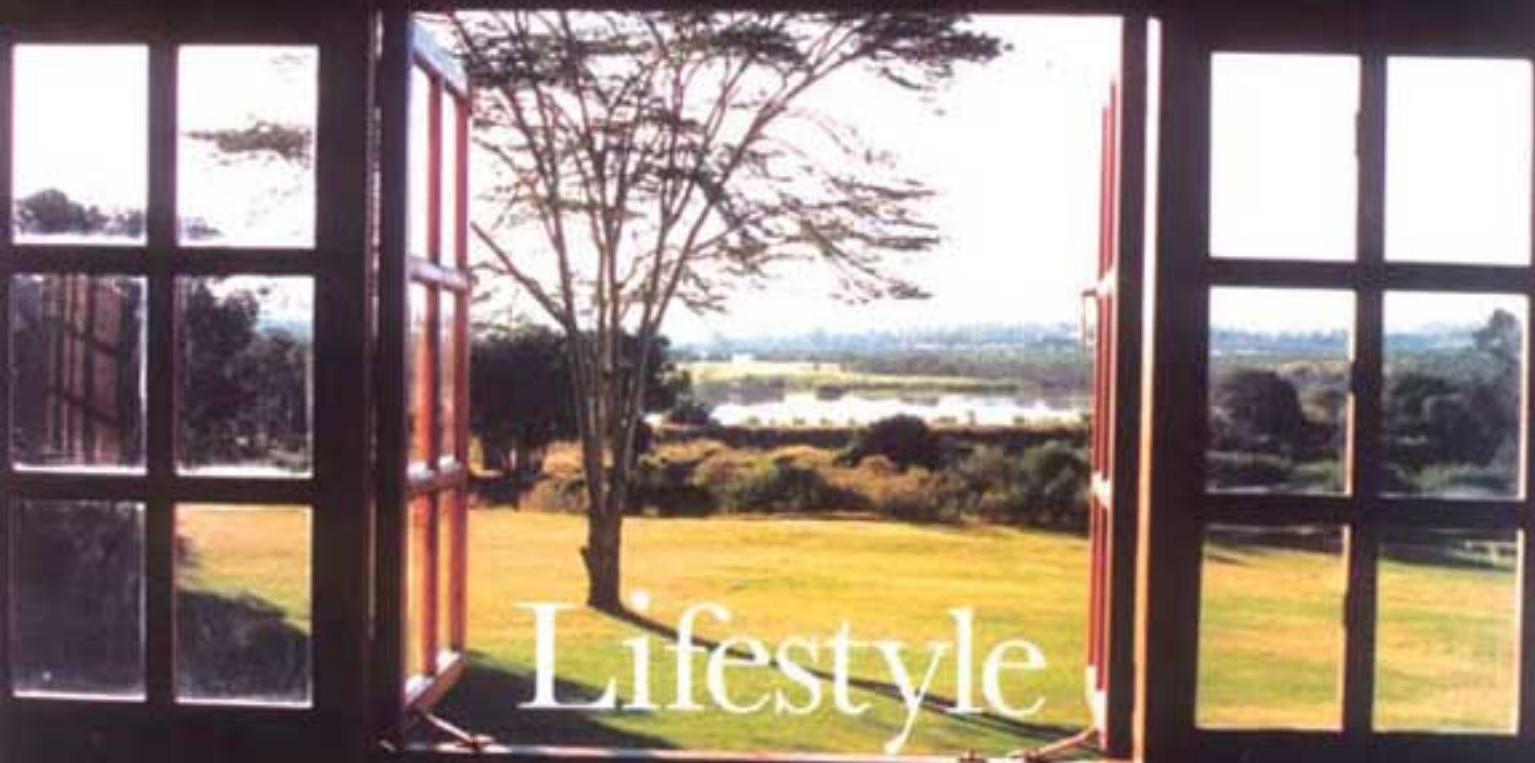


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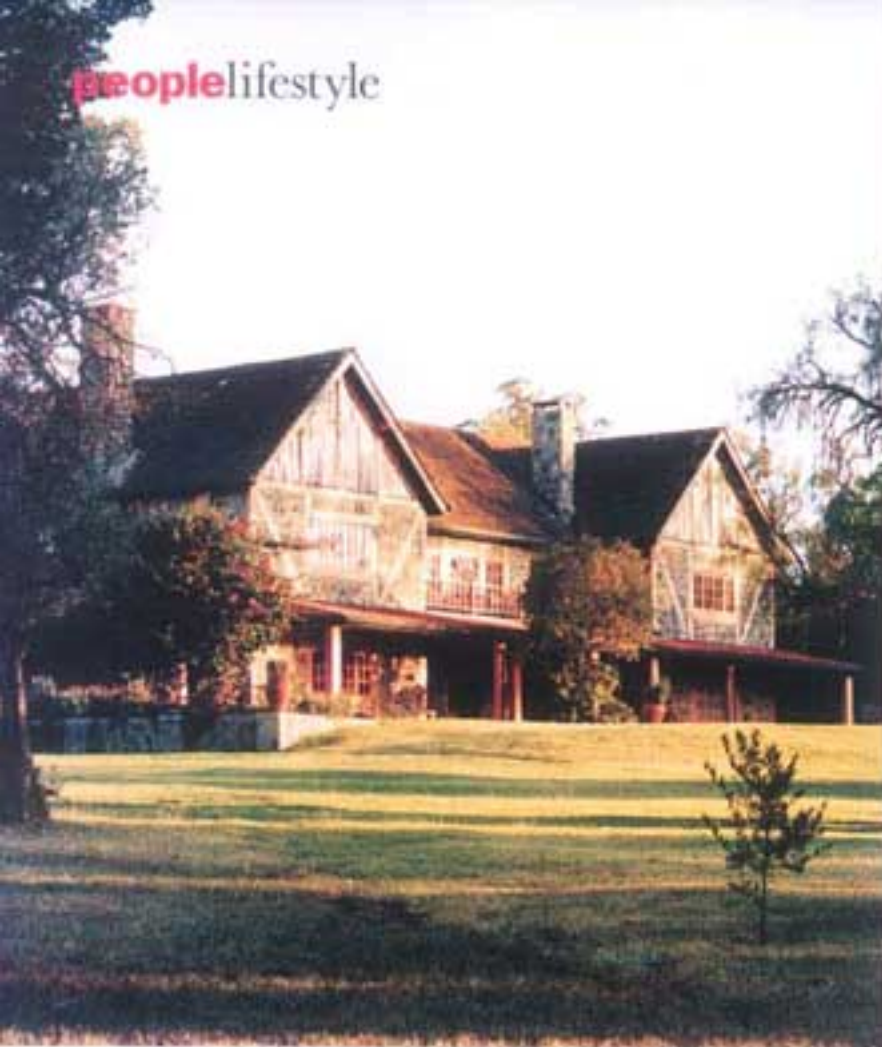
Hatta Byng meets multi-talented Leslie Duckworth, the driving force behind a development of stunning beach houses in Kenya

