

# TANZANIA ODYSSEY

SPECIALISTS IN TRAVEL TO TANZANIA

## Zanzibar

A sense of Zanzibar drifts in the minds eye as a fairytale island, eliciting images of Arabian nights, awash with romance and spirits that dwell among the bizarre and beautiful ruins of its ever-elusive history.



It is said that sailors smell a scent of spice on the wind before their dhows beach on the white coral sand shores, and on arriving they discover a land quite distinct from any other. And so it remains in most part today, an oasis of green amid a startling turquoise sea, its rural centre alive with the drifting pace of a non-motorised existence, sustained on foot or bicycle in the intermittent shade of palms and heat of a tropical sun. The islands of Zanzibar are just dots on a map in the great Indian Ocean a few kilometers from mainland Tanzania, a tiny portion of the great Republic, and yet Zanzibar has evolved a history and reputation that far exceeds its size. The archipelago of Zanzibar is a world of irreconcilable paradox, a plentiful island paradise that has born witness to a harsh and cruel history of domination and slavery. It has emerged in the 21st century with a heady brew of mixed African and Arabic cultures and religions poised between the bedrock of tradition and the pressing imperatives of the

modern world. You might walk through streets of private homes that have been lived in by generations since 1800, and then return to an elaborately carved antique Arabic four poster bed to switch on cable television by remote. This is the paradox of ancient and modern in present day Zanzibar. Times are changing in these remote Indian ocean islands, where in the past three years they have embraced technological advances that took the western world a century. Until 1995, there was just one television on Unguja, Zanzibar Island, attracting a large crowd to its screen on the Creek road. While this still operates in the midst of a popular coffee baraza, Stone Town now has numerous Internet cafes, there are televisions in the villages, and the modern world keeps on rolling up to its shores, seeking an island retreat but also enjoying the luxuries of satellite tv and telephone connections, email and hairdryers.

### How it is



Zanzibar is an archipelago of islands, the largest of which are Zanzibar Island, called Unguja, and the island of Pemba. The next largest, Tumbatu Island, off the northwesterlytip of Unguja, is



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rarely visited by tourists, but is the site of an early Shirazi settlement that may even be the first in this region. The smaller satellite islands include Chapwani, Bawe, Chumbe, Chunguu, and Mnemba, most of which can be visited on boat trips from the Zanzibar Island, although Mnemba is reserved exclusively for guests staying at the lodge there.



Zanzibar Island is 86 km long and 39 km wide, and is separated from the mainland by 35 km of sparkling Indian Ocean over a shallow coral shelf. Pemba lies 41km northeast of Unguja, and is much smaller - about 64km long and 22.5 km wide - and is separated from the mainland by the narrow but extremely deep and often dangerous Pemba Channel, which drops to over 1000m deep. Here swim the larger creatures of the sea, the whales, sharks, barracuda and huge manta rays that peruse the clear, salty depths on the outskirts of the reefs. The islands are coral rock outcrops that were once mainly forested, but are now predominantly agricultural farmlands with numerous spice and coconut plantations dating from the days of the first Sultan. The last remaining areas of natural forest are protected, such as Jozani on Zanzibar Island and Ngezi and

Msitu Mkuu on Pemba. Mango trees have been planted throughout the main islands, with the greatest number on Pemba, and baobabs have seeded and rooted wherever there is enough earth to sustain them. Villages cluster in the shade of these great life-giving trees, and beyond them stretch wide, open areas of low bush. Farmers in these rural regions trundle their home-grown produce to the main road at the islands centre on ox-cart, bicycle or on foot, and then onto the island buses that ferry back and forth from the central market in town. Much of the land provides fertile soil that allows for a fantastic range of fruit and vegetable plantations to continue flowering throughout the year. The eastern side of Zanzibar Island is exposed coral rock with a thin covering of vegetation, and many of the coastal villages are dependent on fishing and the growing evolution of seaweed as an export crop to Asia. The fishermen operate mainly on a level of small-scale subsistence, using nets, lines and hand-held spears and sticks. Women ply the shallows with nets and poke sticks for octopus at low tide, and gather shellfish to supplement the family meal while tourists devour the last remaining octopus.



