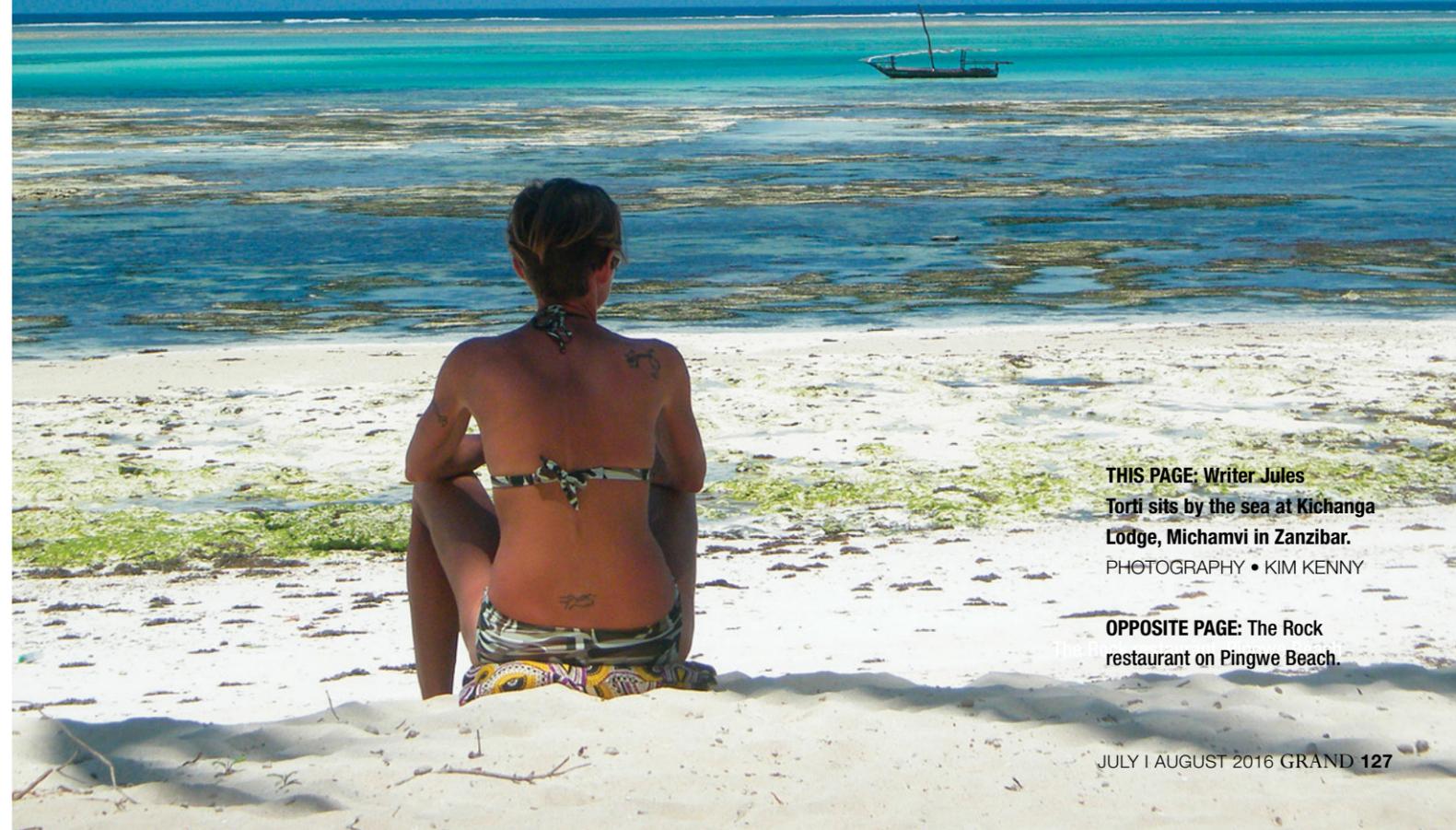




# *Spoiled* on the Spice Island Zanzibar

With its spectacular scenery and fresh-from-the-sea dishes,  
Zanzibar Island is a feast for the senses



**THIS PAGE:** Writer Jules  
Torti sits by the sea at Kichanga  
Lodge, Michamvi in Zanzibar.  
PHOTOGRAPHY • KIM KENNY

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The Rock  
restaurant on Pingwe Beach.



