

Culture holidays

Spices and sand dunes – where Arabia meets Africa

A new tour soaks up the very different but inextricably linked cultures of Oman and Zanzibar. Sue Watt got a pre-Covid preview

It's a hot, sticky afternoon and I'm lost among Stone Town's maze of narrow streets and tall, mildewed houses steeped in stories of the past. But this is a place where you should get lost, where you should wander aimlessly and simply soak up its soul.

Children's high-pitched laughter pours out from glassless school windows, and the muezzin's calls to prayer echo down the alleyways. Motorbikes squeeze down streets filled with colour from traders hawking their bright kanga fabrics, Tingatinga-styled paintings, and souvenir spices. And ornately carved wooden doors heavy with symbolism reveal the histories of the houses behind them: chains signified a slave-trader's home and crowns meant Omani royalty once lived there.

From the spices in souks to the faces of locals to decadent Arabian architecture, Oman's influence infuses Stone Town, the historical hub of Zanzibar City. Even though there are direct flights between the two destinations, most holidays here are twinned with Tanzanian safaris rather than Oman, despite their sharing an intricate web of history and heritage so tightly entwined that this Indian Ocean island was once the Omani capital. In late February, just before Covid-19 turned travellers' dreams to dust, I took a tailor-made trip, with the luxury tour operator Cox & Kings, that connected the two destinations.

My tour started in Muscat, Oman's



crystals above a vivid Persian carpet that took 600 women four years to weave. Outside amid pristine gardens, polished marble pavements reflect soothing cream archways and walls engraved with the Koran. We walked around in silence, not out of obligation but out of awe for this serene and special place.

Muttrah is the old heart of the city. Its souk is all winding alleys and jam-packed stalls, with aromatic spices, traditional Omani clothes and silver jewellery sold alongside cuddly camels and tourist tat. The shiny turquoise-tiled minaret of Muttrah Mosque seems to reflect the sea and the sweeping cornice curves around the old harbour where royal yachts, cruise ships and graceful dhows are moored. The cargoes of the monsoon trade winds once moored here, and nearby Bait al Zubair, a museum on Omani life, displays colonial prints of the port alongside prints of Zanzibar, of dhows riding the waves out at sea, sails billowing, or coming into the chaotic port of Stone Town.

Those ancient dhows hailed mostly from Sur, the next stop on my four-day road trip. Our route took us to Quriyat, a pretty fishing village with turreted houses and a watchtower jutting out to sea, and along twisting roads into the rugged eastern Al Hajar mountains to see the intensely turquoise waters of Wadi Arbreen and Wadi Tiwi canyons.

Sur is a sprawling city with an elegant cornice overlooked by Sunaysilah Castle and smart 18th-century merchant houses. Once a major port, its small Maritime Museum is packed with seafaring history.

"People still come from all over the Gulf to buy dhows," Karim said. In an old boatyard smelling of freshly sawn wood and sea air, craftsmen were building a huge hull from Indian teak by hand, following traditional techniques. Once used for carrying spices, ivory – and many thousands of slaves over centuries – today's dhows are built for fishing, tourism or wealthy individuals.

We overnights at Ras al Jinz reserve and watched green turtles laying eggs on the beach, popping them out to the sound of gentle waves under starlight [see box]. The next day, I swam in the jade pools of Wadi Beni Khalid, a canyon of white rocks and caves, climbed the endless desert dunes of Sharqiyah Sands at sunset as they turned from pale gold to a deep, glowing red and slept at Thousand Nights Camp in a Bedouin goat-hair tent.

We continued to Nizwa, once Oman's capital attracting traders from around the country. They're still drawn to its souk, particularly its Friday goat market. But it was quiet when we sought spices in the old East Souk, and sipped *kahwa*, black coffee laced with cardamom, and sampled dates, for which the town is renowned.

A huge, taupe-hued fort dominates Nizwa. Panoramic views from its ramparts span the old town, encircled by verdant date palms and the Al Hajar Mountains beyond. Look closely inside its warren of rooms and you'll see connections with Zanzibar – an old door with carvings and studs like those in Stone Town, Zanzibar stamps in a cabinet, and an ivory dagger handle. "It's from Africa," my guide confirmed.

I flew to Zanzibar the next day. Tourism is big business here, but there's more to the island than gorgeous beaches. Its people, mostly Muslim, are deeply traditional with a Swahili culture imbued with Arabian and Indian influences. And there's more to Zanzibar City than historic Stone Town. We



▲ Middle Eastern promise: the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Oman

◀ Dhow! The traditional means of transport in these parts

► Just deserts: the dunes of Sharqiyah Sands



▲ The Indian-style Old Dispensary in Stone Town

► Spice up your life with fresh nutmeg from Zanzibar



modern capital of gleaming white buildings, smart shopping malls and manicured gardens. Oman conquered Zanzibar in 1698, although the island had long been the African gateway for seafarers from foreign shores sailing the lucrative monsoon trade winds across the Indian Ocean.

