

THE  TIMES

travel

INSIDE



Saturday May 17 2008 • "Only when you are lost can love find itself in you" H el ene Cixous (b.1937)



KENYA'S ISLAND IDYLL

Lose yourself in Lamu **12-13** Robert Crampton sees Paris through the eyes of his son **4-5**
Hotels to beat the euro **6** Florida theme park showdown: Toy Story vs The Simpsons **12-13**

No traffic, just donkeys or dhows

Less edgy than Zanzibar, less hassle than Mombasa, the island of Lamu is a true Indian Ocean idyll, says **Jill Crawshaw**

APART from a tiny ambulance and a police car, there are no vehicles on Lamu — the town's alleys are too narrow for traffic. Locals and visitors alike, the latter include Princess Caroline of Monaco, Mick Jagger *et al* who have fallen under the island's spell, either have to walk, hire a donkey or hail a passing dhow.

Borne by the trade winds, merchants, sultans, slaves and adventurers have washed up on the little Indian Ocean island, once the fiefdom of the Sultans of Oman and Zanzibar and a wealthy trading port in its 18th-century heyday.

In the 21st century, well-heeled Western tourists are following in their wake, lured by its laidback charm, golden beaches and the seduction of the old Swahili stone town with its

crumbling mansions and secret courtyards. The sheer tropical languor seeps into your bones as soon as you arrive at the tiny airport. The island is Islamic and highly traditional, but less edgy than Zanzibar and with less hassle than in Mombasa.

Lamu is usually tacked on to safari holidays on the mainland; it deserves to be a destination in its own right.

VILLAS

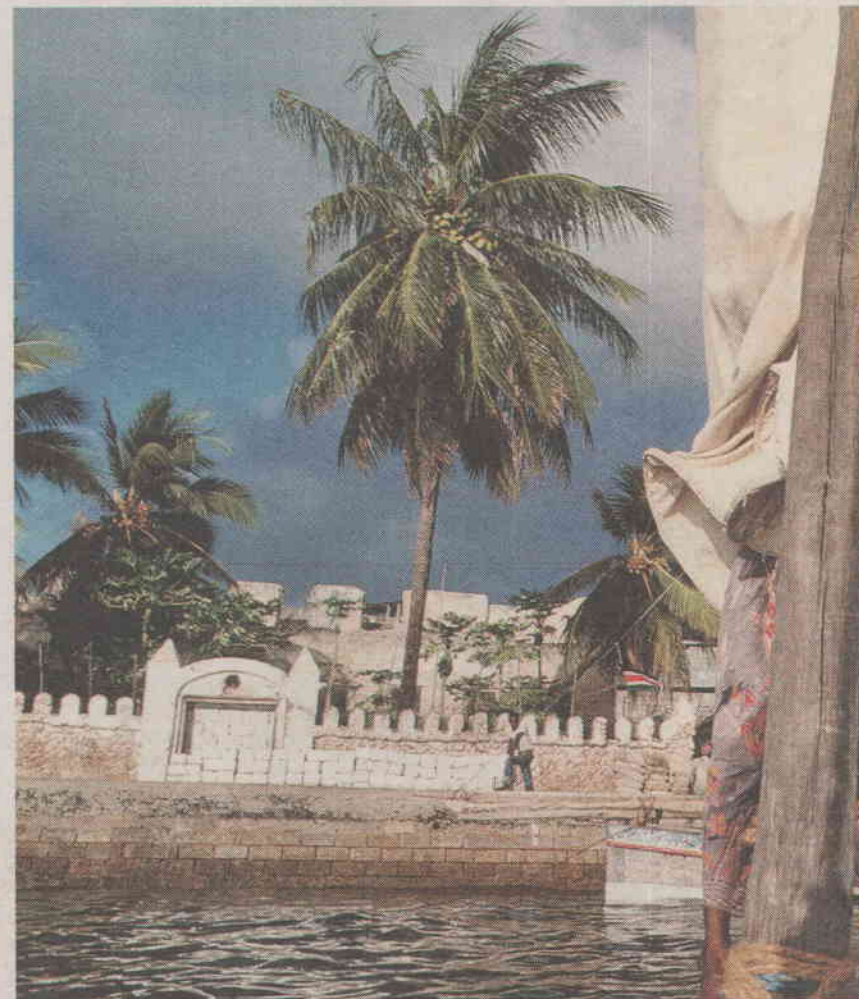
The island doesn't sport the five-star deluxe extravaganzas of, say, Mauritius or the Maldives, but has a fascinating, occasionally eccentric, range of accommodation. All Lamu's villas are fully staffed.

