

Episode 58b: Stone Towns (Part 2)

Summary

In the second part of a two-part episode about Stone Towns off the east coast of Africa, Nick and Wendy talk about wonderful Mozambique Island.

Transcript

Nick: Welcome back to our discussion of stone towns in Africa, or more precisely, just off the east coast of Africa. Last time we talked about Lamu and Zanzibar, and now it's the turn of Mozambique Island, where we've spent the better part of¹ the last week or so.

Wendy: Yeah, we stayed there for longer than we had intended to, and that was mostly just because we loved the place so much.

Nick: Yeah, we wanted to stay for about four days. In the end, we decided to stay for eight days, and that meant that we changed our plans for Mozambique. We had intended to go a little bit further north and we just decided, 'Let's stay here.' You know, once you get to a place like this, it's hard to face the challenge of going back to the mainland and dealing with all the transport and the roads and all ... and things like that. So we thought, 'We really like Mozambique Island, there's lots of things for us to do here.' And there was also a festival coming up, and so we said, 'Let's just stay for eight days,' and, umm, and that's what we did.

Wendy: We did, and I think it was a good decision.

Nick: So Mozambique Island, like the other stone towns that we've talked about, the island itself is just off the coast. It's about three kilometres off the coast of Africa. And there's actually a bridge now, and so you can travel with a vehicle to Mozambique Island. The island is very small, it's about three kilometres in length and five hundred metres in width. And so it is very small and even within that island, there's two very distinct parts.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: The so-called Stone Town is the northern part, and this is really the colonial Portuguese part of town. And we were told that actually the island was uninhabited when the Portuguese arrived, and so they were responsible for building up the

¹ the better part of: most of, the majority of

island and then also inhabiting it, and also having locals come and inhabit it to work, uhh, on building the Stone Town, I guess.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And it was actually the capital of the Portuguese colony in eastern Africa. So it was a very important, umm, place at that time.

Nick: Yeah, despite being very, very small. And so you have the Stone Town and there's still these Portuguese buildings that are there. As we mentioned before, a lot of faded grandeur, these old buildings that could do with² a new coat of paint perhaps, but, umm...

Wendy: Or even a bit more. I mean, some of them look to be completely abandoned, umm, and, you know, it's just the shell, the outer shell of the building, really. But then sometimes you think that they're abandoned and then you'll see someone walk out, you know, and you realise that actually there's a family that's living deep inside the building, uhh, inside one of the rooms. They've, uhh, made that into their home. So it's a really interesting place. Umm, but...

Nick: Yeah, and I think some of the faded aspect of the buildings gives a lot of the timelessness that makes Mozambique Island special.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm, yeah.

Nick: And so in this stone town in the north you have, umm, several churches. You also have a very huge fortress, which is supposed to be, perhaps, the best military fortress constructed in Africa, uhh, by European colonisers. And at the very, very northern tip, there is a church which is the oldest European building in the Southern Hemisphere. It was built in 1522, and it's a fortified church. So it was one of the first buildings, or as I said, the oldest that still remains, but perhaps one of the first buildings built by the Portuguese, and the church is fortified. And so it functions as a small fortress. Umm, and then of course later they built this very large fortress behind it and so the fortified nature of the church, umm, didn't really have a purpose anymore. But at the time when they built it, uhh, it was necessary because there were potential attacks coming from the sea, and so the church was used as a way to ward off³ these attacks.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And we visited that, and it was really interesting to visit that as part of a visit to the fortress. And so that was one thing that we did on one of the days that we were there. And then we also went to some of the other museums and some of the other churches that are in Stone Town. But then to the south of the island, you have what's called Makuti Town, which is completely different, right?

² could do with: need(s)

³ to ward off: to successfully defend against

Wendy: Completely different, yes. And that is actually where most people live today, of the local people who live on the island. It's very, very densely populated, umm, lots of houses very close together. Makuti is the local word for reeds or thatch. It's what they use to make the thatched roofs of their houses. And in some cases, the houses ... the body of the house is also made of reeds, others are made of cement or different materials, maybe mud-brick. Umm, but it's very poor housing, by and large⁴. And even the cement ones are still what we would consider to be very poor living conditions, you know. We would probably ... definitely if it was in one of our countries, we would consider it to be a slum. But in Mozambique, this is probably pretty much the average standard of living, because it is a very poor country. Uhh, so it's an interesting situation. Uhh, we did get a chance to walk through the Makuti Town, and we met people who lived in the Makuti Town, and some of them were very proud. They showed off⁵ their houses to us and stood in front of their houses and posed for pictures. And, uhh, it was nice to see that, uhh, they seemed to be very happy there, and seemed to, you know, be happy with very little. Umm, but the fact is that a lot of the children are going hungry, that was very obvious, that they were not adequately nourished. And so it is a sad situation too.

