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# Zanzibar: The History of the International Trade Center off the Coast of Africa

*Charles River Editors*

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**Charles River Editors : Zanzibar: The History of the International Trade Center off the Coast of Africa** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Zanzibar: The History of the International Trade Center off the Coast of Africa:

\*Includes pictures \*Includes various explorers' accounts of Zanzibar at different times \*Includes online resources and a bibliography for further reading \*Includes a table of contents "It was then capital of an Afro-Arab dynasty, a centre of commerce and international diplomacy, a seat of learning...and a gateway to Africa.- Abdul Sheriff, 1995 Situated about 25 miles off the Tanzanian coast, Zanzibar, with its sultans and spices, merchants and mosques, dhows and doorways of richly carved timber, has captured the imagination of travelers and writers for hundreds of years. It has long evoked a romantic mystique, calling up images of an island paradise in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Its gleaming Muslim Swahili town, built of white coralline limestone, can trace approximately a thousand years of maritime trading, and it also sustained a plantation economy based principally on slaves and cloves. Stone Town is one of the few historic trading cities from the Swahili civilization that remains a viable urban center to this day. For much of the last millennium, Zanzibar served as the center of maritime interaction and trade between Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and India, and the architectural and urban heritage of the island reflects the complex fusion of these cultural spheres. By tracing the changes seen in the archaeological record, it is possible to identify the transformations that occurred in the landscape, people, and architecture of Zanzibar. The earliest known people to call Zanzibar home, the Swahili, built their iconic coral rag houses on the strategically important Shangani Peninsula. It was therefore a populated though sparsely so island that European traders discovered during the Age of Exploration. The main settlement in Zanzibar was Mji Mkongwe (old town in Swahili), better known as Stone Town. It is today but one part of the modern Zanzibar City, but it is a site that has gone through many fascinating stages of development in history. Starting as a small and nondescript fishing village, the settlement became a royal residence and commercial bazaar through a complicated network of ethnic and cultural relations. The Portuguese were especially prominent in their activities in Stone Town, though their influence declined at the close of the 17th century, when the sultans of Oman emerged as the dominant political and economic force in the Indian Ocean region and eventually established Zanzibar as their base of operations. Tremendous amounts of wealth and influence were earned by Indian and Arab traders engaging in the clove and slave trade, and it was these two groups that had the longest lasting influence on the island's tangible formation to the present day. From the latter 19th century, the British exerted pressure and influence on Zanzibar in an attempt to end the centuries-long trade of slaves through the island. Today, the urban landscape contains a number of iconic structures and a wide variety of vernacular architectural styles, yet because of political and economic vicissitudes over the centuries, Stone Town has undergone both development and retrogression. The main buildings of the town that can be viewed today were built during the 18th and 19th centuries. The old Arab Fort, the palaces of the sultans, numerous mosques, and elegant mansions with their massive, carved wooden doorways, dominated the town. Over the last hundred years, however, political changes have affected the architectural landscape in critical ways. The partition of Africa in the late 19th century diminished Zanzibar's commercial dominance, causing a decline in wealth and influence, and as a British protectorate, it became subject to colonial ideas of modernization. After a devastating revolution in the 1960s, during which some twelve thousand Arabs and Indians were killed before fleeing the islands, Zanzibar adopted a communist government.