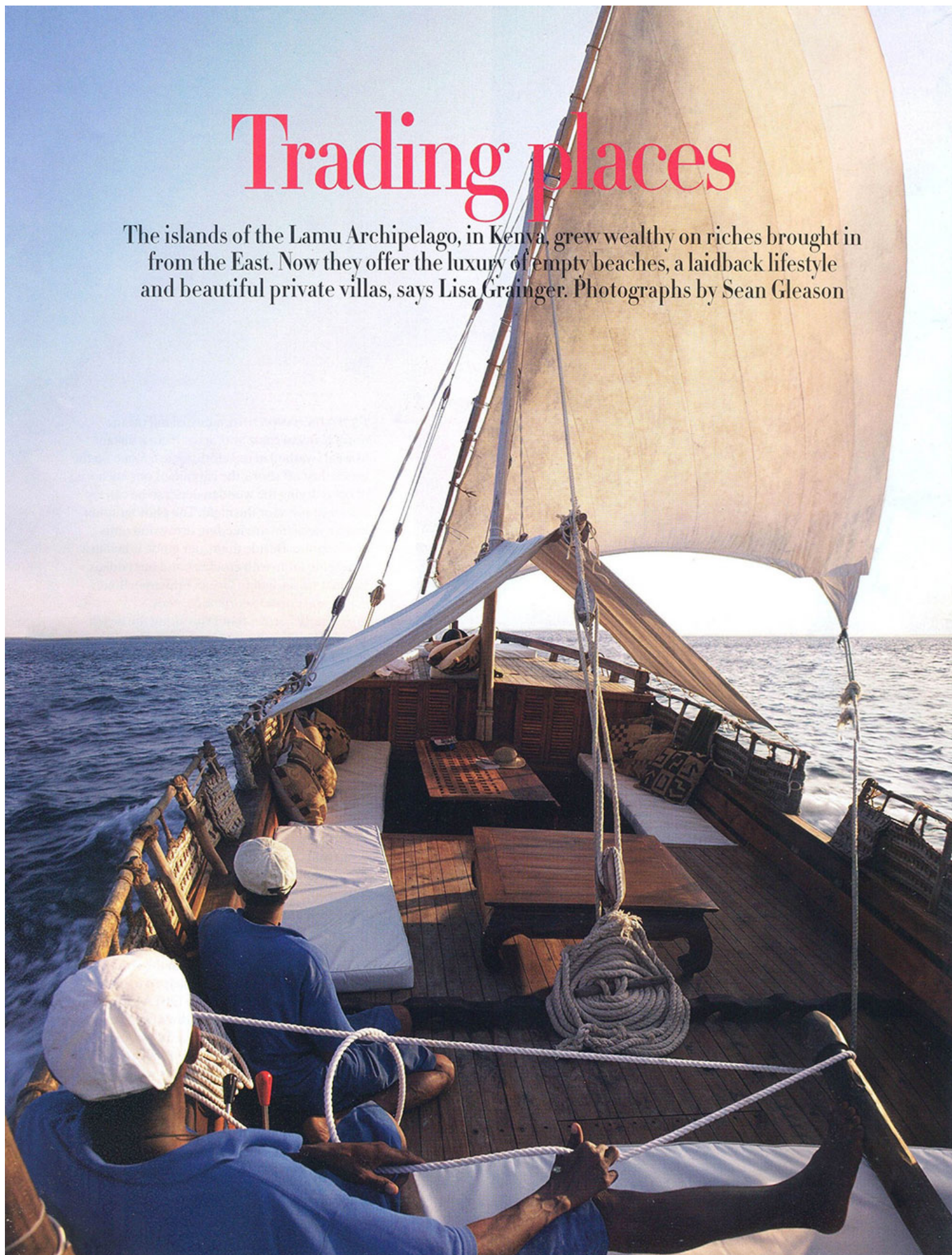


The pool at Manda Bay hotel, on the Lamu Archipelago. *Opposite*, aboard the *Kilindini* dhow on the way to the island of Kiwayu



Trading places

The islands of the Lamu Archipelago, in Kenya, grew wealthy on riches brought in from the East. Now they offer the luxury of empty beaches, a laidback lifestyle and beautiful private villas, says Lisa Grainger. Photographs by Sean Gleason





IT'S 7PM ON MANDA TOTO, a tiny island off the north Kenyan coast and, apart from a distant Masaai swathed in red cloth, we are alone on the beach. Just off shore, the captain of our anchored dhow is drying the wooden decks so he can lay out mattresses for the night. The photographer and his assistant are feeding driftwood onto the campfire. Beside them, our guide is laying a beachside table with crockery and our cook is marinating fat Indian Ocean prawns in lime, ginger and crushed coriander seeds.

