

# Life's a Beach

If you're looking for the archetypal tropical escape, the Seychelles, the Maldives or even Bodrum might do the trick. But if paradise found is what you're after, might we suggest Thanda. Situated on Shungi Mbili, a tiny private island off the east coast of Tanzania, this getaway proves there is heavenliness in taking it slow.







They say that part of the fun of travel lies in the getting there. I think about this as we bounce across the ocean, arcs of spray spreading out like wings on either side of the boat. We're steaming ahead at a rate of knots – powered by 400hp. "Four times more than a Ford Focus" adds my petrol-head husband, who's sitting beside me. It's been quite a journey because before this, before the boat, we were aloft, first in an airliner with barely an empty seat, then in a light aircraft that had just a single other passenger – a lady wearing a complicated head scarf arrangement and bearing just a pastry box for luggage which, I realised after arriving, must have been her birthday cake, given she was greeted by a hearty rendition of Happy Birthday in the tiny arrivals lounge at Mafia airport.

Mafia is an island about 50 per cent larger than Malta, located just off mainland Tanzania, roughly a hundred kilometres from the capital, Dar es Salaam. Yet, as much as we might have hoped for even the slenderest of connections, its name has nothing to do with the Cosa Nostra. Instead, it seems that once upon a time, back in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, stumbled upon the place on his way north from the Cape, and he recorded its name as

**Right:** Thanda is located within the Mafia archipelago of sandstone-and-coral islands, 200 kilometres south of Zanzibar, Tanzania's most famous cluster of islands. Off the beaten path and therefore barely touched by tourism, this archipelago remains a characterful treasure. **Left:** Water sports are a must, especially between October and March when glorious whale sharks pass through the area.

Monfia. Then, when Germany took control of the island in 1890, its spelling was changed to Mafia. But the roots of Mafia's name originate from the Arabic word **morfiyah** meaning a group of islands. And that of course is what it is, forming the larger part of an archipelago that also includes: Fanjove, Kwale, Nyororo, Chole, Jibondo, Juani, Jina, Okuza, Simaya, Nyuni, Pumbavu, Songa Songa, Mbarakuni and Shungu Mbili. Currently, it's to Shungu Mbili that we're headed. Together with the similarly uninhabited islands of Nyororo and Mbarakuni, it is cupped within a protective embrace between Mafia and Tanzania's mainland, surrounded by coral reefs, and situated within a marine reserve.

We are heading there as a guest at Thanda, the holiday home of Swedish entrepreneurs and philanthropists Dan and Christin Olofsson. The Olofssons actually opened their first property, the Thanda Private Game reserve in South Africa in 2004 and two years later they began a search for their second – a private island retreat. That it took so long only proves how hard it is to find one of these gems, despite the dozens of atolls that string the Tanzanian coast like bright beads. The couple began their search in the north, the Seychelles (spectacular but mostly already developed so didn't meet the criteria for privacy), and went south to Madagascar (beautiful and untouched but lacking the infrastructure to lend access to travellers) before heading to Mozambique (full of interesting options but most of them already hosted lodges). The final choice, Shungu Mbili, was only spotted by chance from the air whilst on reconnaissance along the Tanzanian coast. It's a teardrop of a land formation with an emerald interior and a salt white hem of beach in waters the precise bottle blue of Bombay Sapphire.

Our own discovery of the island begins as the 400 horses slow to a patter and then stop altogether, leaving us with blissful silence. We start tuning into the sounds of nature – the kiss of waves on sand and wind rattling coconut fronds – before then spotting the household staff as they sweep out to greet us and help us clamber ashore. An ice-cold flannel, some fresh Bruschetta with tomato and olives and a glass of homemade juice later and we're asked by our hostess, Antigone, if we'd like some bubbly. We decline. Then she and her partner, Oscar – they are Italians with years of hospitality experience garnered on the neighbouring Kenya coast – show us around.

Shungu Mbili is all tropic-exotic with picture perfect seas and swaying palms but, in contrast, the sole villa on the island looks as if it has been plucked from Martha's Vineyard or Maine. With its traditional lines, whitewashed walls, doric columns and shuttered windows, it is startlingly, but refreshingly, different from anything I've witnessed on this coast. ➤







The staff explain how the house is powered by solar energy and that its water supply is gathered both from harvested rain and desalinated seawater. I am struck by the pride and the affection with which they offer up all the minutiae of their adopted home. The house sprawls across 1,200 square metres, encompassing five en-suite bedrooms, generous decks and huge French windows. The house oozes a generosity of space, light, air, colour and comfort.

