



Mombasa & the South Coast

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Why Go?

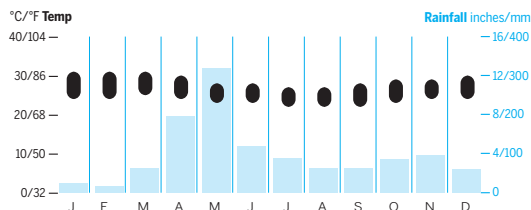
There's something in the air here.

It's the smell of salt and spice on the streets of Mombasa (*Kisiwa Cha Mvita* in Swahili – the Island of War). It's muttered chants echoing over the flagstones of a Jain temple, and the ecstatic passion of the call to prayer. It's the sun's glint off coral castles, it's ribbons of white sand, it's the teal break of a vanishing wave and it's the sight of a Zanzibar-bound dhow slipping over the horizon.

Thanks to the long interplay of Africa, India and Arabia, the coast feels wildly different from the rest of Kenya. Its people, the Swahili, have created a distinctive Indian Ocean society – built on the scent of trade with distant shores – that lends real romance to the coast's sugar-white beaches and to a city that 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.

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, 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 admixture 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, or 'Nine Homesteads', a Bantu tribe whose homeland, according to oral history, was located somewhere in southern Somalia. Six hundred years ago they began filtering into the coast and established themselves in *kayas* (sacred forests), which are dotted from the Tanzanian border to Malindi.

The riches of this region never failed to attract attention, and in the early 16th century it was the Portuguese who took their turn at conquest. The Swahilis did not take kindly to becoming slaves (even if they traded them), and rebellions were common throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. It's fashionable to portray the Portuguese as villains, but their replacements, the sultans of Oman, were no more popular. Despite their shared faith, the natives of this ribbon of land staged countless rebellions, and passed Mombasa into British hands from 1824 to 1826 to keep it from the sultans. Things only really quietened down after Sultan Seyyid Said moved his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1832.

Said's huge coastal clove plantations created a massive need for labour, and the slave caravans of the 19th century marked the peak of the trade in human cargo. News of massacres and human-rights abuses reached Europe, galvanising the British public to demand an end to slavery. Through a mixture of political savvy and implied force, the British government pressured Said's son Barghash to ban the slave trade, marking the beginning of the end of Arab rule here.

Of course, this 'reform' didn't hurt British interests: as part of the treaty, the British

East Africa Company took over administration of the Kenyan interior, taking the opportunity to start construction of the East African Railway. A 16km-wide coastal strip was recognised as the territory of the sultan and leased by the British from 1887. Upon independence in 1963, the last sultan of Zanzibar gifted this land to the new Kenyan government.

The coast remains culturally and religiously distinctive (most coastal people are Muslim) and there are calls by some coastal politicians for some kind of autonomy from the rest of Kenya.

MOMBASA

☑041 / POP 939,000

Mombasa, like the coast it dominates, is both quintessentially African and somehow...not.

If your idea of Africa is roasted meat, toasted maize, beer and cattle, and farms and friendliness, those things are here (well, maybe not the cows). But it's all interwoven into the humid peel of plaster from Hindu warehouses, filigreed porches that lost their way in a Moroccan *riad* (traditional town house), spice markets that escaped India's Keralan coast, sailors chewing *miraa* (shoots chewed as a stimulant) next to boats bound for Yemen, and a giant coral castle built by invading Portuguese sailors. Thus, while the city sits perfectly at home in Africa, it could be plopped anywhere on the coast of the Indian Ocean without too many moving pains.

Therein lies Mombasa's considerable charm. But said seduction doesn't hide this town's warts, which include a sleazy underbelly, bad traffic and ethnic tension, the last of which ebbs and flows and is smoothed by the unifying faith of Islam, but it's not entirely sublimated. Overlaying everything is the sweating, tropical lunacy you tend to get in the world's hot zones (and it gets *hot* here). But what would you expect from East Africa's largest port? Cities by the docks always attract mad characters, and Mombasa's come from all over the world.

Perhaps though it's best to let the Swahili people themselves describe their city in their native tongue with an old line of poetry and proverb: *Kongowea nda mvumo, maji maangavu. Male!* ('Mombasa is famous, but its waters are dangerously deep. Beware!').