



Sail away: pro-rider and Kite Paradise founder Marcel Glaser catching the breeze off Zanzibar

TAKE FLIGHT IN ZANZIBAR

Think kite surfing sounds like a thrilling way to spend your clocking-off-from-work time? You'd be absolutely right, says *Rebecca Newman*

It's hard to improve on the exhilaration of a day's kite surfing, no matter where you are in the world. But as the evening sky turned pink above the Indian Ocean and the barman shook ice into my drink while someone else packed up my gear, it struck me that the kiting scene in Zanzibar has got an awful lot to offer.

Lying 26km off the coast of Tanzania, the archipelago of Zanzibar has an exotic past and an alluring present. The same winds that now draw kites have for centuries brought sailors from Persia, India and China. Zanzibar was known as the Spice Islands for the flourishing exchange of cinnamon, pepper and nutmeg. The spice trade was supported by an equally lucrative but barbaric trade in slaves; both were encouraged by the Omani sul-

tans who ruled from the 1600s to the late 1800s when the British took over a protectorate that continued until 1964, when it became part of newly independent Tanzania.

This rich heritage comes alive in the old quarter of Zanzibar City, Stone Town, which was awarded Unesco World Heritage status in 2000. It's a heady mix of sultan's palaces where Scheherazade told her tales, of forts and fish markets, of coral-built town houses with carved and studded teak doors. The site of the old slave market is now an Anglican church, but the air feels heavy with ghosts and the original slave chains are on display. There are still spice markets, and you might stop by Africa House, a venerable, colonial style hotel with a terrace evoking the days of Victorian explorers Richard Burton and David Livingstone, who came to Zanzibar to prepare for their expeditions deep into Africa.

If Stone Town is captivating, the coast is mesmeric. In the past five years tourism including kite-surfing has increased in Zanzibar, bringing a wider selection of upmarket hotels, a drive to remove rubbish (I saw none) and an improvement in the roads. The main kiting destination is a 4km stretch of coast in the south-east. For nightlife and tourist buzz, stop at the northern end of the strip at Paje village: bounce along a potholed track and at once you're on the beach in a jostle of kite schools and beach bars, blazing white sand and the odd herder taking his cows for a walk.

'It's nothing like as crowded as Tarifa, but yes it can get busy,' says Mo, 32, a consultant from Dubai whom I meet coming off the water. 'But really it's great: once you get past the learners near the shore there's plenty of space.' Any tips? 'You see the fishing boats? They tie up to anchors which are sharp and hard to see. Don't hit one.'

Suitably warned, I set out my kite. The coral sand was like sifted flour, warm and light underfoot. The water warm and crystal clear and the wind steady, curling just enough waves to lift my jumps. The glee I felt was reflected in the shining faces of the riders around me.

Offshore investment: explore nearby islands with a Safari Blue tour. Right, Glaser on the water. Inset, a Relais & Chateaux villa



At lunchtime there was live music at Mr Kahawa, a café-guesthouse celebrated for its lingua franca of flat whites and wi-fi, avocado toast and freshly caught grilled tuna. The guests seemed largely French and Italian; girls in rash vests getting braids and henna, tanned dudes comparing board sizes.

