

# *Hakuna Matata*

Off the East coast of Tanzania, basking in the Indian Ocean sun, lies Zanzibar – a tropical island like no other. Editor Heather Ingarfield spent a week there, eating, drinking and lolling in the sand

ZANZIBAR  
EXCLUSIVE



'It's just like I pictured,' I say, taking off my airport shoes (which are just really comfortable, but now a little smelly after seven hours of flying, sneakers). The soft white curtains in the villa dance in the breeze coming through the sliding doors, revealing what was to be our view for the next four days. The shadows of bent palm trees bounced in the afternoon sun, casting dappled light on the powder-white sand. The ocean lapped softly, changing from turquoise to a peacock blue as the clouds masked the sun. The humid air clung to my neck, and the warm wind swirled through my hair. It's not the kind of wind that scrapes the first layer of skin off your legs (spoken like a real Capetonian who's spent many days chasing umbrellas on Camps Bay beach). It's an unassuming wind that is entirely necessary to cut through the humidity and 30°C weather - and that's in winter.

We'd chosen to explore Zanzibar in low season, desperate to break away from the typical tropical-island scene of tourists sprawled out head-to-toe on the beach, sunning their pale torsos while marvelling over the strength of the African sun and demolishing their mojitos in one quaff. With all its rich history and fascinating culture, Zanzibar deserved more.

You can thank the monsoons that blow across the Indian Ocean for its existence - they opened the lines of communication between Persia, Arabia, India and the coast of East Africa (including the islands of Zanzibar) some 2 000 years ago. The first European arrivals were Portuguese navigators looking for a trade route to India. They reached Zanzibar at the end of the 15th century and established a bustling trading station there. They languished in the African heat, munched on coconuts and sunk Portuguese spice plants into the island soil, only to be ousted by the Omani Arabs at the end of the 17th century. People flocked from Arab countries to Zanzibar, where they brought with them the Islamic religion.

Omani Sultan Said built his kingdom and elaborate palaces, turned the island into a thriving slave centre, galvanised critical trading routes for cotton cloth, porcelain and copper, established Zanzibar as an increasingly powerful and important commercial centre - and reigned supreme over the coastal Bantu people. At the same time, the Bantu were developing their own culture, one that inevitably turned out to be intricately intertwined with Arab traditions - they became known as the Swahili, the name stemming from the Arabic word *sahil*, meaning coast.

GOOD TO KNOW

**1. Dollars**

Pretty much everything in Zanzibar is priced in the local shilling or US dollars. If you're buying curios or fresh produce at the markets, however, it's best to do your bartering in shilling. The second you display your dollars, the price will double.

**2. Typical prices...**

Of the critical things, drinks: Coke \$4, beer \$7, Savanna Dry \$8, double G&T \$15. Lunch is around \$25 per person.

**3. Beach boys**

There's a roaring trade happening on the beaches, with locals selling everything from curios and clothes to boat- and snorkelling trips, and beach BBQs. They're very friendly and perfectly harmless, but they might join you and your other half on your romantic beach walk trying to befriend you as part of their sales pitch. If it's privacy you're after, be open upfront and tell them clearly that you're not interested.

**4. Appropriate attire**

Zanzibar is a Muslim country, so be mindful of this when stepping out of your resort's ground. Cover up appropriately – covered knees and shoulders for the ladies.

**5. Taxis**

In general, Zanzibar is pretty affordable. The thing that's going to eat into your budget the most is the taxis. Bank on around \$1/km.



WHITE SAND LUXURY VILLAS & SPA

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Airport shoes stashed far away, bikini on, we leave the villa and make a beeline straight for the ocean. It was only once we were wallowing in the knee-high tepid water, wooden fishing boats bobbing around in the distance, not a single other soul on the beach, that we could fully appreciate the beauty of our first stop on the island, White Sand Luxury Villas & Spa.

With only 11 luxurious villas, each located on its own private plot, White Sand is just the kind of exclusive resort we wanted. Each villa has its own garden, pool, dining area and living area – but the most exciting part was the outdoor shower and bath, encased in a stone cocoon and open to the starry sky. 'Nature, space and harmony, all with a sophisticated touch, inspired the design of the resort,' says Linda Le Dirach, White Sand's general manager.

