

---

# The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi (Kenya) No 1720

---

## 1 Basic information

### Official name as proposed by the State Party

The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi

### Location

Kilifi County  
Kenya

### Brief description

Gedi was one of the most important Swahili cities on the East African coast in the period from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this period, it was part of a complex network of trade and cultural exchanges that crossed the Indian Ocean, linking African coastal centres with Persia and other areas. Because Gedi was abandoned, it strongly represents the characteristics of Swahili architecture and town planning, utilising materials such as coral rag, coral and earth mortar and wood. Gedi was an opulent settlement, and is clearly delineated by its inner and outer walls. There are remains of domestic and civic architecture, mosques, tombs, and a sophisticated water management system. Luxury goods imported from China, Persia, India, and Venice found at Gedi demonstrates its role in international networks. The street pattern and wells of the town are readable within the inner city-wall. Gedi is unusually located away from the Indian Ocean coastline and is surrounded by a remnant coastal forest.

### Category of property

In terms of categories of cultural property set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

### Included in the Tentative List

12 February 2010 as "The Historic Town of Gedi"

### Background

This is a new nomination.

### Consultations and technical evaluation mission

Desk reviews have been provided by ICOMOS International Scientific Committees, members and independent experts.

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the nominated property from 31 August to 6 September 2023.

### Additional information received by ICOMOS

A letter was sent to the State Party on 4 October 2023 requesting further information about the comparative

analysis, community engagement issues, planned and approved development projects, and the management system.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 22 November 2023.

An interim report was provided to the State Party on 19 December 2023, summarising the issues identified by the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel.

Further information was requested in the interim report on the site plans, the research plan, the interpretation strategy, the conservation management plan, Heritage Impact Assessment, and the ritual and religious practices.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 23 February 2024.

All additional information received has been incorporated into the relevant sections of this evaluation report.

### Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

13 March 2024

## 2 Description of the nominated property

Note: The nomination dossier and additional information contain detailed descriptions of this property, its history and its state of conservation. Due to limitations on the length of evaluation reports, this report provides only a short summary of the most relevant aspects.

### Description and history

Set in a lush green strip of remnant coastal forest, The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi is an important and well-researched Swahili settlement located approximately 6.5 kilometres inland from the Indian Ocean coast in Kenya.

The Swahili Coast stretches over 3,000 kilometres from the Somalia Coast to Mozambique and features many ancient urban settlements and city-states that developed as a result of maritime trade between the East African interior and the Indian Ocean. Some of these cities were abandoned in the past, but others such as Lamu, Zanzibar and Mombasa continued and are inhabited cities.

The nominated property includes the ruins of the ancient Swahili town, with still-intact inner and outer city walls that clearly delineate the settlement. The site includes a number of notable structures such as a palace, mosques, large residences, pillar tombs, and clusters of private dwellings. The layout is evident and includes streets, wells, alleys, and sunken courtyards. Evidence of civic infrastructure for water management, including toilets in residential buildings is a notable element. The segmentation of spaces inside, outside and between the defensive town walls in relation to different social classes is also distinctive. The rich lived in the inner wall, and the outer wall enclosed eighteen hectares of farm and

plantation land with numerous mud and wattle houses for the middle class, while peasants lived outside the walls.

Swahili architecture and building traditions are a fusion of a range of diverse cultural and religious influences. Many palaces and mansions found on this coast belonged to wealthy merchants and landowners associated with the Swahili mercantile economy. Local materials such as coral stone, lime, coconut palm, mangrove poles and coral rag were used in the construction of the houses, tombs, and mosques. The building facades, carved doorways and inscriptions on lintels bear decorative elements that combine influences from the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and Africa.

The nominated property has an area of 20.81 ha, and a buffer zone of 22.61 ha.

Access to the nominated property is via the formal entrance which is staffed by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK). The nominated property and buffer zone also include a small number of modern buildings, including administrative offices, ablution blocks, museum, parking, and an interpretive centre that is currently under construction. None of these buildings are within the archaeologically or culturally sensitive areas. There is also a Butterfly House and a Snake Park located within the buffer zone.

Swahili is a Bantu-speaking culture that absorbed influences from other parts of the Indian Ocean world and combined them with local culture. Swahili peoples have been engaged in oceanic trade across the Indian Ocean for centuries, interacting with communities in the interior of the African continent and beyond. The seasonal monsoon winds assisted the flow of sea bound vessels to traverse the Indian Ocean, linking Persia, the Indian sub-continent and Africa.

Occupied from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Gedi flourished between the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century, a period referred to as the “Golden Age” of Swahili civilisations. It was part of a network of cities which flourished in this part of East Africa. During this period, Gedi had an especially high degree of opulence in wealth and standard of living of its people.

Gedi was part of the Indian Ocean trade routes at a time when there was an expansion of Islam into Africa. The archaeological evidence from Gedi, including ceramics and luxury goods imported from China, Iran, India, and Venice, among others, indicates its role in a broader international network of trade and culture and suggests a significance that transcends national boundaries as part of a larger Indian Ocean trading network. The Indian Ocean trading network of which Gedi is a part generated its own socio-economic and cultural system, a unique architecture, a people and language that have become global in their influence.

The site is known to be of spiritual significance to local communities. In the additional information received in

November 2023 and February 2024, the State Party has explained that people from Arab and Swahili communities visit the site to conduct ritual prayers at several mosques. This is not a formalised activity, and the NMK endeavours to provide access to the site for these purposes when requested. Traditional herbalists also visit the site to pick herbs for use.

