

**Travel**

# Off the Zanzibar coast, Chumbe Island champions marine conservation

By **Paige McClanahan** February 19, 2015

At first, the island was just a blur on the horizon; a low, gray smudge on which I fixed my gaze in the hopes of keeping myself from losing my breakfast over the side of the boat. The morning mist had turned to rain, and the steely blue swells outside our wooden vessel were getting bigger as we cruised away from Zanzibar, the island from which we were venturing even further afield.

We were heading toward Chumbe, a sliver of coral reef and jungle that sits in the Indian Ocean about 20 miles off the coast of mainland Tanzania. The island has no roads, no power lines and fewer than a dozen buildings; it covers an area of 54 acres, about one-third the size of Washington, D.C.'s Mall. But, small as it may be, Chumbe is breaking ground in marine conservation. The island was going to be our home for the next three days, and I (and my stomach) couldn't wait to get there.

By the time our guide turned off the boat's engine, the sun had emerged and the ocean had transformed into a peaceful lagoon that shimmered a miraculous shade of turquoise. Following the half-dozen other passengers off the boat, my husband and I jumped into knee-deep water and waded the few yards to the shore, taking care not to step on the shells that littered the sand.

And there we were: Chumbe, said to be the world's first privately managed marine protected area and still the only one in Africa. Being private, Chumbe doesn't get any government money; its conservation work is funded by the visitors, like us, who come to the island to relax and get a close-up look at one of the most pristine coral reefs in East Africa.

All of this we learned during our first briefing with members of Chumbe's staff, just after we got off the boat. We and the other guests — some of whom were visiting for the day, others, like us, overnight — piled onto brightly colored sofas on the veranda of Chumbe's main building, a high-ceilinged structure made of local timber and coconut leaves that serves as restaurant, visitors center and head office.

In line with its status as a conservation area, Chumbe has some strict rules, we were told. A maximum of 16 guests are allowed on the island at any time. Fishing and scuba diving are both forbidden, as is shell collecting, which I admit I was slightly disappointed to hear. But we were actively encouraged to explore the reef the old fashioned way: with flippers and a snorkel.

And so we did — at least half a dozen times during our stay. On our first venture into the water, I stuck close to our guide, who introduced himself as Matata, since I figured he would know where to find everything good. But I didn't need any guidance, it turned out.

As soon as I stuck my head underwater, I was face to face with a maze of corals that were branching, ballooning, or just waving in the gentle current. It felt like I was swimming through an underwater botanical garden, with the coral flowers blooming salmon pink, mustard yellow, a deep maroon. And then there were the fish. Schools of glimmering damselfish hung lazily in the water — so tame that I could almost swim into them. Matata pointed out sea cucumbers, angelfish, sea urchins and an octopus, and I spotted a neon-flecked stingray gliding along the seafloor. It was another world, and I was happily lost in it, the water so warm I could have spent hours exploring.

At one point, a sharp tap on my shoulder made me jump. I turned to see Matata jabbing his finger into the hazy blue distance. I squinted through my snorkel mask but saw only light and shadow.

“Did you see it?” he said, resurfacing with a splutter a moment later. “The shark! It was just over there.”

It was a blacktip reef shark, Matata later explained, a species that is apparently fairly common along the East African coast. He assured me that the sharks didn’t pose a threat to humans. But still, the idea of sharing the water with such a predator gave me the shivers.

It didn’t scare us away, though; we were back for more later in the afternoon. There was just so much to see.

Indeed, the 74-acre protected area is home to more than 400 species of fish and 200 species of hard coral — 90 percent of the marine biodiversity that can be found in all of East Africa. The managers of Chumbe have worked hard to protect their little patch of ocean, and for good reason.

In the waters around nearby Zanzibar, overfishing and booming tourist numbers are causing long-term damage to fragile marine ecosystems. Globally, climate change — which is increasing the acidity of the oceans, as well as the temperature — is taking an enormous toll on coral reefs and the species that inhabit them.

“People don’t talk about pristine reefs anymore because there are hardly any left,” Ulli Kloiber, Chumbe’s manager of conservation and education, told me during a chat on the veranda of the main building.

