

Fort Jesus Mombasa

Written by Administrator

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Fort Jesus Mombasa, often referred to as a Portuguese fortress in Kenya, is by far Mombasa's most popular standalone tourist attraction.

Long before I knew about its popularity, Fort Jesus was a memorable component of my East African History classes in secondary school.

I remember listening with fascination as my teacher recounted that it was built by Portuguese to signify their control over the East African coast to arch-enemy Turkey and stubborn African tribes.

So naturally, I was keen to check out this historical monument for during my first Mombasa vacation.

Fort Jesus was designed by an Italian architect and engineer, Joao Batista Cairato and the site chosen for it was considered to

be the best harbor on entire East African coast.

Construction was completed in April 1593 and the fortress was dedicated the same year. Shaped like a human being with a head, 2 arms and 2 legs, it is, without question, an architectural masterpiece of the sixteenth century.

Fort Jesus Mombasa is perched on 2 acres along the Indian oceanfront in Old Town. Owing to its strategic location, it was the site of several gruesome battles between the Arabs and Portuguese over 2 centuries.

One of these was the great siege of the fort by Omani Arabs that lasted nearly 3 years from March 1696 to December 1698.

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Then, at the end of the seventeenth century, a plague nearly wiped out all Fort Jesus' occupants. The fortress also survived 2 mutinies and bombardment with rockets and shells by British navy vessels.

In fact, although a few walls were added or modified, the fortress essentially retains its original plan. The canons used to ward off enemies, ammunition stores excavated in the coral, slave prison cells, torture rooms, church and wells have been preserved intact.

A newer building houses a museum which displays various ancient Portuguese and Arab artifacts such as ornaments, ceramics and jewelry.

The museum also exhibits archaeological finds from excavations at Fort Jesus, Gede, Manda and Ungwana. There are also attempts to simulate homesteads of coastal tribes such as the Digo and Mijikenda.

When a British Protectorate was proclaimed over the Kenyan coast in 1895, the fortress was turned into a prison.

In 1958, Fort Jesus was declared a historical monument and a museum building subsequently constructed. It is now under the custody of the National Museums of Kenya.

Fort Jesus Mombasa offers an especially satisfying experience for those who want to explore a classic sixteenth century European fortress. It is also great for those who want to go back in time and put Mombasa's cosmopolitan culture in perspective.

As a bonus, parts of the fortress provide commanding views of both the turquoise Indian Ocean and Old Mombasa so be sure to take these in as they arise.

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We found that it is worth hiring a guide to take you around the fortress but remember to agree the fee upfront. Literature on sale at the ticket office also provides a detailed history of this classic Portuguese fortress in Kenya.

Fort Jesus is open every day from 8.30am to 6.00pm. Charges are Ksh. 200 for resident adults, Ksh. 100 for resident children and Ksh. 800 for non-resident adults.

In addition, 3 nights a week, the fort plays host to a spectacularly choreographed show that uses light and sound effects as well as actors to re-enact the fort's long and tumultuous history. The show is crowned by a candlelit dinner in the fort's open courtyard.