

POSTCARD FROM AFRICA

Christina Lamb on Zanzibar

Twenty years ago, the Sunday Times chief foreign correspondent got married on the Tanzanian island. She has just returned for the first time — and fell in love all over again

Christina Lamb

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Stuff of dreams: another screensaver beach on Zanzibar

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I blame it all on the bishop of Evora. If he hadn't declared me unfit to marry in one of his churches, I would have wed my Portuguese fiancé, Paulo, in the medieval village of Monsaraz, all cobblestones and whitewashed houses under a fairy-tale castle. But perish the thought of an Anglican at the altar amid all the gold and Catholic frippery.

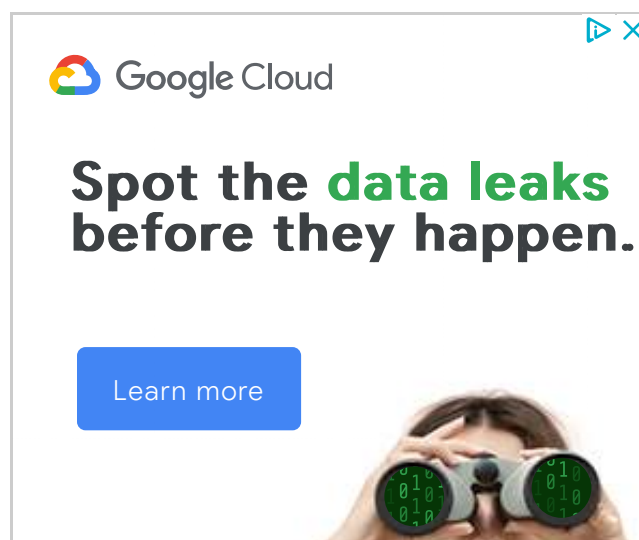
There was obviously no option but to elope to Zanzibar. The canon there had no problem with our denominations, though he did rather fancy a new CD player. Once that was sorted, he even produced his wife as a witness, as well as an alarming wedding certificate on which my new husband was given the choice of being monogamous, polygamous or potentially polygamous. Had he ticked the wrong box, it might have been a rather short marriage.

It was almost a very short honeymoon, as my editor — I worked for a different newspaper back then — tried to order me back to cover the bombing of Belgrade, until I confessed the real reason I was away.



That was almost 20 years ago and Zanzibar has been in our affections ever since. On the mantelpiece above our fireplace sits the wooden clock we bought to mark the occasion. Next to it is a drawing of us, made by a local sign-maker in lieu of a wedding photo. On our bathroom shelf is a jar of white sand from the beach (now somewhat black), and whenever I smell jasmine, it reminds me of the bridal headdress I wore and then tossed in the Indian Ocean.

Zanzibar is my ultimate getaway screensaver, and I often daydream about it, particularly when I am supposed to be writing about another global atrocity. Paulo and I first discovered the island in our twenties, when I was working on a book in northern Zambia. I took the train to Dar es Salaam, on the Tanzanian coast, then a billowing white-sailed wooden dhow across the sea.



I'd never been anywhere so magical: beaches as soft and white as sugar, seas of turquoise and jade, and a whole underwater world of multicoloured fish flitting in and out of the reef.

There were other unexpected things. It's the birthplace of one of my favourite singers, Freddie Mercury. There is a cathedral founded by the missionary followers of one of my heroes, David Livingstone, to which his body was briefly brought after he died of malaria in Zambia. And, fittingly for me and Paulo,

Zanzibar has both British and Portuguese history, having been part of both empires. We always joke that the Portuguese colonised the places with the best beaches.

Our Zanzibari wedding was our third trip to the island. Then I had a baby, and 9/11 happened and endless war broke out, and we never went back. Too quickly, that baby became a young man. When we were looking for somewhere special to take Lourenço before he started university this autumn, Zanzibar seemed the obvious choice.

