

Mombasa & the Kenyan Coast – Where the Sun is Ever Faithful

This report features Mombasa and the Kenyan coast. Find out why hundreds of thousands of visitors, most of whom are returning pilgrims, flock to the Kenyan coast every year. Here unlike other beach destinations, you are served with much more than just sun and sand..



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1. Mombasa & the Kenyan Coast – Where the Sun is Ever Faithful

Kenya's 480 km coast is one of the principal attractions for visitors to the country. Every year, hundreds of thousands of sun lovers find their way here. Many are returning pilgrims who truly know that the sun here is ever faithful. Unlike other beach destinations, the visitor is served with much more than just sun and sand but is delighted to discover ancient coastal forests and historical sites and a people with a fascinating history and culture. The casual visitor impressed by the tranquil beaches and gentle people will not suspect the colourful and eventful history of these realms.

For the tourist, the Kenya coast can be seen as five regions. These are: the town and island of Mombasa; the south coast –stretching from Mombasa to the Tanzanian border 135 km away: the north coast- covering the beaches from Mombasa upto Kilifi, 60 km away: Malindi and Watamu about 130 km to the northeast of Mombasa and Lamu island and archipelago, 225 km further up from Malindi. Each of these regions has similarities in terms of history, culture, natural attractions and beach experience. But as sports fans will understand, it is the differences matter to the dedicated fans of each region.

The gateway to the Kenyan coast is Mombasa. You get to here by flying into its international airport or by taking the 520 km road journey from Nairobi, the common entry port for most visitors. If you demand the freedom of your own car, consider taking a rental car either in Nairobi or in Mombasa to help you get around.

Mombasa, the principal city at Kenya's coast is one of the oldest human settlements on the eastern seaboard of the African continent. Though it has without doubt been in existence for at least 700 years, it is mentioned in writings of Arab, Roman and Egyptian travelers dated as far back as 2,500 years ago. The Arabs came to trade and settle, starting from about the 8th century AD. With the push of the northeast monsoon, their dhows brought ironware, glassware, textiles, and took home rhino horn, ivory and slaves. Substantial settlements gradually developed and many traders settled and intermarried with local Africans. The Arabs also brought along the message of the Prophet and the Kenyan coast is even today predominantly Muslim.

Relative tranquility prevailed at the coastal towns until the Portuguese showed up at the end of the 15th century. The Portuguese were a substantial seafaring power of the day and were anxious to break the stranglehold of the Ottoman Empire on Indian Ocean trade. Vasco Da Gama opened the way for his

compatriots when he made his way round the southern tip of Africa and up to eastern Africa in 1498. The Portuguese were not warmly received in Mombasa, but not so at Malindi. The local sultan offered his ready friendship and proved very useful to Da Gama by providing a pilot who knew how to get to India, his ultimate destination.

Between the 15th and 19th centuries, Mombasa saw plenty of war. For this reason, the city was nicknamed Mvita, which in Swahili translates as Isle of War. Fort Jesus, the permanent garrison whose construction was started by the Portuguese in 1593, changed masters 9 times before 1875. By the terror of war, the Portuguese sought to control the east African coast. As colonial overlords, the Portuguese were deficient in that they were mostly interested in plunder and trade and did not establish robust systems of administration. Another related difficulty they faced was that they were supplied from Goa in India. The student of military theory will recognise this as a classical case of "long supply lines".

The Portuguese were finally driven out by the emerging power of Omani Arabs in 1729. The ascendancy of the Omani Arabs lasted until Britain, a leading super power at the time, appeared at the beginning of the 19th century. The British came in under the guise of a humanitarian mission- the suppression of the slave trade. The Omani Arabs were notorious slave traders. Christian missionaries put pressure on the British government to persuade the Omani Arabs to pursue other trade other than trafficking in humans. This is somewhat like the problem the Americans face today in South America with respect to the cocaine trade.

The British were actually successful in this, by using time honoured carrot and stick tactics. Under the resulting deal, the Omani Arabs whose headquarters was in Zanzibar were recognized as overlords over a 16 km strip along the Kenyan coast. The sultan was to be paid an annuity as compensation for resulting loss of revenue. This territory acquired the status of a British Protectorate until 1963 when the Sultan of Zanzibar ceded it to the newly independent Kenyan nation.

