

On the Far Side of Nowhere

Steve Shelley travels to Kiwayuu Island in search of history, adventure and escape.

If you fly eastwards out of Nairobi, the terraced hills around Machakos give way to a thinning patchwork of shambas which marks the end of civilisation. There follows miles and miles and miles of nothing, 300km of nothing to be precise, flat featureless desiccated scrub scarred solely by a few old surveyors' cutlines. No-one lives there, no-one visits, hardly anyone passes through. But on the far side of this expanse of nowhere lies paradise. It's called Kiwayuu, which in the Swahili language means 'high island'. Its sand dunes, rising nearly a hundred metres, have long formed a welcoming landmark for ocean navigators as they do now for aspiring desert island holiday-makers.

From the air, the verdant channels and sultry islands of the Lamu archipelago are set out as an ancient estuarine delta, though no river now feeds it. Kiwayuu lies between these mangrove-edged creeks and the azure waters of the Indian Ocean, a sandy strip 12km long but barely one kilometre wide. There are no beachboys, no touts, no concrete buildings, no cars, no bars, no discos. Of the few boats stationed there, most are sailing dhows and local fishing craft. There are not even many visitors, though there is a good choice of places to stay and things to do.

One morning, I beachcombed Kiwayuu's eastern shoreline scouring the high tide line for nautilus shells and bits of flotsam. Hiking to some hollowed coral cliffs before turning back, I could see nearly the entire length of the island. I was the only person on that long sun-drenched stretch of sand. A pair of plovers made a lazy attempt to chase a couple of ghost crabs. It was the only activity. There was no cell signal, I had left my laptop at home and there was not a soul in sight. Total peace and complete solitude. Just another typical Kiwayuu Monday morning.

Climbing back across the dunes, you get a 360° view of the creek and the ocean. Eastwards lies the open ocean and to the west is mainland Africa. It seems like we are no longer part of it but somewhere different, between the land and the sea.

Mike Kennedy came here in 1983 and never looked back. "We bought a dhow and ran safaris for a while from Lamu", he tells me. "Then with my sister Caroline we raised some money and built a small camp."

That camp, now nine years old, has seven beautifully appointed and carefully situated cottages, each with its own view and complete privacy. It is called Munira after the dhow, signifying 'light of the moon' in Arabic. But most people still refer to the place as Mike's Camp. The rooms are spacious and airy, set atop a cliff overlooking the creek and ideally placed to do what is natural at sundowner time, watching the orange globe of the sun sink gently into the mists of Africa. All the rooms and public areas are walled and carpeted with 'mkeka', natural woven palm frond matting that serves as a screen against sand, sun and wind.

Mike is a natural host, together with his dog Tigger, performing tricks at the bar, regaling stories of fishing and exploration, chatting with those guests who are eager to know and politely leaving those who just want to be alone.

All the supplies have to be brought in from Lamu, the nearest shopping centre, if you can call it that. But seafood is abundant and fresh. The islanders bring in a daily catch – crabs and oysters are plentiful. Lobsters are caught here by hand. A lone lobster catcher utilises a captive octopus on a stick to scare the lobster into a carefully positioned sack.

In season, the fishing is spectacular. The ocean just off Kiwayuu, and north towards Kiu, has brought record catches this past year. In October 2008, several boats tagged more than thirty sailfish in a single day and in December Alistair Franklin, fishing from Mike's boat on 50lb tackle, brought in a record 500kg 3.72m Blue Marlin, again tagged and released. Mike sent us out with his boatman Hashim. We were going snorkelling but decided to throw out some lures and troll the ocean swells where flocks of terns were diving for sardines. Suddenly all four

reels screamed in unison as we passed through a shoal of yellowfin tuna. We hauled them in enthusiastically, thinking sashimi and barbecue on the beach that night.

Often in these waters, dolphins, whales and turtles are sighted. We jumped off over some coral gardens near the '*mlango*' between the outcrops at the southern end of the island. Here, tidal rips can be treacherous but at the right state of tide and season, as we found, the snorkelling is dazzling.

Back on the beach, Mike was demonstrating his 'boys' toys' and encouraging the girls to have a go too. He set off at speed in his sand yacht, a fast three-wheeler with a windsurfer mast and sail. The skill is to catch the wind at just the right angle, and turn fast enough to flip round the sail but without running so fast as to roll over. Just like sailing a boat, in fact.

