

Fishing Zanzibar's impossibly clear waters from a traditional dhow is still a daily pastime in this part of the world.

# A SULTAN'S LEGACY

SPICES ARE AS MUCH A PART OF ZANZIBAR'S FAME AND FORTUNE AS GOLD IS OURS. AND, AS INTREPID FOODIE **NICOLE MCCREEDY** DISCOVERS, THE COUNTRY'S CUISINE IS AS RICH WITH SPICES AS IT IS WITH HISTORY

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**"VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE THAT GIVES IT ALL ITS FLAVOUR."**

Or, to turn a cliché on its head, in Zanzibar it is the variety of spices that add to life's flavour. The island is a living, breathing pantry stocked with cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, vanilla, cumin, pepper, ginger, turmeric, and much more.

For centuries Zanzibar's harbour has been a key port on the Indian Ocean trading route between the Middle East, India and the East African mainland. As recently as the early 1960s you could count as many as 2 000 merchant dhows docked at the harbour in Stone Town. It's no wonder that the easygoing ethos that underlies Swahili cuisine, as it does the rest of its culture, is inherit, borrow and adopt.

The Indian specialties chapattis, samoosas



This spread, clockwise from above: Setting sail; a feline inhabitant takes a nap outside one of the island's distinctive carved doors, a relic from Arab occupation; the island is a rich source of fresh produce; Zanzibar's idyllic beaches are the stuff of many an island dream; locals gather on the beach to inspect the fishermen's catch; Stone Town, a UNESCO World Heritage site, forms the old part of what is now known as Zanzibar City.



SHREDDED GREEN PAPAYA AND DATE SALAD

**THE ISLAND IS A LIVING, BREATHING PANTRY STOCKED WITH CLOVES, CARDAMOM, CINNAMON AND VANILLA**

and lassis are as much a part of the culinary repertoire as *haluwa*, the dark brown, sesame- and cardamom-flavoured, sticky dessert from Arabia. At Darajani market, a short walk from the harbour through the narrow, winding alleys of Stone Town, you will find rows of street vendors selling piles of squidgy, soft dates from Iran for a song. These sweet treats are eaten with ginger or vanilla-flavoured coffee, which is drunk black from small dainty cups in the Omani fashion.

In the 1800s, sultan Sayyid Said of Oman moved his capital from Muscat to Stone

Town. One may imagine that it was based on a whimsical desire to live on a tropical island. Truthfully, though, Sayyid found the climate ideal for growing the scarce commodity of cloves. It was a move that was to turn the Zanzibar archipelago into a major player in the world's spice industry – and the slave trade. Today, cloves are still grown for export and spice tours to the farms are a popular tourist outing.

The tours take place in the plantations about half an hour's drive outside Stone Town. The first thing that Fuid, our guide, says to the



## TRAVEL

group is, "I have many things to show you today." He fires off plant names in Latin, Dutch and German. Slices of the orange turmeric root are passed around and the "guess what this is" game is on. Curry leaves are smelled, young stalks of green peppercorn baubles are touched and new, unfamiliar star-shaped fruits are tasted. There is a lot to see and remember. For example: drink turmeric with ginger and honey for bronchitis; ginger is good for sore throats and seasickness; vanilla flowers look like orchids; annatto is a food colouring used in tandoori masala; and the

The name is a misnomer. It is chapatti dough, rolled out into a very thin crêpe-like base, filled with a savoury or sweet filling and fried in ghee on a gas wok.

The bright pink tandoori lobster skewers are the most eye-catching. Cinnamon, cardamom, black pepper, and ginger are mixed together to create the tandoori flavouring. Rashid, who is eager to make a sale, assures me that "it is typical from Zanzibar." Once chosen, the lobster is grilled over hot coals, and then a squeeze of lime is added before it is served on a paper plate

### PAN-FRIED PRAWNS WITH CHILLI TOMATO SAUCE

Serves 4 ■ EASY

Preparation: 5 minutes

Cooking: 15 minutes

olive oil ½ cup  
ginger 1 x 10 cm piece, grated  
garlic 6 cloves, grated  
red chillies 4–6, chopped  
ripe tomatoes 4, chopped  
sea salt to taste  
tiger prawns 12 (with shells), cleaned  
sunflower oil 2 T

## IT IS A SEAFOOD FEAST OF PRAWNS, CALAMARI, CLAMS, MUSSELS AND KINGFISH, STACKED NEXT TO LOBSTERS

leaves of the clove plant can be used in cooking, but the flavour is very strong. A young Canadian girl walking with me sighs, "I wish I had brought a notebook."

