Webtour Getaway
(083) 325-0070
info@webtours.co.za

Zanzibar

Zanzibar Travel Guide

Located about 22 miles (35km) off the east coast of Tanzania, Zanzibar is an archipelago consisting of the main island of Unguja (commonly known as Zanzibar), Pemba Island, famous for its deep-sea fishing, and about 50 smaller surrounding islands and coral reefs.

Also known as the Spice Islands, Zanzibar evokes images of an exotic paradise with white palm-fringed beaches and turquoise coves, dreamy dhows with billowing white sails, and ancient Islamic ruins.

Today's idyllic beach resorts belie the island's haunting history of slavery, and Zanzibar combines Arabic alleyways and historic monuments with coral reefs and excellent diving and snorkelling opportunities.

The island's varied history features seafarers, explorers, and traders, and it became a major centre for the slave industry. Its heyday was during the 19th century, when the island became the world's leading producer of cloves. Its plantations still produce more than 50 different spices and fruit, and guided spice tours are a Zanzibar speciality.

The historic centre of Zanzibar's capital city, Stone Town, is a captivating place built by Arab and Indian merchants in the 19th century from the island's coral stone. A walk through the disordered twisting alleys, past intricately carved wooden doors and beneath ornate balconies, takes one back in time to the days of a prosperous spice industry.

Arabic architecture, numerous mosques, and an old fort, as well as a bathhouse, cool interior courtyards, and lively markets are the remaining influences of the Persians and Omani Arabs who once established themselves as the ruling powers here.

For centuries, Zanzibar has enticed those in search of business; today it remains an irresistible attraction for those seeking a heavenly beach holiday or an exploration into its exotic heritage.

Things to do in Zanzibar

Most travellers visit the destination for a beach holiday, and Zanzibar's beaches alone more than justify the trip. The northern beaches of Zanzibar are particularly celebrated for their beauty, and excursions to Pemba Island and Mafia Island are a treat for beachgoers.

Other tourist favourites include Kendwa Beach and Nungwi Beach, which are close together on the northwestern tip of the island, and have good resort facilities; Uroa Bay, in the middle of the east coast, which still retains a pleasant local flavour; Paje Beach, on the east coast, is said to be the best spot on Zanzibar for kite surfing; Nakupenda Beach, accessible by a short boat trip from Stone Town, which is pristine and usually deserted, a true paradise beach; and the beaches of Changuu Island (Prison Island), where beach lounging can be combined with a visit to the old quarantine centre and the resident giant tortoises. It's possible to arrange many different water sports and boat trips, and the scuba diving and snorkelling is world-class.

Zanzibar is more than just picturesque beaches, though, as the Islamic heritage infusing the island with an exotic, ancient atmosphere, and the legacy of the slave trade ensure some historical interest.

The dilapidated beauty of Stone Town is a big draw card for travellers wanting a taste of culture. For those wanting to explore the interior of Zanzibar, 4x4 excursions are popular, and the Jozani Chwaka Bay Conservation Area is the best place to experience the surviving mangrove forests.

Peace Memorial Museum

Home to a wealth of Zanzibar's memorabilia, the Peace Memorial Museum is a great place to discover the intriguing history and culture of the islands. With exhibits that include traditional carvings and local wildlife displays covering reptiles and birds, visitors can also view relics from the age of the Sultans and early explorers such as Chinese porcelain, an old palm oil-powered bicycle lamp, and David Livingstone's medical chest. Built as a peace memorial by British architect J.H. Sinclair, the beautiful spherical design of the museum acknowledges Zanzibar's Arab influence and is reminiscent of the eastern architecture of Istanbul and India. Visitors should look out for the cumbersome land tortoises that inhabit the Museum's lush garden.

Northern Beaches of Zanzibar

The many superb beaches and picturesque villages around Zanzibar are ideal for those wanting to get away from the bustling town life, and the options along the northeast coast are particularly inviting. Modestly veiled women make bright splashes of colour along stretches of white sandy beach, dhows with curved sails drift along close to shore, and fishermen offer their fresh catches of the day to the simple seaside restaurants. Miles of pristine beaches are dotted with pockets of guesthouses, particularly around Kendwa and the fishing village of Nungwi, which is renowned for its tradition of boat building. There's excellent diving and deep-sea fishing off this coast.

Old Fort

The Old Fort was built at the turn of the 17th century on the remains of a Portuguese church and crumbling Arab garrison. It was constructed to protect the lucrative Spice Islands from invading Portuguese seafarers and Mazrui Arabs of Mombassa. The thick walls and castellated battlements later acted as a place of incarceration, detaining local criminals and slaves. In later years the fort functioned as the depot for the Bububu Railway, Zanzibar's first railway, which once wound from Zanzibar Town to Bububu. Nowadays, the Old Fort houses shops and henna painting stores and the Cultural Centre where visitors can marvel at the fine artistry of local craftsmen at work. In the evening, local music and dancing at the open-air theatre brightens up the night and occasional film screenings are shown.

