

Tanzania

she's waiting there for you

OFTEN OVERLOOKED
FOR THE ASSUMED
SAFER MADAGASCAR,
EAST AFRICA OFFERS
MANY OPPORTUNITIES
FOR CRUISING.

KIA KOROPP

A procession of dhows heading out at
sundown for a night of fishing off Fundo
Island, Pemba.

MY bloodshot pin-propped eyes have just logged 4,867 images into my brain of snapshots of our time in Tanzania. While the visual onslaught has left me cross-eyed and numb, the catalogue of moments spun in succession makes me realise how different an experience our time has been from the average khaki-clad tourist.

I knew our cruising experience would be different for us when we set sight on east Africa. Stripped of our palm-fringed beaches and string of pearly isles, I expected that our panorama would be replaced with a long stretch of bone-dry red dirt and parched baobab trees. That we would have to slip into safari-mode as we tootled off with a bunch of other gawping cheetah-spotters to trek through world-class game parks.

Given the extremely high cost of the top-tier game parks and the distance we would need to travel from coastal Tanzania to get there, we knew it was out of budget and we were too far

removed for any serious safari trekking. After researching our options we decided to skip the east African parks and wait for the cheaper, more accessible reserves of South Africa.

With Mount Kili and The Geti now in the scrap bin, I mistakenly thought we had missed what east Africa was all about; but 4,867 blurry photos of spots, stripes, ivory and horn hidden behind a bone-dry veil of wheat-coloured grass prove otherwise.

Rather than the safari-mania we had envisioned, it was a quick adjustment to realise we were going to experience a much less 'trip advised' Africa. By the time we'd hit this realisation it did not matter, there was much more to east Africa than the 'big five' and we had fallen in love with our less-hyped experience.

We were off on a back alley tour of Tanzania. While we would not be out tromping around the bush with a rifle-toting scout or trinket-shopping in a Masaai village, we were hanging out with locals in places far off the tourist path.



For me, therein lies the best that cruising has to offer: off-beat, authentic and unexploited. As I sort through our 4,867 images, what dawns on me most is the richness that “off the beaten path” offers: to seek your own route brings with it an authenticity of experience and a uniqueness of encounter that the tour-schemes are generally void of.

Not that I advise anyone with the chance to game-drive east Africa not to jump at the opportunity: the Serengeti and Ngorogoro Crater are truly one of the world’s most incredible natural wonders, but they are only a part of the richness that is east Africa and there is much that extends beyond the regions top-ranked attractions.

IS EAST AFRICA SAFE?

Tourism is one of east Africa’s leading economies, with thousands of international visitors signing up for safaris and land tours every year. On the cruising front, however, there is very little activity.

Quotes from officials, locals and resort personnel suggest an average of three to five cruising yachts per year; even if you double that

number it is still a very small percentage in respect to global cruising numbers.

With so many people throughout the world jumping on planes bound for Kenya and Tanzania by the thousands, why are so few cruising yachts headed to her shores?

One factor may be piracy. While Somalian piracy has been a dissuading factor in recent history, current reports indicate an abatement in attacks and a decrease in risk for yachts headed through the Red Sea.

There has been an increasing stream of cruising yachts crossing from the Indian Ocean into the Mediterranean via the Red Sea over the past few years, all report safe passage. With this threat minimised, the proximity of east Africa to Somalia should weigh less heavily on the mind. In fact, current reports rank the Caribbean and Indonesia as having higher incidents of piracy yet boats continue to flock to those shores every year.

Where has that flock gone in east Africa and why has it not returned? Perhaps the reason few cruisers do not include east Africa is concern for a less headline type of crime: general safety.

When we talked to a few cruisers of our interest in east Africa, crime became a common discussion point. Would we be safe there? Weren’t we putting our children at risk? Wasn’t a yacht a target for thieves?

Yet, all yachts heading through the Indian Ocean would pull into Madagascar, where reports of property theft were rife, then sailing onward to South Africa that holds some of the world’s highest crime rates. Yachts continue to sail to Madagascar and South Africa each year: so, why avoid east Africa for similar concerns?

