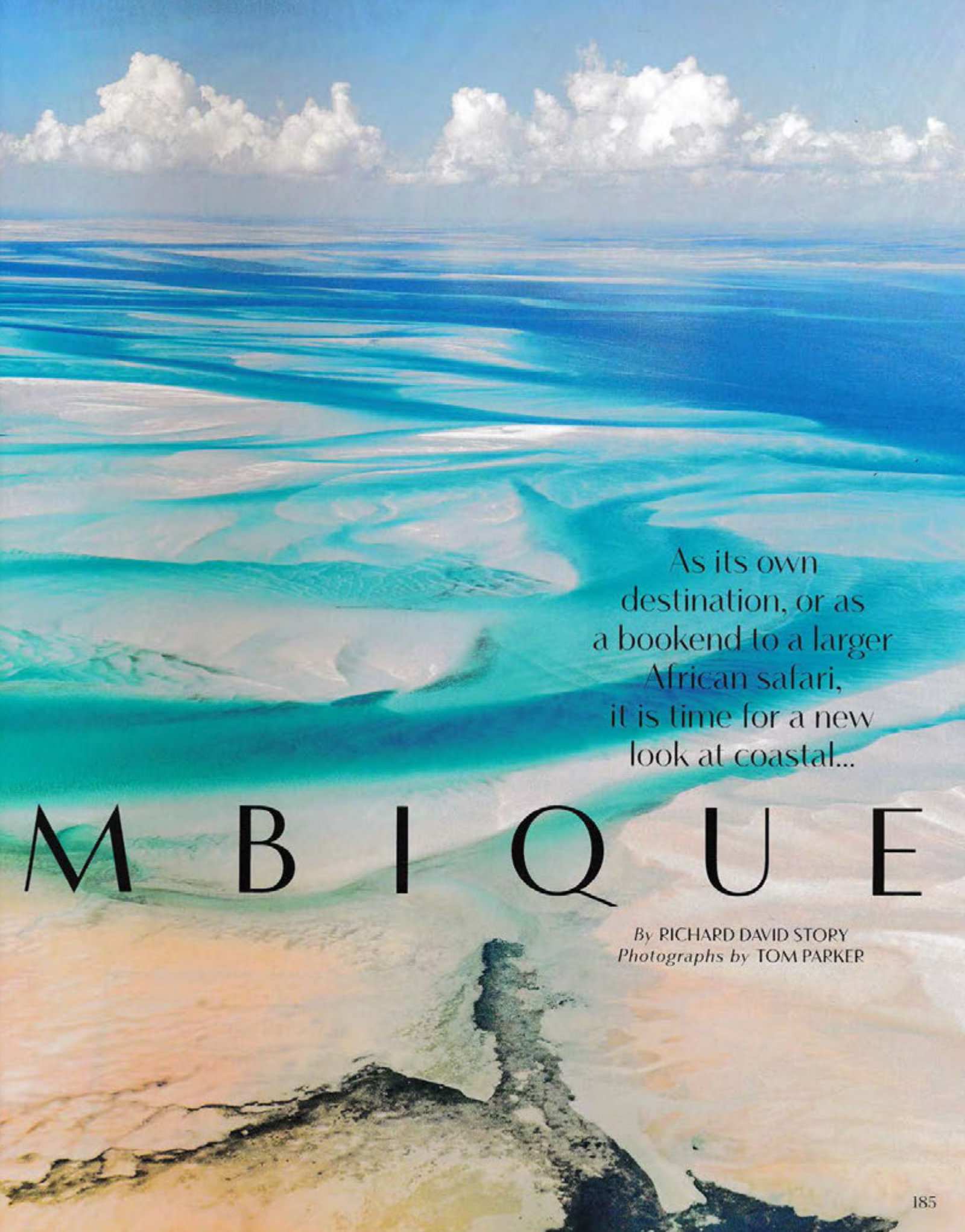




M O Z A

Jasse Pedro Milice, and Beyond Bengueria Island's dive master, rides Vumba, one of more than 100 horses rescued from Zimbabwe. Opposite: The bleached white sand and turquoise waters of Bengueria Island



As its own
destination, or as
a bookend to a larger
African safari,
it is time for a new
look at coastal...

M B I Q U E

By RICHARD DAVID STORY
Photographs by TOM PARKER





Each of the lodge's thatched-roof casinhas, like No. 11 pictured here, have canopied beds and a wooden deck with a plunge pool.

