

Episode 58a: Stone Towns (Part 1)

Summary

In the first part of a two-part episode about Stone Towns off the east coast of Africa, Nick and Wendy talk about Lamu and Zanzibar as a prelude to their recent visit to Mozambique Island.

Transcript

Nick: As we continue travelling throughout southern Africa, today we're talking about some of our favourite places in all of sub-Saharan Africa, and these are these so-called Stone Towns, which are small towns on small islands in the Indian Ocean, off the coast, off the east coast, of Africa. And we've been to three of these now.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. So we've been to Lamu, which is in Kenya, or off the coast of Kenya, and we've been to Zanzibar, which is the one that people are most likely to have heard of before, that's probably the most famous one, and it's part of Tanzania. And those were both on a previous trip. And now on this trip we've just been to Mozambique Island, which, as you might suspect, is off the coast of Mozambique.

Nick: And because we like these places so much, we've got quite a lot to say, so we're going to do this in two parts, firstly talking about those first two places, Lamu and Zanzibar, and then in the second part, talking about Mozambique Island. So we visited the other two actually quite quickly, one after the other. It was seven years ago when we were travelling in east Africa. Umm, but before we get to those, these stone towns, I think, are worthy of an introduction. They're very interesting places, and I think primarily because you have a cultural mix that has existed for centuries on these islands. And so the mix is between Africans, Arabs and also Indians. And so this mix represents the trading and the other commercial activity that has taken place, as I said for centuries, in the Indian Ocean. And you can really see that mix even today, reflected in a lot of different cultural aspects of life on these islands.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And then of course on Mozambique Island you have Portuguese influence as well, but we'll talk about that, uhh, in more depth later on in another episode. But yeah, uhh, you can see, for example, the Muslim influence which is still very present today. There's still a very large Muslim population, particularly in Lamu. And so, for example, the women there, many of them wear, uhh, what they call the *bui-bui* in the local language. Uhh, in other parts of the

world it's more commonly known as the *abaya*, so it's a long black robe and often a full veil¹ completely covering the woman's face as well, so that's something that is very commonly seen there.

Nick: Right, and so Kenya is a majority Christian country, but then in Lamu not only is it a Muslim area, but it's a very conservative Muslim area as well. And so you see this throughout these islands. It's also true on Mozambique Island as well, it's about ninety-five percent Muslim even in a majority Christian country. Uhh, and so you see this in religion, you see it in language, there's different influences and different mixes in the language. You see it in the food, you have curries and other Indian-influenced dishes, and so it's just really fascinating, I think, to see this different cultural mix in these places. They're also very ... they're very laid-back and relaxed to a certain degree. Umm, and that's different from travelling in Africa.

Wendy: Yeah, travelling in Africa can be very hectic² and, uhh, a bit tiring after a while, so these are wonderful places to really kick back³ and relax and recharge your batteries after dealing with some of the hardships of overland travel in Africa.

Nick: But despite that, you also get a great cultural experience and there's historic things to see and do as well. So it's not just sitting on a ... on an island, on a beach island, doing nothing, and so that's one of the reasons I think that we really like it, is that you have that combination of a laid-back situation but also each day you can go and do things. You can take boat trips on dhows, which are traditional sailing boats in the Indian Ocean, and you can visit churches and mosques that are historic buildings, fortresses, and things like that. So really, for us it's a perfect destination in Africa.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, so for example in Lamu, I remember one of the activities that we did that I really enjoyed was taking a cooking class with a local woman. And so we went to the market with her, uhh, before the class. We went shopping for the ingredients that we were going to use to cook, and then she actually brought us back to her home and we prepared the meal in her kitchen and for me that was the most interesting part, was seeing how she lived with her children and, umm, the very basic rudimentary, uhh, tools and things that she was using to cook with in her kitchen.

Nick: Yeah, the kitchen was extremely basic. There were no cupboards or benches or anything really. Umm, no equipment, nothing that you would consider in a modern western kitchen. And so basically she just had some things piled up on the floor and then (a) very basic, uhh, stove top and then that was it. But she managed to⁴ create a delicious meal just from that.

¹ veil: piece of cloth that covers the face

² hectic: intense, busy, noisy

³ (to) kick back: relax, take it easy

⁴ managed to: succeeded despite difficulties

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And I think part of even the advertising of that cooking class was that you got to see in someone's house and I think that was particularly interesting in Lamu. It was a conservative Muslim island, or still is, and so to go behind the *bui-bui* or beyond the *bui-bui* as they say, umm, was really good to just see a little bit of private life as well as public life on the streets as well.

And so the streets of Lamu are really fantastic, there's donkeys everywhere.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Umm, the alleyways are so narrow that there aren't cars there, and so people get around⁵ by donkey, or they use the donkeys to carry certain things for them. And, you know, it's a small town, and you can see, compared with Zanzibar, that it's more of a backwater⁶, that it's never had ... that it never had the kind of influence that Zanzibar had, but yet it's got its own little bustling⁷ economy with these markets and everything, and so it was just such a fantastic place to spend a few days in.

Wendy: Yeah, it's quite busy in its own way. Like you said, lots and lots of donkeys and people in the streets, but at the same time, no cars, so it's quiet in that way, you don't have the traffic noise and the honking and everything. But yeah, lots of bustle, lots of people milling about⁸.