Crème de la crème of the villas, the **Dhow House** in Shela, 20 minutes from Lamu town, takes its name from

the humble boat-building enterprise on the beach at the bottom of the garden where dhows are hammered by hand and caulked with shark oil, using centuries-old techniques.

With its sybaritic pillared atrium, brass chests, sunken gazebo and large pool, there's nothing modest about the villa built as a private holiday home. The tales of Sheherazade seem to echo from the walls of the circular master bedroom, with its great round bed and glittering decor, which overlooks a courtyard flanked by more luxurious en suite guest rooms.

Seven staff pamper you, but discreetly; young Evan, a trained chef, consults guests every morning about the day's menu — don't miss his coriander soup, coconut and fish curry



Lamu has been a magnet for adventurers since its 18th-century heyday. Princess C



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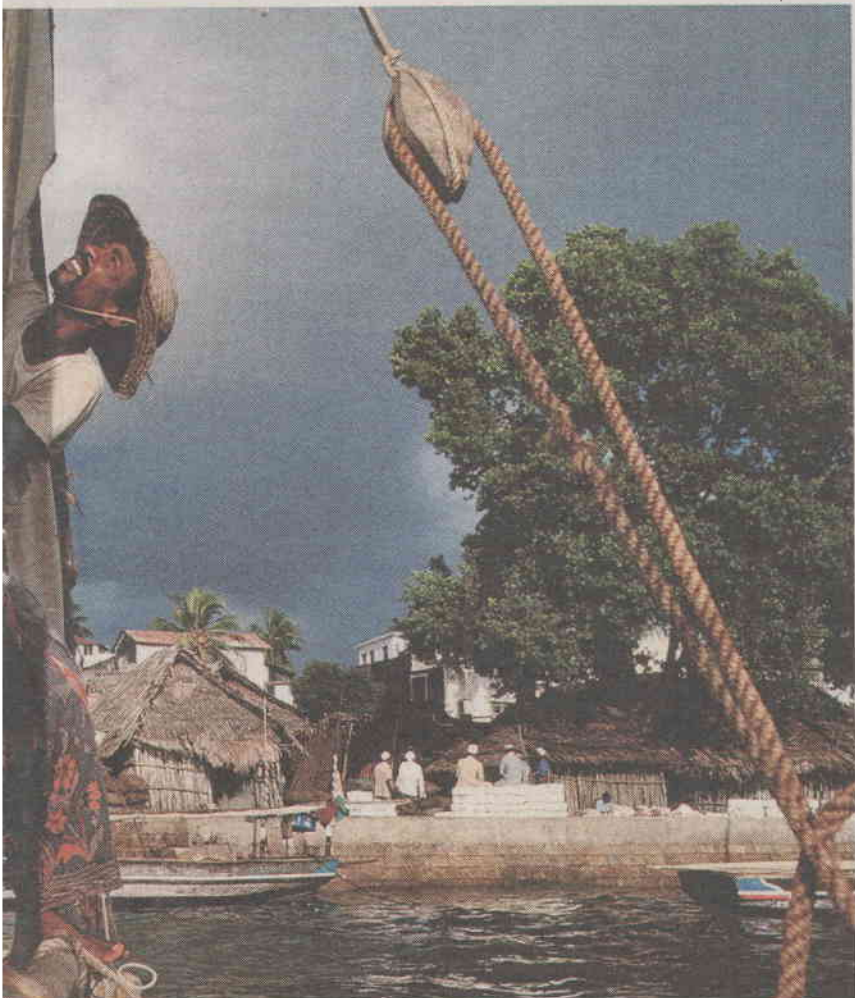
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with local thatch and reed and colourful fabrics in the 16 en suite cottages hidden under palms and takamaka trees where a new pool has just been added. Full board is generous with copious wine, afternoon teas and fish banquets and wildlife walks and sundowners in the hills.

Sailing trips are available on Lamu's largest traditional dhow, the *Utamaduni*, which guests can also hire for two or three-day cruises. A Cessna C206 aircraft is based at the lodge for scenic flights and transfers to and from Nairobi or Mombasa. From £250pp a night on full board, with *Journeys by Design*.

Peponi Hotel features high on most hotel groupies' charts. There's no spa, no minibars or phones in the rooms, and morning showers can be distinctly tepid owing to the solar power. What the Peponi Hotel has is character — bags of it — and a guest list that would make many a top five-star establishment drool with envy.

The 40-year-old watering hole — to which a pool has been added only recently — rambles organically along the seaford and it is difficult to tell where the hotel begins. Dhow captains pull in alongside its jetty bringing wine or beer, fishermen



Need to know

Kenya Airways (01784 888222, www.kenya-airways.com) has return fares to Lamu via Nairobi from £532, business class with flat bed is from £1,782.

