

Travel details: for convenience and price, buy a package. Tim Best Travel (020 7591 0300, timbesttravel.com) can arrange stays in the houses at Kizingoni (kizingonibeach.com). For example, seven nights at the KazKazi, which sleeps eight, start at £1,875pp (based on eight sharing), including flights from Heathrow to Lamu with Kenya Airways (via Nairobi), all meals and drinks (including alcohol). A smart dhow is available for parties at about £350 a day; deep-sea fishing trips cost £400. Or try Cox & Kings (020 7873 5000, coxandkings.co.uk), Audley (01993 838000, audleytravel.com) or Aim4Africa (0845 408 4541, aim4africa.com).

LAMU ON THE CHEAP

On a budget? You won't meet Mick Jagger in any of these low-cost Lamu options, but the warm welcome and reliable rooms should salvage your disappointment.

CASUARINA REST HOUSE

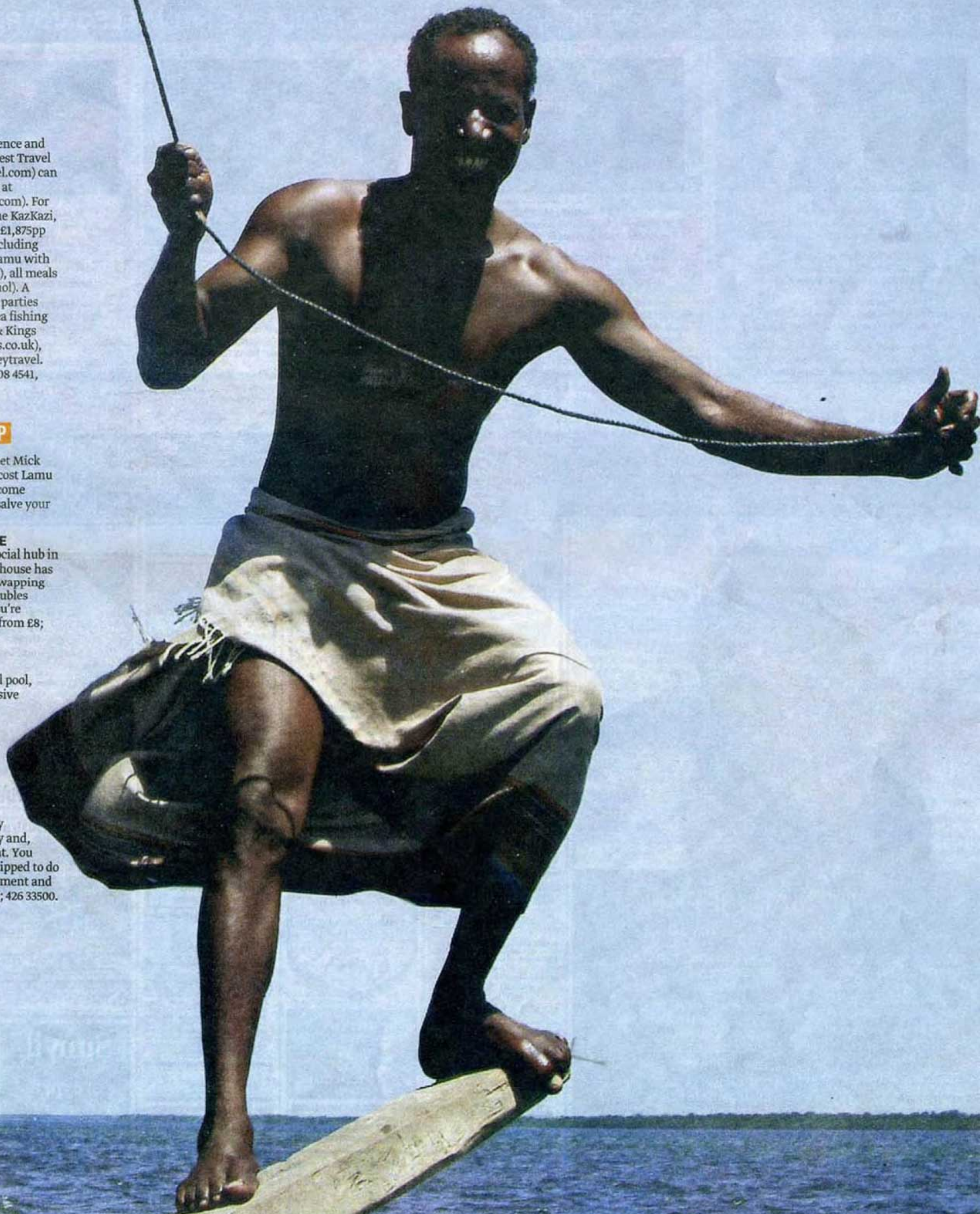
Renowned as a laid-back social hub in the town centre, this guesthouse has a terrace for relaxing and swapping travellers' tales, or a few doubles with private balconies if you're more shy. Ensuite doubles from £8; 00 254-426 33123.