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Seaweed farming provides an important economic income for local women, who are responsible for the plantations.



They cultivate their crop by attaching small sprigs of seaweed to strings, which are then pegged out in rows just beneath the tide line. These plots require a great deal of work and attendance, although the crop can increase ten-fold in a couple of weeks, and the harvest is then taken to a central co-operative at which they are paid by the weight of their crop. The island bedrock of coral rag is the basis for the roads, and is used to build rugged homesteads, combining coral rocks with a limestone cement that you can frequently see being made on the sides of the road. As on the mainland, it is common to see houses that seem to have been abandoned halfway through the building process, although it is rare that this is the case. Invariably the vast expense and effort involved in building a house results in a long-term layer by layer approach, with additions being made in accordance with erratic income flow. The trees growing through the centre will be felled just before the roof is added.

### Coast and beaches

The best beaches on Zanzibar Island are to the North and East, where the sun shines on luminescent clear waters in a range of striking turquoise blues, and the sand is clean and bright and fine. On the whole, the beaches on the West Coast are generally less inviting, as this is the central region for industrial development and fuel depots around Stone Town. Nevertheless Mangwapani and Fuji and Mweni and Kisimkazi remain clean and quiet enclaves on the western shore to escape the madding crowds. All the islands are surrounded by rich coral reef, which protects the shoreline and also results in wide flat shallows that are invariably subject to tidal extremes, although these are less extreme on much of the west coast.



### Climate

The climate of Zanzibar is generally hot, between 21-29°C, and becomes increasingly humid from mid-November to March, when air-conditioning becomes a welcome treat. The long rains - masika - fall between April and May, although showers often continue through June so



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finishing later than on the mainland. Early July to October is coolest and driest, with an average temperature of 21oC in August. The short rains - vuli - should fall in November, usually intermittent showers followed by sunshine. It is hot and dry and humid between December and March, when the island is subject to the north-east monsoon wind Kaskazi - and is slightly cooler during the months of Kusi, the Southwest monsoon, between April to November.

### Stone Town

The sun begins to dissolve into the horizon, perfecting a sweep of unknown orange against pure pale blue, and Stone Town stirs with the wakefulness of night. Muezzins in their different mosque towers call the faithful to prayers again, dogs bark and children shout as they play football in open corners or dive into the harbour waters and demonstrate feats of bravery with their friends. A crowd starts to gather along the harbour front and in Forodhani Gardens, where smoke is beginning to rise from barbecues at the assorted food stalls and the curio markets are assembling by gaslight amid a hubbub of banter and chat.



### History

Zanzibar Stone Town is an extraordinary place. UNESCO has recently declared the old town one of the world's historic cities, and at last more attention is being paid to its desperately needed conservation. The old quarter roughly forms a triangle in the middle of the West Coast of Zanzibar Island, bordered by the sea on two sides and the Creek Road to the east. Continuing east beyond the Creek Road, Stone Town rambles into Ng'ambo - the other side - a wide expanse of modern blocks and tin roof housing that contains the growing population of modern day Zanzibar. The old city, however, remains a living monument to the culture and histories of its curious mix of East African, Arab, Indian, Persian and European conquerors, traders and seafarers, and continues to thrive as a commercial centre. The ancient maze of narrow streets is a romantic hotchpotch of historic old stone buildings built close for cool respite from the tropical island sun, and shaded by elegantly carved balconies, loggias and verandas that cling precipitously overhead - close enough to catch a whisper, or a kiss. These historic stone constructions are homes and hotels, restaurants, guesthouses, offices and shops, whose stone and wood structures are still the backdrop for tropical Arabian-style nights, cloaked women heavily scented with spice and illicit romances eluding the boundaries of a strict social code. Houses of the most wealthy and influential are built from coral



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stone, in the Arabic style, usually contained within a walled central courtyard accessed through one grand door.



The door, being all that could be seen from outside, was considered the outward expression of the wealth and standing of the household within, and often was built first. Many remain to this day, with elaborate carvings of patterns of lotus flowers, fish and vines or dates, and sometimes inscribed with passages from the Koran to tell of the household within. In accordance with the customs from Persia and Iran many of the doors are also studded with impressive polished iron studs, sharply pointed to ward off illintentioned marauding elephants despite the striking lack of these on the shores of Zanzibar.

