

## THE SEDUCTIVE ISLE OF ZANZIBAR

It was hot. 35 degrees actually, with humidity of at least 500%, or so it felt. The wind rustled softly in the palms. The powder-soft sand shone whitely under a blazing sun, and beyond that the aquamarine sea tumbled gently against the reef. I sipped from my coconut that some children had hauled down from a tree (for a small fee) and watched as Fatima inscribed sinuous curves and curliques on the back of my hand with a shred of palm frond. She was painting my skin with henna, an ancient custom made popular by the Indians centuries ago.

Zanzibar is a mish-mash of ancient cultures. First inhabited by Bantu-speaking peoples, the slave-trading Arabs built flat-topped, intricately carved, square doored edifices, while the Indians that settled there later, built structures with elaborate spiked doors, constructed to repel elephants. Zanzibar is famous for its carved wooden doors and any ramble through ancient Stone Town, on the west of the island, will enthral the visitor with more than 500 unique examples of this exquisite artform. Often built before the rest of the house, the doors served as a symbol of wealth and status.

But Stone Town is not all about doors. The vibrant fish and vegetable markets bustle with commerce. Violently coloured mounds of spices vie for attention with scarlet tomatoes, emerald peppers and golden bananas. The senses are bombarded with a heady mixture of freshly caught fish, exotic cloves and the nearest sewer. Not for the faint-hearted, the crowds ebb and sway around towering baskets of live chickens balanced precariously on scooters that toot their horns incessantly to warn the masses of their progress. It is possible to undertake a spice tour while visiting Zanzibar and fascinating to see the different spices in their raw form, spirals of vanilla pods, multi-coloured chillies, fat nutmegs and the ubiquitous cloves. The air is redolent with their fragrance and children weave small baskets for you to carry samples of each product. After the visit you enjoy a local meal, spread out on mats in an open *banda*. Flavoured with lemongrass and coconut milk the fare is fit for an Omani princess.

In the quieter alleys, old men play *bao* on the *barazas* (stone benches facing the street) of the buildings. Stone Town is a maze of narrow alleyways. Many of the several-storey houses and shops are crumbling with age and electricity cables are strung between them. No cars pass through these streets. Chattering Muslim women scuttle past, swathed from head to foot in black fabric, almond eyes peering around for a bargain.

Two places you have to visit in Stone Town are the House of Wonders – “Beit el-Ajaib” and the Old Slave Market. Built in 1883 by the Sultan Bargash, the House of Wonders boasts the largest carved doors in East Africa. It was the first building in Zanzibar to enjoy the luxuries of running water, electricity and a three-floor lift, hence its name, as the local populace were overawed by these striking innovations. The Old Slave Market is now an Anglican Cathedral with some of the most beautiful stained glass windows I have ever seen. Now inhabited by ghosts, the miserable slave holding cells next door are shocking to comprehend. Tiny stone prisons

with slits for windows, these ten by ten metre cells held up to eighty women and children. Inside the Cathedral stands a log, the remnants of a tree to which the slave men were tied and flogged to see which were the fittest and healthiest. Slaves from as far afield as Malawi and the Congo passed through this market, on their way to Oman and the plantations of Mauritius. With the advent of the first missionaries to East Africa, this abhorrent practice was eventually abolished.

Another remnant of the Sultan Bargash are the Mahurubi Ruins. Constructed in 1882 to house his harem of 99 women, the opulence of this structure can only be wondered at. Its baths are claustrophobic affairs, small rooms that must have been filled with steam and slaves. Toilets had been built in rows, a hole in the ground with two bricks on either side, hot, damp rooms now inhabited by scores of bats.

Fatima inscribed an intricate floral flourish on my thumb. "Mango, mango" shouted a local boy, smiling. The sun was sinking in the sky, its long rays dropping behind the palm fronds. The colour of the sea deepened to turquoise. The coral rag buildings of the lodge behind me took on a tangerine glow. The tide was returning from the reef. Fishing outriggers were slowly paddling back to shore and in the distance the sail of a dhow flashed on the horizon.

The previous day I had visited Nungwi, the dhow building capital of Zanzibar. Situated on the northernmost tip of the island, Nungwi is a sprawling village of white beaches and nearby reefs for snorkeling. Unfortunately overpopulated by ugly tourist lodges and fancy hotels, the village itself remains untouched by the march of progress. All along the beachfront lie the skeletons of half constructed dhows. Fascinating to watch, a small group of men slog away in the burning sun for one month to complete the structure. Building is executed with old-fashioned tools such as handheld adze. Planks are bent over fire and the dhows are caulked using fluff from the kapok tree.

