

GETTING TO TROPICAL BEACHES such as this one on Zanzibar's Mnemba island (left) is easier and cheaper than ever for South Africans; you don't need a visa, there are two direct flights a week and packages are going for a song. Although beaches are a highlight, Stone Town is worth a visit for its Eastern-influenced architecture.

TIDES

written in the

PALM-STUDD BEACHES MAY WELL BE THE REASON MOST SOUTH AFRICANS VISIT ZANZIBAR, BUT ONE FORCE GOVERNS ALL OTHERS ON EAST AFRICA'S MOST PROVOCATIVE ISLAND... WORDS BY EMMA ODENDAAL. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAAN LOUW.

The afternoon thunderstorm brewing overhead could easily have dissipated into clear blue skies. Instead, it broke into heavy, warm drops that fell onto the snaking streets of Stone Town. Steam rose from the cobbled alleys, the stones having baked in the morning sun.

Just like the weather, travel is uncertain ... capricious even. One moment, you'll be wondering whether the self-assured taxi driver who'd meandered for two hours searching for your hotel ever actually knew where he was going; the next, whether the beaches will be as good as promised or your hotel as wonderful as it appeared in the brochures. But on this little island locals call Unguja – you probably know it best as Zanzibar – there are some certainties. The weather is always as warm as its people and the perpetual rhythm of the tides sets the pace for life on the spice island.

Nowhere is this unhurried tempo more apparent than on the southeast coast. Here,





ZANZIBAR'S HISTORY is peppered with stories of the craftsmen who carved Stone Town's iconic doors (far left), the adventurers who came in search of spices such as nutmeg (left) and the fishermen who plied the East African trade winds for the day's catch. It's this traditional way of life and the pristine waters that attracts holidaymakers.

LAND EXCURSIONS
Just about every resort in Zanzibar offers the same set of organised excursions: tours of Stone Town, the spice plantations and Jozani Forest (to see endemic red colobus monkeys). If you have an aversion to organised outings, you'll want to skip them and do a bit of on-land exploration yourself. Don't miss the old slave market in Stone Town; it's gut-wrenching at times, but it's important to have an understanding of Zanzibar's sadder history to appreciate where its people have come from.

when the tide pulls out, it exposes a two-kilometre stretch of bleached sand and local women and children wearing purple and yellow kangas scurry across the divide like oversized fiddler crabs. Clutching nets, they wade through ankle-deep rock pools teeming with urchins, baby octopuses and starfish and scoop up armfuls of slippery emerald seaweed (that will eventually make its way to China to be used in traditional medicine). In the distance, the reef is bared, cutting a sinuous path down the coastline, and, beyond that, *ngalawas* (traditional wooden dugouts) sail the old East African trade winds in search of fish.



Meanwhile, at resorts dotted along this part of the coastline, tourists who haven't left early with the tide to go diving on the reefs or swimming with dolphins instead take long walks on the mercury swaths of exposed beach. Or they simply lie in a

Resorts are sardined along the western coast, particularly in the north near Nungwi, where beaches are crammed with banana-leaf umbrellas and overweight Italians.

hammock, as I did in Jambiani, watching this daily rite play out on the horizon. Ultimately, it was this little-seen, cyclic side of Unguja dictated by the flux of the warm Indian Ocean that held me in its grasp.

EAST OR WEST

Many travellers don't realise that Zanzibar is actually an archipelago comprising of Unguja, Pemba (the second significant island, 50 kilometres north of Unguja) and more than 50 smaller islands, some no bigger than a basketball court, off the east coast of Tanzania. Although just 85 kilometres in length and 39 kilometres wide (about the size of Cape Town), driving Unguja from south to north takes more than two hours along the main road. Pockmarked with villages and speed bumps, it's not uncommon to see carpets laid out to dry on the tar and children playing games on its fringes. Thatched shacks lining the road brim with

neat piles of baby tomatoes, tiered bunches of green bananas and silvery fresh fish.

The eastern coastline is characterised by ancient coral rocks (probably once a reef) against which the waves crash at high tide, retreating at low tide to expose a shore of coral pools interspersed with sand. Off-shore, a fringing reef extends along the coastline, beyond it a spectacular undersea wilderness where shoals of barracuda, hawksbill turtles, stingrays and parrotfish glide through coral forests. Some of the best snorkelling and diving is to be had here, particularly off the coast of the northern reaches, characterised by impossibly clear blue waters and dramatic drop-offs near the small, heart-shaped island of Mnemba.

Unguja's western shore, on the other hand, is a beachgoer's paradise. I'd spent a blissful week messing around in the still, turquoise waters with my family. Calmer than the moody seas of the east, these are

perfect for swimming and paddling, even with young kids. Resorts are sardined along this coast, particularly in the north near Nungwi, where beaches are crammed with banana-leaf umbrellas and overweight Italians. Barefoot 'beach boys' wander up and down, peddling shells, henna tattoos and the occasional incongruous lion in a snow globe. Picking up on my accent, more than once a beach boy changed his Swahili 'Jambo!' to 'Môre. Hoe gaan dit?' in a startlingly effective sales pitch. Quiet stretches in the northwest are hard to come by, but there's bustle, bars and a merry party atmosphere that attracts young honeymoon couples and backpackers.