#### **State of conservation**

The majority of the structural remains are stable, although there are outlying building remains that are experiencing structural problems. The major cause of structural problems is vegetation growing on walls. A recent significant collapse at the site of the first Great Mosque was caused by a fallen tree.

Structures within the main town area (within the inner-city wall) are in better condition because they are clear of vegetation. The area between the inner and outer walls is heavily vegetated and inaccessible.

Monitoring includes checking of vegetation, removing branches and trees that may fall on the walls, and removing roots that may affect the foundations of the structures.

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation of the nominated property is generally good. Many structures have standing walls, and the town layout is intact.

#### **Factors affecting the nominated property**

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the main factors affecting the nominated property are vegetation management, fire, and informal logging activities. The State Party also acknowledges that climate change and weather events are factors that require conservation attention.

The site does not have pressures from development, encroachment, or traffic. There are occasional reports of vandalism and illegal logging for domestic uses (building and firewood). The NMK has increased security and community engagement to assist with these issues. The perimeter fence has been broken or removed in some sections of the site. The additional information received in November 2023 advised that the broken fence sections will be repaired by mid-2024.

As noted above, vegetation growth is an issue for the conservation of the walls. Vegetation has grown on some structures, and trees and tree branches can fall on the walls, causing damage. Dead trees within the monument need to be promptly removed to avoid this. Thick vegetation is found in the area between the inner and outer walls, obscuring possible archaeological evidence, and preventing visitor access and interpretation.

Risks from fire are due to the surrounding forests and grassed areas. The surrounding farming communities often use fire to prepare their fields, adding to the fire risk. At this stage, the preparedness for fire risks is not sufficient. In addition to the risks to the nominated property and visitor infrastructure, the sustainability of community projects depends on the maintenance of the forest, so it is crucial that the forest is protected.

---

ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is generally good, and that factors affecting the nominated property are vegetation management, fires, and informal logging activities.

---

### 3 Proposed justification for inscription

#### Proposed justification

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- Gedi is one of the greatest, most important, and most prosperous Swahili cities on the East African coast, and is the only major Swahili city located away from the coastline.
- Gedi is an exceptional example of Swahili Islamic settlement of the period from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and demonstrates the characteristics of a Swahili town, including its architectural and town planning characteristics, and a high degree of building skills.
- The street layout and sophisticated water management system of Gedi are distinctive characteristics.
- Gedi demonstrates the prosperity of the Swahili inhabitants and the successes of the Indian Ocean trading networks.
- There is a symbiotic relationship between nature and culture demonstrated by the co-existence of the site with a biodiverse forest.
- Gedi has spiritual significance for present-day communities.

ICOMOS notes that there are ongoing scholarly debates about the origins of Swahili culture that Gedi has the potential to contribute to in the future.

Based on the nomination dossier, the key attributes of the nominated property are the archaeological and architectural remains of the Swahili settlement, including the remains of buildings, the form and design of the town plan, the water management elements, and the original building materials (coral rag, lime mortar, mangrove timbers). In addition, the vegetated areas between the inner and outer walls are considered to have the potential to contain important archaeological evidence about the spatial arrangements and social hierarchies of the Swahili town.

#### Comparative analysis

The comparative analysis has examined properties along the Swahili Coast that are inscribed on the World Heritage List, including the Ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani and Ruins of Songo Mnara (United Republic of Tanzania, 1981, criterion (iii)); Lamu Old Town (Kenya, 2001, criteria (ii), (iv), (vi)); and the Stone Town of Zanzibar (United Republic of Tanzania, 2000, criteria (ii), (iii), (vi)). The comparative analysis has also discussed other Swahili settlements in Kenya and Tanzania, including: SanjeYa Kati; Manda Island; The Ancient Town of Takwa; Pate Island; Shanga; Siyu; Ungwana; and Mwana.

The comparative analysis has considered several other large-scale ancient settlements of a similar period, scale or Islamic cultural influences inscribed on the World Heritage List, namely: the Great Zimbabwe National Monument (Zimbabwe, 1986, criteria (i), (iii), (vi)); the Historic Town of Zabid (Yemen, 1993, criteria (ii), (iv), (vi)); the Ancient City of Qalhat (Oman, 2018, criteria (ii) and (iii)); and the Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu (Peru, 1983, criteria (i), (iii), (vii), (ix)). Although the rationale for including sites beyond the Swahili geocultural area is understood and this broad consideration could be further expanded (including trade connections in coastal locations in Arabia and/or Asia), ICOMOS considers that the inclusion of these World Heritage properties does not contribute strongly to the comparative analysis, given their very different geocultural contexts.

ICOMOS considers that the most relevant comparisons are those that focus on contemporaneous properties within the East African Swahili Coast and its hinterland, along with the Comoros Islands and Madagascar. There are over 300 Swahili settlements and sites along the East African coast, and these vary in their contents. In addition to the sites discussed by the State Party, several World Heritage properties and Tentative List properties are directly relevant, including: the Island of Mozambique (Mozambique, 1991, criteria (iv) and (vi)), the Historical Sultanates of the Comoros (Comoros Islands, Tentative List) and Ibo in The Quirimbas Archipelago (Mozambique, Tentative List). Additional relevant examples that are not on the World Heritage List or Tentative Lists include: Kilepwa (Kenya), Malindi (Kenya), Mombasa (Kenya), Pemba (Mozambique), Tongoni (Tanzania), Mogadishu (Somalia), and Sofala (Mozambique).