Nick: And I remember there's a fortress in the middle of town and we went into it and then you could climb up onto the ramparts of the fortress. And then from there you could just look out into the centre of town and you could just watch the markets and watch the donkeys and the people going ... uhh, coming and going and just doing their daily activities, but from a higher-up point, uhh, and so that was just really interesting to watch daily life just go by there as well because it's just such an interesting, umm, little town with its little bustle, like you said.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so we stayed in Lamu for five days, we were supposed to stay three days and then we loved it so we stayed longer. And then I remember that after we left, I was a bit grumpy⁹ for a few days, and you told me I had the 'post-Lamu

⁵ (to) get around (phrasal verb): travel, go from one place to another within a town

⁶ backwater: place of little or no importance

⁷ bustling: thriving, energetic

⁸ milling about: standing around without an obvious purpose

⁹ grumpy: irritable, unhappy

blues¹⁰ because I was, basically, upset that we weren't in Lamu anymore. I mean, as soon as we arrived, I remember saying it was my favourite place in Africa. And we just felt like we really, umm, discovered this place that wasn't really known to us before we started planning for that trip.

Wendy: No.

Nick: Umm, but, so we continued down the coast, down the Swahili coast of Kenya and then eventually we crossed into Tanzania and went to Zanzibar quite soon after, just a week or two after we'd been to Lamu. And it's a similar kind of idea with the Stone Town but it's much bigger, really in all aspects. It's a bigger island, it's a bigger town on that island. There's more tourists, it's more famous so there's more facilities and even the buildings are quite large, so you can tell it was a grander place, uhh, in its day. Umm, it has a lot more non-religious colonial buildings or non-religious grand buildings compared with Lamu which is on a more smaller scale.

Wendy: Yeah, so Lamu has mosques, and it does have the forts that you mentioned, but other than that it's mostly residential buildings, whereas Zanzibar, yes, it was a very important centre when it was built. And so you have more administrative buildings and things like that.

Nick: But it's still very laid-back and very relaxed, uhh, and a great destination to visit. You can also take trips outside the Stone Town itself, so we did a little trip to see some monkeys, umm, which were cute monkeys, and we also did another trip to see the spices that they grow. I think it's a spices and market trip, and so you kind of get the whole thing. You kind of see where they grow the spices and then you go to the markets and see where they sell them. And of course spices is a huge part of the Indian Ocean trade, or has been, for centuries, as well. And that's one of the main reasons why the Portuguese went, umm, to the Indian Ocean via the southern coast of Africa to begin with, was to find spices and be able to dominate the spice trade without having to go through the Venetians and the other route, uhh, overland through Arabia. And so the spices are still an important, uhh, thing in the Indian Ocean and in Zanzibar today.

Wendy: Yeah, so it was interesting to be able to see how that all works and to see how the spices are grown and get a better sense of their importance.

Nick: And so we stayed for a few days in Zanzibar and, uhh, it was another great time, and we were - again - sad to leave, especially as we took a thirty-something hour bus ride across Tanzania to get to Rwanda. Umm, but, uhh, yeah, it was another great time and so in the next episode, we will tell you about the newest of these stone towns that we've visited, which is Mozambique Island.

Wendy: Yes!

¹⁰ blues: depressed feelings (always plural)

Comprehension Questions

1. What is the main feature of these stone towns, according to Nick?
2. Which activity did Wendy enjoy doing in Lamu?
3. What is the main difference between Zanzibar and Lamu, according to Nick?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. I saw a lot of people _____ in the car park after the game. No one wanted to go home.
2. Ever since his father passed away, he's had the _____. He is having a lot of trouble moving on.
3. After all the late nights she has had at work this month, she deserves to _____ and relax this weekend. She's earned some rest.
4. This town used to be a _____ place but now it's become very quiet. The young people can't find work here so they move to the cities instead.
5. Turkey used to have a ban on women wearing the _____, but now [that ban has been partially lifted](#).
6. With our new product launching on Friday, it's going to be a very _____ week at work. We will have to do a lot of overtime.
7. Even with a broken arm, she still _____ play a song on the piano at the party last week.
8. He comes from a very small town. It's in the middle of nowhere and nothing much ever happens there. It's a real _____.
9. If I don't get eight hours of sleep, I become very _____ the next day. No one will talk to me because I'll be in such a bad mood.
10. In Italian cities, many people have scooters (*motorini*) so they can _____ more easily. That way, they can avoid some of the traffic and go down the narrow alleyways.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Do you think you would like to visit one of these stone towns? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever had the 'blues' like Nick did after leaving a place that you liked? If so, where was it and why?
3. Have you ever taken a cooking class, either travelling or at home? If so, what was it like? If not, would you like to take a cooking class and what food would you like to learn how to cook?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. The mix between African, Arab and Indian people and culture.
2. She enjoyed taking a cooking class with a local woman in her home.
3. Zanzibar is bigger and grander than Lamu in every way.

Exercises

1. milling about
2. blues
3. kick back
4. bustling
5. veil
6. hectic
7. managed to
8. backwater
9. grumpy
10. get around