Located on Paje beach on the south-east side of the island, the family-owned villa is quickly securing its name as the perfect spot for honeymooning couples. 'Our beach, with its very white sand and very blue water, is quiet, as we are near a small cliff. It's pretty

perfect for long walks on the beach,' Linda told us upon arrival.

'*Jambo! Jaaaaaaaaaaaaambo!*' a voice comes in over the crystalline water from the shore.

We squint through the white glare, trying to make out more than a waving hand. The silhouette hangs around for a while, but moves on when we get distracted trying to perform a cartwheel in knee-high water (despite how much of a cartwheel master you may think you are, you can't do it). Seven hundred belly flops later, we paddle back to shore, motivated by our hunger and the Swahili-inspired braai being fired up at the resort.

A mere 49 km from Tanzania – on a commercial flight, it's an ascent that goes straight into the descent down to Ugunja, the largest island in the archipelago and home to the international airport – Zanzibar is a predominantly Muslim country. The fascinating Arab-Bantu plait is most evident in the food. Spices are the very foundation on which the island and cultures were built, from cinnamon, cloves and saffron, to chai, masala and pepper. Cloves were introduced



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**BRAND NEW!**

Zuri Zanzibar, which just opened in June, offers a completely unique experience in Zanzibar for anyone looking for something off the beaten African track – a place that allows guests a feeling of peace and tranquillity. 'Zuri' means 'beautiful' in Swahili, which is the language of the island of Zanzibar – and that is precisely the feeling Zuri Zanzibar wants guests to experience in its 32 acre micro-universe. The resort is nestled on the most beautiful white beach of the north-western shores of the island. The hotel is self-sufficient as much as possible and socially responsive, offering lifestyle accommodation in 55 bungalows, suites and villas. For culinary delights, Zuri Zanzibar presents three bars and four restaurants; the 'Dining by Design' concept gives guests a choice of special dining experiences. [www.azanzibar.com](http://www.azanzibar.com)



by French colonies from Île de France (now Mauritius), Seychelles and Réunion. Their plantations on the island flourished, leading to the opening of farms and distilleries and establishing Zanzibar as one of the most important clove producers in Africa. For families on the island, it's most useful for treating toothache – just rubbing a clove on the throbbing tooth can ease the pain.

'Jambol' one of the resort staff sings to us as he cruises past on a bicycle. We're strolling arm in arm, chasing the seafood aromas suspended in the evening air. White Sand is a sprawling network of paths, all flanked by soft beach sand and lush greenery, and leading off to the villas, spa, open-air gym, beach bar, and the setting for the evening braai: the main pool area.

Hurricane lanterns frame the shimmering blue pool, casting an amber glow on the tables, all of which are adorned with white tablecloths, and too many sets of knives and forks. On the other side of the pool, a seafood braai and buffet awaits. I try to show restraint, but end up piling my plate with calamari and mango salad, sushi rolls made with fresh seaweed, shot glasses filled with chilled pumpkin and cinnamon soup, fresh avocado salad, grilled red snapper, rock lobster, charred jacket potatoes, lamb chops and beef skewers. Through the haze of cocktails and a sugary banana flan, we realised we were already totally entranced by the island.

From the home-made banana bread and spicy omelettes for breakfast, to the whole fried snapper and fries for lunch, and creamy coconut curry for dinner, we dined like kings, feasting on the local flavours and being consistently surprised by the diversity and complexity of the flavours.



**BOUTIQUE HOTEL MATLAI**  
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'We've got something really special for you tonight,' Linda tells us. It's our last full day at White Sand, and after SUPing (they have the boards, as well as snorkelling and kite-surfing gear, at the Zanzibar Kite Paradise shop right next door), snacking on burgers and pizza poolside and lolling around on the beach, we were ending the itinerary with a full-body massage at the spa. Tucked away like a tropical oasis, the spa has two open therapy rooms, a steam room and a sauna, set amid jungle-green foliage. With delicate white curtains separating us from the bird chatter and balmy scent of the island, we settle into the massage beds and let the skilled therapists knead the last of the city stress from our muscles.

