

A HOUSE CALLED *Jasmine*

Nowhere in Kenya had the country's history, culture and hospitality been richer and impressed David Rogers and his family more than on Lamu Island, where they rented a gorgeous villa for less than you'd imagine.

As the slithers of startlingly white sand and deep blue sea of Kenya's Lamu Archipelago passed beneath our plane, we could almost feel the sand between our toes. My wife Jenni and I and our two boys, aged five and six, had been on a quintessential African safari: we'd camped in tents beneath the imposing massif of Kilimanjaro; followed incomprehensibly large herds of wildebeest over the Mara Plains and had even taken to the skies in a hot-air balloon. Tired from early wakeups and dusty from long, bumpy roads, we were now ready for the refreshing splash of tropical waters.

A sleek, wooden water taxi took us from the airstrip on Manda Island to Lamu Island, which lay less than a kilometre away. Our first impression was of lateen-rigged dhows being pushed along by *kaskazi* monsoon winds with elaborately designed Moorish buildings as their remarkable backdrop. This was no typical bucket-and-spade holiday. Lamu is Kenya's oldest settlement and we were thrown back millennia to when Indian and Arab sailors followed the winds along this tropical coast and traded fortunes in ivory, slaves and spice.

We came ashore in the fishing village of Shela, just a few kilometres from the old town, and followed our guide through a twisting maze of narrow streets, which were hemmed close by multi-storey dwellings made of plaster, mangrove wood and coral rag. On the way, we passed old men dressed in flowing white

galibayas and donkeys that were rooted to the spot. It was magical – like a walk into the pages of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

The heavily carved doorway of our accommodation, Jasmine House, was quite unexpected – situated as it was in the midst of the town and flanked by crumbling buildings. It was scorching and the cool courtyard shaded by tropical palms and bejewelled with red and orange flamboyants and bougainvilleas brought relief. The villa was fit for a sultan – and his whole entourage – and typical of the Lamu style with graceful arches, open courtyards and generous staircases which rose four storeys to cool rooftop rooms where flowing curtains caught the breeze. There were four bedrooms and as many living areas, all of which were kept cool by whirring fans. Much to the delight of our children, it also had a pool where they would remain, laughing and playing, for much of the next few days.

Jasmine House was restored by Jake and Jill de Motta of Zambia (the same creative husband and wife duo who built Flatdogs Camp in Zambia and Tribal Textiles) and has since been purchased by the owners of Kaya Maya Resort in Malawi. As with any sultan's villa worth its salt, there was resident staff to cook, serve and pamper. Over the next few days, we hardly lifted a finger.

Saadu Salim Hohammed, our concierge, checked on us daily and offered water taxis, windsurfing

A riot of decorated dhows moored at Shela fishing village. These lateen-rigged craft are little changed since Arab traders arrived here hundreds of years ago.

BELOW: The master bedroom of Jasmine House has the perfect veranda to chill out, read a book and catch the Indian Ocean breeze.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jasmine's architecture is typical of Lamu, with rooms scattered over four storeys, banana-leaf thatched roofs and wonderful plaster work; there are no motorised vehicles on Lamu – donkeys are the preferred mode of transport; the Peponi Hotel has a fine restaurant where you dine on wonderful seafood delicacies.

lessons, kayaking and dhow trips, yoga and anything in between. But why would we want to go anywhere when we were experiencing such bliss? We relaxed at the villa and fell asleep listening to the soothing sounds of the faithful being called to prayer.

We took long walks along the beach, which stretched for 12 enticing kilometres from the town. It was a big change after the plains of the Mara – women wearing black from head to toe and visitors and locals going about their business.

One morning, while watching our children running down a dune and hurtling into the clear warm waters, we were approached by a woman walking her dog. 'Those look like African kids,' she said with a smile.

We figured she was a local and later discovered that her name was Carol Korschen, whose family started the Peponi Hotel back in the 1960s. The Peponi served the only alcohol in Shela and its wide veranda was a popular spot for suntanned holiday-makers and expats to sip G&Ts and be lulled by the mesmerising sight of dhows sailing to and fro.

It was from Carol that we learned about the Lamu Conservation Trust. This environmental NGO, started

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by Carol in 1992, pays fishermen for turtles caught in nets and, instead of them being thrown into the cooking pot, they are tagged and released. Money for this worthwhile initiative is raised from guests who adopt turtles and their nests.

The sea-facing fishing town of Shela had many restaurants where men typically stood outside and invited us to 'Sit, eat and enjoy.' But Jasmine House had a secret weapon. His name was Richard Kashero and, during our stay, he managed to bewitch our senses with delectable crab, rock cod and prawn dishes, all of which were laced with a delectable potion of garlic, ginger and lime. 'This is the best fish ever!' we spluttered again and again; Richard simply smiled.

