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African queen

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS TIM BEDDOW



The main living area, above the entrance hall, provides sunny and shady areas for reading and relaxing

This architect-designed house on the idyllic island of Lamu has provided its owner with the compact, jewel-like 'palace' of her dreams



here's no doubt that Lamu has – even for first timers – that 'must have a house here' factor. Its beguiling mix of laid-back charm, history, offbeat characters, pristine beaches, bohemian chicness and rooftop dinners with dhows floating silently past in the moonlight has an understandable, irresistible attraction. What's more, it has what so many 'island paradises' lack: a real life, with schools, shops, mosques, businesses, children chasing each other around the narrow streets and people going about their daily lives. Somehow all this gives the 'mzungus' (the white residents and visitors) a notion that it's a normal place – which it certainly isn't.

Mary Greenwell, make-up artist to the stars, who first came to Lamu with Tonio and Anna Trzebinski 10 years ago, was captivated by the lives of the creative, dynamic couple (artist Tonio was tragically killed in 2001), whom she met in Montauk, New York, and travelled with in Kenya. 'It was a whole new world I had longed to explore,' says Mary.

After two weeks of safari 'up country', they arrived on Lamu to stay with friends in Shela, a village at the southern end of the island, 20 minutes' walk from Lamu Town, which was first inhabited in the fifteenth century. 'It was the calm after the storm,' says Mary, 'and the most romantic place I have been to, with its gentle breeze, sweet smell of jasmine, and stars that seem so close.'

It took a couple more trips before the island got under her skin, prompting her to buy two empty plots; one on the beach of the island of Manda opposite, and the other in Shela, nestling between existing houses and the Friday Mosque near Peponi Hotel. 'It did not take long for me to realise that the charm of village life outweighed the seafront view,' says Mary, 'so I sold Manda, secure in my decision to build in the village.'

The task of designing the house fell to renowned architect Claudio Modola – who has built, among other projects, the landmark fort in the dunes beyond the hotel. 'The plot was quite modest but well placed,' says Claudio. 'I had to make the building sufficiently tall to view Manda across the channel and catch the monsoon breezes. In addition, I felt it necessary to give the house a sort of double personality – public and somehow formal; palatial, yet also soft and emotional.' Mary agrees: 'Minimalism and harsh edges were out. I wanted something welcoming but grand. We talked a lot about colour, texture and structure.'

Claudio's sketches were spot on, and the construction began. Local Swahili elders gave him and his team permission to spread their building materials over the public square, in exchange for coral blocks to build a small temple round the nearby tomb of the philosopher Sheikh Bin Amin. A ferocious rainy season slowed operations, 'But,' says Claudio, 'I was fortunate in having as my site manager local Kenyan Brendan Hill, who had the energy to work 14-hour days in the most difficult circumstances.'

Thirteen months later, Mary's 'petit palais' was complete. It was named El Yafir, after a legendary town in Saudi Arabia's Empty Quarter where peace and harmony reigned. Mary was over the moon when she first saw the finished building. 'I was lost for words. It was more beautiful than I possibly could have imagined, with great grace and sweetness,' she says.

Claudio had built a classic gem, perfectly tailored to his client's needs. A huge Rajasthani door was shipped from Mumbai for the entrance, which leads into a deliciously cool entrance hall with arches and a fountain in the corner. Above is the main living space, with sunny and shaded areas for dining, reading or sleeping off a hard session on the beach. A staircase takes you up to the guest floor, comprising two bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms, while Mary's private eyrie and terrace are above. At the top, a roof terrace for sundowners has views, described by Claudio as 'almost biblical in appearance', looking over the village. Furniture is a mixture of locally commissioned pieces, lights from India and decorative objects shipped over from London.

For Mary, the house really is jewel-like. 'From outside, it sparkles at night with light coming through the shutters. It's majestic, yet gentle: an eclectic dream which is home – my home – and I simply love it' □

Claudio Modola (www.claudiodmodola.net) • El Yafir is available to rent. For details, contact Journeys By Design (tel: 01273-623790; www.journeysbydesign.com)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Mary Greenwell's house, situated in the heart of Shela village, is built of stone in the local style, mixed with Omani and Moorish influences. In Mary's bedroom, cotton mosquito nets soften the lines of the stone interior. The hall, entered via a Rajasthani door, shipped from Mumbai, has a fountain designed by architect Claudio Modola. The living area opens on to a sunny terrace. Cushions made from rough linen grain bags turn benches into comfortable seating. The chairs in the dining area were made by local craftsmen. The view over the village from the top roof terrace is 'almost biblical'



