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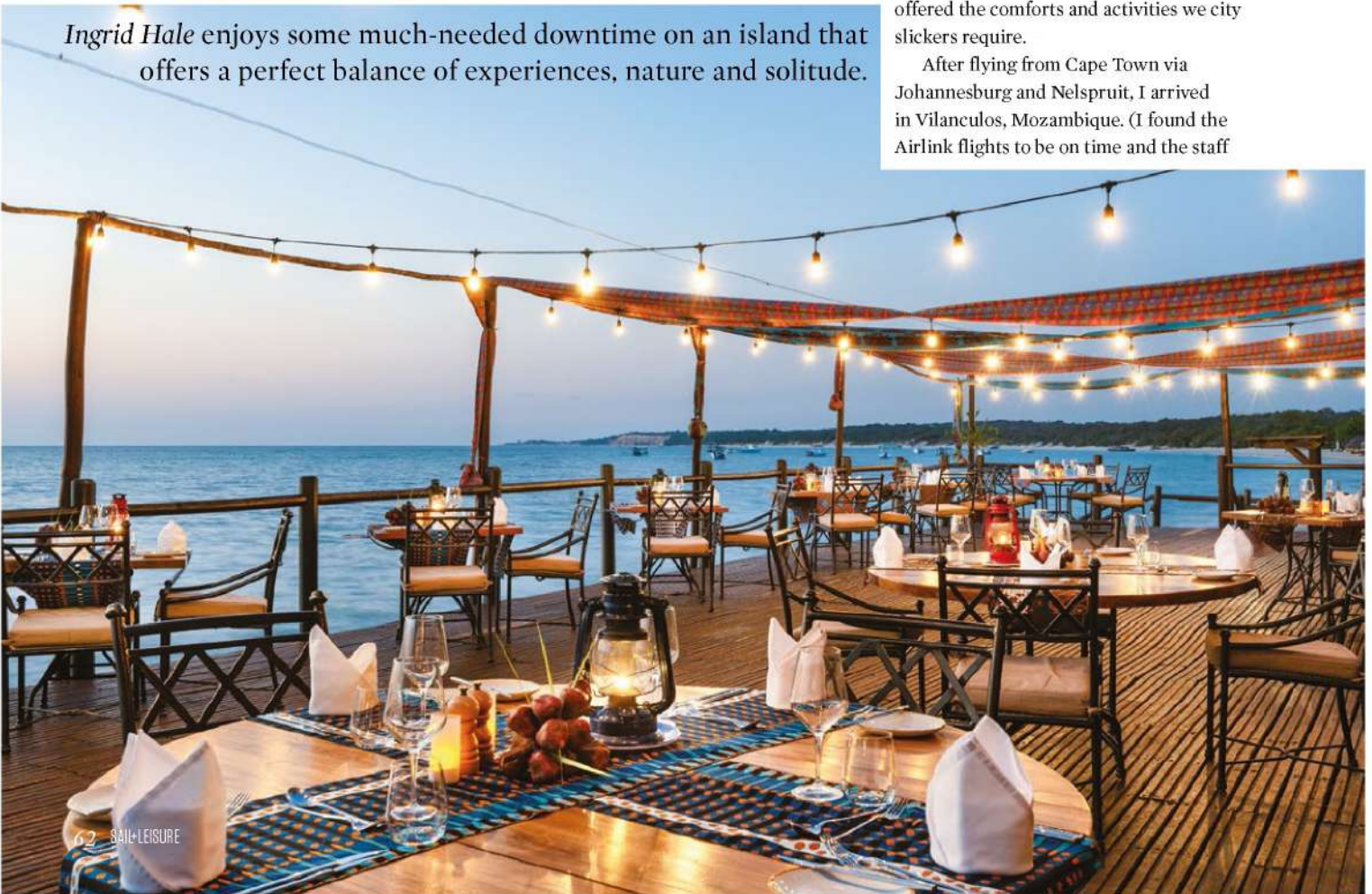


AFRICAN ISLAND MAGIC

There are few remote places left on earth, and Ilha de Bazaruto, or 'Island of the Mist', proved to be just that place for me. I was invited to experience Anantara Bazaruto Island Resort, which was remote enough to make me feel like I was away from it all, but still offered the comforts and activities we city slickers require.