One morning at sunrise, a local captain took us by water taxi to the old town. We could easily have walked, but what an adventure it was to arrive by boat like traders at this Arabian town.

Lamu is a World Heritage Site because of its importance to Swahili traditions and is also a centre of Muslim learning. We visited Lamu Museum, which revealed much about these seafaring people, their art, furniture, architecture and boat-building traditions. Lamu Fort, which was built in 1813 by a sultan to protect the interests of the government and traders living and working there at the time, was another fascinating place to visit. The heavy metal spikes on the doors were copies from India and designed to thwart the advances of elephants.

There are no motorised vehicles in Lamu; we negotiated the narrow streets on foot, stopping often to inspect the ramshackle shops and stalls where industrious merchants turned mahogany logs into ornately carved beds and raw silver into delicate bangles. After an hour of negotiation and deliberation, we returned to the wharf bearing our prizes: a heavy slab of teak with blue-and-white designs that was once attached to a dhow's bow and a circular disc decorated with a new moon and star, which was the Lamu symbol for luck.

Back on the boat, we cruised to the neighbouring village of Matundoni, where muscled workers

fashioned mangroves into dhows, and then to another settlement named Kipungani, where palm nut fronds were being turned into all manner of baskets, carpets and decorations. It was late afternoon when we returned and we were just in time for a sunset dhow ride.

Most of the dhows at Lamu were fairly narrow, but Captain Zazie's splendid craft was more like a Mozambican vessel from further south with a wide hull and plenty of deck space to stretch out. As the stiff breeze tugged at our sails and we navigated the channels feeding the mangrove swamps, we listened to the slap of water against the boat's sturdy hull and toasted our final Kenyan sunset. 'Tomorrow, we go snorkelling,' suggested Zazie with a smile.

Lamu Archipelago stretches more than 100 kilometres and begs to be explored, so we promised him we'd return and take up his offer.

It was our last night in Kenya and we reflected on a journey that had started 10 days before on the wide-open plains of the Masai Mara and ended on the Swahili coast. We'd had such a wealth of wild experiences, but it was the kind and gentle people we'd met that had given us our most lasting memories. Nowhere had the history, culture and hospitality been richer and impressed us more than in Lamu. ■



Travel planner

How to get there

Ethiopian Airlines, Air Kenya and South African Airways fly daily from Johannesburg to Nairobi for about R5 000 a person return. From there it's a 90-minute Safarilink flight to Lamu. This flight costs about R3 000 return.

Who to contact

For Jasmine House bookings and enquiries, tel +265-179-4555, email escape@lamuretreats.com, www.lamuretreats.com.

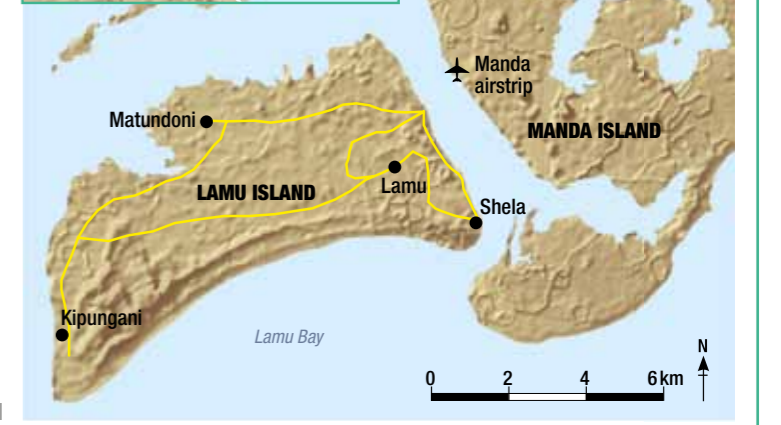
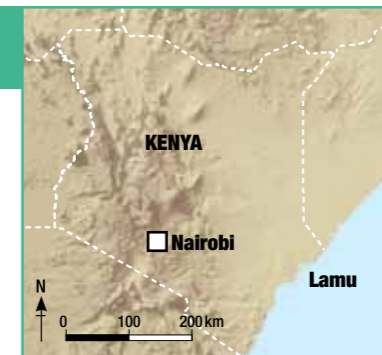
What it costs

Jasmine House costs from US\$280 (about

R2 800) a day to US\$1 750 (about R17 500) a week. With a maximum of 10 adults and four children, you could pay as little as R180 a day. Our family of four spent about R1 200 on food over four days. Buy drinks on the mainland as alcohol is very expensive and not easy to get.

Weather

Lamu is on the equator, so it's always warm. December to March is perfect, as there typically is no wind and the temperature is around a pleasant 32°C. The rainy season runs from May to July. ■



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Accommodation price ratings A person a night, usually B&B, sometimes full board under R250 R251 – R499 R500 – R750 R751 – R999 R1000+