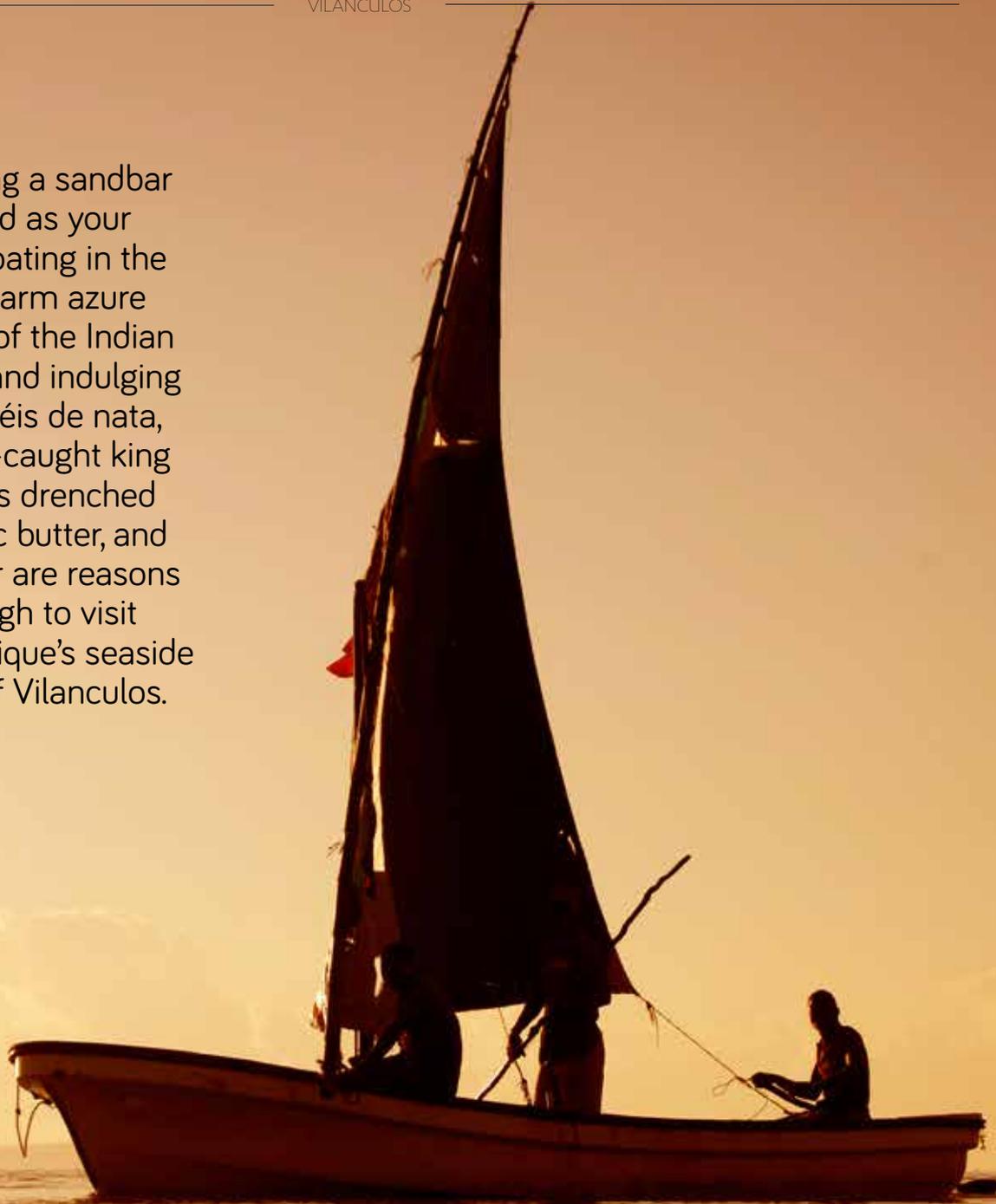


# Drop anchor in Vilanculos

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Claiming a sandbar island as your own, floating in the lukewarm azure waters of the Indian Ocean and indulging in pastéis de nata, freshly-caught king prawns drenched in garlic butter, and 2M beer are reasons enough to visit Mozambique's seaside town of Vilanculos.



#### FAST FACT

The dugong is a species vulnerable to extinction, largely due to habitat degradation and hunting. Their long lifespan of 70 years and slow rate of reproduction means they are even more susceptible to extinction.



**D**ugongs (from the Malay word duyong) are probably one of the most popular reasons to travel and dive along Mozambique's 2 500km coastline, and particularly in Vilanculos which is 700km north of the capital city of Maputo.

I was determined, as a newly-qualified scuba diver with only a few dives under my weight belt, to do a full-day excursion along Two Mile Reef with Odyssey Dive in search of these plump, ever-elusive, herbivorous marine mammals that hold so much intrigue.