By the 19th century, Oman's extensive maritime empire spanned the Arabian Gulf and East Africa, with Zanzibar as its hub. The Omanis introduced spices to their fertile colony, making it the world's greatest producer of cloves and earning it the moniker of the Spice Islands. Tragically, it also became the thriving hub of the Arab slave trade, in which Arabs, Indians, Europeans and even Africans were nefariously embroiled. Every year, thousands of slaves were brought here from mainland Africa. Some worked on the island's prosperous clove plantations, but most, crammed in dhows, sailed to Madagascar or Oman and further east across the Indian Ocean.

On the back of the slave and spice trades, Zanzibar flourished and, in 1840, Said bin Sultan declared it Oman's capital. It remained so until his death in 1856, when his sons split the Sultanate, one ruling Zanzibar, the other Oman. While Zanzibar prospered, Oman's economy plummeted. Its resurgence began in 1970, thanks to the oil industry and a new, forward-looking Sultan Qaboos.

The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque is a beautiful legacy from the popular father of modern Oman, who died in January. "Sultan Qaboos united our country," my guide Karim said softly. "He brought us wealth and he was our guiding light." An absolute monarch who suppressed his critics, perhaps not everyone would agree.

Inside the main prayer hall hangs a chandelier of 600,000 Swarovski

bar City than historic Stone Town. We drove through the urban sprawl of Ng'ambo for a spice tour at Kizimbani in the island's lush interior. "This used to be spice farms, now it's just part of the city, all apartment blocks and offices..." my driver said wistfully.

Explaining how the Omanis introduced spices, our guide climbed a tree for what he called "Zanzibar gold", producing cloves that smell of Christmas. Apparently, its leaves are used for marijuana cigarettes, their aroma masking the pungency of weed. He divulged the aphrodisiac powers of fresh nutmeg encased by webs of red mace that make people "wide-eyed and happy before weddings". He extolled the curative powers of turmeric, picked cinnamon – the "Queen of spices" – from bark, and crushed lemongrass between

TURTLE CONSERVATION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

In both Zanzibar and Oman, visitors can stay at important nesting sites for endangered green turtles, albeit the experiences are very different.

Green turtles live an extraordinary life. Abandoned by their mothers once eggs have been laid in the sand, they can live for up to 80 years, should they survive that first dash to the sea as hatchlings, and then the perils of predation (both human and natural), pollution and the trappings of the fishing industry. Migrating far and wide across oceans, they always return to their beach of birth to lay their eggs. Oman's Ras al Jinz Turtle Reserve (rasaljinz-turtlereserve.com) is one of the most important turtle-breeding sites of the Indian Ocean. From mid-May to September, 30-70 turtles nest nightly.



▲ Race against time: if they survive the first dash to the sea, green turtles can live for 80 years

Even in quieter months, you'll see turtles most evenings. Traditionally you would see plenty of tourists too, divided into groups with excellent guides.

It's a more exclusive experience at Zanzibar's private &Beyond Mnemba

Island (andbeyond.com), available only to residents of the luxury lodge which has just 10 suites.

Here, guests learn about turtle conservation, watching the turtles laying eggs and helping the hatchlings reach the sea,

covering up crab holes and shielding them from seagulls. The main season is between February and June.

The experiences are sensitively managed, and no handling of the turtles is permitted.

walking tour of Stone Town. "In January 1964, they were violently overthrown in the Zanzibar Revolution. We don't know exact numbers, but thousands were killed in just one night." Three months later, Zanzibar united with Tanganyika, becoming a semi-autonomous region of Tanzania.

We strolled along the seafront, seeing the grand houses and royal palaces born of Zanzibar's newfound wealth and ill-gotten gains of the slave and spice trades. "The House of Wonders was the first house in Zanzibar to have electricity and an elevator," Khamis said. Today, its wide verandas, iron columns and clock tower are closed for renovations. The Sultan's home is now the Palace Museum, revealing glimpses of royal life in diverse exhibits, including a rickshaw, ebony thrones, Murano glass, and that darling of 1950s decor, Formica tables and chairs. And the ornate Old Dispensary, once a merchant's home, still retains vivid stained glass windows true to Indian style and elaborate balconies painted blue.

We meandered through aromas of spices, fish and live chickens at the Darajani Market, once an Arab souk, that sells everything from car spares to goat carcasses. Nearby, the imposing Anglican Cathedral stands on the former site of a more forbidding market, where slaves were sold.

"The altar is where the 'whipping tree' stood, where slaves were tied and whipped to test their strength," Khamis said. "The red marble around the altar represents their blood."

Outside is a sculpture of five slaves standing in a sunken pit. Shocking in its simplicity, they're wearing genuine slave chains, somehow exuding dignity through their despair. It's hard to walk away and even harder to walk around the underground chambers nearby. Dark, airless and tomblike, it's believed slaves were incarcerated here. Above them, the East African Slave Trade Exhibit tells their sorrowful story: although its rooms are busy, barely a word is spoken.

As we ended our tour, Kharim said quietly: "Stone Town's a Unesco World Heritage Site, so we couldn't change it, even if we wanted to."

I got lost again in its maze of alleys and everyday life, relieved by the thought that these mildewed walls will tell their stories for generations to come.