

Travel

One Ocean's Sylvia looks on as butterflyfish whip themselves into a frenzy feeding.

REFRESHING ZANZIBAR

It's the archetypal tropical island paradise. So what can be said about Zanzibar that we haven't heard before? Aaron Gekoski dives in to find out

Few places evoke such romantic images as Zanzibar Island. Even its name exudes a sense of tranquillity: Zan-zee-bahhhh. This delicious 1 660km² bolt-hole attracts dreamers, poets and travel writers who tell us all about those palm-fringed beaches and the white, powdery sand. And yes, the dhow-laden turquoise waters and

five-star lodges sound nice too. Yet a little less is known about what lies beneath these pretty scenes.

With 40kg of underwater camera gear and my 47kg partner, Gem, in tow, I'm off to check out some of the island's top diving sites. Like most travellers, our first experience of Zanzibar comes in the frenetic form of Stone Town, the old quarter of ▶



the capital, Zanzibar Town.

Stone Town manages to charm its way through the chaos by mixing a rich history with a hefty dose of charm. The best thing to do here is discard the guide book and get lost amongst the higgledy-piggledy alleyways of baked coral stone houses.

These lead us to Darajani market, the beating heart of the city. Swathes of colour greet us: mounds of plump yellow mangoes, deep orange pyramids of turmeric and piles of red-hot chillis. Down back alleys, optimistic vendors sell scarves, sandals, kitsch wooden carvings and kanga. “\$20. OK, \$15. Tell you what, mister – for you, \$10. Hakuna matata, no worries.”

Before travelling to any new country, I always learn three important – and completely disingenuous – words in the local dialect: “I live here.” The aim is to minimise tedious bartering rituals

and strike the best deals. My dodgy Kiswahili appears to have worked: one “naishi hapa” later, the kanga’s Gem’s for \$5.

As the light fades, it throws a pastel blue veil over Stone Town. We head to Forodhani Gardens, the city’s seafront night market, where chefs are setting up their stalls as children hurl themselves into the ocean, performing impressive flips before connecting with the water.

Around the square, locals and tourists gather to chat and sip a pleasant concoction of sugar cane juice mixed with ginger and lime. We also tuck into a famous Zanzibar “pizza” with Nutella and banana. In reality, it’s more of a stuffed pancake. Either way, it’s delicious.

We shun the pricey, not-so-fresh-looking seafood kebabs for Archipelagos restaurant. I salivate over perfect fillets of red snapper, while Gem falls unnervingly quiet as she wolfs down a Swahili prawn curry.

FROM THE BOWL TO THE BEACH

Over the next couple of days, we visit nearby Changuu Island, which was used to imprison slaves in the 1860s. Piling out of the city to join us are some Italians, who don neon vests and hotpants. This failure to respect the island’s predominantly Muslim culture irritates us: visitors should cover their shoulders and the tops of their legs.

Aside from scantily clad morons, the only other inhabitants of Changuu nowadays are the Aldabra giant tortoises, originally a gift from the British Governor of the Seychelles. Craning out of ancient necks to reveal grizzled faces, it would appear they rather enjoy a tickle on the chin.

While we’re inclined to steer clear of traditional tourist activities, we also embark on a Spice Tour, which involves a trip to local farms to ➤

*Above: Gem gathers her thoughts at idyllic Ras Michamvi Beach.
Opposite: Children frolic in the water, Stone Town.
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**BENEATH US IN THE 29°C WATER, A CORAL
BRAIN AND STAG CORAL BLOOM OUT OF**

**BUFFET AWAITS: CABBAGE, ACROPORA,
THE SAND, PERFECT MARINE SCULPTURES**

The colours of
Mnemba: Sylvia
at coral outcrop,
Moray City.



see how cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg are cultivated. It's well choreographed stuff, but interesting nonetheless.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Having ticked off a few of the city's "must-do" activities, it's time to escape the all-consuming heat and get down to my favourite pastime: diving. One Ocean is Zanzibar's largest, longest-serving dive operator. We load up its traditional dhow and glide through gloriously flat, brilliant blue water to Pange, a small sandbank just 1,5km from shore.

I back-roll into the Indian Ocean to be embraced by 29°C water.



Beneath us a coral buffet awaits: cabbage, Acropora, brain and stag coral bloom out of the sand, perfect marine sculptures. In amongst these works of art, we spot various nudibranchs (a type of sea slug), unicornfish, lizardfish, pufferfish, boxfish and a school of yellow and black sweetlips, which all smear neon trails across the coral canvas. It's a superb start.

MINI-ITALY

Although Mnemba grabs the diving headlines (more about this later), we leave Stone Town pleasantly surprised by the quality of diving there and head north to Nungwi. Before hitting the water again, we spend a couple of days at Mnarani Turtle Conservation Pond, a community-based NGO that rescues and rehabilitates sick and injured turtles.

