

Mini-voyage on a fishing dhow takes visitors to colorful Lamu

By J. Madeleine Nash

Lamu, Kenya—Omar was not difficult to spot in the crowd of dhow captains waiting on the dock. He was wearing a chartreuse T-shirt with a show of parrots on the front, a floppy straw hat the size of a Mexican sombrero and a rose kitenge, the saronglike wrap favored by Swahili men.

As we stepped aboard his small dhow, Omar glanced up at a cobalt blue sky beginning to fill with cottony clouds. "Wind clouds," he said with a smile. Soon we were gliding past mangrove swamps framed picturelike by the sail. A stately heron patrolled the shallows, and two fish eagles circled overhead. Boys swimming in the water waved.

Omar was taking us to the small village of Matandoni on the island of Lamu. The main city of the island, which lies just off the coast of Kenya, dates from the 14th Century and is named Lamu as well. In all of Lamu there are only three forms of transportation—foot, donkey and dhow.

Dhows are sailing vessels that have plied the Indian Ocean for centuries, opening trade routes between India, Persia, Arabia and East Africa. Traditionally dhows followed the monsoons. The strong northeast winds that blow from November to March brought the dhows to Lamu. The southwest winds that blow from May to September sent them away again. Large cargo-carrying dhows still traverse the Indian Ocean, from the Arabian Sea to Zanzibar, though today they are almost universally motorized.

Omar's was a fishing dhow: a broad, beamy boat known as a *mashua*. Like their larger relatives, *mashuas* are built of mahogany and waterproofed with shark oil. Their main feature: a wide, triangular sail that can be drawn close to the wind or let out in front almost like a spinnaker. We were especially intrigued by the bow of Omar's dhow: It was carved and painted in red, white and green, and on either side were two small circles containing a star and crescent. "Dhow eyes," explained Omar. "To help dhow see rocks."

Omar was one of many dhow captains we had met only the day before. He had introduced himself as Omar Sharif, like the movie star; it was not his real last name, just the Lamu version of a CB handle. Finding a dhow captain willing to take tourists on excursions was not exactly a problem. In our case, a short walk along the waterfront sufficed to flush out dozens. "I am the captain of a dhow," the inevitable line began.

Each of the dhow captains we encountered had a special angle. One posted a sign on his boat: "We give massages." Another touted his cuisine: "We catch fish and cook it with a sauce, and we make coconut with rice and such a salad as you never taste before." The going price for a day on a dhow: 200 Kenya shillings, or roughly \$15.

Getting to Lamu proved a bit more

expensive. The easiest point of departure is the coastal resort town of Malindi, and though it is possible to take a bus or car, we decided to fly to nearby Manda Island. The cost of two one-way tickets on a six-seater plane: \$50.

On Manda Island we boarded the motorized dhow that acts as a regular ferry. The boat quickly filled with locals carrying bundles of brown-and-green twigs, and, as we watched, one young man popped a twig into his mouth along with a stick of bubblegum. What he was chewing on, he explained amid giggles, was *muranghi* or *mirah*, a mild upper.

The bundles of *mirah* had flown in with us on the plane and were now bound for market in Lamu. At least one occupant of the boat appeared to have chewed too much *mirah*.

"Cool," he repeated with boundless enthusiasm. "Cool."

Nimble stepping off the boat, Mr. Cool [as we had nicknamed him] gave us a friendly hand up. An older man wearing a gold-and-white embroidered cap and long white robe bowed deeply.

"Welcome," he said, "to paradise."

Our hotel, the New Mahrus, at first seemed far from paradise. Situated on the town's main square, it greeted us with a dank staircase and dingy second-floor reception area. The concierge was a young, slightly pudgy man who wore his hair in an American-style Afro and spoke English with a crisp Oxbridge accent. His nickname was Bushbaby, Bush for short.

Briefly we wondered if we had made a mistake, but as we climbed the inner staircase to our room, we suddenly found ourselves on a bright and airy terrace. The room was small, but it was clean, painted white and equipped not only with mosquito netting but also with a small electric fan. Just outside was a balcony overlooking the central market. It was mid-afternoon, and street vendors still had their wares on display: piles of green bananas, coconuts and pawpaws, or papayas.

Suddenly we heard the sound of drums insistently beating and voices chanting. Below there materialized an exuberant parade of women clad in black from head to toe. Following them through narrow streets, we saw brown eyes glint mischievously and pretty faces as some of the women momentarily forgot to lift their veils, called *buibuis*, or casually dropped them to converse with a friend. Their sandaled feet were elaborately decorated with tattoos.

Back at the hotel, Bushbaby eagerly confided that some of the town's less respectable women had been known to open their robes while wearing nothing underneath.

"It drives the men crazy," he whispered.

A short time later our floor was visited by two black-robed women, heavily made up and wafting perfume. They were some of Lamu's ladies of the night, paying a



Thomas Nash photos

Lamu women clad in black from head to toe: "Concierge Bushbaby eagerly confided that some of the town's less respectable women had been known to open their robes while wearing nothing underneath. 'It drives the men crazy,' he whispered."

visit to a Saudi businessman in a room nearby.

