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Pemba

It makes up a smaller half of the Zanzibar archipelago, and yet Pemba lies a full 40km north of its sister island Unguja and feels characteristically very distinct. Unlike its southern sister, Pemba has remained virtually unknown to hordes of beach-bound tourists, and just a couple of distinct niche market options have recently opened up on its rural shores. Pemba has a fascinating reputation among local Swahili and Zanzibaris, not least for its reputation for black magic, but also for being a hotbed of political inspiration; the majority of the island population are supporters of the Civic United Front party who continue to fight for fair democratic representation on these islands. Travellers intent on discovering Pemba's charms may encounter unusual reactions from inhabitants of Unguja, who are generally under the impression that travelling the distance to Pemba is far more daunting and impressive than flying halfway around the world to be in Zanzibar in the first place. Actually Pemba was a focal destination for travellers in past years, when it was known as "Al khudra", 'the green island', and it remains today green and picturesque, coloured by the rich greens of ten types of mangoes in plenty, and many hundreds of clove trees that have traditionally supported the fortunes of this island of spice.

The quiet island of Pemba is renowned along the east African coast for the powers and abilities of its Waganga, or witchdoctors. Belief in witchdoctors and sorcery remains rife throughout East Africa and Tanzania, and remains prevalent alongside and still underlying more recent religious beliefs introduced in the last 2000 years. Tanzanians are known to travel to Pemba, (and also regions of the Usambaras), to find appropriate Waganga to cure, or supposedly also to cause, especially difficult or evil acts of sorcery, called Uchawi. Uchawi might be originally caused by unruly spirits or by contemporary evil intent against an individual. The most common reasons for bewitching are most often based on jealousy, envy or sexual affairs. It is unlikely that the Pembans will be fantastically forthcoming about the local waganga, and they are not often introduced to simply curious tourists. They do however get introduced to the travellers who supposedly come here from Haiti, (as reported by Evelyn Waugh in the prime of the last century), with the prime objective of learning secrets from the Pembans.

What to do and Where to Go,

The island pace on Pemba is gentle and refreshingly rural, and activities are not generally too high-adrenaline inducing. Instead these tend to be more focused on the natural surroundings, especially in the Forest Reserves such as Ngezi Forest, and Kigomasha Peninsula in the north of the island, and around the coral reefs and marine life. Other attractions include a number of stone and coral rag ruins of ancient Swahili and Shirazi

(check again) settlements dating from the 11th century onwards. The evolution of this unusual ancestry continues to thrive on the island, and visitors experience a smiling welcome from each of the three main towns and all the villages, which are awash with a vibrant hubbub of daily activity and colour. For fun alternatives, negotiate boat and island excursions on traditional ngalawa outrigger sailing boats (although be sure to take nothing that will be water damaged!), or pikipiki motorbike, (although be sure to take out adequate insurance, and drive carefully!).

At very certain times of year, around December and in July, when all the crops are harvested and stored, the people of Pemba let their hair down by organising bullfights, a legacy of their one-time Portuguese colonialists.

Pemba Wildlife

Pemba is a fantastically green and natural island, with masses of unusual and endemic wildlife to excite nature lovers. This tiny island has four endemic bird species, the Pemba White-eye and the Pemba Sunbird are common throughout the island, and Ngezi Forest Reserve, (see below), a tall tropical forest filled with slanting sunlight and unusual wildlife action, is the best place to try to spot the Pemba Green Pigeon and Pemba Scops Owl. Here also you can see the unusually squat and characteristic endemic Pemba Palm Tree (*Cressolida Dipsis Pembanus*), and might catch a glimpse in the gathering dusk of the island's endemic fruit bat, also known as Flying Fox, and their endemic Galago Bush Baby. The whole island is surrounded with magnificently unspoilt coral reefs, and both shallow deep waters allow for some of the best snorkelling and diving opportunities on this east African stretch of coast. Offshore islands such as Misali Island in the south west, accessible from Chake Chake, are surrounded with reefs and have excellent remote beaches for day trips to enjoy them.

For many people the attraction of Pemba is often more focused on the coral reefs and waters that surround it than the coral rag island at the centre. The incredible depths of the Pemba Channel, which shelf off to depths of more than 2000m between the island and mainland Tanzania, has made all the aspects of Pemba famous for the serious size of its sea fish, which include barracuda, tuna, shark, and even whales cruising its perimeters. It is a paradise playground for experienced divers, who will discover that the waters around Pemba provide some of the most fantastic wall dives and drift dives, fine soft and hard coral formations and open water diving opportunities that this East African coastline has to offer. There is such a variety of dive spots to suit all levels of experience or interest. In general, the West Coast of Pemba faces onto the deep shelving depths of the Pemba Channel, and here is the best place for all kinds of excellent wall dives, and fantastic coral formations. The channel is sheltered from the Indian Ocean Swell, and provides masses of good anchorage spots over coral at different depths, with diving options for all abilities. Spinning dolphin have often been spotted off the north west peninsula, and the diving is especially good around the offshore islands here, such as Njao and Fundo Island. Two humpback whales come back and forth along the Pemba Channel each month. Whale sharks are rare, but occasionally seen in this region in February and March, and in July and August the seas are awash with hundreds of Manta Rays. Sailfish and similar fish can be found further north, and greenback turtles still swim in these seas. There are a couple of good dive sites off the southern coast, where the

wreck of an old steam cargo ship has attracted plenty of soft coral and marine life, and there are a couple of attractive coral garden drift dives with mainly excellent visibility. The best time to dive the south coast is during the north monsoon, between December and April. The east coast should mainly remain the preserve of experienced divers, who are fit and ready to brave the swell of the Indian Ocean. This is the true domain of the big fish, and those that wish to find them should be certified to dive depths of at least 30 metres.

Offshore islands and islets to visit

Some of the best beaches to make an effort to reach are those surrounding Misali Island almost parallel with Chake Chake in the South West. Swimming here is a real pleasure, especially for colourful snorkelling and diving over beautiful coral reefs straight off the beach, and walks all around the island can be made at low tide. The island has a shiver-me-timbbers reputation for having been the hiding place for Captain Kidd's treasure, since he apparently buried it here in 1698. Whether or not this date is absolutely credible, the island was known to be popular with 17th century pirates as a safe place to stash their booty. The island forest is home to a dazzling green forest bird, the rare Fischer's Muraco, and to vervet monkeys and 'flying fox' fruit bats. The waters around the island are a marine conservation area, specifying controlled fishing, and no fishing at all on the Western Reefs, and there remains a long-term hope that it will become a fully recognised National Marine Park.