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'Food to go' takes on new meaning on a dhow in the Bazaruto Archipelago, where on-board chef Alfredo Zaqueu Boane whips up simple, mouthwatering fare



A DELICIOUS DHOW SAFARI

IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHENTIC AND INEXPENSIVE MOZAMBICAN HOLIDAY ALONG WITH WORLD-CLASS SNORKELLING? SAIL AWAY ON A DHOW FOR ALL THIS AND MORE

WORDS BRIDGET MCNULTY

ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES OF ANY FOREIGN ADVENTURE is hunting for an authentic experience, one untainted by tourist traps and carefully constructed glimpses of 'real life', one that is, quite simply, local. A dhow safari in Vilanculos, Mozambique, is just that. Right on the edge of the Bazaruto Archipelago – a thread of islands that together form one of the largest marine parks in Africa – Vilanculos is often called a beach paradise. But delicious as it is to laze on the sand sipping cocktails and watching the sun dip into the ocean, we wanted something a little more from our holiday: something that smacked of Mozambican culture and custom. And that's when we found the Sailaway Dhow Safari: a three-day snorkelling adventure on a traditional Mozambican dhow.

'Sailaway operates in a sustainable manner supportive of local economic and social development of the islands,' their website promises, 'while ensuring conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the area.' It sounded good, especially the next bit: 'We create unforgettable leisure and educational opportunities.' Unforgettable? Yes, please. A friend had been on the dhow safari before and told us of fresh crab cooked on the back of the boat, long days spent snorkelling in turquoise water, picnics on deserted islands. We were hooked. What could be better than three days soaking up the sun, sea and underwater sights of the Bazaruto Archipelago?

The large wooden boats that form so many sunset silhouettes in holiday pics are surprisingly comfortable, with wide cushioned seats, a shade cloth roof and plenty of space to lounge around or lie down for a mid-afternoon nap. The pace is slow but steady, either catching the wind or, if the wind drops suddenly, using an auxiliary motor to chug along. Lateen rigged dhows have been sailing the Indian Ocean for more than two thousand years, a common sight from Mozambique, Zanzibar and Madagascar to as far afield as the Persian Gulf. With little to do but gaze at the horizon, scanning the clear water for dolphins or the elusive dugong, life unwinds at the pace of the dhow.

Each day we sailed to a different island: first Bazaruto, famed for Ponta Dundo, the highest dunes in the archipelago. Two Mile Reef, the popular snorkelling and scuba diving spot, is closest to Bazaruto (through an exciting stretch of open water known as 'the washing machine'. Enough said). Day two saw us heading to Benguerra, the only island to have freshwater inland lakes, an ambitious hike for the summer months, but a great opportunity to see Nile crocodiles for those willing to sweat it out. And on our last day, we slowly made for

Magaruque, home to a fascinating base reef and a shaded picnic area.

The Sailaway picnics are legendary: authentic Mozambican fare saturated by seafood. That first day, chef Alfredo Zaqueu Boane calmly set about cooking at least 25 bright blue swimmer crab (that emerged from the cooking pot bright orange) and chopping up a mountain of vegetables to be turned into a spicy tomato sauce served on fluffy rice with grilled fish, rolls, fresh salad and ripe mango on the side. The next day it was braaied chicken pieces and more fresh fish; after that, a spicy calamari stew. There aren't many restaurants that can rival a shady spot on a deserted island, the bright blue sea stretching out on every side.

After lunch and more snorkelling, the dhow lapped its way back to the mainland, with Alfredo whipping up a batch of fresh popcorn en route, while Duma Fernando, the guide, regaled us with stories of previous safaris. Hot salty popcorn on a dhow in the middle of the Indian Ocean is pretty unforgettable. The dhow returns each evening either to the Sailaway beach camp or Villas do Indico, the luxury option, a fabulously comfortable lodge run by Portuguese couple, Ana Paola Simoes and Victor Carvalho. Each night, the Portuguese restaurant dished up four-course wonders for dinner that left our taste buds tingling. Marinated mushroom and feta tapas, ginger prawns in a sweet, spicy sauce, grilled lobster and creamy homemade vanilla and hazelnut ice cream – and that was just the first night!

At the end of our three days exploring the Bazaruto Archipelago, we didn't just feel like we'd seen the islands, we felt like we'd had a small taste of Mozambican life: the people, the customs, the food. And really, what more could you ask for from a foreign adventure?

Sailaway Camping Safari based at mainland beach camp from R1 840 for two days or R2 756 for three days. Lodge Safari based at Villas do Indico from R2 390 per person for two days or R3 795 for three days. A one-day dhow safari to Magaruque Island is R640. Includes meals, water, fruit juice, tea, coffee and snorkelling gear. Kids aged six to 12 pay half, while children under six are free. www.sailaway.co.za.

