

Zanzibar Archipelago



Step off the boat or plane onto Zanzibar, and you'll be transported through the miles and the centuries – to the ancient kingdom of Persia, to the Oman of bygone days with its caliphs and sultans, to the west coast of India with its sensual rhythms and heavily laden scents. In Stone Town – the heart of the archipelago – narrow, cobbled alleyways wind past Arabic-style houses with brass-studded wooden doors. Elderly men in their *kanzu* (white robes) and *kofia* (caps) chat animatedly over cups of strong coffee while playing a seemingly never-ending game of *bao* (a board game). Nearby, veiled women in their flowing, black *bui-bui* (cover-alls) pause to share the latest gossip, while children chase balls through the streets.

Along the coast, life goes on as it has for centuries, its pace set by the rhythm of the tides and the winds of the monsoon. Just across the deep waters of the Pemba channel lies hilly, verdant Pemba – the archipelago's 'other' island, seldom visited and steeped in mystique. Dense mangrove swamps line its coast, opening occasionally onto stunning white-sand coves, and a patchwork of neat farm plots covers the hillsides.

There is, of course, another side to life on the archipelago: hassles from Zanzibar's ever-present street touts will probably be your first introduction, development threatens to overwhelm some areas of the coast, costs creep constantly skywards and *piki-piki* (motorbikes) careen recklessly through Stone Town's streets. However, there are still some quiet, unspoiled spots left and good deals to be found. And, while your reverie on caliphs and sultans may not last, the archipelago's allure will captivate long after you've finished your visit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wandering through **Stone Town's** (p112) narrow, cobbled streets
- Relaxing on picture-perfect **beaches** (p128)
- Discovering **Pemba's** (p142) unknown corners and culture
- **Diving and snorkelling** (p118) amid shoals of colourful fish around Mnemba atoll, Misali island or elsewhere around the archipelago.
- Browsing for **souvenirs** (p126) in tiny shops fragrant with spices



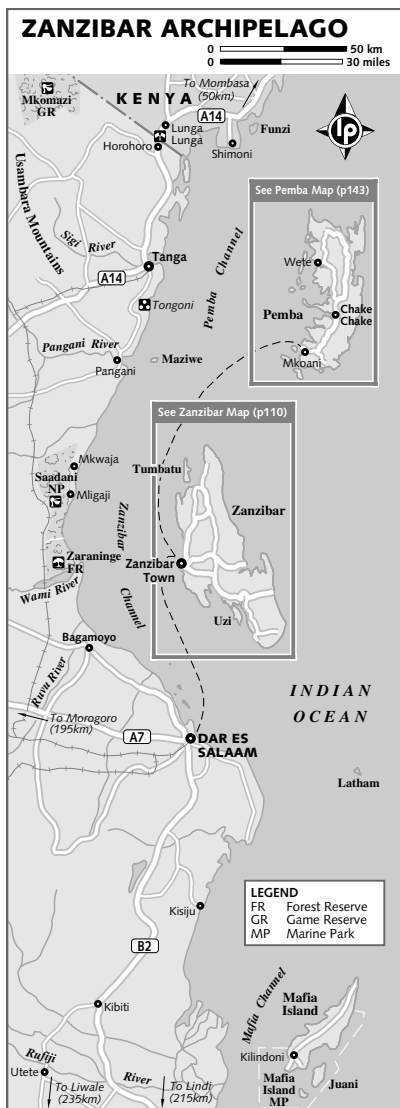
History

The archipelago's history stretches back at least to the start of the first millennium, when Bantu-speaking peoples from the mainland ventured across the Zanzibar and Pemba channels – perhaps in search of bigger fish and better beaches. The islands had probably been visited at an even earlier date by traders and sailors from Arabia. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (written for sailors by a Greek merchant around AD 60) documents small Arabic trading settlements along the coast that were already well established by the 1st century, and makes reference to the island of Menouthias, which many historians believe to be Zanzibar. From around the 8th century, Shirazi traders from Persia also began to make their way to East Africa, where they established settlements on Pemba, and probably also at Zanzibar's Unguja Ukuu.

Between the 12th and 15th centuries, the archipelago came into its own, as trade links with Arabia and the Persian Gulf blossomed. Zanzibar became a powerful city-state, supplying slaves, gold, ivory and wood to places as distant as India and Asia, while importing spices, glassware and textiles. With the trade from the East also came Islam and the Arabic architecture that still characterises the archipelago today. One of the most important archaeological remnants from this era is the mosque at Kizimkazi (p138), whose mihrab (prayer niche showing the direction to Mecca) dates from the early 12th century.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16th century temporarily interrupted this golden age, as Zanzibar and then Pemba fell under Portuguese control. Yet Portuguese dominance did not last long. It was challenged first by the British, who found Zanzibar an amenable rest stop on the long journey to India, and then by Omani Arabs, who in the mid-16th century gave the Portuguese the routing that they no doubt deserved. By the early 19th century Oman had gained the upper hand on Zanzibar, and trade on the island again flourished, centred on slaves, ivory and cloves. Caravans set out for the interior of the mainland, and trade reached such a high point that in the 1840s the Sultan of Oman relocated his court here from the Persian Gulf.

From the mid-19th century, with increasing European interest in East Africa and



the end of the slave trade, Omani rule over Zanzibar began to weaken, and in 1862 the sultanate was formally partitioned. Zanzibar became independent of Oman, with Omani sultans ruling under a British protectorate. This arrangement lasted until 10 December 1963 when Zanzibar gained its independence. Just one month later, in January 1964, the