The nominated property exhibits many similarities with the other settlements on the Swahili Coast, particularly in relation to architectural types/forms and building materials. In addition to these similarities, the State Party argues that there are significant differences between Swahili settlements that continued to evolve through interaction with various cultural influences to the present (such as Zanzibar, Lamu and Mombasa), and those that, like Gedi, were abandoned (such as Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara, Manda and Ungwana).

In the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party reiterated its arguments that Gedi is the largest of the abandoned Swahili settlements and is the

only site located away from the sea. It has major structures such as two Great Mosques, elaborate houses with sunken courts, a palace, a detailed and complex water engineering system and a clearly defined street plan. The State Party considers that the building stock at Gedi is comparatively the most concentrated and elaborate, and that Gedi fully represents a Swahili town of its time. The State Party also argues that Gedi is the best researched and documented Swahili site.

ICOMOS observes that many of the extant Swahili Islamic settlements have either lost elements of their Swahili character due to subsequent cultural influences and continued occupation (as noted by the State Party). Others have less archaeological potential due to urban development. In this context, the nominated property can be distinguished from other sites by the high quality of the above-ground architectural remains as well as the amount of intact below-ground archaeological material. ICOMOS agrees that Gedi has a distinctive street layout which is unlike the others that are characterised by narrow winding streets oriented to the coastal topography.

The distance of the nominated property from the coast is unusual in comparison with other Swahili settlements, and ICOMOS concurs with the State Party that this is an intriguing element worthy of continuing research. ICOMOS notes that there are a number of theories about the inland location of Gedi, and that the grid layout of the town is possibly due to its distinctive inland location. The trade functions of Gedi suggest additional networks with the African interior or systems of transshipment that are not well understood at this stage. At the same time, the inland location could also be related to defensive needs. The inland location could possibly be a factor in why Gedi was not reoccupied later. While distinctive and intriguing, the distance of Gedi from the sea is an aspect of the comparative analysis that seems to require further research in order to be fully appreciated.

Another distinguishing factor mentioned by the State Party is the native forest that surrounds the nominated property, including important and endangered local species of fauna and flora. ICOMOS acknowledges that this is an unusual and valuable element and an important part of the buffer zone, but does not consider that it is a strong comparative factor, as it is unrelated to the proposed criteria.

Although clearly an important and relatively intact Swahili settlement, ICOMOS considers that the arguments proposed by the State Party that Gedi is the only Swahili city of the time with a complete urban centre, or that it is the best-preserved abandoned Swahili city are debatable, given the various differences that each site provides. Nevertheless, ICOMOS considers that Gedi is significant and distinctive within its geocultural context, and although there are also similarities, Gedi contributes elements that complement the existing Swahili sites on the World Heritage List. The abandonment of Gedi in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and lack of later uses or periods of occupation have contributed to its completeness and state of

conservation. Additionally, Gedi has a high potential for future archaeological research that could further elaborate on the urban structure of the city, the morphology of Swahili cities, and the finer operations of the trade networks.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis demonstrates that the significance of the nominated property potentially lies in its ability to add depth and complexity to the understanding of the Swahili Coast settlements and the associated trade networks of the Indian Ocean world. The abundance of archaeological evidence, authenticity, integrity, state of conservation and archaeological research potential are key factors in what makes Gedi to stand out. Unlike many other Swahili settlements, Gedi did not experience subsequent occupation and influences. Despite the presence of other comparatively representative settlements, Gedi is considered to be an impressive example of Swahili urbanism.

---

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

---

#### **Criteria under which inscription is proposed**

The property is nominated on the basis of cultural criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv).

Criterion (ii): *exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the architecture, technology, and town-planning of Gedi are a result of the interactions and exchanges of the Indian Ocean trade between the East African coast, Persia and Asia. The interchanges are demonstrated through the use of building types, building and settlement design, materials and techniques that reflect these interchanges, particularly the Islamic traditions. The technical know-how of the wells and hydraulic systems also demonstrate the engagements of Gedi.

The Swahili settlements were oriented at trading networks in the Indian Ocean. There are examples at Gedi of the links with the Middle East, including religious buildings and traded materials. The fusion of African and Islamic beliefs can be seen in the design of Muslim tombs, installation of talismans in many residential buildings, and there are words of Arabic and Persian origin assimilated into the local Bantu language.

ICOMOS considers that the justification for this criterion could be strengthened by providing more specific evidence of the interchange of human values and their probable origins. A greater clarity of the fusion between African and Islamic cultures is central to the justification of this criterion and should be a continued focus of research at Gedi. Nevertheless, ICOMOS considers that, in common with other Swahili towns, the nominated property exhibits important interchanges between East Africa,

Arabia and the Indian sub-continent resulting in the development and demonstration of monumental Islamic architecture and town planning, particularly with reference to water management. The interchange of cultural knowledge around the Indian Ocean is demonstrated in the architecture and building materials used at Gedi, and the presence of mosques, tombs and sunken courts.

Criterion (iii): *bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Gedi bears an exceptional testimony to ancient Swahili culture and commerce along the East African coast from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The evolution of the settlement is demonstrated, and there are numerous outstanding features such as large structures, wells, sunken courts, dwellings and streets, and civic engineering works. The elaborate town planning and water engineering design is a tradition that is not evident anywhere else on the Swahili Coast of Africa. The town also features arched doorways, mosques, palace, wells, and public toilets, all of which exhibit the opulence of the wealthy inhabitants of the town.

