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EXPLORE AN UNDISCOVERED SIDE TO THE ISLAND



WORDS & PHOTOS: SOPHIE BAKER

# Moments in Matemwe

When most people picture Zanzibar, they think of Stone Town's alleys or Nungwi's busy beaches. But Matemwe is not only culturally rich and environmentally important, but still largely under the radar



**T**he road to Matemwe winds past small workshops, fruit stalls and unfinished houses. It's a landscape that travellers often skim past on their way to somewhere labelled 'worth seeing'. My taxi veers onto a narrow dirt track towards Attitude Matemwe, and for a moment I'm not sure we haven't taken a wrong turn. Then the sea appears through gaps between huts, and the whole coastline reveals itself. The hotel sits inside the village rather than apart from it, built low and close to the ground, its makuti palm frond roofs threaded with local craftwork. Here, you don't arrive at a resort. You arrive in a community.

The next morning, at first light, the village stirs to life. From a raised wooden veranda overlooking the beach, I watch fishermen push narrow wooden boats into the lagoon – silhouettes against the pale gold sky. The dhows slip past the reef in slow procession, sails catching the morning breeze, each man hoping for a good day's luck.

By mid-morning those same boats sit high on the sand, their hulls drying in the sun while men cluster around baskets of wriggling fish. Swahili voices rise and fall, quick and assured, hands cutting the air as they sort through their catch.

## WOMEN'S HOUR

By late morning the tide has released its grip. The lagoon empties in a long, slow breath, revealing a patchwork of coral ridges, seagrass meadows and glassy pools stretching all the way towards Mnemba Island. And then the women appear.

Wrapped in bright kangas, they wade into the retreating sea, their dresses billowing. They bend to gather slippery bundles of seaweed from the shallows to take home and dry. Their fingers move quickly and deftly; without hesitation. Seaweed bundles are flung into baskets; later, they'll be washed, dried and sold as cosmetics, balms, food products and supplements shipped across East Africa.

The work is repetitive and physical. But the women greet one another with ease, call out to friends on the beach, and look up long enough to give us a nod as we pass. Stand beside them for even a few moments and you'll understand that seaweed farming is more than subsistence. It's also independence, dignity and control over one's own income in a place where opportunities for women are limited.

Attitude encourages guests to step into this everyday life, rather than watch from a distance, which is how we ended up rattling inland in a tuk-tuk bound for Chuini market. The hotel had suggested spending a morning at the island's 'real kitchen'.

Maskat, the Matemwe-born founder of Mamas of Zanzibar, created the initiative to preserve Swahili food traditions, create income for local women and offer travellers an experience far

more authentic than the usual resort buffet or cocktail-bar dinners.

A single mother of three tells us her story with disarming candour: a difficult divorce, the need to support her children and her belief that the island's culinary heritage could be both livelihood and legacy. "I want you to see Zanzibari culture through the eyes of the women," she tells us. "Zanzibaris know how to create delicious food in their homes."

The first order of the day is a trip to gather ingredients at the local market. Grandmothers squat beside baskets of plantains. Pyramids of cassava roots tower over plastic bowls of turmeric, ginger and tiny hot chillies. Later that day, we sit in Maskat's courtyard, which doubles as a makeshift kitchen.

There are woven mats underfoot, charcoal stoves glowing, and a circle of women preparing lunch as though orchestrating a dance. We learn how to husk and grate fresh coconut, extracting the thick milk with our hands. We fold chapati dough, slice vegetables and simmer greens and fish over the terracotta charcoal stoves, fanning the flames with hand-carved paddles. In between, we sip on Zanzibari spiced coffee laced with cardamom, and nibble on hot snacks: potato and lime fritters, baobab seed and peanut-sesame biscuits.

Mama Selma stirs a pot of tuna stewed in coconut and lime. When we lean in too close, she waves us back. "Pole, pole," she says. Slowly, slowly. Let the heat do the work. "If you go too fast, all the flavours go out."

Around her, dishes accumulate. By the time cooking is done, there's a veritable feast: lime-marinated snapper, fufu, beans, stewed cassava, leafy mchicha, golden plantains simmered in coconut, handmade chapati blistering over the coals. We eat on the floor with the mamas, and silence hangs in the air as we all

quietly devour the food. Nothing is staged. The women talk about their children, their days and what life is like on Zanzibari shores. It feels less like a cooking class than a passing-down of knowledge, a quiet act of cultural preservation disguised as lunch.

Maskat shares that she's working to open a Matemwe chapter of Mamas of Zanzibar, so guests can cook with women from the very village they're staying in and she can support the women of her hometown.

## PROTECTING THE REEF BELOW

Out on the water, Matemwe's story shifts to another kind of caretaker. Our snorkelling trip to nearby Mnemba island is led by two young men who learned to swim before they could read and now work with One Ocean Dive Centre and Attitude's marine team.

