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Kenya

# Swahili Time

FAST-FORWARDING A CLASSIC ON LAMU,  
IN THE SPIRIT OF SLOWING THE PACE

Architectural Renovation and Interior Design by E. Claudio Modola

Text by Jeff Turrentine | Photography by Tim Beddow

The island of Lamu, on the Kenyan coast, graciously welcomes tourists, but it's not a tourist destination in the conventional sense of that phrase. Most of the island's narrow streets aren't wide enough to accommodate cars, and as a result there aren't really any to be found; transportation options in Lamu Town—a 14th-century Swahili settlement and redoubt of African Islamic culture that has changed little since its emergence—are basically limited to donkeys (which are found in abundance) and one's own two feet. Hotels and guesthouses are packed with travelers who must endure frequent power outages, typically choosing to wait them out with a good-natured smile and a cold drink from furnished rooftops where sunsets dazzle and merciful breezes blow in from the Manda channel.

Nearby is the tiny village of Shela, itself a getaway from the getaway that is Lamu Town. Among other things, Shela is renowned for its long, calm stretch of white-sand beach; its central mosque, an exemplar of Swahili architecture that dates from the 17th century; and the Peponi Hotel, which opened in 1967 and whose bar has become the village's undisputed, if unofficial, center of activity, especially for a sizable population of part-time and full-time European expatriates.

For two of these part-timers—Robert Peugeot, a vice president at one of the companies within his family's French

Robert and Domitilla Peugeot hired E. Claudio Modola to renovate their house on the Kenyan island of Lamu. Domitilla Peugeot (above) wanted spaces for entertaining. RIGHT: The 4,800-square-foot getaway overlooks the Manda channel. LEFT: In a *baraza*, or conversation area, Indian fabrics add bold infusions of color. The door surround is from a 16th-century palace.



ELIZABETH L. GILBERT







Modola's aim was to "avoid radically interfering with the existing structure while using balconies to heighten the feel of the traditional corner village house." ABOVE: The dining room.

OPPOSITE: Another of the house's *barazas*. "The crescent moons," says the designer, "are commonly found on the front or back of the dhows, put there for good luck."

automobile empire; and his wife, Domitilla—Shela became the place to go when they needed to escape from everything. And helping them achieve this goal was the architectural designer E. Claudio Modola, a native of Italy who calls Lamu home for a good chunk of each year and who has become fluent in the architectural language of Swahili, a composite of many styles that manages to be completely unique. As various cultures came to

this part of the world—whether as traders, occupiers or colonizers—each one helped to shape the vernacular. "The Arabs and Persians left something, the Indians left something, and the Europeans left something," says Modola.

Over the years, the village has grown significantly—and not just out, but up. As Bruce Hobson, the Nairobi-based landscape designer who handled the house's several gardens, points out: "In Shela,





*It became the place to go when they needed to escape.*





ABOVE: The corner master bedroom opens on two sides to capture breezes coming off the channel. "The bed was made by local Swahili artisans," Modola says, "as were most of the house's pieces." OPPOSITE: A guest room.

the houses are all crammed together, so your neighbors are literally in your face, and every time one adds a floor to their house, the next one has to follow suit to try to keep their view over the neighboring roof."

This house, sitting high atop a slope and looking out onto the water, has seen its share of renovations but is still instantly identifiable to anyone approaching Shela from a dhow in the channel. Modola knew that his clients wanted to be up as high

as possible, not just for views, but for the unobstructed current of coastal air that can make the difference between a pleasant alfresco dinner party and a stuffy, stifling debacle.

On the house's lowest level, Modola placed the house's functional heart: its kitchen, its storage areas and a door that opens, handily, right onto the village square. "If someone wants to go out to buy some vegetables in the square, or if someone comes to the door proposing



*"At night, with the right light, you have the impression that the entire village is looking at you rather than you looking at the village."*



business, they use this door," he says. Up a flight of stairs can be found what Modola refers to as the house's "social center," where the Peugeots, their family members and their guests often relax in one of two cocoonlike seating areas—elevated banquettes festooned with dozens of brightly colored pillows—before dining at the long wooden table, crafted locally.

Stretching around the house on this level is a narrow balcony that brings whoever stands upon it even closer to

the neighbors, who are already quite proximate to begin with. Echoing Hobson, Modola cites that peculiar aspect of Shela's culture that prizes community and intimacy over seclusion and privacy. Which may explain why he and his clients don't mind at all that standing on the balcony "at night, with the right light, you have the impression that the village is looking at you rather than you looking at the village."

Which isn't to say that Modola and

Hobson didn't build in to their design ample opportunities for privacy and peaceful detachment. A pair of gardens conceived by Hobson offer cool, shady respite from the heat and village bustle; the smaller of these, he says, consists of "a small waterfall and central space surrounded by a palm jungle. From the street the final effect is very much like Burnett's *Secret Garden*: a mysterious garden beyond the walls. Once in the garden, the outside world falls away." Near the









**LEFT:** Enhancing its privacy and views, the pool was fitted into a portion of the lot that's 30 feet above the activity of the adjacent beach. Bruce Hobson handled the gardens. **ABOVE:** The poolside pergola, says Modola, "is more of a Mediterranean than an East African feature." **BELOW:** The rooftop *baraza* is where the Peugeots and their guests retreat in the evenings for drinks.



unusually shaped, semitriangular swimming pool—the only one like it in Africa, suspects Modola—is the pergola, shaded by a ceiling of mangrove reeds and lush foliage, the regular spot for informal family lunches and dinners.

But if the house were to be summed up in a single architectural symbol, surely it would be one of the several *barazas*, the cozy, covered outdoor nooks where one can eat, drink, sleep or socialize while

taking full advantage of ocean winds. Describing their appeal, Claudio Modola cuts to the heart of what makes life in Shela so attractive, and what differentiates it from life almost anywhere else. "In the morning you can have your breakfast on cushions, then you can have lunch on your cushions if you want, and then have a long nap," he says. "And then you can invite your friends over and have cocktails—all on cushions." □