

THE LAND OF TREES & HONEY



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Kenya may not be an obvious foodie destination but it's a favourite among Italians, and they are rarely wrong. Add Watamu to your list now and discover its star ingredients, from coconut and honey to fresh crab



IMAGINE

transporting a hive of African bees on a motorbike. And those bees crawling under your shirt while you're driving. It's a very serious but equally comical scene and I can't help but burst out laughing at the story Abbas Sharriff is telling me. "I was taking the bees to a nearby farmer and hadn't sealed the hive properly. Luckily it was at night, so they couldn't fly, but they crawled up my shirt – one hundred of them! My wife had to take a knife and scrape them off my back."

Abbas, who is an apiarist, was showing me around his farm, a smallholding between Watamu and Gedi. We stood together in the shade of a mango tree that dripped with fruit. Above him, three beehives painted an equally mango shade of yellow-orange were strung up in the boughs. "There are 400 beekeeping farmers around the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. Many farm butterflies too." I ask whether the farmers enjoy working with insects. "Yes! People earn a good income from it. They can educate their children and buy medical supplies".

Measuring 42 000 hectares, the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest is the largest remaining belt of indigenous coastal forest in East Africa. It may seem strange, but beekeeping is crucial to forest

protection. In a bid to shield this wild woodland, community-driven projects ensure that people can still draw a livelihood and use the natural resources without destroying the forest. Abbas is the chairman of the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest Adjacent Dwellers Association (ASFADA) and therefore an essential link between folk and forest. Just one of the important things the forest produces is flowers for bees, and Watamu honey has a distinctive flavour thanks to the area's unique botanicals. Simply by examining the colour of his honey, Abbas knows which flowers were used to create it.

A laid-back coastal village

north of Mombasa, Watamu is best known for its tropical shores and Marine National Park, which shelters precious species such as sea turtles. The unsung Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and its honey harvest are just the beginning of my unexpectedly delicious adventure here.

Evidence of this fishing town's origins is still very much apparent. You can walk through the last standing remains of a Swahili city-state that flourished between the 11th and 13th centuries. Medieval ruins at the Gedi National Monument provide proof of the thriving maritime trade that dominated the East Coast. Out

in the Indian Ocean, traditional fishing dhows slide across the horizon, and palm trees sway in the sea breeze, as they have probably done for hundreds of years.

Today, the town is dominated by whitewashed holiday resorts, frequented by Italian tourists, which complement the aquamarine waters. They have been visiting the Kenyan coast for decades, and many locals even speak Italian. "Ciao!" one shouts in my direction, waving to his motorbike. "Boda-boda?" he queries, switching to Swahili. The easiest way to get around Watamu is on one of these long-seated motorcycles (terrifyingly, sometimes four passengers climb aboard for a trip) or via tuk-tuk, which is generally the safer option.

I board a cheerful tuk-tuk to explore beyond the forest, and the vehicle rattles off. We zoom by several restaurants that boast locally made gelato, *osterie* popular

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Welcome to Katembe via the suspension bridge in Africa.



for home-made pizza and pasta, along with other Italian treasures. We also pass a mountain of watermelon on the roadside, waiting to be pulped into fresh juice, then several street stalls trading in fish kebabs and dried specimens that remind me of West Coast bokkoms.

Our dinner destination is the Crab Shack, built by the Mida Creek Conservation Community. Just beyond Dabaso village, the tuk-tuk turns down a dirt road and motors between several tall palms, many bearing yellow buckets and bottles for harvesting palm wine. A boardwalk leads through the swamp to a rustic restaurant on the edge of a mangrove forest, set up high on stilts and overlooking a vast saltwater lagoon. The perfect sundowner spot.

The Italian influence shows again in the menu, and I settle on an Aperol to dispel the last heat of the day. The first course is their signature starter – a plate of crispy crab samoosas seasoned with a spray of lime. All crab dishes on the menu are sustainably farmed in these waters and the fish are caught by local fishermen. These samoosas are the

perfect balance of spice and salt, crunch and acid, and I simply have to order another plate before moving on to mains: mouthwatering whole ginger crab served with coconut rice.

“The menu at Swahili Café offers an intriguing mash-up of cultures”

The next day, I decide to stay in-house for a morning feast

at Watamu Treehouse, where the Swahili-style breakfast offers plenty of reasons to stay put. Green bananas, mango jam, organic peanut butter and home-made granola with coconut milk all speak of their commitment to seasonal eating and using local produce. *Mandazi* pockets (deep-fried, *vetkoek*-like pillows, similar to an unsweetened doughnut) stuffed with *mbaazi* (beans cooked in coconut) provided a wholesome taste of Kenya. The *mbaazi* is prepared using

WHERE TO EAT

📍 **NON SOLO GELATO** Find bona fide gelato, cannoli and great coffee at this little ice-cream café. Ask for the vanilla, ginger and cinnamon flavour. **Find them on Facebook.**

📍 **CRAB SHACK** Dining here supports the local community and profits also go towards conserving the remarkable mangrove swamp. **dabasocreek.com**

📍 **SWAHILI CAFE** *Pole pole* (pronounced “polay polay”) means slowly, slowly in Swahili. Embrace the saying, it could take a while but the food here is worth the wait. **Find them on Facebook.**

📍 **PETER'S CHOMA** This unassuming restaurant also sells excellent Swahili food and has a pizza oven. The pizza all have roughly three toppings only – the Italian way.