### Island Hopping

The closest island to Stone Town is called Changuu, Swahili for .Tortois., in reference to its unusual residents. The island is also called and is said to have once been owned by a wealthy Arab, who used it to detain unruly slaves. A prison was actually built on the island by Sir General Lloyd Matthews in 1893, who spent much of his time in Zanzibar

apprehending ruffian slave smugglers and other insurrectionists, but the prison was actually never used. Instead it became a quarantine station for immigrants entering coastal East Africa. Frangipani-lined pathways were planted for the quarantined inmates to enjoy a fragrant night-time stroll. A half-hour boat ride from the harbour brings you to this small and pretty island surrounded by coral reef and clear sea, making it a popular spot for snorkelling. The Zanzibar Tourist Corporation has a small office that must be visited on arrival to pay an entrance fee of \$5, or Tsh3000. Snorkels can be hired beforehand or on the island for Tsh1000 per day, and most swimmers set off from a sandbank beach facing the town that gets smaller and smaller as the tide comes in and more and more excursion boats stop to moor against it. The island itself is picturesque and pretty, and provides a rare opportunity to sunbathe. A path leads all around and takes about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an hour to walk.



Along the way it passes large pits in the ground, which were quarries for coral rag and used to build houses some of the original stone houses in the Stone Town and Dar es Salaam One of the main attractions of Chunguu is its



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resident population of giant tortoises, believed to have been brought to the island from Aldabra in the Seychelles in the late 18th century. They used to roam the island freely, but a decline in population followed a trend in visitors stealing the pocket-sized babies, and they are now contained within an appropriately vast pen. Visitors can climb inside and feed these seemingly pre-historic reptiles with oranges, mango peel and greenery, for which they seem grateful and tirelessly devour. There is a plan to free the massive creatures again, while continuing to protect the now thriving young. There is little hope of casually stealing a full grown male, as their body weight is a number of tonnes and would require the strength and determination of at least four grown men.

### Diving

The Zanzibar archipelago is surrounded by thriving coral reef and gin-clear Indian Ocean, and is reputed to have some of the best diving in the world.



The waters around the island are awash with colourful marine life - with approximately 4 times the range of fish species than the

Caribbean - and with an average visibility of between 20-60 metres and warm waters - average temp 27 degrees C - and numerous colourful shallow sites to explore, which also make it a good spot for beginners. Visibility is generally better after the November rains, between November and March. There are good shallow reefs around the North and North East of the island, around the Mnemba Atoll and close to Stone Town, where conditions are varied enough to suit all abilities. Leven Banks in the north is a massive reef structure 10km out to sea, where depths vary from 14m at the shallowest point to deeper than 200m on the ocean bed. Mnemba Atoll has many clear shallow waters, but with drops away to an average of 40m, and one stunning Great Wall plunging steeply from 35m to 70m. Dolphin and turtles are commonly seen on dives here. The waters around Zanzibar Island are generally shallower than those around Pemba, where deep water channels over 1000m deep are world renown for excellent diving conditions and variety suitable for more experienced divers. While Reef, Tiger, Whale and Nurse sharks are commonly spotted on dives around Zanzibar island, the Pemba channel is also visited by Hammerhead sharks, manta rays and an assortment of extremely large fish, and wall dives and drift dives descend past superb coral formations. Although prices vary, a single dive in Zanzibar waters costs approximately \$40-50, and around \$230-50 for a ten dive package. Most dive schools can arrange introductory dives for those who have not completed a dive course. Night dives cost more, and should be booked in



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advance in order to coincide with the tides. PADI courses are usually around \$300 for a 5 day course. For all courses and specialised dive requests it is advisable to book in advance.

### North Coast: Nungwi

The northern peninsula of Zanzibar is truly stunning, and for anyone with a passion for beaches it has all the elements of paradise. It is hard to imagine any traveller arriving on a fine day without a gasp of admiration for the startling translucent waters washing over fine coral sands and wide views across the Indian Ocean. Here, on the northernmost tip of Zanzibar Island, the air feels fresh from its wide sea crossing and so susceptible to the slightest nuance and reflection as the sun rises and sets. The sand shores up against the land in unfeasibly fine, sinkable pale drifts, and the beach makes its changing way around the headland, depending on the tide.



