

Lamu - a long and colourful history

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 24 January 2012 09:40 - Last Updated Thursday, 26 January 2012 08:08

In the 14th Century, Lamu was established as a Swahili trading outpost and settlement. The town became an important landmark on the Northern sea trade route, and one of the great centres of Swahili culture.

The islands history is long and colourful. Some believe that the island has been settled since the 7th century, although the first written history of the island begins in 1402. Local legend speaks of the lost city of Hadibu, an Arab settlement buried beneath the rolling dunes of Shela beach.

Shela was the scene of a great battle and massacre in the mid 18th century, as Lamu battled its neighbouring islands, Manda and Pate.

While the civilizations on these islands faded, lamu prospered. Both Lamu town and the village of Shela are home to many fine examples of Swahili architecture. Some of the original mansions have been restored and maintained.

Lamu is one of the most historically important Swahili towns. On nearby Manda Island are found the ruins of Takwa, a civilization razed in the 17th Century. These ruins, now overgrown and overshadowed by baobab trees, show that Takwa was a holy city, where all doors faced Mecca.

Some residents of Shela, who believe themselves to be descendants of Takwa, still visit the ruins to pray. Takwa can be reached by dhow from either Lamu or Shela.

Lamu was also culturally influenced by the Bajun people. The Bajun are an indigenous tribal group, centred around the Lamu archipelago, whose origins and history have become blurred with the Swahili to the extent that one of their sub-clans, the Shiradhi claim to be direct descendants of Shirazi Arabs.

The Bajun are traditionally a fishing people, who also cultivate coconuts and mangrove logs. Many of their traditions have melded into Lamu's cultural melting pot.

Their traditional woodcarving played a major part in the development of the locally renowned Lamu carving industry, and their language was the genesis of Kiamu, a Swahili dialect that is the true language of Lamu.

There is an excellent Museum in Lamu town with good exhibits on Swahili culture in general and Lamu culture in particular. The staff are very helpful and have a wealth of local information.

The labyrinthine streets of Lamu town itself are a historical attraction in themselves. These

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narrow streets are all built upwards along a gentle slope, letting the rains wash the town clean.

The Old Town was declared a World Heritage site, and exploring the town on foot is a wonderful way to soak up the atmosphere of the living, breathing history of Lamu.

At the centre of town is the impressive Sultan's Fort, built by the Omanis in 1808. The Fort has been through various changes over the years, including conversion into a prison. It is now a museum and its forecourt is home to Lamu's largest open market.

Lamu saw many visitors over its long history, including traders and explorers from Portugal, China, Turkey and much of the Middle East. Its culture was inevitably influenced by most of them, producing this truly unique society.

Lamu is a very relaxed and relaxing place, and its easy going lifestyle has long attracted those seeking an alternative and exotic lifestyle.

This started in 1894 with the arrival of the 'Freelanders', a group of idealistic British and European intellectuals who planned to use the island as base for a utopian commune to be finally located near Mount Kenya. Their plans fell apart almost immediately, and some never left Lamu.

This was repeated in the 1970's, when Lamu became a popular haunt for easy going hippy travellers.

It should be remembered though that while tolerant, Lamu is proud and protective of its Swahili cultural traditions. Visitors to the island should keep this in mind and dress and behave in a way appropriate to an Islamic community.

It can be arranged to visit a home in Lamu to meet a local family, and spend some time in a traditional Swahili home. This is a wonderful opportunity to experience life as it is lived within the walls of the island's famous historical houses.

The families you visit with will be happy to explain to you the traditions and daily routines of life in Lamu. You may help out the children with their school work, visit the mosque, or assist with the preparation of food.

Often these visits involve taking a traditional Swahili meal with the family. This is the best way to sample this unique cuisine, and discover the best cooking on the coast.

Ask at your hotel for details of how such a visit can be arranged.

Lamu is well known for its local Henna artists, who paint the hands of feet of local women with elaborate traditional designs for special ceremonies or just for decorative purposes. This is considered a fine art and attractively painted hands and feet are a great mark of beauty.

The Henna used stains the skin, and washes away after several days. Women can have their

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hands and feet painted in a number of shops in old town.

One of the best times to visit Lamu is during the Maulidi festival. This annual Islamic festival celebrates the birth of the prophet, and on Lamu is cause for great celebration indeed.

A week long festival of music and dance is held, with traditional sword fights in public squares and Swahili feasts. Book well ahead to make sure you find a room during this festival.