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Zanzibar

WHITE BEACHES, AN EXOTIC PAST AND A WHIFF OF CLOVES COMBINE TO MAKE ZANZIBAR THE MOST COLOURFUL OF AFRICAN ESCAPES. STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATE AYRTON





SIX DEGREES SOUTH of the equator, just off the east African coast, lies Zanzibar, an archipelago surrounded by clear green waters. These are mythical islands, abounding with tales of witchcraft, pirates and princesses. For centuries they have engendered a special fascination for those who suffer from wanderlust, with Unguja, the main island of Zanzibar, a favourite stopping point for navigators, traders and empire builders.

Unguja was a centre for spice and slave trades in the 19th century – the reigning sultan had almost total control of slave trafficking on the Indian Ocean and deep into the African interior – making it one of the richest islands in the region. Today, as part of the United Republic of Tanzania, Zanzibar relies more on tourism than trade, offering even the most seasoned traveller a unique opportunity to explore an exotic landscape and a cultural heritage as rich as its fertile soil.

Stone Town is the cultural centre of Zanzibar. This remarkable town remains much the same as it was 140 years ago when European explorers like Burton and Speke stayed here before embarking on their epic journeys into *terra incognita*. In narrow sunlit alleyways Arab, Indian and African vendors hawk their wares as children and bicycles weave in and out of the pedestrian traffic, the sweet scent of cloves wafting in the air like incense.

Stone Town is a walking city, a labyrinth of passageways in which it is easy to lose yourself, but it is from the street that you get the best view of life here. Around every corner is a surprise, be it a particularly beautiful pair of brass-studded, ornately carved

doors or a group of men huddling intently over a game of *bao*, a version of backgammon that is the island's favourite pastime.

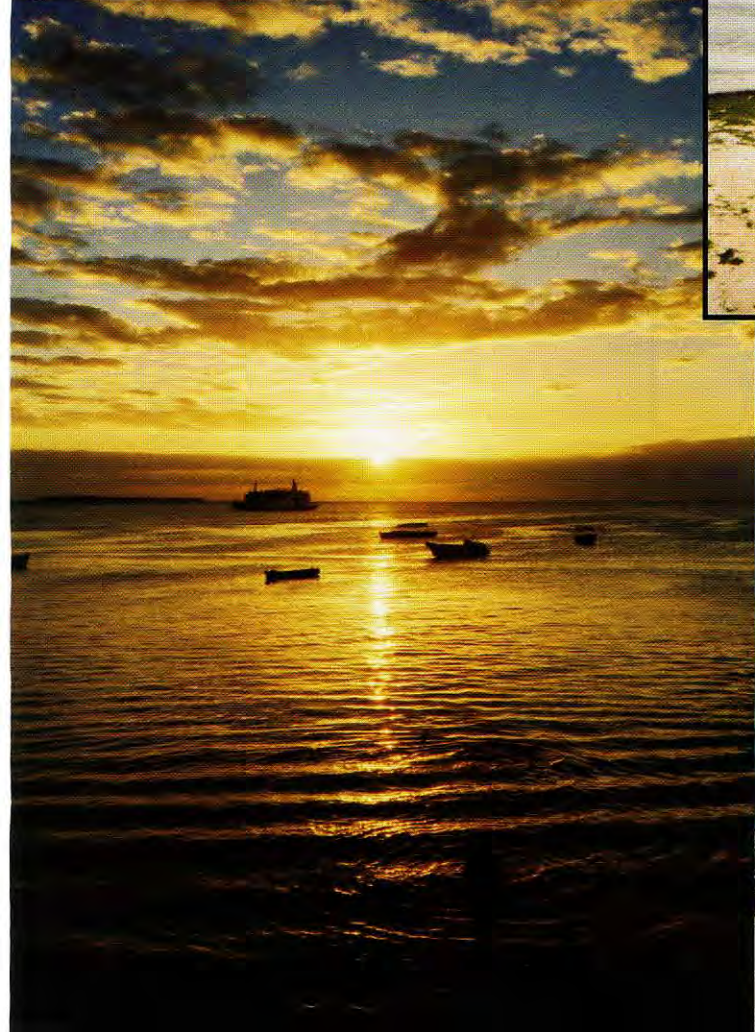
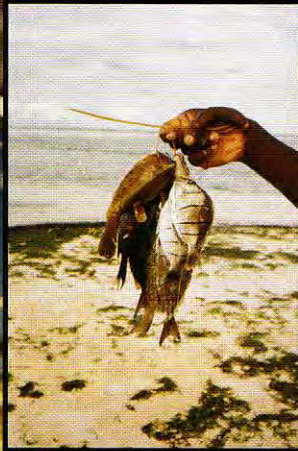
In the late afternoon children converge on the crumbling seawall of the Forodhani Gardens to hurl themselves into the water in an impressive display of aquatic gymnastics, their dark skin bathed in a golden light from the setting sun. Nearby, some of the elders stand wistfully, in a quieter, more reflective mood, at the water's edge watching the sun go down. One senses a remembrance of things past.

