

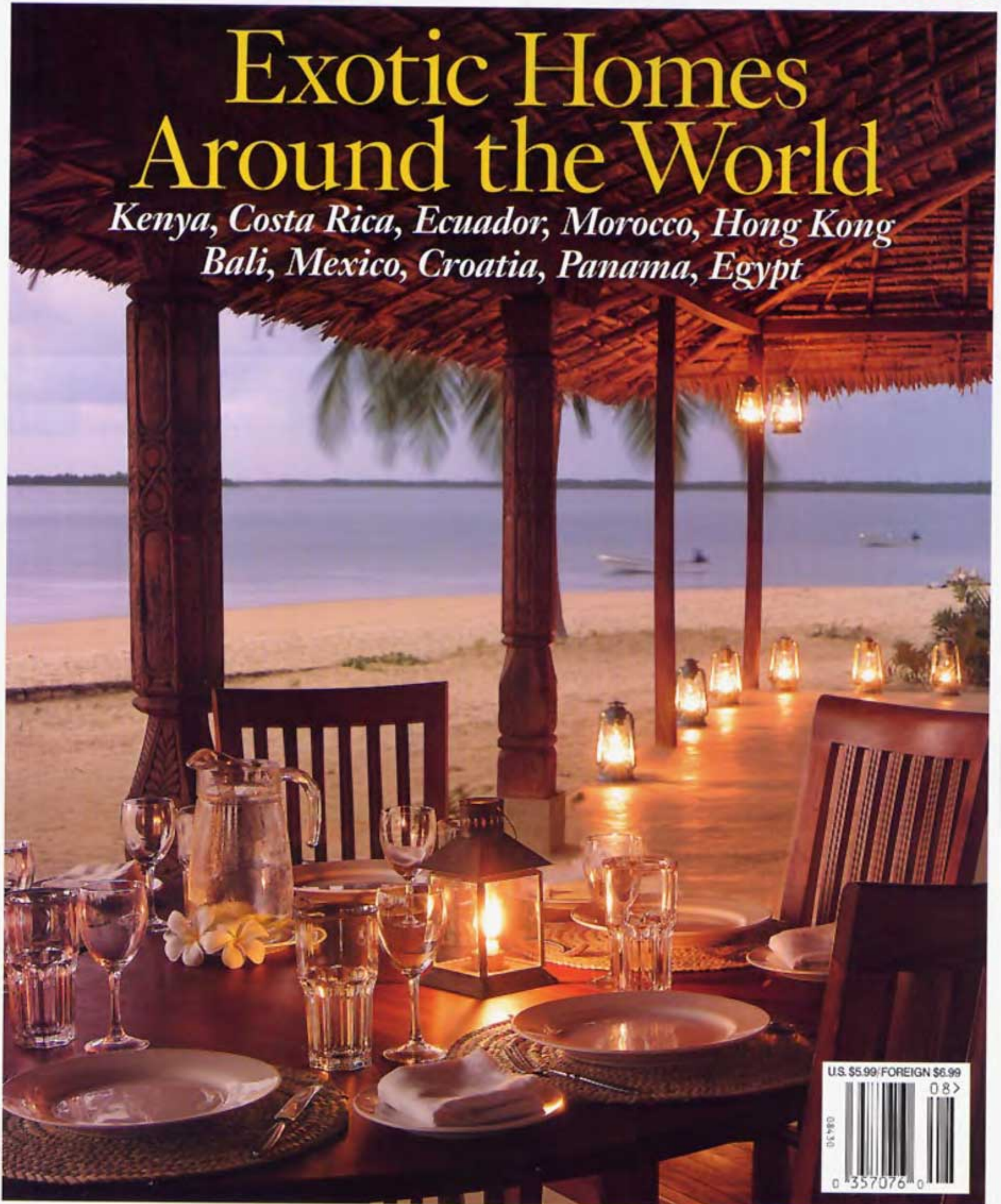
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