

Going for glow

Sara Mould exchanges late nights, cocktails and high heels for very early morning workouts, organic food and quiet nights at a new fitness and wellness holiday retreat in Mozambique

A dhow on the Mozambican coastline

Vilanculos Airport: in full make-up, smart pin-striped black pants, perfectly pressed white shirt, hair flat-ironed straight, my Guess watch glinting in the sun... The last meal I ate at home was a two-minute microwave dinner; the most exercise I'd done in the past week was a 15-minute walk to the DVD shop. How different the next four days turned out. For one thing, I'd never experienced 30°C with a humidity of up to 70 percent – it's an absolute disaster for someone with curly hair! And I needn't have jam-packed a suitcase – a toiletry bag, swimsuit and shorts would have sufficed.

As we journeyed the 61km from the airport to the small fishing port of Inhassoro, I took in the beautiful surroundings. A group of young boys playing in a field on a pile of long wooden logs caught my eye. They had one of the logs balanced across the pile making a seesaw of sorts. As our car passed, they smiled and waved and then shyly scurried away. No McDonald's Happy Meal toys or the latest Puma trainers for them. They were just happy to be playing outside. Coming from a deadline-driven, late-night-party, fast-paced city lifestyle, it felt like I had taken a step back in time. Local residents live in thatched rondavels among wind-swept palm trees, and survive off the fruits of the plentiful mango, papaya and pineapple trees. Chickens and goats roam free and fishing dhows line the pristine beachfront.

There are no roads this far out, so we had to wait two hours for low tide before we could 4x4 our way along the beach to the Purescapes retreat at Rio Azul resort. It was worth the wait. The resort faces the Govuro River Estuary, which is a protected reserve with more than 200 species of birdlife and spectacular coral reefs. A five-minute gravel path leads you to the Indian Ocean shore, and wooden verandahs and plunge pools invite you to forget the rest of the world.

As the sun dipped, we were given a rundown of our retreat programme, and I have to confess my enthusiasm dipped with it just a little. While informal, the programme still follows a strict holistic approach to health and fitness, and

guests are encouraged to participate in all activities for maximum benefit. And there were rules.

► **Rule No. 1:** No alcohol (“Help!”)

► **Rule No. 2:** No caffeine (“How would I survive?”)

► **Rule No. 3:** No chocolate (“Where can I start digging my grave?”) For me, this translated into “devastating deprivation”.

Rules aside, my beautiful wooden villa with its own verandah, right on the river and with my own estuary boat for expeditions up the river and exploring nearby islands such as Bazaruto and Santa Carolina, perked me up. And the complete and utter silence – and no TV – meant early bed, and the deepest, most peaceful sleep I'd had in a long while.

By morning what was left of the uptight, city girl in a pin-striped suit was transformed into someone with wild curls and a make-up-free glowing complexion. So a couple of mosquitoes had followed me into my fairy-tale mosquito net before going to bed, but I was up, and right on time for my 6am workout.

Personal trainers were flown in from the UK to usher us through each planned activity: Kacie Baxter Henriques – slim, trim and super-fit, and Ben Coomber – sandy-haired, good-looking and well-built. I started the workout trying to impress with enthusiasm and energy, but only 15 minutes into the circuit I had Ben shouting, “Squat lower Sara, squat lower, come on, come on.” And again, “Squat lower, don't cheat, come on.” If I'd had a gun... The pain made me realise I was a little less prepared for this than I'd thought.

After a few workout sessions and a one-on-one body assessment with Kacie, where she analysed my body movements to identify my imbalances, I soon became accustomed to the pace. Certain exercises were tailored to strengthen the weak muscles I never knew existed.

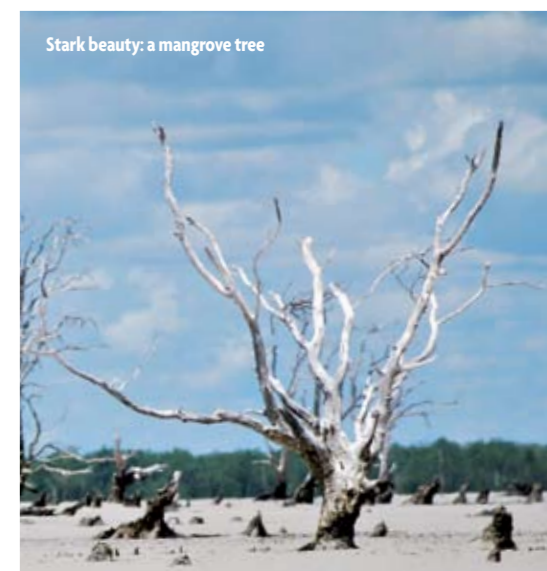
When the activities for the day listed a game of volleyball, my stomach turned. I was, well, pathetic, but once I stopped worrying about what the others thought, I gained momentum and eventually had the team high-fiving my performance. I had real, laugh-out-loud fun – that's serotonin for you, I guess. And against the beautiful