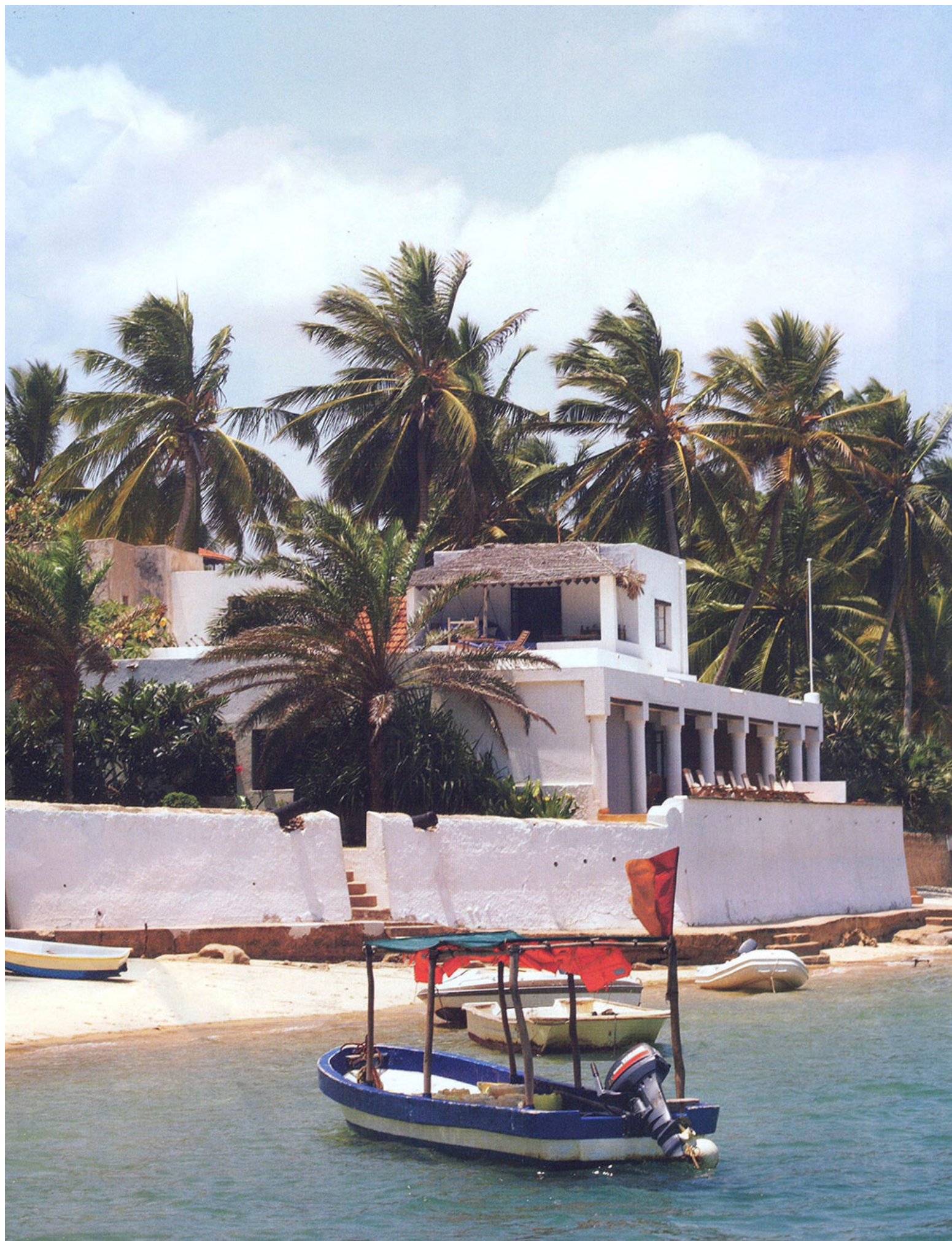
Life suddenly feels so utterly perfect that I run along the beach kicking sand into the air. A full moon is rising and fine clouds of sand float down against a black sea crisscrossed with shards of moonlight. Pinky crabs disappear into holes to avoid my pounding feet. Across the water, I can see reflections of the orange lights of Manda Bay: the last hotel before the Indian subcontinent.

