

# “THE EXTRAORDINARY ONE”



## Indian film crew hits the streets of Stone Town

By Jon Rosen

At first glance, it's an ordinary morning in the Hurumzi neighbourhood of Stone Town. Small children play noisily in the local square alongside young men hawking bright green, half-peeled oranges. Shopkeepers summon tourists inside their wood-carving bedecked shops, brightly-coloured women prepare *mandazi* on their doorsteps, and like many local residents, Ali Haji makes a desperate attempt to navigate the congested streets on a motorbike.

Yet for Haji, and his crowd of onlookers, this is no ordinary Vespa ride. Dressed in a tattered striped shirt and white scull-cap, Haji is not going about his morning routine, but is under the lights in his first ever role for the big-screen, playing a villain in the forthcoming Indian feature *Ayan*. In this scene, Haji barrels on his bike down a narrow alleyway, in hot pursuit of *Ayan's* hero, played by the well-known actor Surya – or, in this case, his stunt double Grant Powell. As a large crowd of locals gathers round – including small children watching from nearby rooftops – the stunt-director calls action and Haji narrowly misses careening into Powell, who jumps and grabs a makeshift rafter, as the speeding scooter passes below.

“This is my first time acting,” Haji – who was recruited for the film as a member of a local acrobatics troupe – says later

in his native Kiswahili. “But it's not difficult, since I'm used to performing.”

Haji is just one of approximately 60 local residents hired by the film's crew each day to serve as what S.C. Babu, CEO of the film's Chennai-based studio AVM Productions, terms “junior artists” – ranging from credited actors to “extras” like street vendors, donkey-cart owners, and traditionally-dressed Maasai. On this day, even some curious passer-by are pulled into the set to participate in what for most locals is an exotic happening. This is the first time in more than 20 years that a major film crew has been in Zanzibar.

*Ayan* – or “the extraordinary one” – is a Tamil-language thriller and the latest project from AVM, one of India's oldest and largest film studios. Directed by award-winning cinematographer K.V. Anand, the film centres around a plot involving “evil people trying to snatch a precious stone,” according to Babu, and includes segments shot in India, Malaysia, and Namibia as well as Zanzibar. The Zanzibar portion will encompass approximately 10-12 minutes of the film, including a song sequence with local dancers and a chase scene – featuring Haji, among others – that weaves through various neighbourhoods of Stone Town.

“We wanted a locale different from what we normally see in Indian movies,” Babu explains the decision to come

to Zanzibar. “To keep audiences coming back, you need something different – not the Taj Mahal over and over again. At the same time, you need a place that is safe, accessible, and amenable to filming. We came in February to scout out locations in Zanzibar, and decided the island fit our requirements.” Four months later, in association with Gallery Tours and Safaris, which handled on-ground logistics in Zanzibar, the AVM crew arrived for ten days of filming. “This is really unexplored territory as far as most Indian films are concerned,” Babu says. “It's sure to excite our audiences.”

For the film's star Surya – a household name in Indian cinema who went largely unrecognised in Stone Town – another attraction of filming in Zanzibar has been the ease of working with the local people. “The locals have been very friendly,” he notes while on break from the Hurumzi set, donning his character's ragged t-shirt, black track-jacket and aviator glasses. “We've had crowds around us all day and we're not behind schedule. They've been very accommodating – allowing us to alter their neighbourhood for the purpose of our set. If we filmed this in India, we would have to do it in a studio. But there's much more reality to the film here. This will be the first time to show such a place to our viewers.”

Not to be confused with the Hindi-language Bollywood, the Tamil-language film industry – dubbed Kollywood – has

grown steadily since its inception in 1916, releasing a record 105 films in 2007 – many of them distributed widely overseas, particularly among Tamil speakers in Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. In its 61st year of operation, AVM has produced 170 films to date, including its most recent *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007), featuring Indian megastar Rajinikanth, which set worldwide box office records for the Tamil industry and created a “nationwide frenzy” at home, according to the *Times of India*. Though *Ayan*, a smaller-budget production, is not likely to replicate such a feat, Babu predicts the film, to be released in December 2008, will gross between USD \$10-15 million.

On this day, however, such figures are still well into the future, as the crew moves on from Haji's motorbike chase to a fight scene featuring Surya in a donkey-filled square. Though the cameras will soon disappear from Stone Town – with Hurumzi returning to normalcy and Haji to his acrobatics – Babu, for one, is hopeful that *Ayan* may help galvanize interest in Zanzibar as a prime location for shooting future films. “We hope that our film may encourage others to make use of Zanzibar's beautiful locations and its heritage structures,” he says. “Our filming has generated a lot of local commerce, and we've found some great local talent. But there's a lot of talent left to be discovered.”