

# Travel+Life

Virtuoso's guide to inspired pursuits

## **New London on a Plate**

Fusion culture and cuisine take on grand new proportions as the capital embraces a globalized gastronomy

## **Not Your Ordinary Africa**

Swahili rolls off the tongue in Kenya, Tanzania, and the dreamy Zanzibar Archipelago, the Indian Ocean's best-kept secret



Birding fun, weird food, shipboard romance, and coming attractions for the holidays

# Inward Bound

*Where to raise your consciousness in far-flung locales or one of a dozen health-minded retreats closer to home*



## “Leo ni...” asks Mr. Farouk.

“Leo ni jumapili,” we recite. Today is Monday.

Day, date, year, place. Slowly, laboriously, we assemble words and numbers to place ourselves in the space-time continuum: We are on the continent of Africa in the current millennium. When we get it right, Mr. Farouk beams, the laugh lines around his eyes creasing upwards to his fez.

## Of Witch Doctors, Rambutans, and What

KAREN BERGER finds that, on the island of Zanzibar, learning about

My husband Dan and I are enrolled in a one-month course at Zanzibar’s Institute for Kiswahili and Foreign Languages. To someone who has not entered a classroom in 18 years, the setting is distantly familiar: cramped desks, assignments tacked to the wall, a chalkboard containing a carefully written plan for the day. But it is also distinctly different. Overhead, a languorous fan stirs the sultry, premonsoonal air. Outside, students roam the courtyard, the women shrouded head-to-toe in black robes, untouchable as shadows.

Dan, a historian, is learning Swahili because he plans to visit remote archaeological sites where people are unlikely to speak English. I’m tagging along because I like the idea of saying I speak Swahili.

We’ve been told it’s an easy language.

I beg to differ.

Exhibit A: Saying hello. The word you’ve probably heard – *jambo* – is a simplification used by visitors. A real Swahili greeting involves double negatives: “Is nothing the matter?” “No, nothing is the matter.” Except if you’re talking to your elders; then you say something that roughly translates as “I hold your feet, old person.” (You’re not actually expected to make good on the offer, but they always reply, “I am delighted.”)

A language that requires all that just to say hello is not, by my definition, easy.

Ali, the manager at our guest house, is trying to help. At least, that’s what I think he’s doing. Dan thinks he’s trying to confuse us.

“What news of the day?” Ali demands whenever we pass his desk. “What news of the morning? Your health? Your journey? What news of the classroom? Of walking around?” It’s like a game of tennis. Ali serves up words, we hit them back, gaining confidence until his coup de grâce – inevitably, something like, “What news of waking up?” – sends us stuttering into silence.

TWO WEEKS INTO the course, the monsoon is in full force, the streets awash in torrents of water. In class, we have moved from basic tourist survival (“There are insects in my room”) to Swahili culture. To introduce the subject of jobs, Mr. Farouk acts out the words for farmer, fisherman, translator, and witch doctor in what looks like a Swahili version of charades. (He does not, I notice, act out words for accountant, consultant, or corporate executive.) But it is in the chapter called “Women’s Work” that Mr. Farouk’s theatrical talents really shine: In addition to words for cooking, cleaning, and children – the common lexicon of women everywhere – we learn words for carrying firewood, collecting seaweed, making rope, and tending vegetables.

**“They mix the big papayas and the small ones in a pile,” Mr. Farouk explains. “You must point to the small ones. Shake your head; offer a lower price. Otherwise they will think you are just a stupid tourist.”**

We also learn about families. Mr. Farouk has four children. He tells us that his parents arranged his marriage. He thinks it has worked out well. Today, young people have begun choosing their own mates – like in America, he says. The idea intrigues him, like everything American.

“How many people live in an American house?” he wants to know. We struggle to explain (in Swahili, of course) that “one family” usually means parents and children, not mothers-in-law, stray siblings, and an unattached cousin or two. “And everybody has a car?” he

asks. He has heard of machines that wash clothes and dishes; he is not sure he can imagine them. He is surprised that we have donkeys in America, and asks what kind of work they do. He asks what kinds of wild animals we have; when I describe mountain goats, he laughs at the idea of a goat on a mountain.

