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Adventures in Mombasa

BY: Neal McKenna

When you hear the names “Mombasa,” “Nairobi,” or simply “Kenya,” what comes to mind? Swaying palms and moonlight? Steaming jungles at sunrise? Sun-soaked sandy beaches? Safaris on the savannah? Sprawling colonial mansions? Most certainly, all these can be found in the multi-faceted country called Kenya. But perhaps – if your tastes lean toward the more sensual – the phrase “white mischief” might come to you. Seven decades ago, Kenya was truly the land of white mischief! It was a prime destination for affluent



Mombasa's Serena Beach Hotel & Spa

British expatriates and down-on-their-luck

aristocrats who wanted to live large on a dwindling fortune. Today, Kenya remains the place to visit – but for people like you and me! And, the good news is: you still can live large – even with a less than aristocratic vacation budget.

So, let's start with getting there. One of the most economical and comfortable ways to reach Kenya is flying Kenya Airways. The flight from Johannesburg to Nairobi takes slightly under four

hours and balmy Mombasa is just another 40 minutes away as the crow flies. The bottom line is: a junket to Mombasa from anywhere in South Africa is an all-day affair. However, it is well worth the effort especially when your destination is a 5-star Serena Hotel.

Serena Hotels are located in some of the world's most exciting and exotic destinations. Each is tailored to be unique and unforgettable – whether it's a luxury safari camp, a deluxe hotel or one of their sumptuous resorts. Built upon a coral cliff overlooking the beach, provides all the creature comforts in high

style. Amenities include a swimming pool, fitness

centre, spa/massage centre, meeting facilities, two restaurants on the hotel grounds, a piano bar, tennis courts, windsurfing, deep-sea fishing, catamaran sailing, scuba diving, snorkeling as well as a great deal more. – And, there's even babysitting if you require it. One hundred and sixty-four rooms and suites are available on no more than two levels above ground and many are wheelchair accessible.

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Designed to evoke a 13th century Swahili village, the several buildings comprising the Serena Beach Hotel complex are joined by winding lanes, fountained courts and bustling market squares. Set back from the white sands and saltation waters of the Mombasa National Marine Park, the hotel décor blends the intricacy of Swahili carvings with the beaded glow of Arabian lanterns. At any time of day, the place takes on the gleaming-white splendour of a Sultan's palace as well as the lotus-cool of a Persian water garden.

To accurately describe the scenery at Serena Beach Hotel, Mombasa is a truly difficult thing to achieve. However, Karen Blixen came very close to doing so when she wrote the following in her novel, "Out of Africa:" "The sea at Mombasa is as blue as a cornflower, and, outside the inlet to the harbour, the long breakers of the Indian Ocean draw a thin crooked white line, and give out a low thunder even in the calmest weather."

The expansive hotel grounds are cooled by swaying coconut-palms as well as an exotic mix of tropical trees and bright blossoms. All this centres upon an idyllic sky-blue swimming pool with a thatched 'swim-up' bar. For many, this feature alone creates a Heaven on earth! To be succinct, the Serena Beach Hotel provides an oasis of tranquility while delivering a unique mix of high-action water sports, indulgent sun worship, world-class cuisine and a vibrant nightlife. Nightly entertainment includes live bands, discos, acrobatic & gymnastic displays, traditional dancing and occasional fashion shows.

Off the resort, there are numerous ways to fill your days with shopping, cruises and historical tours. Modern-day Mombasa is centred on Mombasa Island, but extends to the mainland. The busiest port in East Africa, it is also the largest coastal metropolis in Kenya. Hot, humid and bustling, it is a

city with its own unique style. Here, you get a true sense of the "real" Africa. Streets are crowded with people and vehicles of all descriptions – including 3-seat "auto-rickshaws" from India. Traffic is absolutely insane – even by Jo'burg standards – so let a tour bus driver do the chauffeuring for you.

Dating back to before 1150 A.D., even then it was a major seaport involved in the spice and ivory trade. Old Town Mombasa, with its narrow, winding streets and busy markets, has a distinct Arabic flavour. Here, you will find emporiums, mosques, coffee houses, the fish market and the old dow harbour. Driving north or south on Mombasa Island takes you to the lush coastal forests and sandy beaches. Driving to the near-by Shimba Hills National Reserve will provide close encounters with sable antelope and elephants.

Walking the battlements of old Fort Jesus quickly takes you back to the 16th century. Views in every direction are amazing. Built in 1593, by order of King Philip II of Spain, then ruler of the joint Portuguese and Spanish Kingdoms, the fort was a major foothold in East Africa until 1728 when they were driven out by an Afro-Arab siege. Constructed in the shape of a man – when viewed from the air – it was designed by Italian architect, Jao Batisto Cairato. Today, this structure exists as one of the finest examples of 16th century Portuguese military architecture in the world.

