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Catch the drift

A hit with wastrels, writers and royals, Kenya's Lamu is one of the most storied corners on earth. It has been lying low for a while – now we revisit its classics

By Peter Browne. Photographs by Jack Johns & Owen Tozer

MET A BLIND MAN IN MATONDONI who had worked on the most majestic dhow on the Swahili coast of East Africa 50 years ago. Long before *Tusitiri* was refitted as an elegant home, she was a workhorse plying the trade routes between Arabia and Mombasa, carrying spices, coffee, skins, ivory and mangrove poles.

Sitting beneath a tamarind tree in his home village on the Kenyan island of Lamu, quietly weaving rope for donkey harnesses from memory, Bwana Mzee could still recall his three-month-long journeys on the stately dhow, sailing north to Oman and Yemen on the Kaskazi and in the opposite direction on the Kusi trade winds.

In the late 1980s, a Norwegian family, the Astrups, found *Tusitiri*'s abandoned skeleton on a beach and decided to rebuild the vessel, calling on Bwana Mzee to help put her back together again. After that, he sailed on the dhow for 22 more years, voyaging as far south as the Quirimbas Archipelago in Mozambique, where he lost his heart and fathered a daughter, Asha, but was never to return.

The word safari is Swahili for 'journey', and it is still used in its purest form along this coast. Today the boat can be chartered from the Astrups to sail up to Kiwayu, an isolated but mesmerisingly beautiful islet on the Somali border, but it is more commonly found plying the waters of the Lamu archipelago, a timeless world of reflected sea and sky.

The islands' mix of Arab architecture, Chinese and Indian culture and superb artistry (silversmiths and wood carvers proliferate) has proved dreamy to travellers since hippies hailed Lamu as Africa's Kathmandu in the 1960s. And they still attract curious travellers and soothsayers rather than flag-following sightseers, their remoteness a draw rather than a hindrance. The three largest

The mix of cultures has proved dreamy to travellers since hippies hailed the islands as Africa's Kathmandu in the 1960s

are the sandy isthmus of Lamu itself, the coralline island of Manda and the biggest but least-known, mysterious Pate, which is only accessible at high tide. Resolutely traditional and almost entirely Muslim, there's nowhere more authentically Swahili along this stretch of Indian Ocean shoreline.

A vessel such as *Tusitiri* is a languorous base for exploring Lamu's bustling villages and emptier margins, if even just for a night or two. Measuring 65 feet from almond-shaped bow to stern, with a deck polished to a rich brown patina, she moves with surprising grace and speed; it takes seven sailors to raise anchor and hoist her imposing sails. I joined the dhow from the village of Shela, one of just four settlements on Lamu and a honeypot for royalty, artists, rock stars and actors. We sailed past Lamu Town, the oldest and best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa, and on to Matondoni, where *Tusitiri* was built and Bwana Mzee lives quietly in the simple coral-brick house he was born in. From there we continued our circumnavigation of the island to anchor at remote Kipungani, a tiny cluster of thatched houses fronted by a deserted, dune-backed beach, where we slept soundly on deck beneath the sparkling equatorial skies.

