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REAL PEOPLE, REAL FASHION

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THE ART OF STYLE: REAL PEOPLE, REAL PLACES

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Off the Beaten Path

Shela Village, Lamu Island

SOPHY ROBERTS checks out what may well be the hippest little fishing village in all of Africa.

The Indian Ocean island of Lamu, off Kenya's northern coast, holds its pleasures close. It's around a 36-hour journey from New York, with multiple long-haul flights to Nairobi followed by hops on a small plane and boat. Once on land, donkey is the only means of transportation and air-conditioning is rare. Service is more willing than fluid, and the wild beaches—well, Turks and Caicos this isn't.

And yet, once seduced by its charms, knowing travelers find Lamu to be something of a—dare we say?—African St. Barths: a close-knit community of boho-chic insiders, the tone set by

the high percentage of regulars. Over Christmas and New Year's, wealthy Kenyans flood in, as do Brits: a smattering of Goldsmiths, English aristos, and the odd high-profile banker. And today there are even New Yorkers, in vintage Ungaro and flip-flops. The designer himself, in fact, was on the island last December, during the three weeks I spent there with my husband and two young sons; I had breakfast with him at a house where a mutual friend, preeminent Kenyan designer Anna Trzebinksi, was staying. Faces everywhere seemed familiar, all of them coming to Lamu so as not to be identified. They were there for something simple, uncomplicated. **CONTINUED »**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GILLIAN LOJEK/PHOTOLIBRARY; NIGEL PAVITT/PHOTOLIBRARY; COURTESY LAMURETREATS.COM; COURTESY PEPONI HOTEL (2); COURTESY LAMURETREATS.COM; COURTESY PEPONI HOTEL; SOPHY ROBERTS

“Lamu’s not everyone’s cup of tea,” admits Angelika Schuetz, who manages four of the island’s best house rentals, properties frequented by Prince Ernst of Hanover and his wife, Princess Caroline of Monaco, among others. “Here you meet the locals, and your kids aren’t confined to resorts. Lamu is a reality only certain parts of the high-end market will accept.”

But for those whose travel experiences don’t always have to be about wall-to-wall luxury, Lamu is just the ticket—especially when all we want right now is less flash and more authenticity. The island offers the perfect balance of style, food, and soft adventure, particularly among the donkey-wide alleys of Shela village, a 20-minute dhow ride from Lamu Town. Made up of some five mosques, a dusty square, a football pitch, and a few quirky boutiques, Shela has the best beach here, an eight-mile stretch to the island’s south. Visitors live among the coral-walled village houses, some of which have been converted into upmarket rentals, others into guest-houses, of which there are now several. There’s a handful of small restaurants, too, and one significant bar, at Peponi Hotel.

To get the measure of Shela, one has to stay at Peponi, Lamu’s social nerve center since it opened in 1967. (There are times when the bar’s crowd could compete with that at Claridge’s.) In the winter months 80 percent of Peponi’s guests are repeat visitors, Americans among them. For although it’s just a simple whitewashed 24-room guesthouse, Peponi is the only hotel that really counts here. (Baitil Aman Guesthouse, a newer Shela hotel, is a romantic, impeccably restored 18th-century house—straight out of the pages of *The World of Interiors*—but it lacks Peponi’s buzz and beachside location.)

It’s easy to fall in love with Lamu while at Peponi. I certainly did, watching my kids on the beach, lazing in hammocks, reading to the whir of ceiling fans. We went snorkeling, took boats out to explore the mangroves, enjoyed picnics with big monkeys on deserted sands. And we ate like kings. The food at Peponi—grilled prawns, Swahili curries, tuna carpaccio—is the island’s most delicious. And it gets better: Dinner for four is cheap, around \$60. We also visited



The veranda at Beach House

When in Lamu...

HOTELS **Peponi** (\$280–\$360; peponi-lamu.com) and **Baitil Aman** (\$180–\$210; baitilaman.com) are the two best hotels in Shela, with Peponi better suited to families. In Lamu Town it’s **Baytil Ajaib** (\$195–\$305; baytilajaib.com), an American-owned guesthouse with four doubles.

RENTALS **Bisletti House** (from \$420) is available through **Lamu Retreats** (lamu-retreats.com), which represents several other reasonably priced, pretty, and characterful properties, including the flower-laden **Jasmine House** (from \$420), sleeping ten adults and four children. The **Beach, Shela, Palm, and Garden Houses** (\$310–\$1,360) can be booked through **Shela House** (shelahouse.com). The feminine **El Yaffir** (\$1,500), sleeping six, and Chris Hanley’s **Hilltop Fort** (\$3,000–\$6,000), which accommodates ten, are available through **Journeys by Design** (journeysbydesign.com).

SHOPS **Aman** (254-733/455-821) in Shela sells beautiful silk and cotton skirts and shirts for men and women, slouchy leather bags made in Kenya, exotic semiprecious jewels, and a smattering of household items—all curated with impeccable taste by Sandy Bornman, the South African owner. In Lamu Town, **Baraka Gallery**, located on Lamu Town’s main street, just off the town square, is best for a wide selection of African antiques, textiles, and jewelry.

Lamu Town to browse the tiny shops packed with silverware and textiles, wandering through the quiet alleys of this former trading post, which over the centuries has absorbed Omani, Indian, and Portuguese influences.

Peponi is the best place for Lamu first-timers because it lets them edge in slowly to a place that might otherwise intimidate. The island, unlike the Maldives or Mauritius, isn’t all packaged up by resorts—there simply aren’t any.

There are, however, more and more private homes available for rent. In Shela alone there are now upwards of 50, estimates Jake da Motta, who runs Lamu Retreats, one of the island’s top rental agencies; that number has gone up 12 percent since 2005, when he bought Jasmine House here. And there are more. “Some of the owners are too wealthy to care about renting,” says Da Motta. “But they let friends stay.”

Last Christmas, after a week at Peponi, my family and I moved on to Bisletti House, a Swahili-style home formerly owned by Jack Couffer, an American cinematographer who worked on *Out of Africa*. The walled

garden was large, and we’d watch the boys nod off during sermons overheard from the mosque next door (the island is Islamic). Thirty yards away was the seafront, where fishermen sat in the shade of their fat-bellied boats. Bisletti’s exceptional cook made ceviche, crab curry, exotic salads with lime and coriander, and the style of the house suited us perfectly: local antiques, whitewashed coral walls, intricately carved stone alcoves.

There are smarter houses in Shela, of course. The most dramatic is probably the Hilltop Fort, owned by American movie producer Chris Hanley and his wife, Roberta. A mix of traditional Omani architecture and John Pawson-esque minimalism, Hanley’s home is as good as it gets for those who want cool, contemporary living, with air-conditioning, a vast pool, and superattentive service. I hung out with Hanley one afternoon. And slowly, Lamu’s inside track began to reveal itself. I learned of the actors, artists, architects, and filmmakers who come—drawn to an island where they can be barefoot, the only wardrobe essential the striped cotton sarong known locally as a *kikoi*. That’s what makes Lamu different: It’s glamorous, but it has nothing to do with logo’d beach bags.