

Travel to Mafia Island (taken from the internet)

The vast majority of tourists arrive by airplane, direct from Dar es Salaam or Zanzibar. However, there is another way: by ferry from the mainland town of Nyamisati. As the guidebooks indicate, the ferry is much more time-consuming and, yes, it can be difficult. But the overall cost of the ferry is one-tenth that of the flight. It's obvious why islanders travel only the one way – a single fare plane ticket is more than the average person makes in three months.

I keep mentioning the guidebooks, which probably makes you wonder why I'm writing a letter about how to get to Mafia Island. The simple answer is that there is far too much bad information out there about how to get to Nyamisati, journey length, how to buy tickets, and especially departure times. Lodges on the island, surprised at the idea of their guests traveling by a boat without safety features, will tell you it departs Nyamisati at 10am. Hotels in Dar es Salaam, or at least the ones that have heard of Nyamisati, will give 8am as the time. The Lonely Planet firmly says 2pm. They're all wrong.

It's easy to find out about the planes, of course, so I won't dwell on that method in this letter. And because everything is sure to change as the months and years go by, let me just say that the information below is accurate as of september 2013.

Travel by Sea

Every day two ferries ply the sea between Nyamisati, 150km south of Dar es Salaam, and Kilindoni, Mafia Island: one going, one coming back. There are numerous vessels in both harbours that make the trip, and you might as well flip a coin to determine which boat you'll be on.

Getting to Nyamisati and back

Nyamisati is 150km by road south from Dar es Salaam. Several dalla-dallas (minibuses) do this route each day, departing from Rangi Tatu station across the main road from Mbagala Rangi Tatu hospital. The earliest dalla-dalla leaves at 6am, and drivers will probably say you'll make it in time for the ferry – and this is usually not true. Cost is around TSH 5,000 (about US\$3), and the average journey takes 2.5 to 3 hours.

For the return journey, dalla-dallas and buses will be waiting for the ferry from Mafia to arrive. Simply get off the boat, walk 20 seconds up the dirt road, and ask around for the best deal (again around TSH 5,000). Don't negotiate too long, however, as you're liable to discover that the only spot left is standing-on-one-foot-room only, wedged between an armpit and a sack of onions.

Rangi Tatu bus station is in southern Dar es Salaam, about 15 minutes by taxi or bajaji (three-wheeled open cab) from the city centre, or 30 minutes by dalla-dalla from the main Posta station. Expect to pay TSH 10,000-20,000 (US\$6-12) for the former, and TSH 300 (about 20 US cents) for the latter.

You may also flag a Dar es Salaam taxi direct to Nyamisati. Expect to pay the standard long-distance taxi rate: TSH 1,000 per kilometre, so about TSH 150,000 (about US\$90). It's better both for negotiating the price as well as guaranteeing a driver (not everyone wants to do these trips) to arrange the trip the day before. The driver will need to bribe the police several times along the way

(it's illegal, but very common, for taxis to leave the city); make sure he has agreed in advance that this is part of the fare, or you might find yourself getting squeezed by both him and the cops down the line.

Staying in Nyamisati

Currently, the ferry from Nyamisati departs too early for the day's first dalla-dallas to get you there on time, which means you'll need to get there the day before and spend the night. Many locals simply lie down on the pier, especially if the ferry is a very early one (I've heard of it leaving one day at 4am). But mosquitos are bad in Nyamisati, and malaria is common, so it's a good idea to go for cover. Local accommodation is a five-minute walk away, at the Christian Mission (formerly a Swedish malaria research station – thus, it has a good collection of relevant books as well as a Swahili bible). To stay there, find Noah, a friendly man with good English who charges TSH 10,000 (US\$6) per person, 5,000 for a tent, and offers various rooms with mosquito nets: some are actual dorm rooms, others are the Mission's office and common room.

Departure times

At the time of writing(2013!), the Nyamisati-Kilindoni ferry should depart around 5am. The Kilindoni-Nyamisati ferry should depart around 6am. These times depend partly on tides, and partly on when the crew decides to wake up, but the intended schedule has been fairly regular for the past month. The actual departure times, of course, are often hours later. The main point is that both try to get going before the sun is up.

Note that on quieter days, when there isn't a full load of passengers (weekdays), the crews will hold in port up to several hours after the departure time to wait for more to load.

Tickets

At the time of writing, one-way per person tickets cost TSH 12,500 (about US\$7.50).

In Nyamisati tickets are available at a single wooden booth just a few feet up the road from the concrete pier: it's on the right hand side as you face out towards the channel. Tickets can be purchased the day before if someone is there, or on the day if unavailable prior.

In Kilindoni tickets are available at three different shops along the road between the town's main roundabout and the port. One seller is at the port itself, and all have signs which, unlike in Nyamisati, post the departure time. It is necessary to purchase the ferry ticket the day before, as the shops are not open early enough on the morning of departure. The shops usually shut just after sunset, or 7pm.

Tickets are inspected at boarding in Nyamisati, and on the boat from Kilindoni.

Both the departure time mentioned on the signs on the island and the one stated by the agent in Nyamisati are typically one hour in advance of actual boarding.

