

Spice of life

A new resort in Zanzibar encourages clients to forge local connections, writes **Alice Barnes-Brown**

You could set your watch by the flotilla of fishing boats that sails south through Zanzibar's Matemwe lagoon each day at 1.30pm. As I tuck into my lunchtime feast of green-chilli-sprinkled paneer curry at the new Matemwe Attitude resort, I count a rainbow of 15 dinghies taking advantage of the low tide. Seeing local life up-close can be difficult when staying in an all-inclusive resort, but here, I'm at the heart of the action.

RESORT LIFE

When this 74-villa, adult-only resort opened last November, it was Attitude's first property outside Mauritius, though it has quickly become Kuoni's top-performing resort in Tanzania. Some facilities were yet to open when I arrived, but I was able to try the tasty buffets at main Chakula Chakula restaurant, à la carte dining on the beach, cocktails at the two bars plus plenty of chill time at the two pools.

Matemwe is Zanzibar's longest beach, so there's plenty of space to spread out on the cornflour-fine sand. Active clients keen to explore can join staff on a 5km power walk, passing herds of resting cows and swaying coconut trees before dunking into the shallow sea. If clients are worried about hawkers at the beach, there's no need – Maasai security guards from the mainland keep a careful watch.

The resort is well and truly rooted in the region's culture. As I opened the solid wooden door to my Deluxe Villa, I spotted the Swahili touches immediately, from the distinctive *makuti* thatched roof to handcrafted towel hooks carved with flowers. In fact, nearly half of the furniture in each room is produced in Zanzibar, and many other pieces are made on the Tanzanian mainland.

However, Matemwe Attitude's remote location on Zanzibar has its challenges: power cuts can happen throughout the day, and there are sometimes shortages of imported foods. ➤

Matemwe Attitude resort, Zanzibar

DESTINATIONS

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PICTURES: Julien Pelleier; Studio V

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Maasai staff member; Matemwe Attitude's Chakula Chakula restaurant; view of Mnemba Island; local fishermen

UNDER THE SEA

North of the hotel lies diminutive Mnemba Island, a popular snorkelling area and conservation site. The resort's on-site marine biologist Shadrack led us on a snorkelling trip to Mnemba with local operator One Ocean Dive Centre, boarding a traditional Zanzibari dhow to sail over to the island.

"Those fishermen you saw from the hotel have been here for years – they know where to go to find the current," says Shadrack as the boat glides across glass-like waves. He tells us to expect plenty of fish, but adds that increased construction from large-scale resorts in the area has compounded threats against the native turtle population. He says: "Sea turtles laid eggs in Mnemba, but you can't see any now. I've seen six turtles in three years."

Indeed, there are no turtles today; however, I do see shoals of triggerfish, stonefish, scorpionfish

and long, yellow trumpetfish, as well as a puffer fish huffing below. I also spy a starfish draped over a rock, its purple arms lolling off the edge of the coral. Feeling inspired, I shake my shoulders loose as I float in the sapphire waters.

Our next snorkel stop brings us to a coral nursery, where local NGOs are growing healthy coral. It's interesting to view the scene from above. Each grid is a different shape – whether star, turtle or flower – and the coral growth is starting to flourish. Reassuringly, sea creatures have set up camp here already: a batfish weaves between the rocks, while dories and sea snakes peek up to suss me out.

STONE TOWN

Zanzibar's past is as intriguing as its underwater world. Unesco-listed capital Stone Town was once home to spice (and slave) traders from the Arab world, Indian

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subcontinent and Europe, who each left their architectural mark on the Swahili port.

Our guide Mussawir stood out even amid the city's hustle and bustle in a tall kofia cap and palm-frond-woven satchel, and soon set the tone for what became a refreshingly honest walking tour. "Before Zanzibar was famous for tourism, it was famous for three things: slavery, ivory and spice. If you didn't have a slave, you probably were a slave," he says.