“HOW COULD WE TRAVEL THIS FAR TO BYPASS THE EAST AFRICAN COAST ALL TOGETHER?”

While we encountered no instances of assault to either body or property during our time in east Africa that is not to say every country does not hold a crime sheet. The last time I was in Tanzania, working in the tourist trade, my purse was stolen from me.

Impulsive by nature, I chased after the thief. In doing so I unwittingly incited a mob and the mania that ensued was mind-blowing. The mob caught and battered the poor man. The police who intervened only carried on the abuse.

The result of his capture was imprisonment and death. What blared out to me at the time was how quickly order can disintegrate into





LEFT: Braca engaged with local wildlife.

BELOW: Chameleon, common to east Africa.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Mother and her children at the communal water tap in the Usambara Mountains.

chaos, "this is how we deal with crime in our country," the Chief of Police told me.

The life of a twenty-year old man for a passport and few hundred bucks. It was a hard lesson learned. I had no idea my cry of theft would issue the young man a death sentence.

The instance illustrates the hard line attitude towards crime, yet even with severe repercussions, theft remains an issue.

Acknowledging this undercurrent of potential unrest, our time in east Africa was not tainted by any fear of threat. Life on a yacht means we are often in remote regions exposed to our surroundings, yet throughout our time we felt very safe and welcomed by the locals.

That said, as travellers, it is our responsibilities not to invite an incident and not taunt those without with our comparative affluence. In these parts of the world, a little goes a long way and in comparative terms, we have a lot.

Equally, it is our charge to ensure we do not expose ourselves. There is a saying that goes: "if it isn't locked on, you must not care for it."

Outboard engines, for example, are more precious than a block of gold. Hang it on the rail without securing it on or leave the tender with it attached in the water overnight and you send out a beacon as a target.

I know of several cruisers who woke to the sound of uninvited guests knocking about on deck in the middle of the night. Everything secured was in place, but anything not locked down was lifted. Invitation accepted.

Returning to the discussion of cruising in east Africa, or lack thereof, another factor may be a fear of corruption and the hassle of dealing with crooked officials. For my part, I believe there is a fair amount of miscommunication and misrepresentation



on cruising blogs and websites that paints an unfair picture of east Africa.

Personally, we received a number of warnings that cautioned us against clearing in at almost every port of entry: we would be ripped off, bribes would be demanded and the officials would be difficult. None of these reports matched the experience.

We know of four yachts that cleared into Tanzania this year, each at a different port: Pemba, Mafia, Tanga, Dar es Salaam; every one had a positive experience.

Gossip and reports were different from our collective experience, yet if all you have to go on is negative feedback then it is hard to be persuaded to add it as a destination on your list.

Adverse wind and current for yachts transiting south down the coast may also play at the minds of would-be east African cruisers. This was one of the reasons we initially scrapped Tanzania from our route plan, but my love for east Africa



TOP: Hanging with the locals.

ABOVE: Cruising companions along the Tanzanian coast.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Relics of the cannons used to guard the Stone Town waterfront of Zanzibar.

kept niggling in the back of my brain: how could we travel this far and come this close to bypass the east African coast all together?

I knew in setting our sights on east Africa that we would diverge from the majority of cruising yachts crossing the Indian Ocean. But with so much on offer it seemed a worthwhile decision.

What we needed to understand, however, was whether we could sail *Átea* south down the coast against the strong currents and winds. All talk had been that the coast was impossible to transit during the southeast monsoon season.

The prevailing winds are from the south and the current also sweeps you north, making progress south very difficult before the seasons change in January. However, on closer analysis we had decided that by sticking very close to the coast we would avoid the biggest punch of current and that both wind and current turns favourable after Capo Delgado on the Tanzanian-Mozambique border; we would only need to tackle this issue during the first 300 miles of our passage.

If we picked our weather right we should be able to pinch our way forward in calm conditions and use the land breeze to make good progress; this might result in less sailing but it would mean that we could move south without bashing boat and body to pieces, a fair tradeoff.