The Jozani Forest is home to Kirk's red colobus and Sykes' monkeys and an amazing variety of birds.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JULES TORTI

We had shovelled snow for the third time that day. It was the dead of January, femur-freezing bleak and the prime catalyst for us choosing Zanzibar. I was inside, still in layers, nursing a hot cocoa laced with Kahlua, scanning the last-minute sell-offs on Expedia. The deal was unpassable. In a fevered rush, I checked for monsoons, plagues, hurricanes, conflict or any other red flag, courtesy of the Canadian Embassy site. Clear. Early March was bordering the questionable edge of the rainy season in Zanzibar, but the

guarantee of 30-plus degrees C overrode the chance of precipitation.

Zanzibar would be just the ticket to ease my partner, Kim, into deeper, darker Africa. We'd been to Egypt, but the desert and oases were a far cry from safari and the stretches of savannah portrayed in "Out of Africa." However, the chaos, horns and lung-collapsing diesel plumes we experienced in Cairo were a solid introduction to the reliable frenzy, setbacks and surprises that are synonymous with African travel.

Kim had seen my Uganda, Kenya and Congo photos and had heard nearly all my tall tales (perhaps too many). I pitched her

on Zanzibar, quickly pulling up Google images of desolate beaches. English was widely spoken. The Muslim population was hip to tourism (which meant beer and bikinis would be acceptable, unlike parts of Egypt). "Plus," I emphasized to Kim, "there is nothing in Zanzibar that can eat you." There would be no harrowing lion encounters. No stampeding elephants. No toothy crocs or hippos.

Zanzibar consists of two islands, Unguja (Zanzibar Island) and Pemba. Unguja is easily traversed as it is 85 kilometres long and between 20 and 30 kilometres wide. Prince Edward Island in contrast, extends 224 kilometres and is four kilometres to 60 kilometres wide. If we were really ambitious, we could pack some trail mix and run across the width of Zanzibar in a few hours. From Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, it's a 30-minute flight east or 90 minutes by ferry.

Home to endemic species like Kirk's red colobus monkey and a startling amount of bird species, the only nuisance would be the spiny black sea urchins underfoot at low tide (pack your water shoes). I showed Kim enticing photos of the tiny restaurant on Pingwe Beach called The Rock. I even pulled up the menu — "Crab claw salad! Fish carpaccio with lime, coconut milk and fresh chilies!" Depending on the tide, we could walk to The Rock but would most likely have to take a boat back to shore.

We agreed that 19 hours of flight time would be acceptable because of that very ocean. We shovelled our driveway again that night, but our minds were already equatorial. I was humming bits of Queen songs to get in the groove — the lead singer of the band, Freddie Mercury, was from Zanzibar. I'd already dog-eared his namesake restaurant in Stone Town for pizza and a Kilimanjaro beer or two.

For me, the extreme flora and fauna beckoned. For Kim, the famed doors of Stone Town (a World Heritage Site), the slave history and empty beaches whispered.

### KICHANGA LODGE

The soupy heat leaves your skin slick with sweat instantaneously. Oxen, disoriented goats, mopeds with crates of eggs a dozen flats high, trucks hauling foam mattresses and women with pails of fish precariously balanced on their heads clog the roads from the airport.

Children in bright and dusty school uniforms wave madly, lithe teens push bikes loaded with jerry cans to the nearest water pumps. African pines, listing palms and verdant mango trees frame the cinnamon-coloured roads and spin the landscape into that of a storybook. We could even hear the cacophony of weaver birds over the engine of our taxi. Every village has a token soccer pitch. Roadside vendors sell curly cukes, small ripe bananas and avocados as big as footballs.

Kichanga Lodge on Michamvi's serene East Coast (a bumpy hour from the airport) was just as the online photos had promised. Standing on the steps of our traditional bungalow, the ocean looked photoshopped with its myriad of greens and blues. Whoever named the Farrow & Ball line of paints probably came here for inspiration. We were gobsmacked.

Sinewy spear fishermen picked their way barefoot along the coral rock bed below Kichanga. Half a dozen women in blowing dresses sang low and sweet as they gathered seaweed in buckets. The spa products they create from the seaweed (soaps, lotions) are exported and have created solid income for the local women.

From our private balcony, we plotted day trips from our lodge to Jozani Forest, the turtle sanctuary and Prison Island, where we could walk among the giant tortoises. In short, we had created an itinerary for a wide-eyed, pinch-me-now destination that only seems plausible in dreams.

