biggest Napoleon wrasse I have ever seen, the biggest potato bass, the biggest parrot fish ... it looked as though all the fish were on steroids! And they all appeared so tame.

Even the snorkellers swimming along on the edge of the drop-off saw them. Apparently all the fish came up to inspect them.

On our return trip, the crew hoisted the sails on the small dhow and glided silently over the calm sea, admiring the beautiful tropical coastline – a refreshing change from the frantic, high-speed shuttle service we have become accustomed to in South Africa.

Recommended dive sites

Moez - the DM at Mafia – offered these as his favourite sites:

Kinasi Pass: 'You can see big fish such as grouper, cobia and giant barracuda, schools of barracuda and jackfish, small leaf fish and coral fish, and very nice corals.'

Milimani: 'It starts shallow with a wide variety of coral and coral fishes and slopes down slowly to the depth of 20 metres with high tide. You can see groupers, stingrays, moray eels and cleaning stations.'

I did not have the opportunity to dive all the sites, but was pleasantly surprised at the coral and fish life of the dives I did manage.

On one of the dives I saw evidence of old reef dynamiting, but nowhere near the levels I have seen in the Maldives. But with the whole area now a marine reserve – with active support from the local fisherman and boat patrols very

much in evidence – this is hopefully a thing of the past.

Because most of the dive sites are in a protected bay, they are suitable for all levels of diving experience.

Besides diving, there is a number of other exciting and unusual activities to do on the island. Mario took us for sundowner cruises in his dhow and for snorkelling trips to the tiny islands scattered around the bay.

Across the bay, there is a huge colony of over 1 200 flying foxes (giant bats) that roost in the same trees every day.

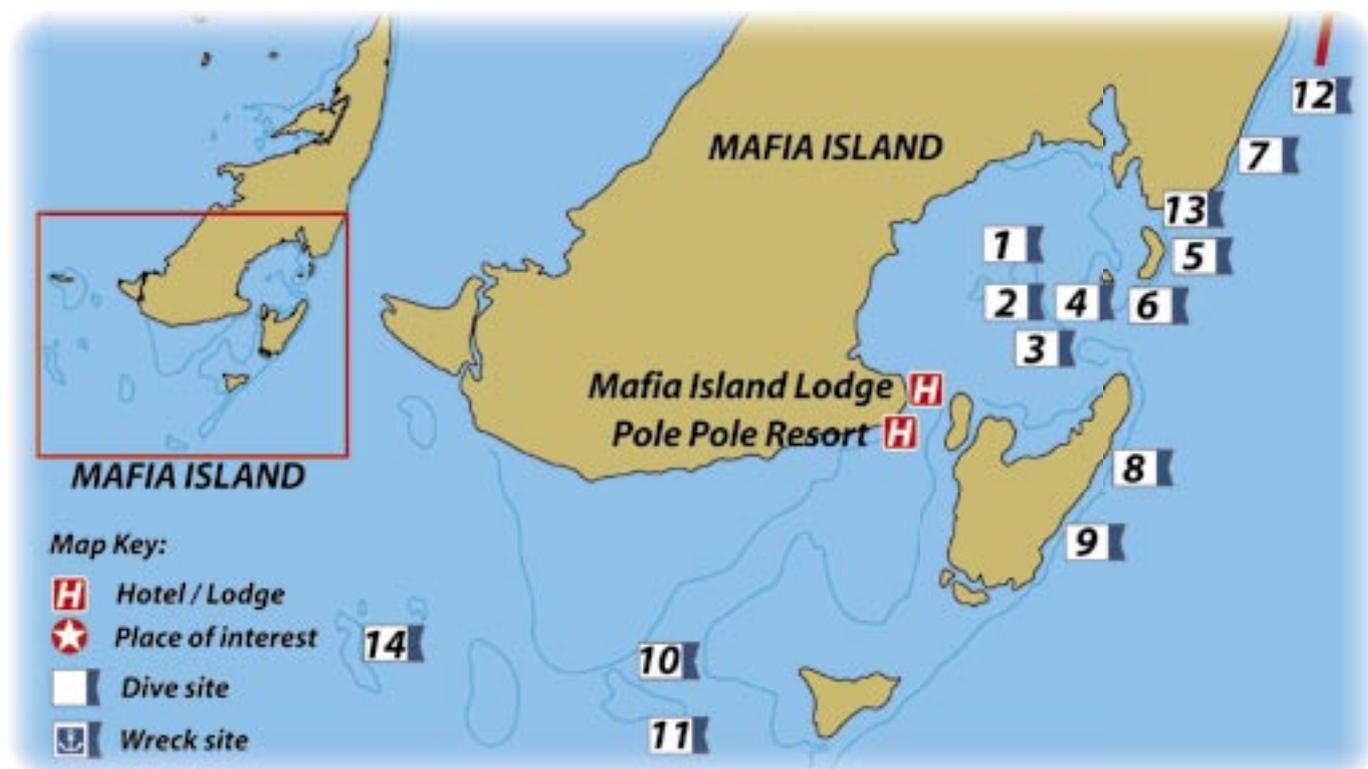
As one of east Africa's earliest trading stations, there are numerous old ruins to explore on Mafia. And nearby, you can see beautiful wooden dhows being built with hand tools, and without any measuring instruments – just ancient traditional methods, by real craftsmen.