UPS AND DOWNS

While the resorts keep their beaches and tropical gardens in a permanent postcard state, wherever you are, you have only to step outside the walls to walk along lit-

tered, potholed roads past squat, Soviet-style, grey-brick homes with rusting roofs. The strange thing is, despite the obvious hardships the villages face, each home, in vehement defiance, has an elaborate wooden front door. These intricately carved works of art signify wealth and stature and have become prized architectural statement pieces around the world. Each door tells a story; fish scales indicate a family of fishers, vines are a clue to the owner's involvement in the spice trade. Even modern grindstones like accounting are represented in ordered shapes and geometric carvings. Whatever the trade, Zanzibaris seem to take things as they come, resigned to the ebb and flow of life on the island where the smell of sweat, cloves and unripe bananas hangs in the air. The bananas are sweeter here; the egg yolks white (Camembert-like when softly poached) and served with green beans for





THERE'S A STILLNESS ABOUT the people and the waters of Zanzibar (above), while the exoticism and romance of Stone Town is epitomised in the rooms of Emerson Spice (below).

Delicious, spiced smells of grilled octopus and coffee waft through a warren of stalls, galleries and cafés. Shopkeepers lure you into their poky stores with promises of great treasures as you dodge hooting scooters.

breakfast, a tribute to their Arabic roots.

The island's cultural melting pot is about as rich as it gets as a result of a tumultuous past, each era as restless as the daily tides. A ripple of Persian, Chinese and Assyrian influence began around 600BC as these early explorers plied the East African coast. Later, the islands were ruled by Swahili kings, then colonised by the Portuguese and eventually became the capital of the rich Omani sultans in search of ivory, spices and slaves. The British had a hand on the spoon too, governing from the late 1800s until finally it granted Zanzibar independence in 1963. A short, bloody revolution followed, and in 1964 Zanzibar entered into a union with what was then Tanganyika to form Tanzania.

The effects of these colonial changes are most obvious in Stone Town, the original and oldest part of the capital Zanzibar City, and where the East and Africa crash head

on in a maelstrom of culture, language and architecture. Its faded palaces are exotic reminders of rich Omani sultans who once lived here. Though these storied buildings are now battered and worn, paint peeling off the pastel-coloured walls, muezzins' calls to prayer still reverberate through the streets, a sign that the Omani legacy lives on.

And it was on these streets that I eventually realised that the best way to explore the city was to lose myself in its clutches. Delicious, spiced smells of grilled octopus and coffee waft through a warren of stalls, galleries and cafés. Shopkeepers lure you into their poky stores with promises of great treasures as you dodge hooting scooters and pedestrians carrying bags laden with cassava, Indian teak and spices. You can't help but imagine the sultans, slave traders and explorers who walked these same alleyways.

SOME THINGS ARE CERTAIN

The rain left as quickly as it came. And I made my way to a rooftop restaurant overlooking Stone Town's skyline where I sat cross-legged on a Persian carpet sipping a *dawa* cocktail and nibbling on masala-dusted, grilled mango. On one side I peered into a five-star hotel's terrace, on the other into a washing-filled window. Schoolchildren's high-pitched chatter rose from the streets below. The sun snuck behind a baby-blue minaret and rapidly dipped for the pink horizon – as it does in the tropics. It was high tide and in the distance *ngalawas* were heading back to shore. Back in Jambiani, the women and children would be home, having left the beaches, and the tourists would have returned to their resorts. Someone else would be lying in my hammock watching the same scene unfold. It is, after all, certain. It's written in the tides.



STAY HERE

In the thick of Stone Town, **Emerson Spice** is nothing short of magical. Walking into this hotel is being transported back in time. Each of the rooms plays out in ornate, romantic decor inspired by heroines from non-fiction classics, operas and films. Think a French château or courtesan's boudoir (a throwback to Stone Town's European history) with capacious tubs built into archways, gaudy antiques, languid sofas and rich satin fabrics. The ornate balconies allow you to observe the streets below, taking in the sounds of calls to prayer and shopkeepers catching up on gossip and the spicy smells from street-side vendors. Don't miss dinner at the rooftop restaurant with views over the city and the harbour. B&B from US\$225 for a double room. www.emersonspice.com

Package deals are great value for money, particularly those that extend beyond three meals a day to include activities and drinks. **Hideaway of Nungwi** near the northwest town of Nungwi is one of Zanzibar's newest resorts. All suites have sea views, although those from rooms set at the back of the resort are partially obstructed. The resort is large and you'll do a fair bit of walking from your suite to the beach and restaurants if your room is set at the furthest reaches. Main meals consist of average buffet fare, but hang around the pool for tasty tea-time nibbles and sunset snacks. Seven-night, half-board packages, including flights, start at R16250 a person on www.africastay.com. www.hideawaynungwi.com

