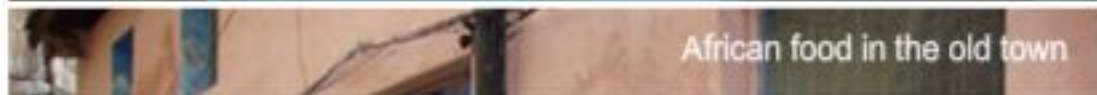


## Mombasa: The Edge of Islam

By: Karen Dabrowska



Mandhry Mosque



African food in the old town

**Mombasa is an African city on Kenya's south coast, with an Islamic flavour. It has 50 mosques and an old town which resembles old towns in Arab cities. Hijab-clad women mingle with shoppers in the market place and a driving school with «Allah is greatest» on the back window of its vehicles assures learners that they will pass their driving test.**

The city has been neglected by the municipal authority. The once magnificent Hotel Splendid was white in its hey-day: now it is black and dirty. But private enterprise is thriving and welcoming tourists, especially the Indian restaurants including Shehnai named after an Indian musical instrument.

Due to its strategically important position, many groups of traders

sought to impose their dominance on Mombasa, and it was continually fought over by various trading nations throughout its history. Arab traders sailed around to the Kenyan coast from the first century AD onwards and Mombasa and Lamu Island still exhibit many remnants of Arab culture.

The dominance of Arab influence on Mombasa was suppressed for about 150 years when the

Baluchi Mosque



Memon mosque



Canon in For Jesus

Show room in Akamba Handicrafts Co-operative

Portuguese arrived. In 1498, the famous Portuguese explorer Vasco De Gama landed on the shores of Mombasa to spread the Christian faith and to further expand Portugal's trading area. The locals were hostile to his presence but he made a very important ally, the King of Malindi. In 1592 they used their power to make the King of Malindi the Sultan of Mombasa. The locals

consequently had no choice but to obey the orders of the Sultan, which in turn came from the Portuguese Government.

Mombasa became Portugal's main trading centre along the East Coast of Africa. The Portuguese constructed the monumental Fort Jesus which served as the main hub for trading goods, a prison for slaves, and most importantly protecting the Portuguese from



conflicts with locals and threatening foreign battalions. The trading of spices, cotton and coffee, which were cultivated and grown in the rich fertile soils of the town's farms, made Mombasa a popular destination for seafarers.

Today Fort Jesus is the main tourist attraction. There has been little renovation but the imposing structure does not need much embellishment. The fort still

contains cells where slaves were held, and a well stocked museum provides a penetrating flash of insight into the history of Mombasa. The town bell located at the exit of Nyali Bridge was rung to inform the locals to hide from the slave traders. A walk through the narrow winding streets of the old town provides a sense of daily life several hundred years ago.

Coconuts for sale



Souvenir shops



Enchanting beach



The old town

Early Swahili culture was influenced by the presence of Omani Arabs. In tandem with Muslim-influenced architecture, there are traces of the Indian and British colonial past. Many houses in the Old Town are modelled on ancient Swahili designs, whose defining feature is doors with intricately carved designs. Some of these designs are also found on the furniture in the hotels.

Colonial buildings from the British era are also scattered throughout the city. The famous "Mombasa Tusks" are located in the centre of town – the two pairs of crossed tusks formed a ceremonial arch to commemorate the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. Around the Fort Jesus area, there are other government buildings that display distinctive colonial-era architecture. Treasury Square is

one such area – where old colonial buildings, the historic town hall, and a charming garden square, can all be found within walking distance.

Muslim tourists have a total of 50 mosques to visit. The most imposing are the Mandhry Mosque, the oldest mosque in Mombasa, which was completed in 1570 and features a picturesque minaret.

The Basheikh Mosque dates back to around 1300. Painted cream and white the purposeful square facade of this mosque reflects the best in Islamic architecture. The Memon Mosque is traditional, yet modern with lofty minarets. The historic Dawoodi Bohra Mosque, built in 1902, stands on the top of a cliff with a view of the old harbor. There is also a beautiful Baluchi mosque, founded in 1875.