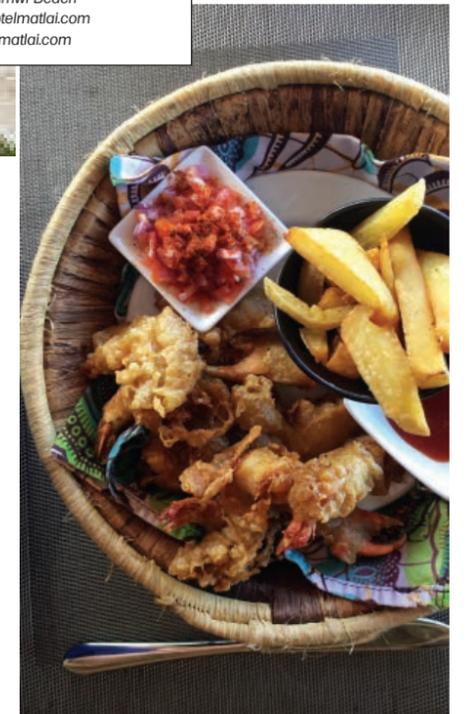
Unbeknown to us, back at the villa, a private dining room was being constructed on the slice of beach in front of our room: palm fronds were twisted into an elaborate canopy adorned with crimson, orange and white flowers, under which a table was laid, waiting for us. There we sat, side by side, under the blaze of the Moon, practising the Swahili phrases we'd picked up (the most famous of which, 'hakuna matata', is actually used by locals) and savouring the shrimp soup, chicken breyani and barracuda steak.

'It feels like we're the only people in the world right now. I wonder what the beach will be like when we head north tomorrow,' I say over my last bite of chocolate mousse.

The next day, as we drive into Boutique Hotel Matlai, we discover that further north, the beach is a little different, but equally as beautiful. Sitting on Michamwi, on the south-east coast of the island, Matlai is an exclusive and extremely private hotel with only two villas (Asili House and Villa Kidoshu) and six rooms. German owner Inge Becker-Boost had a dream of opening a hotel on the beach, and after a few holidays to Cameroon and Tanzania with her family, completely fell in love with Zanzibar.

'There are so many different cultures here – you can see the African, Arabic and Indian influence everywhere, in the buildings, food, furniture, people and history. And because of the coral stones on our beach, it's always changing and the colours of the ocean are incredible,' Inge tells us as she leads us into the reception area of Asili House.

A circular pool sits in the centre of the villa, merging with the bright blue ocean on the horizon. On either side are the rooms, each with their own deck, reclining chairs and unimpeded views of the beach. In the



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time it takes Inge to explain the inspiration behind the design of the villa ('The idea was to have a mixture of the different cultural influences, and for it to be spacious and open, yet also cosy and private.'). the ocean has gone from a moody cyan to a glistening green and back to the quintessential tropical turquoise as the tide draws nearer.

Our room is spectacular, designed purely to allow for as much ocean gazing as possible, with large doors and windows opening on to the short lawn and sprawling ocean. Inge was going for the outside-in feel, and it's definitely the most prominent feature of the room. The open-plan bathroom, with its (super private) beach views and expansive shower (it actually has no doors), houses a gorgeous Victorian claw-foot bath, which is surrounded only by some green foliage, bamboo shoots and soft linen. Beyond the tub and our villa lies Inge's prized tropical garden.

Wild yet maintained, plants and their colourful flowers cover the grounds of Matlai, leaving their dewy, heady scent in the air. They're carved to make way for the paths leading to the beach bar, garden dining area and outdoor games area (where you can play a game of volleyball or boules, if you're not too busy doing nothing but sipping cocktails in the pool). 'We started to plant the trees and flowers very early on - the garden areas are much cooler, which is important during the hot season,' Inge says. 'Sometimes, when it is too windy in front of the houses in the afternoon, the guests can stay in the garden.'

