

SOMETHING SPICEY SOMETHING SWEET

By Anne Birch

Pay a visit to Mrembo Spa in Stone Town and get more than a massage; come away with a real sense of Swahili culture

There is a place, tucked away in one of the winding streets of Stone Town, where it's possible to step back in time and embrace much of Swahili culture. Today spas are popping up all over the world and Tanzania and Zanzibar are no exception. However, Mrembo (meaning beautiful, sophisticated woman) Spa makes for a refreshing change. If your only idea of a spa is a sterile, white environment full of fluffy towels and "airy fairy" music then this place is probably not for you. But, if you like to delve deeper into the place you're visiting and discover the finer aspects of a society; then journey into the heart of Stone Town and visit Mrembo.

Owner Stefanie Schoetz has done a wonderful job of creating a "sense of place". Her lasting love affair with Zanzibar and the culture of the archipelago culminates in this unique establishment. You'll find explanations and legends about various treatments, ingredients, and traditions painted on the walls, both interior and exterior. Step inside and feel like your visiting a friend or relative in a traditional Swahili dwelling. You'll be welcomed with a sweet, warm glass of lemongrass and ginger tea and shown to a comfortable waiting area while you decide which treatment to indulge in.

You can choose from a menu offering aromatherapy massage, "Singo" or clove body scrub and massage, hot sand treatment, castor wrap and massage, manicure, pedicure and facials. Also offered is henna painting using a concoction made of real henna leaves, black tea and lemon juice, not hair dye as is now so often passed off as henna. All massage and scrubs last for an hour and utilise fresh natural ingredients sourced locally, many from Stephanie's own garden. The scent of rose, ylang ylang, basil and jasmine pervade the environment. If you choose the Singo scrub your beauty therapist will show you the dried flowers and herbs before crushing them in a traditional mortar and mixing with sandalwood dust and rosewater to create a fragrant and stimulating paste. Your skin has never felt so soft.

Cd's of taarab music, kanga cloth and clothes made from it, scented massage and perfume oils, natural soaps and many other items made on the island all are on offer. You might decide to purchase a "vidonge" (clove ball) or natural massage oil so that you can recreate the Mrembo experience at home. In fact, everything in the shop is for sale including the antique furnishings! Part of Mrembo's mission is to empower local women and this is achieved not only by selling these locally produced items but also in the training of the massage therapists, one of whom is blind.

The happy chatter of children, friends and neighbours drifts through the windows into the treatment room, blending with the traditional sounds of taarab music, heightening the awareness of the surroundings. Prepare to relax and enjoy. Traditional methods take time. "Real" henna must be applied at least twice to give the desired effect and grinding fresh flower petals by hand is time consuming but worth the effort. Sit back, sip your tea, loose yourself in the amazing rhythm of taarab, wrap yourself in a kanga and prepare to be pampered, as you've never been before.

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INFO BOX

Mrembo Spa has two locations on the island of Ujunga

In Stone Town, just past the Catholic Church (Minara Miwili)

At Mtoni Marine, 10 km north of Stone Town

For appointments:

T: +255 777 430 117

E: mrembozanzibar@yahoo.co.uk

For more information:

www.mtoni.com/mrembo