### JOZANI FOREST

When we finally shook off the terrible trifecta of gin, sun and jet lag, we ventured



In Stone Town, there's a mix of Arab homes with hidden courtyards and Indian houses with open façades and balustrades. The size of the doors and the carvings on them hint at the owner's wealth and status.

to Zanzibar's only national park, Jozani Forest, with a local fixer named Friday. The Brothers Grimm forest is full of snaking mangrove roots and aerial branches that grow downward like stalactites to connect with the ground root system. The forest moves from mangroves to skeletal Indian almond trees to gigantic canopies of mahogany to stands of African pines vibrating with honey bees.

In Jozani, visitors are treated to the antics

of Sykes' monkey and the red colobus. Leap-frogging through the trees, the troops are oblivious and unaffected by human presence, allowing for National Geographic photo ops with curious-as-George monkeys who often come within a hand's reach.

Once the domain of the Zanzibar leopard, recent research indicates the species may now be extinct. The last sighting was in 2003. Instead, Kim and I were on high alert for the knee-high Ader's duiker (a small



**ABOVE:** Traditional dhow boats sit in the sand at low tide in the sleepy village of Nungwi.

**LEFT:** Prison Island was once used as a detention centre for slaves. Today, it is home to giant Aldabra tortoises.

antelope), the elusive bush pig and, higher up, the crimson crown of Fischer's turaco.

Because of the suffocating heat of the day, our guide suggested the pigs and duikers were resting. Instead, we found a neon-green snake, millipedes as big as bananas and, yes, dozens of monkeys. Don't forget your binoculars!

#### MANGAPWANI SLAVE CAVE AND CHAMBER

Mangapwani ("Arab Shore" in Swahili) cave is located 20 kilometres north of Stone Town. Kim and I had gone spelunking

**RIGHT:** A bar on Prison Island, where a jail was built in 1893 but never used.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Mercury's Restaurant in Stone Town is named after Freddie Mercury of Queen, who was from Zanzibar.

in Belize and crawled around caverns in Aruba. What we weren't expecting was the terrain. I thought we'd enter the mouth of the cave, listen to accounts of the slave trade and continue on to the nearby slave chamber. I didn't think we'd be allowed to actually retrace the route of the slaves.

A coral cavern is indeed that — the "floor" of the cave is sharp and uneven coral rock. Our guide, Abdul, had flip-flops on and said we'd be fine in our flip-flops too. Right. "Do you want to take the cave tunnel to the beach? It's half a mile." I looked at Kim, bewildered, as we were walking with possibly the first flashlights ever made. They were the size of a tool box and dimmer than an Ikea tea light. We opted for the scramble to the other exit, just seven minutes away. A calf-twitching, flip-flop skidding, two-handed, crawling, haul-yourself-out-of-a-hole grand finale. However, we didn't lose a flip-flop or consciousness, the greater goal. The experience was unnerving and humbling, above all.

The Mangapwani Slave Chamber is located a few kilometres from the cave. The square dank cell cut into the coralline rock was used to hide slaves after the 1873 abolition to the trade. Boats would stealthily unload their human cargo on the beach and transfer the slaves to the chamber at night for sale at the auctions in Stone Town.

You must arrange for a guided tour as public transit to this area is near impossible. Also, proper headlamps and running shoes are recommended.

#### MNARANI TURTLE SANCTUARY

The sleepy fishing village of Nungwi on the northern end of the island is a marvel for photographers and romantics. It's the beating heart of the traditional dhow boat-building industry. It's also home to the turtle





These women sang as they gathered seaweed from the shore in Michamvi. The seaweed is used to create spa products, which are then exported.



On hot days, locals take shelter in the shade of 'Mtini,' the Big Tree, which was planted in 1911.

sanctuary where a natural saline pool allows for thrilling proximity (sans the scuba gear) with green and hawksbill turtles.

Established in 1993, the conservation pond has been a successful venture in re-establishing the turtle population that has been threatened by poachers catching hawksbills for their shells and green turtles for meat.

The sanctuary is responsible for several initiatives, which include educating local fishers on the safe release of accidental turtle catches. They organize beach cleanups, nurse hatchlings and provide employment to over 20 local villagers. Over 200 marine turtles have been rescued from nets since their inception.

#### KENDWA

Just three kilometres from Nungwi, the West Coast of Zanzibar is known as the "Italian Riviera." Locals are fluent in Italian

here, for good reason — sales. Enterprising Tanzanians strut about in Maasai shukas (the traditional cloth worn by the Maasai is a red checkered pattern, but green, blue and plaid are popular as well), ear buds jammed in, texting as they walk the shore. Tourists clamour to them for photos, though we were told by our guide that they are not genuine Maasai at all, simply smart entrepreneurs.