PHOTOGRAPHS HUGO BURNAND



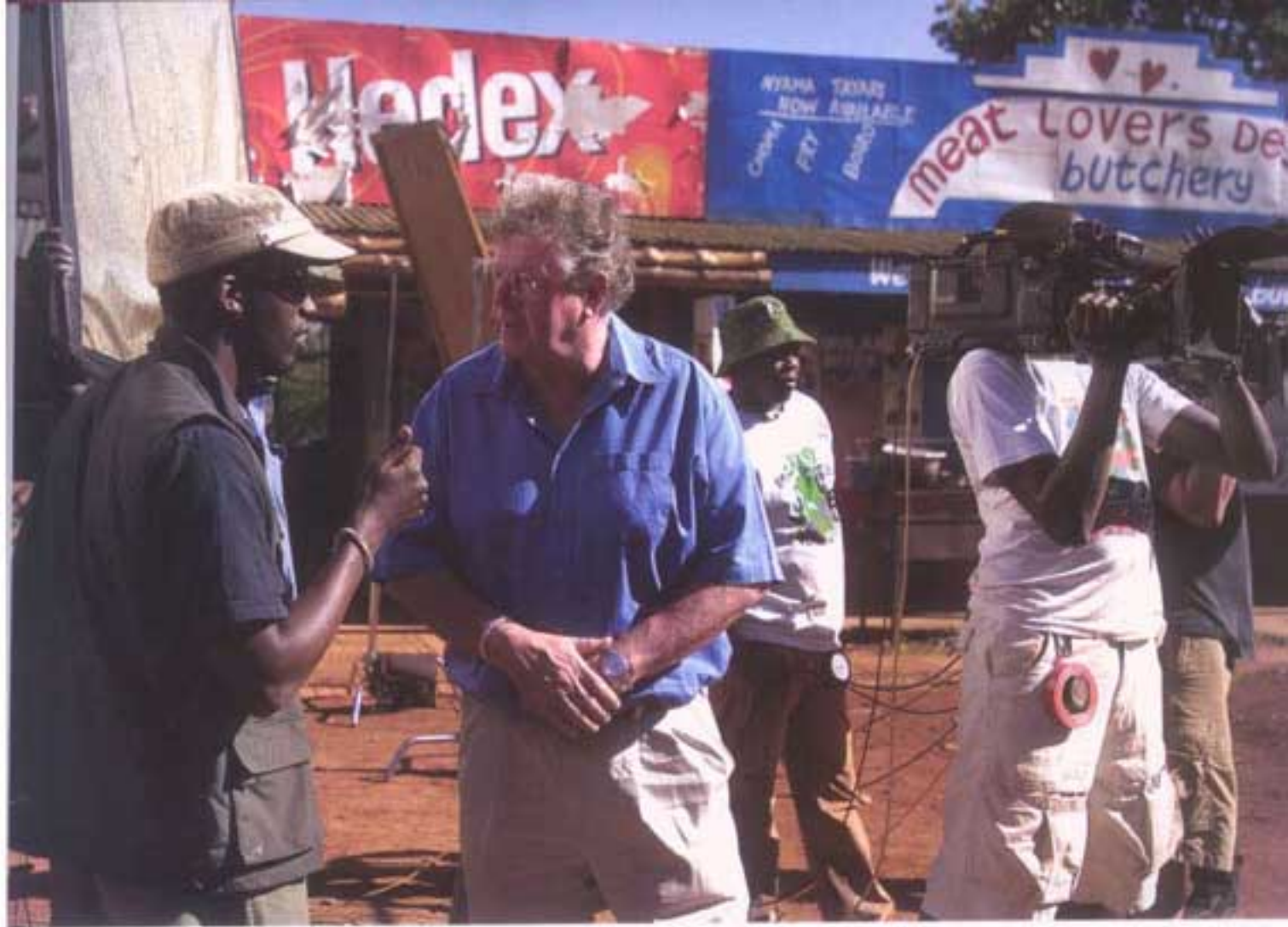
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Leslie (left of picture) stops for breakfast with her friend Diana Hunter, who surfer with her husband, who runs the Masaders Hotel Di Pejeta Bush Camp in the Laikipia region of central Kenya. The house's Bedroom at home offers views of the acacia tree on the lawn and lake beyond. Leslie tries to a trout as she has school for her Blue Rhino dog Leslie and her family. She is exploring in the stunning scenery surrounding Mount Kenya.





THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Leslie and her brother restored the house at Mukima 'almost from scratch'. Leslie discusses lunch menus with Paulina, the cook at Mukima. Titus, the farm manager, rides out to inspect the trees on the estate. Roses from The Real Flower Company enliven the main sitting room. Leslie joins Titus to inspect the cedar saplings





Leslie Duckworth, although brought up in Zimbabwe, has lived in Kenya with her Ugandan-born husband, Thump Campbell, and their daughters, Kate and Anna, for more than 25 years. When asked what she does, her usual, diffident reply is 'graphic design', the subject she trained in. She also refers to herself as a 'dilettante' and a 'dabbler', which certainly hints at the fun she has had, but still vastly underplays her impressive portfolio of achievements and staggering capacity for hard work. In a single day she can be seen juggling calls with Titus, the farm manager at Mukima, the estate she runs with her brother; sourcing products for Blue Rhino, her craft shops in Nairobi; finding a buyer for her latest Lamu beach house; and planning her next adventure with Annie Powys, her ethnobotanist friend with whom she has compiled a book on East African medicinal plants. All things considered, her family nickname, 'Duchess of Fix-it', is slightly nearer the truth.

Leslie's life is itinerant and hectic; she goes wherever she needs to be. Nairobi is her home base: she and Thump have a house in Karen, a leafy suburb, and share an office in the next road. Thump, an expert in developmental communications, is a major player in the growth of the Kenyan media industry – his pioneering radio programme, *Tembea na Majina* ('Move with the Times'), a Kenyan version of *The Archers*, is hugely popular. Leslie loves Nairobi but never stays for long – that she's on first-name terms with

THIS PAGE FROM TOP: Thump on the set of *Makutano Junction*, the hugely popular Kenyan TV series he produces, funded by the British Government's Department for International Development. Leslie enjoys a cocktail at the Talisman restaurant in Karen with her friend, Annie Powys, and daughter, Kate. Leslie has lunch at Nanyuki airstrip with her friend, the owner of the airstrip, Jamie Roberts





THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT in the absence of cars, supplies are brought to Lamu by dhow and carried up the beach. The houses Leslie is building on Kizingoni beach are simple, yet stunning. One of Salim & Salim's carpenters works on furniture to be used in the beach houses. A weaver in Kipungani village makes coconut-palm matting for the houses.



all the baggage staff at the airport bears out that she's on a plane at least once a week.

Mukima is 15 kilometres from Nanyuki airstrip. Her brother, who farms in Zambia, originally bought the 350-acre estate to extend his harvesting season. When this failed, Leslie persuaded him to let her restore the crumbling yet formidable house on the site. Completed at the end of last year, it is available to rent when Leslie is not in residence. It comes equipped with the quintessential African view: a magnificent acacia tree on the lawn, with a lake, the bush and Mount Kenya as a backdrop.

'We started almost from scratch, drilling a borehole for water and installing electricity,' says Leslie. 'Luckily, the original beams remained and we were able to salvage cedar from ruined outbuildings for the floorboards.' Jackson, her resident carpenter, made the windows and doors entirely by hand. Furniture was more 'instant': Leslie spent six days in Jakarta and completely kitted out the house. 'It's very simply decorated. I'm slowly collecting pictures by local artists, but basically we fill the house with flowers.' This is rose-growing country and, nearby, The Real Flower Company sells 'proper old-fashioned roses with the most wonderful smell'.

Leslie has a never-ending list of projects on the go or recently completed. 'Mukima is tamed Africa, not frontier living,' she points out. The pool house has just been finished - for which Jackson is making the furniture - and the stables are next up for an overhaul. She

has been in discussion with the man who owns the hardware shop in Nanyuki: she should have a tennis court within six weeks. Titus is busy working on the vegetable garden and tending the saplings they have planted all over the estate; Leslie is reintroducing the cedar forest that was originally here and has plans for an arboretum of medicinal plants. Thump, a keen bird-watcher, intends to draw up a list of birds on the lake with the help of an ornithologist friend.

Mukima inspires Leslie. 'There is always something happening,' she says passionately. 'It's a tight, friendly community and I think everybody is thrilled that the house has been brought back to life.' It is also perfectly sited for game-viewing: the Laikipia region has the largest diversity of endangered species in Africa. 'For some serious riding we take the horses to the Loldiaiga Hills, where the game-watching is fabulous.'