Next up was a two metre para-sail kite which flew powerfully enough in the ocean breeze to lift its flyer from the ground if attention drifted even a little. On offer too is scuba diving, kite surfing, water skiing, donutting, wake boarding, kayaking and sailing.

Over the char-grilled tuna that night, under a brilliant starscape, we talked about the olden days. Long long ago, the Swahili settlements of this Azanian coastline formed a vibrant trading colony which eventually stretched all the way down to Kilwa and Sofala. More than fifty stone built towns have been identified. Most are unexcavated, many unexplored. The towns of Lamu, Shanga and Pate were amongst the first and most affluent of this nation, trading for millennia as far afield as Egypt, Arabia, Oman and India.

The vast delta region from Lamu to Kiwayuu was shaped by the Uaso Nyiro and Tana rivers during a period of much greater rainfall than we now enjoy. But climate change six hundred or more years ago caused the volume of water to reduce and the channels to shift. The Tana now reaches the sea near Malindi while the Uaso Nyiro plunges uncertainly into the Lorian Swamp in north eastern Kenya. Fishermen tell of upwellings of fresh water far offshore where the ancient aquifer still pumps deep into the ocean.

The drying up of the water supply and the arrival of marauding Portuguese in the late 1400s coincided to constrain trade and collapse Swahili civilisation into fewer but larger centres such as Malindi, Mombasa and Zanzibar. Many of the old towns were abandoned. Chinese chronicles dated 1225 AD tell of a certain Tiung-Lji, a centre of trade on the East African coast which historians equate with Shungwaya, the legendary capital of this once great trading nation. As early as 1071, emissaries from Shungwaya were entertained at the Chinese court and in 1421 Chinese sailing junks visited this coast, taking a giraffe presented by the Sultan of Malindi and leaving behind their DNA, as identified by the recent National Geographic project on Pate Island.

Shungwaya has never been found. But its lost remains may lie somewhere amid the meandering upper reaches of the Dodori channel, concealed by a proliferation of mangrove forest.

We challenged Mike on his 'eco' credentials so prized these days by hoteliers and travellers. Apart from being constructed fully from natural local materials and employing islanders throughout the camp, Munira is totally self-sufficient in power. A wind turbine runs day and night to feed a bank of batteries and a 2.4 kVA inverter. With a solar back-up, this is one place where electricity is so abundant that nobody minds if you leave the light on.

The great beauty of Kiwayuu lies in its remoteness and its simplicity. Overseas visitors give their eye-teeth for such an unspoilt getaway. For those of us nearer at hand, it is not exactly on the doorstep but it's not far either. For couples, it's a wonderfully aphrodisiac retreat. For families, it's a fantastic playground. Either way, you seem to get the island and its 12km beach to yourself. You come to Kiwayuu to switch off, leaving the urban world and – I dare you – your mobile phone, far behind.

Flip-Flotsam

In the village, men are sewing sails and repairing their nets under the *baraza* tree. It's Sunday and Shahane Bwana, the headmaster, is rested enough to show us around. His

daughter Zahara swings quietly in the garden while small boys burrow for bait worms in the bay. We've come here to see flip-flops, or at least the things the village ladies make from them.

The villagers collect the washed up flip-flops which arrive on the tide in vast numbers and process them into the most colourful and ingenious goods – bead curtains, reef fishes, flowers, boats and bangles. The colourful designs are sold at Marula Studios in Nairobi and are exported around the world. It's so successful, not only as a business but as a waste recycling operation, that there is a looming shortage of flip-flops, so the villagers now face the challenge of extending the search for their raw materials.

To create an income for the villagers and provide an incentive to preserve the island, Etienne and Lucy Oliff helped set up an NGO as a vehicle for the craft business and for a new lodge they call Champali. The camp formerly served as a base for film-makers Mark Deeble and Vicky Stone. Etienne and Lucy worked with them and stayed on, producing their own award winning film 'Flip-Flotsam' which tells the story.

Champali – 'Kiwayu's Community Camp' – is located on its own idyllic beach and consists of three lovely family cottages which overlook the cove. Stylish and luxurious in its own way, the lodge operates on a self-catering basis and is staffed by local villagers trained by Lucy and Etienne. Guests can obtain seafood but should plan to bring all their food and drink with them. Provisions can be obtained in Lamu by advance arrangement.