The West Coast advantage is found in the icing-sugar beach and gigantic sunsets. It's a long and wide stretch of sand and hoteliers jumped on this swath long ago. Disco music pumps out of every property, competing. Vendors hawk knock-off Ray Bans ("Riy Dans") and full-moon parties have lured a younger and louder crowd.

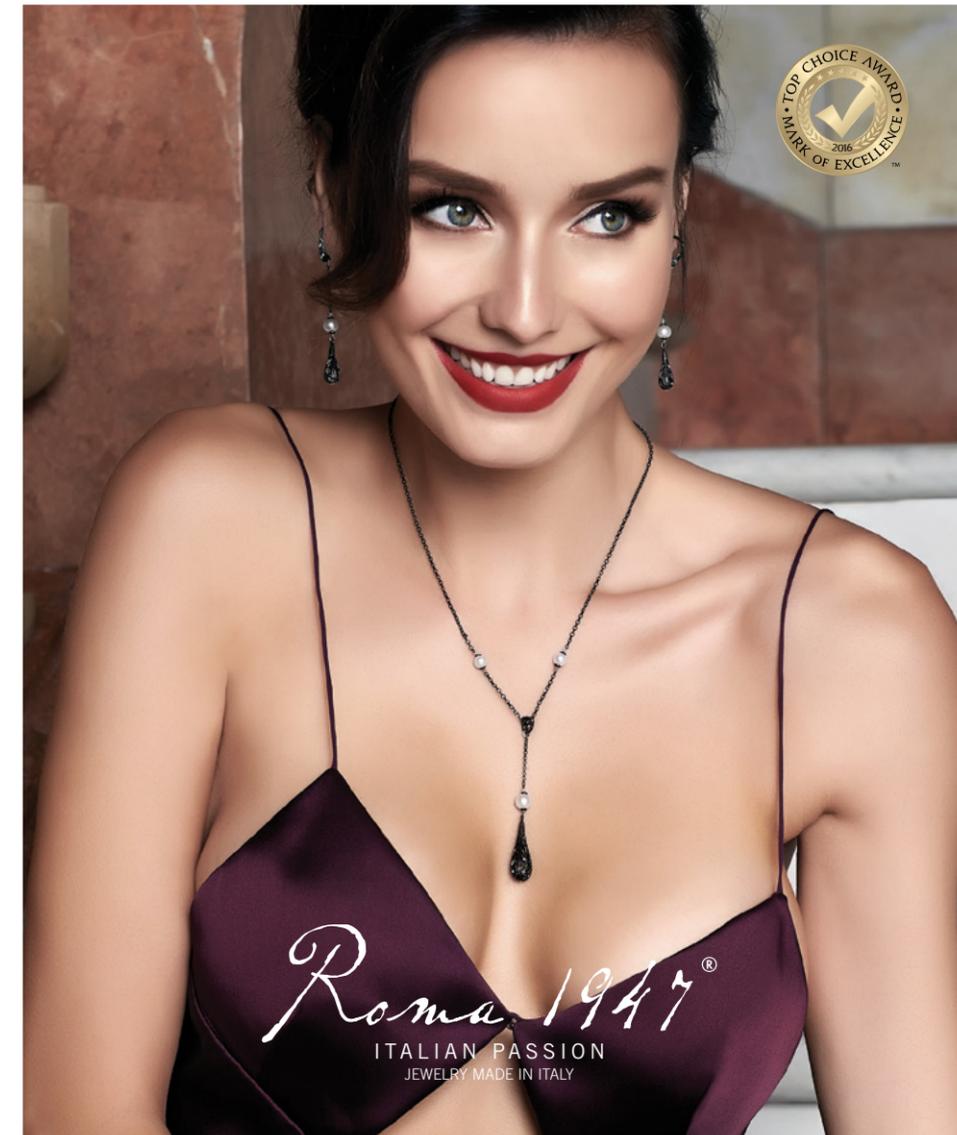
Definitely walk the beach, take a recalibrating dip and order octopus ceviche or spicy prawns pili pili at one of the open-air, feet-in-sand restaurants with a killer view.