JANNAT HOUSE

A spacious pad with a small pool, Jannat offers a comprehensive travellers' service, so you can relax while someone else books your next adventure. Doubles from £57, B&B; 426 33414, www.jannathouse.com.

DODO VILLAS

The Dodo, in Shela, is pretty basic, but it's clean, friendly and, best of all, on the beachfront. You can camp here if you're equipped to do so, otherwise book an apartment and relax. Apartments from £10; 426 33500.



MY SECRET RETREAT

When **Max Hastings** wants to escape the gloomy weather and miserable masters of modern Britain, he heads to the island of Lamu, off the coast of Kenya. There, the frolicking dolphins, friendly bats and laid-back locals make everything better

Kenya had a terrible press during the violence that followed the elections at the end of 2007, and to this day its shrunken tourist numbers reflect this. But most of the country was unaffected by the bloodshed, and in my eyes it remains one of the happiest destinations, among some of the friendliest people on earth. Because I am a writer and can write anywhere, almost every winter we rent houses there.

I scribble away amid some of the most stunning scenery and one of the most benign climates on earth, while my wife, Penny, reads, swims and relaxes with friends. There is something pleasing about the incongruity of composing a chapter on Churchill in the second world war while gazing up from the laptop at lateen sails creeping across the Indian Ocean horizon.

Lamu island, just off the coast and a two-hour flight from Nairobi, has become a favourite destination with all sorts of people who want almost empty beaches and a touch of the exotic. Lamu town and its smart villagey neighbour, Shela, have no cars, lots of donkeys, great people and architecture that reflects their mixed African and Arab heritage.

Behind the beaches further round the coast lie modest thatched cottages, mostly owned by white Kenyans who like surfing, and caught on to the charms of Lamu before the herd got there. Beyond them, the shore is mostly mangrove swamps and pretty fishing villages.

On the south side, eight miles from Shela, a Zimbabwe-born designer named Leslie Duckworth has, over the past four years, built seven big, lush houses on an idyllic 24-acre site beside the golden sands of Kizingoni beach. They have been sold to private buyers, but are rented out for most of the year and run by a joint management. Each is a cluster of thatched open spaces, built around its

own pool, with unbroken views of sea and palm trees.

The only sounds are made by birds, surf and braying donkeys. Every house has its own staff of seven and access to lots of waterborne toys, at a price. The weather is hot but gently breezy almost all the year round. Our house had a big infinity pool, so that even as we swam, we looked down on the ocean.

On Valentine's Day, Penny and I had a picnic on the beach under the moon, alone save for Vincent and Isaac who barbecued the langoustines. You may call for a sickbag at the notion of two sixtysomething-year-olds dining beside a bonfire on an otherwise virgin African beach — but sucks to you, we adored it.

During our days, we did a little light kayaking and a lot of snorkelling, which is pretty good here. Once, we went out with Louis Van Aardt, boss of the neighbouring Kizingo lodge, a cluster of thatched huts a few hundred yards down the beach. He specialises in finding dolphins for visitors to frisk with. The boat cruised around a likely patch of ocean off a coral island, looking for a school. The moment we were alongside them, Louis called: "Go!" We threw ourselves over the side and swam as hard as we could go towards the dolphins.

Sometimes they want to frolic, sometimes they just race away, a touch faster than overweight Englishmen can shift. We had a couple of magical moments when they twisted past, a few feet from our face masks. We did half-a-dozen sorties among the dolphins, with a lot of puffing from some of us as we struggled back into the boat, heaving on the swell.