Mombasa is today a cosmopolitan metropolis reflecting the influence of Africans, Persians, Arabs, Turks, Indians, Portuguese and the British. The Old Town is a grid of narrow winding streets lined with houses built to coastal Swahili and Indian styles. Some of the houses have intricately carved doors similar to what you find in Zanzibar and Lamu. In the Old Town you will find Fort Jesus, the permanent garrison built by the hapless Portuguese. Fort Jesus, in addition to being an attraction itself, houses a museum exhibiting various artifacts reflecting the various cultures that have influenced the Kenyan coast. You will also see articles recovered from the ill-fated Portuguese warship Santo Antonio De Tanna, which sank in the siege of 1697 that lasted 1000 days.

In Mombasa you can take an all day dhow trip and relive the experience of the traders who sailed along the East African cost and as far as India and the Persian Gulf aboard these vessels for centuries. For the past few years, every November the Mombasa Carnival has been staged in the town. The Carnival is a lively street parade where you see incredibly adorned musicians and other artists from the Kenyan coast and other parts of the country. Street comedians, Swahili Taarab singers, Maasai warriors, brass bands and individual artists in outrageous costumes brave the November heat to march in the parade.

Visitors to the south coast usually head to Shelley, Tiwi, Diani, Msambweni and Shimoni. These are the beaches to the south of Mombasa, where hotel and resort development has taken place. To get to the south coast beaches you need to take the ferry at Likoni, the southern tip of Mombasa Island. If this does not suit you, take a flight to Diani airstrip. Diani beach, 40 km from Mombasa is the most developed beach at the south coast. This is the quintessential tropical paradise and here you will find a wide range of hotels, including an 18-hole golf resort. Though some of the other beaches are excellent, the have limited range of accommodation and attract fewer people.

Shimoni, 100 km from Mombasa is a centre for serious deep-sea fishing. It is also from Shimoni that you can visit the Kisite-Mpunguti Marine National Park. Here you will see the treasures of Kenya's underwater world. At the marine park, the snorkeling experience is outstanding and on a lucky day will swim with the dolphins. At Shimoni, there are a series of deep coastal caves stretching from the sea to deep inland. Arab slavers reportedly used these caves in the dark days of the slave trade. The slaves who perished here are remembered in Roger Whittaker's song "Shimoni".

At the south coast you have plenty of chances to indulge in some thrilling marine activity such as water skiing, wind surfing, scuba diving, goggling and deep-sea fishing. The Shimba Hills National Reserve, directly inland from Diani is a surprise and you have the opportunity to see some of the wildlife that Kenya is famed for. Though the wildlife is not as prolific as in the upcountry game parks, the beautiful rainforest and the spectacular Sheldrick Falls make it worth a visit. You can also spend the night here at Kenya's only tree lodge at the coast, which has some water holes where elephants and other animals come for a drink.

The main attraction of the north coast is its beaches. Heading north from Mombasa these are: Nyali, Bamburi, Shanzu, Vipingo and Kikambala. Here you will find hotel and resort complexes to suit the taste of most beach holiday enthusiasts. From your north coast base, you may want to visit Mamba Village, reputed to be one of the worlds' largest crocodile farms. Those interested in eco conservation projects must not miss Haller Park. The park is named after the

Swiss agronomist who by sheer grit and vision transformed a huge abandoned cement quarry into a spectacular 7 sq km nature and animal sanctuary.

At Mtwapa, just beyond Shanzu beach, Kenya Marineland houses some very diverse marine life, which you view from a glass-sided underground tunnel. From the same point, you can take a dhow sailing trip that includes onboard entertainment - acrobatics, fire eating and local dancers. Just off the coast, spectacular coral reefs teem with numerous fish, sea turtles and dolphins. You have opportunity for world-class diving here, including some serious wreck diving. Diving at the Kenyan coast is good year round, expect in the months of July and August when silting and high seas are a problem.

Malindi has a history going back at least 800 years. This is the only town along the east African coast where the Portuguese found friendship without the persuasion of arms. Vasco Da Gama erected a pillar to serve as a navigation aid that still stands today. Today, the town is a particular favourite with Italian visitors. Most of the hotel and resort development are to the south of the town along the Silversands beachfront and nearer town around Malindi Bay. At Malindi Marine National Park, you can see some fascinating coral gardens by diving, snorkeling or from a glass bottomed boat.

Malindi is a respected centre for big game fishing and several world records have been set here. The writer Hemingway was here in the 1930's to enjoy one of his favourite macho sports. Watamu, 15 km further south, is a small beach development around the beautiful inlets of Turtle Bay and Blue Lagoon. Watamu too has its own Marine Park. At the edge of the park, you find a collection of caves housing a school of giant rock cod, some stretching the whole of 2 metres. Consider making an excursion to Gedi Ruins, one of Kenya archeological treasures. Gedi is estimated to have been founded in the 13th century but was mysteriously abandoned in the 17th century. Experts guess that marauding Galla tribesmen from up north did in the settlement.