#### RAS MICHAMVI

If you want to experience a view akin to what astronaut Roberta Bondar did, visit Ras Michamvi. The boutique hotel is a short beach walk from Kichanga Lodge and sits upon primo real estate. Once you climb the heart-pumping stairs, it's a shocker of a view. The 360-degree panorama of the Indian Ocean is like looking down from outer space. You can see the reefs and the pockets of emerald and azure where clown-nose red starfish hang out. Deep sea divers resurface to gut eels, puffer fish and snapper. The catch of the day is the catch of probably five minutes ago. This is the best place to pack back a \$5 blue marlin burger with a heap of fries and a glacier-cold Serengeti.

#### CHANGUU (PRISON) ISLAND

In Stone Town, boat captains lie supine in the shade drinking Coca-Cola but fly into action at the first glimpse of a starry-eyed tourist, eyes trained on



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Prison Island six kilometres from shore. We found ourselves in a milieu, being tugged at all angles to better boats, better engines, faster, cheaper. All the sales pitches were barked out until we opted for the captain who was least persistent. It was a 25-minute vibrating ride across the Windex-blue waters with a bare-chested teen in SpongeBob surf shorts and his kid brother in a soccer jersey on the bow.

Changuu was originally owned by an Arab who used the isolated isle as a detention centre for slaves. A prison was built in 1893 but never used. Instead, those infected with yellow fever were quarantined here.

The big draw to the island is the giant Aldabra tortoises, lumbering around like slow-motion coffee tables. They collide occasionally, like bumper cars, and carry on, ever slowly, pausing to extend their leathery sock necks for cabbage cores. Historians believe the centenarian tortoises were originally a gift from the British

governor of the Seychelles. Visitors can enjoy up close and personal interactions with the tortoises and then amble along the path circling the island.

I felt an immediate need to send postcards, a long-standing family tradition. What parent wouldn't want a postcard from prison? I asked about the island's boutique. Kim and I were told quite frankly that the boutique was empty. We opted for a beer instead. Yes, beer, in prison.

## STONE TOWN

It's a winding rabbit's warren through the heartland of the 19th-century slave boom buildings. The Arab homes with hidden courtyards juxtaposed with the open façade and balustrades of Indian houses. The size of the doors and carved frames were quick indicators of the owner's wealth and status. We spent hours walking in dizzying circles (just as the "Lonely Planet" guide suggested, you will

get lost in the labyrinth), taking over a hundred photos of the Zanzibari doors in Stone Town. They are elaborate, imposing, carved with chain-links to indicate places that held slaves. Some are ornate with brass spikes that were, once upon a time, marauding elephant deterrents.

The heat in the city is cranked up to lethal. More faux Maasai warriors in Crocs and mirrored sunglasses begged us to buy ebony carvings and beads. Every hamster-tunnel alley has a dozen shops spilling contents out of doorways. Looking is free, they bellowed. It's impossible to be mildly interested in anything without the swoop and attack for a final sale. Packing our patience, we had to make ourselves vulnerable, all in the name of cloves (one of Zanzibar's biggest exports), saffron, vanilla pods and nutmeg. We couldn't go home from the Spice Islands empty-handed.

It's worth seeking out the covered market on Creek Road just to admire the jumble

of goods. You can find everything you *don't* need, from screwdrivers to fresh fish to car engines to underwear, here. We stopped at the Hamamni Persian Baths, but were informed that the baths built for a Sultan were closed for the day. We felt like Sultana raisins, dried out from the African sun, and decided to "take to the shadows" as the locals say, in the shade of "Mtini." The Big Tree, as it is commonly known, was planted in 1911 by Sultan Khalifa and nearly 20 cars could park below its umbrella.

We found liquid refuge nearby at Mercury's, which is disappointingly slim on Queen nostalgia (they're weren't even playing "Bohemian Rhapsody" on the sound system). Just a half-dozen black and white framed pictures hang haphazardly on the walls. But, the pineapple, banana and fig pizza is divine and we drank tangawizi beer (Swahili for ginger) like we had been in the desert for days.

Satiated with our spice cargo and homage

to Queen, we headed to the Africa House Hotel (the former English Club, founded in 1888) for 5:45 p.m. and the highly anticipated sunset show. The park below came to life as the stagnant air of day dropped a few degrees. Impromptu soccer matches erupted, dozens bobbed about in the water (some still fully clothed) and others practised jiu-jitsu. We, on the other hand, revisited our day with piña coladas in a halved coconut shell. As the sun slid down, we ordered Dawas, a lime-choked, honey, gin and Konyagi sugarcane liqueur elixir. This is a necessary to-do.

On our last night in Zanzibar, we come to the conclusion that we'd ruined ourselves for all future travel. We gazed at the Indian Ocean, like a long-lost lover, watching as the tide pulled out nearly a mile, leaving behind the aquarium-like pools that we had spent our days poking around.