I feel so free, so far from civilisation, so intoxicated by life, that if I were agile enough to do a cartwheel, I would. Instead, I slow down to a contented trot towards the cocktail-bearing guide.

It's been two days and we haven't seen anyone but local fishermen on our wind-powered journey through the Lamu Archipelago. Yet in previous centuries these six sparsely populated islands in north-eastern Kenya thronged with foreigners. From the ninth century, dhows arrived on the south-easterly *kaskazi* wind from distant Eastern lands, carrying perfume, sugar, beads, ghee and silk, returning home a few months later on the *kazi* winds with rhino horn, ivory, leopard skins, mangrove poles and, in later years, slaves. The Turks came with glassware, then the Portuguese with heavily-armoured galleons. And finally the Omanis arrived, bringing their art and architecture, leaving the islands only when the British outlawed slavery, strangling the trade that had helped to make Lamu Town the richest centre of culture on the East African coast.

It may once have been material wealth that drew outsiders to these shores, but in the late 20th century it was Lamu's scenic shabbiness that attracted Western visitors. In the 1960s and 1970s, this tiny island became the Kathmandu of Africa, its white beaches and run-down lodgings attracting alternative travellers in search of peace, free love and inexpensive highs. A British-owned hotel called Petley's opened next to the main jetty. Its owner was widely

Left, the infinity pool at the Beach House villa in Shela on Lamu Island, which sleeps 12 people; its outdoor dining area. **Opposite**, the nearby Peponi Hotel, which evolved from the island's 1960s scene





The sunken lounge at Dhow House on Lamu Island, which can be rented with its own sushi chef



At dawn, I lay on my daybed on my own roof terrace and watched palm-tree leaves turn from black silhouettes to glossy, green striations against the peach skies



regarded as the rudest hotelier in the world, but its bar was well-stocked enough to keep adventurers coming back. A Norwegian bought a house on the shores of Shela village in the 1960s, which his son Lars Korschen has magicked into the celebrated Peponi Hotel, where rastas sit beside royalty, watching the sun go down. Over the last few decades, Europeans have been buying up derelict ruins and turning them into the most glamorous beach hideaways in Africa: the Peugeotts, make-up artist Mary Greenwell, Lisson Gallery founder Nicholas Logsdail, Princess Caroline of Hanover and soon, over on neighbouring Manda Island, I'm told discreetly, actress Isabelle Adjani.

Landing on the neighbouring island of Manda in a small plane, after a two-hour flight from Nairobi, it's not immediately apparent what draws so many famous faces to Lamu. In April, in the 35°C heat, my skin is already starting to fry in the open-air customs area. But once we're on a motorboat to Lamu, passing wooden dhows loaded with wood, cooled by sea sprays and calmed by the monotony of the shiny-leaved mangrove shoreline, the island's appeal becomes more obvious.

Half of the island's upmarket accommodation is made up of smart, fully staffed private villas (sleeping up to 12), private fiefdoms dedicated to fun. As Kim Granger-Brown, the manager of KazKazi, our five-bedroom house, says to us on arrival: 'It's all yours: the pool, the terraces, the garden, the staff. Plug your iPods into the speakers, have a swim, help yourselves to drinks, lie on the swingbeds... Just let the cooks know what you want for meals and enjoy!'

Like the other six privately owned houses (including Kuni Jogoo) on Kizingoni Beach, on the deserted south-west side of the island, KazKazi makes for a great getaway: Lamu town is a 20-minute boat ride away, and Shela village a good 40 minutes.