Although indigenous wood is used for the dhows a small patch of forest remains on Zanzibar. The Jozani Forest is home to a unique sub-species of the red colobus monkey. I had found a group of them around lunchtime, taking a siesta in a large breadfruit tree. Their backs shone rufous in the sun and babies clung to their mothers' distended stomachs. I was told that these monkeys scavenge charcoal from nearby village cooking fires to neutralize the tannins in their diet.

I watched lazily as an outrigger swept into shore. Its crew leapt onto the sand dragging heavy baskets loaded with fish. Two men staggered under the weight of a giant kingfish, its gills glowing red in the setting sun. Owners of the nearby lodge strode down the beach to barter with the fishermen for their catch. Silvery barracuda glinted from the baskets. One or two fish I had never seen before were hauled out. Brightly coloured reef fish that I had noticed while snorkeling at Kizimkazi lay like flowers on the sand.

To snorkel off Zanzibar is a must. After rising early one day we had driven to the south of the island and boarded a small boat. The sea was flat and still as a mirror. Clusters of sea urchins lurked in the shallows and seagulls squawked overhead. Suddenly dolphins burst from the surface of the water, racing the boat. The sea was alive with them, diving in and out of the small waves. We splashed over the side and immediately another world opened up. Large purple brain coral squatted on the sea floor. Blue starfish thirty centimeters in diameter lay draped over rocks. A myriad of tiny angel fish darted to and fro while larger, braver fish peered into my mask. The visibility seemed endless and the water was warm as soup. I wished I could stay forever.

Interrupted from my reverie by Fatima's "Finished", I looked down at her masterpiece on my hand. The henna had dried black and the intricate swirls and flourishes followed the contours of my fingers. The beach was darkening and all the children had gone to their homes in the nearby village of Paje. A cool breeze shifted the palm fronds. A blood red moon appeared over the rim of the horizon, floating clear of a tuft of cloud. Faint strains of *taarab* music filtered through the trees. The people, the buildings, the history, the music, the beaches, the spices – it was almost too much for the senses. I had been seduced by the sensuous isle of Zanzibar.

### **VISITOR'S INFORMATION**

Zanzibar is predominantly a Muslim island so legs and arms should be covered when traveling around Stone Town. Long shorts and T-shirts are acceptable, while a kikoi is a useful piece of clothing that can be worn as a skirt or used as a towel on the beach. Most people on the island are quite relaxed about tourists but respect for their culture should be maintained at all times. The drinking of alcohol in public places is a definite no-no and always ask permission if you may take photographs before snapping away. A long lens is useful when getting those candid people shots in Stone Town. Most of the beach resorts are very cosmopolitan and can become over crowded in the high season (Dec – March). Zanzibar is in a malaria area so consult your doctor regarding prophylactics. Snorkelling and diving are great and gear can be obtained from the various centres for a small fee. There is a wide range of accommodation to suit all pockets and your travel agent should be able to get you a good package deal but it is also fun to do it on your own. Here are some useful websites for researching the area: [www.exoticvacations.co.za](http://www.exoticvacations.co.za), [www.getawaytravel.co.za](http://www.getawaytravel.co.za), [www.encounterzanzibar.com](http://www.encounterzanzibar.com), [www.zanzibar.net](http://www.zanzibar.net) and [www.pajebynight.net/](http://www.pajebynight.net/)

### **List of Captions:**

1. The Anglican Cathedral, sited over the Old Slave Market.
2. Fruit and vegetables of all shapes and sizes can be found at the market in Stone Town.
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4. The spikes on this door point to its Indian origin. The spikes were to repel elephants.
5. A view over Stone Town, the amphitheatre and the harbour from the top of the House of Wonders.
6. A typical tropical island beach on Zanzibar's east coast.
7. This subspecies of the red colobus monkey is unique to Zanzibar.

8. The red colobus monkey was preserved on Zanzibar island as it was thought to smell bad and people were not keen to keep them as pets.
9. Spices drying in the sun.
10. Daily tours to see the dolphins are available from Kizimkazi.
11. Dolphins frolic in the waves and although they seem unperturbed by the tourists, with the number of visitors increasing this practice may become unsustainable.
12. A traditional dhow.
13. This young hawksbill turtle was rescued from a fisherman's net and will remain at this conservation facility for young and injured turtles until it is old enough to be returned to the sea.
14. The Mahurubi Palace is where the Sultan Bargash kept his ninety-nine strong harem.
15. The makings of a dhow.
16. Traditional tools are still used in dhow making.
17. A swaying palm – synonymous with Zanzibar's idyllic beaches.
18. The day's catch.
19. Fishing boats at sunrise off Zanzibar's east coast.
20. A fishing boat returns after a night's fishing.