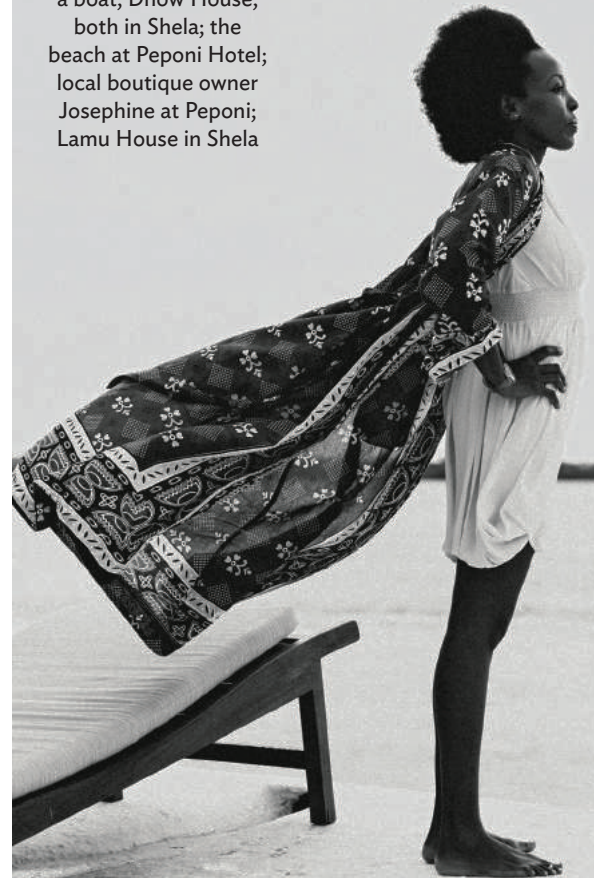
ONE AFTERNOON, I TOOK a tender from the dhow to explore the ruins of Takwa, a once-thriving trading town on the island of Manda abandoned in the 17th century. For half an hour we motored slowly up a narrow, shallow creek lined with mangrove forests rich in spiny lobster and shrimp, and when the clear water became

From top, the pool at Peponi Hotel; an islander; crab at Manda Bay beach lodge; a balcony at Peponi. Previous pages, from left: The Majlis hotel on Lamu; Peponi





Clockwise, from top left:
a boat; Dhow House,
both in Shela;
the beach at Peponi Hotel;
local boutique owner
Josephine at Peponi;
Lamu House in Shela







From top, children in Shela; backgammon at Manda Bay; sand dunes; typical architecture in Shela. Opposite, Tusitiri dhow



too shallow to navigate, we walked, coming eventually to a clearing. The remains of a grand mosque dominate the site; its outer walls etched with fine-line graffiti images of sailing dhows and Arabian daggers. Baobab trees stand sentry over a sacred tomb distinguished by a single soaring column. It is said that Takwa was forsaken when its wells ran dry (even today the island is devoid of fresh water) and its occupants made their way to Lamu to settle in what is now Shela village.

Pole, pole (slow down) is one of my favourite Swahili sayings and time certainly has a more languid dimension here, where the medieval world and ancestral spirits prosper still. Twice a year, villagers visit the pillared tomb at Takwa to pray for rain, and four centuries after Shela was founded it is still seen by some islanders as an uppity upstart and rival to Lamu Town, which lies two miles away.

Both are linked by a coastal path, along which donkeys serve as taxis and pick-up trucks carrying coral bricks and lime mortar. Until recently the only vehicles on Lamu were a Land Rover belonging to the district commissioner, a tractor and an ambulance. Today a fleet of *boda boda* – whiny motorcycle taxis – whizz along its rudimentary backroads and busy promenade, puncturing the *Arabian Nights* atmosphere of Lamu Town itself, a UNESCO World Heritage Centre since 2001.

For more than half a century the Peponi Hotel has been a part of the fabric of neighbouring Shela village. The handsome seafront house was built in the 1930s for the colonial district commissioner, a Major Sharp (known as ‘Sharpie’), and sold in the 1950s to Henri Bernier of the Swiss Nestlé family. Bernier in turn sold the house to Danish-born Aage Korschen and his German wife Wera in 1967.

Time has a more languid dimension in this place where the medieval world and ancestral spirits prosper still

The couple had lost their Highlands farm after Kenyan independence and had determined to leave Africa. But, after setting sail for Europe from Mombasa, they stopped here and, persuaded by its remoteness and great beauty, decided to buy a house and open a small hotel, then with just four bedrooms.

