

# Beit el Mtoni

## the palace by the stream

*'Beit il Mtoni, distant about five miles from the city of Zanzibar, lies on the sea coast, surrounded by most beautiful scenery, and quite hidden in a grove of palm and mango trees, and other gigantic specimens of tropical vegetation. The house of my birth is called "Mtoni house," after the little river Mtoni, which rises only a few miles inland, runs through the whole palace into numerous fountains, and flows directly behind the palace walls into the splendid and animated inlet which severs the island from the African continent.'*

*From 'Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar' by Emily Reute*

In its heyday, the Mtoni Palace was a Shangri-la, an exotic paradise abounding in opulence and splendor. Through lush, tropical gardens, tamed peacocks, gazelles, guinea-fowl, flamingoes and ostriches freely roamed, feasting on a cornucopia of fruits and vegetation. The massive building, described by Sir Richard Burton as 'looking like the Gothic castle of a German prince', and its direct surrounds was home to a thousand odd people. To the front of the palace lay the sea, its magnificent beauty observed from a raised, ballroom sized, gazebo called 'The Bendjle'. To the rear, giant orange trees lined a long row of bath houses which were in use around the clock. At the corner of this complex stood an exquisitely designed Persian bath, like no other found in Zanzibar, for the exclusive use of the Sultan himself.

During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sultan Seyyid Said had moved the capital of his Omani empire from Muscat to Zanzibar, his love for the island so vast and the opportunities for prosperity so great. In 1828, he built Beit el Mtoni – the palace by the stream. It was the largest of the palaces built on Zanzibar during his reign and it is believed that the first clove trees were planted there by Saleh Bin Harmaly El Abry. Beit el Mtoni was the residence of the Sultan's first and only legitimate wife, many of his scores of secondary wives, their children and the hundreds of slaves that tended to them.

One of the most notable inhabitants of Zanzibar during this time was Sayyida Salme. Salme, one of the many daughters of Sultan Said, became well known as the Arabian princess who fell in love with a German merchant, Rudolph Heinrich Ruete. The couple eloped to Hamburg and Salme converted to Christianity, changing her name to Emily Reute. Like so many of the royal brood, Salme was born at Beit el Mtoni and lived there until she was seven years old. Her strong emotional ties to Beit el Mtoni feature prominently in her autobiography, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from*

*Zanzibar* where she describes the bustling Mtoni Palace of her youth, and the decay she encountered many years later, when she returned to Zanzibar. After the death of Sultan Said, the palace was abandoned around the 1880s and fell into ruin.

Although severely deteriorated, Mtoni Palace still offers visitors a glimpse into the world of the Arabian royalty that once lived there. Entering the palace from the coast line, one steps into the former reception hall. Most guests would not have gone any further when visiting Beit el Mtoni, as the women in the palace were not to be seen by stranger's eyes. Now however, visitors can step over the threshold and walk in the footsteps of the Omani household. A visit continues into the inner courtyard, the palace garden and the well preserved bathing complex. The main row of baths were used by the courtiers, whereas the separate dome aisle or Persian bath was uniquely reserved for the use of the Sultan and his first spouse.

In the early '90's, the Zanzibar Directorate of Archives, Museums and Antiquities (DAMA) in collaboration with the Mtoni Marine Centre, initiated a project aimed at conserving the Mtoni Palace ruins and the surrounding gardens. Since then, the Mtoni Palace Conservation Project (MPCP) has made slow but substantial progress in clearing the gardens, replanting original species and laying out a natural historical trail through the grounds. Regular maintenance and cleaning of the grounds is undertaken by four permanent gardeners employed by the project. A team of tradesmen are also employed to undertake repairs of areas in danger of imminent collapse.

Many sections of the ruins in severe decay have been restored to some extent. Restoration techniques are used that remain true to the original construction and materials used in order to retain authenticity. Rock stone is used for plastering of the palace, after it has gone through a process of pounding from its original form into a very fine powder called 'soft stone'. It is then mixed with limestone and sand and water. Four authentic limestone ponds have been constructed on site for the ongoing restoration of the buildings and currently a study of temporary roofing is taking place to protect the ruins against further decay.

Archaeological research is another key factor in the proper conservation of the ruins at Mtoni. Survey drawings were commissioned and carried out by a team from the ETH Zurich (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) in 2003 and archives are being screened on historical evidence of the palace. In November 2007, through support from the Royal Netherlands Embassy, three students from the Technical University of Delft visited the site to study the Palace and the Persian Baths. In collaboration with archaeologist Dr Abdulrahman, this small team have completed very important excavations of the cistern (reservoir) and part of the impressive aqueduct in front of the palace on the beach side.

Further research will be carried out in cooperation with local training institutes in the area of archives and archaeology, from which students will be involved.

But there is still much to be done. A number of activities are currently underway to raise awareness and much needed funds for the ongoing protection of this important

national monument. A guide book to the ruins is under development, disclosing the history and context of the archival material that has been unearthed to date. The aim of the publication is to attract parties who may be potentially willing to carry out scientific research and undertake further conservation measures, which are of immediate need.

Tours through the ruins combined with entertainment events are planned for 2008. Kikundi cha Taarab Kizazi Kipya (KIKI) presents a new sound of orchestral taarab music, combining modern and acoustic instruments and will feature regularly at the ruins. The Princess Salme Tour, paying homage to this pioneering Zanzibari and run through the Mtoni Marine Hotel, takes visitors through the landmark sites of her life as royalty in Zanzibar. Proceeds from all these ongoing activities contribute to the restoration and maintenance of Beit el Mtoni.

Beit el Mtoni represents a pivotal period in Zanzibar's history. A time that would go on to shape the very fabric of Zanzibari society and how future generations would come to perceive themselves. With more resources and support, it should be possible to partly restore the Mtoni Palace and its gardens to their former splendor and to end further dilapidation to the parts of the palace that are beyond reconstruction; not only providing visitors with a historical snapshot but also the people of Zanzibar with an enduring memento of their past.