

# THE FANTASTICAL FOUR

Much like the Indian Ocean island that they inhabit, the Zanzibar Collection's quartet of idyllic hotels have an ethereal quality that makes you believe that they can't quite be real — but they most certainly are

by Olenka Hamilton – staff writer at Spear's



LIKE TIMBUKTU OR Casablanca, Zanzibar is a place the very sound of which causes people, and not only the nostalgically disposed, to swoon, as though it were literally mythical, another Arcadia or Elysium, perhaps. But it really does exist.

'Everyone loves Zanzibar, not just the Aga Khan,' says Amer Amer Bindu, smiling proudly to expose his three teeth (one on top, two on the bottom). Beekeeper by day (which may explain the teeth), Bindu moonlights as the

resident 'storyteller' at the four luxury hotels which make up the Zanzibar Collection. Anyone from anywhere can acclimatise to life on Zanzibar, says Bindu, because the sun is always shining, the air is fresh and the water clean and tasty.

Toni Raguz, a delightful Croatian businessman and the brains behind the Zanzibar Collection, fell in love with the island in the 1960s, when he first moved to Africa. In 1993, he organised the first-ever large-aircraft flight to the

From left: the pool at Baraza; a bedroom at Baraza; a bedroom at the Palms

island and opened Breezes, the first of the collection's four hotels, shortly afterwards. Today, the Raguz family owns numerous hotels around the world, in locations ranging from Berlin to Vermont to Nairobi (where they now live), and, of course, Zanzibar. Now the biggest employer on the island, with 700 staff, each of whom is trained up on-site, the family also ensures that a proportion of the hotels' annual revenue goes towards funding social projects on the island, including the



recent opening of a hospital specifically for women and children.

Breezes, my first stop, is a low-key beach and dive resort with a beautiful spa and beach huts with views of the ocean: which in Zanzibar seems different every time you look, because the tide moves very quickly. It is Raguz's favourite of the hotels for sentimental reasons because it was the first, but also because of its relaxed bohemian atmosphere, which appeals to a perhaps slightly younger 'surfing' crowd. Now, 20 years on, there are four hotels — Breezes, Baraza, Zawadi and the Palms — and they sit side by side on the south-eastern coast of the island. Each has its own distinctive character, and everyone has a favourite.

Breezes was a world away from my fantasy, which involved luxuriating behind majestic teak doors in a warmly lit, spice-filled room, surrounded by fine gauzy veils, like some kind of fabulous Arabian princess. Baraza was more like it. With its sheer palatial size and its décor in a majestic fusion of Arabic, Swahili and Indian styles, its elaborate wood carvings, brass fittings and the scent of burning frankincense, it is pleasingly reminiscent of the era of the sultans. With 30 villas in total it's the largest of the hotels, and has an even better spa than Breezes has. In fact, it's worth going to Zanzibar just to see Rusti, its miraculous Balinese masseuse, who my companion claimed cured her chronic lower-back pain.

The newest hotel is Zawadi. Opened in 2016, it has just nine villas and a completely different feel altogether: 'barefoot luxury' is how the manager describes it. Distinctly informal — it is the only one of the hotels with no dress

code — it does simplicity, modernity and exclusive comfort very well. The beds are huge and swathed in pleasing layers of flowing white gauze, and it's possible to go a whole day without seeing another soul. With the aim of becoming ultimately self-sustaining, it has a chicken coop and a vegetable garden growing everything from dragon fruit and guava to pumpkin and jasmine, and a kilometre-long running track is carved out down the middle of a banana grove. The view over the blindingly bright and deserted sands of Mswakini beach and the turquoise water of Bwejuu is genuinely breathtaking — despite being on the same stretch of coast, none of the other hotels offers seascapes quite like this one. It's the perfect spot for a solitary dive or snorkel when the tide moves in around midday.

## THE LITTLE THINGS

The final stop was the Palms, the smallest (it has just six villas) and most stylish of the group, offering a rich and traditional décor. Each 140-square-metre villa has a bedroom, living room, study and bathroom and is redolent of colonial grandeur: a wooden veranda is equipped with a cream silk-draped four-poster bed and a Jacuzzi, which gives out the soft sound of trickling water, cutting through the afternoon humidity; the rooms have mahogany furniture and golden curtains, old maps of the 'Aethiopian Ocean' hang on the walls, and the lampshades, which are the colour of caramel when lit, are made out of coconut leaves. Group manager Jaime Vilardell i Margarit says the Palms is his favourite of the four because 'it has the atmosphere of the social clubs in the film *Out of Africa*. I love the '40s feel,' he says. The quality

of service at the Palms is supreme and the food outstanding — lunch was green octopus curry and home-made coconut ice cream.

The Palms even has its own microclimate. If you try to swim in the late afternoon you won't make it farther than the beachfront white stone wall, because the tide will have come right up against it. But it's a singular experience to sit perched on the rocks and feel the heat from the incoming waves on your legs while a cold shiver-inducing wind blows from behind. It seems like another world from that of just a few hours earlier, when you could have eaten lunch on the sand in the same spot, the Indian Ocean barely visible in the distance.

The Palms expresses the magical and exotic sanctuary of Zanzibar that captured my imagination before I visited. It is also a reminder of the past, which is felt profoundly when you step away from the heavenly hotel paradise. In Stone Town, an Anglican church stands on the site of the old Arab slave market. The underground cells where the slaves were kept before they went to market have been preserved, and visitors can climb down the stone steps into the darkness. My companion was so upset by the lingering atmosphere that she retreated almost instantly, as if physically repelled.

Bindu is right about Zanzibar. Its beauty extends beyond the awesome seascapes and colourful vegetation to its people, who are peaceful and kind-natured despite these periods of serious hardship and poverty. 'KP', our guide in Stone Town, stresses repeatedly that although 70 per cent of Zanzibaris are Muslims, they live in harmony with the remaining 30 per cent, who are Christians and Hindus. 'Zanzibar is truly cosmopolitan,' KP says. He is a Muslim, but his helper, a boy of about 17, is wearing a blue T-shirt that says 'Jesus saves our souls'.



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THE PALMS' VILLAS ARE REDOLENT OF COLONIAL GRANDEUR