Leslie is also on the frequent-flyer list at Lamu airport. Here, with Jane Newman, her business partner, she is creating eight beach houses on Kizingoni beach, at the southwest tip of the island. Leslie, an old Lamu hand, came here first with Thump in 1973, and they were later married wearing kikoi on the beach. There were no invitations, simply an announcement: 'there was no palaver that way.' When this site came up for sale, Leslie had just finished several houses in Shela, also on Lamu, and was looking for a project in Nairobi. Another developer had planned to build a huge lodge on the site, but Leslie and Jane felt they could do something more sympathetic. >

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP This veranda at one of the Kizingoni beach houses is one of the many spots designed for relaxation. The airy rooms are decorated with local furniture and traditional plasterwork by Twaha, Leslie's builder, who is also the project manager, electrician and plumber for the development. The fabrics Leslie uses in the beach houses are designed and hand-printed by her friend Jane Roberts, who lives near Mukima. Leslie's daughter Anna is a keen wakeboarder. Leslie's Lamu 'HQ' is made entirely of coconut-palm leaves



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There was no business plan – it evolved in Leslie's usual piecemeal, yet highly effective, way. The idea was to build, sell, and then manage the properties as holiday lets for the owners. Leslie simply sketches the houses on graph paper. 'It's very easy – one square is a metre. I shut my eyes and visualize myself walking through the rooms.' She then plots them out with her builder, Twaha, using string. Twaha is also the project manager, plumber, electrician, and the executor of the beautiful traditional plasterwork. Wind and solar power provide electricity and a coastal-plant expert has advised them on indigenous planting.

The houses are simple – everything is local, brought by dhow and carried up the beach – but they are also spectacular. Each house has its own sense of drama, beautifully proportioned rooms and plenty of places to lie down and relax. Furniture is collected as Leslie builds – much of it made, along with the doors, windows and shutters, by Salim & Salim, her carpenters in Lamu Town. Her seamstress makes the cushions, tablecloths and curtains from local kikois and fabrics hand-printed by her friend Jane Roberts.

Leslie herself lives the local way here – albeit a deeply civilised version – in a hut made entirely of coconut-palm leaves. 'HQ', as she calls it, is enchanting, with big, airy bedrooms, a proper loo, electricity and even a power point for her laptop. Nearby are several more Robinson Crusoe-like *bandas*, including two for her daughters – Anna, a keen wakeboarder, sees hers as home. The coconut-palm matting used in the *bandas* is woven in the village nearby. Indeed, since beginning her property development here, Leslie has noticed a visible growth in the village's prosperity.

Alongside all of this, Leslie, together with Annie Powys, has spent long periods of time on the road researching their book, *Miti ni Mali* (meaning 'Plants are Valuable'). As more children go to school and learn 'western things', vital knowledge of their native medicinal plants is disappearing. Annie and Leslie spent five days in 15 different communities in Kenya, Uganda



and Tanzania, meeting some 'extraordinary' herbalists. They have since returned to deliver comics that were designed by Leslie to convey the importance of these plants to children, and a third trip is planned to deliver the completed book. 'It is vital these communities see what we have done and feel included,' she says. In one village, as a thank you for the support they received, Annie, through her charity Symbiosis Trust, has helped the local women to set up the Mukogodo Elephant Women's Group, which makes paper from elephant dung which Leslie then sells at Blue Rhino.

With her role in *Miti ni Mali* winding down and Lamu on its way to completion, Leslie's mind is fizzing again. She's working on a small development of houses on the ridge above Mukima, there is a possibility of a project on the coast with Thump, and she dreams of establishing an educational cartoon company. One can only marvel at her creative energy and be reassured that, occasionally, even Leslie lets herself succumb to 'Lamu-itis', Anna's word for the blissful inertia that sets in after a day or two at Kizingoni □
The House & Garden team travelled with Abercrombie & Kent (tel: 0845-0700 611; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)



FROM TOP The Mukogodo Elephant Women's Group makes paper from elephant dung. Leslie meets the village chief. Leslie, Anna and JIB, a family friend, pose on the beach with the Samburu askaris (watchmen)



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