

THE SPIRIT OF STONE TOWN



DON'T OVERLOOK ZANZIBAR'S HISTORIC HEART IN THE RUSH FOR THE ISLAND'S WHITE-SAND BEACHES, SAYS **SUE WATT** – STONE TOWN IS WORTH LINGERING OVER.

‘T his old part of the city is a Unesco World Heritage Site so we couldn't change it even if we

wanted to,’ our guide Khamis Juma tells me with a wry smile as we meander around Stone Town’s alluring labyrinth of narrow alleyways, their crumbling coral-stone houses heaving with stories of the past.

Change certainly isn’t something you associate with the historic centre of Zanzibar: in many ways, it looks exactly as it did when I first set foot on the so-called Spice Island 20 years ago. Back then, like most visitors, I spent my time wallowing on its Indian Ocean beaches with shimmering turquoise seas and sand as soft as white pepper, only venturing into Stone Town for one day. But it’s a day I’ve never forgotten.

I remember vivid colours everywhere, on *kangas* and *kikois* (both kinds of sarongs), and garish, cartoon-like oil paintings of Maasai warriors, elephants and lions in Tingatinga style, all hung up for sale on weathered walls of mildewed houses. The heady scent of spices – cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves – drifted from market stalls as we wandered past in the stifling heat and humidity. And the persistent hawkers, aptly known as *papaasi* (Swahili for ticks), pestered us wherever we went.



WE SPEND OUR DAYS AMBLING AROUND, NO RUSH, NO PRESSURE.

Just before dusk, we watched young boys diving and bellyflopping off the quayside and guys on the beach running, playing football, or performing random handstands in the waves. We sipped sundowner G&Ts at the Blues Bar on a pier jutting into the sea to the soundtrack of Bobby McFerrin's *Don't Worry, Be Happy* on repeat. Wandering around Forodhani Gardens' frenetic food market, we saw cooks sweating over hot coals under torchlight, grilling sizzling fresh fish and glistening chunks of meat. Our night ended at the simple Seaview Indian restaurant, devouring a curry on its rickety balcony overlooking the harbour.

Since then, my partner Will and I have often dashed through Stone Town in our rush to reach Zanzibar's beaches. But this time, we're slowing things down, spending four days here soaking up the city vibe rather than the sun.

Stone Town is just one small part of Zanzibar City, which is home to around 600,000 people. The island is staunchly Muslim, cherishing a traditional Swahili culture imbued with Arabian and Indian influences and undiminished by the impact of today's tourism. Zanzibar's first visitors were drawn here centuries ago by its strategic position on the monsoon trade routes between Asia and Africa. Not all were welcome.

Portuguese explorers first set up a trading post here in the 15th century, only to be overthrown by the Omani Arabs nearly 200 years later. Under their watch, Zanzibar thrived as a centre for ivory, spices – and, sadly, slaves:



PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Aerial view of Stone Town.

**OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT:**
*Wandering Stone Town's
streets; A coffee seller;
A man jumps off the sea wall;
The House of Wonders.*

THIS PAGE:
*Local men playing Mancala, a
traditional board game.*



thousands of men, women and children were callously sold to the highest bidders, with Arabs, Europeans, Indians and even Africans all involved in this heartless trade. Such was Stone Town's prosperity that from 1840 to 1856 it even became the capital of the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman.

On our walking tour, Khamis shows us the legacy of Oman's colonial opulence that is now inextricably part of Stone Town's soul. When the past mingles with the present, old places find new purpose and change does happen. Take the turreted Old Fort built 300 years ago: still dominating the seafront, today it's a craft centre and home to Zanzibar's renowned Sauti za Busara festival, showcasing Swahili music, from traditional taarab to hip-hop.

Along the seafront, the Sultan's former home has morphed into the Palace Museum, offering insights into royal life through furnishings and fashions over the years, Murano glass and 1950s Formica included. Nearby, a cultural centre and offices are housed within the beautiful Old Dispensary, a former Indian merchant's home with brightly coloured stained-glass windows, elaborate balconies and spectacular views of the harbour, although cruise ships now dwarf the traditional dhows and fishing boats. Opposite the port, the Big Tree, a huge banyan, stands proudly, providing shelter from the blazing sun to men wearing *kanzus* (long white tunics) and drinking coffee.