Nick: Yeah, there are about fifteen thousand people who live in Makuti Town, so it's very densely populated.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: Umm, and the population of the island is about ninety-five percent Muslim, even though the grandest buildings, apart from the fortress, on the whole island are churches. Umm, but those are in the northern part in the Stone Town and then there are ... there's at least one mosque and one *madresa*, which is a Muslim religious school, in the southern part near where most people live in Makuti Town. And so this dynamic of the Stone Town and the Makuti Town, it's in miniature what we saw in Maputo, in the capital of Mozambique, umm, when we went into the Mafalala neighbourhood that we talked about previously. And so you also have this division between the colonial rulers and the local people who were living there, who were needed to do ... to work in the area where the colonists are, but who live separately in their own, kind of, areas.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: So another thing that you can do is that you can take boat trips around the island and that's another magical part of these stone towns is that you can travel in these dhows, these old sailing boats. And we did that for one day and that was quite interesting. We went actually back to the mainland but to an area that's really only accessible by boat from the island, and we saw an old well which they call the Vasco da Gama Well, supposedly discovered, or at least used, umm, by the

⁴ by and large: in general, for the most part

⁵ showed off: proudly displayed

Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, who was the first person to discover a sea route to India from Europe. Umm, and we saw a little village on that island (on the mainland). Would you say the village was even poorer than Makuti Town, perhaps?

Wendy: Umm, I mean, perhaps.

Nick: It felt a lot more rural.

Wendy: Yeah, the houses are more spread out. They have, you know, more distance between them. Because in the Makuti Town, they're really just right on top of each other, with just little tiny alleyways, just barely, you know, big enough to walk ... for two people to walk past each other. So they had more space, umm, but, yes, still very, very poor.

Nick: And another trip we did by boat was to go whale watching, which was amazing because often when you go whale watching - or certainly it's been our experience - you know, because the whales are mostly under the water, you don't really see that much. Every now and then you see a tail, and everybody on the boat is ooing and aahing⁶ when they see a small portion of the whale. But you never really understand or really can grasp⁷ the true size of the whale. But on this occasion we saw whales jumping up out of the water and playing around and that was really great.

Wendy: Yeah, so these are humpback whales, who migrate, uhh, from Antarctica to come breed⁸ and, uhh, give birth to their babies, uhh, in the Indian Ocean around Mozambique Island at this time of year. It just so happened that we were there at exactly the right time of year when the whales come, and it wasn't something that we knew about really or that we had planned to do, because we have had some less-than-exciting whale watching experiences in the past, so we thought, 'Ahh, it's not worth it, we don't want to do it again.' But for some reason we decided to do it and it was the best whale watching experience that we've ever had. The humpback whales were actually jumping up out of the water and putting on a great performance and we got to watch a mother with her baby. She was teaching her baby how to do the jumps, so it was really special.

Nick: Yeah, and we were quite close to them, a distance of I guess about twenty or thirty metres, and we were also only in a very small zodiac boat.

Wendy: Yeah.

⁶ ooing and aahing: making excited noises

⁷ grasp: understand, process (in this case). In its physical sense, it means to take or seize.

⁸ breed: procreate, make babies (used more for animals than humans)

Nick: Uhh, so you can't get too close, because the whale is much bigger than the boat, and could easily tip it, uhh, if it got agitated⁹, if you got very close to, uhh, to it or to the whales that we saw. But fortunately nothing like that happened. Uhh, we stayed far enough away but close enough that we had a really amazing view.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so that was just, uhh, one of the many great experiences that we had on Mozambique Island.

Wendy: Yeah, we did something different for just about every day that we were there for eight days. Even though it's a very chilled out¹⁰, laid-back place, we managed to find lots of different things to do and it kept us busy for a while, and, uhh, it's something I'll always remember.

Nick: But eventually it was time to leave the island and go back into Africa proper and see what adventures awaited us there.

⁹ agitated: frustrated, annoyed

¹⁰ chilled out: relaxed, easy-going

Comprehension Questions

1. What are the main features of each of the two parts of Mozambique Island?
2. What were the two notable aspects of the church at the northern tip of the island that Nick mentioned?
3. Why were Nick and Wendy initially unsure about doing a whale-watching excursion?

Exercises

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

1. Many maths students find calculus to be a difficult concept to _____.
2. There have been some ups and downs, of course, but _____ she's been a good president.
3. If you travel in Africa, you'll spend a lot of time trying _____ mosquitos. To do this, some people prefer spray and others use mosquito coils.
4. Rabbits _____ at a high rate and as a result, there can often be problems with exploding rabbit populations.
5. When the famous actor finally came out onto the stage, there was a lot of _____ by the audience.
6. As soon as he came home, he _____ his new car to all his neighbours. He boasted to them about how much it cost.
7. She's a decent pianist but she _____ some more lessons by a top-quality teacher. Then she could really improve.
8. It's just a little scratch on the car. It's not worth getting _____ over.
9. He's been the president for _____ two decades now. I think it's time for him to retire.
10. Despite being a large city, it's still quite _____. There's not much noise or pollution and it's a pleasant place to walk around.

Discussion Questions

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

1. If you had to choose one, would you prefer to walk around Stone Town to see the churches and historic buildings or Makuti Town to see how people live?
2. Of the three stone towns that Nick and Wendy talked about in this double episode - Lamu, Zamzibar and Mozambique Island - which one would you like to visit the most? Why?
3. Have you ever been whale watching? If so, what was the experience like? If not, would you like to? Why or why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Stone Town contains the Portuguese colonial buildings such as the fortress and several churches, while Makuti Town contains basic houses and is where the local people live.
2. That it is the oldest European building in the Southern Hemisphere, and that it is a fortified church, so it served a defensive purpose as well.
3. Because they didn't see much on their previous whale-watching trips.

Exercises

1. grasp
2. by and large
3. to ward off
4. breed
5. oohing and aahing
6. showed off
7. could do with
8. agitated
9. the better part of
10. chilled out