Palace Museum

Illuminating the lifestyle of the Sultans of Zanzibar, the Palace Museum became the official residence of the Al Busid dynasty in 1911. Built in the 1890s, the extensive white building is situated on a harbour road with breath-taking sea views. It is the most recent of the Sultans' palaces and was occupied till the revolution in 1964. The Palace Museum houses an impressive collection of the Sultans' elaborate furniture and possessions, as well as a room dedicated to the life of Sultan Sayyid Said's daughter, Princess Salme. Renowned for her manuscript, Memoirs of an Arabian Princess, this significant autobiography is the only known written account of what life was like for Arab women of the Royal court in the 1800s. Excerpts from the book, family photographs, and samples of Princess Salme's wardrobe are also on display.

Anglican Cathedral and Slave Market

The colossal Anglican Cathedral in Stone Town is located on the grounds of the island's largest former slave market. The cathedral's altar stands on the exact location of the former whipping post, a tree where slaves were brutalised to show their strength and resilience to potential slave owners. Building began in 1873 to commemorate the end of the slave trade and was conducted by Edward Steere, third bishop of Zanzibar and a fervent abolitionist. The cathedral has a combination of Gothic and Arabic styles and is noted for its Basilica shape and barrel vault roof, which the populace believed would never hold. Edward Steere died of a heart attack during construction and was buried behind the altar.

House of Wonders (Beit el-Ajaib)

The first building in Zanzibar to have electricity and the first building in East Africa to have an elevator, Beit el-Ajaib (which translates into the House of Wonders) was the former ceremonial palace of Sultan Barghash and was built in 1883 on the site of the 16th-century Queen Fatuma's residence. A striking white building, the House of Wonders has housed many influential tenants, such as the British, who used it as their local offices, and Tanzania's political party CCM, who used it as their headquarters. While the building is now in disrepair and not open to the public, one can still admire the architecture. The multiple verandas, Arabic arches, heavy wooden door, and embossed cannons are all a fascinating.

Central Market

A vibrant array of colours and spicy scents lures visitors to the lively Central Market in Stone Town. Opened in 1904, the numerous stalls run over with tropical fruits, exotic spices, brightly coloured khangas (worn by local women), and rare provisions such as pomegranates and red bananas. Locals come daily from the surrounding areas to display their subsistence wares, and fishermen display their catch of the day with a pungent selection of fresh fish from huge marlins to salty sardines. The market is chaotic and can prove a bit overwhelming for some people, but it is an exciting, colourful cultural experience and worth a quick stroll at least. Foodies will enjoy sampling the rare fruits and local specialities. Speaking of food, the best place for a sampling of traditional street food is the night market by the waterfront of the Forodhani Gardens.

Jozani Chwaka Bay Conservation Area

The largest conservation area in Zanzibar and the only remaining natural mangrove forest on the island, the Jozani Chwaka Bay Conservation Area is renowned for its hairy ape residents, the Red Colobus Monkeys. Endemic to Zanzibar, these entertaining, highly endangered creatures attract visitors from far and wide. Due to large-scale cultivation, firewood collection, harvesting building materials and charcoal and lime making, Zanzibar's forests have been largely depleted, making the Jozani Chwaka Bay conservation area a significant natural landscape and well worth protecting. Nature lovers can walk through the 100 different towering tree species and marvel at the rich variety of birds and other small wildlife that inhabits the cool woodland area. Exploring the mangrove forest is a refreshing break from the sunny beaches.

Mtoni Palace Ruins

If visitors are looking for a place to escape the bustle of Stone Town for a few hours, they should head north to the peaceful Maruhubi and Mtoni Palace ruins. Sultan Said bin Sultan first built Mtoni between 1828 and 1834 after he left Muscat and made Zanzibar his throne. It was also the childhood home of Princess Salme. The decadent Maruhubi Palace was built later in the 1880s by Sultan Barghash as a harem for his 99 concubines and wife. The structure was mainly wooden and one of the most beautiful of its time, but was gutted by a fire in 1889 and left in ruins. The rolling lawns, bathhouses, and water lily ponds are reminiscent of the affluent lives enjoyed by the palace residents over a century ago. To view a well-preserved Hammam from the 1800s, travellers should continue north to the Kidichi Persian Baths, constructed by Sultan Seyyid Said for his Persian wife.

