

## MAD RUSH TO CHUMBE

It's actually a miracle we ever made it to Chumbe Island at all. John and I had inadvertently chosen a day during the Tanzanian Elections to visit the sanctuary but in true African fashion, nobody bothered to inform us that there had been political unrest on Zanzibar and that all but one of the one-and-a-half hour long Dar Es Salaam to Zanzibar ferry crossings had been cancelled.

Chumbe Island itself lies – along with her fellow sibling islands - in an Indian Ocean channel between the Tanzanian Coast and Zanzibar.

We had arranged to be at Zanzibar's Mbweni Ruins Hotel slipway by 12.30 p.m. to ensure our seats on the daily crossing to the island, but at exactly that time (I know because I was checking my watch every few minutes!) we were still struggling through the throngs of travellers disembarking at Zanzibar port, desperately trying to find a reliable taxi driver who would violate all speed limits and deliver us to our next port of call.

We did make it though, only because we were expected and the Chumbe staff had held the boat up for us, but it was literally by the skin of our teeth! On arrival at the Hotel, our next obstacle proved to be John's attire. It was low-tide and the motorboat was moored quite some distance off; accessing it entailed a 20-minute or so mud-sucking walk across slimy, slippery sand, dotted frequently with unbelievably sharp outcrops of coral - not something to be attempted in bare feet if at all possible!

Getting wet wading out to the boat was a foregone conclusion and barely even a consideration, however, although he rolled up his trouser-legs for the trip, footwear was very definitely a serious issue, one which my British-born and not yet African-weathered partner had not considered before we left Dar. Trying to negotiate this spiky quagmire in shoes and socks was just not an option. Luckily, assistance eventually arrived in the form of a hotel porter who appeared from nowhere and offered John his well-worn flip-flops - any warning either of us had ever heard from parents about wearing stranger's shoes, went flying out of the window. The shoes and socks were left ashore as a temporary trade-off for which he was very grateful.

Now at last the rush was over and we could sit back and enjoy the putt-putt of the small boat's engine as it slowly weaved its way across the aquamarines and turquoises of an incredibly calm Indian Ocean. Chumbe, which first appeared a dot on the distant horizon, slowly began to take shape and the mood aboard the boat changed to one of excitement and anticipation. Our travelling companions - aside from the 'skipper' and Dean, the then tourism manager - consisted of a half a dozen or so international students, all wonderfully bronzed and bleached by the African sun, who would spend the next few weeks undertaking various marine and coastal studies for their respective Universities. The mood was euphoric ... the weather was perfect, the view spectacular and the anticipation tangible.

Chumbe - just one of a string of spectacular coral island jewels lying off Zanzibar and once 'belonging' to the Sultan of Zanzibar who was under British rule in Africa's 'colonial' days - is now a Marine Protected Area, a haven featuring a Reef Sanctuary, a Forest Reserve and Historical monuments including the Chumbe Island Lighthouse which was built by the Sultan in 1904.

Accommodation (in the form of eco-bungalows is designed to be as environmentally-friendly as possible to preserve the island's flora and fauna) and are only available for a maximum of 14 visitors at any one time. The roofs of the bungalows are designed in such a way as to collect rainwater, which is then directed towards complex filtration units underneath the bungalows; this is then hand-pumped and heated by solar power to feed the showers and basins. Sewage is dealt with by 'composting toilets' which encourages human waste to decompose quickly and environmentally friendly photovoltaic panels on the roof provide the lighting required.

Students bunk down in the large open-air Visitors Centre which overlooks the ocean, or even camp out in tents in the forest clearings. Local fishermen have been dissuaded from their dynamite fishing in recent years and the coral reefs of which Chumbe itself is part) have slowly but surely restored themselves to their original and natural state. Some of these ex-fishermen have even been given jobs as Game Rangers on the island.

