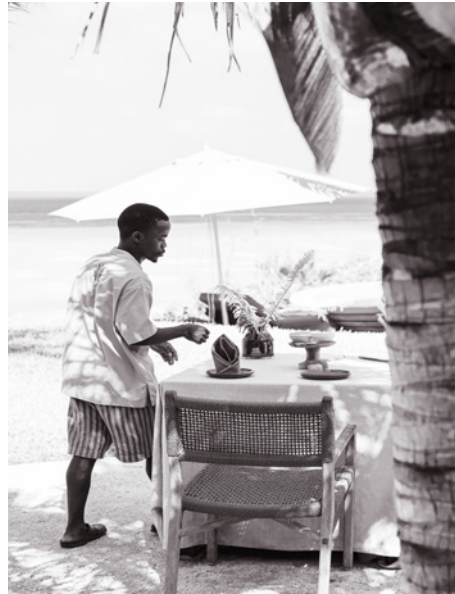




Serendipity by the Sea

WHAT BEGAN AS A BEACH WALK TURNED INTO A REVELATION – SAUDADE IN VILANCULOS. THIS INTIMATE BEACHFRONT HAVEN MERGES SUSTAINABLE DESIGN, MOZAMBICAN ARTISTRY, AND SOULFUL SIMPLICITY

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Truth be told, we quite literally stumbled upon Saudade. After four days of barely leaving the sanctuary of our pre-booked villa, we embarked on an exceptionally long beach walk. At some point, we climbed a path from the beach, expecting to find another whitewashed hotel where we could order a taxi home. Instead, it was a ‘pinch me, is this real?’ moment as the astoundingly beautiful Saudade stood before us.

Saudade is the love-child of South African couple Sarah and Michael, who have poured every ounce of time, passion, and skill into it. What was once a cherished Mozambican family getaway has evolved into an intimate escape for travellers seeking an alternative to the chain-hotel experience. Michael narrates the story: “When we took over what was then a well-loved family beach cottage, it hadn’t been touched in fifteen years and was in urgent need of care. Sarah and I could see the potential to create something special.”

Six bespoke rooms adorn the property, while the neighbouring Villa Coco offers four additional rooms for exclusive hire. The lawns cascade down towards the beach where an infinity pool, shaded salas, and decks for sun-soaking invite long afternoons. It’s a generous piece of paradise for just a handful of rooms. Needless to say, we changed our accommodation booking for the last two nights of our holiday, making Saudade our final beach home.

“The inspiration was high-end luxury built using locally available materials, created by the people who live in Vilanculos”

BIOPHILIC AT ITS BEST

On the second day of our new stay, Sarah appears – radiant in green and fresh off a quick flight from Johannesburg. I eagerly catch her for a chat about Saudade. “The inspiration was high-end luxury built using locally available materials, created by the people who live in Vilanculos. The challenges were finding the right artisans – it is a long process, as everything is made by hand, so very time-consuming. It’s the imperfections in a product that make it feel personal and special in a world where everything is mass-produced.”

The design ethos embodies the Japanese concept of ‘wabi sabi’ – an appreciation for simplicity and imperfection. Earth-inspired interiors and minimalist design invite stillness and contemplation. No colour appears indoors that wouldn’t be seen when stepping outside. Naturally clad walls transform into verandas and windows that frame ocean landscapes, with lush foliage and private courtyards bordering the bedrooms around the property.





SCENES FROM SAUDADE:
Endless ocean views, local craftsmanship, and barefoot luxury blend seamlessly together in this coastal escape



Understandably brimming with pride, Sarah says, "Our reward has firstly been witnessing the sheer pride and dedication that the artisans show for their work, and then ultimately the guests' appreciation for what we have created."

Her playful panache is visible throughout, from the custom-designed fabrics that adorn the beds to the tantalising textures. Perhaps Saudade's most iconic feature is the spiralled reeds covering the building's pillars. "Originally, they looked too blocky," Sarah tells me. "Working

with local thatchers, we experimented with materials." The result is mesmerising designs, perfectly complemented by the plaited overhanging thatched roofs and oversized hanging basket-lights that sway gently in the breeze.

Creativity spills into the kitchen too. Chef Pape serves a variety of dishes – both meals and crockery. "You eat with your eyes before anything else. I don't want just a plain plate.

It's boring," says Sarah. Added to the variety of dining spots, every meal feels unique – all the while enjoying one fine bucket-list view.

FIFTY SHADES OF BLUE

If blue was invented in the sky, it is perfected here in Vilanculos, where the sea reflects countless hues. Thanks to a shallow bay, a significant change between the tides creates a natural spectacle I've not witnessed elsewhere: every six hours, an azure ocean transforms into a fluvial fantasy. You'll see countless blue channels flanked by emerging sandbars, only to disappear again, creating an ever-changing living canvas.

Following the rhythm of the tides, local fishermen sail back and forth in search of food. As they return, women waiting nearby approach the boats, ready to fill their buckets. We also see some folk wading through the waters with hand nets or lines of large nets. In the distance, the silhouettes of the six Bazaruto Archipelago islands form a dreamy backdrop.

The town is hardly sleepy though, with 23 000 people calling it home. But in classic Mozambican style, it possesses a distinctive go-slow vibe. Yet, it's the

unique ocean and postcard-perfect archipelago that draws people from around the world. With a 90-minute flight from Johannesburg via Airlink, it's an easy escape.

ISLAND HOPPING

We leave the lodge only once – tempted by a boat trip to the nearby islands. My only memory of Bazaruto is visiting as a child, when cruise ships disgorged throngs of passengers onto land. Fortunately, those crowds have ceased, and now only a limited number of small boats visit from Vilanculos.

First, we climb the dunes of Bazaruto, where the view back to the mainland reveals narrow channels of blue ocean. Later, snorkelling at Two Mile Reef, countless colourful fish pass through my masked view. After a freshly grilled seafood lunch on the beach, we head to Benguerra Island, where the low tide leaves behind inland lakes to wade and swim through.

Finally, we lie on an isolated stretch of sand, with the rustling palms and lapping waves providing the soundtrack. It's a halcyon experience; that's what Mozambique does – it takes you out of time. It doesn't merely slow down but softens, carrying a sacredness.

As we head back, the crew spot movement ahead – perhaps the elusive dugong, one of the last colonies of these quasi-dolphin creatures on Earth. We cruise closer and wait in silence for 10 heavy minutes. There is no sighting, no dugong. Straddling the side of the boat, one hand clinging to the mast and the other holding my 2M beer, I feel frustrated but secretly pleased: it's simply another reason to return to this watery wilderness. ■

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