Located further down the beach is

a strip of rather soulless hotels and restaurants inhabited by an eclectic mix of Speedo-clad, cremated tourists and backpackers who come for their fix of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll. Divine Diving takes me to dive site Shane's Reef, which is so packed full of macro life that I could spend days down there.

We see purple leaf-fish, ornate ghosted pipefish, crocodilefish, flounder, thornback cowfish and scorpionfish: an array of chilled-out, highly photogenic creatures that allow me to plonk my lens right on the end of their patient little snouts.

THE BIG ONE

The next destination – and the one we've been really excited about – is the reefs of Mnemba Island. It's home to a single lodge, operated by luxury hotel chain &Beyond. This exclusive, achingly romantic getaway accommodates a maximum of 20



guests and it definitely is beyond – our price range.

We're staying at Matemwe, a small village on the north-east coast and an ideal launching pad to Mnemba. Upon arrival at the island, our boat wrestles for space among a handful of operators. Despite the crowds, once we hit the water, we only encounter a couple of divers.

The conditions are exquisite and the visibility's 40m+. At dive site Kichwani, we witness schools of butterfly fish in a feeding frenzy, along with gigantic numbers of

Top: Octopus or 'pweza' form a staple part of locals' diets.

Above: Gem has a turn feeding at Mnarani Marine Turtle Conservation Pond.

Above left: Customers line up to experience Mnemba's famous reefs and blue blue water.



yellow snapper. I finally understand where Mnemba gets its reputation as a world-class diving destination.

Our day gets even better as we hit the second site, Aquarium. A juvenile turtle flaps by, barely a speck of plankton between the two of us. I'm so wrapped up in the scene that I fail to notice a pod of dolphins speeding past above us.

ONWARDS & SOUTHWARDS

Thankfully, our next destination is Kizimkazi, a small fishing village down south and *the* place to snorkel with Flipper and chums. As the light morphs from white through yellow to orange, we spot a 20-strong pod. For 10 glorious minutes, I'm accepted into the dolphin family as they bite each other's tails, scratch their backs on the seabed and somersault around me.

The trip to Kizimkazi leads us to nearby Jambiani and Paje, villages

joined by a quiet beach and united by a kite-surfing community. Dhows, marooned until the tide returns, break up horizontal strokes of blue. Around them, women stoop to collect snails and seaweed. Best of all, there's barely a man pouch in sight.

Walking through the village, we're met with a cacophony of "jambos", "mambos", "salamas", "karibus" and "habaris". There are many ways to greet people in Kiswahili.

Our favourite eatery is Sea Horse – a hut with a few plastic tables that serves perfectly cooked kingfish with ratatouille and juicy king prawns. At around \$8 per dish, the food's also very reasonable for Zanzibar.

THE END OF THE LINE

The next day, en route to the airport, we pass through Jozani Chwaka Bay, Zanzibar Island's only National Park and its last remaining stand of near-

USEFUL INFORMATION

BEST TIME TO DIVE

October-March, before the long rainy season, which can affect visibility. Humpback whales arrive around July and generally stay until November.

WHO TO KNOW

Wheeler-dealer Baboo can organise car hires, tours, safaris and trips to local islands. In fact, there's very little he *can't* do. www.zanzibarbabootours.com

DIVE OPERATORS

Stone Town and Mnemba: Zanzibar One Ocean. www.zanzibaroneocean.com

[zanzibaroneocean.com](http://www.zanzibaroneocean.com)

Nungwi: Divine Diving. www.scubazanzibar.com

Paje: Buccaneer Diving. www.buccaneerdiving.com

ACCOMMODATION

Matemwe: Matemwe Beach Village: www.matemwebeach.net
Bluebay Beach Resort: www.bluebayzanzibar.com

Nungwi: Mnarani Marine Turtle Conservation Pond: www.mnarani.org

Paje/Jambiani: Mango Beach House. www.mango-beachhouse.com
&Beyond: www.andbeyond.com/mnemba-island



Above left: Master of camouflage: an extravagant scorpionfish blends into Paje's reef.

Above: Spectacular coral formations in Paje.

natural forest. We make a quick pit stop at a chip shack to drink coconut water and eat delicious, waxy potatoes wrapped in tin foil. On top? Shredded cabbage, cucumber, chilli sauce and a squeeze of lime, of course.

We're watched by a couple of endangered red colobus monkeys, a species endemic to the island. With their weathered faces, they look similar to some of the visitors up north. Fascinating wildlife and tasty, unpretentious grub in an area of outstanding natural beauty... Forget the fancy resorts: this is Zanzibar at its best. 🌴

Aaron Gekoski runs underwater photography workshops in Zanzibar. His work can be viewed at: www.aarongekoski.com
His trips wouldn't be possible without the help of his sponsor, Cameras Underwater: www.camerasunderwater.com