Sultans would mark the close of the day by ceremoniously lowering the flag and firing a 21-gun salute from the steps of the palace. Now, as the muezzin calls the faithful to prayers, Emerson Skeens marks the end of the day with a sunset ceremony of his own: a double gin and tonic on the terrace of his landmark Emerson and Green hotel. The Tower Top Restaurant, with its breathtaking, panoramic views across the city's rooftops and minarets, is one of the hottest tickets in town. Guests can lie on huge *kitenge* wax-print cushions spread out on a fine Persian carpet beneath a billowing silk canopy and imagine they are stepping into a tale straight out of the *Arabian Nights*.

When I arrive for dinner, Skeens, who holds court here on most nights, looks every bit as royal as a sultan in his signature brightly coloured robes and embroidered cap.

Born in Virginia, Skeens first visited Zanzibar some 12 years ago and instantly fell in love with the island and its people. "Most places have been so globalised that there is nothing left of the

Previous pages, left, day beds at Ras Nungwi Beach Hotel. Right, clockwise from top left, on the beach in Stone Town. Ruins at Mweni. Diving off the seawall at the Forodhani Gardens in Stone Town. Palm frond, Kidichi Spice and Fruit Farm. The Parajani fruit and vegetable market on Creek Road, Stone Town. The old gas lighthouse at Chumbe Island. This page, clockwise from top left, latticed window, Serena Inn, Stone Town. The Maruhubi palace ruins just outside of Stone Town. Approaching Chumbe Island Coral Park. Sunset, Forodhani Gardens. Catch of the day at Matemwe Beach. Opposite, the Palace Museum (Beit al-Sahel).



a fusion of cultures



This page, clockwise from top left, ornate balcony, the Old Dispensary (now the Stone Town Cultural Centre). Day beds at Mnemba Island Lodge. On the beach at Nungwi, a village at the northernmost tip of Unguja. A suite at the Materniwe Bungalows, south-east of Nungwi. Mnemba Island beach. Starfish, Chumbe Island Coral Park. **Opposite**, sunset at the Tower Top Restaurant, Emerson and Green Hotel, Stone Town.



original and the aboriginal," Skeens rails. "At least here there is a chance to save it and to savour it."

Since the relatively recent advent of organised tourism in Zanzibar, a number of socially and environmentally conscious hotels have sprung up around the islands to offer visitors a chance to enjoy first-class accommodation, food and service without the guilt that frequently accompanies a trip to a third-world country. Zanzibar is still a poor country after all, where the average wage is around \$60 a month and the difference between the haves and have-nots can be glaring.

The most environmentally friendly accommodation in Zanzibar is in the privately managed Chumbe Island Coral Park. Sibylle Riedmiller, a German marine scientist who campaigned for years to save the reef, has turned the island into a shining example of eco-tourism, education and conservation. Up to 12 people can sleep in six open huts that look like miniature, thatched versions of the Sydney Opera House: the income from this operation finances the island's conservation management and education programs.

Off the northern tip of the other side of Unguja, at the very top end of the market, is Mnemba Island Lodge. Here you pay for the privilege of your own private island and the sheer joy of nature at its simplest. Guests like Bill Gates and Naomi Campbell come here to live in barefoot luxury and sleep in ocean-facing bungalows hand-woven from traditional Zanzibari palm matting.

Shaped like a heart and surrounded by a coral reef, the island is popular with the honeymoon crowd who appreciate the privacy and pure romance of their own fantasy island getaway. If \$1140 a night seems a bit steep, Matemwe Bungalows across the way on the mainland is an excellent alternative.

In Pemba, 80 kilometres off the north-east shore of Unguja, we revelled in a beach safari at Fundu Lagoon, a stunning achievement in eco-friendly architecture built by a trio of mad Brits in the middle of absolutely nowhere. At night we slept in thatched tents on stilts overlooking the sea and waited for the promised wild animals to appear, but the only animals we ever came across were the ones dancing till dawn on the ultra-cool jetty bar. No wonder that notorious pirate Captain Kidd had a hideout here in the 17th century and buried his treasure on nearby Misali Island!