ICOMOS considers that Gedi is distinctive in this context for the elaborate town planning and water engineering and is a particularly intact and well-preserved abandoned Swahili settlement. Along with several other World Heritage properties from this geocultural area, Gedi bears an exceptional testimony to the cultural tradition of the Swahili civilisation at its height. Because the settlement was abandoned at the end of this period, it leaves a remarkable architectural and archaeological record that has not been disturbed by later cultural phases or traditions.

Criterion (iv): *be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Gedi represents an important stage in Swahili civilisation from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in terms of its location, town planning and building forms. Gedi is one of the largest Swahili urban settlements and is the best preserved of the abandoned settlements, with the highest concentration of standing monuments of this period. The State Party considers that its location away from the coastline is also a distinctive characteristic, and points to a number of exceptional extant features that establish Gedi as the most complete urban centre of its time.

ICOMOS considers that Gedi is a large and well-preserved Swahili settlement that flourished during the period that is known as the “Golden Age” of Swahili Civilisation (12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries). It has some distinctive elements such as the street layout, two rings of intact city walls, water management infrastructure, and a number of substantial architectural features such as a palace,

mosques, public buildings, private dwellings, and tombs. The nominated property also has an outstanding potential to represent the characteristics of Swahili settlements of this period, and to yield additional understanding through future research. The size and completeness of the town and its state of conservation relative to other Swahili settlements on the World Heritage List lend weight to the justification of criterion (iv).

---

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets cultural criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv).

---

## **Integrity and authenticity**

### **Integrity**

The integrity of the nominated property is based on the extent to which it contains all the attributes necessary to convey the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, the condition and intactness of the attributes and the management of major pressures.

The boundaries of the nominated property are well-defined and contain all the elements of the historical town including the inner and outer walls, water infrastructure and wells, tombs, mosques, sunken courts, palace, private houses, streets, and alleyways. The nominated property is a National Monument protected by Kenyan law.

The physical fabric of the site is generally in a good state of conservation. Maintenance of the structures has utilised traditional building materials and methods. The visual integrity of the site is also good, due to the protection provided by the surrounding forests that comprise the buffer zone. No modern developments are visible from inside the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that the integrity of the nominated property has been demonstrated.

### **Authenticity**

The authenticity of the nominated property is based on the ability of the attributes to convey the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. The nominated property is an abandoned settlement with standing walls and buried archaeological materials.

The nominated property meets the requirements of authenticity in terms of form and design, location and setting of the ruins of the Swahili city. The abandonment of the settlement and lack of subsequent occupation have ensured a high level of authenticity in relation to the period of occupation of the city. The remains of buildings and walls are in their original location, and the town layout is evident. The water sumps and other infrastructure elements are in place. The original building materials have been respected in the conservation works undertaken, and all works are documented.

ICOMOS considers that the authenticity of the nominated property has been demonstrated.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the nominated property have been met.

#### **Boundaries**

The nominated property and buffer zone are owned by the government of Kenya. There are no inhabitants within these areas.

The boundaries and the buffer zone of the nominated property reflect the designation of Gedi as a National Monument by the Government of Kenya. The boundaries of the nominated property are precise and clearly identifiable on the ground. The site is fenced, although the fencing has been removed in a number of sections and requires repair. Access is controlled through a gated entrance. Vegetation has been cleared outside the buffer zone, and the coastal forest vegetation, which includes many indigenous tree species, has been maintained within the buffer zone, lending further visual clarity to the demarcation of the extent of the buffer zone. The buffer zone is delineated according to the area that is under the direct protection and management of National Museums of Kenya (NMK). The forest is managed with the assistance of the Kenya Forest Service and enhances the security and protection of the site.

The boundaries of the nominated property fully contain the site of the former Swahili settlement, and the size and forest cover in the buffer zone provides an additional layer of protection to the nominated property.

---

#### **Evaluation of the proposed justification for inscription**

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies the consideration of the nominated property for the World Heritage List, and that criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv) are demonstrated. The main factors affecting the nominated property are vegetation management, fire, and informal logging activities. The state of conservation is generally good, although this will need active maintenance. The conditions of integrity and authenticity have been met, and the boundaries and buffer zone of the nominated property are appropriate.

---

## **4 Conservation measures and monitoring**

#### **Documentation**

The ruins within the nominated property are well documented. A large inventory of maps, photographs and 3D laser scans exist allowing conservators to measure changes to walls to the nearest centimetre. However, ICOMOS considers that the documentation is somewhat under-used for site management purposes and the related surveying expertise is located in Nairobi. In the additional information received in February 2024, the State Party provided additional site plans, including plans showing the spatial arrangement of attributes within the inner wall and plans and other drawings of several attributes (including structures and engineering

infrastructure). Taken together, ICOMOS considers that the materials provided demonstrate that the nominated property is well documented. A map showing previously excavated areas within the site would also be useful for the future management and research at Gedi.

Gedi was one of the first sites in Kenya to be listed and studied from the 1920s, and archaeological work has been done there since the 1940s. The site is therefore relatively well researched, although there is considerable potential for future research, and many continuing questions.

