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romantic fort

An enchanting bastion on the edge of the Indian Ocean: Omani in its bones, Swahili in its spirit, Lamu in its soul

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Previous spread The Fort stands quietly at the far end of Shela beach, its coral stone walls catching the last pink light of sunset as figures move slowly along the shoreline. Still lifes gathered in deep window recesses frame glimpses of the world outside, while narrow openings allow shafts of Indian Ocean light to spill softly into the fort's interiors. **Above** The double-volume front door stands as a symbol of safety and strength, a threshold between the bustle of the beach outside and the stillness within. **Opposite** When the fort's doors stand open, they welcome guests into a lush internal courtyard sheltered from the wind outside. Closed, they return the house to its fortress origins, private, imposing and almost impossible to enter any other way.



There is a particular kind of magic that happens the moment you step off the small propeller plane in Lamu. You walk down the jetty and board a wooden boat. The engine hums low and unhurried. And somewhere between the shore and the open channel, somewhere in that slow, salt-laced crossing, something in you begins to release.

I have been coming here for over a decade. I fell in love with Lamu the way you fall in love with a person: suddenly, then completely, then in deeper layers gradually over time. It does something to you that no wellness retreat, no beautifully edited itinerary can replicate. There are no cars here, only donkeys picking their way through narrow limestone lanes, the occasional *pikipiki* (motorbike, in Swahili) cutting a lazy arc down the beach, and the great carved bellies of dhows rising and falling on the tide. The mangroves catch light in the late afternoon. The sand dunes shift slowly, millennia of patience. The Indian Ocean arrives in every shade of jewel. And the smell of salt and wood smoke and something floral you can never quite name settles into your clothes and stays there.

Lamu has been trading with the world since at least the 14th century, when Arab and Persian merchants first established routes along the Swahili coast. The Omani sultans came later, leaving their architectural signature in the tall carved doors, the ornate plasterwork, the courtyards built to hold shade and breeze in equal measure. Chinese porcelain arrived as ballast on trade ships and found its way into the walls of Lamu's oldest houses, still visible today in fragments: a blue-and-white shard catching the light in a doorway, a whole plate mortared into a coral ceiling like a quiet offering. The island has always absorbed what arrives from the sea, then made it entirely its own.

It was here, in December 2022, that Jakob and I got married. We chose The Fort for our wedding.

It stands at the far end of Shela village, where the beach curves away from the centre of things and the channel opens towards the sea. Quietly. Majestically. The Fort was the vision of the late Antonio Ferro, an Italian adventurer who arrived in East Africa in the way of great romantic figures: to recover from a love, and to find something new. After years in Africa, he ended up in Lamu, then made his way to Kenya, eventually landing on Manda Island where in the late 1980s he and his Italian friends built Ras Kitau, a small guesthouse. He looked across the water at Shela and imagined a fort.

The Omani forts of the Arabian Peninsula were his inspiration for their coral-stone arches, the mass of their towers, the logic of walls built to outlast their makers. Drawing on that tradition and planting it firmly in the soil of the Swahili coast, he created something at once ancient and entirely invented: a fort on the edge of the Indian Ocean, Omani in its bones, Swahili in its spirit, Lamu in its soul.

Gabriella, his wife, would eventually become its custodian, and she knew exactly what she wanted to change. When she finally began, she did it with characteristic care and, as it happened, during a global pandemic that meant sourcing everything online: lamps measured against photographs, dimensions translated from German suppliers to Kenyan spaces, fabrics that she carried personally across four flights from Germany because you simply could not find the right outdoor weave in Nairobi at the time.

She worked through the lower dining terrace, the pool and lounge, the rooftop, the bedrooms, each space revised slowly, intuitively, the way a person edits a beloved manuscript. Not imposing a vision so much as listening for what the building was already asking to become.

The result is a space that feels entirely of its place. Coral stone walls hold the cool of the night long into the day. Arches frame views of the sea as if they were paintings. The rooftop catches every breeze that moves through the channel. The interiors are deeply considered, layered with texture, pattern and a restraint that reads as confidence. There is nothing superfluous here. The food, sourced from local fishermen and the gardens of the island, arrives at the table tasting of the place itself. Gabriella's team tends to everything with a quiet attentiveness that never tips into formality.

As a textile designer and the founder of Siafu Home, a brand rooted in the handwoven traditions of Kenya, I am perhaps professionally inclined to notice cloth and surface. But what I feel at The Fort goes beyond the professional. It is the particular way that a space built from natural materials such as coral, stone, wood, linen, cotton holds the light differently at every hour. The way texture becomes atmosphere. The way the line between inside and outside is made so porous that the breeze becomes part of the interior design.

We were married on the rooftop at sunset, with the channel going gold below us and the dhows moving like shadows across the water. Cocktails in the warm air, our people gathered around us. Then dinner at the beach tables lit in the dark, the Indian Ocean arriving at our feet in regular, untroubled waves. Then dancing again, on the rooftop, under the stars, with Lamu spread out quietly in every direction.

I have returned since, and I will keep returning. Some places stay with you not because of what they offer, though The Fort offers much, but because of what they allow. The stillness. The long breakfast. The afternoon in which nothing is required of you. The sunset that asks only that you watch it.

That is the gift of Lamu. That is, I think, the particular genius of The Fort. ● **@thefortshela thefortshela.com @perfecthideaways perfecthideaways.co.za**

Opposite One of the many lounging spaces scattered throughout The Fort, each opening onto the lush internal courtyard where palms sway softly above coral stone walls and the sea breeze drifts through shaded archways. For those who know Lamu, The Fort is the perfect house. For those arriving for the first time, it will feel, somehow, like coming home.

















This spread Time at The Fort unfolds slowly, shaped by light, tide and breeze. Mornings drift into afternoons beside the pool, long lunches stretch lazily across shaded balconies, and hidden corners within the coral stone walls invite moments of quiet retreat. Everywhere, there is a sense of ease, linen curtains lifting softly in the ocean air, palms casting shifting shadows across whitewashed walls, and the gentle rhythm of island life carrying on just beyond the arches.



Opposite The master bedroom opens onto a private balcony overlooking the channel, with views towards Manda Island and the changing light across the water beyond. **Above** A regular sight on Lamu island and in Shela, donkeys wander slowly past The Fort each day at the far end of the beach towards the popular Peponi Hotel, where life still moves at the island's unhurried pace.