The Bazaruto Archipelago, with its coral reefs, sandbanks, shallow bays and seagrass meadows, makes for ideal grazing conditions for these sea cows with their fluked, dolphin-like tail and downturned snout. We are told that these so-called ladies of the sea are more closely related to elephants than other marine mammals. The other drawcard is a large variety of tropical reef fish, such as surgeon, parrot, trigger and angel, as well as seven kinds of rays, reef sharks, turtles, and moray eels.

**THE BAZARUTO ARCHIPELAGO, WITH ITS CORAL REEFS, SANDBANKS AND SHALLOW BAYS MAKES FOR IDEAL GRAZING CONDITIONS FOR SEA COWS.**

As our small group of six divers lazes about Bazaruto Island during our pre-packed lunch stop, surveying the views from the sand dunes, wallowing in the inland shallows that are created at high tide, snorkelling and walking along the golden beach, our dive instructor comes running up to us. We only hear one word of what he says: "Dugong!" Everything else is dropped. And forgotten. We tumble back into the boat and head past the rock pools in the direction where it was spotted.

The water gently bobs us about. Each of us peer into the cerulean depths below and at the water ahead. But as easily as it was spotted, it just as easily has disappeared. We prepare for our second dive, invigorated with the hope that we may see it within the water. We have no luck, but as we ascend, we speak of our determination to dive these waters again and enjoy an encounter with a dugong.

We return to the mainland along with the fishing dhows. The shoreline near Odyssey Dive is lined

## THE BAZARUTO ARCHIPELAGO

**Vilanculos is the springboard to the Bazaruto Archipelago of six islands off its coastline that can be visited on a day trip or overnight. The largest island at 12 000ha is Bazaruto. From here you can visit Pansy Island, go scuba diving and snorkelling, do a sunrise horseback outride and take a day trip to Dolphin Bay in search of the resident flock of flamingos. The five-star Anantara Resort and Spa on Bazaruto is what tropical island holidays are made of – private, thatched beach villas, sundowner dhow cruises, beachfront banquets by candle and starlight, massages and spa treatments, as well as panoramic views of the bay from the hilltop. Because there are only a selected number of guests on the island, at times it seems as though you have it all to yourself.**



SUNSET IN VILANCULOS BRINGS WITH IT CATAMARAN CRUISES, SUNDOWNERS AND SEAFOOD FEASTS.



with sails of various colours on one side and hungry customers on the other. Barefoot women wrapped in capulanas bring colourful plastic buckets and beer crates down to the beach to be filled with handfuls of fish. Gleeful children splash through the shallows as they race to pick up the fish that slip into the water. The catch is spilled out onto the sand and separated according to variety and size. Customers circle, vying with their voices to be helped first. The women fill their plastic bags, which are weighed by the pot-bellied dhow owner using a hand scale. Fistfuls of fish are either added to the plastic bags or thrown back onto the sand as money exchanges hands. The fish are sold whole or gutted and cleaned – ready for the barbeque. This is the definition of fresh – from sea to grill to plate.

**BAREFOOT WOMEN WRAPPED IN CAPULANAS BRING COLOURFUL PLASTIC BUCKETS AND BEER CRATES DOWN TO THE BEACH TO BE FILLED WITH HANDFULS OF FISH.**

For those who want to reel in their own on a catch-and-release basis, big game fishing happens aboard the 27ft Nova Cat or the 25ft Magnum Cat with Big Blue. Vilanculos mornings start with

casting baits and lures from the beachfront, while afternoons are reserved for the fighting chair. Black marlin bite in spring, between mid-September and mid-December, though there are other fish species to go after including sailfish and giant trevally, while tuna, dorado, billfish, rock cod and jobfish are caught between reef systems.

Another option is to spend a day aboard the Catsonova – Bahia Mar’s 44 ft motorised catamaran yacht –floating past sandbars, reading a page-turner beneath a parasol, keeping an eye out for dolphins and taking a dip in the water before a gourmet picnic lunch. It can be chartered for a full day of island-hopping between Paradise, Margaruque, Benguerria and Bazaruto islands or anchored off their shores overnight.

Sunset in Vilanculos brings with it sundowners and seafood feasts of baked crayfish, coconut prawn curry and calamari steaks at Casbah Restaurant and Beach Bar along the beachfront. Before it starts all over again tomorrow. 

**MALARIA**

Visit your general practitioner before travelling as Vilanculos is a malaria area. Bring insect repellent, citronella candles as well as long-sleeved shirts and trousers. Most accommodation options have mosquito nets and window mesh.



Did you know that all fares now include a light snack and your first checked bag (23kg).