Being sun-starved, stressed urbanites, we welcomed our days of lethargy, miles from anywhere. At dawn, having been woken by the hypnotic call which entices the mainly Muslim population to prayer, I crawled out from under my mosquito net and lay on a daybed on my own roof terrace, watching palm-tree leaves turn from black silhouettes to glossy green striations against the peach and blue skies. In the clear light, the dazzling red of a carmine

Where to stay on the Lamu Archipelago: the best private houses and hotels

Prices for private houses below are inclusive of staff and food, unless indicated. Most close in the rainy season between May and July. Peak season is from November to March, with prices highest at Christmas

Dhow House

Owned by Londoner Katy Barker, this is the sexiest party house on Lamu Island, with frangipani-scented gardens, infinity-edged pool and a

sleek, open-plan entertaining space, with sunken living area and slick white bar. Extras include a speedboat and sushi chef. Sleeps 12. From €2,000 per night. www.dhowhousekenya.com

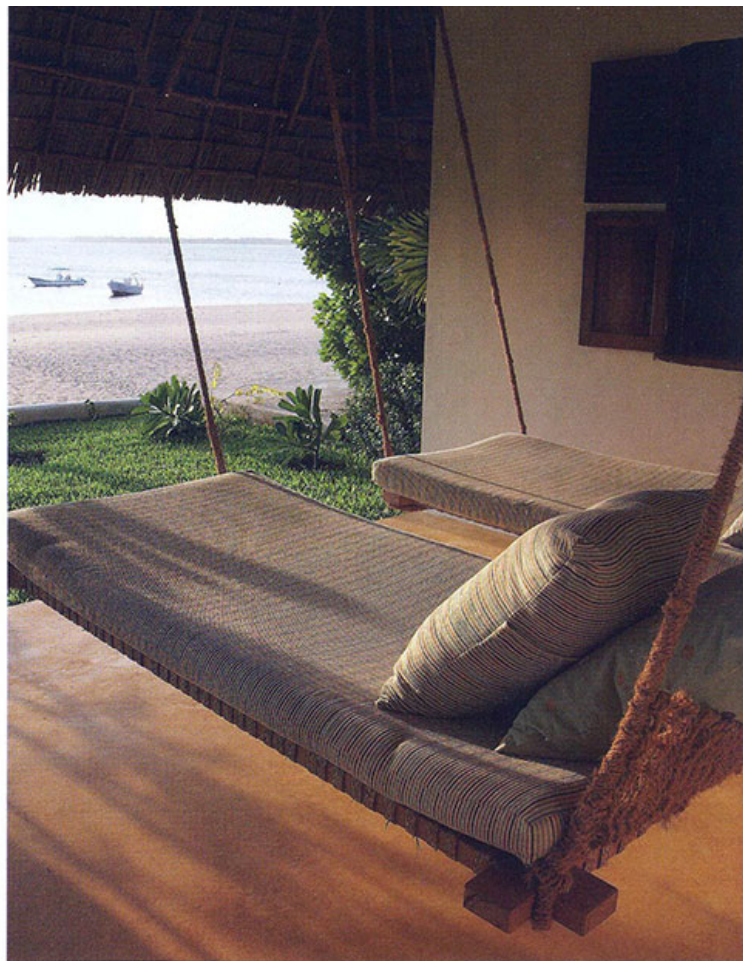
Blue Empire

A wooden Balinese-style house set bang on Manda Island beach with wooden screen walls that fold right back, a cooling Japanese-style pond in the central living area

and bathroom walls plastered with shells. The X-factor is an Italian-trained chef and a private launch on which to nip over to Peponi. Sleeps six. From €600 per night, plus €50 per person for meals. www.mandadream.com

Baytil Ajajib

An authentic Swahili house in the heart of Lamu Town, with a palm-cooled courtyard and a roof terrace for



Right top, view from Kuni Jogoo, a beach home on the secluded Kizingoni Beach; below, the master bedroom at Dhow House. Opposite, the pool at the five-bedroom KazKazi villa, also on Kizingoni Beach



bee-eater's breast flashed past. One of the island's many donkeys let out an agonising bray, which echoed in the dunes behind. And on the golden beach in front of the house, fishermen started to come in on their battered wooden dhows, nets laden with swordfish, tuna, red mullet and lobster.

ON A SMALL ISLAND governed by tides and seasons, nothing happens quickly, hence the sense of lethargy that pervaded every day. We lingered over breakfasts of sweet, rich mango, buttered toast and thick espressos on our palm-thatched rooftop. Late-afternoon naps were taken on *kikoy*-strewn beds swinging from coconut-fibre ropes on a poolside veranda, and grilled seafood eaten outdoors with constellations sparkling above. One evening, we walked 10 minutes along the moonlit beach to the nearest hotel, Kizingo, built with mangrove poles and reeds, where we drank lime-based Lamu Dhow cocktails and listened to guests rave about that day's excursion: swimming with dolphins.

