

The terrace
at the Lamu
home of Suno
Kay Osterweis,
Kate Foley's
mother-in-law



SHORE LEAVE

For stylist Kate Foley, languid days on the Kenyan island of Lamu unfold in a haze of reading, swimming, and slow waterfront breakfasts

Photographs by Tim Beddow



Before 2012, I hadn't heard of Lamu – the thumbnail island off the Kenyan coast, where cars are not allowed and pythons loop the branches of trees, poised to snap up a resting bat. My husband (then my boyfriend), Max, had invited me to holiday at his mother's house shortly after we first got together. His mother, Suno Kay Osterweis, the inspiration behind his former fashion label Suno, had completed a three-month safari across eastern and central Africa in 1996 when she headed to Lamu for the weekend, intrigued by the promise of a paradise in the Indian Ocean. She ended up staying for three months. Soon afterwards, she acquired a beachside plot and instructed Claudio Modola, an architect with a house on the neighbouring island, Manda, to join her in designing a home that blended ancient Middle Eastern lines with whitewashed modernity.

That was the first time I made the now familiar journey from New York to her fairytale house, which is entirely open to the wildlife, wind and sunshine. There is no glass – a fact that always astounds new visitors, as it astounded me. These days, I relish each leg of the voyage – the tiny plane from Nairobi, the dhow ride from Manda, and the ritual kicking off of shoes (the first of many unnecessary trappings >

thrown to the wayside). The feeling of “unplugging”, as my husband puts it, is immediate. The rhythm of an instinctive, ancient way of life enters you as you approach the empty stretch of beach and the tall palms come into view. The crackling of their fronds has soundtracked Max’s life here since his late teens, when he would come for two or three months at a time, replacing the 24-hour whirr of city traffic.

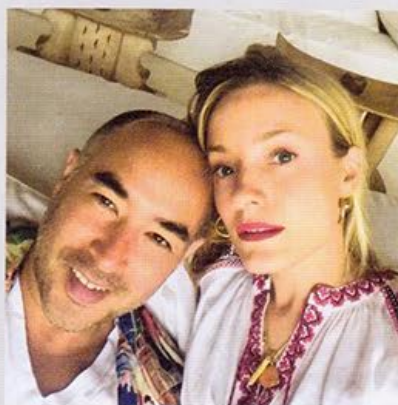
Days blur into one another. Sunrise spills through the broad, open arches (all the bedrooms face east). We will attempt to run, but mostly walk, along the beach, or swim the mile across to the neighbouring island before the heat of the day rises, returning hungry for a breakfast of passion-fruit juice and peppery scrambled eggs. By then the fishermen have come by with their haul of red snapper, oysters, clams, octopus and squid, and that decides the menu for the rest of the day. An accompaniment of aubergines, peppers, tomatoes, radishes and rocket is plucked from the vegetable and herb garden that Suno planted. (She is a spectacular cook, and helped to train the chef at the house.)

The same mood of self-sufficiency dictates the Lamu packing inventory, which is very short. Unless we are riding out the warmest afternoon hours of the day shopping in the old town (Max seeks out vintage textiles from a man who keeps them in a freezer at the back of his store), there isn’t any real need to be dressed – a rare and blissful state of play for a stylist. We undergo a style reversal of sorts on the island. He will wear a *kikoi*, similar to a sarong or kilt, the uniform of local men, and I abandon my ordinarily colourful city wardrobe for the subdued lines of a navy Matteau bikini that fulfils the demands of almost any island

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agenda. At my most “dressed up”, I’ll have thrown an embroidered dress from Aman, a boutique in the nearby village of Shela, atop that same bikini. Books take priority over clothes and become a trading commodity among the family; *The Sellout*, by Paul Beatty, was dealt between us on our last holiday. Suno consumes a book a day, so the library in the house grows fatter with each trip. Until lunchtime we will be stationed by the little upstairs pool, reading, enjoying interruptions from the hummingbirds, kingfishers and dragonflies that drop by to bathe, pausing to break for fish curry. The male dragonflies are very territorial, standing guard over a body of water all day to protect it, so we have airborne tenants. The wind will have picked up by then: our cue for a nap. The whooshing of the palms induces a precious, deeper sleep. We’ll rise late in the afternoon to make preparations before the sun sets at exactly 7pm.

Max is the expert on sunset. He leads an expedition by boat if the tide is right, meandering through the mangroves with a picnic. Other evenings, we take up position at the Hotel Peponi for a sundowner – the house cocktail, the Old Pal. There aren’t many restaurants, so the joy of eating a dinner cooked at home takes over, entertaining local acquaintances such as Chris and Roberta Hanley, friends from Nairobi and family and friends visiting from London. There are a few house parties on Manda during the high seasons (Christmas and August) that are unmissable, temporarily disturbing the unhurried flow of life. Thinking of the island now after another busy day in New York, I am longing for our next escape. JH >



The gate leading from Suno’s garden to the shore. Above right: the approach to the house’s entrance. Above: Kate Foley with her husband, Max Osterweis





This page: the house's terrace (above and bottom right); scenes from Lamu life

WHERE TO STAY

- The Peponi Hotel, Shela
- Forodhani House
- Shela House
- Kizingoni Beach Houses

Airbnb has good options including Ras Firdaws House Lamu and a spectacular house on Manda (search for Spectacular Ultimate Luxury, Manda)