Lamu has in recent years found favour with the international glitterati. The town has an ambience of mediaeval romance that attracts those who are offended by the burdens of our modern existence. Life in the island goes on almost like it did in the 14th century when the settlement was founded. Lamu has narrow streets and the town has only a single car for use by the top government official. Everybody else walks, takes a dhow or uses donkey taxis. If you come in by air you land at nearby Manda Island, from where you take a dhow or ferry. In this centre of Islamic culture, the men wear full-length whites and the women are shorn head to toe in black.

Shela is the main beach on the island and is just 15 minutes away by motorboat. You will find good rated accommodation at Lamu. There are also some very

pricey hideaways in the neighboring islands of the archipelago favoured by the jet set. In the centre of the town, you find a fort built by invading Omani Arabs in the early 19th century that now serves as a cultural centre. Lamu museum is located at the seafront, in a house once occupied by Jack Haggard, Queen Victoria's consul in this then important outpost. The museum is a repository of Swahili culture and on display are artifacts, dhows, jewelry and crafts.

You will find rated accommodation at the Kenya coast. Once you are the Kenyan coast, you can take a break to view some of the wildlife that the country is famed for. From Mombasa, the nearest park reachable by road is Tsavo East, 4 hours away. Another good option is to fly to the Maasai Mara, Kenya's top wildlife sanctuary and home to the big five- elephant, lion, leopard, rhino and buffalo. We have a wide range of safari options at our [Kenya Tours & Safari](#) page, which you should visit to view info and make a reservation.

The Kenyan coast has a tropical climate and it is a hot and humid place. Temperatures year round vary between 22° C and 33° C. July and August are the coolest months. Light clothing is recommended, as even the evenings are usually warm. Short sleeve shirts, shorts and trousers for men and short sleeve blouses, slacks and skirts are sufficient. However, in this predominantly Muslin area, women need to dress modestly so as not to offend local sensibilities. But swimwear is perfectly acceptable at beaches and hotel premises.

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2. Destination Facts: Kenya

Full Country Name: Republic of Kenya

Area: 583,000 sq km

Population: 30 million (2001)

Capital City: Nairobi

Other Major Towns: Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, Eldoret

Peoples: Kikuyu (21%), Luhya (14%), Luo (13%), Kamba (11%), Kalenjin (11%), Gusii (6%), Meru (5%) plus Asian, Arab and European minorities

Language: English, Swahili & indigenous languages

Religion: Christian (54%), Muslim (6%) and traditional religions

Government: Republic

Time: GMT + 3 hours

Currency: Kenya Shilling (Ksh)

Electricity: 220/240 V, 50 Hz

Weights and Measures: Metric

Economy: Textiles, tea, horticultural produce, agricultural processing, oil refining, cement, tourism

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3. Travel Basics: Kenya

Health

Visitors over 1 year of age entering Kenya from yellow fever infected areas require yellow fever international certificate of vaccination. Exemptions are made for visitors arriving from non-endemic areas such as Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Cholera is a health risk in the country and precautions are essential. Malaria is a serious risk in most of the country. The risk level is however lower in the highlands above 2500m, of the Central, Rift Valley, Eastern and Western Provinces. Visitors are strongly advised to take anti-malaria medication commencing two weeks before travel.

It is recommended, especially for longer staying visitors, to take vaccinations against hepatitis A, polio and typhoid. HIV-AIDS is prevalent in the country and prudent measures are called for. Some fresh water lakes and rivers carry the risk of Bilharzia and you are advised not to swim or paddle in such areas. There are good hospitals in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu. Chemists can be found in all the major towns.

Visas

Passports valid for 3 months from date of entry are required of all visitors. All visitors require a visa except for citizens of some commonwealth countries. There are also exceptions with varying conditions for citizens of Ethiopia, Turkey, Malaysia, and Uruguay and a few other countries. Airport visas are available although this may result in delays upon arrival. It is advisable to obtain visa's in advance from Kenyan Embassies and High Commissions as some airlines may require it before allowing you to board. Visa requirements vary from time to time and you are advised to check on prevailing status well ahead of travel.

Peoples & Culture

Kenya is made up of more than 70 or so tribal groups. There are also small but influential minorities of Asian, Arab and European origin. More than 90% of the African population falls within the broad categories of Bantu and Nilotic speakers. The main Bantu speakers are Kikuyu, Luhya, Kamba, Gusii, Mijikenda, Embu and Meru. Nilotoc speakers are Maasai, Samburu, Pokot, Turkana, Luo and Kalenjin. At the coast, the interaction of Arabs, Persians and Bantu Africans has resulted in the Swahili people. The Swahili language is now widely spoken in Kenya and throughout Eastern and Central Africa. It is quite useful to have a working knowledge of Swahili if you intend to travel outside the main urban and tourist routes. English is widely understood in urban centers.