When the tide is out the way is opened to walk the long distances exposed and bathe in shallow pools left warming in the sand. Crabs scuttle among the odd flotsam of shells and shapely coral, and colourful women sing

and chatter together as they gather around their wide fishing nets, fully clothed and knee-deep in pale turquoise waters to survey their days catch.



Tin pots worn on their heads - for convenience- catch and reflect the gleam of the sun, and their songs rise and fall on the wind. These beaches are the life force of the nearby local villages, and children scour the shoreline daily gathering shellfish for suppers while women fish in the shallows. Further east, at the point at which the road diverges to each side of the peninsula, the old Mnarani Turtle Sanctuary is a pretty natural rock pool formed in a coral inlet which has been made into a protected aquarium, watched and tended by local people. The colourful pool within forms a sanctuary for small and shiny-shelled green and hawksbill turtles whose livelihood is severely under threat, because locally sea turtles have traditionally been regarded as a food source, and their shells sold for ornaments. Because the locals here make some money from donations, there is a chance that awareness of the need for their preservation will spread. Zanzibari turtles are now desperately endangered, and further threatened by on-shore developments that confuse their



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sense of time with lights which look to them like a full moon, so they are lured onto the beach to lay their eggs at completely different times of the month. But there are signs of giant sea turtles on the Nungwi beaches, leaving a trail as wide as a caterpillar tractor in the sand as they leave the sea in the early dawn to lay and bury their eggs on the beach, and they are frequently encountered by divers. Tourists can play a part in the attempt to preserve the species around these islands by taking vigilant care not to buy goods made with tortoiseshell.

### Diving Nungwi

For those who would like a chance to see the turtles swim in wider waters, along with the possibility of a glimpse of a dolphin and a mass of reef fish, there are PADI certificate dive centres at Nungwi on either side of the peninsula. The dive centre at Ras Nungwi Beach Hotel is well equipped to train beginners and runs regular PADI courses, which should be booked in advance. Diving is notably good around coral reefs off the north east of the island and skirting the Mnemba Atoll, and there are plenty of options for beginners and experienced divers alike. Resident pods of dolphin here are frequently seen on dives or on the way to or from the dive sites, and are fun to swim with if they are in the mood to do so. There is plenty to excite experienced divers if they dream of wall dives, night dives and drift dives, (again, advise the dive centre in advance), or wish to explore deeper waters where lush coral gardens can extend as far as

the eye can see. In the deeper channels barracuda, kingfish, tuna and wahoo hunt together with large Napoleonic wrasse, graceful manta rays and sharks, whereas the in the shallows a huge variety of Indo-Pacific coral gardens are the playground of colourful tropical fish.



### North East Coast (Matemwe)

The East Coast of Zanzibar has a superb succession of long, wind-swept and palm fringed beaches. The further south you go, the beaches seem progressively more wild and naturally flotsam strewn than their northern neighbours. Although many of the hotels make an effort to sweep their areas of beach, these regions are prone to fluctuations of seaweed in the early months of the year. Nevertheless, the sand is remarkably fine and clean, with knee high drifts to relax into under the palms, and these shining pale beaches seem to stretch on and on and on. The East Coast is naturally divided into north and southern regions by the formation of the coastline, which is also followed by the roads. Turnings lead from the central main road to the northern reaches of Matemwe (Pwani Mchangani), Kiwengwa and Chwaka, and a separate route



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leads to the southern beaches of Paje, Bwejuu and Jambiani.

### South East Coast (Breezes)

This area of coastline remained the most undeveloped until recently, and some areas still retain a wild sensation, which increases the further south you go. The main road leads to Paje village, about half-way along this stretch of coast, and then turns north to newly built, larger, smarter hotels such as Breezes, the Italian Venta Club Resort, Sultan.s Palace and Karafuu, and south to small, rural villages and clusters of budget guest houses.