📍 **PILIPAN RESTAURANT** Set on a Swahili-style outdoor terrace that embraces the outdoors, there is a varied menu (lots of great curries) and a happy hour every Saturday from 5 to 7 pm. **Find them on Facebook.**

📍 **BLUE MARMALADE SUPERMARKET** Stock up on Arabuko-Sokoke honey, Dormans coffee, baskets and masala tea at this delightful general dealer. **blue-marmalade.com**

📍 **WATAMU TREEHOUSE** A serene yet vibrant guesthouse famed for its fresh food and yoga retreats. **treehouse.co.ke**

boiled pigeon peas, coconut milk (grated and then squeezed to release the milk), onions, a little cooking oil and livened up with cardamom seeds.

Kenya produces some of the world's finest coffee, and usually, that's my breakfast go-to. Established in 1950 as Kenya's first coffee roastery, Dormans coffee is part of this spread, but I can't resist indulging in a mug of spicy masala tea instead – a cup of pure goodness with cinnamon, cardamom and hints



Clockwise from top-left: Graphic wildlife warnings at the Reserva Especial de Maputo; the busy Praça dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Square); honey and fire: peri-peri offerings at Mercado

of black peppercorn. At the centre of the spread stands a bottle of amber-coloured Arabuko-Sokoke honey, which complements the tea perfectly.

Surprisingly after this hearty spread, I feel energetic enough to swim with the fishes on a snorkelling trip into the Watamu Marine National Park. Many dolphins, starfish, shimmering parrotfish and one turtle sighting later, it's time to eat again, would you believe. I settle down at Swahili Café, where plastic chairs and tables are arranged on the verandah, shaded by a palm-leaf ceiling.

Just as I've noticed all over the village, the menu at Swahili Café offers an

intriguing mash-up of cultures. Italian pasta with fish, deep-fried octopus with *kachumbari* (an East African tomato-and-onion salsa), goat grilled to order, or lobster linguini. Then there is *mchicha* (amaranth leaves cooked like spinach) and soft chapati (essentially a roti) to mop it all up. The fresh juice of the day is watermelon, and after swigging it, I opt for a cocktail to accompany prawn curry with spiced coconut rice.

Dawa, a mixture of vodka, brown sugar and lime chunks generously drizzled with honey, is a classic Kenyan drink. Savouring the sweetness, I think of what *Watamu* means in Swahili – this “home of sweet people” has been an unexpected place for me to discover *la dolce vita*, Kenyan style. Gelato for dessert? Most definitely. **W @melaniejanevz; melanievanzyl.com**

WATAMU NEED-TO-KNOW

📍 **VISAS** South Africans don't need a visa and can visit Kenya for up to three months. Plan your travel at **magicalkenya.com**.

📍 **GETTING AROUND** Hail a tuk-tuk. It's the easiest (and a seriously fun) way to get around. Ask your hotel about expected rates to the destination. Watamu is generally safe, but be vigilant. A trip to this section of Kenyan coast ties up nicely with a safari to Tsavo East National Park, which is roughly a two-hour drive away. Ask your hotel for a reliable operator.

RAW VEGAN BANANA PUDDING

Serves XX
EASY
GREAT VALUE?
Preparation: XX minutes

raw cashews 2 cups <GRAMS>
bananas 4 (2 frozen)
dates 4
almond milk ¾ cup

chopped cashews (optional)

1 If your food processor or blender is not very powerful, soak the cashews overnight. **2** Place all the ingredients in a food processor or blender and blend until smooth. Chill for at least 2 hours. **3** Before serving, top with your favorite toppings. We like bliss balls (see below) or cashews.

RECIPE INFO

BLISS BALLS

Makes XX
EASY
GREAT VALUE?
Preparation: XX minutes

rolled oats (or granola) 1 cup <GRAMS>
cashews ½ cup <GRAMS>
shredded, unsweetened desiccated coconut ½ cup <GRAMS>
cinnamon ½ t
salt 1/16 t A PINCH?
honey (or other sweetener such as dates) 1½ T
water 1 T

1 Place all the ingredients in a food processor and blend until the ingredients are mixed well, but not long enough to turn them into a smooth paste. **2** Roll the mixture into balls about 2.5 cm in diameter. Chill so they remain firm.

RECIPE INFO