For any enthusiastic snorkeller or scuba diver Chumbe truly is an oceanic paradise. The island hosts more than 400 fish species, the likes of parrotfish, angelfish, butterflyfish, triggerfish, boxfish, sweetlips, unicorn fish, trumpetfish, lionfish, moorish idols as well as lobsters and blue-spotted stingrays. Favourites though are a friendly hawksbill turtle, and batfish which, driven by curiosity, follow humans around their home - and then there is Oscar - a one metre long potato grouper.

The tide was still out when we anchored and after wading through enticing, luke-warm, clear-as-glass, water - home to a myriad sea creatures (not to mention the hoardes of bright red starfish) - we faced yet another mud-sucking journey to the island proper. In my 'unburdened' state my heart went out to the group of youngsters all weighted down by gigantic over-packed backpacks as we cautiously fillliipp - fillloopped our way over the dangerous terrain. I don't think there was a soul amongst us who didn't slip and need assistance at some stage - certainly I felt a moment of extreme pain when a thigh muscle tore as one leg disappeared off side-ways without the rest of me.

We had barely recovered our land-legs and were still assembling in an open thatched shelter on this incredible island, when the ominous black clouds that had snuck up behind us during our slog up the beach, suddenly vent and Chumbe received it's first torrential downpour in over 8 months! The sound was deafening and we could barely see a few feet in front of us as the water torrentially cascaded down in opaque sheets ... a scene reminiscent of 'In Search of Lost Worlds' .. little rivers forming along each tiny track, not missing the minutest opportunity in their quest to escape into the ocean. Suddenly our

flimsy tropical clothing was no match for this angry heaven-lashing and we all huddled miserably, drenched to the bone until island staff were rushed off to find us suitable attire.

Once we were all clothed in various designs and shades of 'raincoats' and other paraphernalia, we were then individually escorted under the few island umbrellas along what had just moments before been the pathways - now paddling pools - to the magnificently decorated and usually inviting eco-bungalows to wait out the rest of the storm. The bungalows are designed to make visitors feel as much a part of nature as possible which is great when the weather is clement, however at this point, unless we stood in the middle of the main room we might just as well have been back out in the storm again ... all furniture, fittings, bedding and clothing were totally water-logged and when I decided I could no longer wait to relieve myself (after all by now it was well over four hours since we left Dar and I do have a rather small bladder, even for a woman), I found I was sitting in a downpour again on the sopping wet seat of the loo. All we could do was laugh - we were like two soaked doormice scurrying to find shelter in a no-shelter world.

But then, as suddenly as it had begun, the rain ceased its torment, the skies cleared and the sun once more beat down and caused steam to rise from everything ... and although initially we were still shivering, after a brief spell we felt as though we were in an outdoor sauna. It was still and silent - and breathtakingly beautiful as we gazed through now quiet palm fronds at the changing colours of the Indian Ocean.

As we only had a few hours on the island before the boat set off back for Zanzibar, after a brief chat with Dean about our respective projects and a mouthwatering meal - a seemingly endless supply of variable dishes incorporating both African and Indian flavours - we decided that as we weren't equipped for any snorkelling, we would spend a few hours exploring some of the island's terrestrial delights. Khamis, the Head Ranger - a veritable font of information which included the Latin names for ALL species of Chumbe's flora and fauna - escorted us, sharing his considerable knowledge as we followed him in awe.

You can't walk on Chumbe without treading on dead coral ... much to my amazement, this is what the ENTIRE island is composed of. Even the densely-thick rag forest that blankets most of this dot in the ocean and protects its inhabitants from the worst of the tropical sun's fierce rays, thrives on this unlikely nurturer. Each of the forest's unique floral specimens are specially adapted to survive on terrain where the only sources of fresh water either come from the seasonal rainfall - many have adapted methods of storage - or from what they can glean from the humidity in the air. The entire eco-system, some of which is highly reminiscent of rainforest, has adapted so delightfully to life on a soil-less floor that one is constantly reminded that if Nature is just left to her own devices, she is well able to provide for herself.