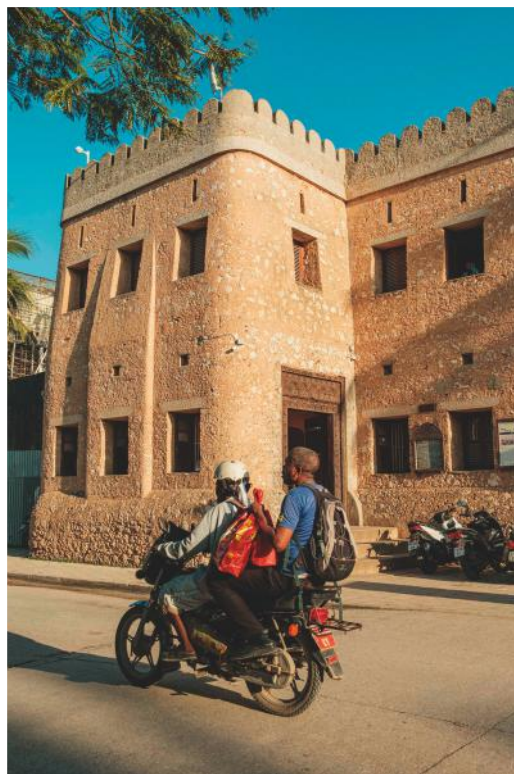
We stop to fuel up on caffeine from a coffee vendor, who we're told is a local fixture. "This man is a third-generation seller. If he isn't selling coffee, the city simply won't drink it," Mussawir quips. I thank him in Swahili while accepting my steaming little cup, and sip carefully.

We spend hours in Stone Town's shaded backstreets, admiring towering doors that are painted, studded and engraved to represent the families who once dwelled in these old buildings. Mussawir explains: "These remind us of Zanzibar's heyday, when doors were seen as the ultimate symbol of status. Doors ascribed to your values and occupation."

The grandest entrance of all stands outside the Aga Khan Mosque, flanked with golden pillars and Gujarati inscriptions. "It's the most well-maintained door on the island," says Mussawir – though there are 30 other mosques, two temples and two churches in town. ➤

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ABOVE: Mamas of Zanzibar offers a taste of local culture through women's eyes (left); Stone Town PICTURES: Studio V

We lose track of time wandering between sleepy squares and petting stray cats, with only the setting sun and meditative call to prayer echoing off Stone Town's coral brick walls to remind us to head home.

MAMA KNOWS BEST

Close to Stone Town is tourism co-operative Mamas of Zanzibar, which offers henna workshops and cooking classes (bookable via Attitude; a half-day cooking class costs \$100 per person). Founder Maskat lived in Matemwe for 10 years and, prior to starting the Mamas, had a 15-year career in hotel sales and marketing. As we sit on vibrant mats etched with a Swahili greeting, she tells her story.

"After my divorce, I was unemployed and had lots of time to get to know my neighbours' stories and issues. I had an idea of how we could support each other – to give tourists the culture of Zanzibar through women's eyes. We're a group of 20-25 ladies, and everything that is contributed goes directly to us."

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Zanzibar's conservative culture makes it tough for women to earn an independent living, and many of the Mamas had to ask their husband's permission to join, but Maskat's initiative has a healthy waiting list.

Eight women are present today, sporting identical blue kanga headscarves, which they wrap us in ahead of a visit to Chuini market. I'm paired with Salma, a former Stone Town guide.

We check off the items on our shopping list, inspecting a veritable cornucopia of fruits and vegetables, until we reach the most important of all – coconuts. "You don't want the ones with too much water inside, as they are very young," Salma tells me. I shake them about

a little but my ear isn't attuned to the sound, so I shoot Salma a defeated look and she steps in.

A short but bone-shaking tuk-tuk ride takes us back to the kitchen, where we set about grating coconuts, grinding spices and mashing tomatoes for a lunch of spiced stews and samosas, our speed controlled either by Maskat's young son, reminding us to go "pole, pole" (slowly, slowly), or the Mamas singing traditional Zanzibari chants to speed us up.

Kneading dough is more within my comfort zone than coconuts, so I sit with Muskat and shape it into rounds while she shares her hopes of opening another Mamas of Zanzibar base. "I know people from Matemwe who can benefit from being part of the Mamas. It's hard work, but it empowers them – it uplifts them," she says, looking around at a kitchen full of women helping women.

I've learnt so much about this storied island, but it still has one more surprise in store. On our final night, we dine on Matemwe

WHAT'S NEW



✿ Matemwe Attitude's second beach area is now complete, with Fukwe beach shack serving up drinks and casual plates, including *mishikaki* Tanzanian skewers.



✿ The POZ spa has opened, offering single and double massage cabins so clients can indulge in all-natural treatments by the sand.



✿ Eight Beachfront Villas are now available, each one allocated its own reserved beach cabana.

Attitude's beach, and with only candles to light our table, I see the constellations in breathtaking clarity. We have enjoyed plenty of eye-opening conversations with the people of Zanzibar, but this dazzling night show of stars – with Orion's Belt at the heart of it – stuns us into reverent silence. **TW**

BOOK IT

Kuoni sells a seven-night, half-board stay in a Swim-Up Villa from £2,175 per person, based on two sharing. Includes luggage, transfers and Ethiopian Airlines flights from Heathrow departing in November. kuoni.co.uk