

Sun, Sea and Sandflies

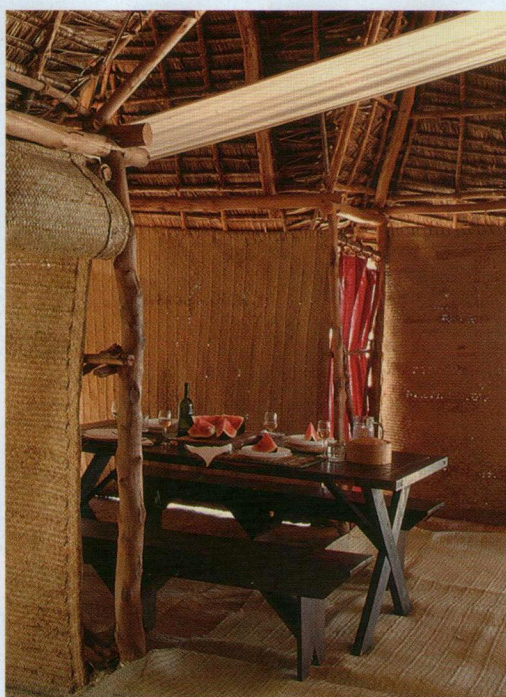
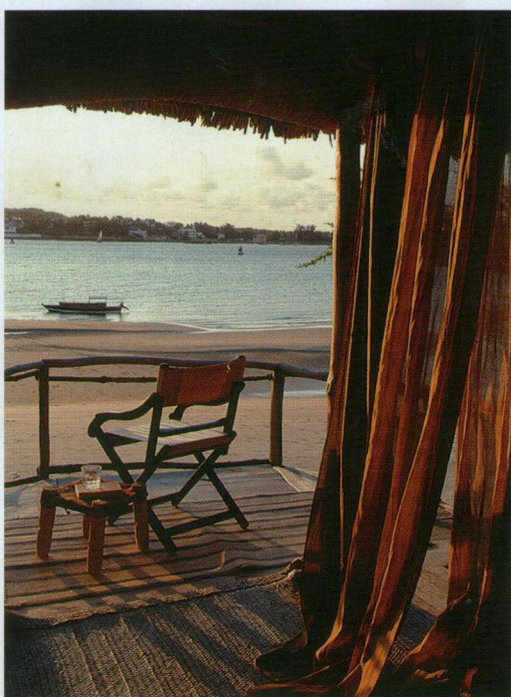
With just an arc of golden sand separating it and the sea, Claudio Modola's house on a barren island off Kenya couldn't be more idyllic. Or eco-friendly, for that matter. Made by the designer/builder entirely from palm leaves, mangrove wood and matting, it is a lesson in sustainability – and a triumph of hope over invasive insects. But on the plus side, pests keep all but the pluckiest people at bay... Text and photography: Tim Beddow. First published: October 2008





The beach house is constructed out of mangrove poles, palm leaves, mats and rope. The materials have a limited lifespan — the makuti roof has

to be replaced every two or three years. The idea that an organic structure is cheap and maintenance-free is, says the owner, 'baseless'



This page, clockwise from top: a *johazi*, or small sailboat, passes by the encampment; panels divide the dining area from the main veranda and other rooms; a large daybed with sumptuous cushions is positioned to take in views of the Lamu Channel. Modola's desk is at the far end of the veranda; moored nearby, his boat is seen from the spare bedroom. Opposite: the armchair is a traditional Swahili piece, while the mats on the walls and floor come from Matandoni, a village over on Lamu Island







The double
spare bedroom is
in an adjacent
structure. Doors
cannot be locked
and windows
stay open – but
then there is little

need for security.
Modola regards
his only valuables
as kikoiis, a laptop
and a vervet
monkey unlikely
to co-operate
with strangers



BUILDER and designer Claudio Modola is frank about the risks that come with living in his 'organic' Manda Island beach residence, located in the Lamu Archipelago off the coast of Kenya. 'The place is still pretty wild,' he admits, 'with a healthy snake and insect population. It's quite common to come across a writhing form in the semi-dark on nocturnal trips to the smallest room. Nothing nasty, but always somewhat alarming.'