Because tourism is reasonably new here, whatever activities are available will depend on where you're staying and what boats and guides there are. At KazKazi, having our own boat and captain meant we could go where we wanted, which on our second afternoon was Lamu Town, where a guide was waiting to meet us. Although locals complain the place is changing too fast (property prices have risen tenfold in five years), Lamu Town looked much as it did in drawings executed 200 years ago.

In the deep channel just outside town, a dugout canoe was being paddled by an old, turbaned man, his cows tied to it by their horns. 'Swimming to the butcher,' our boatman shouted above the engine. A dhow pulled out in full sail, loaded with women in black *bulbuis* and men in white *khanzu* robes, going to the mainland to trade, as they have done for centuries. Wiry sailors in sarongs painted vile-smelling shark oil into the cracks of their wooden hulls; behind them a Muslim boy guided donkeys loaded with saddlebags of sand.

The town itself, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site with just one road and two cars (an ambulance and vehicle for the District Commissioner), is a maze of winding alleys, open drains and donkey debris. As we wandered along its cobbled streets, avoiding donkeys, Samburu warriors bedecked in beads sat on shady verandahs, Meru

➤ **sunbathing.** The four double bedrooms are furnished simply with antiques and wooden four-posters swathed in net, and the shady inner verandahs are dotted with alluring daybeds. An old-fashioned, charming gem. Sleeps eight. From US\$7,000 per week. Book through Chic Retreats (020 7307 2797; www.chicretreats.com)

Beach House

Furnished with dark wooden furniture, offset by furls of white

fabric, this four-storey pad in Shela has a pool overlooking the sea, dining areas beneath lush trees, and meticulously well-trained staff (Princess Caroline of Hanover is a part-owner). Sleeps 12. From €700 per night, plus €50 per person for meals. 00 254 42 633419; www.shelahouse.com

Kisimani House

Built two centuries ago in Shela for the Caliph of Zanzibar, this is a grand home with an Arabian Nights

atmosphere, created by its lower-floor harem section, beamed ceilings and layers of rooms, topped by a roof terrace with a view. The house's Swahili furnishings are as charming as its staff: Karisa, an inventive cook, and Fred, a housekeeper with a permanent smile. Sleeps eight. From €300 per night, plus €70 per person for meals. 00 254 20 883695; www.kisimanihouse.com

Kizingoni Beach

There are seven contemporary beach homes on the ➤

Left: American interior designer Paul Weaver in his restored, 18th-century villa, Baytil Ajaib; the villa's roof terrace, above Lamu Town. **Opposite,** daytime in Lamu Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site

housekeepers slipped between market stalls, black-swathed women with glamorous handbags queued at the town's only ATM, and lithe Bajuni fishermen mended nets.

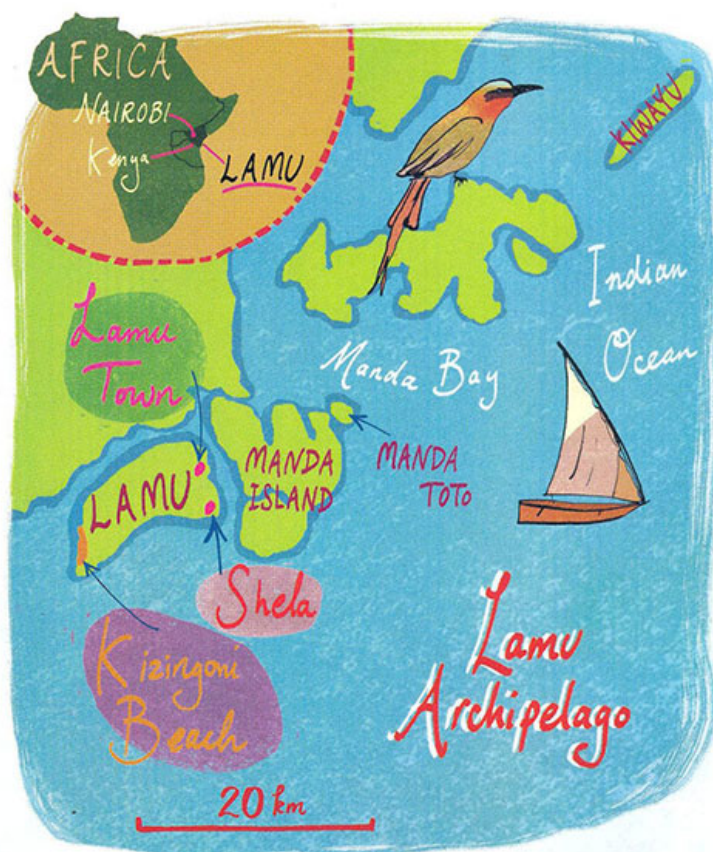
Lamu Town's layout was conceived to cope with the weather, our guide Mahmoud Abbas tells us, as he takes us round the (highly informative) Lamu Museum. The streets run from north to south to provide maximum shade and to funnel cool winds; the drains slope down to send dirty water into sand pits by the sea. There are few businesses other than boat-builders' yards, small shops and carpentry workshops; the majority of the population of 15,000 live off fishing and tourism.

