



# Island Mentality

Two thousand miles from Muscat, a contemporary Omani fort washes ashore in Kenya

Lamu is a small, Kenyan island closer to Somalia than either Mombasa or Nairobi, although, in truth, not really close to anything in particular. As such, time putters by in Lamu at a speed considerably slower than the mainland, measured daily by the adhan and marked, over the years, on its buildings.

However, if one were to walk – for Lamu is a roadless island – beyond the fishing village of Shela and, further still, beyond the sand dunes and casuarina trees that replace its houses as they dwindle, one would find a building markedly less beaten by time. Rising amid nothing but an otherwise virgin beach, there is the unexpected sight of a large, newly built Omani fort.

'Well, I don't think he could have built a massive fort anywhere else,' says Gabriella Ferro, referring to her late husband, Antonio, whose idea the fort had been.

Though completed in 2001, Shela Fort is something of an anachronism, one that, despite its imposing and defensive stance against nothing apparent, manages to appear coherent with its

surroundings. Its four corner towers (replete with arrow slits and turrets) and thick, 50 foot-high structural walls are made with, and therefore match, the local topsoil. Ferro has been living in the 11-bedroom fort for 14 years.

'Historically, there was a big battle here,' says Ferro, describing the Battle of Shela – a battle between the people of Lamu and its neighbouring island, Pate, that took place around 1812. 'My husband wanted to find a structure which would match the local history, so he thought [a fort] would do very well. It was something that perfectly matched his character, too,' she continues. 'Not that he loved war,' she adds, quickly, 'but he saw the art in it.'

'The Omani fortress is of a softer appearance – it's never as aggressive as, say, a Scottish castle. It's much more of a natural colour and soft in its lines,' says architect Claudio Modola, who helped Ferro bring his sand castle to life and ensured its integration with the local surroundings. 'We looked around to see what we had in large quantities and used it,' he says, referring to the

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01  
Since its construction in 2001, Lamu's salty sea winds have been kind to Shela Fort, lending a weathered look to its historical design





site's swathes of sand, which was mixed with lime and silicate to make the thousands of blocks needed for construction.

Following the Battle of Shela, the people of Lamu sought and received protection from Oman, which, in 1652, had already assisted the island to combat Portugal's rule and established a protectorate.

With its position in the Indian Ocean, not to mention its friendship with the Sultanate of Oman, Lamu got rich. Though wooden dhows swarmed its port, trading ivory, precious wood and, among other things, hippopotamus teeth, Lamu's economy was largely dependent on Oman's slave trade. One year after the Battle of Shela, in 1813, the Omanis assisted in building a fort in the island's main town of Lamu, which still stands to this day; a squat, two-storey building, with four towers at its corners.

Ferro, however, says that her husband was not inspired by the historical fort further up the shore, but does describe the design of her home as

'Swahili fusion.' Modola says it 'was renaissance, somehow, of the Omani fortress.'

Lamu, in fact, remains one of the last outposts of pure Swahili culture – the result of interactions between the Bantu, Arabs, Persians, Indians and Europeans with East Africa – visible in the town's architecture, where Moorish arches, Arab shutters, and Omani timber doors line labyrinthine alleys of elegant Swahili buildings. Around the island, today, the wooden dhows of its seafaring past remain the main mode of transportation (there was, until recently, only one car on the whole island – the District Commissioner's Land Rover) and, although they may now sport Bob Marley flags, most are still waterproofed with shark-liver oil.

Though little has changed in the fabric of the town of Lamu since Oman left it in 1895 (the United Nations recognises it as a World Heritage Site), in recent years, however, the village of Shela, like many of its new found visitors, has undergone a facelift.

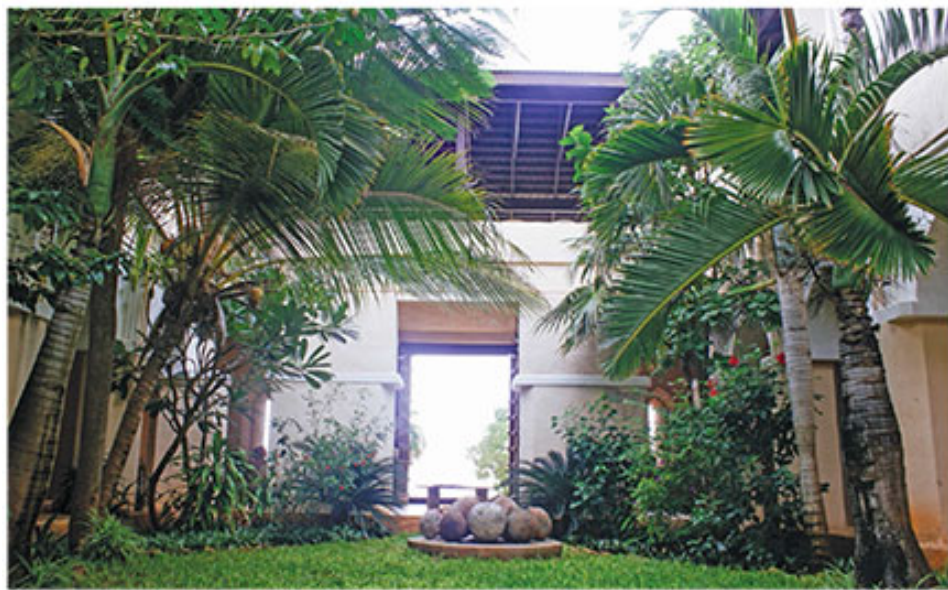
02  
Wooden dhow boats  
remain Lamu's lifeline,  
and are still made by its  
residents today.



Once you enter the house,  
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go out anymore

جيريلا فارو





03

Traces of Oman's influence in Lamu can be found in the thick, often ornate, wooden doors found in homes across the island - including Shela Fort.

Among its original offerings - five mosques, a football pitch, and dhow-building sheds - the fishing village, despite its relative remoteness, now counts a yoga studio, a spa and a fishbowl expat scene centred around one restaurant, Peponi.

'In the last few years, lots of people have mortgaged houses and renovated property for private renting,' Ferro says of the islanders' newer neighbours. After Prince Ernst of Hanover and his wife, Princess Caroline of Monaco, bought and renovated several properties in Shela in the 1990s, wealthy European families followed suit.

In high tourist season, bankers trade in their pinstripe suits for linen and join the fashion designers and European aristocracy who descend on Shela to loaf around from beach to each other's rentals, most of which are renovated Swahili villas. Tourists project Shela as a louche St Barts, travel writers as 'the hippest little village in all of Africa.'

A ten-minute walk along the beach is Ferro's fort, which she now rents out on Airbnb for \$450 a night, and hails as 'the epitome of privacy

and seclusion.' Like many Arab or Islamic residences, the fort's exterior conceals its interior organisation. Inside, five bedrooms line each side of an open gallery, overlooking an arcaded garden courtyard, where a small swimming pool sits at one end. The master bedroom occupies the circular tower, and a dining area faces the ocean, directly above the main entrance, which is barricaded by iron-studded, thick wooden doors.

'It's a massive cocoon. It's secure, and 100 percent private. Once you enter the house, you don't really want to go out anymore. It's like having your own little paradise,' Ferro says, describing the fort. 'You don't care about the outside world.'

Outside, however, Lamu's native residents continue to preserve the island's Swahili culture, despite any impact from newer arrivals. Island life carries on; fish are caught from dhows, taken to the market by donkey and cart, and gutted in front of customers. The adhan breaks the rhythm five times a day, much as it has done for hundreds of years.