



# QUILALEA 'THE RESTING PLACE'

The flight to Azura Quilalea Private Island resort is an appetiser of things to come: a barefoot paradise expertly flavoured with indulgent service and gourmet food.

WORDS **KATHY MALHERBE**

**T**he Airbus EC120 helicopter flies out of Pemba over the string of islands making up Mozambique's Quirimbas Archipelago. The loosely strung islands, like raw pearls, are joined by a cyan string in the Indian Ocean. The water canals through the mangroves on one uninhabited island appear as if made by a bloat of hippos on their daily commute. An occasional rough-hewn kayak dots the ocean as subsistence fishermen wait patiently.

Quilalea comes into view; it's nature's pièce de résistance in the Archipelago, and the only island with its own house reef.

The pilot touches down gently, sensitive to the island's environment, and you feel the mellowness immediately, as if your DNA has recognised paradise. The restorative journey on this 35km<sup>2</sup> island (that has cheekily adopted its own time zone) has already begun.

Quilalea, which forms part of the Quirimbas National Park, is an island of limestone karst, characterised by an artistry of caves, sculptured rock formations and natural blowholes.

It is one in a triptych of Azura Retreats' luxury destinations owned by Christopher and for them Bettany, and celebrates its 10 anniversary this year. The preservation of the island is a high priority. The coral reef is a palette of colour and undisturbed marine life. It's a scuba diver's utopia and, unsurprisingly, the island and its waters are home to nesting turtles, migrating humpback whales and more than 100 species of bird life, including the Madagascar bee-eater.

When your personal host's name is Nelson, you know you're going to be more

than OK. Not only does he have a great sense of humour but he has mastered the art of 'benign neglect'. Unobtrusive, anticipatory service.

Nelson leads the way to one of the nine handcrafted sea-facing villas. The walls are coral stone and the roof Makuti thatch (made from the sun-dried leaves of the coconut palm). A mosaic in the shape of a baobab tree adorns the shower.

## **TOUGH CHOICES**

For an island this small, there is so much to experience. Fishing trips often produce a delicacy for dinner. One guest lands a 24kg wahoo (a new record on the island) and another a dogtooth tuna. 'Barry's wahoo' is beautifully prepared by chefs Julio and Abacar, both born and raised on the Quirimbas Archipelago. The fresh catch is prepared with local Arabian and Portuguese flavours, and utterly unforgettable in taste and presentation. The local fishermen are supported and arrive daily to offer a smorgasbord of fresh line fish, calamari, mangrove crab, lobster and prawns.

On the light-lunch menu - chilled avocado and lime soup, spinach and pomegranate salad with honey and lime oil, mangrove crab-claw tempura with wasabi mayo, and fresh white-snapper ceviche with lime and chilli, topped off with home-style organic mango sorbet. A welcome, cooling respite from the alimentary inferno after the best and hottest chilli paste on the globe.

As the sun sets, the 12-hour day shift on the coral reef ends. The water morphs into soft velvet and night snorkelling begins. The reef glows with its own soft light and the coral comes alive in a feeding



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frenzy of tentacles. We are gentle gate-crashers to this all-night underwater party. A hawksbill turtle moves unperturbed and languorously towards the surface, centimetres away. As he takes in a breath of fresh air, we hold ours, knowing we're privy to something really special. We have just swum with one of the oldest creatures on earth.

Quilalea is a single-use-plastic-free island. Showers are solar powered, eco-detergents are used in the laundry and grey water is recycled and used in the gardens. They also have an advanced rainwater harvesting system. What can't be recycled is transported to Pemba for this purpose. There is no lip service to eco-tourism here.

Azura's Rainbow Fund establishes and supports social and environmental projects that make a meaningful difference - from supplying a local clinic with medical supplies and building a school on Quirimba island to protecting endangered marine life. It gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling knowing your impact is minimal and sustainable to the local population.

#### THE GUESTS RETURN

Kudos must be given to general managers Claudia Pellarini and Leon Joubert, whose hands-on and creative approach to the guest experience is unparalleled. They're warm, vibrant, engagingly interested and interesting hosts. Their nurturing leadership means the personalised service infuses every aspect of the private island. Both are well-known underwater photographers and PADI scuba instructors, with thousands of dives behind them and more than two decades of experience in the hospitality industry around the globe. The high percentage of return guests is testimony to their dedication.

Leon guides a marine walk - with 4.8 metres of tidal change, there is a vast area of freshly exposed seabed. It's alive with creatures. You can hear the plop of the small bubbles of sand, the tinkling of a crab as it launches sideways, then settles into its hole. There are cowrie shells of different hues with shy tenants and a baby eel that slinks through the thin layer of water.

There is no shortage of time out on the island either. Or pampering. The spa is built discreetly into the rocks and at high tide, the water pushes through a blowhole. Nature's uncanned music is the slop and gurgle of the seawater.

Nelson continues to surprise and delight - a dinner among the giant 1 200-year-old baobabs, with lights reflecting off the grey, wrinkled bark, not unlike the skin of a matriarch elephant. The low-hanging baobab fruit is a superfood with an extremely high antioxidant rating, which is why it is ground up and used in much of the food on the island. The baobab is like the 'canary in the mine', a harbinger of environmental changes or harm. It's unsurprising that the 58 baobabs on Quilalea are thriving.