Fresh fish for dinner



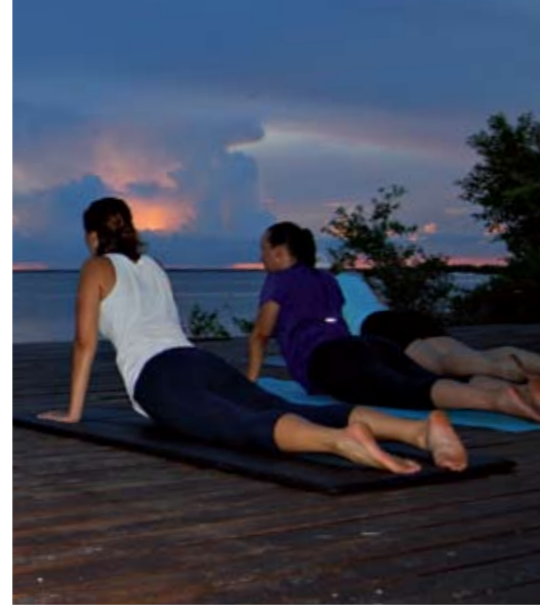
Dining at sunset



Stark beauty: a mangrove tree



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Rio Azul resort

“As soon as the kayak floated to the shore, I dropped myself over the edge and just lay in the water. What an incredibly invigorating workout!”

setting, we barely noticed the blistering sun and the pain in our tired muscles.

In the days that followed, kayaking and snorkelling became my two new favourite activities. The waters were warm and clear (never dropping below 25°C) and the bright-hued fish make this one of the most treasured snorkelling spots. There are hundreds of sea cucumbers, green turtles and soft coral species to be seen and dolphins and whales are often spotted from the boats. Beneath the surface you'll find whale sharks, manta rays and the endangered dugong. If you've never snorkelled before – like me – this seems the perfect place to start!

Kayaking across the estuary, I thought it would be best to accompany one of the personal trainers. “If you want to turn left, paddle more on the right.” This is usually



Volleyball on the beach

the advice provided to a first-time paddler. And often it is all the instruction you'll ever receive on the subject of manoeuvring a kayak. Of course, by the time Kacie and I had paddled far enough from the shore, applying this instruction was easier said than done. The others were well ahead of us and we were left zigzagging our way to the other side. As soon as the kayak floated to the shore, I dropped myself over the edge and just lay in the water. What an incredibly invigorating workout.

As the sun was setting, I thought, “Sundowners!” And then remembered the “no alcohol” rule. But it was OK. Instead I watched the sun go down from yoga's cobra pose – it proved the perfect prescription for my desk-bundled muscles.

At supper we were surprised with a trip to the beach to watch the full moon rise. When it comes to meals, the programme

TRAVEL ADVICE

- ▶ When the sun sets it's mosquito feeding time. Insect repellent will become an essential part of your daily routine. Don't leave home without it!
- ▶ Plan a GP consultation a week before your trip. Mozambique is a high-risk malaria area and you'll need to take prophylactics at least a day before you leave. (Malaria symptoms include fever and flu-like illness, shaking chills, headache, muscle aches and fatigue.)
- ▶ As a former colony of Portugal, Portuguese is the official language. Most locals won't understand a word of English as it has only been introduced into the school system in the past year. Take a Portuguese handbook to learn key phrases.
- ▶ It's a wallet-friendly holiday with five New Mozambique meticals (MZN) to one South African rand (ZAR). Because of its rapid growth as a tourist hot spot the US dollar, SA rand and more recently, the euro, are also widely accepted.
- ▶ Peak season is between March 23 – May 1 and December 1 – January 15.
- ▶ If you have a South African passport, you won't need a visa to enter Mozambique.

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philosophy is this: “If our grandmothers wouldn't recognise it, it's not food!”, and it's a philosophy that stuck with me throughout the programme and beyond. The Purescapes team creates simple, fresh, nutritious and, most importantly, local menus. The fish that was served at dinner could have been the same fish I'd seen while kayaking. In one of the nutrition information sessions, Ben also provided some useful tips to help one stick to this type of healthy eating plan. His top tip: dedicate a “power hour” each week (perhaps on a Sunday) to cut up all the ingredients needed for the week. It makes the thought of preparing healthy meals much easier to bear.

When it came time for goodbyes, there's a traditional morning workout called the W.I.L.Y workout (Wish.I'd.Left.Yesterday). Ben had designed a gruelling workout plan with Turkish get-ups, deep lunges, star



Kayaking across the estuary

jumps, push-ups and running waist deep in the sea. Still he shouted, “Lower Sara, come on squat lower.” This time, I didn't mind.

I had to leave by noon to catch my flight, and as the 4X4 pulled up to take me to the airport, I was surprised to feel a little teary. I'd made a group of new friends, brought closer together by our struggles on the sand. Although my usual idea of a holiday would have been to arrive at an exotic location, sip cocktails and lounge around a pool, this new holiday philosophy provided a much-needed escape. No phones, no TV, no newspapers or clocks. I'd lost the “dress to impress” attitude, and surprised myself by going natural – no make-up, no flat-iron! It was a bit of a revelation, and a relief not to worry about my appearance and possessions. (I was even brave enough to get dressed with the villa doors open). I returned to the office raring to go and feel-

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ing positive about life; I had been reminded of what my body is capable of, and how it good it feels when it's challenged. I was surprised by the positive reaction I got from my colleagues – they really could notice a natural glow about me. And that was just four days of exercise and healthy eating. Imagine what a month could do? ☺

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