Boarding

At Nyamisati, the ferry's location is obvious, as the whole town is centred around it. There is a short concrete pier with tall stone steps leading down to wherever the tide brings the boat. Just prior to

loading, the crew hauls the boat with lines and swimmers up to the pier. By the time it has arrived, the crowd of passengers will be shoving and edging each other at the end of the pier, not really caring if the shoved person is pregnant, carrying a child, using a cane, or an astonished tourist – all to get the best seats, which are at the back of the boat. Before the eager whirlwinds can hop on, however, a metal footbridge is manually lifted up to the boat, and the crew loads the heavy cargo into the lower deck (if you have a lot of bags, or something unwieldy, you can load it now; you may be asked to pay a small fee, say TSH 500). While this is happening, some passengers elect to swim across and climb up, or even jump. At low tide, you can only access the plank by walking over deep mud and slippery rocks, usually in the dark. Also at low tide, the boat may be stuck on the channel bottom, causing the boat to tilt heavily to one side. This can make boarding even more hazardous: remember to hold on to the sides or to the loops of rope tied above. Amazingly, nobody gets hurt and everybody gets on.

At Kilindoni, the ferry departs from the right side of the long, new dock as you face the ocean. Boarding is usually more calm and careful: lacking a pier or dock, the boat stays anchored about 100m out. Two or three medium-sized boats ferry passengers to the ferry, going back and forth until all are aboard. There is a premium of course on getting in the first boat, to get those good seats, but unlike the dangerous shoving in the mud from Nyamisati, this more often than not amounts to overcrowding.

The Journey

Don't expect comfort on the boat: the benches, if you can snag a place on one of them, are wooden and small. Many passengers sit or lie on the floor, and it helps to travel with a second person to lean against. Tarpaulins on the two sides protect somewhat against sun and spray, but if the seas are anything but totally calm, expect a little water to come in over one of the sides of the bow. Thus, it's a good idea to be mid-way back or further.

The only other things to prepare yourself for are the lack of safety devices on the boat (there are a few floatation rings, that's it), a loud engine which can blow fumes downwind, and the chance of seasickness. For the latter, most of the journey is on protected waters: in the channel to Nyamisati, in the natural bay before crossing to the island, or insulated from the open ocean when closer to the island itself. But there is about one hour on every trip where the waves can rock the boat considerably. If you feel queasy, remember to keep your eyes on the horizon or closed.

Arrival in Nyamisati can be a breeze or a hazard, depending on the tide – see the boarding section, and reverse. Arrival in Kilindoni depends on the tide. If low, the ferry will anchor and several boats will come to carry people to the shore. Make sure you check the one you're getting into: it could be someone unconnected to the ferry, who will charge you TSH 500 per person. At high tide, the ferry will pull up onto the beach and unload there. Either way, expect to get your feet wet. If you are bringing a lot of stuff, you'll need to wait until the passengers have off-loaded to retrieve your things, which will be unloaded onto the sand unless you grab it yourself.

If I haven't discouraged you from taking the ferry, you'll get to see how the locals travel, and be introduced to the island the slow way. You'll also save a great deal of money. Fly, and assume at least US\$100 each way for the fare plus another US\$20 each way for the taxi, adding up to US\$240 per person total round-trip. The ferry, meanwhile, at TSH 12,500 each way, plus a dalla-dalla at TSH

5,000 each way, plus another TSH 300 each way to get from Dar es Salaam city centre, and you're at TSH 35,600 – or a grand total of US\$22 per person. See the difference?

Travel by Air

I haven't taken a flight to or from Mafia Island, but I've heard good things. It's beautiful, with the green and blue sea cresting in on the island seen from above; it's easy, from Dar es Salaam's main airport to Mafia's airstrip in the principal town, Kilindoni; and it's fast, at only 30 minutes flight time from Dar es Salaam, or 90 minutes from Zanzibar. Two airlines offer a regular daily service from Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar to Mafia Island: Coastal Aviation and Tropical Air. The former is apparently less expensive, with fewer frills, and is more relaxed about extra baggage weight. Tropical Air, meanwhile, has steeper fares and is known for dinging travelers (whom it hopes won't be bothered) with a hefty per kg fee of luggage over 20kg per person.

Coastal Aviation is on the following schedule:

Dar es Salaam to Mafia at US\$120 per person

10:45-11:15

15:00-15:30

Mafia to Dar es Salaam at US\$120 per person

12:45-13:15

15:45-1615

Zanzibar to Mafia at US\$160 per person

9:30-11:15

14:00-15:30

Mafia to Zanzibar at US\$160 per person

12:45-14:20

15:45-17:25

Some flights require a 2-person minimum or they will be cancelled.

An additional cost for flying is getting to and from Dar es Salaam's airport. Taxi drivers will charge a big fare for the trip, and there is no real negotiation possible with the cabs waiting for you when you arrive at the airport: their list of outrageous prices is posted for everyone to see. There is a way around this, however – simply walk three minutes past the arrivals area outside to the main highway and flag down a taxi.

There are also chartered flights to the island, sometimes arranged by the lodges. Keep in mind that if a lodge arranges your flights, they can be as much as 20% cheaper.

As a final note, there is no ATM on Mafia Island, but there is one at Dar es Salaam airport. If you run out of cash on the island, both airlines are known to let you pay for your return ticket after you've already flown back, using cash retrieved at the destination. There is no guarantee on this, however, so be careful.

The airline websites are:

Tropical Air - <http://www.tropicalair.co.tz/>

Coastal Aviation - <http://www.coastal.co.tz/>

Catch you on the island!