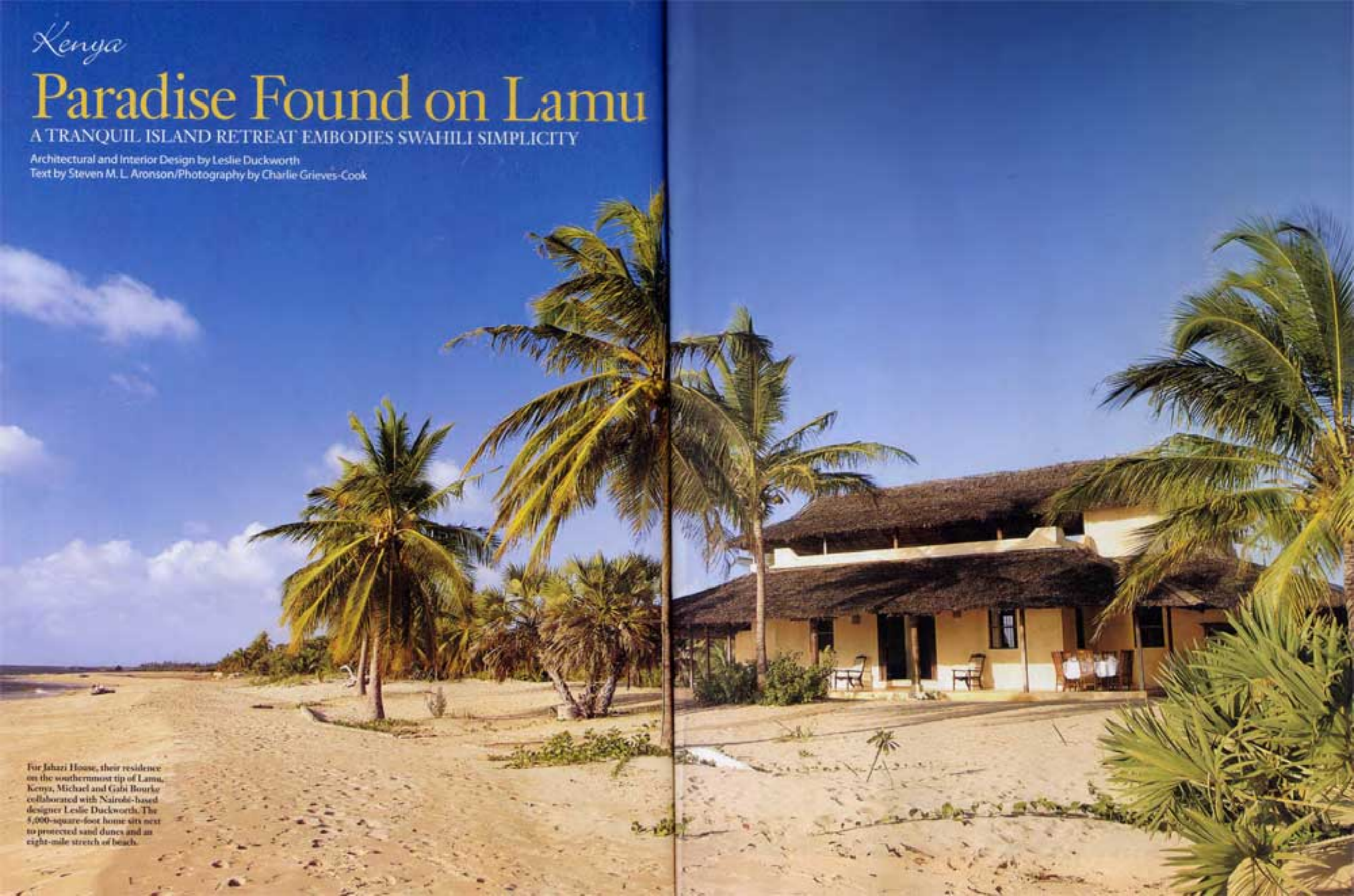
Paradise Found on Lamu