Our tour ends at the forbidding Anglican

Cathedral, built on the site of the former slave market. It's easy to imagine ghosts here. 'The altar is where the "whipping tree" stood, where slaves were tied and whipped to test their strength,' Khamis tells us. Outside, a striking sculpture of five slaves chained together in a sunken pit epitomises the despair of all those caught up in this tragic trade.

We spend our remaining days ambling around, no rush, no pressure, just soaking up the spirit of Stone Town. Our hotel, Jafferji House, adds to its mystique. Deep in the maze of the ancient streets, it's over 150 years old, full of narrow corridors, creaky stairs and sumptuous jewel-coloured décor, with antiques in every nook and cranny.

We frequently get lost, distracted by old houses with latticed balconies and ornately carved wooden doors. Some are polished and shiny, others dry and dusty. Several buildings patiently await restoration, among them the ceremonial palace Beit al Ajaib. Known as the House of Wonders, it partially collapsed on Christmas Day 2020, leaving its intricate verandas and iron columns surrounded by rubble.

One morning, we wander around Darajani Market, once an Arab souk, with its fish and butchers' stalls, its sweet aromas of fruit carts and spices, and the nauseating stench of live chickens. Aside from the car spares, plastic kitchenware and flip-flops for sale outside, this place probably hasn't changed in years.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Old Fort (Ngome Kongwe);
The Slave Market
Memorial outside the
Anglican Cathedral; Close-
up of one of the statues of
the slaves.



Yet some things have changed. On the seafront, I discover with a tinge of sadness that the Blues Bar and Seaview Indian Restaurant have both closed, but others have opened, along with the colourful Mizingani Seafront Hotel in yet another former royal palace, international flags fluttering in the breeze. At Forodhani Gardens, the boys still dive from the quay into the sea, but the food market has had a facelift, with better lighting, vast menus and chefs in full whites.

In the name of research, we try the smart rooftop bar at 6 Degrees South and the top-

notch Beach House Restaurant, both very cool with gorgeous ocean views. But our favourite place, our 'local', is the simple Traveller's Café overlooking the beach, hidden incongruously among the luxury hotels of Kelele Square. Every evening, we drink our G&Ts watching traditional dhows going out to sea for fishing or for sunset cruises, and enjoy a grandstand view of the guys who still play football on the sand until the sun goes down.

Stone Town, it seems, is ever-changing, yet strangely never-changing, always moving on, yet also holding on to its stories of the past.



THIS SPREAD:
*View of the blue waters
surrounding Stone Town.*

Photo Credits: Dreamstime.

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Kenya Airways is your best bet for international flights to Zanzibar, with connections from Nairobi; alternatively, fly to Dar es Salaam on the mainland then take a local scheduled flight or a ferry. Choose your ferry company carefully as there have been some tragic accidents.

BEST TIME TO GO

Zanzibar is good to visit throughout the year, with temperatures consistently between 26°C and 33°C, although rainy season (March–May) can be sticky and humid.

CURRENCY Tanzanian shillings.

TIME ZONE GMT +3

FOOD

Don't miss the buzz of Forodhani's food market – just make sure your food is properly cooked and keep an eye on your tab.

WHERE TO STAY

Jafferji House, Serena Hotel, or Mizingani Seafront Hotel. There are also plenty of cheaper B&Bs available.

HOW TO DO IT

It's fairly straightforward to travel independently here. Tour operators such as Expert Africa and Cox & Kings can book everything for you or combine a Zanzibar stay with a safari on the Tanzanian mainland.

MUST-PACK ITEM

Cool clothes that won't offend the Muslim culture, especially during Ramadan: swimsuits, strappy T-shirts and shorts are acceptable on the beach, but more modest dress is appreciated in town.

WHY GO

To get lost in the maze of Stone Town's ancient streets, immerse yourself in its rich but heart-rending history, watch footie on the beach and drift off on a sunset dhow cruise.

Sue travelled to Zanzibar with Cox & Kings.