After flying from Cape Town via Johannesburg and Nelspruit, I arrived in Vilanculos, Mozambique. (I found the Airlink flights to be on time and the staff

Ingrid Hale enjoys some much-needed downtime on an island that offers a perfect balance of experiences, nature and solitude.





friendly – all in all, a pleasant experience.) Once through passport control at this busy, somewhat frantic airport, I collected my bag and was ushered into the cool Anantara Hotels, Resorts & Spas airport lounge to wait for guests arriving on other flights. I was pleasantly surprised to hear European, American and British accents. The Anantara Group promotes the safari and beach experience – it's based on the idea that people going on safari might like to combine their adventure with a beach holiday if all the logistics are in place and it's packaged well. The concept has proved to be very successful. South Africa is still a key market because of its proximity to Mozambique, but there's been a decline in South African tourism lately due to the slow economy.

Once the other guests arrived, we were bussed to a local hotel, from where we boarded a ferry for the 45-minute trip across the channel to Bazaruto Island, passing large, leatherback turtles en route.

On arrival, we waded from the boat to the beach, where we were welcomed by a group of local dancers in traditional Swahili dress, singing traditional songs. Then a quick welcome cocktail and a meet and greet with my private butler, Tom, who saw me to my room. The accommodation was actually a private chalet, and so much more than I had expected. I had a stunning vista of the beach and the dhows lying lazily in the water. The room was spacious and light but, for me, the

private, outdoor shower overlooking the beach, and the bath, which had a panoramic view of the ocean, stood out.

It was late afternoon when I arrived, so I didn't have time before the sun set to do much more than take a walk around the resort and on the beach. I saw the local fishermen bringing in their day's catch of six huge tuna. The group of men worked together to bring in the boats, offload and clean the fish, and wash the boats down, while women and children cheered them on from the sand dunes.

I enjoyed my first evening meal with General Manager Grégory Thierion and Marine Berard, the Executive Assistance Manager Rooms. Both have worked at resorts around the world, but they say what sets this one apart is the people who are so willing and happy to learn. Most staff have worked at the resort or its surrounds for many years, which goes hand in hand with the owners' philosophy to support the community – 70 percent of resort employees are from the island. The owners have built three schools to date and are now building a secondary school to accommodate the older children so they can stay closer to home for longer. (The only high schools are on the mainland.) There are also plans to build a clinic.

We chatted about the uniqueness of this special place, and how important it is to maintain the natural environment

and prevent it from being exploited.

African Parks is contracted by the government to patrol the waters off Mozambique and the surrounding islands, including Bazaruto. This arrangement has assisted a government with little resources and manpower to keep illegal fishing at bay. African Parks also extends its services to the land to combat poaching. Each resort guest pays a park fee, which goes towards this service, and a community fee that supports the local communities.

In addition to this mindfulness around eco-friendly practices, the resort has introduced reusable glass bottles for drinking water – plastic water bottles are no longer used. These glass bottles are refilled with very pure, high-mineral-content water captured on the island. A separate water filtration system was built to accommodate this initiative. They have also introduced biodegradable straws and recycle all waste.

While discussing these initiatives, I enjoyed a delicious new menu item called 'Sea. Fire. Salt', a signature dish of Anantara Resorts. It refers to meat or fish cooked on a block of hot Himalayan salt. Chef Donaldson Madubela prepares it for you at your table. I had the seared sesame salmon, which was utterly delicious. This method of cooking lends the fish a natural, salty flavour.

The salty theme extends to other offerings too: truffle salt, pink salt, citrus salt and even pepper salt. All very tasty,



especially when combined with fresh bread and a little olive oil.

I couldn't be in Mozambique and not sample the country's famous peri-peri and garlic-butter prawns. They were as wonderful as I had expected.

Aside from relaxing at the pools and enjoying other resort facilities, you can tour the outer islands, go whale and dolphin watching, try out sandboarding, have a picnic on the dunes or go deep-sea fishing. And if you catch that 'big one', chef Donaldson will show you how to prepare it. Another fun option is to collect and prepare your choice of veggies from the resort's veggie garden, once again under chef Donaldson's guidance. Star-gazing tours will soon be available.

