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Mafia

Mafia is an archipelago of islands at the mouth of the Rufiji river delta, composed of Mafia Island, Jibondo, Juani and Chole. Their position as the most southerly islands on the Tanzanian coast has made them strategically covetable throughout the long game of historical wrangling for rule, but visitors today find essentially rural farming and fishing communities whose day to day lives continue in much the same pattern as has been traditional for millennia. Mafia Island and the surrounding archipelago have a great deal to offer as an unspoilt, little-visited alternative to other Indian Ocean locations around Zanzibar and along the coast. The archipelago provides excellent opportunities for diving and snorkelling, and for discovering deserted beaches and offshore islands fantastically imbued with rich/great natural and historic interest. The deeper channels around the islands are also renowned for world-class deep sea fishing, and home to at least two greatly endangered species; the docile dugong (manatee or sea cow) is still thought to find refuge cruising the seagrass between Mafia and the Rufiji River Delta, and the small islands around the archipelago remain a popular breeding ground for giant and green turtles. These islands are an idyllic natural haven for birds and wildlife, with over 120 different species of birds sighted and recorded, (including five types of sunbird), and the whole area is best explored from the comfort of the deck of a traditional sailing dhow.

Mafia today

Today, each of the four main islands are inhabited with farming and fishing villages and homesteads, where smallholder farmers grow a variety of crops including rice, cassava, pineapple, paw paw and beans, and most households tend to have cashew, coconut and mango trees. This area of the coast is richly surrounded with various coral reefs and marine life, and diving these waters is rewarding for divers of all abilities. The high diversity of these reefs and extensive work to document and preserve them by organisations such as Frontier and the WWF brought about a much needed government protection order, and after many years in the making, the creation of the Mafia Island Marine Park - Tanzania's first marine park.

Getting Around

There are no tarmac roads on Mafia Island, and only two major roads that are ever graded, one running North to south and one west to east, all meeting at Kilindoni, the central town and airstrip. The rest of the island is linked with thin sandy paths and tracks, wide enough to walk, bicycle or manoeuvre a cow. Long distance local transport relies on the tides, as it is generally by dhow. Motorised vehicles are limited to those owned by the

hotels and organisations, and visitors are advised to prearrange transport through their accommodation where possible. Kinasi Lodge will always organise transfers as a matter of course.

Chole Island, (Chole Mjini)

The overgrown ruins of the German administration on Chole provide an eerie sense of the imposing power of colonialist rule. These old stone edifices stand in grand alignment along a wide and immaculately straight central pathway, although the old stone gaol and boma are now freely open to all the whims of nature. There are also less distinct remains of the older Arab settlements here.

The island is also home to a sizeable roost of giant fruit bats, sign-posted along a path past a chirruping Qu'ran school, although the noisome racket of the roost at morning and night is guide enough. The docking beach at Chole is a good spot to see traditional boat-building and sail-making, in which all materials are impressively fashioned by hand. This tiny island, only 1sq km, is a peaceful and natural haven to wander at leisure. The local people are friendly, and it is interesting to see their smart mud and pole houses, often well-decorated with pebbles to add colour and style. The pathways around the island sometimes take a fine line through the garden plots, growing mainly cassava and beans, and the newly extended school and clinic are encouraging for further achievements here. Boats to Chole should be easily arranged with your hotel, although it is very easy to jump aboard the popular local dhow ferry from the beach at Utende, just in front of the Mafia Island Beach Hotel. This ferries back and forth regularly throughout the day until 4pm, and the beachside wait is pleasant as the boat is always in view. The fare is about Tsh200, and ferryman and crew are welcoming and friendly, as long as you are decently dressed!