Local scholars and community members have conducted oral history studies of Gedi which have been incorporated into the nomination dossier. ICOMOS considers that this is a commendable effort by the State Party that contributes an important dimension of the documentation of the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that the research plan could be further developed. For example, ICOMOS considers that further research is needed in the area between the inner and outer town walls, and in relation to the Indian Ocean routes between the town and the coast and/or hinterland.

#### **Conservation measures**

The approach to conservation consists of regular pruning of trees that might pose a threat to the proposed attributes, regular clearing of vegetation from structures and pathways, and periodic repairs. Conservation of the physical fabric of the standing elements uses traditional building materials along with modern lime mortar.

Some walls have been restored, although the structures are treated as archaeological ruins. Restoration works are carried out by a curator and traditional stone mason employed by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK).

The ruined nature of the site has been respected and no reconstruction has attempted to recreate the original buildings. ICOMOS considers that the protective infrastructure around walls could be strengthened to improve their visual appearance and public safety.

Conservation is led by a site manager, and the research and conservation works are carried out by the archaeologist and the traditional stone mason and assistants.

ICOMOS considers that the conservation measures have been carefully applied and have ensured the authenticity of the nominated property. Additional information received in February 2024 added further detail regarding the process for developing a detailed Conservation Management Plan for Gedi. It is anticipated that this will be finalised in December 2024 following consultations with communities and other stakeholders.

## Monitoring

The monitoring arrangements are briefly outlined in the nomination dossier, and in the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party explained that a monitoring system will be put in place following the potential inscription on the World Heritage List. Currently, regular monitoring of the nominated property is carried out by the archaeologist, the stone mason and the assistants, and primarily involves observations of the condition of walls and tombs, as well as routine checks of vegetation and the condition of the boundary fence. There is also some monitoring of the biodiversity values in the buffer zone by resident researchers. The State Party has indicated that local community members are encouraged to assist with monitoring activities, particularly in relation to illegal uses and activities. Monitoring records are kept by the site and by the NMK.

---

ICOMOS considers that the documentation, conservation, and monitoring are adequate although each requires further strengthening. In relation to the monitoring system, ICOMOS considers that the system could be augmented with regular monitoring of vegetation by an arborist, and the development of more specific indicators that can track trends and identify emerging issues. ICOMOS also recommends that the further elaboration of the monitoring system is designed to integrate its outcomes into the Periodic Reporting questionnaire.

---

## 5 Protection and management

### Legal protection

Gedi has been subject to legal protection from 1927 and today protection is provided by the National Museums and Heritage Act (2006), the Forest Conservation and Management Act (2016) and the Wildlife (Conservation and Management) Act (1985, 2013). These protect the cultural heritage, the vegetation, forests, and wildlife found within the nominated property.

At the local level, the County Integrated Development Planning processes require the preparation of five-year strategic plans for development (Integrated Development Plans). These plans create an overall framework for economic development, land-use management, infrastructure development and protection of the environment. Each county must also prepare a Spatial Development Framework to guide decisions on land development issues. Community participation is encouraged in these planning processes. All developments within the nominated property and the buffer zone can only be carried out by, or with permission from the National Museums of Kenya (NMK).

### Management system

The nominated property is maintained by the State Party through the NMK and is managed through the Malindi Museum. NMK contributes financially to the management and protection of Gedi and also collects revenue from tourism. These funds are utilised in the management and

conservation of the site. The management of the nominated property is also implemented through collaboration with the local community and other state agencies such as the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS).

Because there are several agencies involved in managing the nominated property and buffer zone, ICOMOS considers that an advisory mechanism for conservation issues would complement the existing management system. This body should include the NMK, KWS, KFS, and representatives of the local community.

The State Party acknowledges that there have been some staff vacancies available to the nominated property. Some of the expertise available to the site is based in Mombasa, and in the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party explained that it is addressing gaps in staffing through the NMK Strategic Plan (2023-2027). ICOMOS considers that when fully implemented, the structure will be functional, although there is a need to expand the conservation team to also include a trained arborist to monitor the health of trees and avoid collapses caused by falling trees and branches. It may also be necessary to recruit a surveying assistant based at Gedi to enable better use of the mapping and documentation resources available.

The management plan (2022-2027) was prepared by the NMK with the participation of major stakeholders, including state agencies and local communities. It outlines the full set of heritage values that apply to Gedi (beyond the proposed Outstanding Universal Value). A summary of planned actions is included, and an update was provided by the State Party in the additional information received in November 2023.

The management plan indicates that capacity building is planned. These efforts should include the transfer of skills to younger people/apprentices, including stone masons and arborists. The additional information received in November 2023 mentions several improvements that have already occurred in the expertise available to the management of the nominated property, such as recruitment of a stone mason.

The State Party provided additional information in February 2024 concerning the formal provisions for Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) within the frameworks for legal protection and management of the nominated property. The legal framework for HIA is provided by the Environmental Management and Coordination Act (EMCA, 1999 and 2015), National Construction Authority Act (2011), and the National Museums and Heritage Act (2006).

The management plan includes a brief discussion of disaster risk preparedness and climate change impacts, and a summary of planned actions. In the additional information provided in November 2023, the State Party has explained that a disaster risk preparedness plan is due for finalisation by May 2024. At this stage, the climate

change response relates to monitoring, but this does not seem to be tied into the monitoring system for the property. Risks from severe weather, earthquake and forest fires are considered, and some responses are outlined.

