



Life in Lamu is laid-back, but luxurious

Prices have trebled here and the glitterati flock to the beaches. But this ramshackle Kenyan island keeps its low-key charm, writes **Anna Tyzack**

DONKEYS are the mode of transport on Lamu island, off the coast of Kenya – yet the place is a magnet for A-list celebrities.

Sienna Miller, Ewan McGregor and Kate Moss have been spotted there. Barack Obama is a regular on the island and Princess Caroline of Monaco and Prince Ernst of Hanover own several large houses. The fact that Lamu is cluttered and ramshackle, with no proper roads (or electricity in places) does not deter the glitterati.

They rather like the crumbling Swahili buildings, the deserted beaches and lack of mass tourism.

"It's very low key," says Andrew McGhie who runs a property company on the island. "If you'd lived here 400 years ago you'd still recognise it now."

Lamu's house prices have trebled in the past five years but are still tuppence compared to popular Caribbean destinations; large town houses cost £90,000 while an eco home with infinity pool is on the market for £1.3million.

There's a small and select community of British home owners on Lamu. They live in Robinson Crusoe-style homes with thatched roofs, solar power and infinity pools. They get about by donkey or on foot and use small motorboats to zip through the mangroves.

Lamu island measures 10 miles by five miles, and is part of the Lamu archipelago.

"It's a pretty cool lifestyle here – like living in a film set, with amazing food and sun everyday," says Rachael Feiler, who set up an eco lodge called Diamond on nearby Manda island when she graduated from Bristol University. "We

have a bizarre expat lifestyle which I couldn't be part of anywhere else. It can be social if you want it to be; it's very international."

But Lamu is also the ultimate place to chill out; massages cost £8 per hour and a house isn't complete without at least three lounging areas.

The population is predominantly Muslim. There's call to prayer five times a day; the men wear kanzu robes and women often wrap themselves in black buibui.

The architecture is a mixture of Moorish, Indian, Swahili and Colonial styles.

"Most people who come here have a feeling for the architecture and the culture. It's the oldest Swahili trading port and a World Heritage Site," says Andrew.

"Most people are in bed by 10pm but there's a low-key nightlife and you can drink as much alcohol as you like in the tourist bars."

His original plan was to write a book on Lamu's colonial history but he fell in love with the island the moment he

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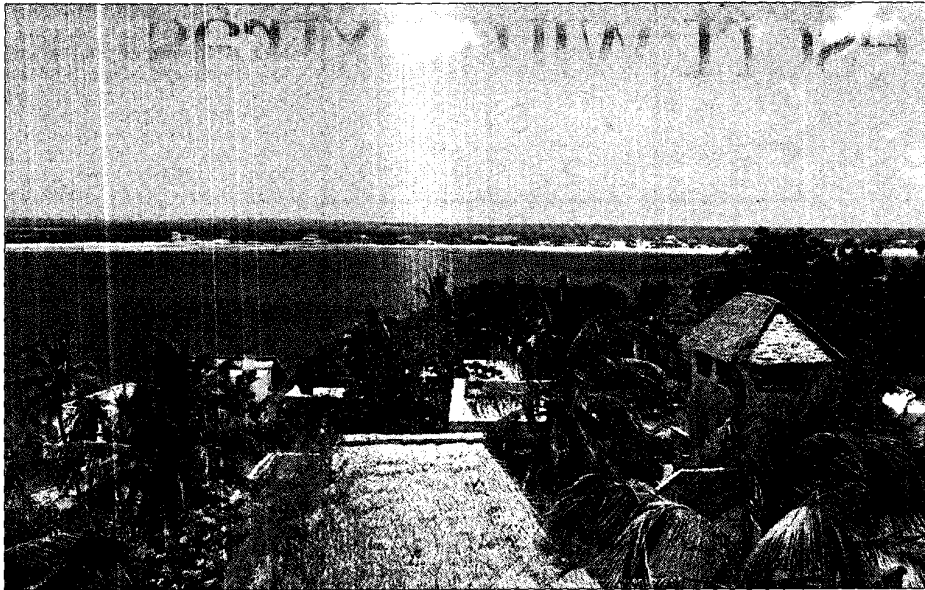
arrived and ended up buying and restoring a Swahili house in Lamu town.

A team of local fundis (masons and plasterers skilled in ancient building techniques) worked on it for two years, using local coral limestone blocks and mwangati hardwood beams.

The rooms are on a variety of levels, with smooth white walls and thatched makuti rooftops. Curtains made of local kikoi fabrics hang in the living room, study and three bedrooms; there's a thatched dining room and a garden with sweet jasmine, banana and papaya trees. Andrew has now finished restoring a second



Lamu's laid-back ambience and isolated location has attracted everyone from Kate Moss to Barack Obama



A-list location: views from a Shela rooftop (above), Maridhiya House (top right) and Siani estate

house, which he's selling for £207,000 (www.lamuisland-property.com).

While Lamu town attracts an arty, bohemian crowd, Shela, a village two miles along the coast, is more star-studded. "It's become quite chic and the houses are among the most expensive in east Africa," says Andrew. This is where Peponi hotel is located, the centre of Lamu social life (sometimes referred to as "Groucho-Club-on-sea").

The white sand beach stretches as far as the eye can see and there is scuba diving, waterskiing and windsurfing.

Ernst of Hanover's houses are in Shela, and the former home of the Sultan of Zanzibar, the largest house in Lamu, is for sale for £695,000.

Sienna Miller, Sting and Ewan McGregor rent houses on the southern tip of the island at Kizingoni beach, (named after the summer monsoon wind that once carried the dhows to Lamu from Asia).

It is more remote here than Shela (African wild, not Caribbean chic), with houses and a rustic bar set back from an untouched eight-mile beach. "You can watch the most spectacular sunsets," says Leslie Duckworth who is building 10 large eco homes on a 24-acre beachfront plantation. Leslie first came to Lamu in the Seventies and bought a house in Shela. "I came to Kizingoni to escape the crowd," she says.

Kazkazi House, the seventh to be finished, is on the market for £1.3 million. Designed to be

the ultimate in "away-from-it-all luxury", it has large tropical gardens and numerous lounging areas.

Hopefully Lamu Island is not too good to last. It is attracting more tourists and there's talk of a new port further along the coast.

"I can see it becoming more popular," says Andrew. "But it's still remarkably unspoilt. No one's building anything

ugly." He believes Lamu is far enough from Europe to risk being over-run (a nine-hour flight from London to Nairobi, plus a two-hour connecting flight).

For the time being at least, the donkeys and the dhows are unlikely to be replaced by anything more sophisticated.

□ www.kizingoni.com; +254 (0)733 444 144 www.diamond-beachvillage.com