

ZanziStar

This group of Indian Ocean islands is worth a visit at any time of year, finds Olivia Greenway

Zanzibar is an Instagrammer's dream: miles of sugar-sand beaches, turquoise waters and palm trees along the shoreline. It's hot and humid, with long hours of sunlight, making it a year-round destination. And being just a few degrees south of the Equator, sunsets are spectacular.

Although Zanzibar is a semi-autonomous region of Tanzania, the 40 miles of sea that separate the island from the mainland make all the difference. Zanzibar's history as a slave and spice trading centre drew in a mix of cultures and food – African, Arabian and Indian – resulting in Unesco World Heritage status for Stone Town on main island Unguja, which is both a tourist attraction and a magnet for the islands' million inhabitants.

Once known for low prices, the country is popular with backpackers, but since its first five-star hotel opened in 2015, ushering in a wave of upscale tourism, it has developed into a compelling, competitively priced destination that compares well with other Indian Ocean escapes.

WHAT TO SEE: SPICES AND SNORKELLING

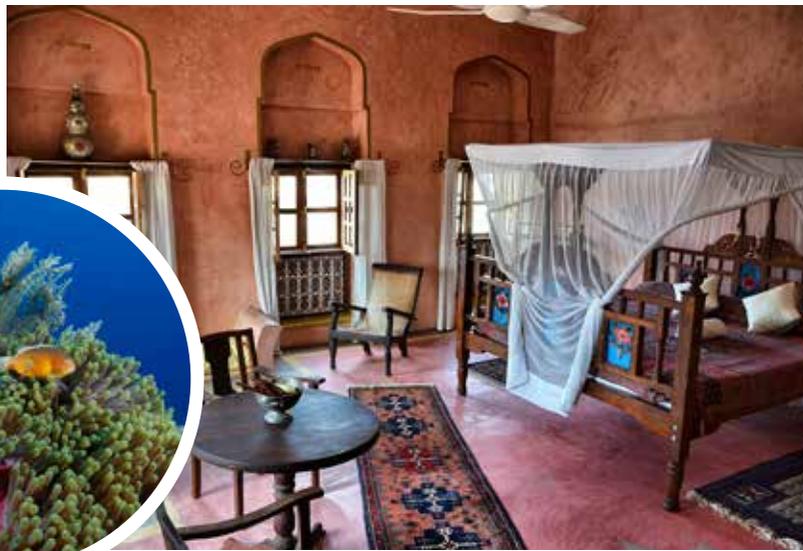
Top of the list is Stone Town. The compact, historic city gets its name from the limestone corals (or stones) from which its oldest buildings were made. A walking tour will take you through narrow car-free alleyways, past ornately carved doors, to the Old Fort and amphitheatre, and to the site of the slave market and Darajani produce market, where wet fish compete with heady spices to emit the more pungent aroma.

Visitors can buy local henna paintings or visit a herbalist – his shop marked out by the animal skins hanging outside to ward away bad spirits – or eat from the barbecue food stalls at Forodhani Gardens near the harbour, which becomes a ➤



LEFT: Paintings for sale in Stone Town; street food at Forodhani Gardens
BELOW: Diving in Zanzibar; accommodation at Zanzibar Coffee House

PICTURES: Shutterstock; Adam Sokolski/Dive Point Zanzibar



meeting place at dusk. From here, numerous boat trips depart for sunset cruises.

Islanders are generally poor and even those in employment are not well paid. My guide from ZanTours, one of the biggest and most reasonably priced tour companies, told me that he has a government job but works on his days off to get extra money for his family.

Spice farms remain a key source of income, and a visit to see the spices growing and being harvested by hand is a must. Tangawizi spice farm, which translates as 'ginger', offers a free two-hour guided tour, although guides rely on tips and purchases from the on-site shop.

There are also opportunities to see dolphins and giant tortoises on Prison Island (from around £30), or visit the endangered red colobus monkeys in Jozani Forest (£45), though warn clients to choose their tour company carefully to avoid compromising animal welfare standards.

Snorkelling in the coral reefs that surround the islands is superb, with at least 400 varieties of colourful fish and sometimes pods of dolphins. The best site for scuba diving is Mnemba atoll, where Dive Point Zanzibar, part of the Sunshine Marine Lodge resort, runs diving trips.

WHERE TO STAY: AFFORDABLE LUXURY

Zanzibar has a wide range of accommodation to suit all pockets, from modest B&Bs to swish resorts. It takes up to 90 minutes to travel from north to south; as it's a bumpy road, visitors due to head north might be wise to spend a couple of days exploring Stone Town first before transferring.

New properties include Zuri Zanzibar, which

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opened in 2018 on the island's northwest coast in sheltered waters and with safe swimming from 300 metres of private beach. Socially responsible, and with 45 bungalows set in 32 acres of gardens, it's already enjoying high occupancy. Half-board is from \$410 per bungalow per night.

Another venue of note is the Zanzibar Coffee House. This cafe not only serves the best coffee and cakes but is also attached to a delightful small hotel, which dates from 1885 and comes with period rooms and a rooftop bar.

For guests who like the familiarity of a brand, there is Park Hyatt, close to Stone Town, and Serena. All-inclusive resorts include Diamond La Gemma in the north and Baraza Resort & Spa and The Palms on the east coast.

HOW TO SELL: SUN AND SAFARI

Zanzibar positions itself as a year-round destination, but March to May sees the heaviest rainfall and a risk of flooding. Although it is hot all year, the winter months (June to October) are cooler. However, being only 20 miles wide, you're never far from the breeze of the coast.

Zanzibar is popular with honeymooners, whether as the perfect place to unwind after a dusty safari or to visit in its own right.

Most accommodation has air-conditioning but a few don't – even the luxury ones – so do check, if this is important to clients. Some resorts have steep steps to the beach or dimly lit paths leading to bungalows or villas, so guests with limited mobility might prefer a hotel with a lift.

Visitors need a visa for Tanzania, which can be obtained from the embassy or on entry for \$50 (credit card only). The currency is Tanzanian shillings but for a short visit, you should be able to manage with US dollars, which are widely accepted.

Zanzibar offers plenty of bang for your buck, whether visitors choose an all-inclusive honeymoon or prefer to combine culture and food with a helping of winter sun. **TW**

BOOK IT

Hayes & Jarvis offers a 10-night holiday in Tanzania and Zanzibar from £5,499. The price includes a four-night Highlights of Northern Tanzania tour, six nights' all-inclusive at the five-star Baraza Resort and Spa in Zanzibar and return flights from Heathrow with Emirates, departing on January 10, 2020. hayesandjarvis.co.uk

Kuoni offers a week's half-board at Bluebay Beach Resort & Spa in Zanzibar from £1,957, departing December 5, including flights from London. kuoni.co.uk