Old Dispensary

An architectural symbol of Zanzibar's diverse cultures and histories, the elaborate Old Dispensary was so named because it once housed a pharmacy, dispensary, and doctor. An affluent Ismaili Indian merchant, Tharia Topan, who financed the building project, laid the first brick 1887 and the building was completed in 1894. One of the most decorative buildings of the time, the Old Dispensary is adorned with ornate carved balconies, stuccowork, and stained-glass windows. Restored in

the early 1990s, it had a small museum that displayed old photographs of Stone Town's waterfront, though the upper floors are now mostly empty. For a stunning view of the harbour, travellers should visit the upper veranda, which is open for visitors.

Mafia Island

Mafia Island, along with Pemba and Zanzibar, form the famous Spice Islands off the coast of Tanzania. While the name conjures images of shady criminals and glamorous heists, the real riches of Mafia Island lie underwater in its magnificent coral reef system. Mafia Island is a top diving destination for those in the know. Limited accommodation means it's a great place to hide from the tourist crowds on Zanzibar, and provides additional opportunities for fishing and swimming with whale sharks. There are also land-based activities, including trips to the bustling village on tiny Chole Island and the ruined one on Juani Island.

Pemba Island

Located approximately 31 miles (50km) to the north, the small and unspoilt Tanzanian island of Pemba is becoming a popular alternative for visitors seeking a quieter and less developed alternative to Zanzibar. Pemba is known as the 'Green Island' in Arabic and is one of several islands that make up the Zanzibar Archipelago. The island trio consisting of Pemba, Zanzibar, and Mafia is traditionally referred to as the Spice Islands. This undulating, fertile island hosts a number of small and large scale farming enterprises. This backdrop of cultivated countryside makes for some interesting and fragrant sightseeing. Pemba offers some great dive sites with abundant marine life, untouched corals, and dizzying vertical drop-offs. The towns of Chake-Chake (the capital), Mkoani, and Wete have some interesting cultural and archaeological attractions influenced by the local Arab and Waswahili peoples.

Getting Around

Public transport on the island of Zanzibar is limited. Daladalas are cheap crowded minibuses that operate extensively on the island. Taxis are quite affordable but travellers are advised to negotiate a price before starting a trip as very few vehicles have a functioning meter.

Motorcycle taxis are a cheap and speedy way to get around the island, but passengers are advised to always wear a helmet. A fun way to explore the island is by bicycle. Bicycles can be hired throughout the island at a very low rate.

Travellers can also hire cars, motorcycles, or 4x4 vehicles (ideal for off road adventures), and these offer greater independence when it comes to travelling around Zanzibar. Drivers will find that most roads in Zanzibar are fairly well maintained and driving is relatively safe on the island.

Zanzibar Climate and Weather

Zanzibar is warm throughout the year, though the heat at the coastal resorts on the north and east coasts is tempered by sea breezes. Stone Town and the centre of Zanzibar Island have showers throughout the year, and there are heavy showers throughout the island in April and May, when most tourists avoid the island, and hotels close. Temperatures average between 72ºF (22ºC) and 92ºF (33ºC) throughout the year.

Tanzania travel info

Electricity

The electrical current 230 volts, 50Hz. Rectangular or round three-pin plugs are used.

Language

Swahili and English are the official languages, though several indigenous languages are also spoken.

Money

The official currency is the Tanzanian shilling (TZS), which is divided into 100 cents. The tourism industry prices everything in US dollars and this is the preferred unit of currency for hotels, lodges, resorts, safaris, national parks and attractions, guides and tours, as well as high-end restaurants. Money can be exchanged in larger towns; foreign exchange bureaux may offer a better rate of exchange than banks.

Major cities have ATMs that accept foreign debit cards and issue Tanzanian shillings, though they sometimes break down or run out of money. To minimise the risk of card cloning, travellers should use ATMs located in banks, shops, hotels and shopping centres rather than on the street.

Major lodges, some hotels and travel agents in urban areas accept credit cards, but these shouldn't be relied on and can incur a surcharge. International digital wallet services such as Apple Pay and Google Pay are still relatively limited in their availability, especially for everyday transactions.

Tipping

Waiters in the better restaurants should be tipped around 10 percent; guides, porters and cooks in the wildlife parks and on safari trips usually receive tips as well. The amount is discretionary according to the standard of service and the number of people in the travelling party.

Health

Visitors should consider vaccinations for hepatitis A, hepatitis B, typhoid, and polio, and proof of yellow fever vaccination is required if visitors are coming from or have transited through an airport of a country where yellow fever occurs. There's a risk of malaria all year and outbreaks of Rift Valley Fever occur; travellers should take precautions to avoid mosquito bites and take malaria medication.

Food prepared by unlicensed vendors should be avoided, as meat and milk products from animals may not have been cooked thoroughly. Sleeping sickness is a risk in the game parks, including the Serengeti, and visitors should take precautions against bites by tsetse flies.

