

Jambo! Welcome to Spice Island

By Debbie Hathway

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Visitors love Zanzibar for its rustic authenticity, natural attractions, and welcoming people. A little all-inclusive luxury provides the best of both worlds for avid travellers.



Image by Louise McAuliffe

There's a lot to be said about somewhere you feel immediately at home – a new destination in a foreign country where English is not the first language.

In Zanzibar, Swahili is the dominant vernacular, followed by Pemba, and a smattering of broken English accompanied by toothy grins.

As is so often the case, music is the common language. If words fail you, simply break into song.

“Jambo Bwana”, meaning “Hello Sir” in Swahili, was first recorded by a Kenyan band, Them Mushrooms, and later covered by others like Boney M. According to Wikipedia, it has been “largely adopted as a hotel pop song, targeting a tourist audience”.

Vacationers quickly learn the lyrics, which include common phrases such as “Habari gani?” (How are things going?) and Nzuri sana (Very well). If all else fails, “Hakuna matata” (no problem).

Unspoiled treasure

I was in Zanzibar for the first time for the opening of the new Emerald Zanzibar Resort and Spa, a member of The Leading Hotels of the World, on the shores of Muyuni Beach, Matemwe. The resort forms part of the award-winning Emerald Collection, a group of luxury all-inclusive properties across East Africa and the Indian Ocean established by the Italian Scarapicchia family in 2013. The family has been involved in luxury hospitality for four decades and has been active in Zanzibar since 1994.

The deluxe all-inclusive Emerald Zanzibar Resort & Spa is their seventh five-star venture on the island. Why invest in a place like this? It's all about the white sandy beach, which you can enjoy unaffected by the tides. That means you can walk a long way out at low tide, picking your way over the seabed of protruding rock and spiky sea urchins (venture barefoot at your peril). You'll pass local fishermen pulling their dhows behind them when it's too shallow to float to shore and others on foot carrying their catch of the day.