COMPARING OUR LIVES intrigues us; comparing our foods delights us. Mr. Farouk isn't going to let us squeak by with "fish" and "fruit," so I fill my notebook with Swahili words for kingfish, tuna, bluefish, shark; nine types of bananas; mango, papaya, coconut, sugarcane, and rambutan (which, to be honest, wasn't even in my English vocabulary). And spices, too: Zanzibar was once

## News of Waking Up language means learning about life.

the world's largest supplier of cloves and a multicultural trading center, which is why so many Swahili words come from other languages. I add peppers, cinnamon, cardamom, and curry to my list.

As a sort of final exam, we go to the local market. At each stall, fruits and vegetables are arranged in bright pyramids of color. It is impossible not to admire them.

"No, no," Mr. Farouk scolds. "Not 'very good.' Never say 'nzuri sana.'" He scrunches his face into an elaborate frown and regards a pile of papayas as if he expects them to rot right on the spot. The merchants watch the performance, impassive.

"They mix the big ones and the small ones in a pile," Mr. Farouk explains. "You must point to the small ones. Shake your head; offer a lower price. Otherwise they will think you are just a stupid tourist."

I *am* just a stupid tourist, I think, but I do as I'm told and scowl at the papayas. The merchant tries not to laugh as I mangle the numbers and achieve a discount of approximately two cents. Mr. Farouk beams and declares me ready to go out into the world.

THE WORLD, IT TURNS OUT, is a forgiving place when you open your mouth and try to make another language come out. With the exception of rambutans and witch doctors, I found a use for most everything I'd learned. I didn't argue much over the price of papayas, but I was at the top of my game when it came to taxis. And I aced the greetings.

Now, months later, I've forgotten many of the words, but those I retain form an outline of the trip: a collection of verbal souvenirs. I can say kingfish and mango, hot pepper, cold beer, too expensive, and (most essentially) thank you very much. I had reason to say that a lot.

Also: I hold your feet, that mango is too small, and (Ali would be glad to know) what news of waking up. ■

### Where to Learn

Swahili is a linguistic lovechild, born of the flirtation between Arabic spoken by traders along East Africa's coast and Bantu spoken by the native people. Indeed, Swahili writings from the early eighteenth century are transcribed in Arabic script (although Roman letters have since replaced this). Today, Swahili (or Kiswahili, as it's known in East Africa) is on the lips of people in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Congo. Should you wish to infuse an East African tour with a dose of Swahili study, bear in mind that "classroom" can be a loose term. Blue skies over game reserves occasionally replace the blackboard, the students are curious travelers, and graduates take home a head full of the vernacular.

#### TANZANIA

##### Institute of Kiswahili and Foreign Languages

This Zanzibar-based school instructs visitors in the nuances of Swahili. Programs range from in-depth, two-month programs to one-week, hello-and-where-is-the-restroom crash courses; 255-24-2230724 or [takluki@zanlink.com](mailto:takluki@zanlink.com).

##### University of Dar es Salaam

The university's Department of Kiswahili offers four- and eight-week intensive courses that include field study in Zanzibar, Mikumi Game Park, and Bagamoyo; 255-22-2410757 or [swahili@ucc.ac.tz](mailto:swahili@ucc.ac.tz), or see [www.udsm.ac.tz/kiswahilicourses.html](http://www.udsm.ac.tz/kiswahilicourses.html).

#### KENYA

##### The Language Center Ltd

This Nairobi school offers private or group lessons with flexible dates and times. For a fee, it will send tutors to nearby sites or design courses for travelers with specific interests in, say, the history of area rhino hunting; 254-25-69531/2 or see [www.africaonline.co.ke/tlc](http://www.africaonline.co.ke/tlc).

— MARIKA MCELROY

### Swahili for Beginners

A few choice words to file away for an East African sojourn:

Asante ( <i>sana</i> )	Tembo Elephant
Thank you (very much)	Chakula Food
Tafadhali Please	Nina njaa ( <i>sana</i> )
Karibu Welcome	I am (very) hungry
Kwaheri Goodbye	Maji Water
Simba Lion	Nina kiu ( <i>sana</i> )
Kifaru Rhinoceros	I am (very) thirsty
Twiga Giraffe	Siwezi kusema Kiswahili
	I can't speak Swahili

► When greeting an elder, say, "*Shikamoo*" ("I hold your feet"). They'll likely answer, "*Marahabaa*" ("I acknowledge your respect"). And for impressing acquaintances, try this bit of advice: "*Siku utakayokwenda uchi, ndiyo siku utakayokutana na mkweo.*" That is: "The day you go naked, is the day you will meet your mother-in-law."