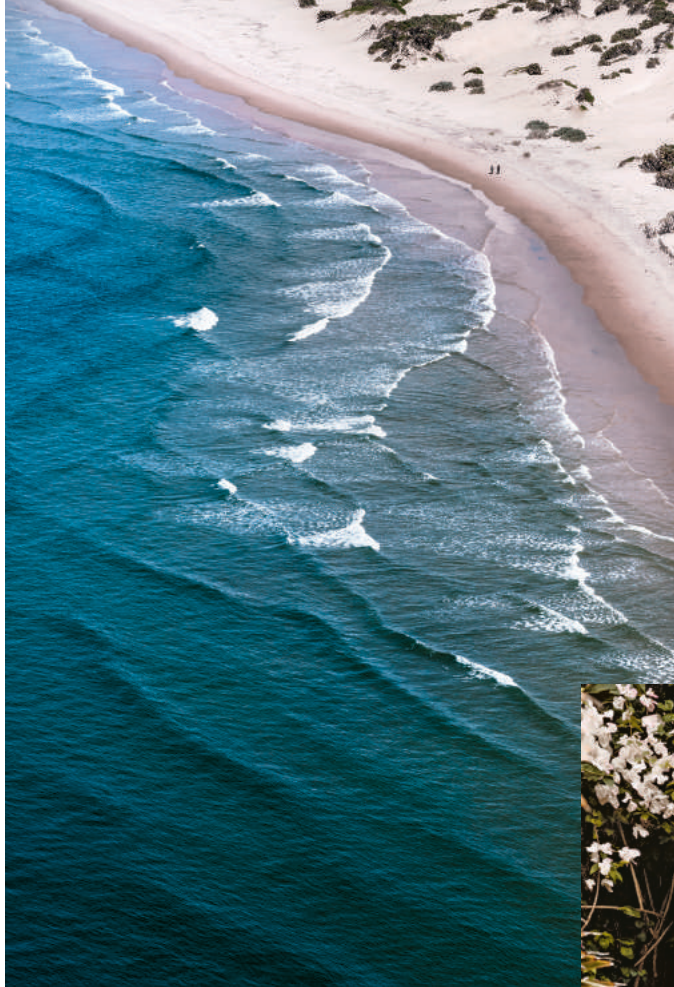
Peponi, which is still in the same family, has expanded organically over the years to a gaggle of 28 rooms set in whitewashed buildings, arranged protectively around the old house in grounds full of palms. Early on, the Korschens added the deep, colonnaded veranda overlooking the Lamu Channel, where guests gather to gossip over sundowners and watch the sailing dhows glide past. But the hotel really took off after the Korschens’ son, Lars, picked up the reins when his father died in 1976. Some of his earliest guests were Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall, whom he took fishing; Yehudi Menuhin once agreed to play Bach for guests after supper.

Small and quirky, with none of the usual trappings (there are still no televisions or telephones in the rooms), Peponi cultivated and gathered in sophisticated, worldly novelists and foreign correspondents, great white hunters and robust conservationists. The hotel’s celebrity status was sealed in the 1990s when Prince Ernst August of Hanover built a mansion next door and renovated three other Shela houses to rent out through a discreet agent at Hollywood prices. Soon stars including Sting, Kate Moss and Jude Law were hanging out at Peponi enjoying the anonymity afforded by a cramped, low-lit bar on a far-flung African island with only donkeys or dhows to spread word of their location.