*I like to spend some
time in Mozambique*

*The sunny sky is
aqua blue*

*And all the couples
dancing cheek to cheek*

*It's very nice to stay
a week or two*

—“Mozambique,” Bob Dylan, 1976

Okay, so the lyrics may not be among Dylan's wittier or most rhapsodic bits of poetics, but they do get to the simple naïveté that one feels about the islands of Mozambique, a bracelet of glittering sand and dunes spilling into the multi-blued waters of the Indian Ocean. That said, I must admit, I didn't know exactly what to expect. “Don't worry. You're going to love it. The trip of a lifetime,” promised Explore's Cherri Briggs, an African specialist and outfitter whom I've been recommending to friends and DEPARTURES readers for close to ten years. In May, I spent three days with Briggs and her husband, Richard Wilson, on Bengueria Island, eight miles off the southern coast of Mozambique. I have enormous trust in their understanding of Africa (Wilson was raised in South Africa) and, just as important, in their understanding of what DEPARTURES readers are looking for...and what they aren't.

But is it safe?” I asked 47-year-old Joss Kent, CEO of travel-adventurer outfitter and Beyond, whose ecologically enlightened Bengueria Island is one of the brand's 31 lodges in Africa. After all, I told him, the way most of us know Mozambique is by the years of civil wars that devastated this coastal African country from 1976 to 1992. “There are not many places in the world that don't have some sort of geopolitical unrest right now,” Kent explained. “Paris, Brussels, and everywhere in between. There are conflicts here, but they are thousands of miles from coastal Mozambique. Believe me: We would not be sending people into a war zone, and I certainly wouldn't be promoting Bengueria if there was a dangerous civil war situation.”

Set in a protected marine-conservation area in



the middle of the Indian Ocean, Bengueria is the second largest (and it's still small: seven miles by three and a half miles) of the islands in the Bazaruto Archipelago, which separated from the mainland hundreds of thousands of years ago. It is as close to genuine paradise as you will ever find. After all, who hasn't had that Robinson Crusoe moment in which they fantasize about being a castaway on a deserted island, a place where we can live our lives with nothing but the most necessary and natural tools for survival?

That's a little of how I felt flying into the island by helicopter. Pristine, wild, and remote for sure.... In fact, it took me close to 36 hours from New York via Emirates to Dubai to Johannesburg. Then two more flights and a ten-minute chopper ride. Not to mention a few layovers here and there. But that's also how it remains as pure and untouched as it does. *That* and the passion and meticulous care with which general manager Johan Van Der Merwe runs the entire operation, overseeing an incredibly eager and helpful staff.

At the lodge, which was preexisting but painstakingly rebuilt by andBeyond last year, there are ten casinhas, or private villas, with thatched roofs, a large, open bedroom off of which are outdoor showers, wooden deck, and plunge pool. (There are also two cabanas and a three-bedroom casa to choose from.) All are within a brisk two-minute walk from the main house and come with a butler, should you require. And I must say although Kent warned that "if you're looking for lap pools and manicured golf courses like Punta Cana, beware," I loved the fact that it wasn't but also that everything was air-conditioned even if I chose not to turn it on.

This is decidedly not the designer-driven Caribbean. "It's still a frontier experience," Kent said. "But I think if you take that on board and you say, 'Okay, that's what interests me. I want to go back to the way Africa was,' then Mozambique is an incredible place to do that. It's got a great history, and the sensory overload is, well, magnificent."

And so it is. Whether in the sheer jaw-dropping beauty of the white sands and blue ocean or in the majesty of the coral and marine life that you can experience right outside your casinha, snorkeling off the lodge's catamaran, or by deep-sea fishing for the likes of barracuda, wahoo, and giant trevally. AndBeyond takes great pride in its initiative Oceans Without Borders, which supports endangered

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One of the lodge's two cabanas under moonlight. Opposite: Milice swims with the fishes on the island's unspoiled reef. The Bazaruto Archipelago is part of the East African marine ecoregion, a stretch of coastline that spans almost 3,000 miles, from South Africa to Somalia.

