

BENGUERRA ISLAND

THE STORY OF A LODGE

By Margie Adcock – part owner

It all started in 1989. I was on holiday on Bazaruto Island with my family and there we met 2 brothers who had a vision... The Landrey family had been involved in the area for a long time, and Dan Landrey (Kim and Trevor's father) had been trying to revive the small lodge on Bazaruto, while his sons explored the island next door, and found what they thought was the perfect spot for a new Lodge. They chose the site that would become Benguerra (then Benguela Lodge) carefully and well: It was the only forested area left on the island, it was close to the beach, it faced north and, most importantly, it had a permanent deep water channel which would allow for boat access at all tides. The tidal movement in Moçambique is big – approximately 3 meters – so when the tide goes out, it really goes out. And boat access is very limited in all other sites.

We initially got involved because they need financial know-how and my then husband (Alistair Macduff) happened to be very clued up. We were all dreamers, I suppose. Our families had brought us to this part of Moçambique when we were children – and so with a child's ignorance of borders and politics, we grew up thinking of it as "our beach" (4 of the 6 shareholders are Zimbabwean).

So we decided to build...



Margie and her Boys in 1989



Kim Landrey, Pete Hougaard, Alistair Macduff and Trevor Landrey

At that point in time Moçambique was just limping out of several decades of war and misery. There was an uneasy truce and a lot of armed people were on the loose, with no direction, objective or control. The country as a whole was devastated. Most of the schools and hospitals etc had been destroyed. There was no infrastructure to speak of. The roads were in a shocking state – most of them with big anti tank ditches dug across them; and there were many areas which were totally unsafe for travel due to landmines.

There was nothing to buy outside main towns, and when we arrived no-one would work for money as it had absolutely no value. There was nothing to spend money on! (The upside of that being that there was no modern garbage, no plastic bags, no soda cans... - it was all strangely pristine). The shops had virtually nothing in them, famous cafés and restaurants were closed and the people were pretty destitute. I once saw a line of people waiting to buy a puff on a cigarette as they couldn't afford to buy a whole one.

Maputo (the capital) was fairly derelict, with shocking roads and massive potholes. I remember the atmosphere being tense and uncomfortable. You couldn't take photographs of anyone, or anything – and there were army personnel everywhere, with AK 47's. You couldn't travel after dark. Hotels (such as the Polana, which still exists) were open, but there was usually no water, very little food and often no power. And I remember that most of the windows were empty of glass... A lot of the businesses that were opening up again had generators to guarantee their power supply – otherwise it was a tricky place to do business in!

All land and property was state owned, and routine events like hiring office space were very difficult as a foreigner – almost impossible in fact, without the help of a Mozambican.



Maputo Port in January 1990



The outskirts of Maputo in January 1990

Benguerra itself was a little different – because it was an island. There were a lot of refugees on the island – and the forests were being systematically cut down for fire wood and to build shelters. We arrived just in time to preserve the forested area around where the Lodge now sits. The people on the island were dressed in very old clothes and a lot of the children were naked. The government moved the refugees off the island and said that only the traditional island families could stay, which seemed like a smart thing to do at the time because resources were stretched and everyone was suffering as a result.

The sails on the dhows were made out of food aid bags, plastic and old cloth sewn together. Quite colourful – and an example of the gloriously African tradition of “making a plan”.

Nothing commercial had ever been built on Benguerra. There was a resident population and there were 2 half finished houses on the hills on the north of the island. I think they had been started by Zimbabwean holiday makers before the war. And there was a shack on the extreme north-western corner which sold peri-peri chicken!

We were the first Lodge there. The island was said to have belonged to Joaquim Alves – who built the hotel on Santa Carolina (Paradise Island), and the Donna Anna Hotel at the harbour in Vilanculos. He also built and owned most of Vilanculos and a lot of the buildings there still have his name inscribed on them. His wife, Donna Anna (after whom the hotel was named) was a local woman, and was famous for her homemade “Donna Anna Peri-Peri Sauce”. It was so strong it blew your head off if you weren't used to it! My family travelled there from Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) in the 60's, and I remember staying in the Donna Anna before catching a wooden ferry to Paradise Island (now Santa Carolina). At dinner one evening my younger sister put lots of “tomato sauce” in her soup and then complained bitterly that it tasted horrible. My mother told her that it was her choice to put so much sauce into the soup she must finish it! My poor sister had put the famous peri-peri sauce into her soup and had to eat it all! To this day she won't touch anything hot.

Getting permission to build the Lodge was, frankly, a nightmare. It required many trips to Maputo, many stairs (you couldn't use the lifts, for fear of being stuck in one when the power inevitably failed) and many days of waiting. One classic story is of a meeting Kim had set up with a Minister for a certain time on a

certain day. He duly arrived, hot and tired after all the stair climbing, announced his arrival and was told to sit and wait as the Minister was not there, but would be coming back. After 3 hours, and trying to still be polite, Kim demanded to know when he would be back. “Oh – in 2 days time”, he was told. The Minister was overseas – but would assuredly be back!

The goal posts changed often, and no-one actually knew the regulations – largely because there were none. We were pioneers of a sort – and no-one really knew what to do with our requests. We had a Mozambican colleague who assisted with all the trials and tribulations. Very few people spoke English and so Kim learned Portuguese. It took 18 months to get our permission. Much longer than it took to eventually build the Lodge!

