

Travel-worn

Somewhere Between Heaven and Hell

Nearing eight months into my journey, I had to admit road weariness had begun to take a toll on me, and I figured a little bit of heaven would be just the thing to put the sparkle back into my wanderlust. Go to Lamu, they said. Lamu is heaven. An island retreat off Kenya's Indian Ocean coast, Lamu, according to the travelers' grapevine, is an idyllic trip back in time. No cars and heavy on interesting Arab influences.

They also said I should fly to Lamu and avoid treacherous roads and Somali bandits. Be that as it may, my decreasing cash supply increased my taste for adventure. With a visit to Lamu fondly impressed upon my mind, I persuaded myself to go by bus. Besides, they said the roads were dry and bandits hadn't struck for some time. Furthermore, just as I was making inquiries about the situation, a handsome Frenchman arrived to make similar enquiries. Overhearing the discussion between the clerk and myself, he said he planned to catch the bus to Lamu after dropping off his rental car and would first give me a lift to the bus station. My mind was made. I would go to Lamu.

Any designs I had on the Frenchman were soon dashed when his attractive female friend appeared, but at least I saved on cab fare to the bus station. About noon I took my assigned seat aboard a solid, respectable looking Tana River Transport bus parked in the dust at a Malindi service station, about five hours due south of Lamu.

An hour later, with the equatorial sun high and hot, the journey to Lamu seemed about to begin when a guy with a dipstick came on board wanting to check the oil. This was okay, except that bags, bundles, humanity, animal





hides and other odd things already filled every possible niche. A waist-high heap of stuff was even stored on top of the motor housing, which straddled the space between the driver and a lengthwise seat that faced the motor housing and the driver. I shared that seat with a Dutch couple, and we had earlier agreed how lucky we were to have a front-end view for the trip. Naturally the mechanic designated our laps for temporary baggage storage until he deemed the bus and its oil fit for travel.

With a semblance of order finally restored, the bus rumbled onto the highway only to stop again a few minutes down the road. Here, my seat mates and I gaped in amazement, as a dozen or more passengers emerged from a nondescript building and noisily forced themselves onto the completely full bus. Baffled, I observed the clamor with detachment – after all, I had a seat – until the irate face of a youth, aged about 18 or so, peered intently through the crowd and jarred my brain into realizing that he was shouting at me.

“Madam!” he said fiercely. “That is my seat since Mombasa. You must move!”

Similarly enraged conversations transpired between the seated and non-seated all over the bus. Someone was just as furious with the Dutch couple, and a lady with two children succeeded in routing a man and his small boy from their seats. These two were now trying to establish themselves astride a bundle of straw brooms atop the luggage piled on the motor housing.

Without trying to fathom the whys or wherefores of the situation I determined to keep my place come what may. I gave the fellow yelling at me a withering look and told him to take it up with the driver. Meanwhile, the driver had put the bus in motion and was whistling a happy tune, serenely oblivious to the pandemonium storming on about him. Obviously this scenario was not new to him.

Eventually the commotion subsided into angry glaring as the unseated resigned themselves to the situation. Not that anyone was having a luxurious time of it. I now had three seat mates, one more person having managed to cram onto “our” seat built for three. In fact, sardines in a can might be better off than we four. Our knees were jammed into the pile stacked and skittering around on the reverberating motor housing. The man and his boy, still stuck on top of the pile, clung to it as if they were riding a bucking bronco.

Some got seats as others left at stops along the way, but someone was always standing during the entire journey, and so we proceeded hour after hour in various states of misery. The African landscape changed from fertile coastal farmlands to thorny scrub country, dry, bleak and little changed for hundreds of years. The only evidence of the twentieth century was the odd village shopkeeper’s sign advertising “Abdullah’s Photo Shop,” or something equally incongruous.

For a short distance between stops we had the company of a raving fanatic urging us all to repent our sins before it was too late. Evidently Lamu was on the way to hell not to heaven as we had supposed, and the front row passengers were first in line to feel the flames a'licking. Motor heat made the floor so burning hot to the feet, our only respite was to hoist our legs up onto the luggage between the brooms. Once, at a place called Garsen, we had to ford an inlet by a ferry that operated by rope pulley. We all got off to lend a hand hauling the bus across, and believe me that felt like blessed relief.

