

Mombasa & the South Coast

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Why Go?

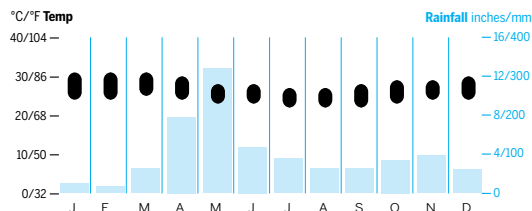
From the hypnotic port city of Mombasa south to the border with Tanzania, this stretch of Kenyan coast is anything but ordinary. Where else can you see snow white beaches framed by *kayas* (sacred forests), soft-sailed dhows and elephant watering holes, all in one day?

Governed by Swahili rhythms and the rise and fall of the tides, life here moves to its own beat. Duck into the Indian Ocean and you'll see there's far more going on beneath the surface than the simple pleasures of sun, sea and sand. Those waters hide dolphins, turtles, Swahili secrets and some of the best diving and kitesurfing in Africa.

Thanks to the long interplay of Africa, India and Arabia, this coast feels wildly different from the rest of Kenya. Its people, the Swahili, have created a distinctive Indian Ocean society – built on trade with distant shores – that lends real romance to the coast's beaches and to Mombasa, a city poets have embraced for as long as ivory has been traded for iron.

When to Go

Mombasa



Jan–Mar Dolphins (and the occasional whale shark) fill the ocean and diving is at its best.

Apr–Aug The rainy season is the coolest time of year.

Sep School-holiday crowds are gone, accommodation is cheaper and beaches are quieter.



Mombasa & the South Coast Highlights

- 1 Trading for chilli and cardamom inside the skinny streets of **Mombasa Old Town** (p212)
- 2 Diving into the emerald reef at **Wasini Island** (p228) and soaking up the Swahili spirit
- 3 Tracking down elephants and sable antelope in **Shimba Hills National Reserve** (p218) and **Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary** (p219)
- 4 Stepping barefoot onto the soft white sand at **Diani Beach** (p220), and later kitesurfing its waves
- 5 Spending some one-on-one time with a baby colobus monkey at the **Colobus Conservation Centre** (p220)
- 6 Finding god in the greenery in **Kaya Kinondo** (p222)

History

The coast's written history stretches much further back than the history of the interior, and is essentially a tale of trade and conquest, with outside forces. By the 1st century AD, Yemeni traders were in East Africa, prompting one unidentified Greek observer to write about 'Arab captains and agents, who are familiar with the natives and intermarry with them, and who

know the whole coast and understand the language'. Merchants traded spices, timber, gold, ivory, tortoise shell and rhinoceros horn, as well as slaves.

The mixture of Arabs, local Africans and Persian traders gave birth to the Swahili culture and language. But the Swahili were not the only inhabitants of the coast. Of particular note were the Mijikenda (Nine Homesteads), a Bantu tribe whose