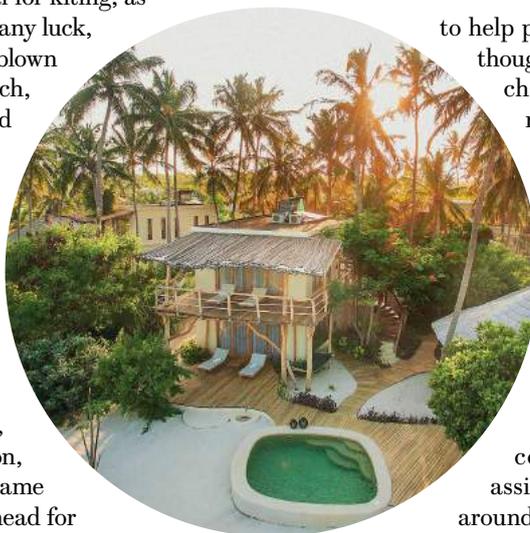
December through February brings the Kaskazi first wind season, which averages 16 knots; the second is from June to September, bringing the Kusu at around 18 knots. They both blow cross-shore, which is ideal for kiting, as you tack to and from the beach and with any luck, if you lose your board out at sea it will be blown back toward the beach. Speaking of which, that evening I was learning a new trick and lost my board. A passing kiter kindly brought it back as I lay floating in the sea; by then I'd drifted down to the southern part of Paje and caught a booming beat coming from burger shack B4. Apparently the bars of Paje collude to make sure there's a party every night; that evening B4 was a seductive blend of electronic music and potent Caipirinhas.

A few kilometres south along the shore, the village of Jambiani is a quieter option, where you're less likely to be invited for a game of beach beer pong. This is the place to head for low key hotels that open on to the beach: think sun-bleached hammocks strung up for basking with a view. We stayed at Mwezi Boutique, a friendly place with a beautiful pool, thatched beach huts and service that drew heavily on the Swahili motto, *pole pole*, or slowly slowly.

There were fewer people at Jambiani, but there was also less opportunity to be on the water. Low tide at Paje just means you need to walk further to get to the ocean. But at Jambiani, when the water goes out it reveals a coral sea bed studded with seaweed farms. These present a much needed income stream for local women, but are a kiting hazard with lots of rusty struts.

'Any time there's not enough water here, we take clients up to the lagoon,' shrugs Julia, the Swedish born co-owner of Jambiani's Mbuzi Kite Center. 'It's a nice area of shallow water less than 10 minutes' walk away.'

Although it's more of a kiosk than 'centre', Mbuzi is the friendliest and cheapest of the kite places I explored (around £17 to rent a board for the day, though it may be a bit dinged). It's also one of the few spots where the instructors are all locals. There's always someone happy



"There's neither seaweed nor boats to avoid, just a beckoning expanse of ocean. I raced out; the day vanished, lit with pure joy"

to help pump-up your kite or pack your kit, and even though I was only paying for board rental, Gardi, the chief instructor and a gifted rider, was always ready with useful tips. One day as we walked back from the lagoon, I asked Gardi what he does in the seasons without wind. 'Anything,' he grins. 'If I can get 10,000 shilling a day [around £3] I'll do it.'

Sitting at the Relais & Chateaux White Sands Luxury Villas between Paje and Jambiani, Zanzibar Kite Paradise is unquestionably deluxe. Founded by Austrian pro-rider Marcel Glaser, it is the acme of efficient service: the kind of place with a compressed air pump and well-schooled assistants, plus multi-qualified instructors from around world. Being between the villages means there are also fewer kites around. 'I love the fact that we have flat water here at the shore, but if you kite out to the reef there are always big waves,' Glaser says. 'Some people see dolphins.' Better still, there's neither seaweed nor anchored boats to avoid: just a beckoning expanse of ocean. I raced out; the day vanished, lit with pure joy.

At the bar in Kite Paradise I got talking to Alizée, a 28-year-old Parisian yoga instructor with enviable moves. 'I'm used to strong winds and cold water in Cape Town. Having a light wind and flat water to practise new tricks is amazing — especially compared with the big waves in South Africa, which can make things painful!'

Should you fancy a day off, there are myriad options. Take a boat with operator Safari Blue for an idyllic day trip to one of the tiny local islands: feast on Swahili food and fresh fruit, and swim out to see bright shoals of fish and huge red starfish. Take a trip inland to tour the spice plantations or spot the endangered Zanzibar red colobus monkey. But whether you are a novice or a seasoned pro, the kiting here is very special. No two ways about it: I will be going back.