

# Travel



**Palm beach:** Jahazi House is built in a traditional though individual style, with white walls, thatched terraces and intricately carved wooden doors. Each house has five full-time staff including a cook, a boatman and a masseuse

**P**ARADISE can be elusive. Finding a house to rent on a deserted beach with excellent food and facilities — and at a reasonable price — requires some luck and a bit of experience. After years of hit-and-miss searches across the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and the north coast of Brazil, I flew with some trepidation last week to Nairobi.

Kenya has some of the most beautiful beaches in the world but these are now empty as a result of the reports of murder and mayhem that followed the disputed election. Disregarding friends' words of caution, I decided to head for Lamu, the small island just off the mainland coast and 350 miles from the capital.

The troubles have had a devastating effect on the tourist industry. Friends running game parks in the Samburu, Masai Mara and in the northern district beyond Mount Kenya tell of mass cancellations — though not one tourist has been hurt in any of the protests.

Even the hugely popular Manda Bay — one of the best lodges on the coast — is only 50 per cent full. But on the day we arrived in Nairobi, there was a first glimmer of hope as former UN secretary general Kofi Annan seemed to be making some progress in the talks. The coastal region was certain to offer peace — and deserted beaches.

It was a deliciously warm evening as I stepped off the 20-seater aircraft that had taken us on the hour's flight from Nairobi to the coast and walked 100 yards across a grassy strip to board our private speedboat. We passed the old Arab port of Lamu, circled the island's mangrove swamps and within half an hour pulled up in the shallow waters of Kizunguni.

## Away from the troubles on the island of Lamu, Tom Bower finds a mini paradise — an idyllic house on a deserted beach

Between the palm trees and frangipani bushes was our house. I knew at once that I had made the right decision to come to Kenya.

Jahazi House, named after the largest of the Swahili trading boats hand-crafted from local mahogany and mangrove, is one of five houses, each on two acres, built in the traditional style: white walls, shady thatched terraces and intricately carved wooden doors.

Ours was built around a 45ft swimming pool, within an arched courtyard. Leading off, two on each side, were the double bedrooms — cool white with big fans, mosquito nets and en suite bathrooms. The huge master suite is upstairs, with a wooden four-poster bed, double bathroom, dressing room and private sitting area which leads to a vast veranda overlooking the sea.

Once owned by a retired Italian big-

game hunter, the 23-acre plot had been bought by a local Kenyan designer/architect and the individually designed houses sold off to foreign buyers, including several British families with Kenyan roots. When not staying there themselves, they rent out the houses.

With a glass of cold white wine — full board includes unlimited drinks — I stood under the shade of the thatched roof gazing at the fishermen's dhows sailing across the calm blue sea. Pulled up onto the shore, two men were unloading lobsters, crabs and a big red snapper. I watched their slow progress as they carried a heavy basket from the dhow towards our house. Dinner had arrived.

Each house has five full-time staff. Ours included Justin the cook, Ronald the waiter and Peter the houseboy. Dressed in immaculate white cotton

shorts and shirts they were charming and efficient. Balo, the boatman, was available from dawn to dusk to steer the house's own speedboat to fish, water ski or explore the archipelago.

Visitors pay only for the petrol. I had already made a date to water-ski the following morning. Grace the masseuse was on hand, too.

We watched the dhows come and go early in the morning as they set out to net their catch. During the week, the local fishermen delivered fresh swordfish, Swahili fish, prawns and tuna.

One day drifts into the next. A swim in the sea, a cup of coffee while watching gulls dive into the sea for their breakfast and Carmen bee-eaters darting from one palm tree to the next, a few laps in the pool, a walk along the deserted beach, a book to read, and a game of backgammon or Scrabble.

The daily ebb and flow of the tides still govern fishing patterns and sailing routines. The Kusi and Kaskazi winds dictate which way trade travels across the Indian Ocean. The focal point of any Swahili town is its port and, in the past, wooden sailing boats from all over the East African coast moored in larger harbours to sell their cargoes, buy goods and rest until the changing winds carried them home again.

After three days of blissful inactivity (and no jet-lag because Kenya is just three hours ahead of Britain), we took the boat back to Lamu town. Famous since the Sixties as a hideout for hedonists and adventurers, Lamu, established in the 9th century, is an island community that combines the best of African, Arab and European cultures. Prosperous from supplying gold, ivory and slaves, the Swahili's glory ended after the Portuguese invasion in the 17th century. Following their expulsion, enough remained of Lamu's old glory to remind visitors of the craftsmen and traders of that prosperous era.

The most famous houses are the three owned by Princess Caroline of Monaco. Since Caroline arrived in Lamu's Shela beach nearly a decade ago, travellers have sailed past the minarets of the devout Muslim community towards Shela. Here every visitor heads for Peponis, a glamorously faded hotel owned and managed for 20 years by Carol and Lars Korschein. Ageing hippies and American travellers drink cold Tusker beers on the terrace overlooking the harbour.