Once we had permission to build, and a concept – then the fun began!



This is what made it all worthwhile...

Once the design had been decided on and drawn up, a complete breakdown of what was required was done, and everything was sourced. We had 14,500 crates to transport from South Africa, as well as 2 Ace-Cat boats (22 ft each), a generator, 2 Landrovers, a tractor and trailer and 400 cubic feet of thatch!! All the furniture, electrics, bedding, crockery, cutlery, kitchen units, light fittings and plumbing etc had to be included – and we only had one shot at getting it all to the island on time. We hired a ship, Anna, in Durban and had a week of co-ordinating everything to arrive at the correct dock, on the correct day. We would meet every morning at breakfast to decide who was going to do what on that day. We would then scatter and do our various chores. One day I had to collect fertilizer (“the one to make the runway grow” was the answer to my question of which one to get!) and had a hair-raising drive back to the dock as I had one bald tire, and was terrified of getting a puncture with the spare under half a ton of fertilizer. Never have I driven so carefully!

On the last morning we were sitting rather smugly, congratulating ourselves on the fine job we’d done, when I glanced out of the window and saw “Mattress House”. Mattresses...we had forgotten them! Thus ensued a collective dash to the 6th floor of said shop, general bouncing on numerous beds, pretend sleeping, tossing and turning before deciding on the perfect mattress – and then my having to persuade an eager salesman that he was about to make a sale of 14 mattresses, but there was an important condition... They had to be suitably packaged, crated and delivered to Dock 14 by 15h00 that afternoon! He opened his mouth to protest, the sweat beading on his brow – but I quickly interrupted, saying that he was obviously extremely efficient and would naturally therefore have no problem with such a simple request, I flourished the cheque, and dashed off to do the next chore. I didn’t dare look behind me in case he was running after me trying to return the cheque. The mattresses arrived, on time.

The 400 cubic feet of that also posed a problem. As you can imagine, it was a HUGE pile of grass. Trucks had been scurrying like busy beetles between Hilton (in the Natal Midlands) and the docks for 2 days, non stop, when the Harbour Master called me and said I had to remove it from the dockside, as it was a potential fire hazard. I crossed my fingers behind my back and told him that it had all been treated with a fire retardant. “All of it?!” he glared at me, I mumbled something looking at my feet and prepared myself to burst into tears if necessary, a long silence followed, and then finally he said: “well as long as that’s the case, you can leave it.” I thanked him politely and rushed out before he changed his mind.



The Anna arrives, fully laden



400 ft³ of thatch takes a while to offload



The temporary camp on the beach

Back on the island, we built a small temporary camp for staff on the site where Chalet #5 now sits. The kitchen was a piece of corrugated iron on 4 poles. We dug a well, built a bird bath (still there), and thus, after quite a difficult birth, Benguerria was born.

It was not long after the ship, Anna, arrived from Durban and anchored in the deep water channel, that the word spread that something was happening. All manner of boats arrived to help with transferring all the cargo to shore. At one point a roll of chicken wire fell into the sea and in no time the locals were diving for it, and managed to bring it up to join the rest of the cargo on the beach. We did have to watch the transfers carefully as such wealth and variety of goods had not been seen for many, many years, and the temptation to acquire it must have been strong.

After that builders, carpenters, metalworkers and anyone connected with the building trade began arriving to look for work. There hadn't been work available for over 15 years – so we had more willing staff than we knew what to do with. Everyone on site was local, and was paid in food and clothing, initially. The only outside help was for the very specialised job of thatching – we brought people in from Zimbabwe for that.



One of 14,365 crates



The building begins



Digging a well for the villagers

We opened 8 months later with 6 rooms and increased that to 9 – which was our capacity for a long time. The current chalets are the original ones built – but they've been modified over the years.

In the beginning all of our business came from word of mouth. And we got lots of Zimbabweans and South Africans coming to us who delighted in being able to return to a country fondly remembered. Our target market was fishermen who knew Moçambique and longed to be fishing there again, and were brave enough to try. The memories of 1000 lb marlin, prawns, peri-peri chicken livers, floury Portuguese rolls, Laurintina beer, endless sunshine, white beaches, and warm water drove many people back to the Archipelago.

All our supplies came from Durban. The logistics were horrific. It's miraculous (or perhaps we're all just very good at what we do) that it all worked. Food and fuel had to be ordered from Durban and put on a passing ship, which weren't all that frequent. On occasion we would have fuel loaded onto the deck of a ship, and when they passed by, the ship would slow down, roll the barrels of fuel off, and we would round them up with the boats, push them onto the beach, roll them up the beach (easier said than done!) and into the storage tanks. Surprisingly we never once ran out of fuel – although we did once get down to 5 litres...

After a year of so of operation, Kim started to fly the provisions to the Island, although we still had to go via Maputo, as Vilanculos airport wouldn't open for another 5 years.



Our lucky Pangolin

This Pangolin was brought to the lodge from the mainland. A delegation of Government officials were on the island to give us a star rating and our license, and she gave birth the night they arrived. A very good omen for the Lodge!

There have been a few changes since then...



The Lodge then...



The Lodge now...



The Chalets then...



The Chalets now...



The Bar then...



The Bar now...