On the northeast coast, **Matemwe Lodge** offers a more personal experience than typical resorts. It consists of just 12 bungalows (some with private pools) and four luxurious

villas perched on the coral rag land, each with panoramic views from the bed, bath and rooftop balcony. There's just one restaurant and one bar (larger resorts may have several dining options), but the food is excellent and was some of the best I ate on my travels; from grilled prawns and lobster tails to a melt-in-your-mouth fillet. Staying in a villa gets you a butler and personalised menus. matemweretreat.asiliaafrica.com. **GETAWAY OFFER:** Seven nights in a bungalow from R8750 a person sharing, including meals (excludes drinks), village walks and a guided reef walk. Valid until 31 March 2014. travel.getaway.co.za

Built on a coral cliff in the southern town of Jambiani, **Coral Rock** is the antithesis of a resort experience. The location couldn't be better; waves break metres from your door and the beach is deserted save for a handful of locals. Accommodation in a standard room is basic (don't expect little soaps or fluffy towels) and has seen better days, but the newer deluxe rooms feature a few extras such as modern bathrooms, small seating areas and private loungers overlooking the sea. The South African owner warns that guests need 'patience and humour' in abundance and that 'it's not always easy to acquire quality goods and services'. But you'll quickly forgive any shortcomings. B&B from US\$35 a person sharing a quad room. www.coral-rock.com

A number of holiday homes are available for rent, particularly in the south; www.zanzibarvillas.com is a good starting point. Though not grand, they're great value for money for a small group and most come with a caretaker. Rates start at \$130 a night for a house that sleeps four.

Matemwe Lodge



Coral Rock



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LIFE ON THE SPICE ISLAND is unhurried; whether exploring a village where the locals always have time for a chat, playing on the beach or drinking chai on a balcony in Stone Town.



PLAN YOUR TRIP

GETTING THERE

South Africans no longer need a visa to enter Zanzibar. Mango flies from Johannesburg to Zanzibar every Tuesday and Saturday. If travelling from outside of Joburg, be aware that the flight to Zanzibar leaves at 7am, so you'll need to spend the night at an airport hotel to be in time for the 5am check-in. Return flights start from around R4000. www.flymango.com.

ONCE YOU'RE THERE

If arriving by air, you'll land at Zanzibar International Airport, just outside Stone Town. It's chaotic, but it works. Once outside, you'll find a parking lot full of taxis and their eager drivers. If you haven't pre-booked a transfer be sure to agree on a fare before committing to a driver. Getting around by taxi is expensive (a one-way trip from the airport to your resort will cost at least \$40). Hiring a car isn't advised; road signs are almost non-existent and road conditions

are generally poor. However, many tourists use scooters (try www.zanzibarcarhire.info) or, if you can bear the heat, hire a bicycle from your resort.

NEED TO KNOW

Power outages in Zanzibar are frequent and can last for long periods (the longest lasted for three months and covered the entire island). If you like your showers hot, make sure your hotel has a generator.

The local currency is the Tanzanian shilling (R1 equals about 160 Tanzanian shillings), but hotels, taxis and many shops accept US dollars (US\$1 equals about R10,19). Always have cash on you for tipping, paying drivers and making purchases outside your hotel.

Zanzibar is a predominantly Muslim country and women should cover their shoulders and knees when in Stone Town and travelling outside tourist areas, particularly during Ramadan. On the beaches and in the resorts, anything goes. **G**

ZANZIBAR SPECIAL OFFERS

Coral Rock Bungalows 3★ BB 4 nts from R7 890 7 nts from R9 490	Ngalawa Beach Village 3★ HB 4 nts from R7 990 7 nts from R8 990
Azanzi Beach Hotel 4★ FI 4 nts from R9 790 7 nts from R12 790	Mapenzi Beach 3★ Superior FI 4 nts from R9 990 7 nts from R13 490

Prices include: Return airfares to Zanzibar from Johannesburg, return airport/hotel transfers, accommodation, selected meals & drinks where applicable. **BB** = breakfast only, **HB** = breakfast & dinner, **FI** = all meals & selected drinks. **Excludes:** Yellow fever inoculation • Prices are per person sharing • Travel offers are subject to availability, high/shoulder season price adjustments, currency & airport tax variations at time of booking.

Please contact us for more info info@gatewaytours.co.za
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AZANZI BEACH HOTEL - ZANZIBAR

The hotel is situated on the North Eastern coast of Zanzibar, and approximately 45 minutes from the airport in Stone Town. Azanzi is a luxury boutique beach hotel which boasts 35 rooms comprising of 8 superior suites, 17 deluxe suites and 10 deluxe villas. The central guest entertainment areas offer guests multi-level viewing decks, a well-stocked curio shop, azure swimming pool, bar and dining area - maximizing the sublime view of the majestic and tranquil Indian Ocean, and powder-white beaches scattered with palm trees.

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ZANZIBAR

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8 day land only package from R4 580 pps. Plus airfare ex JHB from R4 070 pp (incl. taxes). Valid for travel 01 Feb—31 Mar 2014. Enquire for an alternate quote for the rest of the year.

How about combining this blissful beach relaxation with an adventure safari to the Serengeti? Contact us and we will make it happen!

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