Back at Jahazi house, I plotted my



**Island style:** a private seating area upstairs leads on to a huge veranda overlooking the sea. The bathrooms are simple but luxurious



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# 007's licence to chill

At the hotel where Ian Fleming created one of James Bond's favourite cocktails, you can be pampered like an off-duty spy

**T**HERE are few more decadent pleasures than sipping a very strong, very cold vodka martini on a Friday afternoon.

Especially if it comes at the end of a masterclass in the art of mixing this king among hard drinks at Dukes Hotel.

The much-loved, red-brick, 90-room Dukes, tucked discreetly into a quiet St James's side street, is reportedly where Ian Fleming came up with the recipe for the Vesper martini James Bond invents in *Casino Royale*. A recent refurbishment by new owners Campbell Gray has enhanced rather than altered the restrained clubland décor of Dukes. The hotel, built in 1908, shares its centenary this year with Fleming, in honour of which it has created the Bond About Town weekend package.

The martini masterclass is the start of it. New head barman Alessandro Palazzi explains that shaking the drink with ice only dilutes it. Stirring is better, but best of all is to pour the chilled spirit (Alessandro has a huge range, including Potocki vodka and Hendricks gin) into a frozen glass just kissed with Vermouth, before anointing it with the oil from a slice of Sicilian lemon peel. As Alessandro's revered predecessor Gilberto used to say, one martini is never enough, while three is too many. Regretfully, after one, my wife Ann and I decamped for a bracing walk among the frosty, sunbleached daffodils of Green Park, before retiring to our room.

The Duke of Clarence Penthouse Suite occupies most of the fifth floor of Dukes, its balcony offering views across rooftops to the park. At around £1,100 a night, it's half the price of a comparable West End hotel penthouse I could mention, and better kitted out: a huge bed, attractive 19th-century bronze sculptures, full bottles of spirits and wine offered gratis, supplies of ethical Belu water. We could barely tear ourselves from the sunset to eat in Dukes' dining room.

Here the emphasis is on simple English cuisine. I had mackerel escabeche followed by skate wing with capers, Ann had dressed Cornish

## WEEKEND IDEA

DUKES HOTEL, LONDON

NICK CURTIS

crab followed by loin of lamb; we shared a plate of British cheeses. Everything was plainly but beautifully cooked; service is relaxed, the room is popular but not crowded, and the lack of piped music a godsend.

After dinner, James Bond himself would doubtless have joined M at his club Blades for a few hands of bridge, ending the evening with scrambled eggs, a Piccadilly tart and his 80th cigarette of the day at 3am in some dive near Swallow Street. But the smoking ban and democratisation of most of St James's formerly exclusive bars and businesses preclude one from embracing the Bond fantasy too closely, and quite rightly so. Back in our room, we opened the windows, and sunk into a silence rare at so central an address.

In the morning we opted for a well-cooked kipper in our room and that gorgeous view of the park, rather than breakfast in the chintzy drawing room. Dukes has a well-equipped basement gym but Fleming's 007 rarely does any exercise other than swimming and his only preparation for the big card game in *Casino Royale* is to have a massage. This is precisely what Ann opted for; in Dukes' treatment room, while I finished up the Bond About Town package with a traditional wet shave and haircut at Truefitt and Hill, around the corner.

Founded in 1806, and dominated by a glowering portrait of the Duke of Edinburgh, this barbershop really does offer the chance to step back in time. The décor is from the 1970s, the jokes positively Victorian. As soon as Jimmy, the Greek maestro of the wet shave, had swathed my face in hot towels and begun stropping his cut-throat razor, the other staff members began a loud conversation about ordering in more bandages. Ho, ho. But the service, too, is delightfully old-fashioned, as I learned when another barber, Mr Dennis, gently dealt with a long-term customer now suffering the confusions of old age.



Old-school charm: the restrained clubland décor of Dukes has been enhanced by a recent refurbishment

I love St James's. I love the shops of Jermyn Street, the private members' clubs I've been inside, the open spaces and the way the district sits genteelly on the borders of the naked commerce of Bond Street and the fleshpots of Soho. Most of all, I love Dukes Hotel. But I wonder what a snob like Ian Fleming would make of modern St James's. Round the corner from Dukes, the Royal Academy is

showing a glitzy exhibition. From Russia, James Bond would be appalled.

## WAY TO GO

**Dukes Hotel**, (020 7491 4840, [www.dukeshotel.com](http://www.dukeshotel.com)), St James's Place, SW1. The Bond About Town Package, including martini masterclass, wet shave, three-course dinner, full English breakfast, 2pm checkout, from £320pp. Penthouse Suite from £1,233, room only.

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