There's a high prevalence of HIV/Aids; cholera outbreaks are common throughout the country and visitors are advised to drink bottled or sterilised water only. Travellers climbing Mount Kilimanjaro are at risk for altitude sickness.

Medical services are available in Dar-es-Salaam and other main towns, but facilities and supplies are limited even in cities and often non-existent in rural areas. Visitors with particular requirements should take their own medicines. Comprehensive travel insurance is advised.

Safety

Most visits to Tanzania are trouble free, but violent and armed crime does exist. Travellers are sometimes the victims of mugging and bag snatching (especially by passing cars or motorbikes), and armed robbery and burglary rates have increased throughout the country. Travellers should avoid walking and cycling at night, and should walk towards the traffic so they can see the vehicles approaching. They should also avoid carrying large amounts of cash or other valuables, and leave their passport in the hotel safe.

As in other East African countries, there's some threat of terrorism in Tanzania, and visitors should be cautious in public places and at tourist sites. The areas bordering Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and with Mozambique in the Mtwara region should also be avoided.

Road accidents are common due to poor road and vehicle conditions, violation of traffic regulations and exhaustion among long-distance drivers. There have also been a number of ferry accidents in Tanzania in recent years. Travellers should take precautions, such as staying away from buses or ferries that seem overloaded or in poor condition.

Local customs

Tanzanians are known to be friendly and are generally welcoming, but travellers should be sensitive to local cultural mores. Drunkenness is frowned upon and Tanzanians feel strongly about showing respect for their elders.

Visitors to Zanzibar should be aware that it's a predominantly Muslim region and visitors should dress modestly and respectfully. Beachwear is fine on the beach or around a hotel pool, but not acceptable elsewhere. Topless sunbathing is a criminal offence. Some tourists buy a local sarong, called a kanga, which can be used to cover shoulders when needed, or otherwise be used as a towel.

Smoking in public places is illegal; tourists should be especially careful during Ramadan, when public drinking, smoking and even eating in public should be avoided. Homosexuality is illegal.

Doing business

Although Tanzanians come across as relaxed and friendly, it's important to observe certain formalities, especially with greetings. It's advisable to learn a few Swahili phrases when greeting, followed by a handshake.

Women and men rarely shake hands in Swahili culture; however, if the woman extends her hand, the man is obliged to take it. Tanzanians are to be addressed as Mr, Mrs, and Ms, followed by the family name.

Business dress is seldom very formal but lightweight suits are recommended for formal occasions. Business hours are similar to Western countries, but a longer lunch break is taken during the hotter months, and business continues later in the evening from Monday to Friday.

Duty free

Travellers to Tanzania do not have to pay duty on 250g tobacco, 200 cigarettes or 50 cigars, and one litre of whisky and liquors or two litres of wine.

Communications

The international country dialling code for Tanzania, as well as Zanzibar, is +255. There's good mobile phone coverage in main cities and towns, while rural areas may have limited coverage. There are international roaming agreements with most international operators. WiFi is available in main towns and resorts; visitors can purchase local prepaid SIM cards for unlocked phones or use eSIMs if their cellular providers support it on their networks.

Passport & Visa

All visitors to Tanzania require proof of sufficient funds and should hold documentation for their return or onward journey. Passports should be valid for at least six months from date of entry. Most visitors entering will require a visa as well. Those arriving from an infected country must hold a yellow fever vaccination certificate. It's highly recommended that travellers' passports have at least six months' validity remaining after the intended date of departure from their travel destination. Immigration officials often apply different rules to those stated by travel agents and official sources.

Entry requirements

US passports must be valid for six months from the date of entry. Travellers will need to apply for an eVisa before visiting Tanzania.

UK passports must be valid for six months from the date of entry. Travellers will need to apply for an eVisa before visiting Tanzania.

Canadian passports must be valid for six months from the date of entry. Travellers will need to apply for an eVisa before visiting Tanzania.

Australian passports must be valid for six months from the date of entry. Travellers will need to apply for an eVisa before visiting Tanzania.

South Africans do not require a visa if intending to stay for a maximum of up to 90 days, provided that the passport is valid for six months from date of entry.

Irish passports must be valid for six months from the date of entry. Travellers will need to apply for an eVisa before visiting Tanzania.

New Zealand passports must be valid for six months from the date of entry. Travellers will need to apply for an eVisa before visiting Tanzania.

Useful contacts

Tanzanian Tourist Office: www.tanzaniatourism.go.tz

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Disclaimer: By its very nature much of the information in this travel guide is subject to change at short notice and travellers are urged to verify information on which they're relying with the relevant authorities. We cannot accept any responsibility for any loss or inconvenience to any person as a result of information contained above.

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