



# Zanzibar Archipelago

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## Best of Nature

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## Best of Culture

- » Festival of the Dhow Countries (p79)
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## Why Go?

Step off the boat or plane onto the Zanzibar Archipelago, and you'll be transported through the miles and the centuries – to ancient Persia, to Oman's caliphs and sultans, to India, with its heavily laden scents.

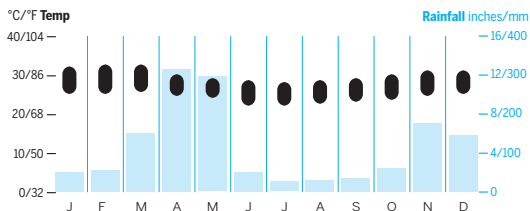
On Zanzibar, Stone Town's alleyways wind past Arabic-style houses with brass-studded wooden doors. Elderly men play *bao* (traditional board game) while women in their flowing *bui-bui* (black cover-alls) pause to chat. Along the coast, local life moves to the rhythm of the tides and the winds of the monsoon.

Across the deep waters of the Pemba channel lies hilly, verdant Pemba, the archipelago's seldom visited 'other' island. Coastal mangrove swamps open onto stunning white-sand coves, and neat farm plots cover the hillsides.

Yet, there is another side to life on the archipelago. Zanzibar, especially, has changed massively in recent years. Overdevelopment is suffocating the coast and mass tourism makes the archipelago's allure ever more elusive. While the magic remains, you'll have to work much harder to find it.

## When to Go

### Zanzibar Town



**Mar-May** Expect grey skies and some hotels closed, but otherwise Zanzibar is crowd-free.

**Jul** July is culture-packed with the Festival of the Dhow Countries and Mwaka Kogwa.

**Jul-Aug** Peak season brings higher prices and hordes of visitors.

## 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 (p104), 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



## Zanzibar Archipelago Highlights

- 1 Wander through the narrow, cobbled streets of **Stone Town** (p70), taking in the sights
- 2 Relax on picture-perfect, white-sand **eastern beaches** (p92) fringed by palm trees and the turquoise sea
- 3 Discover unknown corners and culture in green and hilly **Pemba** (p107)
- 4 **Dive and snorkel** (p75) amid shoals of colourful fish around Mnemba atoll, Misali Island or elsewhere around the archipelago
- 5 Browse for **souvenirs** (p88) in tiny shops fragrant with spices
- 6 Indulge in some pampering at one of the island's many **spas** (p75)
- 7 Step into local life at night markets at Zanzibar Town's **Forodhani Gardens** (p85) and in Pemba's **Chake Chake** (p110)