

The • Spice of Life

Zanzibar is a melting pot of cultures writes Eugene Yiga



IMAGE: GALLERY TOURS & SAFARIS

Confession time. Like many South Africans, I'd heard only the usual about Zanzibar – that it's supposedly an island, making for an idyllic holiday destination, and that it's famous for its decorative carved doors. But I admit that my knowledge of this country just off the East African coast was quite limited, up until nearly two days into my first visit.

Unlike previous trips, where I researched my destination by reading its entire Wikipedia page beforehand, I arrived with almost no knowledge of the history and culture that shaped this – it turns out – archipelago. Yes, the first bit of vital info is that Zanzibar is not merely one island, but is made up of a collection of many small islands. But the true treasure lies in discovering the rich history and assortment of cultures that influenced Zanzibar on the road to independence.

'Zanzibar is part of the United Republic of Tanzania,' tour guide Khamis J Khamis explains. 'In 1964, Tanganyika and Zanzibar joined and combined the names to get Tanzania. But Zanzibar still has its own government, parliament and president. And we still live and embrace different cultures.'

CHANGING HANDS

'The first colonies were Portuguese, after explorer Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498,' Khamis explains. 'For the 16th and 17th centuries, Zanzibar was a Portuguese Empire, but they were defeated by the Arabs in 1698. The Portuguese brought along fruit, crops, and many aspects of their culture, though.'

Under Arab rule, Zanzibar was then controlled by the Sultanate of Oman and became a popular trading centre, especially for spices and slaves.

'In 1811, the Arabs opened the main market to sell slaves,' Khamis says. 'People were collected from East and Central Africa and sent to the islands to be sold. Slavery was a big economy.' As many as 50 000 slaves passed through the port every year.

When Britain put pressure on the Sultan to end the slave trade, he reluctantly agreed in 1873 and Zanzibar became part of the British Empire. There was a rebellion by the Omanis in 1896, which led to the Anglo-Zanzibar war, famously lasting just 45 minutes – the shortest war in history.

THE PAST

A good way to get a sense of Zanzibar's history is through the Slave Routes tour. It begins at the Dhow

OPPOSITE Bibi (grandmother) and granddaughter at an ornately carved door in Stone Tone, Zanzibar City.

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Harbour in Malindi, where slave ships brought their human cargo from Bagamoyo to Zanzibar, moving to the house of Tippu Tip (a notorious Arab slave trader), and then to the Anglican Church, built on top of the old slave market. A short drive to Mbweni then brings you to the ruins of a school for freed slave girls, before heading to Livingstone's House and Mangapwani slave caves, where hundreds of slaves waited out the monsoons and the dhows to exile them away.

You can also immerse yourself in the local lifestyle through a Swahili Cultural Trip. This half-day tour takes you to a rural village to see how traditional people

of Zanzibar live: from women weaving baskets, grinding millet, or cooking local dishes, to men weaving palm fronds for use in thatch roofs or playing Bao, a traditional board game.

Our trip takes us deep into the heart of Unguja,

the main island, for a visit to Muyuni village. Here, we enter a sacred Ngonga cave to witness a Bamba ceremony. The crowd sings and chants to the rhythm of drums, while spirits take control of a 'witch doctor' so that he can diagnose and heal the sick.

THE PRESENT

The best place to sample true Zanzibarian culture is in Stone Town, the old part of the capital Zanzibar City. Even though the roads are so narrow that you have to keep dodging scooters and motorbikes that come hooting around tight corners, there's plenty of history everywhere you turn.

'Before the development of the big cities in East and Central Africa, Stone Town was the largest,' Khamis says. 'It's famous for its culture and the history.'

It's also famous for architecture. The influx of immigrant communities – Omani, Persian and Indian – created a diversity of building styles.

'You can tell the designs apart based on the location of the balconies,' Khamis explains. 'The Arabs put balconies inside to hide their wives but the Indians had them outside.'

The designs on Zanzibar's famous wooden doors are also quite distinct. The Arab versions tend to be more complex, with rectangular brass studs. The Indian doors seem simpler, with rounded shapes instead. The doors also feature intricate carvings,

such as lotus flowers to symbolise prosperity or Islamic verses from the Qur'an.

THE FUTURE

Our walk through Stone Town takes us to several fascinating buildings. The Dhow Palace Hotel and Africa House Hotel welcome anyone inside (be polite and wipe your shoes first) and are ideal places for sundowners overlooking the sea. The best place to socialise, though, is Jaws Corner, so named because it's the local conversation and gossip nook.

'People talk about everything, especially politics, religion, and football,' Khamis says. 'They also have tea, coffee, and they play cards.'

Looking around Jaws Corner, which has a pole in the centre that lets you make free international calls if you can climb up to the telephone at the top, it's clear that Zanzibar is a diverse place. The official languages are Kiswahili, English and Arabic, but many local residents also speak Italian and/or French.

COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

'The new generation like us can call ourselves Zanzibarian because we were born here,' Khamis says. 'But we're not really indigenous to Zanzibar. The islands were excellent for fishing, drawing fishermen from various parts of the world. They collaborated with local people – sharing cultures, intermarriage –

and that's how the population kept growing.'

The Arab influence also led to the spread of Islam. Zanzibar is now 95% Muslim, with Christianity, Hinduism and other religions making up the rest. Zanzibar is a place where diverse religions, cultures and beliefs coexist harmoniously.

'In Stone Town, there are about 1700 buildings, including two churches, three Hindu temples, and about 50 mosques,' Khamis says. 'The good thing is that we respect each other. Regardless of religion or culture, we're always working together.'

OPPOSITE: TOP A view of Stone Town beach and bay through a hotel latticework window. **BOTTOM** The Anglican Cathedral in Stone Town today stands on the site of the former slave market. **THIS PAGE: TOP** Game of *Bao la Kiswahili* – a mancala board game popular in East Africa and part of Swahili culture. **LEFT** Kofias in Stone Town, Zanzibar City. **MIDDLE** A close-up of the distinctive brass studs Zanzibar doors are famous for. **RIGHT** Colourfully dressed women on a beach in Zanzibar.

SAVE

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