We board a small skiff, bumping over gentle swells as the water grows clearer and lighter. About 20 minutes later, we're drifting above the restoration grids, each one seeded with small ➔

**I watch fishermen push narrow wooden boats into the lagoon – silhouettes against the pale gold sky. The dhows slip past the reef in slow procession, sails catching the morning breeze, each man hoping for a good day's luck.**



FRANÇOIS-OLIVIER DOMMERGUES / ALAMY

**Beach life:**

Locals gather on the sands at Matemwe, fishermen head off towards reef waters, while seaweed farms are tended in the shallows. Meanwhile, Mamas of Zanzibar (right) run authentic culinary experiences on the island





**A few locals set up an impromptu soccer pitch on the wet sand. Baefoot children tumble across the beach, shouting and diving for the battered-looking ball as they kick up sprays of sand. As the final minutes of dusk tick down, the entire beach feels like one big family.**

➔ coral fragments that sway gently in the current. Parrotfish scrape algae from the rocks. Moorish idols flick past in quick pairs. Powder-blue surgeonfish move in a loose cloud. The water is warm, clear and so calm that you lose track of time. Every so often one of the guides dips below the surface to point out a scorpionfish or starfish, making sure that nothing is touched or disturbed. None of this feels fragile exactly, but it feels watched over.

Many of these young snorkel leaders grew up in Matemwe and now see themselves as stewards of its marine world. Shadrack, Attitude's marine biologist, is passionate about bringing local schoolchildren to the reef so that future generations understand what is disappearing. "Yes, we have lots of fish," he says, "but without intervention... till when?"

"If we teach the children, the reef will survive," one of the snorkel leaders chimes in. What you hear from the guides, again

**Above:**  
Half-time: local kids pose for a photo during a game of soccer on the beach

**This pic:**  
Matemwe's coastline remains unblemished by modern development



and again, is that the reef depends on everyone who calls it home, not only on the travellers who pass through.

## THE LIVING COASTLINE

As late afternoon turns to dusk on a Saturday, life in Matemwe unfolds on the beach. A few locals set up an impromptu soccer pitch on the wet sand. Barefoot children tumble across the beach under streaks of orange and purple, shouting and diving for the battered-looking ball as they kick up sprays of sand. From the sidelines, a tall Maasai trader in bright red cloth walks by with a basket of necklaces and wooden trinkets. As the final minutes of dusk tick down, and the horizon is slowly bathed in red, the entire beach feels like one big family.

Night falls very gently. Lanterns glow on a few cottages down the shore and the ocean darkens to a deep violet – and that spontaneous match ends under a blanket of stars.

What sets Matemwe apart is not simply its beauty, but the way village life ebbs around the handful of lodges. Even with more ‘polished’ stays like Attitude Matemwe and The Mora, the coastline still belongs first and foremost to the people who live here.

Unlike the manicured strips of Nungwi or Kendwa, Matemwe is not a resort destination dressed up for outsiders. The beach belongs to everyone here: to the boys hawking coconuts and bracelets, to the fishermen dragging boats ashore, to the Maasai traders wrapped in crimson shúkás who still walk this coastline every morning. And while Matemwe is not exactly a secret – travellers do come here – its soul is firmly local.

There are places in Zanzibar where nightfall brings bonfires, beach bars and thumping bass. Matemwe is not one of them. Here, you witness the island going about life as it always has.

Before long, Matemwe will evolve. Places this beautiful always do. New hotels will rise, and travellers will arrive in greater numbers. But for now, the village and the ocean move together, and the coastline still belongs to the locals. Matemwe may be changing, but today, it still feels like Zanzibar at its most real. 🍷



## Matemwe Essentials

### WHERE TO STAY

• **Attitude Matemwe**  
A new eco-conscious boutique stay built using local materials, permaculture planting and a strong community ethos. Expect makuti roofs, coconut-wood details, Tanzanian-made textiles, refillable bath products and a reef-focused marine centre on-site. The hotel is plastic-free, sources locally and supports projects like Mamas of Zanzibar and school-led reef education.

### WHAT TO DO

- **Snorkel or dive at Mnemba Atoll**  
Matemwe is the main jumping-off point for Mnemba, known for its excellent marine life. Dive centres offer everything from beginner dives to drift dives around the atoll.
- **Enjoy village life** Football games on the beach at sunset, seaweed farming at low tide, fishermen returning at dawn...
- **Dhow trips**  
Slow, late-afternoon sails along the coastline, often with calm water and softly changing light.
- **Yoga, spa treatments and lagoon swimming**  
High tide brings warm, turquoise water ideal for floating and gentle swims.

### FURTHER AFIELD

- **Stone Town day trip**  
Swahili doors, narrow alleys, seafood stalls, the Anglican Cathedral built

on the site of the slave market, and some of the best coffee on the island.

- **Jozani Forest**  
Seek red colobus monkeys and shady nature trails.



### WHAT TO EAT

Zanzibari cuisine borrows from Swahili, Omani, Indian and Persian traditions, which means spice-led dishes built on simplicity rather than heat. Expect:

- Coconut-based stews (fish or vegetables simmered slowly with lime, ginger or turmeric)
- Mild curries with cardamom, cinnamon and clove
- Mchicha: leafy stewed local greens
- Fresh snapper, tuna and octopus grilled and served with spiced rice or chapati
- Snacks like kaachori (potato, garlic, lime), sesame-peanut biscuits and crisp coconut doughnuts made from rice flour
- Spiced coffee or tea laced with cloves, ginger or cardamom
- Tamarind, cassava, plantain, lime, coconut and mango used in both savoury and sweet dishes
- Mamas of Zanzibar offer cooking sessions to help you understand the intense flavours of Zanzibar.