Fire poses a hazard to the nominated property, and to the local community, staff, and visitors. There are currently insufficient measures in place to fight a possible fire and there are no water points, hoses or bowsers, no fire breaks between the buffer zone boundaries and neighbouring properties and no access tracks for firefighters. ICOMOS considers that the creation and practical implementation of a fire management plan is essential, including training for on-site staff and communities.

ICOMOS considers that Gedi has very high research potential. Additional information sent in February 2024 provided additional detail on the research planned for the next five to ten years. In the additional information received in November 2023 and February 2024, the State Party has also outlined the institutional partners involved in various areas of research at Gedi.

ICOMOS considers that the management plan provides a sound overview but should be further developed to more specifically guide decision making. The further elaboration of the management plan should also include the strategies and plans for visitor management, sustainable tourism, archaeological research, and conservation.

#### **Visitor management**

Local and international tourists visit the nominated property, and there has been a steady increase in international visitor levels following the period of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party provided updated figures for 2022 (total of 70,246 visitors) and 2023 (showing a higher number for each month to date), with a peak occurring in the period from September to December. Projected figures have also been provided for 2024-2027, demonstrating expected steady growth.

Malindi International Airport is located approximately half an hour away from Gedi by road. Gedi is served by hotels and restaurants located at Watamu Town, approximately ten minutes away from the site by car.

There is a small museum on the site which will be replaced by a visitor and interpretation centre currently under construction. Most visitors are guided by community guides who speak several languages. Currently, information is provided in English, and it would be desirable to also provide these elements in the local language. All visitor amenities are located near the site entrance, away from the archaeologically sensitive areas.

There are some marked paths directing tourists to important sectors of the ancient town, some of which cross over walls, with wooden steps to protect the

structures. ICOMOS recommends that tourist trails should follow the former streets of the towns to avoid crossing over walls and risking impacts on their condition.

Interpretation is guided by the policy frameworks of the NMK, and the State Party has developed a range of conservation, education and outreach programmes. However, there is currently no formal interpretation strategy for the nominated property, and ICOMOS considers this to be an urgent priority. This should include the establishment of a thematic framework, revised tour routes that are meaningful and avoid impact on the attributes, consideration of the various modalities of communication. These should convey the importance of Gedi's position within the histories of the wider region and the evidence of social stratification that can be drawn from the layout of the town (amongst many other important topics). The forest is also an integral part of the historic town and should be included in the interpretation strategy, along with community stories. In the additional information received in February 2024, the State Party agreed that the Interpretation Strategy is a priority, and indicated that this will be resourced. Planned actions include the development of multimedia delivery, updating of outdoor signs by June 2024, consideration of access for persons with disabilities, establishment of a website, and dissemination of research findings. The involvement of communities in interpretation is a key component of these plans.

Although current visitor numbers can be accommodated, this is expected to increase in the future. ICOMOS therefore considers that more rigorous visitor management approaches are required.

#### **Community involvement**

The interests of the local community are described in the nomination dossier, including bee keepers, neighbouring landowners, butterfly farmers, craftspeople, local businesses and tour guides, herbalists, and so on. Schools and educational institutions are key users of the site.

In the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party explained that oral histories establish that Gedi was once associated with the Waata Indigenous People, a forest hunter and gatherer community in Coastal Kenya. Through long interactions with the local Mijikenda People, the Waata have been assimilated into the Mijikenda through intermarriage and trade. Some Elders still have vestiges of the Waata culture particularly in language and subsistence practices. The NMK has worked with these Elders to document their cultural practices, festivals, folklores, cuisine and songs, dances and other relevant indigenous knowledge. These Elders were fully involved in the nomination process.

The State Party recognises local community participation as essential to the management of Gedi and has outlined the engagement that occurred in the preparation of the nomination and management plan, including the collection of oral histories. The content of the



management plan was prepared with community input. The State Party has made a commitment to ensure community and stakeholder involvement in decision making for conservation and promotion of the nominated property. Some documents indicating the consent of community representatives were included in the nomination dossier.

It is apparent that the connection the community has with the site is respected in the management system and through continuing local cultural traditions that include respect for the physical remains and the forest through norms and rituals.

A strength of this nomination is the emphasis on the need to promote the participation of local communities, and the efforts toward community benefit sharing. The NMK supports various local income generation projects, including bee keeping and butterfly farming. In the additional information received in November 2023, the State Party explained that these activities take place on individual farms and in the Kipepeo Project at Gedi that links farmers with markets.

---

#### **Effectiveness of the protection and management of the nominated property**

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the legal protection for the nominated property is adequate for sustaining its proposed Outstanding Universal Value. The management system is adequate, but the management plan requires further elaboration to provide stronger guidance for decision making and should include strategies and plans for visitor management, interpretation, and sustainable tourism. ICOMOS considers that the community engagement and the consideration of community benefits are strengths of the nomination.

---

## **6 Conclusion**

The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi is an important Swahili settlement occupied between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Located inland, 6.5 kilometres away from the coast of East Africa, the nominated property complements in distinctive ways other important Swahili settlements such as Kilwa Kisiwani, Songo Mnara, Lamu and Zanzibar, which already are on the World Heritage List. Abandoned in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Gedi exhibits the features of a Swahili town and has a high degree of conservation, with many architectural and civic engineering elements enclosed within its two city walls.

Gedi bears an exceptional testimony to ancient Swahili culture and commerce along the East African coast from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Swahili settlements were oriented at trading networks across the Indian Ocean, and there is evidence at Gedi of cultural and religious interchanges between local cultures and Persia, the Middle East and Asia.