Journeys by Design (01273 623790, www.journeysbydesign.com); *Africa Sky* (0870 9040925, www.africaspy.co.uk). Kenya Tourist Board (020-7367 0931, www.magicalkenya.com).

Reading *The Rough Guide to Kenya* (Rough Guides, £15.99)

offer crabs and lobster for dinner straight from the ocean.

Several staff have worked here for more than 30 years, often with their offspring. The hotel is the natural hub of the village, with most of its social scene centred around the colonnaded terrace, and a bar where up to 200 or so try to pack in during high season for beer (£2), glass of red wine (£2.50) and dreamy complimentary tapas.

The owners, Carol and Lars Korsden, organise their own excellent guided walking tours of Lamu Town — wear stout shoes to protect your feet from the donkey droppings and open drains. And if you're lucky enough to be there during the turtle-hatching season in July, join a trip to wild, empty beaches for the magical experience of watching hundreds of baby turtles scrambling out of their nests and heading for the sea.

Carol runs her own Marine Conservancy to protect these much-poached creatures.

Seven nights' B&B start at £1,195pp, including flights and transfers with *Africa Sky*.

T More on Lamu and Kenya's islands

timesonline.co.uk/kenyatravel

Caroline of Monaco and Mick Jagger are among visitors to have fallen under its spell

and home-made bread. Gardener Jackson gets offended if as much as a single hibiscus blossom drifts into the pool. Large grounds and grassy lawns are ideal for families and couples alike who prefer their own space. Sleeps 12, from £1,600 a night with *Journeys by Design* (which can also arrange flights and transfers).

Rivalling the Dhow House in Lamu's glamour stakes, the **Beach House**, the last property in Shela village before the dunes ripple away to the horizon, boasts an illustrious pedigree as the holiday pad for regular visitors Princess Caroline and husband Prince Ernst of Hanover.

Sleek, chic and minimalist, its five suites, each with huge balconies, wrap themselves around a pool that seems to merge into the ocean. A venerable baobab tree shades the open terrace.

Sleeps ten, from £750 a night with *Journeys by Design*.

Behind the beach, hidden in the huddled village, you step from dusty alleys into the shady courtyards and elegant interiors of three handsome old Swahili mansions — **Shela House**, **Palm House** and the smaller **Garden House**. These have recently been converted into luxury tourist houses — all cool, arched and uncluttered, with

JOIN A TRIP TO A DESERTED BEACH TO WATCH BABY TURTLES

raised thatched roofs, rooftop terraces with panoramic views and furnished with old carved four-posters, billowing white drapes and local artifacts. None has a pool.

Shela House and Palm House (sleep ten) are from £350 a night, *Garden Cottage* (sleeps six) from £160 a night, all with *Journeys by Design*.

Still in Shela, and with its own plunge pool and lush, leafy little garden, **Jasmine House** is a cosy hotch-potch of roof terraces, *makuti* (thatch), hammocks and urns. Fisher-

men call each day with their catch, and goats and donkeys clop past the gate. This is a chilled-out little *pied à terre* for those who like to feel part of a village.

Sleeps ten, from £230 a night with *Journeys by Design*.

In complete contrast, on the isolated west coast, the swanky new **Kizingoni Beach Villas** are definitely designer inspired. All are differently styled — one is aimed at families, another with its huge terrace and music systems will suit party people, but each offers a raft of glossy beach toys, including a speedboat and boat captain.

Villas (sleeping 8) are from £2,775 a week with *Journeys by Design*.

BEACH CAMPS

Castaways should head for the western tip of the island, and the latest of Lamu's beach camps, **Kizingo**, don their *kangas* or *kikois* (local sarongs) and spend their days scattering crabs on the silvery sands and dipping in the creek (there is no pool). Evenings are for joining Mary Joe, Kizingo's ebullient owner and husband Louis in the bar; the trick after dinner is to find your way by torchlight to your *banda*, one of six scattered among the dunes. From £100pp a night for full board with *Journeys by Design*.

The original beach camp blueprint, **Kipungani Explorer**, farther along the coast, is busier with a pool and 14 *bandas*, some on stilts, their *makuti* roofs, reed mats and blinds all made by craftsmen in Kipungani village near by. Watersports and sunset trips are popular when the tide is in; the remoteness of the coast also makes it a playground for dolphins. Seven nights' full board, including flights and transfers, are from £1,395pp with *Africa Sky*.

For barefoot luxury, the immaculately run but relaxed **Manda Bay** on Manda Island, taken over by two Anglo-Kenyan families four years ago, is a real find. Antiques blend

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