





Turning *of the* Tides

Setting sail in Kenya's Lamu archipelago,
Sarah Khan explores sandy shores and idyllic
villages where Arab influences have lingered for
centuries. Photographs by **Rasha Yousif**



Pastel brushstrokes paint the sky and lingering notes of the adhaan hover in the sultry air as twilight descends over Kenya's Lamu archipelago. I'm joined on a terrace in the village of Shela by a quartet of taarab musicians, and as the sun fades and the moon rises above the thatched rooftops and the Indian Ocean beyond, they serenade me with a string of lively ballads. I may not understand a word of the Swahili lyrics – mostly playful advice on love, I'm told – but through the distinctive melodies and percussive rhythms, my ears map routes towards the Middle East, India and mainland Africa.

Chatting later under the glow of the full moon with Amina Nuhu, lead singer of the taarab group One Love, confirms my aural suspicions: a blend of traditional Arab folk music laced with Indian ragas and Swahili proverbs and embraced by communities along the Swahili coast of Kenya and Tanzania, taarab music mirrors the region's layered history in its use of instruments like qanun and tabla. Strolling through a village on Pate island the next day I hear a song spilling out of an open window that sounds remarkably like it could be a Hindi or Arabic hit; on a closer listen, I now recognise it as taarab.

"Taarab and mashairi, or poetry, have been part and parcel of Swahili culture, influenced by Arabic," Mohamed Ali, an exhibition officer at the Lamu Museum, tells me as we stroll past the home. "We are a cocktail of different cultures. We are just Kenyans."

This intoxicating mélange is visible throughout the islands, and I find myself dabbling in amateur cartography more than once during the week I spend traversing Kenya's coast. In Lamu's architecture, cuisine and language, I trace paths both eastward and westward. The Kiswahili language itself is a hybrid of Bantu, Arabic, Hindi and Portuguese, and I catch plenty of "yaanis" and "naams" peppered in conversations. Lamu's past is very much palpable in its present.

"Pole pole" – slowly, in Swahili – is another phrase you'll hear often in Lamu. Life happens pole pole around here, shaped as it is by the tides, the winds and the heat of the equatorial sun. I have no choice but to move slowly through languid days exploring the islands; even when I try to be eager and pack too much into my schedule, the dense veil of the midday heat descends and reins in my ambitions. I retreat to the ornately carved pavilion by the bougainvillea-shaded pool at the Majlis Resort instead.

The lure of this laid-back lifestyle saw new waves of travellers washing up at Lamu's quiet shores during the pandemic. "It was pretty unknown," says Trisala Bid, who, along with her boyfriend, Abdul Hakim Omar, runs Kijani, one of the few Kenyan-owned hotels in the village of Shela on Lamu island. After years of political turmoil and the looming spectre of terrorism in the region, Lamu had become off-limits for many sunseekers, the result of either red lists or nerves. But the addition of affordable flight routes and tightened security have lately made it more accessible, and Kenyans are the ones leading the way back. "With high-end tourists coming down during the pandemic, there's now a buzz here," Bid continues. "Closed borders encouraged locals to discover their country."

What these pandemic travellers found when they arrived was a seascape perhaps not too different from the one the Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta would have glimpsed when he sailed from Mogadishu and Mombasa to Kilwa and Zanzibar in the 1300s. In its heyday, Lamu was a hub of robust trade with China, India, the Middle East and Europe; from the 13th to the 19th centuries, Omani influence

Clockwise from top: Children at madrasa; Shela's Friday mosque; Lulu's boutique; poolside at Peponi Hotel; schoolgirls walk back to their homes in Lamu Town; a donkey pauses outside Aman boutique. **Previous page:** A dhow sails past the waterfront at Shela





From left: The pool bar at Majlis resort; inside Aman





dominated in the region. Mahogany dhows ply these waters as they have through the ages, their triangular sails piercing the hazy horizon. Only now, these boats are laden with tourists, not traders.

Sailing excursions become a feature of my daily meanderings through the archipelago, from quick five-minute jaunts to neighbouring villages to high-speed rides farther away. The sky-to-sea transition in Lamu is remarkably brief: within moments of touching down at Manda airport – where “baggage claim” is simply an open doorway through which luggage is passed out from a wheelbarrow by hand – I stride along a jetty to clamber onto a waiting speedboat.