The fort quickly became a vital possession for anyone intending to control Mombasa Island or the surrounding areas of trade. When the British colonised Kenya, it was used as a prison until 1958. At that time, the fort finally became an historical monument. Brooding and poignant, Fort Jesus is now a popular destination for foreign and local tourists where you can have dinner within the battlements. Besides being a tourist destination the

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fort now plays an important role in hosting numerous research programmes, a conservation lab, an education department and an Old Town conservation office.

The Mombasa National Marine Park and Reserve is a gigantic 200 km² in total. It is situated adjacent to numerous tourist areas including the Serena Beach Hotel. With massive coral reefs in its waters, it is an extremely popular beach for swimming, snorkeling and scuba diving. Both the park and reserve are the most highly utilised of marine protected areas in all of Kenya. Various agents offer boats for hire to get into the marine park and numerous vendors are there to ply their wares along the beach. Glass-bottom boats take visitors to the nearby coral reefs and diving gear is always available from the many water sports desks.

Cruising aboard an authentic Arab Dhow named the Nawalikhher is something not to be missed. It is the largest dhow on the Kenyan coast and departs from the Tamarind jetty, in Mombasa. Lunch or dinner cruises, both considered half-day trips, are available. Afternoon excursions include a leisurely sail up the river complete with acrobatic displays, henna tattoo painting and lots of relaxation along with the aforementioned lunch. This particular journey culminated with a visit to reptile exhibit where the brave can interact with Galapagos turtles, large pythons and baby crocodiles.

The evening cruise around the old port of Mombasa Town is the most renowned of all the coastal excursions. As soon as you step off the gangplank, you are met by a traditionally-dressed waiter who shows you to your table. Next, you are served a house cocktail made of vodka, lime, honey, sugar and crushed ice. Once the dhow departs from the jetty, the band begins playing and soon the swinging sounds have the majority of

guests dancing on the main deck. Following a cruise around Tudor Creek with excellent views of Mombasa's Old Town and Fort Jesus, your dhow moors in a sheltered bay at the head of the creek. This is when the chefs pull out the charcoal grills and prepare a gourmet four-course meal. Delectable aromas of grilled lobster and steak soon fill the air. As your meal draws to a close, waiters serve aromatic Arabica coffee from the Kahawa, a traditional Arab brass pot. After that, it's time to return to your hotel to conclude your romantic evening. There is a lot to be said for moonlight on the balcony under swaying palms!

Beyond these must-see-and-do activities, there are on-land and sea bird-watching tours on motorised canoes as well as exploring near-by uninhabited islands. There are the ancient Shimoni slave caves which served as holding pens for thousands of slaves captured deep within the hinterland. There, they awaited trans-shipment to the infamous Zanzibar slave market for onward consignment to Arabia. Today, Shimoni is an important tourist haven and a busy fishing village. It is, as well, a direct beneficiary of the old slave-trade business. According to the National Museums of Kenya, Shimoni developed into what it is today from the influx of interior residents running away from the slave hunters.

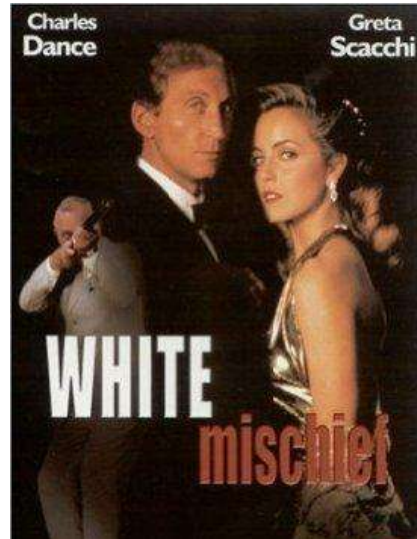
Without a doubt there is plenty to keep a visitor busy in Mombasa. But always keep in mind that Kenya is essentially a Muslim country so there is a need to apply a bit of common sense. That way, your trip to Mombasa or anywhere else in Kenya will be hassle-free and the stuff of fond memories.

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If you choose to lounge on the beach and sizzle in the sun, why not take along a copy of “White Mischief?” It will make stimulating and steamy reading as it steeps you in local legendary history. Written by Britisher, James Fox, the book reveals and revels in the details of the 1941 “Happy Valley murder case.” Here, you get a glimpse of how, almost 70 years ago, upper-class settlers lived and behaved in colonial Kenya. It’s a first-class, factual detective story and it is absolutely stunning in its candid vulgarity! Located just outside Nairobi, Happy Valley still exists in modern-day Kenya.

The book can be found on Amazon.com and Alibris.com. White Mischief is also a deliciously sexy 1987 film, starring Charles Dance and Greta Scacchi. It deftly dramatises the events leading up to the murder of the Josslyn Hay, 22nd Earl of Erroll, and the trial of Sir “Jock” Delves Broughton, the accused trigger man. The beginning of the film also features a very young Hugh Grant in a bit part.



Special thanks goes to:

The Serena Beach Hotel & Spa, Mombasa

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www.kenyaairways.com/kq4/information_and_services/default.aspx.