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Palm Trees & Shark Fin Soup

When Joaquim Cunibane started catching sharks off the coast of Mozambique in 2009, he thought he'd waded into a win-win situation. The annual fish-catch had been getting poorer, and all of a sudden he and his village suddenly had an alternative income. They were getting paid for catching sharks and delivering their fins to a businessman from Maputo, and eating the meat as a bonus.

They had no idea that the fins were going to China. In fact when Joaquim learnt that the fins were intended to feature in a bowl of soup he was consumed by hysterical chuckles.

But that's about where the humour stopped. For himself, his family and the village, the health implications of this new protein source were severe - sharks, due to their oily nature, become a repository for methyl mercury, storing it in their livers. Through this sudden change in diet, Joaquim and his fellow subsistence villagers were absorbing this heavy metal in constant doses (it has profoundly negative effects on pregnant women and children).

As regards the bigger picture, they were unwitting witnesses to a global phenomenon - China's rise as an economic power and the associated predilection for shark fin soup. A situation in which 70-80 million sharks are wiped out annually around the globe. Just for their fins.

Of course, the *why* is important. Consuming a US\$35 bowl of shark fin soup allows the newly rich in China and parts of Asia to announce their arrival on the economic scene in the world of the *nouveau riche*. Much like merchant-types have done forever, whether middle-ages Amsterdam or 21st century South Africa.



From tiny rowing boats these villagers catch hammerhead and zambezi sharks





“The shark fin story was the reason we were in Mozambique.”

This story, this slaughter of sharks, was the reason we were here. It's a country I first made friends with back in 1991, when the civil war was still spluttering in fits and starts, with 14 year-olds manning roadblocks, land-mines a dime-a-dozen in the countryside and the iconic Polana hotel was about to be re-opened.

20 years on and it's a new challenge. While I struggle to get to grips with the image of sharks being butchered for a small triangle of flesh and cartilage, I must absorb the fact that - kilometre by kilometre - Mozambique is developing. This is the Africa beyond South, where tourists familiar with Cape Town and safari in Botswana start their experience of the real thing.

Landing at the small Inhambane airport on a flight from Johannesburg, I was met by Dave, the Liverpool-born, Brazilian raised son of a clergyman who first discovered the shark fishermen. He had got to know Joaquim, and introduced me to his story, which takes place a couple hours up the coast.

The nearest accommodation is a lodge called Pomene, and getting there was a refresher on Mozambican roads. Largely impassable 20 years back due thanks to potholes and guns, the national coastal road is now a dream piece of tarmac, until the dirt-road turning to the left, which at times demands 4x4 capability.

And then suddenly you're on a palm-fringed beach next to an estuary, with waves rolling in from the east and reed huts on stilts taking shelter among the casuarina trees. Arriving in the dark and leaving early morning, I didn't get much chance to experience Pomene.



But I encountered the best piece of fish (*dorado in garlic butter*) I've had in 20 years, I did sleep well, and the staff were gracious and welcoming.

The next night, with most of the shoot completed, we slept in Tofu, a few hours south. While the South African-owned accommodation was thoroughly unremarkable, owned and run by throwbacks to another, ugly time in South Africa's history, the location itself was rather nice.

A beautiful beach in a bay of gorgeous curves, Tofu has long been known for its significant population of whale sharks and manta rays. Recent additions are the arts and craft stalls and little eateries at the top of the beach.

I didn't get to dive, let alone swim or ask for prawns. Sometimes that's the price of working to a tight deadline. And thanks to Dave, Joaquim and his village are no longer eating shark.