Operators

Big Blu Dive Centre

Mario, the owner of Mafia's Big Blu Dive Centre, was on hand to welcome us and ensure the gear was loaded correctly. He then gave the group a thorough briefing, complemented by the most amazing dive-site drawings I have ever seen.

In the Red Sea and Maldives, the DMs



MAFIA ISLAND DIVE SITES

1. Milimani Reef 2. Kinasi Wall 3. Chole Reef 4. Kinasi Pass 5. North Jina Reef 6. South Jina Reef 7. Dindini Wall
8. Juani Reef 9. South Juani Reef 10. Kitutia North 11. Kitutia South 12. Ras Mkumbi 13. Jina Wall 14. Mange Reef

Pole Pole Resort.

usually give briefings off small maps drawn on miniature white boards. In South Africa, some skippers trace circles in the sand.

Mario's site maps were painted by his elderly mother in Italy, from the sketches and descriptions he had given her. They lovingly detailed the reef formations, colours and fish to be found on each site. She did, however, omit any reef sharks to be found – she maintained she did not want to tempt fate and endanger her baby boy!

Mafia Island Lodge

This is the largest of the resorts on Mafia, set among coconut palms overlooking the bay, with its own swimming beach. An airy dining room, cosy bar and large terrace create a tranquil, relaxing atmosphere.

The rooms have separate bedrooms and living rooms, bathrooms with hot and cold water, and air-conditioning.

Pole Pole Resort

The entire resort consists of only seven luxury bungalows with large verandas and spectacular sea views, discreetly blended into the palm trees. The resort is cleverly and tastefully constructed of local timber, makuti matting and thatch. Rooms are all en-suite and exquisitely furnished.

As a final must do, no visitor should leave the island without having a candlelit dinner at the intimate little thatched restaurant at Pole Pole.



FACT FILE

GENERAL DIVING CONDITIONS ON THE ISLANDS

- Although the diving off the islands remains world class most of the year, the best diving months are from October to April.
- The best months to see manta rays and the odd whale shark are from late October to February.
- Water temperatures range between 22 and 28 degrees - warmer in the summer months - so a three-millimetre shorty or one-piece wetsuit is generally sufficient.
- As most of the dives are drift dives and not all DMS carry surface buoys, a personal inflatable buoy is strongly recommended.
- Because of the fierce, equatorial sun and time spent on boats, take plenty of water, and wear a hat, sunglasses and plenty of sun-tan lotion.
- Holidays to the world-class diving destinations of Pemba and Mafia are surprisingly affordable, and, with regular flights, literally on our doorstep.

For more information on all dive sites and accommodation on both Mafia and Pemba, visit www.scubatravel.co.za.



The lodge on Mafia.