Going back can often be a mistake. I had heard from friends that Zanzibar had changed. Five years ago, two British teenagers, Katie Gee and Kirstie Trup, who were spending their gap year teaching at local schools, were victims of a horrific acid attack. Gee was so badly burnt, she lost her right ear.

Twenty years ago, it felt undiscovered. Its holidaymakers were backpackers like us, sleeping in hammocks in thatched bungalows in palm groves, dining on whatever the local fishermen brought in. Now it has all-inclusive resorts.



Each of the six Xanadu Villas has a butler

But there are all-inclusive resorts and there are all-inclusive resorts, and, this time around, we had a couple of days to unwind at one of the most exclusive: Xanadu Villas, on the east coast. Its six white-stone villas, set in exotic gardens, were designed by an amazing Zambian architect, Eileen Smith, who used all local materials, including an old dhow for window frames. Each comes with a butler and, if you want total privacy, you can eat dinner in your villa.

The palm-fringed beach was as picture-perfect as we remembered. Even our son was impressed. “Why do people live in England when there are places like this in the world?” he asked.

Stone Town, the wonderfully named capital, was next. There we found the same smell of cloves and spices, and the same narrow winding alleyways to get lost in, full of old houses with latticework balconies and coloured-glass windows. Many of the old carved wooden doors, however, had disappeared. Also gone were the antiques shops selling carved wooden boxes and clocks. Instead, there are endless

souvenir shops and hawkers pushing spice tours. On the plus side, some good coffee shops have opened.

What have also appeared everywhere are security cameras. Locals told us they popped up overnight earlier this year, installed by the government, supposedly for security, but, others whispered, for watching over people. Tanzania's president since 2015, John Magufuli, has cast himself as an anti-corruption crusader, and he seems well on the path to dictatorship. Newspapers have been shut down and the bodies of political opponents have been found on beaches on the mainland.

Still, there was the wonderful studio of Rohit Oza, a treasure trove of black-and-white prints, many taken by his father, the official photographer to Zanzibar's last sultan. You won't spot the sultan in any: Rohit says they all had to be destroyed when he was overthrown in the revolution of 1964, a month after Zanzibar gained independence from British rule. The sultan went to live in Portsmouth.

At Jaws Corner, men were still playing backgammon with bottle tops. Zanzibar is 99% Muslim, and there were far more women in hijab than we remembered, as well as boys in prayer caps memorising the Koran. Nevertheless, everyone was friendly, greeting us with "Jambo!". Boys poured out of the madrasahs and into a narrow shop called Chiki Games, where they sat at two rows of old screens, paying 75 cents an hour to use PlayStation.



Park Hyatt's infinity pool

On our honeymoon, we stayed at the Tembo hotel, then the best in town. Stone Town now has a five-star Park Hyatt on the waterside. It was a dilapidated mid-19th-century mansion until the Hyatt people converted it, adding a bar and an infinity pool while preserving an ancient mango tree in a courtyard. The friendly staff make it feel far smaller than it is. Its terrace is the perfect place to sip a dawa cocktail — vodka, lime, honey — and try to take the most Instagrammable sunset shot of the dhows, which used to transport cloves to India, drop off textiles in the Middle East, then return to Zanzibar with silver and timber.

I could have watched the boats all day from our balcony, but we had somewhere important to be: Zanzibar's Anglican cathedral, where Paulo and I tied the knot. It's an imposing late-Victorian-gothic building with a minaret-like tower. It was packed with tour groups from Italy and Israel, but we could still see the crucifix made from the wood of the Zambian tree under which Livingstone's heart was buried. A circular spot by the altar marked where a fig tree once stood — the tree under which slaves were auctioned.



A wooden dhow sailing close to Zanzibar's coast

Zanzibar has an ugly past. It was the centre of East Africa's slave trade, with slaves accounting for as many as two-thirds of the island's population in the mid-19th century, when 50,000 a year passed through. In the basement, you can still see the chains that used to hold them, packed in like sardines.