Largesse is an omnipresent feature here and it's personified by the owners and warm, engaging hosts. Nothing, apparently, is too much. Would we like a drink? Which wine would we prefer with our lunch – “a nice Sauvignon, a Pinot Grigio perhaps?”. An enormous fridge is thrown wide open and we ponder its contents before plucking out that nice Sauvignon from the Cape. And later, when would we like our morning tea delivered? Or would we prefer coffee? Half past six? No problem. (And at 6:30am – my husband's idea, not mine – it promptly arrives).

After our unduly early tea the following morning, we take to the beach and walk around the island, twice in fact. Then again, it's not all that big – we're told it's just over a kilometre in circumference and around 8 hectares in size. And with the tide receding, we notice an oyster encrusted reef. Oscar spots us salivating. “You like?” he asks. We nod and he roars in Swahili in the direction of the island's interior, “Nondo! Nyundo!” A waiter charges forth proffering the requested iron bar and hammer and Oscar sets to work. As if from nowhere another waiter appears bearing slices of lime, a bottle of Tabasco and two glasses of Champagne. For 9:30am, this is hedonistically decadent. But it's wonderfully delicious too.

Our entrée of oysters is followed by a breakfast of kings, freshly pressed passion fruit juice, cafetières of steaming coffee and platefuls of tiny homemade pastries warm from the oven. Melissa, the chef, scuttles out of the kitchen at intervals to make sure we are entirely satisfied – her experience of remote African camp cooking stands her in good stead cast away on the island. She is not fazed by her geography; she is used to making orders for supplies remotely, awaiting their arrival by plane and boat.

Then it's time to swim. We help ourselves to the fins and masks that are provided free of charge (as are all the water toys, including

**Left:** There are almost no tarmac roads in the Mafia archipelago, far more bicycles than cars and mobile phones are still an exciting novelty. Life for the 40,000 people in this area revolves, as it has always done, around fishing and boat building and as a result, the seafood is, as you'd imagine, exquisite.

jet skis) and take to the sea. Shungu Mbili was proclaimed a marine protection area in March 2007, but no protection efforts were initiated, which unfortunately meant that destructive fishing and stripping of the reef continued unabated. But that has, as a result of Thanda's efforts, now stopped. The Marine Park is demarcated with buoys and Thanda sponsors a programme educating fishermen while also undertaking patrols. The turnaround is clear to see in the abundance of sea-life: we spot a pair of enormous bat fish, a stingray, a huge octopus eyeing us with suspicion from his hole and the coral tentatively growing back in delicate branches of ultraviolet and cupcake pink.

The sea around Mafia is known as a diving haven and Thanda makes for the perfect launch point into Chole Bay. The deeper channels around the islands are home to at least two endangered species. The docile dugong (or sea cow) is thought to find refuge here, and turtles make the small islands around the archipelago – including Shungu Mbili – their breeding ground. But there are other less expected underwater dive options.

In the vicinity is the legendary sunken city of Rhapta, described thus in the 'Periplus of the Erythraean Sea', dated 50 AD: 'Two days' sail beyond, there lies the very last market-town of the continent of Azania, called Rhapta; which has its name from the sewn boats (rhapton ploiarion); in which there is ivory in great quantity, and tortoise-shell. Along this coast live men of piratical habits, very great in stature, and under separate chiefs for each place.'

You might well be able to envision Thanda's luxury – sumptuous furnishings, opulent bathrooms (inside a double shower, outside a huge private bathtub), fine wine, scrumptious food and a fabulous glass-sided infinity pool. But if you're anything like me, you probably won't be expecting the manner in which it has assumed the mantle of guardian of these waters and how, as a result, it has become a home not just to its onshore guests but it's offshore ones too.

From the Bose SoundDocks to the flamboyant kikoyo (local sarongs) in lieu of regulation white bathrobe to the library chock-full of well-thumbed Hemingways and binoculars, so you can enjoy the seascape in addition to the colourfully uncoordinated towels around the pool, the Thanda experience is all about the details. It's a home indeed. But an absolutely fabulous one. **B**