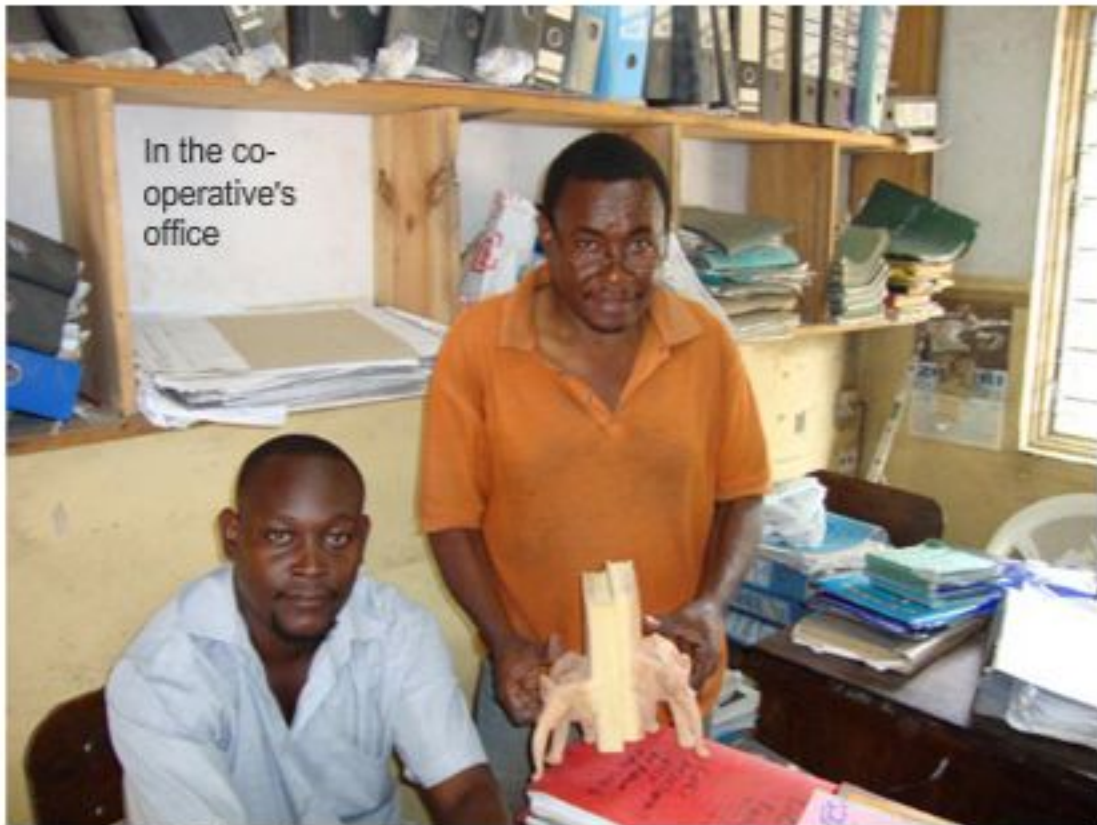


Inside Fort Jesus



Traditional doors





A must-see for all visitors is the Akamba Handicraft co-operative with a massive show room featuring soap stone and wood crafts. Over 100 craftsmen work near the show room using wood imported from Tanzania as well as the local trees. There are plans for tree farms near Malinidi which will ensure a regular supply of timber. The co-operative has over three thousand registered members.

It was established in 1969 with 100 members who bought land on the current site. Most of the craftsmen are from the Kamba tribe from the eastern province who have come to the coast to where the market is. The co-operative hopes to participate in exhibitions in Europe and China and to set up a chain of shops.

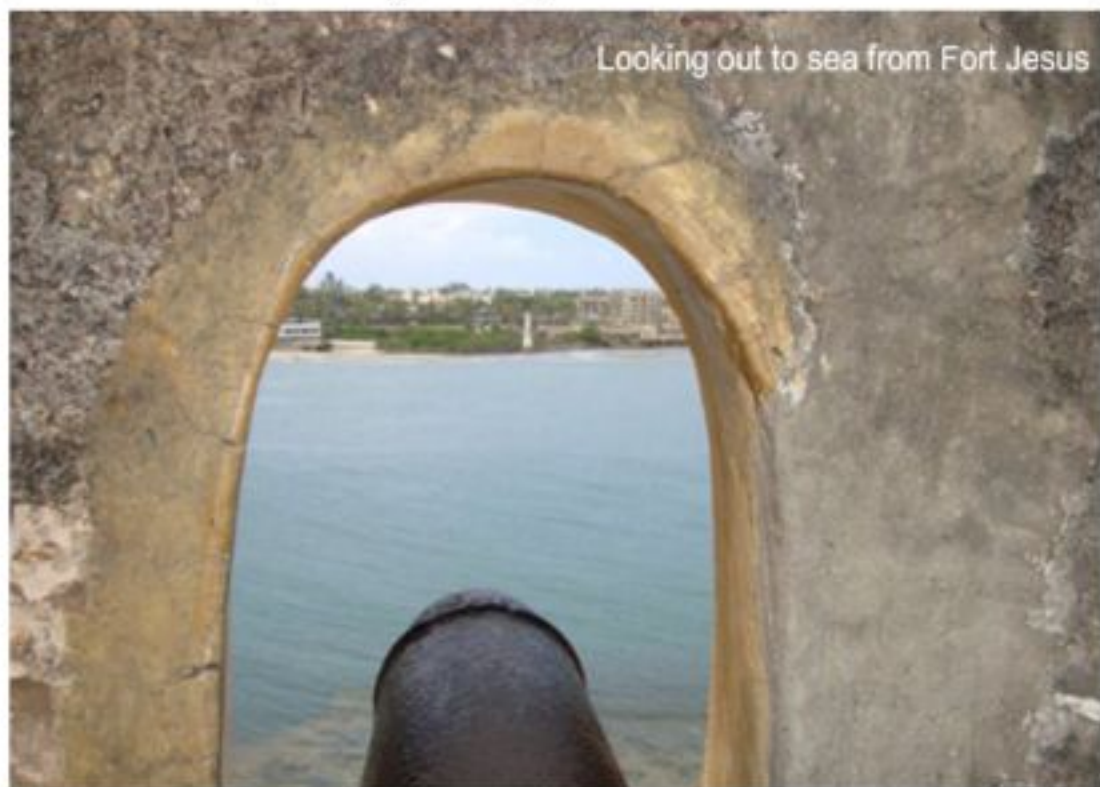
Lunch in the palatial Shehnai

restaurant is an ideal way to end a morning's sightseeing. The restaurant, which specialises in north Indian Mughal Cuisine was set up in 1984. The family business is very sensitive to religious considerations and does not serve pork, alcohol or beef as a mark of respect for its Hindu and Muslim clientele.

The delicacies include achar gosht (tender pieces of mutton delicately cooked in oriental spices and flavoured with pickle ingredients)

and murg kabharta (finely chopped chicken delicately cooked with chopped pieces of tomatoes, sweetpepper and onion with a touch of fresh limejuice and corriander leaves).

Mombasa is easy to reach by air, land and rail. An African city with a Muslim flavour it attracts some Arab visitors, and, with the right marketing and promotion could become an important destination for tourists from the Middle East.



Looking out to sea from Fort Jesus