#### THERE'S NO RUSH

Then there's a kayak through meandering canals in the mangrove forest on Sencar. Perfect timing lets you float in with the tide and out with the turn. Silently, so that you actually hear a mangrove leaf break off a tree, flutter down and land on the water.

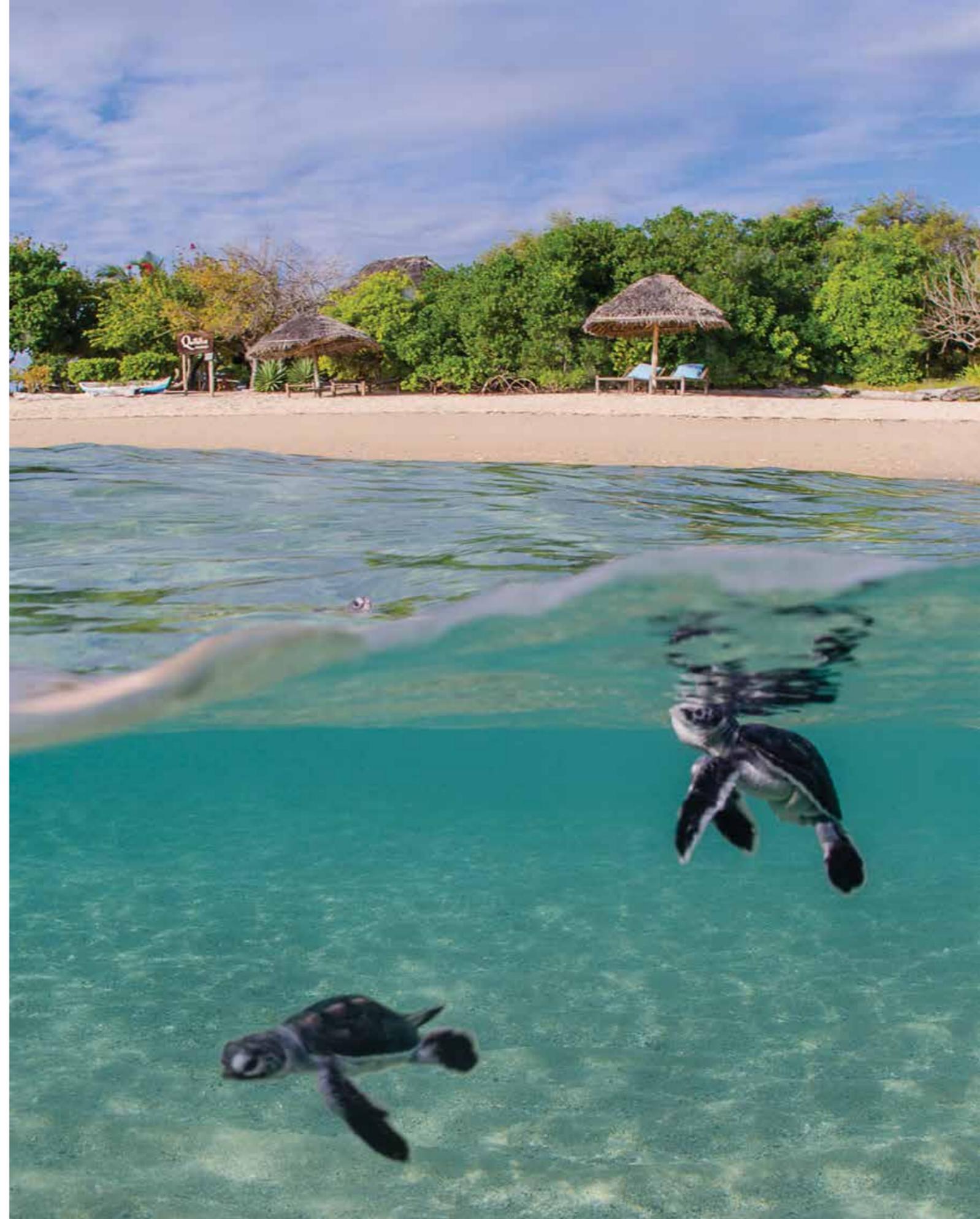
Or you can sit on the deck of your villa, watching the weavers stopping for a quick drink as they continue their thankless task of building a nest on 'spec'. As the sun sets, the day-shy Cape dikkops emerge, their long, spindly legs bend and straighten as if doing squats.

As they serenade the coming of night, the bats swoop over the rimless pool, the light reflecting off their bodies. Like blue-white ghosts they go back and forth, taking in the first insects of the night.

Quilalea has the only accessible beach in the Archipelago, even at low tide, and through the centuries became known as the 'resting beach' for a steady stream of Arab and Portuguese traders. 'Lálea' is an adaptation of the Swahili 'Ulala', which means 'nice resting place'. Quilalea is just that and so much more. ■

*Getting there: Airlink has direct scheduled flights between Johannesburg and Pemba, Northern Mozambique, except on Tuesdays and Sundays. Visit [flyairlink.com](http://flyairlink.com) and call 011 978 1111 to book.*

*The trip was arranged by Tourism Corporation Africa, which covers luxury tourism from the Cape of Good Hope to the Great Plains of Tanzania. Email [andrew@tourismcorp.co.za](mailto:andrew@tourismcorp.co.za)*



PHOTOGRAPHY: CLAUDIA PELLARINI