

Four Days in Exotic Zanzibar

With its powder-white beaches and sparkling turquoise water, Zanzibar was to be a four day respite after a vigorous week-long safari in Tanzania; four days of R&R, a place to rest and relax before the thirty hour flight home to an impending Canadian winter.

But, Zanzibar, off Tanzania's east coast, turned out to be so much more. It opened its sun-warmed arms and drew us in, each day wrapping us a little tighter in its island embrace.

Day One: Sunset in Stone Town.

Stone Town is the historic main centre, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As such it is protected and preserved, locked in time.

Dropping our bags at our hotel, we quickly make our way to the beach. Here, a broad, stone promenade meanders along a stunning shoreline where small, faded fishing boats bob in the water.

Children run and play in the fine, soft sand as the tepid Indian Ocean laps at the shore. Kicking off our shoes, we slowly wander along the beach as the sunlight ebbs, casting its late afternoon glow over the water.

Day Two: Exploring Old Stone Town.

Tall, weathered houses line narrow winding streets where cars cannot go. Much is unchanged in the past 200 years but for the bicycles and scooters that whiz by, darting around crude wooden carts laden with goods for the market.

The original settlers of Zanzibar were Bantu-speaking Africans. In the 10th century the Persians arrived, followed by the Portuguese in the 16th century and the Arabs who set up trade colonies in the 1800's. In 1890 Zanzibar became a British protectorate. Then gaining its independence in 1963, it became part of Tanzania. The influences of all these cultures are evident in the architecture, one being its famous Zanzibar doors. These heavy, wooden doors are intricately carved with motifs reflecting African, Arab, Indian or European influences.

With a strong Islamic culture, Stone Town hosts fifty-one mosques. The bells can be heard calling worshippers to prayer five times a day. The women, young and old, reflect the strong Islamic traditions, resplendent and modest in their colorful draping dress, shy eyes smiling as they pass in the streets.

We wander through markets, brilliant with colorful fabrics and overflowing with fresh fruits, vegetables, seafood and spices. Finally, we escape the heat at a charming rooftop restaurant, overlooking the famous tin roofs of Stone Town.

Zanzibar was the hub of the East African slave trade in the 18th and 19th century, providing slaves to the Arab countries, Persia and India. Today an extensive Museum chronicles this dark part of their history. It is a must see in Zanzibar. Alongside sits the massive Church of Christ Anglican Cathedral, built on the site of Zanzibar's slave market, celebrating the end of slavery and Britain's role in its abolishment.

Day 3: Spice Market Tour

Zanzibar, the Spice Island. Even the name sounds exotic, bringing to mind images and aromas of heady exotic spices. For centuries merchants from all corners of the world came to the island in their wooden vessels, carrying away spices, ivory and slaves and leaving their mark on the history, culture and architecture of the island.

Once the world's largest producer of cloves, it remains their leading domestic product; but other countries like Madagascar have now surpassed its volumes. Zanzibar's tropical climate and fertile soil continue to support the production of other spices as well, like nutmeg, cinnamon, black pepper and cardamom.

Numerous spice plantations offer tours. Knowledgeable guides escort you throughout the grounds identifying the various plants and explaining how each is grown, harvested and used. We learn that in the case of pepper we use the seeds, while in cardamom and ginger it is the root and cinnamon is the bark. We smell, taste and feel the fragrant plants, matching each to the little jars in our kitchen pantries at home. Then, bidding farewell, we continue across the island to our final destination.

The afternoon sun is high as we pull up the rutted drive to the Pongwe Beach Hotel with its twenty beachfront thatched-roof suites. The view stops me in my tracks. Powder-soft white sand rolls gently toward the spectacular waters of the Indian Ocean. Cobalt skies reflect pale soft blues, turquoise, azure, jade – every color in the palette, some that even Crayola has not yet discovered and named.

A small path leads past swaying palm trees that edge the beach. Brilliant blue loungers hide under thatch-topped umbrellas. Hammocks are strung between palm trees, inviting a nap in the afternoon heat, lulled by the gentle rhythms of the ocean.

The white sand is just below the surface; the water shallow and warm as a bathtub.

As the day draws to a close we watch the moon rise in the dark night sky.

Day Four: Pongwe Beach.

Morning dawns on an extraordinary site. Snow white sand dunes lay bare, the shallow water receding far back toward the reef. We kick off our flip flops and wade in, the water barely nipping at our ankles.

The beach is uncrowded, only small groups of local women draped in flowing multi-colored cotton garments, searching the tide pools and beaches, buckets in hand. Slowly they move back and forth, stopping, stooping to pick up a shell here or some seaweed there. They are gathering food. Once full, they carry the heavy buckets on their heads.

Young Maasi men approach tourists, hoping to garner tips in return for their guidance.

We wander in the shallow water, searching for shells and on the lookout for starfish. And as the tide returns, we retire to the beckoning blue lounge chairs on the beach to while away a lazy afternoon, readying ourselves for the arduous journey home.

From historic Stone Town to paradise on Pongwe Beach, Zanzibar has captured my heart, the perfect ending to a once in a lifetime adventure in unforgettable Africa.

IF YOU GO TO ZANZIBAR:

Zanzibar is a short, easy flight from Arusha, Kilimanjaro or Dar es Salaam airports on the mainland. Precision Air offers several flights each day.

Gosheni Safari Adventures: custom-make your Zanzibar adventure, from airport pick-up to transportation and tours. <http://www.gosheniadventures.com/>

Forodhani Park Hotel: a comfortable, Moroccan-influenced modest boutique hotel in old Stone Town, a short walk to the beach. Features delicious daily breakfast, small private balcony and rooftop pool patio area. <http://www.forodhaniparkhotel.com/>

Pongwe Beach Hotel: located on the east side of Zanzibar on one of the most beautiful beaches in Zanzibar. Large comfortable thatched-roof cottages with spacious open patio to the beach. Delicious gourmet meals served daily in the central dining room. Bicycles and watersports equipment available.

<http://pongwe.com/pongwe/contact-us/>

Precision Air: book your easy, affordable and dependable flight from mainland Tanzania to Zanzibar.

<https://www.precisionairtz.com/>