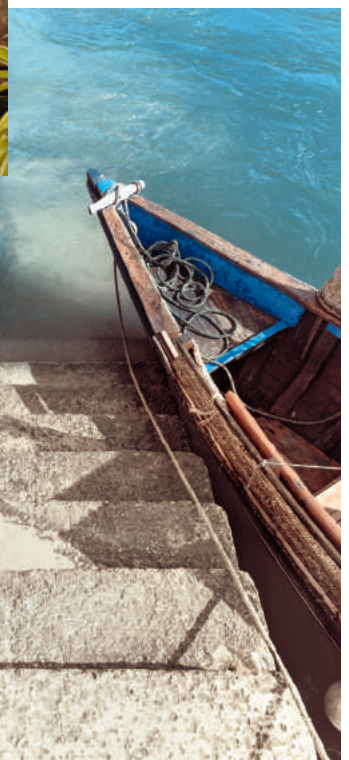
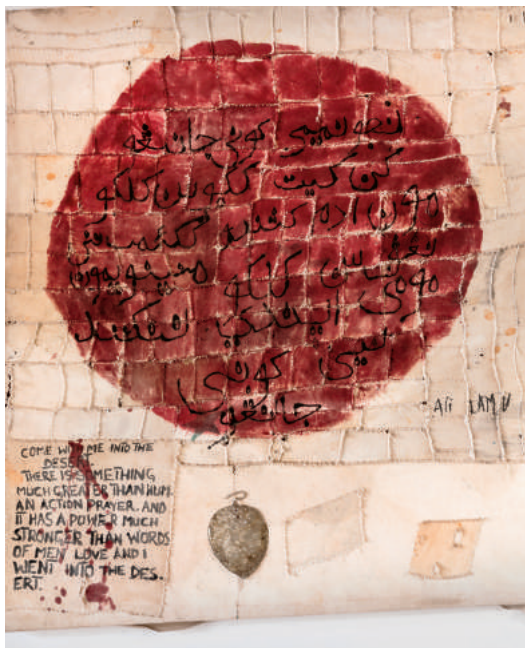
Virtually all visitors to Lamu end up on Peponi’s bougainvillea-shaded terrace at some point. In the early morning, expats



Clockwise from top left: bougainvillea in Shela; the Dhow House roof; a girl in Lamu Town; Manda Bay; Dhow House; Tusitiri; the pool at Dhow House



Clockwise from top left: a beach near the fort in Lamu's north; The Majlis hotel; shadows; and a boat, both in Shela; children on the beach, Kiwayu; a detail at Dhow House; a teenager at Peponi Hotel



stop for coffee before walking their dogs along the empty eight-mile beach just south of the hotel; sunbathers clamber up the stairs from the calm tidal beach in front of it for lunch, and freshly scrubbed young men from Nairobi in linen shirts and *kikoi* gather for Tusker beers at dusk. It also has by far the best restaurant in town, hosted each evening by the owner, Carol Korschen (her husband Lars died in 2014), or the general manager Andrew Gruselle, accompanied always by his faithful Rhodesian ridgeback.

LAMU IS JUST STARTING to emerge from more than seven years of isolation, the result of travel bans imposed following Somali terrorist attacks in 2011. After that, visitors stopped coming overnight and hotels, guest houses, restaurants and shops fell like skittles. Some didn't survive, but most have reopened since the ban was lifted two years ago, and there's a real sense of purpose and optimism about the place.

In the labyrinthine lanes rising steeply behind the waterfront in Shela village, amid the mosques and private houses owned by wealthy Europeans, there are art galleries and tiny boutiques selling beads and boho jewellery, *kikois* and fabrics. The most elegant of these is Aman, owned by the South African-born designer Sandy Bornman. Her delicately embroidered clothes, which are run up by local tailors in hand-loomed fabrics from India, are bought by the screenwriters and poets, architects, stylists and musicians who blow through Shela all the time.

'I am very happy here,' says Bornman, who visited on holiday 19 years ago and never left. 'When I arrived as a single mother with two little girls, we were made to feel welcome and safe. The whole village took care of us from the start.

The people here are kind, generous and warm. We stick together but respect our differences. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else.'

If Shela displays a curated, contemporary edge, Lamu Town has the raw appeal of centuries-old traditions. Even today sailing dhows are built by hand without drawings or plans; the cotton *kofia* hats worn by Muslim men are embroidered with personalised motifs; the carved Swahili doors, the *kiti cha jeuri* chairs introduced in colonial times and spindle beds copied from Indian designs are all part and parcel of the cultural swirl of these islands.

Wandering around town one morning with Nassir Omar, a man of equal Yemeni and Omani origin, I stopped at carpenters' workshops where both the techniques and timeworn chisels are passed down through generations. I met Mbarak O Slim, who makes silver pendants and rings from luminous shards of antique Chinese pottery picked up on Shela beach. Later, I was introduced to Isaiah Chepyator, an artist who creates colourful fish sculptures from old

dhow wood decorated with beach detritus. Together we sat in the town square in front of the fort and talked about the 21st-century problem of plastic waste as we watched the robed men and veiled women, the donkey carts and feral felines said to be direct descendants of the sacred cats of Egyptian pharaohs.