At least, this was our theory. Having seen the possibility: a crack in the bolted door to east Africa, we decided we would wander on through and find out for ourselves.

A final factor that may explain the low numbers of yachts visiting east Africa is that it is not on the main cruising route. Yachts transiting the Indian Ocean have two options if they are heading west, as most are: head north through the Red Sea or south to South Africa.

As there is still a very palatable fear factor to the Red Sea option, most choose a southerly route. While Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique can reasonably fit into this option, Madagascar is now very much on the radar and it is hard to include both destinations in one season.

While Madagascar used to be considered remote and off the beaten path, it is hard to find a yacht who has crossed the Indian Ocean these days who has not included Madagascar as a destination, for many it is a highlight. East Africa, bypassed for its neighbouring island, remains an isolated gem.

Most yachts that head south towards Madagascar from all departure points in the eastern Indian Ocean will hit some very rough seas and weather. Often circumnavigators report this area as being one of the toughest they have ever had to transit and many boats suffer damage on approach. So, when it comes to weather routing there are some considerations a skipper must seriously query.

We decided we could negotiate the strong currents off the east African coast by staying close to land and, in choosing this route, we would also avoid the battering that the direct passage to Madagascar brings.

We found in doing so we compromised a hard passage for a longer, more roundabout route and the decision to go via Tanzania probably added two hundred extra engine hours to the season. Easier on the boat and crew, but harder on the engine and bank account.

I am glad we chose the option we did: our passage was smooth if not costly and we got the addition of exploring Tanzania, an experience as rewarding and worthwhile as I imagined.

WHAT TO SEE

Now that we have scooted past the border and can reflect on our time in Tanzania I see several distinct phases of our trip, which combined weaves a rich cultural and natural tapestry that makes east Africa one of my favourite destinations yet.

Our route included remote Pemba, an island off the north-east coast of Tanzania where the dramatic coastline of eroded limestone and sheer underwater walls drop from a dramatic two metres to three hundred metres in a vertical line.

While there are a few tourist hamlets with isolated, high-end resorts, the majority of Pemba is rural and isolated from tourism. There we were invited into rustic villages where a smattering of Swahili phrases got us further than English, where the children were shy of our foreignness and the women hid their faces from the camera's eye.

The diving in season at Pemba is reported to be some of the best in east Africa and the underwater topography lends itself to truth. Dhows bespeckle the African coast, but no place will conjure up the beauty like seeing a long line of them sail past us at sunset.

I could have spent months there, tucked in, watching their daily pilgrimage to and from the sea.

From Pemba we made a short, unscheduled stop in Kenya due to strong northerly currents and engine failure. We were escorted to the mainland by spinning dolphin, breaching humpback whale and S.V. *Barbara Ann*, an American cruising couple we had become friends with earlier in the year.

"CURRENT REPORTS INDICATE AN ABATEMENT IN ATTACKS AND A DECREASE IN RISK FOR YACHTS HEADED THROUGH THE RED SEA."

There we were entreated to the sight of a beautiful old stone village, the taste of seaweed and mud crab, plus introduced to the Kenyan border security. So much for our sneaky duck in and out that we had hoped for; however, for a bottle of Johnny Walker and \$20 we negotiated an amicable short-term arrangement.



BELOW: Child watching us walk through her village, Usambara Mountains.

OPPOSITE PAGE: TOP TO BOTTOM: Braca, age 6, playing with boys on the beach at Msuka Bay, Pemba.

Learning the culinary ropes of Zanzibar cuisine at Stone Town.

In general, I am not a fan of paying bribes but when you are truly in the wrong and someone is winking you with upturned palm, a slip of green may very well suit the occasion.

From the southern tip of the Kenyan coast, we returned to legal turf in Tanzania; old friends S.V. *Momo* and new friends S.V. *Dallandra*, were waiting for us in the coastal town of Tanga and we were excited to reconnect.

Over the next two weeks we became familiar with rural mainland Tanzania, a grumpy club commodore and cheap yacht club cocktails. We also did some inland travel to the Usambara Mountains in northeast Tanzania, where we rented a mountain chalet and explored the high altitude ranges and the cloud-enshrouded mountain villages. Even tracked down the wild yet charismatic chameleon.

