

The Telegraph

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# PLATINUM

MAY 2014

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## ISLE OF BLISS

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RESORT OFFERS A  
PLUSH COASTAL  
ESCAPE

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great returns

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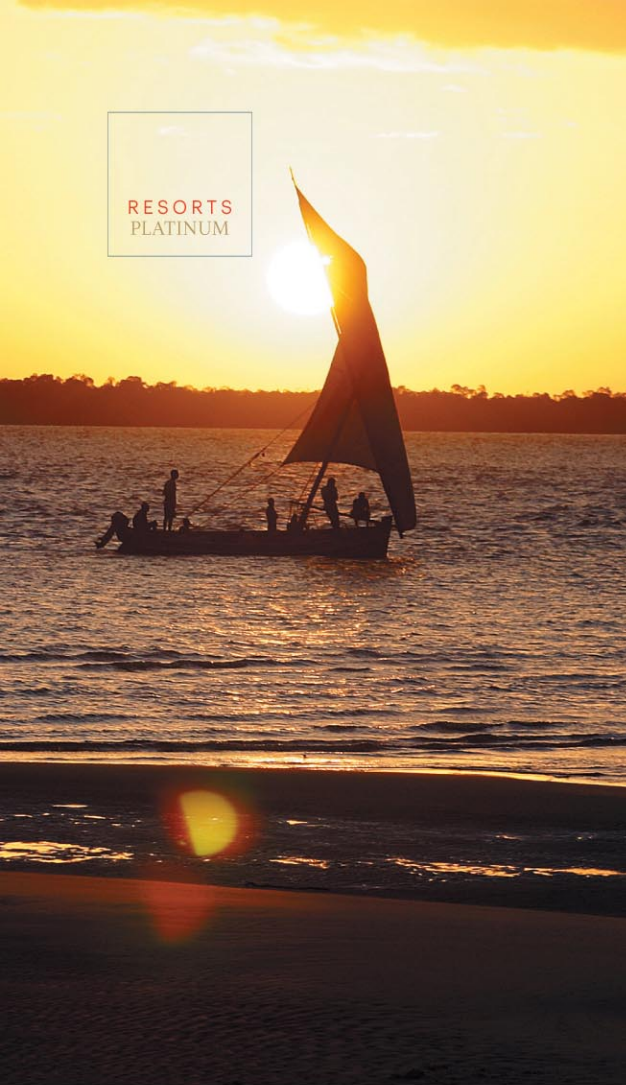
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ISSN 23219211



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From bleached, white coral blocks to hand-made furniture, the resort is made entirely out of local materials

# AN IDYLIC ESCAPE

The Majlis resort, on Manda Island in Kenya's Lamu archipelago, is built in an Italianate style with Swahili touches

BY SAMITA BHATIA



**RITZ RETREAT**  
(ABOVE) ONE UNUSUAL ELEMENT OF THE MAJLIS RESTAURANT IS ITS 14M-HIGH ROOF THAT'S BUILT WITH LOCAL WOOD FROM CASUARINA AND MANGROVE TREES (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) LAMU'S SUNSETS ARE BEST EXPERIENCED ON LEISURELY DHOW BOAT RIDES; DONKEYS ARE THE LIFELINE OF THE LAMU ARCHIPELAGO; THE MAJLIS POOL AND ITS ADJOINING BAR ARE THE JEWELS OF THE RESORT, BUILT IN THE SHADE OF THE ACACIA AND PALM TREES

# I

**T WAS A BLISTERING DAY, BUT ALL, OUR SURE-**footed guide, didn't seem to notice the equatorial heat. He glided with casual ease through the impossibly narrow, tightly winding lanes of Lamu town — the oldest living Swahili town in Kenya's northeastern coastline.

We followed hotly behind him, past Lamu Museum and ahead to catch a glimpse of the hospital for ailing donkeys. Through a maze of medieval streets we proceeded to the restored 18th century Swahili House Museum, and then to the German Post Office Museum that



was operational in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was easy to see why Lamu town — it dates back to the twelfth century — is recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

We jostled past trains of donkeys (the animals are the town's lifeline) with building materials and other sundry supplies loaded in baskets on their backs. Muslim women, demurely swathed in their black-cloaks, hustled by. We stopped occasionally in alleyway shops to admire their cache of beadwork, wood carvings and leatherware. We paused at mosques with their distinguishing domes and cool homes built with pristine white, locally available coral bricks.