We looked out again on the church that evening, from the rooftop of Emerson on Hurumzi, the restaurant where we had our wedding supper. Sadly, the strips of different-coloured silk that had billowed over our heads in the night sky then have been replaced by a fabric roof, but it was still magical dining there, looking out across the roofs to the sea as the muezzin cry rose from one after another of the city's 45 mosques, followed by the bells of a Buddhist temple.

Memory Lane crossed, we left Zanzibar. We took a small plane the hop, skip and jump north to an even bigger treat, Pemba, the neighbouring island, which is undeveloped, like Zanzibar used to be. We drove through lush green hills, cloves drying on cloths spread out by the side of the road. We passed a new Chinese-

built hospital, came to the jetty at Mkoani, then a special forces-type speedboat whisked us across the water to the closest thing to paradise I've ever experienced.

Set on a white beach where the jungle meets the sea, Fundu Lagoon is a marine safari resort, and the rooms are very clever, very luxurious safari tents on wooden decks, some with plunge pools. We fell asleep to the chatter of monkeys and woke to the lapping of waves, unzipping the tent to find the whitest sand, greenest sea and a line of shells washed up on the shore. I was struck by sadness: I knew I would have to leave a few days later. I hated the Germans with whom we had shared the boat over: they were going to be there an entire week.



Head over heels: the locals hit the beach

HEMIS/AWL IMAGES

The hotel is the creation of Ellis Flyte, a Scottish film costume designer. She had fallen in love with Zanzibar about the same time as we had and looked for a place of her own. In 1998, she chartered a boat, as one does, which got struck by a

storm. When she washed up on Pemba, she decided this was the spot.

The local chief was summoned and agreed to sell the land, which was priced up according to the number of palm trees. Later, Flyte found that she had only bought the palm trees and still needed to lease the land from the government.

That was not the only challenge. There was no water, electricity or road, and she had to bring in everything — I even spotted Habitat shower curtains — and train staff who had never seen a restaurant. Pemba also has witch doctors, whom she had to be careful not to cross.

Flyte persuaded the then manager of the Groucho Club, in London, to run the place, but almost two-thirds of the staff come from three small villages outside the gate. One of the longest-serving is Kessy, who took us for a walk one morning. Women were queuing at a water tap provided by the hotel. It also helps fund the local school. Boys were playing football with a ball fashioned from plastic bags. My son joined in, towering over them, and they were all soon trailing after him as if he was the Pied Piper.

Dinner each night was in a different place: on the beach with candles; on the jetty; and on a platform under a tree, where bushbabies, like ETs with red eyes and pointy ears, snatched bread off our table. Apparently, they are also partial to wine. In Fundu's early days, somnolent bushbabies would be found on the bar in the morning, having overindulged on guests' unfinished drinks the night before.



One morning, we roused ourselves for a boat trip across the lagoon to watch dolphins. One evening, we took a sunset cruise on the resort's dhow. Mostly, we just gave in to what is fondly called the Fundu effect. The hotel has wi-fi in reception, and I am bad at being offline, as I'm endlessly WhatsApped by everyone from Zimbabwean activists to the Taliban, but even I managed to forget the outside world for a little bit.

It was the perfect honeymoon spot, only we were already married.

Last year, I met the adventurer Ben Fogle, who told me he and his wife had got married in Monsaraz, despite neither of them having any connection to Portugal. Different bishop, I guess, and maybe he pulled some strings. I was cross. But then, I thought, we wouldn't have had Zanzibar.

Christina Lamb is the chief foreign correspondent of The Sunday Times. She was a guest of Scott Dunn, which has a nine-night itinerary to Zanzibar and Pemba from £3,970pp. The price includes three nights' full-board at Xanadu Villas, two

nights' B&B at the Park Hyatt, four nights' full-board at Fundu Lagoon, all flights and private transfers (scottdunn.com)

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