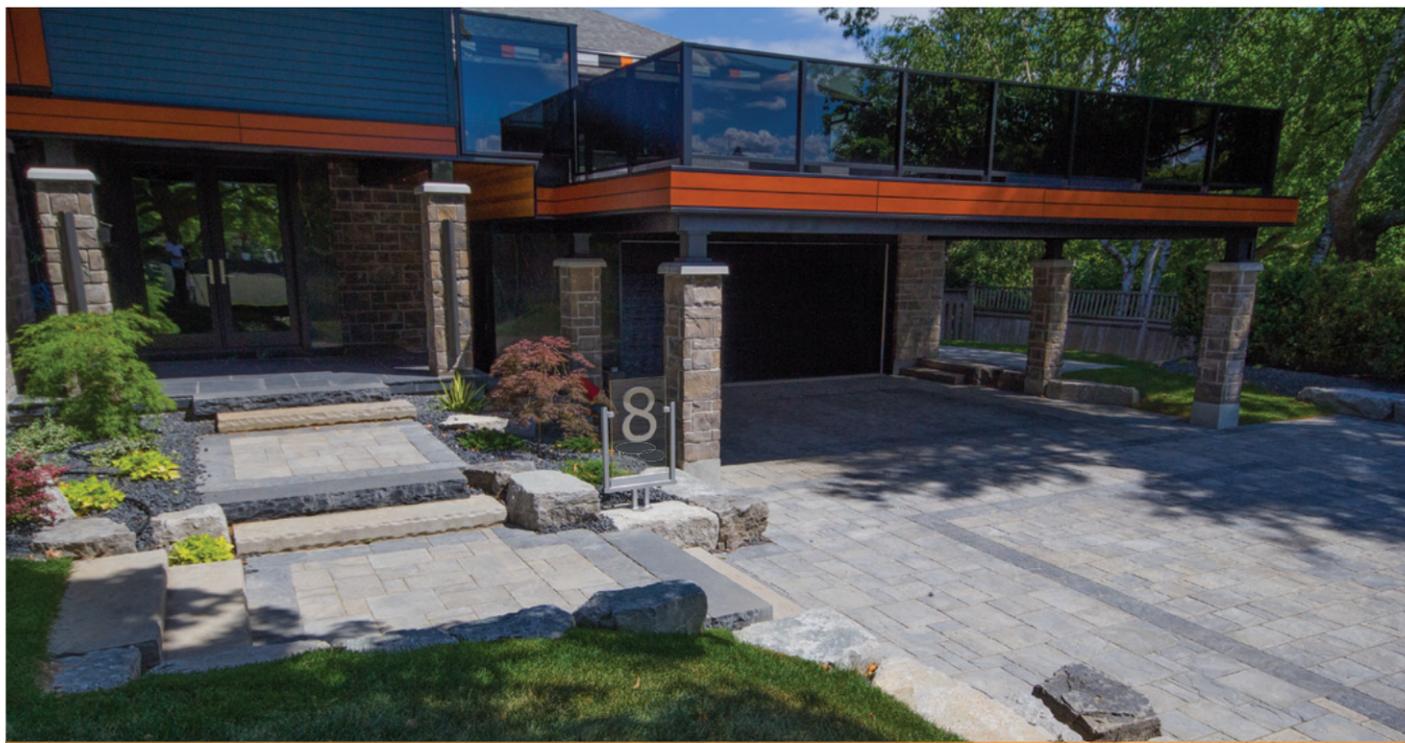
We felt the salt-licked Indian breeze on our face over the mingling scent of spice-

kicked lime broth of a Tanzanian soup loaded with ginger, chopped hard-boiled egg and fried cassava. Kim chose the fiery King fish curry with collards and potatoes made tart with vinegar. I sighed out loud as I order the octopus with piri piri sauce one last time.

If you want solitude, zero light pollution and an endless beach to walk — this is it. If you want front-row seats to spellbound sunrises — where the evolution of pinks, tangerine and cantaloupe set the dawn sky on fire, this is it. If you want to sit down to perfumed halves of mango, tart clots of passion fruit, sweet coffee and oily, golden chapati bread — welcome.

The crickets and cicadas are the only soundtrack and, at dusk, it's like a switch has been turned on. The electric buzz of insects and frogs and gecko peeps remind you that you are far, far away from the homeland.

You'll miss that serenade every day until you return again. 🌍



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