



Vivid turquoise waters and bleached white sand surround this tiny island (just one kilometre all the way around).

&BEYOND

MNEMBA ISLAND

A luxurious wild retreat with a difference in South Africa.



Norah Casey samples island life

Just off the coast of Zanzibar, there is a beautiful paradise island with impossibly vivid turquoise waters lapping to the shoreline of a pristine, white powder beach. It is the stuff of dreams. My late husband Richard and I had a thing for islands. He grew up in Bermuda and Jersey and was always drawn to the sound of the sea. We once sailed The Grenadines for a month, stopping off at remote tiny islands, and our first holiday together was to the unspoiled haven of Bird Island and the rain forests of Praslin in the Seychelles. When I was pregnant with my son Dara we returned to La Digue where the only form of transport was ox-

drawn carts and, in the years before he passed away, we stayed at a tiny island in the Caribbean with only large land iguanas for neighbours. I am incredibly fortunate to have spent time on some of planet earth's most beautiful islands – including those that are dotted around our own coastline.

I am offering that by way of context... because this heavenly place is now at the very top of my list of island idylls. If you harbour a fantasy of living on a quintessentially tropical island – almost picture-postcard perfect but with all of the laid-back simplicity of island living – then Mnemba fits the bill. Happily, it is far from deserted, with a discreet and efficient team at the ready to cater for your every need, even those you hadn't thought of.

Safaris are exhilarating and exhausting in equal measure. Having been up at 5am most mornings in the previous weeks to capture those magical dawn moments, myself and Dara were dreaming of our final few days by the sea – a real bush

and beach experience. And finally the day came when we could peel off the khaki bush gear and head to our island adventure. We left and Beyond's spectacular Ngorongoro Crater Lodge early that morning and headed east to Lake Manyara where we boarded a small Coastal Airways plane for the short hop to Zanzibar.

Zanzibar has two large islands and many small ones nestling in the Indian Ocean, just 20 or so kilometres off the coast of Tanzania. The islands fell under the control of the Sultanate of Oman in 1698, which heralded the development of plantations to grow cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon and black pepper – hence the name the Spice Islands. The archipelago's strategic position between the African Great Lakes, the Arabian Peninsula and Indian subcontinent made it an important base for gold, ivory and slave traders from Persia and Arabia.

After landing at Zanzibar airport on the main island of Unguja, we drove for a couple of hours through the spice

Sun, sea and sand – most activities on Mnemba involve the ocean, from sundowner cruises to kayaking and snorkelling and learning to scuba dive



The alien-like and rare, gigantic, tree-climbing coconut crab lives in deep burrows in the island's forest. It's the world's largest land living arthropod and we were privileged to catch a glimpse of two of the four who live at Mnemba



Jaco, the resident chef, hauling fresh fish to shore, a daily part of his kitchen routine where he takes his culinary inspiration from the spices and natural ingredients of Zanzibar and the sea



“If you harbour a fantasy of living on a quintessentially tropical island... then Mnemba certainly fits the bill”

plantations and the chaotic and colourful towns north west of Stone Town, the historic centre of the capital and a World Heritage Site. We were heading for a remote beach, and from there we would catch the short boat ride across to the island of Mnemba.

The island is just three miles off the coast and, as we rolled up our trousers and waded into the warm waters, we were entranced by a perfect line of traditional wooden dhows stretching towards the beach – we had definitely left the bush behind. The crossing was short, but long enough to whip away the stresses of a frenzied morning of packing, travel and luggage lugging. This was a whole different form of transport. A subtle transformation from weary traveller to excited adventurer – the sun dazzling our eyes, the warm water spray lifting our spirits as we leaned out from the boat to catch our first glimpse of Mnemba.

As we neared the shore, we could make out a group of staff waving and grinning, welcoming us as we pulled up to the beach. The fatigue of the long journey melted away. It is impossible not to smile and feel uplifted when faced with such stunning beauty.

Mike Kelly, the lodge manager, gently suggested that we leave our shoes with the staff as he took us

on a short walk through the forest to our beautiful villa-style banda. I never saw them again until we left.