A TRANQUIL ISLAND RETREAT EMBODIES SWAHILI SIMPLICITY

Architectural and Interior Design by Leslie Duckworth

Text by Steven M. L. Aronson/Photography by Charlie Grieves-Cook

For Jahazi House, their residence on the southernmost tip of Lamu, Kenya, Michael and Gabi Bourke collaborated with Nairobi-based designer Leslie Duckworth. The 5,000-square-foot home sits next to protected sand dunes and an eight-mile stretch of beach.



We were searching the world for the perfect vacation house, my wife and I, when fate put this one in front of us, and the rest is history—we fell in love with the site and, head over heels, with Leslie's work," says Michael Bourke, an Irish psychiatrist living in London.

The Leslie he lionizes is the all-but-all-purpose Leslie Duckworth of Nairobi, Kenya: a graphic designer who also designs houses (as well as builds and furnishes them). It was she who introduced the couple to the southernmost extremity of Lamu, an island off the coast steeped in age-old Swahili culture. She had just finished putting up a 5,000-square-foot house there, on two acres of unblemished beach the likes of which Bourke, who spent his entire childhood in Kenya, had never seen.

The structure was built in the Swahili style, whose hallmarks are balance, symmetry and simplicity, and of indigenous materials. A quarry on the mainland supplied the marble-smooth coral blocks (to which the traditional Swahili patina, a lime-plaster finish tinted with ochre powder, was added); homegrown coconut palms were the source of the thatch for the veranda roofs; and the mangrove forests of the Lamu archipelago yielded the wood for the ceiling beams in the bedrooms (there being no roads on the island, these materials all had to be transported to the site by dhow). After three years, the house has beautifully mellowed in.

The downstairs veranda wraps clear around the house—its front section is dedicated to



Dining on the veranda affords an intimate connection with Kizingoni Beach, where hippos and buffalo have been known to arrive upon swimming over from the mainland. The thatch roof, like the house's floor mats, was woven from coconut leaves by women from the village.



LEFT: In another area of the veranda that extends the house's perimeter, Duckworth placed an antique Lamu four-poster napping bed. **BELOW:** The quiet site is part of an abandoned coconut plantation.

entertaining and candlelit dining, but at the points where it hugs the four guest rooms (two on either side) it's partitioned for privacy. Beyond lies an entrance hall embellished with Lamu plaster wall carvings of stylized turtles (the real things can be found a few feet away, nesting on the beach). One advances processionally through a carved mahogany door into an arched and colonnaded courtyard gloriously open to the sky. A swimming pool gleams like a gigantesque emerald in the middle. The flat-roofed corridor bordering the courtyard leads to the bedrooms.

On the upper level, the front expanse of the house consists of an open *huzza* (Swahili for "meeting") area with a palm-leaf thatch roof and traditional Lamu built-in stone benches (their capacious cushions are swathed in a fabric called *kanga* and imprinted with Swahili proverbs). Here Michael Bourke and his wife, Gahé, a painter, gather in the evening with drinks to watch the falling sun, finally drained of its radiance, sink in the Indian Ocean.

The roof space just in back had been conceived sylbaritically, as a wood-screened massage area, but the Bourkes wanted something a bit more concrete: a self-contained master suite. Duckworth gave them—in addition to a bedroom with windows on all sides that afford far-reaching, breath-snatching views—a study, a dressing room and an airy bath.

Most of the furniture was made to order on Lamu of island hardwoods. Duckworth is quick to credit the "incredibly skilled artisans who produced such beautiful designs out of a simple shack using basic tools." The few antique pieces are equally prepossessing—witness the four-poster Lamu beds, perfect for napping, on the guest room verandas and the Javanese sideboard on the dining veranda.

But the designer has done more than just imaginatively mine the aesthetic of a deep-rooted culture—she has adapted it for contemporary living without compromise (the house has its own solar and wind power to produce electricity and hot water, and even boasts wireless Inter-



net service). The staff of seven that Duckworth engaged for the couple is colorfully rounded out by a Samburu *asbari*, or warrior, usually (and unusually!) accoutered in a voluminous piece of vivid fabric and a headdress of beads, feathers and fresh-cut flowers. "He's like a night watchman who just walks around and gives everybody a sense that there is somebody here," Michael Bourke explains, adding, "Don't worry, he's armed only with a flashlight."

The boathouse (there's also a kitchen house on the property) harbors only the couple's sand yacht. They prefer to let their 39-foot dhow rollick in

OPPOSITE: Mangrove beams line the ceiling of the master bedroom. Duckworth asked local carpenters to construct a traditional Swahili four-poster bed, which she swathed in yards of mosquito netting.



the sea in front of the main house (in March 2008, Bourke and his brother set the record for the circumnavigation of the island under sail—nine and a half sodden hours).

Happily, the house was sited to catch the *huzazi*, the wind that wafts in the haleyon high season. As Bourke attests, "The sun comes up in the morning and stays up, but at night you can sleep a cool sleep, with the sheets over you." Re-viewing the comments in the crowded guest book, he muses, "'Paradise'—that's what they say, mainly. But for me, words like *peace* and *adventure* come to mind. Peaceful adventure. Is that possible? I know it is." □