The garden is breathtaking, and the birdsong is ringing through my ears, but I'm ready for the pool - and a cocktail. And that's pretty

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much where we stayed for the next four days, emerging only to dine on Matlai's exquisite cuisine, particularly their spicy samosas, seafood coconut curries, their famous fish burger, red-curry chicken skewers, home-made chapatis and a fiery chicken masala. We played giant Mikado (pick-up sticks) under the Zanzibar sun, went for long walks on the beach and did some shopping at the beachside curio stalls, and spent endless hours floating around the pool on large bean bags, watching the tide seep in and draw out.

'While it's low tide, take these reef shoes and go snorkelling,' Inge tells us. Matlai is very close to the very seductively named Blue Lagoon, one of the best snorkelling spots on the island. It's best to get there by boat, but from our shore, we could stroll out to a coral reef. Snorkelling gear in hand, we cruised out, taking full advantage of the low tide to investigate what lies beneath - and realising why the reef shoes are a necessity. The sand and rocks are home to millions of black spiky sea urchins, some growing as large as the size of a grapefruit. One of those spikes in the baby-soft skin under your little toe would definitely put a



## 5 THINGS I PACKED ... AND NEVER WORE

**1. Jeans.** I mean, I don't even know what I was thinking. Jeans? When it's 30°C and 95% humidity, the last thing you ever want to slide on to your sweaty leg is jeans. Not even for dinner, not even if it happens to rain. Just, no.

**2. Classy sandals.** I went barefoot or wore my Havaianas. I thought I might want to be fancy and wear nice sandals, but once I was in island mode, I went full beach bum.

**3. Blouse.** I mean a strappy top, but a swanky chiffon or something other than cotton. Once again, full beach-bum mode meant that I only wanted to wear vests or T-shirts. Work-like blouses? Keep them at home!

**4. Jersey.** What if it gets cold? I thought. It didn't. And we weren't even there in high season. Take something warmer to fly in, and leave it at that.

**5. 24 dresses.** I think I wore three dresses only. The rest of the time, I was in my cossie or shorts and a T-shirt. I thought I'd be swanning around in a new dress each day. I was wrong.

dampener on your holiday. Out in what felt like the middle of the ocean before breakfast, it was just us and the fishermen. They laughed and yelled happily at each other while setting their lines and packing away their catch of the day. It's like they truly had no worries in the world.

I really thought *'hakuna matata'* was only meaningful because of *The Lion King* and the crooning meerkat and warthog who brought the phrase into song.

But travelling to Zanzibar made me realise that it's the people of the island who bring this phrase to life. Their friendly, calm natures and wide smiles instantly make you feel like everything will be okay – a problem-free philosophy. It's palpable. The only way you can say, *'Jambol'* is in an indescribably happy, sing-song manner. You can't walk a metre without someone shooting you a genuine smile. And the evocative sounds of the muezzins float through the alluring smells of spices and fish.

My first thought of Zanzibar when we arrived was that it was like any other tropical island. A collection of clichéd adjectives, turquoise waters and powder-soft sand.

But the truth is, Zanzibar is nothing like I thought. It is so much more. ♥

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## THE SPICE TOUR & STONE TOWN

One of the most popular excursions on the island are tours of the spice farms and Stone Town. The spice-farm tour happens like this: Your taxi driver will drive you to the starting point, where lots of different guides will be waiting. You (or in our case, the driver from White Sand) will choose a guide. He'll then take you on a walking tour through the farms, showing you all the delightful spices, coconuts and herbs growing on the island. It takes about 2 hours, and your guide will expect about \$20 for his services. Along the way, he enlists his friends to make you leafy fashion accessories (bags, hats, ties, jewellery) and retrieve coconuts for you to sip on. They'll also ask for a tip, so make sure you have a bit of cash on you.

It's a similar scene for the Stone Town tour. Stone Town is an incredibly historic, fascinating place that you should spend a good few hours in. Finding a tour guide to take you around is not mandatory, but if you want someone to explain what Wonder House is or show you Jaw's Corner, a guide will help.