The houses are rather like rough oysters, the only sign of their inner beauty being a pair of ornate doors set in plain, plastered walls. But as American interior designer and Lamu resident Paul Weaver says, as we remove our shoes in the shady courtyard of Baytil Ajaib, his magnificently restored 18th-century villa, 'Everything on this island is turned inward: the women are covered up, the houses' exteriors left plain. Beauty here is only revealed in the heart of the home.'

Weaver and his German partner, Norbert Herget, bought their house in the 1980s; a time, he says, when 'it was unusual to see another European more than once a week. Now everyone's here... You end up going to parties with Brad Pitt and you see Naomi Campbell on the beach. Can you imagine, on this tired-ass island?'

Taking a boat ride to the island's only other town, Shela, we can imagine. Along the shore, houses that were once ruins now glow with freshly limewashed plaster. At Peponi hotel, the social centre

Continued on page 154



➤ Kizingoni Beach, each with its own boat. **KazKazi House** is set in 1.85 acres of gardens with an infinity-edge pool. **Kuni Jogoo House** is bang on the beach, with sunset views and an expansive second-floor entertaining area. Each sleeps 10. From €371 per night, plus €65 per person for meals; 00 254 733 444 144; www.kizingonibeach.com

Manda Bay

This is actually a boutique hotel: a Swiss Family Robinson-style retreat on Manda Island (and a favoured haunt of the Rolling Stones). But it can also be rented out in its entirety, with open-sided thatched living areas for partying in, 16 private bandas, pool and watersports facilities, from deep-sea fishing boats to

kayaks. Sleeps 32. From US\$17,500 per night. E-mail louise@mandabay.com

Baobabs of Kitangani

A romantic camp for two at Kiwayu Safari Village, with an open-sided living room and bedroom built amid 800-year-old baobabs, a cushioned treehouse platform for sundowners and relaxed beach banda for afternoon naps by a private 1km beach. It is 3km from the main resort; two staff are sited discreetly down the beach. From US\$1,800 per couple per night; www.kiwayu.com

La Marelle

A sweet, Southern-style bungalow on Manda Island. There's a whale skeleton in the garden, and miles of creamy beach outside the gate. Suitable for a

small family. Sleeps six. From €350 per night, self-catering, with a boat. E-mail marcella.anselmotti@gmail.com

Peponi Hotel

Celebrated hotel in Lamu Town, with 24 rooms overlooking the gardens and beach. Doubles from €200. 00 254 20 8023655; www.peponi-lamu.com

Kiwayu Safari Village

Resort on secluded Kiwayu island, with 18 beach-side bandas. From US\$550 per person (sharing) full board, including transfers. 00 254 20 600107; www.kiwayu.com

Kizingo

A six-banda resort on the south coast of Lamu Island. Doubles US\$390 full board. 00 254 733 954770; www.kizingo.com



Kisimani House in Shela, once a home for the Caliph of Zanzibar, now a Swahili-chic villa for eight. Opposite, the family-friendly La Marelle bungalow

Trading places

Continued from page 127



The bosun of the *Kilindini*, a dhow that can be chartered for private voyages

➤ of Shela village, cut-glass English accents ring out at the bar, chic Italians drift by in white linen, and locals in Obama T-shirts and afros hang out, sipping Tusker beers. It's a world apart from old-fashioned Lamu Town.