The de facto national dish is Nyama Choma, barbecued goat meat. But the guy in the street survives on that stodgy filler called Ugali, prepared using maize

meal accompanied with some greens. At the coast however the traditional food of the Swahili is a good experience. This is usually based on seafood and rice dishes. Beer lovers will have a good time in Kenya. There are several international standard lagers produced locally. The most popular is named after the elephant, thus Tusker. While on safari, remember to celebrate the African elephant by taking a little Tusker.

In the last few years there has been some kind of revival in local music. This revival is led by younger urban artists who sing in Swahili and Sheng, a kind of Creole mix of Swahili and English. The music is a local blend of hip-hop and rap.

Communications

Telephone, fax, telegram, post and Internet services are available in urban centers and locations popular with tourists. International direct dialing to many countries is available in most urban centres. In rural areas international calling is through the operator. The country code for Kenya is 254.

Mobile phones are based on GSM 900 network. Coverage extends to the principal urban centres, major highways and parts of popular game reserves such as the Mara. You are however advised to check beforehand whether your GSM phone is usable if you are traveling outside the main urban centres. You can obtain a GSM card that will allow you to make international calls to any country. Currently the country is served by two network operators: KenCell (www.kencell.co.ke) and Safaricom (www.safaricom.co.ke). There are Internet cafes in urban centres and hotels around the country.

Accommodation

You will find good quality accommodation within the main routes popular with tourists and business travelers. This includes Nairobi, Mombasa, Lamu, Malindi, Lake Naivasha, Kisumu and the popular game reserves and national parks such as Maasai Mara, Amboseli, Lake Nakuru, Tsavo, Aberdares, Samburu and the Mount Kenya area. In the parks, accommodation varies from 5 star lodges and tented camps at the upper end, to basic camping at the lower end. Outside the main urban centres and tourist routes, it is difficult to get rated accommodation. See our [Kenya Hotels, Lodges & Resorts](#) page to view info and book accommodation for your stay in Kenya.

Money

The local currency is the Kenya Shilling (Ksh). There are no restrictions on the import and export of local or foreign currency. But for amounts exceeding US dollars 5,000 or equivalent you will need to declare the source and purpose of the funds. Major currencies such as US dollars and now the Euro and travelers cheques can be converted at major hotels, banks and forex bureaus in the main towns and tourist areas. You will get best exchange rates for cash or travelers

cheques if you are dealing in US dollars or Pound Sterling. For this your best deal will be at forex bureaus. Avoid changing money in the streets however favourable the exchange rate may appear.

Visa and Mastercard have wide acceptance. But American Express, Diners and other cards have more limited acceptance. Your Visa card can access your bank or credit card account through any Standard Chartered Bank dispenser, 24 hours a day.

Climate

Kenya has such diverse geography, that, temperatures, rainfall and humidity vary widely. The country can be divided into four main regions: the arid north, the savanna lands in the south, the central highlands and the lowlands along the coast and the Lake Victoria region. The coastal areas are hot and humid though tempered by some much welcome sea breezes. Average temperatures vary little year round and range from 22°C minimum to 33°C maximum.

The central highlands and rift valley enjoy a pleasant temperate climate. Average temperatures vary from a minimum of 10 to 14°C to a maximum of 22 to 26°C. The Lake Victoria lowlands are hot and dry and temperatures can reach 34°C. Rainfall is also heavy. The semi arid north experiences the most extreme variations in temperatures. This ranges from a maximum of 40°C in the day to 20°C at night. There are two rainy seasons: March to May ("long rains") and October to December ("short rains").

International Travel

Kenya is a regional travel hub and has connections by a large number of airlines from all over the world particularly those from Europe, Asia and other parts of Africa. The country has three international airports at Nairobi, Mombasa and Eldoret. The national airline is Kenya Airways, a major player in African air travel. British Airways and Kenya Airways fly to Nairobi direct from London. A few European airlines also have direct flights from their hubs in Europe. Gulf Air and Emirates fly to Nairobi using mid eastern connections.

In addition to flying, you can travel by bus between Kenya and Tanzania. The main connections are from Nairobi and Mombasa to Dar es Salaam and from Nairobi to Moshi and Arusha. Occasional ferries leave Mombasa for Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam. Uganda can be reached from Kenya by air, rail and bus. There is a border crossing at Moyale on the Kenya-Ethiopia border and which trucks mainly use. Overland travel to Sudan and Somalia is exceedingly difficult at present.