These islands have an extraordinary history: in just under 150 years the Zanzibari people have witnessed the end of slavery, the rise and fall of an empire, the demise of the lucrative spice trade, and survived not only two revolutions but long periods of colonialism and Marxism. Over time, an unusual mixture of Bantu, Hindu, Muslim, European and Arab blood has produced a friendly and tolerant society, and a distinctive melting pot. This fusion of cultures has influenced everything from music and art to food and architecture: Zanzibar is called the Spice Islands not only for its famous cloves. 🌿



Where the Trade Winds meet

TRAVEL NOTES

Getting to Zanzibar South African Airways (1800 221 699, 1800 099 281 in Western Australia; www.flysaa.com) flies from Sydney and Perth to Nairobi via Johannesburg. Return fares ex east coast from \$2276, ex Perth from \$2100. Kenya Airways (254 2 3282 2000; www.kenya-airways.com) flies from Nairobi to Zanzibar. Return fares from \$340. Visitors require a visa for Tanzania: call the Tanzanian Consulate in Australia on (02) 9331 4324 in NSW/Tasmania/ACT, (03) 9667 0243 in Victoria/SA, or (08) 9221 0033 in WA/NT/Queensland; www.tanzaniaconsul.com.

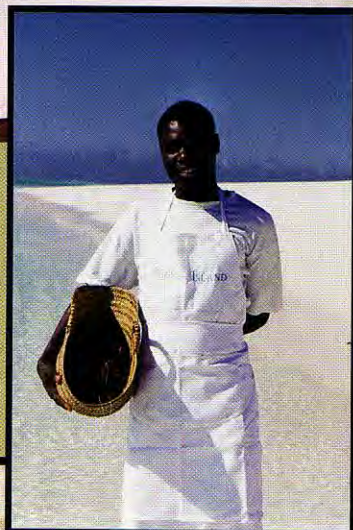
Where to stay Emerson and Green hotel, 236 Hurumzi Street, Stone Town, 255 4747 423 266; www.zanzibar.org/emegre. \$275 per room. Chumbe Island Coral Park, 255 24 223 1040; www.chumbeisland.com. \$275–365 per person, per night. The Matemwe Bungalows, 255 747 425 788; www.matemwe.com. Rates start from \$155–275 per person, twin share. Mnemba Island Lodge, 255 24 223 3110; www.ccafrica.com. \$1140 per person, per night. Fundu Lagoon, 255 24 223 2926; www.fundulagoon.com. Double bungalows are \$520–575 per person, per night. Also in Zanzibar: Salomé's Garden (booking centre in Italy: 39 051 234 974; www.zanzibar-holiday.com) in Bububu, just 20 minutes out of Stone Town, is a guesthouse that offers elegant, traditional accommodation amid the ruins of an old sugar plantation. Rates start at \$230 per double room or \$820–1455 a day for the whole four-bedroom house.

Where to eat In Stone Town, the best places for food and ambience are the Dhow Restaurant (255 24 225 0117), a beautifully restored trading ship moored in front of the Forodhani Gardens, and the Tower Top Restaurant at the Emerson and Green hotel. The Forodhani Gardens food stalls offer a nightly feast of freshly grilled seafood and local specialties.

What to do See the sights in old Stone Town: the Old Dispensary, the House of Wonders (Beit el-Ajaib), the Palace Museum (Beit al-Sahel), the Hamamni Baths and the Anglican Cathedral, built on the site of the slave market. Take a spice tour at the Kidichi Spice and Fruit Farm (and check out the 1850 Persian baths across the road). Tour the ruins of the old sultan's palaces at Mbweni, Mtoni and Maruhubi and at night take a boat to one of the sandbars near Stone Town for a moonlit picnic. The annual Festival of the Dhow Countries and Zanzibar International Film Festival, one of Africa's premier cultural events, is held late June to early July; www.ziff.or.tz.

Where to shop in Stone Town For books, textiles, sculptures, masks, specialty spiced oils and soaps, go to the Zanzibar Gallery on Kenyatta Street. Shop for *khanga* (cloths worn by women) with the locals on Chavda Street. A daily bazaar on Gizenga Street sells straw mats, hand-woven baskets, spices, paintings, colourful textiles and beaded sandals. Zanzibar Curio Shop on Hurumzi Street sells good silver, *kikoi* (wrapparounds worn by men), saris and unusual antiques.





This page, clockwise from top left, a farmer at the Kidichi Spice and Fruit Farm. Tented bedroom at the eco-friendly Fundu Lagoon on Pemba island. Young Zanzibari girl on the waterfront in Stone Town. The East Room at the Emerson and Green Hotel. Mnemba Island Lodge's chef with lobster fresh off the boat. Opposite, above, guest room at Salomé's Garden in Bububu. Below, local boat-builders at Matemwe Beach.