WHEN THE ITALIAN 'architectural designer' Claudio Modola came to live in the archipelago 22 years ago, he says, 'Business was very slow. Now I'm very busy. My next project is with the Prince of Liechtenstein.' Although he chooses to live in a tent on Manda island, five minutes' boat ride over the channel, Modola is responsible for two of the most fantastical homes on Lamu: the King Arthur-esque Sand Castle at the start of the island's 13km beach and the American-Korean Suno Kay Osterweis's towering palace next door to Peponi hotel. He's also what he calls 'the cineographer, the creative visualiser' of three fabulous private houses to rent on Manda: the Bali-inspired Blue Empire and Equator; and La Marelle, which belongs to his former partner, the Italian documentary maker Marcella Anselmetti.

While Lars Korschen, the owner of Peponi, admits he shouldn't grumble about new homes springing up on Manda beach opposite his hotel, 'I really wish every man didn't bloody build his own style of palace right up on the beach.' One can see his point. Looking from Peponi's wide, polished concrete veranda over the channel to Manda, where once only bush and baobabs were visible on the gentle horizon, more than a dozen palatial homes mar the view: Balinese villas, a minimalist beach house, a bungalow, a stone tower. Clearly there are no building regulations. But then, one doesn't have to look at them for long. One of the great joys about Lamu is that,

when you tire of ogling the homes and antics of the European jetset, with their beachside palaces, leopard-print bikinis and Cartier sunglasses, you can escape just by unfurling the sails of a boat.

On our private dhow, *Kilindini*, on which we sailed 100km north from Lamu up to Kiwayu island, there were very few distractions. While the cook prepared salads and fish below deck, and our guide, captain and bosun constantly monitored the sail and guy ropes, we lay on deck and watched the world drift by. When there was something of interest, we anchored.

One morning the captain moored by Kiwayu Safari Village hotel so we could snorkel among the coral outcrops and listen underwater to rainbow-coloured parrotfish gnawing at their coral breakfast. In the evening we put-putted up a shallow channel on a small boat, and shared our grilled fish with villagers on top of a sand dune. We anchored alongside the Baobabs of Kitangani camp, where a suite for just one couple has been built around the bulbous trees. And as the sun began to set each day, we would moor by a deserted beach, and enjoy chilled Sauvignon Blanc and seafood under the stars, before settling down on the dhow for the night on net-draped mattresses, gently lulled to sleep by the rocking of waves.

Even when we were settled into the restorative coolness of Kisimani, a 200-year-old former retreat of a Caliph of Zanzibar on Lamu Island, with its smiling staff who could conjure up a sensational coconut fish curry in a flash, we all agreed the private dhow was the highlight of our trip. Why? Because of that overwhelming sense of freedom that one gets in the middle of nowhere.

What could be more thrilling than a midnight dip in inky waters glittering with phosphorescence? What hotel-room ceiling could compete with the Milky Way? What more authentic way could a lobster be prepared than over a beach fire? And I can't think of a better place to drink coffee in the morning than on the front deck of a dhow, a full sail above my head, bare feet dangling into the water. In fact, just thinking of it now makes me want to do cartwheels. If only I could...

GETTING TO LAMU

Kenya Airways (020 8283 1818; www.kenya-airways.com) and **British Airways** (08444 930787; www.ba.com) fly from Heathrow to Nairobi, from where **Safari Link** (www.safari-link-kenya.com) flies to Lamu. The writer and photographer's visit was booked through **Audley Travel** (01993 838000; www.audley-travel.com). A week's holiday at Kizingoni Beach, including two

days and nights on the dhow, as well as flights, transfers, food and drink, costs from £3,200 per person, based on four sharing.

SAILING THE ISLANDS

Kilindini is a dhow owned by Dubliners Mike and Gabi Bourke, whose crew will sail anywhere up the coast to Kiwayu. The crew is exemplary, laying on both adventures and comforts, from fresh morning coffee to mosquito nets on the

deck. From US\$500 per night for up to four, plus fuel. www.kisingonibeach.com

TOUR OPERATORS

The following can also arrange trips to Lamu: **Abercrombie & Kent** (0845 618 2200; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk); **Cazenove & Loyd** (020 7384 2332; www.cazenoveandloyd.com); **Scott Dunn** (020 8682 5070; www.scottdunn.com); **Turquoise** (01494 678400; www.turquoiseholidays.co.uk)

WEATHER TO GO



Best months to visit: July to September

Temperatures are high year-round in Kenya, although the Lamu Archipelago is cooled by the sea winds. Go for an island odyssey in summer, and avoid the rainy seasons in Apr-May and Oct-Nov.