Local Travel

There are scheduled flights to a number of local destinations from Nairobi to Mombasa, Nanyuki, Kisumu, Malindi, Lamu, Lokichogio and the national parks and game reserves of Maasai Mara, Amboseli and Samburu. See our web page for info and booking of [local flights in Kenya](#). You can also travel to a few urban centers in the country by train though this has not been reliable in recent years. Regular bus service links the main urban centers.

Around urban areas and shorter links between towns, the popular way to get around is by means of matatu (shared taxi). Rental cars are reliably available from Mombasa, Kisumu and Nairobi. Review our [rental cars in Kenya](#) web page and do your booking here. Remember that driving is on the left. Generally, between urban centers the road links are good. The quality deteriorates when you get off the main routes and into more remote locations.

Travel Insurance

Health and the usual travel insurance are recommended. Ensure your travel insurance includes emergency evacuation.

What to Wear

Light clothing is generally recommended in Kenya. The highlands are however temperate and you need a sweater and jacket year round. This is necessary for the evenings and early mornings. If you plan to climb Mount Kenya be ready with special clothing not only for the climb, but to protect yourself from sub zero temperatures.

On safari, bright coloured clothing may get you in trouble with the wild animals. Colours of the earth are generally favoured, thus brown, beige and khaki clothing. Short sleeve shirts, shorts and trousers for men are sufficient. For ladies, short sleeve blouses and skirts are ideal in the national parks and touristy places. This is except at the predominantly Muslim coastal areas, where more conservative dressing is called for. But even at the coast, swimwear is perfectly acceptable at beaches and hotel premises. It is advisable to travel light and some safari and air charters have a baggage limit of 10-15 kilograms.

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4. About Africa Point

Africapoint.com is an Africa specialist travel agent, offering travel services through the company website -Africapoint.com and also offline. This pioneering Africa travel website has been assisting travelers make bookings online since early 1999.

The company was started in 1997 has its central reservations office strategically located in Nairobi, Kenya.

The company is supported by a network of partner offices in the leading destinations in Africa. This includes Cape Town (South Africa), Arusha, Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Cairo (Egypt), Kampala (Uganda), Victoria (Seychelles), Harare (Zimbabwe). We are members of the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA).

What services do we offer?

We provide reservation services for hotels, airline tickets, rental cars, tours and safaris to the top destinations in Africa. Among the countries we are currently covering are Kenya, South Africa, Egypt, Tanzania, Seychelles, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Mauritius.

We have special discounts for most of the services we offer and some of our prices are upto 50% off standard rates. Please visit our website to view the links of all the services we offer.

How do we make your Africa travel planning easier?

Ours is one of very few websites offering one-stop travel booking and information service to a number of different African countries. In addition:

- We know our destinations and our products **very well**. We are in a position to give you good advice on the best hotel, rental car, tour or safari to suit your particular requirements.
- We are committed to working to the highest industry standards. We have many our past clients who are happy to share their experiences with you. Please visit the [Client Profile & Testimonials](#) page and see what some of our clients have to say.
- Our patience is the stuff of legend! We will patiently seek to answer all your queries until you are ready to pick what is most suitable for your

needs. For high value items such as safaris we have communicated with our clients for 6 months and even longer before they are ready to buy.

Others have come back to and said: "Do you remember that tour we discussed 2 years ago? I am now ready to travel." And of course we remember. We always remember!

- Together with our partners, we are based in the African destination whose travel services we are selling. For this reason we are usually able to get you very good prices. For some products our prices are **40-50%** below standard rates.
- As members of **ASTA (American Society of Travel Agents)** we are committed to upholding **ASTA's** motto of " Integrity in Travel" and operate to those same standards you would expect from an ASTA member anywhere in the world.

One of our North American clients for whose 36 person missionary group we provided an air charter, hotel booking, safari and road transport to 2 African countries had this to say.

"My experience with Africapoint.com was good as any service that I've received any where in the USA. Not only were they helpful before and during, but they went out of their way to also be helpful afterwards.

I'm using them again for an upcoming trip in November and will look forward to using them for years to come."

In addition our membership of ASTA assures you of a **neutral and trusted** arbitrator in the event that a disagreement occurs between us.

What is the experience of other travelers with us?

We continue to serve the many needs of travelers who seek our services. From straight forward single night hotel bookings to short and long term **car rental, tours and safaris** for individuals and groups, international conferences.

5. Forward This Report

If you've found this report to be informative and useful please forward it to your family and friends. We're sure they will like it as much as you did!