"Lamu," declared the proprietor of the Equator Restaurant, where we later dined, "is an event." Indeed. The next day we spontaneously extended our stay from two days to five and were immediately rewarded with another parade, this time a dancing procession of small boys dressed all in white.

The culture of Lamu is Swahili; it is Islamic, but with an African beat. Lamu residents became followers of one Habib Swaleh, the founder of the Riya Dha Mosae in nearby Longoni. Swaleh and his congregations scandalized Islamic purists at the beginning of the century with their rhythmic chanting and swaying to the accompaniment of tambourines and drums.

There are, depending on whom you ask, either 22 or 24 mosques in Lamu, and one of them was close to our hotel. Every morning we were awakened around 4:30 by the call to prayer; it was broadcast, loudly, over a public address system.

In the 18th Century Lamu was a flourishing commercial center, exporting

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hippo teeth, rhino horn, cowrie shells, ivory, sharks' fins, coconuts, mangoes, tamarinds, straw hats and mangrove poles. The homes of Lamu's wealthy families were adorned with ornate brass chests and canopied beds from India.

Today the economy of Lamu is in decline, but traces of the old splendor can be found in the intricately carved doorways of its shops and old stone houses. In recent years, a number of Lamu's 18th-Century buildings have been bought up and restored by Europeans, and some can be rented by the month or week. Among

their nicest architectural features: spacious interior courtyards that served as the centers of harem life.

Lamu is not without its seamy side. Single women in particular can expect to be hassled by the town's considerable population of beachboys, who moonlight as Lotharios for hire. While we were there the municipal workers declared a strike to protest their not having been paid in months. The streets and gutters began to fill with trash, donkey excrement, even the bloated carcass of a duck.

But the bougainvillea that bloomed in wild profusion made up for the accumulating filth, and on

the ocean side, a half-hour walk during low tide, a glorious expanse of uninhabited beach awaited us.

Then there were the day trips—Lamu's dhows. The trip we took with Omar to Matandoni is among the most popular. Matandoni is a village where dhows are made and we were able to watch fine local carpenters hard at work on large, ocean-going dhows.

To see them, we climbed a rickety ladder and stood on a wobbly mahogany plank. One of the men was using a traditional hand-drill called a *kekee*, and he worked with a bow like a violin. When completed, we were told, the dhow would bring a price of 300,000 sh

illings, or more than \$23,000.

Matandoni was a friendly place. Children and adults alike approached us with "Jambo, jambo," the Swahili word for hello. Occasionally the greetings were followed by demands: "Shillingi, shillingi," said one child with a shaved head and gold earrings, poking my thigh insistently. Another child dashed out of a mosque school with an eye on my ballpoint pen. "Pen for school?" he inquired hopefully.

There are no restaurants in Matandoni, so we lunched at the house belonging to the head of the village school council. We waited

on a stone bench in the inner courtyard we shared with an old crate and two ducks. Across the way, a young woman knelt on the floor of a small, dark room carefully washing her cooking utensils.

We ate, in another small, dark room, sitting cross-legged on a fresh straw mat our host spread across the floor. The fare was simple: small shrimps in a tangy tamarind sauce and rice cooked in coconut milk. Afterward we ate the soft pulp of the coconut. It reminded us of Chinese rice noodles.

A day later we took another

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dhow to the Takwa ruins on Manda Island. Takwa, a settlement that dates from the 16th Century, is remarkable for a brightly patterned Portuguese bowl in the cistern by its mosque. The bowl served as a reservoir for water during the dry season and helped preserve the fish that were placed in the cistern to prevent mosquitoes from breeding.

Our dhow captain on this trip was Hamid, one of Omar's cousins. On the way over, Hamid told us that he was very sleepy because he had spent the night guarding his brother's *shamba*, or farm, on Manda Island. The reason: Elephants had been swimming the narrow channel that sep-

arates the island from the mainland.

The elephants, Hamid complained, were nothing more than monstrous garden pests. They trampled fences and devoured his brother's sweet potatoes and tomatoes. Last night Hamid had six elephants to contend with, and they announced their arrival with a loud trumpeting noise. "Who, who," Hamid shouted in imitation. Then, he confessed, he got scared and ran.

Returning to Lamu, we marveled at the cosmopolitan mixture of people brought there by the dhows. In the street, we passed a group of Indian Moslems with children dressed in satin hats; they looked almost like dolls. Nearby a little Swahili girl with kinky au-

burn hair and skin the color of caramel sweetly held out a hand for us to shake. "Jambo," she trilled.

Back at the New Mahrus, we found Bushbaby coaching the night desk clerk in English pronunciation. A Kikuyu tribesman from Kenya's interior, the desk clerk tried mightily to pronounce the word "chips." To Bushbaby's great amusement, his efforts all yielded the same result: "Sips," he repeated over and over. "Sips."

It was our last night at the New Mahrus. Sitting on the balcony outside our room, we closed our eyes and listened once more to the special sounds of Lamu—the hum of people on the street, the beating of drums and the evening call to prayer.

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