

# Beach hopping on the SWAHILI COAST

*After the excitement of a safari, some relaxation on the beach is a popular way to end a trip to Africa. Tanzania has some of the best game viewing on the continent, together with some of the most idyllic island destinations. Melissa Hillen takes the short plane-hop from wild bush to white sand.*



Swahili door, Stone Town



Mafia Island people



My most recent foray to East Africa involved a cunning plan to research Tanzania's beach options, starting on the Tanzania coast, hopping across to the Mafia Archipelago, then threading my way across Zanzibar, on to Pemba and ending up back on the mainland coast in the north.

My first stop was Ras Kutani, a ten-minute flight south from Dar es Salaam. This quiet yet easily accessible stretch of coast is perfect for a pre-safari wind down, allowing you to recover from an overnight flight from the UK before heading off to the wilderness. After a couple of days with little to do but relax and admire the location, it was time to move on.

The Mafia Archipelago has to be my favourite beach destination in Tanzania. A 20-minute light-aircraft journey takes you from Dar es Salaam to the minuscule Mafia Island airport. I was captivated by the unsophisticated charm and complete lack of development as we weaved our way through rustic villages, feeling as though we'd leapt back in time 40 years. Accommodation here focuses on creating a wonderfully relaxed ambiance, rather than an ultra-polished finish. Much of the waters off

Mafia Island are a National Marine Park and the diving and snorkelling here is some of the best in East Africa. In addition to the spectacular marine life there are plenty of activities to be enjoyed on land, ranging from island-hopping day trips to exploring local villages to learn about traditional, rural Swahili culture. Mafia is superb for those who really want to get away from it all and enjoy unpretentious, unhurried island life.

After Mafia, the hubbub of Stone Town on Zanzibar Island was an intense contrast. Getting lost in the hot and bustling streets is part of the Stone Town experience, with colourful markets and interesting boutiques lining the narrow winding alleyways of crumbling merchant houses.

Zanzibar's rich and exotic history becomes evident when you leave town and drive across the island. Fading sultan's palaces are scattered between spice farms and coconut plantations - I would heartily recommend an eye-opening spice tour - and the island's beaches are dreamy-white, fringed by palm trees and lapped by azure waters. Early mornings are always a frenzy of activity on the beach as local fishermen bring in their daily catch in old wooden dhows. Zanzibar's waters are extremely tidal so



Beach at Pangani

snorkelling and diving is best done from boats on off-shore corals which teem with all manner of tropical fish. I spent time in a wide range of accommodation from international five-star hotels to simple, friendly beach inns. I really don't think you can beat the small, barefoot luxury beach lodges with makuti-thatched bandas (villa-style accommodation) perching on the edge of the Indian Ocean.

From Zanzibar Island I then took a 35-minute light-aircraft flight to Pemba Island, followed by a road and boat transfer to Fundu Lagoon. This small, rustic-chic lodge is incredibly laid-back and after a couple of days relaxing here (again with some superb diving) the office was but a distant memory. Fundu is an extremely romantic hideaway so perfect for honeymooners - a sundown sail on an old dhow is particularly magical.

My final destination was the northern Swahili Coast, near Pangani. The Tides Lodge is a secret beach hideaway, charming and simply furnished with just a handful of cottages scattered on a coastline otherwise untouched by tourism. As well as the beautifully wild beach, the once thriving port town of Pangani is great for exploring. Diving and snorkelling can be done offshore in

Maziwe Island Marine Reserve, with turtles and spinner dolphins a wonderful highlight. My last word here goes to 'The Tides' seafood – very simple, very fresh and extraordinarily delicious.

Flying back to Dar, I glanced down at the array of beautiful destinations I had visited – incredible beaches, rich culture, superb marine life and gorgeously unpretentious lodges. Whether you seek something new and undiscovered or exclusive and romantic, all options are easily accessible and totally idyllic.

**Melissa Hillen**  
East Africa Specialist



Swahili ruins on Chole Island off Zanzibar

## FACT FILE

A two-week stay on the beach in Tanzania starts from £2,000 per person including all flights. A two-week safari and beach trip would start at around £3,250 per person. For details please contact Melissa, Bronwen, Katie or Alexandra on 01993 838 516.