ONE DAY I TOOK a speedboat to the hotel Manda Bay. Rustic and romantic, it was built in the 1960s by Bruno Brighetti, a colourful Italian musician. Then called the Blue Safari Club, it became known as the ultimate barefoot hideaway, equally popular with glossy Italian actors and doughty aristocrats, and recorded for posterity by celebrity photographer Slim Aarons.

Brighetti sold the club to Fuzz Dyer and Andy Roberts, sons of prominent white Kenyan families, 16 years ago. The friends had overspent on a fancy deep-sea fishing boat and thought they'd better justify the cost by starting a fishing-safari business. Based here, they started viewing properties in the area, until it dawned on them that Brighetti had already bagged the best location: Ras Kilindini, an iridescent peninsula with a calm swimming beach at high tide (and walking beach at low), plus no irritating sand flies or recorded cases of malaria. An offer was made, a deal struck and Manda Bay was born.

Manda has always been a family place: owned, run and oriented. The Dyers' and Roberts' four children were aged eight and 10 when their parents moved out here. Kerry Roberts, now 24, describes her childhood as 'like having two mums and two dads. We were never bored. We'd go digging for clams or harvesting oysters and eat them on the beach; we played football and volleyball, with the staff against guests.' There were some inevitable cutbacks during the recent troubles, but the old place is back to looking a lot like its past self: a good-natured and unapologetically old-school retreat

Tales of Lamu

ANNABEL ELWES

Photographer

'I lived here for 11 years, and had never been so happy. Women in the street give you ylang ylang to pin to your shirt and you smell glorious all night. My boyfriend was the brother of Lars Korschen, who ran Peponi.

At parties on the roof I'd teach the teenagers how to dance the Bus Stop. There was a lot of dancing. We'd watch the glorious dhow races – and sometimes take part. Then there's the hat competition, where locals make hats out of shells, straw and seaweed: one man made his out of a brick. After a while we'd go round to people's houses and sit on the floor on great big cushions and eat Swahili dinners by candlelight.'

CAMILLA LOWTHER

Founder of creative talent agency CLM

'We'll sometimes take a dhow to Manda Bay or Kipungani to go snorkelling and picnic on fresh fish. For lunch, there's a new hotel in the village of Shela called Kijani. It's got a lovely garden surrounded by rooms, with a view of the boats on the water.'

ALESSANDRA GALTRUCCO

Artist

'At six o'clock you go to Peponi. Everyone is there. It's always an interesting mix from all over the world: the Hanovers and other local families, film producers, French intellectuals, American models, Italian expats, documentarians who've been working in Kenya, musicians.'

SUZANNE SHARP

Co-founder, The Rug Company

'When you first arrive by speedboat from the airport, it's like the opening of a James Bond movie. There's that hustle and bustle, people and boats, fishermen and ferries. It's very hot, and very real, and it immediately makes you curious and draws you in.'

MARY GREENWELL

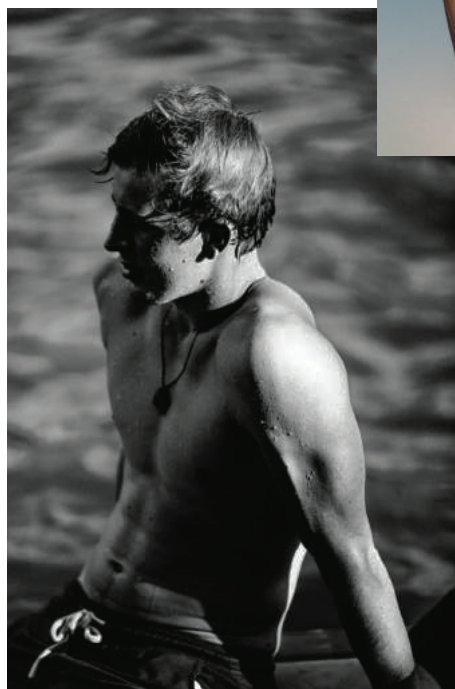
Make-up artist

'There are no cars, no pavement, no sound pollution at night, so I sleep like a baby. You cannot wear Jimmy Choos; you have to walk around in flip-flops or bare feet as the whole place is sandy. Everyone is equal here; it's not at all competitive. Everyone just becomes themselves.'



