

THE VAGABOND

by ande wanderer

THE HOLY COAST OF KENYA—MOMBASA, LAMU AND BEYOND

When most people imagine Kenya, they conjure up National Geographic inspired images of safaris, elephants and Maasai warriors, but there's another side of Kenya for visitors, a laid back alternative to the adrenaline rush provided by animal chasing on the plains. It's the mellow Swahili coast of the country with its eclectic cultural, delicious, deserted beaches and a temperature hovering in the 70's at this time of year.

Here, you're not just visiting another country, but another era. It's a place where time is measured as it would have been centuries ago. No need for a watch, just observe the sun, the tides, and the calls to Mecca.

The first stop on the coast for most will be Kenya's second largest city, Mombasa, one of East Africa's oldest settlements. The city's 2000-year history as a valuable trading port means its culture and architecture is a whimsical global mix with influences from Persia, Portugal, Turkey and Britain. The layers of time can be uncovered in the Old Towne, where narrow streets are lined with carved doors and balconies. Ft. Jesus, built during the Portuguese occupation of the 16th century, was later converted into a jail by British colonizers and is now a museum and favored place to examine centuries worth of graffiti. Sprawling Mackinnon market is a wonderful place to get lost, sample street food and barter for just about anything.

hitch a ride from Mombasa or Malindi on a *dhow*, as the single-masted sailing boats in the region are called, for about \$16. Most folks opt to get to Lamu by taking a small passenger airplane. At the urging of locals, I grudgingly shelled out the shillings amounting to about \$79 for the plane as well. The thirteen seater passenger airplane in a country not held in high esteem for its airline safety standards seemed a rather daunting option in and of itself.

cover of trees, are chai sellers serving tiny cups of sweet mint tea. Sitting down to discuss affairs and sip tea under the Baobab tree is a Lamu pastime and the key to discovering real Swahili culture. Covering up and heading into one of the island's 23 mosques is another good way to get a handle on the culture. Though many westerners have an initial, unwarranted distrust of Muslim customs due to a few high-profile fundamentalist sects, Swahili culture, deeply rooted in Islam, is peaceful and rich.

Sultan age scattered about the isle. Most don't stay overnight as there are nicer beaches to anchor at, but Pate is a place to I seek out some coconut juice and swim with the locals who are thrilled to have visitors—without newspapers and radio, the islanders are happy to entertain.

Another unadulterated paradise where you'll want to find yourself a castaway is Kiwiyu. There is a hush-hush upscale development for the rich and famous some-



This guy's just glad he didn't take the airplane.