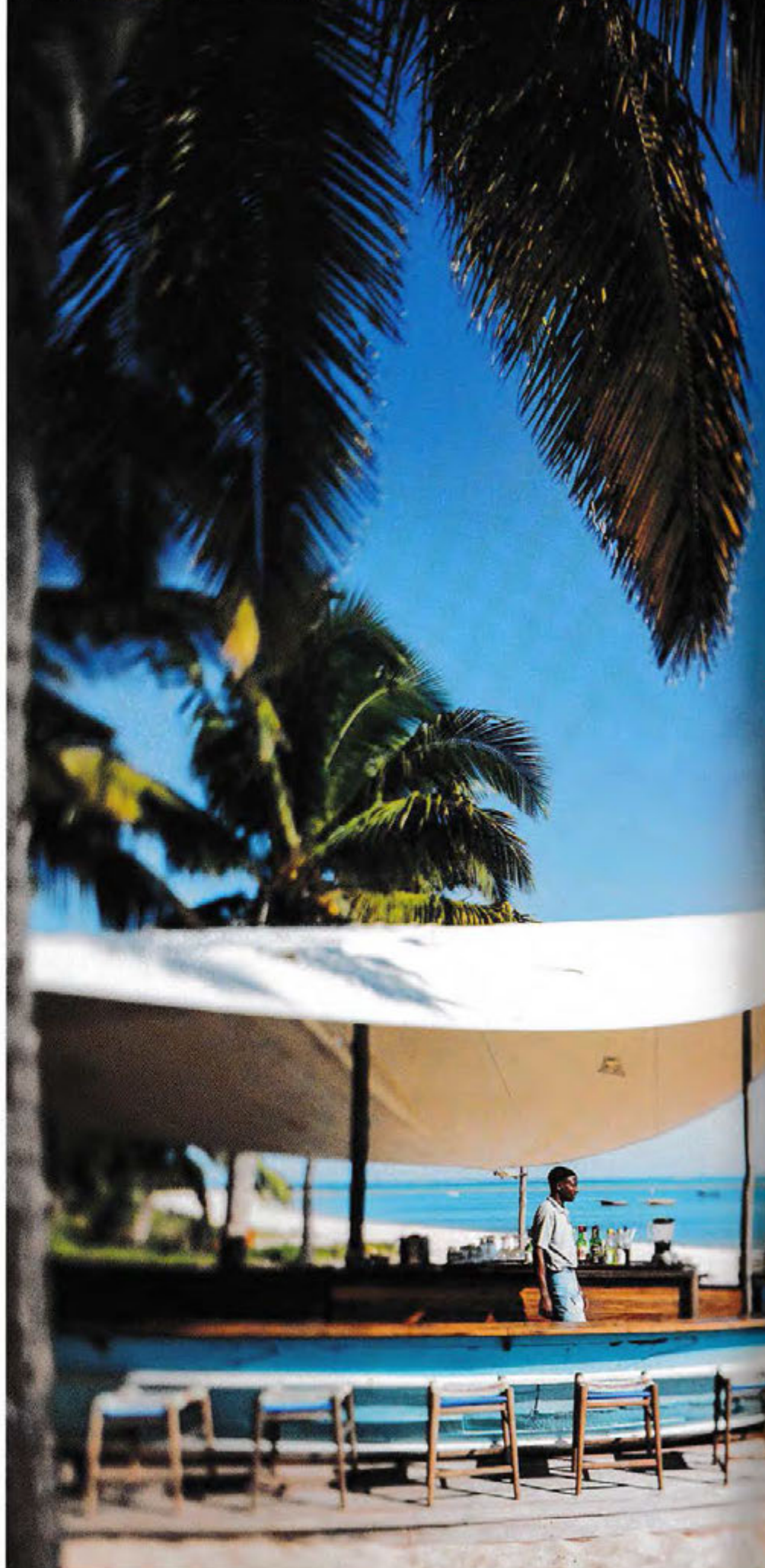
marine life, like the rare dugong, a cousin of the manatee sometimes known as the sea cow. Benguerra is connected to a much larger marine ecosystem that stretches from South Africa to Somalia, as important, I am told, as the Great Barrier Reef but largely unmonitored, exposed, and vulnerable.

