

Matemwe – Blazing a trail to make a difference

Matemwe is elevated on a ledge of dark coral rock jutting out over the clear, aquamarine ocean opposite the Mnemba Atoll. It is in the north east corner of Zanzibar - or Unguja island as it is locally known. The island is an easy three and a half hour air journey from Johannesburg, and this makes it a perfect Indian Ocean destination. It is hard to believe that in such a short time you are in the heart of East Africa with the vast plains of the Serengeti close by.

It is an exotic and heady combination of global influences. The Portugese, Egyptians, English, Chinese and Indians have all been involved there at one time or another. The English came over as missionaries and traders, with David Livingstone playing an important part in the abolition of slavery, but it was the Omani Arabs and Shirazi Persians that stayed permanently. Like many countries in Africa, Zanzibar has a turbulent history scarred by its reputation for trading in slaves. Indians settled later on the island to provide a vital interface for the spice and ivory trade with the East. However, it is primarily the combination of Arab and African that gave rise to a today's coastal community with distinctive physical features and a language developed from both origins - known as 'Swahili'. As trade developed as a currency around the world, Zanzibar was a perfect stopover between America, Europe and Asia. At one time its economy was one of the strongest on the continent because of its dominance of the spice trade. An uprising in 1964 saw the newly elected government redistribute arable land to people who had no proper knowledge of agriculture, and sadly Zanzibar's hold on the spice trade gradually deteriorated. Indonesia and other countries in Asia quickly stepped in to take its place. Nowadays the commercial sector of the spice trade on the island is small, and its income is now generated from tourism. A visit to one of the spice farms is one of the most popular day tour attractions. The other is a visit to Stonetown, the island's capital, with its narrow streets and beautifully carved doors. The colourful street markets are a must, and the architecture is fascinating transcending the conversion of cultures.

Tourism is increasingly being seen as a solution to the island's transformation and economic recovery. The government has welcomed large hotel groups such as Planhotel and Kempinski. And with the year round temperate climate due to its proximity to the equator, it is only a matter of time before it gains popularity with the mass markets. But while the income from tourism is very welcome, careful management will be required to make sure that Zanzibar does not become another victim of excessive tourism development. Learning from the experience of its neighbours, the government is apparently putting policies in place to prevent foreign hotel companies from purchasing land. Instead there will be a type of lease agreement, together with stipulations about job creation for local people.

Matemwe is a member of the Asilia Lodges portfolio, and has long been at the forefront of sustainable tourism on the island. For the community of Matemwe Village it has provided a positive partnership and support system that enables local people to be involved in tourism. The lodge is small and built with the lightest of footprints in mind, so that if it had to be taken away at any point, there would be little if any trace of it ever having been there. As Tanzania regularly suffers from power supply problems, solar energy was a logical choice and generally works well, except occasionally in times of high demand. The building supplies used in building projects are made wherever possible from reclaimed materials, and the lodge has no glass windows. Clever use of patterned clay brick and wooden shutters provide shelter from the sun in the day and insulation at night from the cool breeze, the crashing waves and the cries of the bushbabies. The reed mat carpets on the chalet floors are woven by the women of the community, and local procurement is key in terms of sourcing fresh food and vegetables. Staff members are recruited from the local community and offer an extra dimension in terms of interactions with guests. The result is a very natural holiday experience that suits families, loners or honeymooners, and it presents without a doubt the essence of what responsible tourism is really about.

There is no doubt that the local community is poor, but the people are charming and genuine. The walking tour to the local village offers a rare insight into a different way of life, as your guide introduces you to the men working together to construct new fishing boats from a solid mango trunk or playing bao together beneath the trees. The women are busy drying off seaweed and weaving, and the youngsters tend the animals. Each morning the men go off in search of the day's catch, they must be mindful of the fact that the tide recedes by over four metres. Their time is limited and there is not a moment to lose.

The lodge helped to establish the seaweed project, and thus helped to create an income stream for the women of the village. It is a life dependent on the ocean, and a turtle conservation campaign is in place to make the villagers aware of protecting turtle eggs. Matemwe is also helping to finance the only local school, which is nearby, in order to offer a path to education for the local children. The building is basic, but it is working. This is authentic, rural life in the raw.

Matemwe is tangible and unpretentious. Though perhaps not the epitome of what we would expect as luxury, it is a taste of the real Zanzibar. It would be unsuitable for those seeking a highly polished and slick operation, but for the conscientious traveller and those who really care about the impact of their holiday on the destination they are visiting it is a perfect choice.