It was a treat to get some inland travel and see rural Tanzania, as well as be introduced to Mambo View Lodge and witness how an

eco-tourism business that is embedded in the community can make a genuine and sustainable difference.

From there we explored the historically significant Zanzibar Island, rich in history, spice and tourism. We drank sunset cocktails on the beach with the other foreign imports in the north and walked the tightly woven streets of old Stonetown in the south.

We shopped for trash and trinkets in the labyrinth of shops and stalls and in general, had a fabulous time being tourists amongst tourists. We ate octopus at the fish market, drank spiced coffee at the cafes and indulged in the myriad of culinary options the old town has to offer.

Zanzibar is a truly multi-ethnic community that carries the unique atmosphere of a city that has genuine mystique and whispers of exotic mystery at every corner. Zanzibar was once the centre of the slave trade for the whole of east Africa and the prosperity of the Sultanate was



derived in part from the business of human trade, a dark history beneath the present day tourist-friendly UNESCO-approved World Heritage site.

In such a place, the history of long ago still lingers in the dark crevices of its tight winding alleys and seeps from the cracks of every chipped-stucco wall. A hundred and fifty years later and every thick, spike-studded door continues to hold behind it the secrets of its past.

Our last notable stop was in the main port and commercial hub of Dar es Salaam, where we found ourselves quickly settling into the upmarket expatriate scene. It offers a great base as provisions are easily got and readily available.

The promenade provides a great social hub, there is a great selection of excellent restaurants and the ice cream is divine. There is an uppity yacht club and a hospitable slipway; the former providing airs of colonial self-import and the latter providing resources for practical support.

"I COULD HAVE SPENT MONTHS THERE, TUCKED IN, WATCHING THEIR DAILY PILGRIMAGE."

I guess it is this last stop that clarified what I found so enchanting about Tanzania: the Rubik's cube of travel destinations. It offers a kaleidoscope of different settings unique and different from each other: from coast to sea, from valley to mountain, from bustling town to isolated village.

Weaved through each of these environments is the open arms and the wide grin of the Tanzanian local: warm, engaging and delightful. In itself perhaps you could say this of every people in every country, but there is an intangible and almost indescribable uniqueness that is east Africa, discovered only by time on her soil and interaction with her people.

Looking back, our route included remote Pemba, rural Tanga, misty Usambara mountains, vibrant Zanzibar, quaint Dar es Salaam, interspersed with small bays and islets along the way. We zigzagged back and forth from island to coast moving south through coastal Tanzania from the northern boarder of Kenya to the southern boarder of Mozambique and got a good introduction to the land and life of Tanzania and its people along the way.

While we did not spot the 'big five': walk the crater rim or hike Mount Kilimanjaro, something that would define most people's trip through Tanzania, we got so much that is



outside the box that is equally rewarding. This reward came to us by trusting our capabilities and following our own desires against the recommendation and advice of popular opinion and outsider fears.

By stepping outside the standard cruising circuit, we found the blog posts outdated and general opinions misinformed.

None of the factors that suggest blockades to sailing coastal Tanzania proved to be actual barriers and the few cruisers that do test these boundaries find themselves well rewarded. As I look back on my photos, it dawns on me that we had actually struck gold without knowing it. We got to see and experience things at ground-level, outside of the stampede of flocking tourists and beyond the security of a cruising community. We saw offbeat, authentic and unexploited, the three main ingredients for a top-rate trip.

We got to touch the fringes of a rare and well-endowed gem. ≈



KIA KOROPP

My husband and I have been cruising onboard *Atea*, a 49' Ganley Solution, since departing New Zealand in 2011. We started as a team of two and have grown to a family of four. We spent five years in Asia and the Pacific region and the last two years in the Indian Ocean, having just sailed around the South Africa coast this year. After a break to refill the cruising kitty, we will continue onward into the Atlantic Ocean in late 2019, destination to be determined. To follow our adventures: svatea.com.