After the tour, a traditional meal of pilau with vegetables in a coconut milk sauce, which has been prepared in the local village, is served. If there is a dish that can be said to be typical of the local Swahili cuisine, it is spiced rice or pilau. The best pilau is an unassuming blend of spices, fragrant with the smell of cinnamon, accompanied by the occasional sharp taste of whole cloves. Pilau was inherited from the Persians who were regular traders along the African East Coast as far back as the first century AD. Peeled brinjals, tomatoes and turmeric are cooked together with coconut milk to make a consommé vegetable sauce, which is spooned over the pilau. In many countries pilau is eaten with a vegetable, chicken or beef broth. In Zanzibar, however, try the kingfish variety.

The simple meal is delicious in its simplicity. Is it the fresh spices? I ask the local cook, Msoud, what the secret is. He lifts his hand to his mouth as if he is holding the sweetest tomato and is savouring the taste. "In Zanzibar, our spices and fruits are very, very tasty because we don't use fertiliser. Everything is very natural," he replies.

After a hot and clammy day among the spices, the place to enjoy the sunset is Forodhani Gardens in Stone Town. Drink a glass of fresh sugar cane juice with lime and ginger. The sugar cane is squeezed through an old-fashioned, hand-turned press as you wait. It doesn't get more natural than this.

The food stalls start setting up for trading around this time. It is a seafood feast of prawns, calamari, clams, mussels and kingfish stacked next to whole crab claws and lobsters. The selection is astounding. But a visit to Forodhani would be incomplete without trying the famous Zanzibar pizza.

with salad. Expecting the tandoori to have a chilli bite, it is a pleasant surprise to discover that, like all things on the island, it has a gentle, subtle flavour. This is, after all, heaven.

"Hakuna matata, there are no worries," as they say in Zanzibar, "feel free!" **W**

### SHREDDED GREEN PAPAYA AND DATE SALAD

Serves 4 ■ EASY ■ GREAT VALUE

Preparation: 10 minutes

green paw-paw 1, peeled  
dates 6, torn  
fresh mint for serving

For the dressing, whisk together:

ginger 1 x 5 cm piece, grated  
garlic 3 cloves, grated  
honey 1 T  
rice wine vinegar ½ cup  
fish sauce 1 T  
sugar 1 t  
lemon 1, juiced

1 Shred the paw-paw into thin strands and arrange in a shallow bowl.

2 Drizzle over the dressing, top with torn dates and fresh mint and serve.

**Cook's note:** If you can't get green paw-paw, try shredded mango, or cucumber, for a savoury version.

**FAT-CONSCIOUS, DAIRY-FREE, MEAT-FREE, WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE**

**WINE:** Grootte Post Chenin Blanc 2010



1 In a saucepan pan over a medium heat, fry the ginger, garlic and chillies in the olive oil until fragrant, then add the tomatoes and sea salt. Simmer for 15 minutes.

2 Meanwhile, place a large pan on a high heat and add the sunflower oil. When hot, sear the prawns in batches for 1 minute on each side or until plump and coral in colour. Serve with the chilli tomato sauce.

**CARB-CONSCIOUS, DAIRY-FREE, WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE**

**WINE:** Hartenberg Chardonnay 2010

### WHERE TO EAT

#### ARCHIPELAGO RESTAURANT

This restaurant overlooks the sea and serves an excellent hamburger if you want a change from Swahili food. There is also a range of interesting flavoured teas – try the rose petal and the hibiscus and lime.

#### LUUKUMANI

This is a budget-friendly local restaurant popular with both tourists and locals. It's a good place to try a variety of Zanzibari dishes depending on the day's selection, which usually includes green bananas cooked with vegetables and breadfruit. The tamarind juice is recommended.

#### MONSOON RESTAURANT

Lounge around on cushions while eating a three-course Swahili meal. Traditional taarab music is played on Wednesdays and Saturdays and the kingfish pilau is recommended.

#### RENDEZVOUS LES SPICES

This Indian restaurant has a bold, colourful selection of murals and a wide selection of dishes. The reasonably priced lunchtime menu is a good place to start.

This spread, clockwise from left: Seafood is available in abundance; local women use traditional Swahili printed fabric for clothing; the seed of the *Myristica fragrans* tree produces nutmeg and its red lacy covering, mace; Zanzibar's Spice Island moniker is well-earned; the food market at Forodhani Gardens is well worth a visit.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES AND NICOLE MCCREEDY