The road alternated from passable to barely passable, but at least Somali bandits kept their distance. About 5:30pm, the bus disgorged its 80 or 90 sorry passengers into steamy twilight and the hands of Sammy, a twinkle-eyed hotel tout who waited at an otherwise deserted seaside dock. Nothing like the town of Lamu was in sight. Sammy said a dhow (traditional boat) would soon arrive to fetch us to the island and he would lead the tourists – about nine of us – to the Dhow Lodge and the heavenly touch of a cooling shower.

Minutes later, a wooden craft resembling something between a large rowboat and a Chinese junk hove into view, and suddenly Sammy, grabbing my bag took off at a run.

“Come on!” he hissed, which started something of a stampede to dockside as everyone else concurrently realized that this vessel couldn't possibly carry us all.

Before the inbound passengers could even disembark, the waiting horde, myself included, barged aboard without regard for age, sex, manners or safety. I guess I was pretty good at the local way of doing things because I got seated on a plank alongside the gunwale. The little boat lurched and trembled, but every last soul found space on board. Bodies sprawled on the prow, clung to the masthead and stood cheek by jowl in the center. Luggage was stowed under deck and seats and spilled out around the motor housing, on laps, underfoot and between legs. Yet somehow the small crew boys managed to squeeze through the mass of humanity to collect 5 shillings from each and every person.

Early into the voyage I noted, with only vague concern, water bubbling up through the planks by the motor. Nudging the Dutch woman next to me, I pointed at the rising water and said vacantly, “We might drown.” By now I figured African ways would pull us through somehow, and if not I wasn't sure I cared much, I was so tired.

The Dutch woman managed only a weary nod.

Sure enough, two tiny crew boys came tippy-toeing along the gunwales and slithered like snakes into the jumble of bodies and baggage near the motor. Considerable heaving, pushing and cursing opened a small clearing, a bucket was brought forth, and for the whole half-hour journey the boys bailed enough water to keep us afloat. They got us to the landing at Lamu Island with hardly a damp toe. A mob of hotel reps waited to pounce on the arriving tourists, but Sammy, rounding up his charges like an efficient sheep dog, ran to and fro commanding us not to listen to those “hustlers.” We wouldn’t have dreamt of it.

Like so many docile lambs we followed Sammy to the Dhow Lodge. We approached through a dusty, rubble infested yard, up a narrow, twisting stone staircase, down a dank, dark hallway into the dimly lit foyer. A sense of dejection settled over me as a lodge employee greeted us hesitantly with shuffling feet and wringing hands. Sheepishly he cleared his throat then blurted out, “We only have one double room left.”

Murderous looks passed between the tourists, and Sammy, twitching nervously, cast furtive glances toward the nearest exit.

“But don’t worry!” the clerk added hastily, “We can make room – on the roof.”

“The roof!” I sputtered. “Nothing doing, I want a room to myself – with a shower and nice and clean.”

I felt tears rising, then a reproving voice issued from a dark corner: “The Dhow Lodge is nice. And it is very nice on the roof. You get a bed with mosquito netting. There’s covering against the rain, and there’s a place to put your valuables. And it’s cool. And it’s only 15 shillings.”

Chastened, I should have reconsidered, but I didn’t. Instead, I followed Sammy to the New Mahrus Hotel. No doubt the roof of the Dhow Lodge would have been preferable to the airless, stifling but private room that exhaustion finally forced me to settle on for 75 shillings.

The narrow lanes and quaint architecture of Lamu might have appealed in other circumstances, but this time around the place was too hot and dusty to fit my idea of heaven. My spirit of adventure had been tweaked but now went into full retreat. Unwilling to face a return journey by bus, I blew my budget and flew, by aircraft, back to the cooler climes of Nairobi the next day.

But you know what? That easy, comfortable flight, I barely remember at all. The bus and Dhow story I’ll be telling to my dying day.