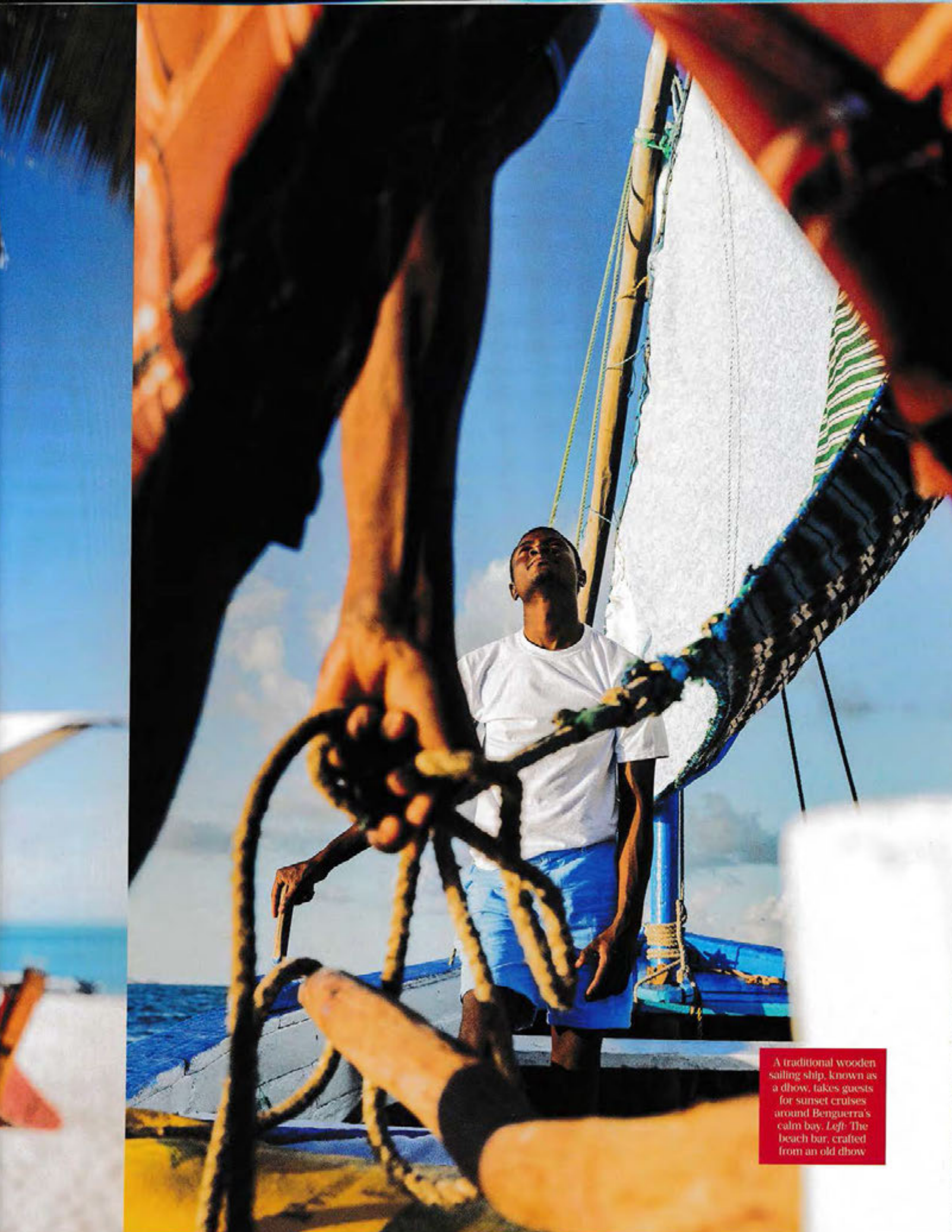
One of the more remarkable experiences is the "water riding" of the horses rescued by Zimbabweans Pat and Mandy Retzlaff during their flight from President Robert Mugabe's bloody terror 14 years back. The Retzlaffs found safe haven in Mozambique, bringing with them more than 100 horses. Seven of the original herd now are on Benguerra. I was sorely tempted to join the others in my party one morning as they rode (more like floated) bareback into the ocean.

"Come on, Richard, don't be scared," Briggs shouted to me from about 50 feet out. Regrettably, I didn't join them, although the image of six strong horses with riders bobbing in the waves of the Indian Ocean was incredibly seductive. Instead, I lost myself in a World War II thriller by David Downing. Such are the tough decisions one makes on Benguerra.

Given the years of civil war, and Beyond's Benguerra Island is a relatively new experience for either a leisurely stay or added on to a larger southern Africa safari. In the '60s, this part of Mozambique and the Indian Ocean was a jet-set heaven. Big rich from South Africa would come for the thrill of its unmatched deep-sea fishing, their wives comfortably situated on Paradise Island, a quick, 45-minute ride by boat from Benguerra. The resort is now a ruined and abandoned heap of a tropical overgrowth, and all that's left are the shells: hollowed-out rooms, empty pools, and stairways leading to nowhere. But that was then and this is now. The world evolves and so too Mozambique. ♦

The best months to visit and Beyond Benguerra Island (andbeyond.com) are April, when the rainy season ends, through mid-June, when the southern African winter sets in. Alternatively, mid-August through early November. I would suggest making arrangements only through an outfitter, in this case, EXPLORE Inc., which can be reached at 970-871-0065 or cherri@exploreafrika.net. I would also recommend asking to speak with Cherri Briggs herself for more elaborate safari planning. Rates are dependent on season and on what sort of package you put together. Although there are direct flights between New York and Johannesburg, I prefer Emirates (emirates.com), which stops in Dubai, for long-haul flights.





A traditional wooden sailing ship, known as a dhow, takes guests for sunset cruises around Benguerre's calm bay. *Left:* The beach bar, crafted from an old dhow