The beach at
Manda Bay





Clockwise from far left,
diving off *Tusitiri*;
a map of Manda at
The Majlis hotel;
Tusitiri; stairs at
Ndoto House, Shela;
a sail; post-swim on
the dhow; Manda Bay
beachfront; The
Majlis; a mosque in
Shela; a Lamu girl



with fishing, sailing and good times at its heart. Even today, there's still no glass in the windows of the bandas, which were built with mangrove poles and mats woven from palm leaves. The pure sea-salty breeze is the only air-conditioning needed and geckos come and go as they please.

THE FAST BOAT FROM MANDA BAY to enigmatic Pate Island skims across the glassy blue water at high tide, past fishermen freediving for lobsters and along the island's mangrove-forested southern coast. I had heard stories about Pate from Mia Miji who, with his English wife Kirsty, hosts guests on the *Tusitiri*. Mia was born and raised on Lamu but his mother's family hailed from this outpost that outsiders seemed to know little about.

Pate village, where I landed, was once an important port and even in its ruined state resembles Lamu and Shela in its maze of narrow streets. Pate islanders are mostly subsistence fishermen, and I found the villagers repairing nets and cultivating modest crops of tobacco amid the remnants of once-grand houses and mosques. The arrival of *wazungu* (white people) is still a novelty, but they made me welcome, and a young boy was hastily summoned to be my guide. Mohammed appeared to know more about Arsenal and Chelsea than the antique associations of his village, but we passed a pleasant hour among the ruins before catching a *boda boda* to Siyu, riding three-up along a dirt road through coconut plantations, radio blaring.

I was taken to this village because the few *wazungu* who come to Pate ask to see its impressive fort, a national monument since the 1950s. The keeper alerted a friend and soon I had a second guide, Salim, to escort me around the crumbling tombs of historic Siyu's spiritual leaders. As it happened, Salim had once worked at an archaeological dig at an abandoned village on the island called Shanga. According to local lore, a bedraggled contingent of shipwrecked Chinese sailors stumbled onto Pate in the 15th century and, having proved their worth by dispatching a python, were permitted to settle and marry. The name Shanga, it is said, derives from Shanghai. Speculation that descendants of the Chinese sailors still lived on Pate has swirled around for centuries, encouraged by the high cheekbones and Asiatic features of some of the islanders. In 2002, a DNA test conducted on a family in Siyu, neighbours of Salim, provided proof of Chinese ancestry – the myth became real.

I thanked Salim for his time and left Siyu, hurtling through the coconut groves, and the centuries, to where the speedboat lay waiting. At Manda Bay, I walked along the beach to the tip of Ras Kilindini peninsula and the open sea. On the way back, I could make out the distant cranes of dredgers working on a vast new port that will one day rival Mombasa's.

As in so many places, change is on its way to these isolated islands. But that night life continued at Manda Bay just as it has done for 50 years, with a barefoot supper served on a starlit beach and the sound of ice-cubes and laughter at the bar. This will always be a place for dreaming, where herds of buffalo swim across from the mainland to be fed like cattle near the ruins of a ninth-century Arabic town and best friends take risks to raise their children on a tiny island in the great swell of the Indian Ocean. ⑦

Getting here

Journeys by Design offers a six-night itinerary in Lamu from £5,250 per person (based on four sharing), full board, including two nights at Peponi Hotel in a superior room, two nights on *Tusitiri* on an exclusive basis (up to

10 on board) and two nights at Manda Bay in a beachfront room, all domestic flights, boat and road transfers. Kenya Airways flies from London to Nairobi from £530 per person. +44 1273 623790; journeysbydesign.com