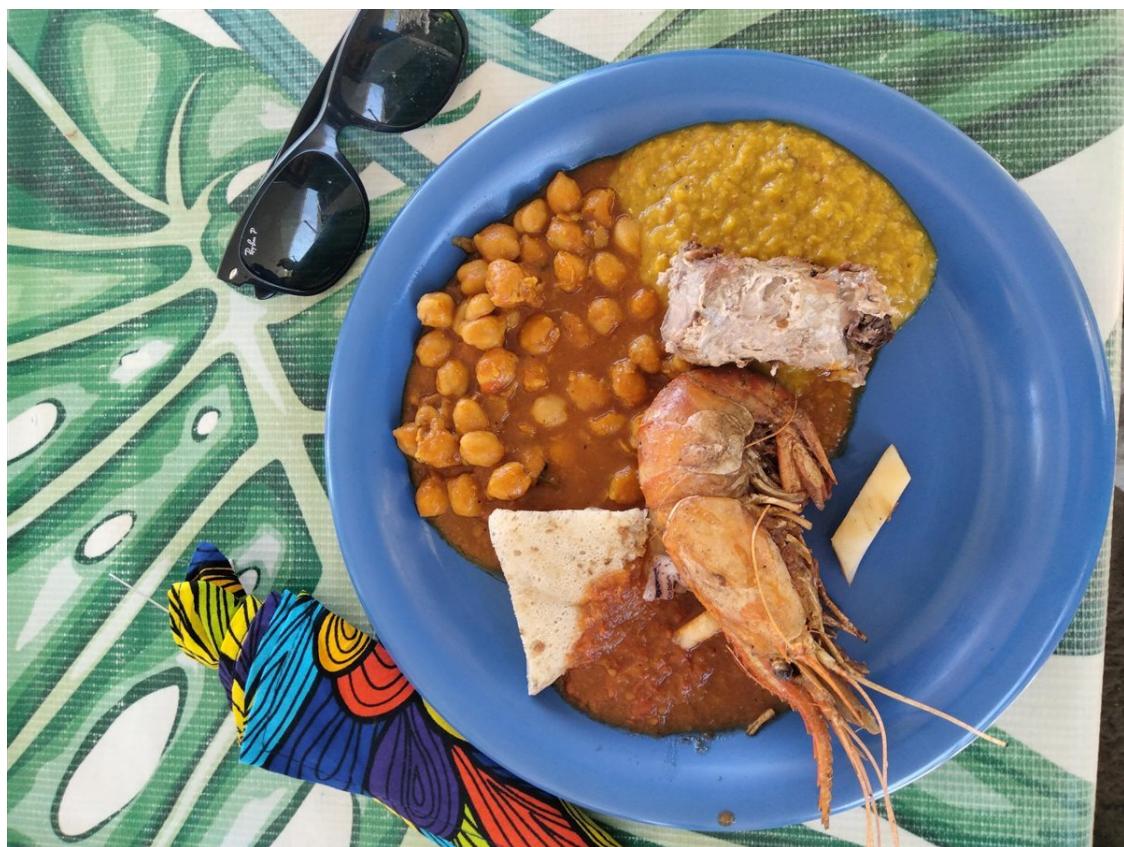


Image by Debbie Hathway

Meanwhile, larger boats are lining up, waiting to invite tourists to dive or snorkel at Mnemba Island straight ahead as the seabirds fly – it's one of the best locations for both in this part of the world. As always, be sure of your skipper. Accredited operators are worth their weight in gold. At high tide, it's a short stroll from the resort to the sea.

"We see a lot of potential in Zanzibar. There are beautiful places on the island, but beach sites are few. Many have long low tides, making it difficult to swim most of the day. You can build the best palace in the world, but when you come to Zanzibar you want to swim in the sea," says chief commercial officer Simone Scarapicchia.

Emerald experiences

"We have done our best with the construction of the 250-room resort to combine the influence of the Omani Arabs on modern Zanzibar as well as the African culture and heritage of the destination – but with a fresh look. Our all-inclusive offering means no surprises on the bill at the end. This is becoming increasingly popular worldwide – to give guests the freedom of luxury, which they appreciate," says Scarapicchia.

The layout of the resort is cleverly conceptualized to offer a welcome respite from the heat of the day via a voluminous reception area, the Eclipse Coffee Lounge near the main infinity pool, the more secluded Garden Pool bar with its floor of natural galana stone and the well-supported Beach Club Grill restaurant. Here it's fun to dine with your toes in the sand, admiring the sea view and enjoying the light breeze.



Image by Louise McAuliffe

We ventured off-site with Dege Adventures for two must-do guided tours when you're in Unguja (Swahili for Zanzibar), the main island among four that make up an archipelago off the coast of Tanzania, East Africa. The Spice Tour at Kizimbanai sheds light on why Zanzibar is known as Spice Island. You'll get to touch, taste, and smell spices such as cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, black pepper, nutmeg (aka the sexy spice duly offered to the honeymooners on the tour), as well as tropical fruits like jack fruit and coconut.

A highlight was meeting the charismatic Mr Butterfly, a 50-something local who makes a living singing, dancing, and shimmying up a tall coconut palm with bare hands and feet. You can buy tea and fragrant oils there too.

Walking tours

We moved on to Stone Town, the oldest part of Zanzibar city reportedly established at least 1,000 years ago. Full of mosques and winding lanes, Stone Town was named a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2000.

If you're a music fan, you'll want to see the museum in the coastal neighbourhood of Shangani dedicated to Freddie Mercury, born in Zanzibar. This walking tour provides fascinating insights into the architectural style, history, people, habits, and retail preferences reminiscent of Arab, Persian, Indian, and European influences. Safety is not an issue, but the dress code is. Women's upper bodies and arms should be covered, and dresses or pants should reach below the knees in deference to the Muslim culture.



Image by Debbie Hathway

Safari Blue is hands-down the best of Zanzibar, sailing on a traditional dhow to different sites where we were fortunate to see dolphins, shoals of colourful fish, sea snakes, starfish, sea cucumbers, and a shy octopus that refused to come out from its rocky refuge. After enjoying a Swahili seafood feast and visiting the market and Sand Bar at Kwale Island (where the ocean was now at bath-water temperature), we sailed on to what our guide called “Blue Lagoon”, a massive body of water with rocky overhangs that empties and fills every six hours with the tide.

That wrapped up the week-long stay, easing the pain of packing for the flight home and inspiring plans for a return visit. “South Africans love Zanzibar, and Zanzibar loves to welcome South African guests,” says Scarapicchia. Now we know why.

Bookings and information For holiday packages including charters, visit [AfricaStay.com](https://www.africastay.com). The company operates 3.5-hour charter flights via Safair from OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg to Abeid Amani Karume International Airport every Tuesday and Thursday.

ABOUT DEBBIE HATHWAY

Debbie Hathway is an award-winning writer, with a special interest in luxury lifestyle (watches, jewellery, travel, property investment) and the arts.

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