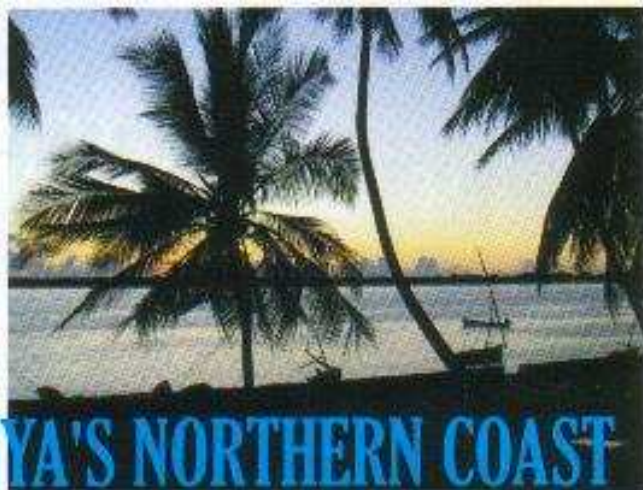


# LAMU,

## A UNIQUE ISLAND OFF KENYA'S NORTHERN COAST



by Ted Cookson

The town of Lamu is situated on a 19-km (12-mile)-long island of the same name off the northern coast of Kenya only 100 km (62 miles) south of the Somali border. Because Lamu's traditional way of life is still intact, visitors might well experience a bit of culture shock when arriving in this remote spot by air from modern Nairobi or Mombasa.

Lamu's only vehicle belongs to the district commissioner. Donkeys, of which the island boasts hundreds, are the mainstay of the local transportation system. Lamu is an Islamic community with religious schools teaching Arabic and with several dozen mosques. Typically local women are seen clad in black robes; and they often keep their faces covered in public.

Originally one of the East African trading ports from which slaves, ivory and rhino horn were exported, the first written mention of Lamu was in the fifteenth century.



Small aircraft at airstrip on Manda Island



Window shutters

It is impossible for visitors not to be aware of Lamu's deep sense of history. The settlement was known to the Greeks as Azania as early as the second century. Later, from the ninth century, Persian and Arab traders settled there, helping to form a unique Swahili Arab-African religious community, the culture and way of life of which appear to be much the same today.

However, most of the buildings still standing in Lamu's historical core today date only from the eighteenth century. During this period Lamu flourished from the export of ivory, mangrove poles, oil seeds, various grains and both cowrie and tortoise shells. The Lamu dhows which sailed east to Arabia and India returned home with silks, spices and porcelain. Lamu continued to prosper into the nineteenth century under the protection of Oman. It was the sultan of Oman who built Lamu's fort in 1820.

The ending of the slave trade in the 1870's reduced the cheap labor on which Lamu's prosperity had depended. Also, Mombasa and Zanzibar began to grow in importance at about that same time. So toward the end of the

