

SOMETHING TO *walk* ABOUT

EUGENE YIGA TAKES A HIKE TO THE CENTRE
OF AN ISLAND TO DISCOVER THE BENEFITS
OF SLOWING DOWN



The most popular excursion for our free day on the *MSC Opera* cruise is to relax on the beach. But that's not what I have in mind. I didn't come all the way from Cape Town to Portuguese Island to do nothing but sit in the sand; I came here for an adventure. And, like all good journeys, mine begins with a single step.

It's a grey day in Durban and the dull skies are in stark contrast to the lush green of KwaZulu-Natal's rolling hills. The airplane shell on the side of the runway makes me feel like we've landed in the Amazon jungle.

"Please remain in your seats, with your seatbelts fastened, until the aircraft comes to a complete stop," the Mango Airlines cabin attendant says at the end of the flight. Dozens of passengers stand up and rummage for their bags.

I stay in my seat and shake my head. Why do people always do that? Don't they know we'll all be waiting at the luggage carousel? Just like so many drivers racing toward a red traffic light, it all feels pointless.

But perhaps they're all hurrying up to slow down. After all, I suspect many of them are here for the same reason I am: to board the *MSC Opera* for a three-night trip to Portuguese Island, a protected marine reserve in Mozambique which the cruising company has leased for a five-year term.

"Leper colony, group two!" the excursion guide announces. "Please take a seat and we'll call you when it's your turn." Hearing her say this makes me feel like she's banishing me to an uninhabited island. Then again, given the tour I signed up for, that's not far from the truth.

It's a long wait before we board a small boat, bobbing up and down in contrast to the stability of the 60 000-tonne ship. And it's another long trip to Portuguese Island, with the motor churning up the Indian Ocean at a constant pace; the shore so close, yet so far away.

It feels good to set foot on solid ground, at which point we meet our local guide. His name is Albert Mapanga and



it turns out we have a few things in common, other than his yellow Bafana Bafana T-shirt and my lack of knowledge when it comes to all things sport. Like me, he's 28. Like me, he has a brother and two sisters. But it seems that's where the similarities end. He tells me he's divorced and has a six-year-old son, whom he's fortunate enough to see every day.

Perhaps that's not surprising, given that he lives on Inhaca, a nearby island that only 6 000 people call home. "We have everything there," he says with pride. "Restaurants, bars, shops. And it's a nice place to live. Very quiet. Everyone knows each other and we're all friends. There's no stealing and no crime."

His home language is Shangaan, but he sounds like he could be from Brazil.

"Portuguese, I learn from school," he says, explaining his accent. "English, I learn from tourists!"

Albert tells me he's been leading tours since he was 13. For many of the villagers, it's one of the few ways to survive. But even though MSC Cruises has brought more than 200 000 tourists to Mozambique's shores over the last three years, it's not easy to make a living. "It's very expensive here," he says as we walk past vendors on the beach, eager in their attempts to sell their souvenirs. "They come from Maputo and they make everything double the price."

I stop to admire some paintings, only to have the artist tell me it's R10 to take a photograph. I move along to buy my trinkets from a friendlier man instead.

But there's not much time for haggling

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Portuguese Island is an uninhabited nature reserve that MSC Cruises has leased and developed into the perfect spot for a tropical getaway

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A 300-year-old church still stands at the centre of the island, a former leper colony; Traders at Portuguese Origins Market sell a variety of arts, crafts and other souvenirs; A view from the beaches of Portuguese Island; The cruise ship docks in the middle of the Indian Ocean and small motorboats transport passengers to the island.

OPPOSITE: The walk to the centre of the island requires reasonable fitness and kids who won't get bored after an hour and a half



The island's dense vegetation offers us a break from the sun, but not from the walking; there's still a long way to go. We crouch down to avoid branches. But I'm so busy looking at my feet (strange creatures may be lurking on the ground!) that I fail to watch my head. Albert breaks off dead twigs so that no one else walks into a low tree.

"It's like we're on a hunt for buried treasure," I say as we continue to make our way through the bush. "Who knows

"Winter is June to July and about 28 degrees," he says. "Summer is the rest of the year and up to 40 degrees." He shrugs. "But I've lived here all my life. I'm used to it." Thank goodness I brought some water, unlike anyone else in the group. If only I'd brought a hat, too.

"We've definitely walked off breakfast," one man says to his wife. "We'll come back a kilogramme lighter. Just think of this as gym." But all I can think of right now is how much I'd like a cold beer. And I don't



over mementos. Our formal walk to the centre of the island is about to begin. At 6.2 kilometres, we're told that a trip all the way around would take about two and a half hours. "I could tick it off my bucket list," I say to a couple in the group. "Although I'd have to put it on my bucket list first."

Albert encourages us to wear shoes, but one woman, with a husband and two young boys, isn't interested in his advice. "We're from Durban," she snaps. "We don't wear shoes." It's not long before she regrets her words. First, one of her sons begins to moan when the soft beach sand becomes the rough terrain of hard shells and giant thorns. Then she gets a cramp in her leg and has to explain to her other son what a cramp is. "It means pain!" she snaps again, no doubt making things worse.

what we'll find?" Right on cue, we reach the 300-year-old church we came to see. It's remarkable to find it still standing so long after the island stopped being a leper colony.

But while half the group finds it fascinating and takes pictures of this ancient relic, grumpy mom is ready to begin the walk back. And what a strenuous walk it turns out to be! The heat waves are visible, so much so that the ship looks like a mirage. "Hold still!" the angry mother says as she smothers her restless boys in another layer of sunblock. "Unless you want to burn?"

The other couple and I do our best to ignore them. Instead, we ask Albert about the weather, which is even hotter and more humid than Durban on a bad day.

even drink beer at all!

It takes a while, but our walk comes to an end 90 minutes after it began. We stroll through the ocean to cool our aching legs. Then we take our seats at the beach bar and enjoy a cold cider while the ship's chefs prepare our braai. Unlike all the restless people eager to get off the plane, I've no plans to leave my seat anytime soon! 🗨️

Eugene Yiga was a guest of Mango Airlines and MSC Cruises, the largest privately owned cruising company in the world (more than 1.5 million passengers per year). The next South African season on the extended and refurbished MSC Sinfonia runs from November 2015 to May 2016 and offers early booking discounts of up to 50%. Visit www.msccruises.co.za for more details.