The comparative analysis justifies consideration of the nominated property for the World Heritage List. Criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv) are demonstrated and the conditions of integrity and authenticity are met. The nominated property overall has a good state of conservation. The key factors that require active management are vegetation management, fires, and informal logging activities. The nominated property has appropriate boundaries and a forested buffer zone that provides an additional layer of protection and interest.

The legal protection of the nominated property is adequate, and the management system is operational, but requires further development to support consistent decision making. Strategies for visitor management, sustainable tourism, research, interpretation, conservation, and fire risk management should be further developed and incorporated into the management system. The monitoring system also requires further elaboration.

The local community associations with Gedi are a key element of the future protection and management, and the State Party has made commendable efforts for community engagement and benefit sharing.

## **7 Recommendations**

### **Recommendations with respect to inscription**

ICOMOS recommends that The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi, Kenya, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv)**.

### **Recommended Statement of Outstanding Universal Value**

#### **Brief synthesis**

The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi was one of the most important and densely populated Swahili cities on the East African coast in the period from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (and particularly between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries). During this period, Gedi was part of a complex network of trade and cultural exchanges that crossed the Indian Ocean, linking African coastal and inland centres with ports around the Arabian Sea and Southern Asia. Because Gedi was abandoned, its surviving ruins strongly demonstrates the characteristics of Swahili architecture and town planning.

Gedi was an opulent settlement, defined by two rings of irregularly running walls, public and private buildings, street patterns, tombs, and an elaborate palace complex and Grand Mosque. Within the inner walls, the remains of domestic, civic and religious architecture, all constructed from local coral stone and lime mortar, are laid out around a grid street pattern, with the mosques and tombs embellished by carvings and inset with Chinese porcelain. Between the inner and outer walls, there is evidence of more modest houses built for the majority of the residents. The city was serviced by wells and a sophisticated water

engineering and management system that is still readable.

Luxury goods imported from China, Persia, India, and Venice found at Gedi demonstrate its role in international trade networks, that were supported by the export of gold, ivory, and other minerals and timber, as well as slaves. Gedi is located inland, 6.5 kilometres away from the Indian Ocean coastline and is surrounded by a remnant coastal forest. Gedi is well-researched, and has the potential to contribute further to the understanding of Swahili coastal settlements and trading histories.

**Criterion (ii):** The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi exhibits an important interchange of values on architecture, technology and town-planning as a result of its participation over several centuries in the Indian Ocean trading system between the East African coast, the Arabian Sea and Southern Asia. The fusion of African and Islamic beliefs can be seen in the layout of the city, in the distinctive architectural forms of its coral stone buildings, in the decorative details of its mosques and tombs, and in the technical know-how of the wells and hydraulic systems that sustained a large urban settlement over centuries of occupation.

**Criterion (iii):** The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi bears exceptional testimony to the strong Swahili cultural traditions that developed and flourished as a result of maritime trade between the East African coast and the Indian Ocean from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Gedi was a substantial urban settlement with outstanding features of town planning, architecture, and infrastructure. It is distinctive for the scale and density of its urban settlement, unusual and complex spatial layout, and intricate water engineering.

**Criterion (iv):** The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi is an outstanding example of a Swahili settlement from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, that reflects a period when the East African coast became part of a global trading network linking Eastern Africa across the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean with India and Southern Asia. Gedi is one of the largest, most well-preserved and well-researched abandoned Swahili Islamic settlements on the East African coast. The architectural and archaeological elements of Gedi demonstrate its opulence, as well as its social stratification.

#### Integrity

The boundaries of the property are well-defined and contain all the attributes of the historical town including the inner and outer walls, water infrastructure and wells, tombs, mosques, sunken courts, palace, private houses, streets, and alleyways. The attributes are well-documented and the structures and archaeological materials are generally in a good state of conservation, although they are vulnerable and require monitoring and maintenance. Traditional building materials and methods were used for the maintenance of the structures. The visual integrity of the site is also good, due to the protection

provided by the surrounding remnant African coastal forest in the buffer zone which is managed with the support of the Kenya Forest Service.

#### Authenticity

Gedi is an abandoned settlement with standing walls and buried archaeological remains. The abandonment of the settlement and lack of subsequent occupation has ensured a high level of authenticity. The remains of buildings and walls are in their original location, and the town layout is evident. The water sumps and other infrastructure elements are in place. The original building materials have been respected in the conservation works undertaken, and all works are documented. Appropriate conservation measures are in place and a detailed Conservation Management Plan for Gedi is in preparation that should further support the authenticity of the property.

#### Protection and management requirements

The property has been subject to legal protection since 1927 and is a National Monument protected by the Kenyan National Museums and Heritage Act (2006). The natural values of the surrounding forest are also protected by Kenyan law. At the local level, Gedi is additionally protected through the County Integrated Development Planning processes, and the Spatial Development Framework. All developments within the property and the buffer zone require permission from the National Museums of Kenya and are subject to Heritage Impact Assessment processes.

Gedi is managed by the National Museums of Kenya in cooperation with the Malindi Museum, relevant national and local authorities, and the local community. A management plan (2022-2027) and action plan are in place, and were prepared in cooperation with major stakeholders and the local community. Gedi is vulnerable to fire, and fire management and training are priorities for the disaster risk preparedness plan which is being prepared. Further development of strategies and plans for visitor management, sustainable tourism, archaeological research, interpretation and conservation are planned. The management plan includes actions for capacity building and the transfer of traditional skills. Adequate monitoring is in place, although this should be further augmented by regular monitoring of vegetation, and the development of more specific indicators that can track trends and identify emerging issues.