The waters around Chumbe were still relatively untouched when the protected area was established in the mid-’90s, Kloiber explained. The Tanzanian military had owned the island for a time but hadn’t made much use of it. Otherwise, Chumbe had simply been a stop-off point for fishermen trolling the waters between the mainland and Zanzibar, a semiautonomous region of Tanzania; the island’s lack of fresh water kept away any potential long-term inhabitants. The only buildings were a lighthouse and a small mosque that had been built by British colonizers around the turn of the 20th century.

So setting up the conservation area was relatively straightforward, Kloiber told me — the island was pretty much empty. Today, Chumbe’s educational and conservation activities are managed by Chumbe Island Coral Park Ltd., a not-for-profit company known as CHICOP that’s owned by a German woman named Sibylle Riedmiller. She was the one who arranged for the land and its surrounding waters to be leased from the government of Zanzibar; Riedmiller is still the owner of CHICOP, although she is no longer based on the island.

Riedmiller and her staff started off by putting rangers on the island and working with local fishing communities to

educate them about the reef and its inhabitants. They soon started to reach out to local high schools, inviting students to the island at no cost to learn about the reef, and experience it firsthand. Both of those outreach programs are still active, with all of the work funded by tourists' visits.

“At the beginning, of course, it was quite tough, because the fishing communities had no idea what a marine protected area was or what the benefits [of conservation] were,” said Kloiber, adding that there isn't even a word for “coral” in the local language of Swahili.

Chumbe's staff also act as watchdogs, reporting any fishing to the authorities in Zanzibar, and offenders are either fined or forced to hand over their fishing gear. They still spot poachers about four or five times each year, Kloiber tells me, but that's much less frequent than it used to be.

Indeed, after two decades of conservation work, Chumbe's reef is now one of the best protected in the region. Species like sea urchins and parrotfish have been fished out of other reefs in the area, but they're still thriving in the waters around Chumbe.

But there's more to the island than just the reef, as we were happy to discover on the second day of our visit. Swapping our flippers for sandals, we took a guided walk through the island's interior. Chumbe is covered in dense forest that sits on a layer of jagged, fossilized coral, known as “coral rag.” The forest is home to 75 tree species, including the storied African baobab, one of which soars majestically above the otherwise low canopy. We learned about local fauna, including a (nonvenomous) lime-green tree snake and the 16-inch coconut crab, the world's largest land-dwelling arthropod.

In the evenings, we wandered back to our seaside bungalow to relax and shower before dinner, a generous buffet heavy on seafood and spices. Shaped like a giant, upside-down clam and constructed of the same local timber and coconut leaves as the main building, our little house was straight out of “Swiss Family Robinson.” Like everything else on the island, Chumbe's bungalows — which use only solar power, have pit latrines and harvest rainwater for the showers and sink — were designed to minimize any environmental impacts. It seemed perfectly fitting that we shared our little jungle cottage with a clutch of hermit crabs that had set up house under the front steps.

It's all in keeping with what Kloiber describes as a “green line” that runs through everything that's done on Chumbe — the fundamental commitment to conservation that underlies how the project was designed and how it continues to be run. Conservation is their focus, but tourism is their lifeblood, Kloiber tells me.

“The engines of the project are really the guests,” Kloiber says. “As long as the eco-tourism is working, it's a self-sustaining project.”

*Paige McClanahan is a writer based in Nairobi.*

## IF YOU GO

### Where to stay

**Chumbe Island Coral Park**

Chukwani Road

### **Chumbe Island, Zanzibar**

011-255-242-231-040

[www.chumbeisland.com](http://www.chumbeisland.com)

Eco-bungalows, Afro-Indian cuisine, and snorkeling galore. Rooms from \$260 per person per night, including all meals, activities, and the boat ride to and from Zanzibar.

### **Protea Hotel Mbweni Ruins**

Plot number 143/93, Mbweni St.

Kiembe Samakie, Zanzibar

011-255-242-235-478

[www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/znmr-protea-hotel-mbweni-ruins](http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/znmr-protea-hotel-mbweni-ruins)

A quick drive from Zanzibar International Airport airport, this friendly and atmospheric hotel is where you catch the boat to Chumbe. Rooms from \$188 (double occupancy), including buffet breakfast.

## **Information**

For more about Chumbe, including the island's ecology and history, visit [www.chumbeisland.com](http://www.chumbeisland.com). For tourism information about Zanzibar, visit [zanzibar.net](http://zanzibar.net).

— P.M.

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