



BEYOND THE BEACH

A number of cultural and conservation-focused experiences are proving that Zanzibar is not just another island escape

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zanzibar

Most visitors arrive in Zanzibar with beaches in mind, and the island more than delivers on that promise. The postcard is real: powder-white sand, translucent turquoise shallows, palm trees swaying in time with the kusi wind. But for those seeking more than rest and relaxation, this tiny Tanzanian enclave has a vibrant culture waiting for anyone who dares venture beyond the exotic beaches. Here are just a few immersive experiences to try when next visiting the East African island, where Etihad flies to from June 2026.

Learn Swahili culinary traditions

Based in Meli Nane, a residential community around 10 kilometres north of Stone Town, Maskat Shineni Abdullah runs Mamas of Zanzibar, a collective of women who host authentic cultural and culinary experiences for visiting travellers. After her divorce, Maskat spent time getting to know other women in her neighbourhood. Learning of their similar struggles and collective desire for financial independence, the mother-of-three saw an opportunity to turn their Swahili cooking skills into a business. "I want you to see Zanzibari culture through the eyes of the women," Maskat says. "If there's one thing I know about Zanzibaris, it's that they cook amazing food."

A number of itineraries are available; the most popular is the four-hour Mama's Signature Experience. Starting with a guided visit to Chiuni market, the mamas teach you how to buy the best ingredients, sorting through bags of beans, piles of hot sticky tamarind, and coconuts organised by size and age. After which follows an afternoon cooking class to prepare a traditional menu of fragrant pilau rice, fresh snapper in coconut and tomato, simmered curried greens, and hand-folded chapati, that you can devour while sharing stories and laughter. mamasofzanzibar.com

Discover coral reef conservation on the coast

At Matemwe Attitude hotel, on the northeast coast, the Marine Discovery Centre is at the heart of the property's coral reef conservation initiatives, where on-site marine biologists educate guests on how to protect the ocean.

Just off Mnemba Island – a short boat ride away – you can visit the coral nursery grids. Since 2021, more than 7,100 coral colonies have been transplanted here after coral cover dropped to just 10 per cent. Now it stands at 80 per cent, and the reef feels newly animated – fish threading between branches, anemones clinging to fresh growth, starfish scattered across the sand. Back on shore, the centre gives that beauty context: what recovery looks like, what "healthy" actually means, and why the reef's future depends on choices made on land and at sea. The same thinking shapes the hotel's wider operations. B Corp-certified, the hotel has removed single-use plastics and built a permaculture project with one hundred thousand native plants, including jackfruit, lime, banana, pollinators, and ginger. Beyond the hotel's boundaries, in the shallows at low tide, women in bright kangas wade out to harvest seaweed, which is dried for use in pharmaceuticals and beauty products. The industry now accounts for the bulk of Zanzibar's marine exports, providing independent income to thousands – another reminder that the ocean here is not just scenery, but livelihood. hotels-attitude.com

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A local Zanzibari mami



A host at Mamas of Zanzibar

See monkeys in Jozani-Chwaka Bay National Park

Jozani-Chwaka Bay National Park covers around 50 square kilometres of mangroves, groundwater forest and coral-rag woodland in central Unguja. Within minutes of entering, monkeys appear: the Zanzibar red colobus (*Ptilocolobus kirkii*) exists nowhere else on Earth. A 2017 census work led by conservation scientists put the total population at just over 5,800 (often summarised as roughly 5,000-5,800 remaining), with a large proportion living in and around protected forests such as Jozani. Habitat loss and fragmentation remain the central threat; on Unguja, studies have estimated forest loss at around 1 per cent per year. Revenue from park entrance fees helps fund local projects including schools and health clinics. Conservation here is hands-on: long-term ecological monitoring tracks populations and pressures, and visitor management is designed to keep encounters non-invasive. Guided walks also double as education – local guides explain why no feeding, no touching, and keeping distance matters for primate health and behaviour.

And beyond the headline species, protecting coral-rag forest and mangroves safeguards a wider web of biodiversity across the Jozani-Chwaka Bay landscape.



Red colobus monkey

Take a guided walking tour through Stone Town

In the late afternoon in Stone Town, Zanzibar's capital, the call to prayer bounces off coral-rag walls, and by the time the sound fades, it is impossible to say which mosque it came from. Heavy carved doors – with rounded Indian arches, or squared in the Omani style – ease open for the evening. The best time to feel the soul of Stone Town come to life.

These doors were once the ultimate status symbol. Fish, pineapples or cloves carved into the wood denoted what a family traded, and, according to local lore, the number of flowers hinted at how many people lived within. "The bigger the door, the higher the ceilings, the deeper the pockets," a local guide explains, pausing before ornate panels fitted into a crumbling façade. Many of the grandest houses and civic buildings date from the 18th and 19th centuries, and UNESCO inscribed Stone Town as a World Heritage Site in 2000, in recognition of an urban fabric shaped by centuries of Swahili trade – Arab, Persian, Indian and European influences stitched into the same streets, built from the coral stone.

The Zanzibar Revolution of 1964 ushered in decades of dilapidation, as the old quarter slipped into disrepair, before restoration gathered pace in later decades. Emerson Spice Hotel is one such recovery, a restored merchant's house with grand balconies and carved balustrades. Around five o'clock, traditional dhows depart for sunset cruises along the coast, their lateen sails catching the breeze.

To properly immerse yourself in Stone Town's layers, a guided walk is worth it. Reputable options include specialist walking outfit Zanzibar Walks, while hotel concierges such as Zanzibar Serena Hotel also run structured evening walks that cover key landmarks and markets. Prefer to pre-book? Use platforms such as Tripadvisor, Viator or GetYourGuide and filter for recent, consistently high-rated reviews and clear inclusions (group size, timings, what's covered). zanzibarwalks.com



Coffee-making in Stone Town



A market stall in Chwaka



Stone Town in Zanzibar