Then, Louis, a charming, slightly melancholy, dispossessed Zimbabwean farmer, took us to explore a nearby coral reef, an experience we always love. There were white-tipped sharks, a big ray lying motionless in the sand and shoals of brilliantly coloured fish, which never lose their power to amaze. The coral shapes and colours

give as much pleasure as the lionfish and turtles. The best investment Penny and I ever made, a decade or so ago, was to buy prescription-made goggles in London. They cost little and transform snorkelling or diving for the short-sighted.

Each evening we strolled along the empty beach, fascinated by thousands of little pink crabs scuttling around the tideline, and by the quick, perfect sunsets as we came home. Early one morning, before it got hot, we walked eight miles along the sands to Shela, on the opposite side of the island, for breakfast at the Peponi hotel, a local institution on the waterfront, full of English types looking for romance and full English breakfasts.

Then a guide took us through Lamu town, where there are no cars, open drains, 6,000 much put-upon and

overloaded donkeys, and old Arab houses up narrow alleys, where my wife said that she expected at any minute to encounter the deprived Lord Sebastian Flyte on one of his benders, fleeing from life at Brideshead.

Lamu is getting fashionable — Mick Jagger has been sighted there. Our guide took us around a big old Arab house, being renovated at vast expense by a French family. We visited lots of furniture workshops, a local speciality, and enjoyed the waterfront teeming with dhows and cheerfully shouting fishermen. Then we boated back to Kizingoni, where Albert the cook produced delicious "bities" to nibble before dinner — hot crab claws, fish fingers, spicy spring rolls.

Menus were whatever we wanted them to be. We chose shellfish almost every night. Albert's roasted crab, served in a cream sauce in the shell, was a triumph, as were his pasta, and banana ice cream. We ate lots of salad and fruit. What is the point of being in tropical Africa if you don't pig out on mango, pawpaw and pineapple?

Our house, KazKazi, newest and biggest in the complex, is a triumph of imaginative design, with lots of private spaces, a faded terracotta colour scheme, pleasing fabrics, hammocks, loungers, locally made furniture and ornate Moorish doorways.

One bear trap for tenants: all the Kizingoni houses are selfish places, built around big owners' bedrooms with their own balconies. This is great if you are the lucky occupants of the main suite, as Penny and I were. But we could imagine ugly scenes if a gang of people were sharing costs and somebody had to take bedrooms number three and four. These were okay, but not remotely in the same league as the master suite. Our giant bed was set on a plinth, high above the floor. This offered a fabulous view of the sea. But being old, we lived in terror of the moment when one of us would trip over the mosquito net, heading for the bathroom in the dark, and break a leg falling 2ft onto a hard floor.

We usually fill rented houses with friends, to share the costs. If you don't mind the bother of arranging it all, you create your own holiday environment and spend less money than staying in a good hotel. This year, although we got a discount on the rent, we were on our own half the time, and reeled at the cost, paying euros in the new world of the fallen pound.

But if one chooses to play in rich people's resorts, one must expect them to charge like a wounded buffalo. Having stayed in a good many tropical beach houses, we agreed that this was our loveliest ever. The house staff were wonderful — Kenyans are natural geniuses at hospitality — and their attention to detail was terrific. Each evening at nightfall, hurricane lamps were set out to decorate the pool.

Even the bats were amazingly friendly, if you like that sort of thing, as we do. One little furry beast hung every night on a nearby lamp shade, watching us play Scrabble — if bats can watch anything, that is.

No mere visitor should succumb to delusions about blissful holiday spots. Last year in Syria, I sought to disabuse a companion who said: "The Syrians are so friendly that I can't believe all this stuff about them being sponsors of terrorism." On Lamu, our boatman said sadly one day: "I would like very much to go to London. They say there is no corruption there."

Everybody who knows Kenya recognises its deep-rooted problems: tribalism, graft and a soaring population notable among them. But we love the place and the people, and Kizingoni is pretty special. There were next to no bugs and nobody got ill. Those long, lazy days beneath the palms almost convinced us that Messrs Brown, Darling and Mandelson were figments of our imagination. Which seems the summit of happiness these days.

✦ Max Hastings travelled as a guest of Tim Best Travel



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