Mnemba has some special touches and one of them is Jaco Kotze, the resident chef. One of the nicest encounters each morning was Jaco's tantalising run-through of his suggestions. The effortless days on Mnemba perfecting the art of doing nothing made decisions about the food all the more important. So while eating breakfast, looking out over the white coral beach stretching to the ocean, we would discuss and plan with Jaco what we would eat next! His suggestions were always just right... a little spiced calamari with a zesty asparagus and artichoke salad or grilled prawns with rice noodles. And then in the evening, the team would surprise us with hidden and divine tableaux in wondrous settings. But not before a little musical interlude when Mike, the lodge manager, and Jaco and Chris, who ran the dive centre, would play the guitar and sing a few songs around the fire as we sipped sundowners with our toes buried in the powdery sand. As night descended, the mystery of where we would dine would unfold as Tumaini, who minded us throughout our stay, escorted us to a candlelit table in the forest or along a stretch of deserted beach. ▶



Room with a view... the ocean breeze provides all the air conditioning you need in your banda (beach villa) at Mnemba. The rooms and bathrooms are designed to bring the outside in with lots of open walls, rattan matting, wooden walkways and overstuffed armchairs and sofas – perfect for letting the sound of the waves sooth you to sleep beneath swathes of mosquito netting



“The moment you set foot on the island, time ceases to be relevant”

Mnemba, like all properties in the andBeyond collection of African and Indian lodges, camps and safaris, takes conservation seriously and works closely with local schools on eco-projects and wildlife preservation. The tiny green turtle visits every year to lay her eggs above the high tide after the sun goes down. The island is home to two species of crab – saltwater ghost crabs who scurry along the sand and the black-back freshwater crabs who inhabit the forest and love to clamour under the boards to join you for a hot shower in the evening. Dwarf geckos and tropical house geckos adorn the walls and are completely harmless. In the fragrant pine forest at the heart of the island, you will find two of the rarest antelopes in East Africa, suni deer and Ader’s duiker.

Mnemba is an atoll surrounded by a coral reef with over 400 species of fish and amazing residents. The warm equatorial waters are home to dolphins (bottlenose, spinner and common) and humpback whales swim past on their migratory routes. During the first months of the year, the world’s largest fish, the gigantic whale sharks, is a regular visitor; while whitetip reef shark and schools of hammerhead sharks are also drawn to the coral reef occasionally.

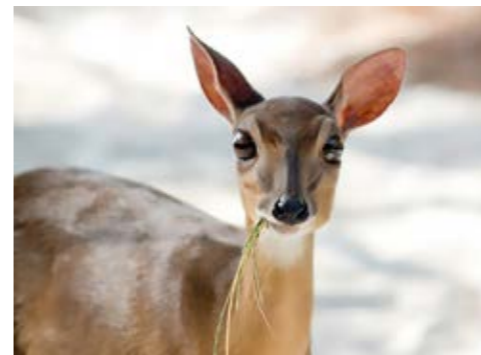
We ventured out on hot afternoons to snorkel the reef and floated for hours gazing at the abundance of tropical fish – a sea safari with wonders to rival the many land animals we had viewed over the previous weeks in the Serengeti. Over time we began to recognise the regulars of the reef – the stripes and pursed lips of the disapproving Moorish idol darting between the innocent looking



Zanzibar butterfly fish with its distinctive singular spot, so different from the racier vagabond butterflyfish. Dara and our guide dived to the ocean floor at regular intervals to take a closer look – pointing out a banded snake eel we almost certainly would have missed amid swarms of bluestreak cleaner-wrasse swerving into view and



Dining with a difference: the island allows for some amazing locations for dinner, all tailored to your every whim



disappearing into the coral. Dara’s list of “must see” of the sea included the haughty emperor angelfish and the extraordinary Picasso triggerfish – he got to tick them off. For me I loved the feminine powder blue surgeonfish, the yummy sounding chocolate-dip chromis and the bluestripe snapper. We returned wrinkled and satiated after each glimpse into this amazing world just a few feet below the glassy surface of the sea.

Mnemba is the last word in barefoot decadence. The moment you set foot on the island, time ceases to be relevant. Not surprisingly, this

island paradise has boasted some very famous guests including Bill Gates (who took over the whole island for his family), Tom Cruise, Rod Stewart, Liam Neeson Naomi Campbell, Paul McCartney and a plethora of royals. For us mere mortals, it was incredible to live out the fantasy of living on our own tropical island with all the luxurious pampering befitting a king or queen. At least once in your lifetime, make a plan to visit this utopia if you can, it was by far one of the best experiences I have had in years of travel writing, and I would return again in a heartbeat. ■

Prices for four nights at Mnemba Island start from €2,855 per person with Mahlatini Travel.

Mnemba Island is offered on an all-inclusive basis. This also includes activities such as scuba diving (two dives per day), snorkelling, kayaking, flyfishing, sundowner dhow cruise, and windsurfing. A seven-night safari and beach package including Mnemba starts at €5,390, and is inclusive of economy-class flights from Dublin with KLM, board as detailed, and transfers. Contact Mahlatini Travel, the luxury African travel specialists on 00353 1 906 1883 or visit Mahlatini.com