Hermit crabs scurry busily everywhere - so much so that one really has to be careful where one puts down one's feet! From the tiniest and most fragile right

through to the larger specimens in their ill-fitting borrowed 'homes', they boldly stand their ground as if to (quite rightly) say, "This is our home, why should we move out of the way?". Khamis explained that the sheltered forest floor certainly is their domain during daylight hours but as soon as the sun drops over the horizon and day quickly hands watch over to it's darker-skied brother (in true African style) suddenly the hermits are nowhere to be found. Their territory then becomes the domain of their large cousins, the Coconut crabs, so named because these creatures can even scale the trunks of palm trees to reach the nutty fruit they crave.

Birdlife is prolific and these creatures too are incredibly tame - they sit on branches teasingly just out of reach, cocking their heads or beckoning partners to witness the spectacle of the strange two-legged monsters passing by, showing no signs of fear of humans whatsoever. Twitchers and bird-of-prey specialists alike can find solace and inspiration in this forest - not to mention an absolute wealth of material for their research.

Although we weren't lucky enough to spot one during our short stay, Khamis was questioned as to how a small, rare and shy duiker happened to be a forest inhabitant on Chumbe. Apparently the Ader's Duiker, endemic to nearby Zanzibar, is the most endangered antelope in the world. The dainty miniatures were introduced to Chumbe Island Sanctuary in an attempt to prevent the species' total disappearance.

After our forest walk, unfortunately there was only an hour or so left before the boat was due to leave to return to Zanzibar, so we resumed our meeting with Dean to discuss conservation issues generally and how we (ACF) could perhaps assist. We were informed that research on the terrestrial and marine species is conducted jointly with Institute of Marine Sciences of the University of Dar es Salaam and the Departments of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries respectively. In addition, short-term studies are conducted by visiting researchers from both National and International Institutions. Monitoring surveys reveal that coral growth and diversity is among the highest in the region and Chumbe has at least 90% of all the hard coral species that have ever been recorded from Eastern African reefs.

The Chumbe Reef Sanctuary is now fully registered as a marine protected area by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (established by UNEP, WWF and IUCN) in Cambridge, United Kingdom. The noted coral taxonomist Prof. J.E.N. Veron from the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) visited the reserve in February 1997 and established that it has "one of the most spectacular 'coral gardens' to be found anywhere in the world" and that "the Park is exceptionally well managed."

Sadly though, it was time for us to leave this peaceful haven and begin our return trip so we again clambered aboard the boat, although this time under completely different circumstances. The tide was now at his highest and we were able to board from the rustic stone jetty and thus avoid the beach crossing of earlier, but the sea itself was also a different 'beast' at this time of the afternoon. Our earlier smooth crossing was replaced by a choppy,

churning Indian Ocean and we and the other few passengers (staff from the island) found it necessary to hold onto the sides of the boat or risk being tipped into the churning mass.

At some point during the crossing one passenger lost his jacket overboard and within seconds it was way out of reach, despite the efforts of the pole-wielding skipper to retrieve it. We probably lost a good 20 minutes as he struggled to turn the small craft around in the heaving mass of water and point it in the general direction of the elusive jacket which was bobbing in and out of sight many metres away - and then he had to repeat the exercise and re-point the little boat back towards the Zanzibar shore. We marvelled at his skill; despite the obvious tension on his face and in his muscles, at no time did we feel he had lost control of his craft. Eventually he delivered us safely back to Zanzibar where we thankfully headed for the bar of the Mbweni Ruins Hotel and our meeting with Chumbe's Manager, Eleanor (John again having swapped his borrowed flip-flops for his original footwear).

Here we learned more about Chumbe's efforts to educate the local schoolchildren – they have hosted hundreds from the mainland and Zanzibar already - but were dismayed to hear that so few of them were actually being encouraged by teachers and parents to take up the offers of trips out to the island to explore. Much of this lack of enthusiasm seemed to centre around religious matters - although CHICOP (Chumbe Island Coral Park Ltd) are not giving up! We rested that evening feeling that at least somewhere in Africa, conservation is working .. this pristine coral island - Chumbe - which we almost didn't get to see, is certainly living proof of that!

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