Separated from Lamu Island by a stretch of strong tidal water, for many years Manda Island has been the ugly duckling to its near neighbour. Its focal point is the beach directly opposite the village of Shela and the twinkling lights of Peponi Hotel's bar, but until recently an infamous sandfly problem and lack of fresh water ensured that Manda itself remained pristine and more or less free of any development – 'Except,' says Modola, 'for a few residents truly brave enough to handle the extreme situation with the necessary esprit.' The designer was one of these originals way back in 1989, when he set up a camp on the island that was to last for three years. At that time, the only other die-hards (aside from local tribespeople) were the Allen family at Ras Kitau, who ran a crumbling hotel seemingly in constant financial trouble.

Modola's youngest son, Sean, grew up on the beach, while his eldest, Siegfried, 'was a sort of contemporary Mowgli, living in a baobab tree and always with the Somali shepherds deep in the island', he says. In due course, their father decided to use Manda as his base for an expedition from the Indian Ocean to Lake Victoria with his brother

Stefano. Part of this entailed training 18 camels on the beach with a group of tough handlers from the Orma tribe. After three months and 1,300km, the rigours of living rough on his travels may have been a factor in Modola's decision to buy a house in the more comfortable surroundings of Shela village on Lamu (*WoI* Feb 2007). It proved to be a prudent, albeit lucky, move. Ten years on, property prices began to spiral. So many visitors fall in love with the island and want to buy there. Building plots appear to be very limited, yet there is somehow always just one left. Securing this 'last' plot can become a mysterious cloak-and-dagger exercise similar to the plight of the desperate refugees trying to obtain 'letters of transit' in the Bogart classic *Casablanca*.

Some years later, Modola sold well and moved back to Manda. One senses it was a relief for him to be away from the shenanigans of Shela, despite having residential building projects on the go there. 'I had exceptional memories [of Manda] and was not concerned about the extreme environmental conditions on the island, having lived in remote camps in Uganda, Congo and Somalia,' he says.

'Inspired by the fact that organic materials are available locally, I decided it was time to build a beach house that would be in touch with nature,' Modola continues. But many elements must be considered when designing this kind of semi-stable structure. Wind, humidity, insects, energy and waste are just some of the important factors. 'Most importantly,' he explains, 'to build organic means to know and understand the materials you will use. Mangrove [the preferred local wood] is exceptional: strong, flexible, resistant to salt water and aesthetically attractive. But it can only last up to three years in 60cm of soil. Termites and other insects will inevitably locate it and cannibalise the base of a house like mine.' The floor mats have to be changed every five months or so, ropes need replacing and drainage routes must be kept clear. Any suggestion that an organic structure is cheap and maintenance-free is, according to Modola, 'completely baseless'. And yet to feel safe in an attractive shelter assembled from a few wooden poles and palm leaves – with nothing else as protection – is a rare experience these days and one that gives him a sense of freedom.

Many others have now followed him across the channel. Mysteriously, the sandflies seem to have retreated somewhat in the face of the foreign invasion. 'Anyway,' says Modola, 'we are in some ways grateful to these irritating insects as they have weeded out the serious from the silly.' The freshwater problem has been resolved by a desalination plant on the island. Perhaps inevitably, beachfront property on Manda Island has skyrocketed in value. Those seeking a bargain African hideaway are now obliged to look farther afield.

For Modola, it is the perfect location. But the dynamics are changing. Although his projects extend over the entire archipelago, 'In reality,' he says, 'there is limited space for new ventures, so I am becoming significantly involved in the Middle East and Gulf regions. As always for me, the emphasis will be on organic or semi-organic environmentally sustainable buildings' ■

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Opposite: the owner's bedroom is at the rear of the house, the coolest part. The bed and bench come from Lamu, while the other furniture

is from Rajasthan. This page: the bathroom features a huge shell found locally. Mats that are resistant to seawater line the floor and walls