



# An Ode to Mafia Island

A timeless and many-layered place to be

By Robyn-Lee Ghaui

Background: The timeless beauty of dhows moored in the calm waters of Chole Bay

Insert Right: The weird and wonderful underwater world

Subverting those Seychellois-style seaside stereotypes, Mafia doesn't promise those endless icing sugar beaches and turquoise wavelets lapping at the manicured toes of bikinied beauties. Rather, it transcends the surface of a tan and whispers of richer, deeper gems.

As I peel back the layers of Mafia's intrigue, I am ever more enchanted by its multifaceted appeal. I left the island a long time ago, but I find my mind wandering often there. There is a poem about a lover giving her Valentine not a rose, but (wait for it) an onion:

*'it is a moon wrapped in brown paper*

*It promises light*

*Like the careful undressing of love.'*

*From the poem 'Valentine' by Carol Ann Duffy.*

### As Old as the Seas

It's a working island, and people are getting on with their lives wherever you look. What is striking is that the skills they use are notably timeless, and this is best illustrated when it comes to dhows. Mafia is remarkable for its absence of speedboats; its waters are dotted with dhows, ngalawas and dugouts that are as at home today as they would be in a scene from centuries ago.

Some date the dhow's origins as far back as 600 BC. If you take the opportunity to explore Chole, the tiniest island in the archipelago, make your way past crumbling 12th century ruins held together by Strangler Figs, past mango trees alive with Comoro Flying Fox fruit bats, past shy, smiling children and worn mosques, and you will reach the boatyard. Enormous vessels – made to endure decades of rough seas, tonnes of cargo and precious passengers – are crafted entirely by hand, as they have been for centuries. Trees chopped, wood carved and fastidiously shaped, the precision of curvature and joins... and not a machine in sight.

And so it happens that you see someone in a bright new Manchester United t-shirt practising an art as old as human seafaring – and children at the low tide, plucking molluscs from exposed pools, foraging as our hunter-gatherer selves did. That time can do this – rush up on you all at once, and not stay relegated to the past – lends that feeling that it is not a linear entity; past and present are there all in one moment, and millennia are packed into a single breath. This, peeled back, is another layer of Mafia's charm.

### Time and Tide

Back to our onion as 'a moon wrapped in brown paper'... if time and tide wait for no man, Mafia's tide-time is dictated by the moon – but Mafians are so innately attuned to its cadence that they don't get left behind. A full moon brings a fertile swell of spring tides and an abundance of fish; new moon sucks the bay dry, exposing kilometres of sea bed and leaving boats perched askew on the beach. Its rhythmic precision is not dictated by the minute and second hand, nor constrained by clocks and calendar squares.

This feeling of connection to the metronomic moon is a constant awareness of its waxing and waning, and its pull and release of the tides. It engenders a sensation of being governed by forces much greater than oneself; an almost religious feeling, except that it's one of smallness in the impassive face of galaxies, planets, gravity, the cosmos. And yet, at the same time, it feels like a deeply personal gift. I recall a magical moonlit night, fireflies aglow in the mangroves, standing under the stars with not a breath of wind or sound, feeling the incoming tide's warm caress inching up my ankles; my calves; my knees – filling the bay imperceptibly swelling quietly and stealthily, like a night-time secret I was being let in on. »







## What's There to Do?

Aside from standing knee-deep in the sea, oceanic activities abound, and the diving really is world-class spectacular here. The East side of Mafia cocoons Chole Bay, which is the heart of the Mafia Island Marine Park. Immersing in its waters plunges you into an underwater safari extraordinaire: the bay's depths are festooned with colourful corals and teeming with a dazzling plethora of life. To boot, whale sharks frequent the channel between Mafia and the mainland between October and March, and it's possible to snorkel alongside these gentle spotted giants, should you fancy treating yourself to an awe-inspiring experience one day.

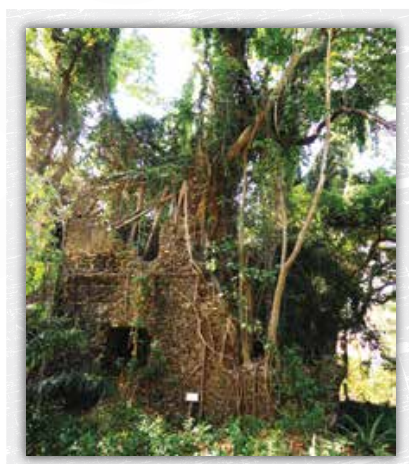
The longer you linger, the more the island offers up: swathes of pristine coastal forest hiding a 19th-century German lighthouse, or – down a channel flanked by lush mangroves and aflutter with birdlife – a secret lagoon containing a unique species of upside-down jellyfish. Inland, a happy pod of pygmy hippos, washed over in an ancient flood, or descendants from a time when Mafia was part of the mainland – or introduced by the Portuguese as a hefty protein source — pick the version you prefer.

The tide recedes to reveal pristine spits of sandbank for picnicking upon, and there's nothing quite like trailing your fingers in warm glass-calm waters as you

sail silently along the bay, watching the sun set fire to the sky as it plunges into the sea.

## Where to Stay?

It generally feels like a barefoot kind of place, and Pole Pole Bungalows distils Mafia down to its essence; it seems an organic function of the island, built all of natural materials and melding harmoniously with its surrounds. Located inside the Marine Park, it preserves and embodies a conservationist ethos – in fact, it feels more like a seaside take on the bush, than a classic beach resort. With just seven gorgeous bungalows perched atop a gentle slope overlooking Chole Bay, it specialises in



warm and friendly service, sumptuously delicious food, and a soul-easing space from which to take in all the isle has to offer.

## Getting There

Between Coastal Aviation and Auric Air, there are several daily flights from Dar es Salaam, taking you over the Rufiji River delta, untouched atolls and over the Kilindoni harbour, perhaps glimpsing some whale sharks from the sky. Unlike Zanzibar, there is no ferry, and only the brave or foolish will alight the cargo dhows from Kibiti.

## Who to Contact

**Pole Pole Bungalows**

Pole Pole can arrange your flights to and from Mafia Island, as well as a seamless stay once you touch down in Mafia; don't forget to ask about their excellent offers for East African residents. [www.polepole.com](http://www.polepole.com)

## Mafia Island Diving

For all your excursions and activities, underwater and above, this fabulous and friendly team has you covered. [www.mafiadiving.com](http://www.mafiadiving.com)

Top: PolePole Bungalows  
Top Insert: A colourful school of fish  
Below: Strangler figs reclaiming ruins