Getting there is half the fun

It takes some effort to get to Kiwayuu so it makes sense to treat the journey as part of the adventure. There are three ways to go. You can fly yourself into Etienne's strip at Champali. The aiming point is the village playing field and the airstrip snakes up into the sand dunes, flanked on either side by coconut palms. On landing, the sand and the incline help slow you down. But so they do too on take-off, which becomes something of a heart-stopping moment as you wonder if aerodynamics and fifty foot trees are really made for each other.

The second option is a commercial flight to Lamu to rendezvous with your dhow captain for the six hour journey to Kiwayuu. You can also drive to the mainland across from Lamu which makes it easier to carry food stocks for the week. Otherwise you can shop for essentials in Lamu.

If you have a family or group going to stay at Champali, a dhow or speedboat transfer out of Lamu is the best option and greatest adventure. But take local advice and use a decent sized 'mashua' with an inboard engine and competent crew. There are too many stories of tourists being marooned in the channels, with broken engines, empty fuel tanks and adverse weather. Travelling by dhow, especially under sail, is a wonderful experience. You can carry a picnic and troll on the way for *kole kole*.

The third alternative is direct from Wilson Airport to Kiwayu mainland airstrip (Mkokoni), a stone's throw from the island. Safarilink drops and collects Kiwayuu passengers on their regular afternoon Lamu shuttle. Camps will arrange transfer from the airstrip to the beach and thence by motor boat across the channel. The direct flight is the preferred option for guests staying at the Kiwayu Safari Village which is located on the mainland about a kilometre from the airstrip.

Know before you go

A NOTE ON SPELLING

Is it Kiwayuu, Kiwayu or Kiwaiyu? The first is the more accurate, the second in more common use.

WHEN TO GO

The best time for fishing is during the north east monsoon, or *kaskazi*, which brings settled hot and dry weather from October to March. Lodges close for the low season in May and June when the *kusi* or south east monsoon blows up.

WHAT TO TAKE AND WHAT TO LEAVE AT HOME

Electricity is available in all the main camps. There is a Safaricom signal but none of the other networks. Carry a supply of novels if you plan to read but leave them or swap with those on the shelves – camp managers are starved of literary culture.

There are no shops, though lodge staff will go out of their way to get anything you might need. Drinking water is available from the local wells. Take enough cash – this is not the credit card world although people will be as accommodating as possible.

SECURITY

There have been no security incidents for many years and there seems to be no theft. You can leave your cameras and handbags wherever you forget them and they will be there when you return.

KWS PARK FEES

Kiwayuu lies within the Kiunga Marine Reserve and the usual bizarre formula depends on the type of passport you hold. East African citizens are charged KShs 100, residents KShs 300 and foreigners US\$15 but this seems to apply only if you enter the water for, say, snorkelling. The Boni and Dodori reserves are nearby but visitors will need additional tickets.

WHERE TO STAY

Munira Island Camp, popularly known as Mike's Camp

Seven family rooms, sleep 3-4 people. Resident rate is US\$220 per person per day full board. Additional fees for boat hire and transfers.

Tel 020 8512213 or 020 3000248

E-mail bigblue@africaonline.co.ke

Website www.mikescampkiwayu.com

Champali Community Camp

Three family cottages each sleeping 3-4 people. Resident rate for the whole camp is KShs 21,000/- , Special offer for July 2009. Self-catering. Motor boat, kayaks, snorkelling and fishing gear are available.

Book through Lucy Oliff on tel 0720 546999.

E-mail

lucy@upthecreek.co.ke

Website www.champali.co.ke

Kiwayu Safari Village

20 bandas, each sleeping 3-4. Resident rate KShs 23,200 full board per adult sharing includes a variety of water sport activities.

Closed from mid April to late July.

Tel 020 600107

E-mail kiwayu@kiwayu.com

The village of Kiwayuu also operates a campsite with tree houses for those who willing to rough it and take what they find on arrival.

HOW TO GET THERE

Kenya Airways, Safarilink, Fly540 and Air Kenya all fly into Lamu. Fares vary. Only Safarilink currently flies direct to Kiwayu mainland.

Dhow or speedboat transfers from Lamu cost around US\$300 each way and are best organised on the recommendation of your lodge.

If flying yourself, the Champali airstrip is at 0201S 4118E, and Kiwayu Mainland at 0157S 4118E. The nearest avgas is at Malindi.