

# TRAVEL



SUBMITTED PHOTOS BY ERIC DOUGLAS

Collecting seaweed for sale to pharmaceutical and food processing companies provides a secondary income for women around Zanzibar. The seaweed is staked down inside the fringing reef that rings the island. As the tide goes out, the shallow sand flats are easily accessible for harvesting.

## Zanzibar: Islands within islands

The East African enclave contains of a mix of cultures

BY ERIC DOUGLAS  
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Traveling 80 kilometers per hour over roads more akin to minefields is a visitor's first introduction to the island of Zanzibar; at least a visitor who gets out and explores the island a bit, although many don't.

During the day, and into the evening hours, the major arteries leading out from Stone Town are choked with traffic — foot traffic, bike traffic, car and van traffic and cargo truck traffic. Slower moving travelers use the outside — walkers against the edge of the road so they can duck out of the way and then rows of bike riders, sometimes two or three at a time on a single seat. Motor vehicles dominate the middle. Cars and old, slow trucks or "dolla-dollars" crammed with 20 or more people — so named because a trip costs a dollar — serve as local buses. Drivers pass wherever they can, usually by honking their horns to warn each other as they go around.

While riding in a car I kept waiting to see a crash as we made our way over the twisting, dipping and kidney-jarring thoroughways. The moment never came. I'm sure accidents happen from time to time, but the drivers seem to be able to snake in and out and avoid problems.

It was in a taxi van that I got my first exposure to one of the most striking contrasts of Zanzibar, though. I was alone with the driver, Anoir, and we had just left the main road. Passing through the middle of a small village, the rutted roads came within feet of tiny mud-brick huts, so simple that they didn't have windows. Rough boards covered the open spaces to keep out the night air. The front doors had gaps between the boards. Insulation from the cold isn't a factor in the tropics, but nothing kept out the mosquitoes either. In malaria country, this can be a real problem.

Entire families leaned against the mud walls, seated side by side, watching the night. There were few, if

any, electric lights, and the villagers passed the time in the dark. In a few places, entire villages appeared to be huddled around a single television, perched precariously on a small wooden table outside.

When we got to our destination and drove through the front gate of the resort, the property opened up like a manicured oasis in a sea of dark green night. The resort was well-lit with paved walkways and comfortable seating. The bar served drinks for the resort guests or visitors lucky enough to have made reservations in advance.

### Two different islands

While Zanzibar is an island—two in fact—there are islands within the islands that are even more abrupt than the change between the talc-soft sandy white beaches and the pale blue ocean waters. There are villagers living in abject poverty within earshot of five-star resorts that cater to their customer's needs and where visitors never leave the confines of the landscaped grounds for the duration of their visit.

Zanzibar lies in the Indian Ocean, just off the coast of Tanzania in East Africa. The island is actually a semi-autonomous part of Tanzania, home to Kilimanjaro. Even though Dar es Salaam is just 20 minutes away by airplane, walking through the front doors of the tiny airport is like stepping back in time to when air travel was new. Portions of the island don't appear to have changed since Dr. David Livingstone lived there before commencing his last exploration of the East African interior or when Henry Stanley left there in search of him in 1871.

During the day, the air had an almost silky feel to it from the high humidity and the bright sunshine beats down, blasting paint off of anything that isn't shaded or cared for regularly. At night, it became comfortable, almost cool. With very few lights around the island, outside of Stone Town, the night sky was an explosion of stars.

The ancient flagstone streets and crumbling parapets of Stone Town, the only major town on the island, included an interesting mix of Arab, Portuguese and In-



Stone Town's central market provides islands with an opportunity to buy food and goods from all over the island and imported from the mainland while buyers and sellers haggle over price.

Indian architecture. In the city, both in the old quarter which is the true Stone Town, and the larger Zanzibar City, the shops and stalls were operated by islanders of Indian, Arabic and Bantu descent. The Indian and Arabic Zanzibaris seem to live mostly in the city while the Bantu live in the villages outside the city and work in the still productive, but shrinking, spice trade, with cloves still predominating.

One morning, I watched a group of children playing on the beach. They were playing football (soccer), but using a ball the size of a softball to do it. Undaunted, as only children can be, they ran on the beach kicking the ball back and forth without a lot of strategy or positioning, but with loads of energy and excitement. I couldn't tell when a team scored a goal or, frankly, if there were teams or if everyone was out for himself. Regardless the game was exciting and fast-paced. Some other boys played in the warm, gentle waves rolling up the sand. They had a large stump in the water that they were using as a float, rolling it over and over in the water as they tried to climb on top.

### Cash crop

The two islands of Zanzibar are known as Ujunga and Pemba. A fringing reef protects them from the waves of the Indian Ocean. The white sand on the broad, flat beaches—at low tide—was so soft and fine it felt like walking on powder instead of sand.

out Asia and other parts of the world, sea cucumbers provide both medicines and a food source. They aren't vegetables, despite their name, but marine animals that are simply shaped like cucumbers. When used for food, they are gelatinous and usually shows up in soups.

Tourism is the second largest income source for the tiny island's government, but the money does not naturally filter down to the workers. The resorts are owned by foreign corporations and the money they make is either reinvested in developments to the property itself or leaves the island. Most of the high-paying jobs in the resorts are filled by South Africans, Europeans and the occasional American. The local island people tend to work in the more menial positions on the resorts, providing gate security, housekeeping and general labor.

Many tourists don't venture outside their all-inclusive resorts. They are there for the weather and the water, but not to understand the culture or the people of the island. Inevitably, some do make it to Stone Town's narrow winding streets. They encounter the vendors who've set up tables with paintings showing local scenes or jewelry.

As more and more people discover Zanzibar, the human footprint continues to grow. Those islands within the island are expanding and will eventually change the face and the culture of the island forever.

Eric Douglas is an author, photographer and journalist living in Durham. He loves to travel to exotic places around the world and share those places with others through words and images. He has also published three books and several short stories. To see some of his other projects, visit his Web site at [www.booksbyeric.com](http://www.booksbyeric.com).



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