The town is a kaleidoscope of vibrant images and a medley of sounds. Clearly Kenya isn't just about vast repertoire of wildlife reserves.

We had made our way from the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, to the tourist-friendly Lamu archipelago in the Indian Ocean. Once on the Arab trading route, this is a small group of islands — Lamu, Manda, Pate and Kiwayu — that has Lamu town as the district headquarters.

Lamu town is just a racy 10-minute speedboat ride (yes that's the only way to get about the islands) from the resort we had checked into — The Majlis — on Manda Island. In Arabic, *majlis* stands for a space reserved for entertaining honoured guests.

One of the smartest resorts in the archipelago, The Majlis is built in Italian villa style, brushed with generous Swahili architectural touches — central courtyards, niches and verandahs. We were met by its Italian owner, Federico Moccia, who told us that the resort has evolved from what was meant to be a family home. It was built as a private retreat by his parents, Naani and Elena, who had travelled the world but loved Lamu for its remote beauty.

The couple started by building a small house and then expanded it into a villa, which was completed in 2005. Two years later they added another two villas and the

entire property was thrown open to guests in October 2009.

Built entirely from local material — like the bleached, white coral blocks we had seen in the old town, and outfitted with local, hand-made furniture — the resort was the perfect balm after our hectic journeys into Kenya's wildlife reserves.

The hotel offers 25 eye candy-esque rooms in its three villas, with each villa opening onto the white sand beach and offering a private verandah with panoramic sea views. All the rooms come with traditionally high, beamed ceilings, large picture windows and terraces with garden views, the swimming pools (the resort has two) or the Indian Ocean.

We lolled by The Majlis Pool (the jewel in the resort's crown), stretched on the extra-large charpoys (complete with roll-down mosquito nets) set up by the pool bar and watched the white-sailed *dhow*s glide through the waters of the Manda Channel. We gravitated to the stunningly appointed central living room to soak in its soothing feel and to snooze in its well-cushioned sofas.

But The Majlis isn't just about wine-coloured days in the dappled sun. A 45-minute speedboat ride, passing mangroves on either side of us, got us to the coral reefs that were alive with colourful underwater life.

Another day, we capped a lazy evening with a sunset *dhow* ride — our picnic-style hamper and portable bar well-stocked, courtesy the resort's well-trained staff.

While every sit-out created at the resort looks inviting, the restaurant bar on the first floor is, perhaps, its more romantic space. In keeping with the open, airy feel of the resort, The Majlis Restaurant is split over two levels with a breezy open-plan verandah on the ground floor that continues into the bar and dining area on the first. And there's nothing like digging into fine fare with ocean breeze and dreamy music as accompaniments.

What a perfect escape from the madness of routine The Majlis was — ideal for a quiet holiday or even a busy destination wedding. Added to that, there's nothing to beat the call of Lamu itself — a lush hideaway in East Africa that is testimony to the fact that time can stand still. **E**

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: THE MAJLIS



KENYA AIRWAYS FLIES DIRECTLY BETWEEN NAIROBI'S JOMO KENYATTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT AND MUMBAI (DAILY) AND DELHI (FOUR FLIGHTS A WEEK). LAMU IS AN 1.45-HOUR FLIGHT FROM NAIROBI. DOMESTIC AIRLINES AIRKENYA AND SAFARILINK HAVE DAILY FLIGHTS BETWEEN LAMU AND NAIROBI'S WILSON AIRPORT. IN LAMU YOU'LL LAND AT MANDA AIRSTRIP AND A 10-15 MINUTE SPEEDBOAT RIDE WILL GET YOU TO THE MAJLIS.



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## A breezy 45-minute speedboat ride from The Majlis will take you to coral reefs that are home to brilliantly coloured underwater life

### SPLENDOUR BY THE SEA

(CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) THE MAJLIS IS A BEACH HOTEL WHERE TIME APPEARS TO STAND STILL; THE JUNIOR SUITE IS SPACIOUS WITH TRADITIONALLY HIGH, BEAMED CEILINGS, LARGE WINDOWS AND A TERRACE WITH GARDEN VIEWS; THE RESORT'S COSY CORNERS AND VERANDAHS ARE TASTEFULLY DESIGNED AND DECORATED WITH FURNITURE, HAND-CARVED ACCORDING TO THE LOCAL TRADITIONS; THE ROYAL SUITE WITH ITS PICTURE-WINDOWS AND TASTEFUL FURNISHING SPRAWLS OVER 260SQM