This airport transfer was the first of innumerable sailings. There are no cars in the islands of Manda and Lamu; passing boats zigzag the slender channel that divides them, ferrying people from village to village, and a rainbow of wooden boats with names like *Taqwa*, *Qabul*, *Lady Gaga*, *I’ll Be Back* and *Lamu Uber* bob in shallow waters by the shore in between commutes.

I board *Hakuna Kulala* – meaning “no sleep,” according to my affable captain Mohamed Abdallah – to zip 10 minutes from Majlis on Manda to Lamu Town on the main island of Lamu, where the perpetual flux at the main jetty makes it feel like the archipelago’s Grand Central station. The relentless swirl of boats pirouetting in and out is expertly choreographed; instead of a departures signboard, captains bellow out destinations as they approach the shore: “SHELA SHELA SHELA!” “PATE PATE PATE!”

LIFE HERE IS SHAPED BY THE TIDES, THE WINDS AND THE HEAT OF THE EQUATORIAL SUN

Charming Lamu Town is a kinetic hive of activity while nearby Shela is more tranquil and postcard-pretty, but despite their boundless appeal, neither feels particularly overrun by tourists. The islands’ remote location and complicated recent history have meant they haven’t come to be as defined by tourism as Zanzibar, where Stone Town locals have moved away while their atmospheric properties have been transformed into boutique hotels and souvenir shops. Here, locals dominate: I pass beauty parlours, bakeries and makeshift movie halls frequented by residents; at waterfront cafés, kofia-wearing men play cards alongside tables of tourists.

“The word ‘Lamu’ comes from ‘Islam,’” one guide declares confidently outside Lamu Fort. I’m a sceptic, and sure enough, I quickly debunk this theory as fantasy – “Lamu” evolved from Amu, a former name. But I can see the temptation to forge narratives that don’t exist; Islam is so intertwined in the fabric of life here that the well-meaning fiction sounds almost plausible.

Settling in with a smoothie in the courtyard of a leafy café, I hear the melodic chorus of children reciting familiar surahs from a nearby madrasa. Later, I stop into a halwa shop selling sweets made for generations in the Arab style, before meeting a silversmith, Mohamed Rufai, who has been delicately forging jewellery with filigree work that’s a legacy of Lamu’s Omani and Yemeni settlers. Older homes were built facing north, facing the qibla; passing by, I sneak peeks into open windows and spy arabesque carved niches.

Even the word Swahili has an Arab provenance. “Sawahil’ is

Clockwise from top left: A seafood platter at Kijani; bougainvillea in full bloom in Shela; the ruins of a mosque in Takwa; caftans for sale at Lulu’s; children watch the festivities at a wedding





PHOTOGRAPH: MUTUA MATHEKA (MAJLIS)

Trip Planner

Arabic for coastal people,” Ali tells me. Lamu’s rich Arab inheritance is the result of centuries of interactions between these seaside communities and Omani and Yemeni traders, with settlements dating as far back as the 13th century; in the 1800s, when Oman’s capital was moved from Muscat to Stone Town, Lamu came to be ruled by the sultan of Zanzibar.

To see early vestiges of Arab influence in these islands, I sail farther afield. Etched into crumbling coral walls encircling the baobab-shaded ruins of a mosque at Takwa, a Swahili settlement that was abandoned in the 1700s, I spy vintage graffiti of an Omani-style dagger; deep in Pate island, meanwhile, the remnants of a once-thriving Swahili city-state that flourished from the 12th to the 18th centuries include a mosque with two separate mihrabs that remain remarkably intact.

“You can see it everywhere,” Bid says of the Arab influences woven into every facet of life in Lamu and the Swahili Coast. “You can see it in the dhows. You can see it in the faces. You’ll go diving and see it underwater in ruins and pottery.”