The spa did not disappoint. It is situated at the highest point of the resort and stands out proudly – the first and last part of the resort you see by boat. It has a wide, open verandah that looks out onto the blue Indian Ocean for miles and miles. The treatment rooms are beautifully decorated and also have stunning views. I could hear the abundant bird life break the peaceful silence while I was having my massage.

The verandah also served as the venue for my morning yoga session with Bernasho, a warm, gentle and patient woman from Zambia. She coaxed my tired and stressed body into positions that I never thought I could manage. We practised Vinyasa flow, stretching and meditation. I can honestly say it was the best yoga session I've ever had. The resort also offers a Wellness Day package, cooking lessons for healthy cuisine, healing therapies and detox treatments.

A full meditation routine is on offer, as well as a blissful 'Slumber Guru' ritual you can enjoy in the comfort of your chalet.

I jumped at the chance to go whale watching and visit Pansy Island. I was joined by a honeymooning couple, Steve and Sue, from the UK. They are keen travellers, and had done the safari portion of their trip, and were now enjoying the beach experience. Steve is an avid photographer, and managed to take some incredible shots of the whales. We spent hours out on the water and saw more than 20 humpback whales and many pods of spinner dolphins. The whale season runs from July to September and apparently sightings are almost guaranteed during this time as it's a favourite route for the whales.

We even encountered the rare dugong, a strange-looking sea mammal with a large, blunt snout. This particular one is resident in a small bay just past the resort, but we kept our distance. Our guides were very respectful of all the sea life we encountered, making sure that we got close enough to take great pictures, but not too close as to disturb them.

TRAVEL TIPS

Remember small change for tips, preferably dollars.

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

No visa is required for Southern African Development Community (SADC) passport holders. I travelled on a South African passport. If required, a visa can be bought at the airport for \$50.

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.

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.

You have to wade quite far out to the ferries, so be sure to wear shorts or a dress that you can hitch up. You will need to carry your own hand luggage, so make sure it is light.



HOW TO GET THERE

I flew with Airlink, which operates as a regional feeder airline and franchisee of South African Airways, connecting travellers to more than 55 destination within Southern Africa and St Helena island.

There are direct scheduled flights from Johannesburg and Nelspruit to Vilanculos. (When I travelled, the flight from Johannesburg to Vilanculos was full, so I had to fly from Johannesburg to Nelspruit to catch the flight to Vilanculos.)

Through the alliance with SAA, travellers can connect conveniently and seamlessly with SAA, their partner airlines and other carriers throughout Southern Africa and the world.

Airlink is a member of South African Airways' loyalty programme, Voyager. For more information, visit flyairlink.com

After our sightings, we stopped at Pansy Island on the way back to the resort. (It's a 15-minute boat ride from Bazaruto Island.) The island consists of a small, shallow lagoon surrounded by tall sand dunes on one side and the wide Indian Ocean on the other. A tarpaulin had been set up for us, complete with a table laden with a stunning seafood platter, fresh salads and chilled wine.

After a long, lazy lunch, I did some exploring. This alone time was so precious to me. I could totally switch off, which is something I hadn't been able to do for a few months. The wide-open spaces and soft sea breezes allowed me to be alone with my thoughts and to reflect on so much that was good.

That evening was spent enjoying cocktails under the stars with my newfound friends, Sue and Steve. The sky was bright with stars, and Steve managed to capture it in all its splendour.

Time was limited on my last day as I had to meet the transfer back to the mainland at 10am. I awoke to the local ladies singing while sweeping the beach of debris in front of my room. I had time for a quick breakfast followed by a swim. The dancers bade us farewell on the beach as we waded out to our ferry.

Although I had only spent a short time on the island, I was struck by the warmth and friendliness of the people, the beautiful, wild nature, and the sense of calm that descends on you as soon as you arrive.

I will go back, but for a longer stay to really relax, and properly immerse myself in all this beautiful resort has to offer. **5•1**



PHOTOGRAPHY: Steve Savage, supplied