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Zanzibar: A Crossroads Lapped by the Indian Ocean

By SETH SHERWOOD

“I am mesmerized,” wrote the Scottish explorer and missionary Dr. David Livingstone about Zanzibar, the base for his final African adventures in the 19th century. “This is the finest place I have known in all of [Africa](#) to rest before starting my last journey,” he said.

Dr. Livingstone was scarcely the only foreigner to swoon under the charms of the Edenic beaches, bustling bazaars and beguiling multicultural froth of the so-called Spice Island, now an autonomous territory of [Tanzania](#). A jaunt through the mazelike passageways of the Stone Town, a [Unesco](#) World Heritage Site in the capital city of Zanzibar Town, reveals bygone Arab palaces, Indian merchant homes, Zoroastrian traders’ offices, Portuguese chapels and an Anglican cathedral — all testament to the island’s onetime glory as an international trading center for cloves and ivory (as well as slaves).

While the 20th century was intermittently unkind to Zanzibar — a bloody independence battle in 1964 was followed by decades of political turmoil and violent inter-party clashes — the streets of the Stone Town are again calm, and many of the rustic colonial mansions have been reborn as period-rich hotels. Beyond the city’s bustle, rural spice plantations produce a symphony of scents, a medley of nutmeg, vanilla, cinnamon and, as ever, cloves. Or to live out your secret fantasies of “Robinson Crusoe” — or “The Blue Lagoon” — sneak off to one of Zanzibar’s sheltered beaches. As you lounge under a coconut grove and watch monkeys scuttle across the warm white sand, you may need to throw some electric turquoise water on your face to know that you’re not dreaming.

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