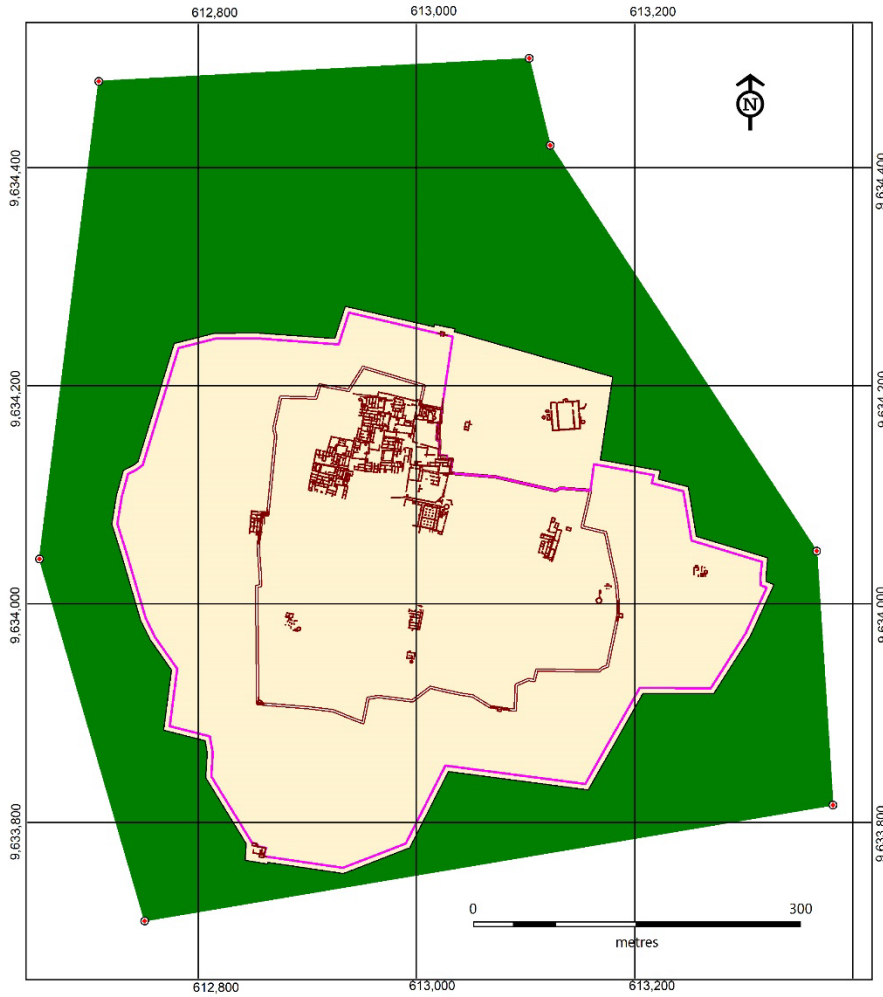
#### Additional recommendations

ICOMOS further recommends that the State Party give consideration to the following:

- a) Collecting and curating conservation reports and records as a basis for conservation decisions and recording the restoration works within the site documentation system,
- b) Continuing the documentation of the attributes of Gedi, including LiDAR and 3D imaging,

- c) Considering the establishment of an advisory mechanism for conservation issues to complement the existing management system, with representation from the National Museums of Kenya, authorities for forestry and wildlife, and the local community,
- d) Ensuring that Heritage Impact Assessments are conducted for all development proposals, including visitor facilities and infrastructure for the site,
- e) Finalising the detailed Conservation Management Plan as a priority, including the approach to restorations,
- f) Completing the disaster risk preparedness plan and developing a fire risk management plan including provisions for the needed equipment and training,
- g) Implementing the five to ten-year research plan and strategy for Gedi, including priorities for cultural mapping, archaeology, history, biodiversity, and climate change impacts,
- h) Developing an interpretation strategy for the property as a priority, including the establishment of a thematic framework, tour routes and information that convey the importance and roles of Gedi within the wider region. Community stories and materials in the local Swahili language, as well as presentation of the biodiversity values of the surrounding forests should be included in the interpretation strategy,
- i) Completing the sustainable tourism strategy and developing a detailed visitor management plan,
- j) Incorporating into the management plan the intangible cultural heritage of Gedi, including local ritual and religious practices.

**MAP OF THE BOUNDARY AND BUFFER ZONE OF THE PROPOSED NOMINATED PROPERTY  
OF THE HISTORIC TOWN AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF GEDI**



<b>LEGEND</b>		Coordinate system: UTM Zone37 South
	Boundary beacons	Datum: WGS 84
	Historic Structures	Units: Meters
	Outer wall	Sources:
	Inner wall	Ground plans of all monuments based on precision laser scans
	Nominated Property boundary (20.81 Ha)	By Prof. Heinz Rither (Zamani Project)
	Buffer Zone (22.61 Ha)	Position and shape of Historic town walls based on Handheld GNSS and James Kirkman.
		Buffer Zone based on Cadastral survey FR. No. 370/177 of 9th December 1999
		Drawn by: Dennis Milewa National Museums of Kenya January 2023

Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property