Many families can trace their heritage back to Oman and Yemen. “My parents used to tell me, if you ignore your culture you’re not complete,” says Ali. “Get to know your culture, where you come from.” This works both ways: Oman’s ambassador to Kenya visits the archipelago frequently, looking to etch out these connections. Many Omani families trace their heritage back to Lamu as well; Swahili is even spoken widely in Salalah, on Oman’s southern coast. And just as the Turkish government invests in preserving Ottoman-era monuments across the

THE RELENTLESS SWIRL OF BOATS PIROUETTING IN AND OUT OF THE JETTY IS EXPERTLY CHOREOGRAPHED

Balkans and other regions, the Sultanate of Oman has been funding restoration of heritage sites in East Africa.

On Lamu Town’s bustling waterfront, I pass one of these projects: the 18th-century villa of an Omani liwali, or governor. It’s usually home to the Lamu Museum, which has temporarily decamped to Lamu Fort; there, I see more links between the Arab world and the Swahili coast in the attire, celebrations and weaponry. When the Lamu Museum reopens in its restored location this fall, it will house an exhibition about the history of Omanis in the Lamu archipelago.

But this history isn’t a relic of the past; it lives on today in the everyday life of residents. “Lamu comes to life in its festivals,” Ali tells me, showing me clips of past celebrations saved on his phone. “We have a true living culture.” Poetry, Islamic calligraphy and carpentry are all entrenched in the contemporary way of life; Mawlid, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), is celebrated with abandon across the islands, with mosque courtyards overflowing with people dancing and singing religious songs called sama.

I’m not in town during Mawlid or Ramadan, but I am fortunate enough to stumble onto a traditional Swahili wedding pre-celebration in Shela. The entire village seems to have converged on a small square next to a gelato shop, to watch men perform kirumbizi, a dance with sticks doubling as spears. A band of musicians play drums and the zumuri pipe with gusto, setting a lively soundtrack as men, including the groom, pair off to joust playfully. It’s reminiscent of war dances performed on festive occasions in Oman and throughout the Middle East, an ancient tradition that carries on today in this remote outpost far across the seas.

Like so much in Lamu, the past has steeped itself in the present until it’s hard to see when one ends and the other begins. 📍

GETTING THERE

Kenya Airways (kenya-airways.com) flies direct to Nairobi from Dubai in five hours. Business class seating in the 787 Dreamliners that service the route have comfortable flat-bed seats, plush blankets and warm service. Domestic carrier **JamboJet** (jambojet.com) offers connections throughout Kenya; to reach Lamu, fly from Nairobi to the tiny airport on Manda island, then take a boat to your hotel.

WHERE TO STAY

Majlis A sprawling oasis on a quiet stretch of Manda island, with 39 rooms scattered across four sumptuous villas brimming with African art and antiques. The intricately carved pavilion by the pool is a standout. themajlisresorts.com

WHERE TO EAT

Peponi Hotel This iconic family-run hotel has been a Shela institution for more than a half century. Watch dhows sail by from the bar overlooking the sea, or book ahead for a traditional Swahili dinner served on comfortable cushions by the pool. peponihotel.com

Kijani Hotel The rooftop restaurant at this seafacing 11-room Shela hotel serves global fare – ceviche, lobster potstickers and laksa seafood soup – but the standout is a moreish Swahili-style prawn curry. kijani-lamu.com

Whispers This atmospheric courtyard hidden away in Lamu Town is a good stop for a coffee or a smoothie. The adjacent Gallery Baraka is a trove of pan-African housewares and accessories. facebook.com/WhispersLamu

WHERE TO SHOP

Aman This concept shop in Shela is stocked with airy caftans, swimsuits, totes, home décor and more. amanlamu.com

Lulu’s Browse chic sisal baskets, soft cotton kikoiis, fish carved from driftwood and olive-wood utensils inlaid with engraved bone at this new boutique in Shela. lulu-stories.com

Ali Lamu Look for colourful bags handmade from vintage sails. Also a good stop for gelato. alilamu.com

Natural Lamu Soaps, spice blends, hair masks, natural deodorants, and other products made on the island are on sale. There’s a small stand at the airport as well. natural-lamu.com

WHAT TO DO

The Village Experience arranges cooking lessons with ladies from the Shela Women’s Association: learn how to make samosas in a local woman’s home, then linger over a freshly prepared Swahili lunch. AED 150 per person; experiencethevillage.com

Clockwise from top: Local men play dominos; sailing at sunset; a junior suite at Majlis; donkeys pass a narrow alley in Shela