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Zanzibar a favourite tourist, honeymoon destination

MANSOOR LADHA
Special to the News

We were greeted with a smile and Karibu sana (most welcome) by our driver at the Zanzibar airport, located just off the eastern coastline of Tanzania. One can reach Zanzibar by a less-than half hour flight or go by a convenient modern hovercraft ferry.

The road from the airport to the city is not very impressive, so don't be fooled. More pleasant and better things are to follow. Soon after we checked in our hotel, we headed to the Forodhani Gardens, (previously known as Jubilee Gardens), a short walk to a seafront sanctuary filled with walkways, benches and food stalls.

This rehabilitation project spearheaded by The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which has restored a variety of sites that preserve Zanzibar's rich history and culture. An excellent introduction to the island's relaxed attitude and life style is provided by visiting Forodhani Gardens. Men in white aprons and chef hats manage the many stalls of the night market. Being an island, Zanzibar's specialty is seafood such as crabs, lobster, eel, calamari, octopus, kingfish, tuna and prawns, served alongside local salads and chips. Makeshift barbecues known for its shellfish, meat kebabs and fruit, freshly pressed sugarcane juice. It's a haven for foodies.

New York has hot dogs, Parisian crepes and Italian pizza, Zanzibar has the local Zanzibar Pizza. No one can explain why it's called pizza because it doesn't look like one neither does it taste like one. However, I can guarantee that it's delicious after your choice of toppings are added.

While it's nice to treat yourself to a relaxing restaurant meal while on vacation, the best way to taste the most exciting regional and local foods is to take on the streets. The fun really begins at sunset when fishermen return with their catch-of-the day to offer tourists a seafood lover's paradise. All these foods are inexpensive, fresh and mouth-watering.

Young and old, local and tourists, gather here every evening to enjoy the views across the aquamarine Indian Ocean. The atmosphere is relaxed, and with hakuna haraka (no hurry). It's a wonderful place to sit on a bench and



SUBMITTED PHOTO MANSOOR LADHA

A shopper browses going through the local market.

watch the world go by. For solo women alone in Stone Town, the place is safe. However, it is not uncommon for a stranger to strike up a conversation with a local or a tourist as warmth and hospitality remain a strong brand.

These gardens blend in well with the local architecture and culture and seem to be appreciated by all. My colleague, Steve from Malawi, goes there most evenings to eat roasted mhogo (cassava). After endless meetings, the gardens offer respite. Luckily, the culture of malls with walls and electric fencing remains distant. And for now, the Forodhani experience — a meal with a drink and a great view — can be enjoyed for less than \$3. These gardens may also offer a formula from which other urban centres could glean a lesson or two.

The island of Zanzibar needs no introduction to most tourists visiting Tanzania. Loved and fascinated by everyone who visits this island, it has been called heaven on earth, romantic island, honeymoon destination, exotic and several other emotional names. Zanzibar is on the minds of every tourist visiting Tanzania because of its world-renowned white sandy beaches, turquoise water, unforgettable sunsets, unique tropical fruits and as the main exporter of cloves and other spices.

I had personal and emotional reasons to visit Zanzibar. First, my whole family — parents, two sisters, one brother

and myself — were all born in Zanzibar. Secondly, we needed to cool off after the exhaustive and tiring experience during a safari by taking it easy for a few days in Zanzibar with their hakuna haraka (no worry) attitude.

Fresh spices and abundant seafood obviously make Zanzibar a haven for foodies. A great place to be gastronomically satisfied is at the open-air street food market in the waterfront Forodhani Gardens in Stone Town.

During a recent visit to Zanzibar, I was able to taste my favourite fruit durian. Love it or hate it, durian is the world's most divisive fruit. We were in Zanzibar at a time when the durian was not in season. Our taxi driver and guide, Ahmed was kind enough to phone his contacts to find durian for me. We came to our hotel disappointed but an hour later, the reception called to say Ahmed has brought durians for me.

When I came to the reception, I was politely told that I couldn't bring the fruit inside the hotel and will have to go outside on the porch to eat it. Dutifully I obliged and devoured a whole fruit by myself and gave the other one to the hotel's grateful doorman.

The smell of durian has been likened to raw sewage by disapproving western tourists but in Zanzibar and part of south east Asia, the durian is the much-loved king of the fruits. Big, heavy and spiky, the humble durian has become a centre of attention as a favourite fruit of discreet and tasteful consumers like me.

Zanzibar has rich history. The elegant Beit el-Ajaib (House of Wonders), home to the Zanzibar National Museum of History and Culture, dominates the area by its majestic presence. A few yards to the east is the former palace of the Sultan of Zanzibar, symbolizing the past glory of the Arab

dynasty and a museum exhibiting memorabilia of the Omani rulers. I remembered how as a child, I used to stand on the side of the road with several other kids to wave to the sultan and his wife as they passed in their red Rolls Royce.

An unpleasant and sad chapter in Zanzibar's history was its involvement as the main centre of slave trade when the Arabs settled in because it offered a convenient point from which to trade with towns on the main land. Persian traders used Zanzibar as a base for voyages between the Middle East, India, and Africa.

The sultan of Oman established control and influence on Zanzibar, eventually establishing a ruling Arab elite. Zanzibar gained independence in 1963 and became a constitutional monarchy. The island's disgruntled Africans staged a revolution in 1964, in which thousands of Arabs and Indians were killed, and Sultan Jamshid bin Abdullah fled into exile to Britain. Mainland's President Julius Nyerere offered a hand of friendship, culminating its merger with mainland Tanganyika to form the United Republic of Tanzania.

It is unfortunate that despite the fact that the alluring Zanzibar island has had a tumultuous past, it's still not eager to forget its stormy political history. Already there are murmurs in some quarters of separating from the mainland and no one can predict when that will happen. I only hope that the paradise that we all enjoy and cherish doesn't become an illusion.

Zanzibar-born Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based travel writer, journalist and author of Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims. Another book, Memoirs of a Muhindi is scheduled to be published by University of Regina.

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