

# Lamu Living with Claudio Modola

THE SHORELINE OF LAMU, THE JET-SET ISLAND OFF THE COAST OF KENYA,  
IS TRANSFORMED BY THE EXTRAORDINARY HOUSES OF CLAUDIO MODOLA

FORT FERRO, SHELA, LAMU

LUXURYCULTURE.COM



A close-up portrait of Claudio Modola, a man with dark, wavy hair, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a light-colored jacket. The background is dark with some foliage visible on the left side.

Claudio Modola's  
definition of luxury:

“Intimate, exclusive, pleasure.”

If luxury were ...

**An object:**

It would have a perfect tactile sensation, the right smell, pure lines and an inner flair - for example, a cultural or historical reference. Personally, I am drawn to objects with a history. They can be 3,000 years or only a few hours old, but they should be a reflection of an act of pure, genuine creativity.

**A moment:**

A sudden emotion for something or someone of impeccable taste.

**A person:**

A woman of forty years old with a single drop of a customized perfume.

**A place:**

An empty horizon.

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**BLUE EMPIRE COTTAGES, MANDA ISLAND, LAMU**  
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MANDA ISLAND, LAMU**  
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The image shows the interior of a cottage with walls and a large window covered in intricate wooden lattice work. The lattice consists of vertical and diagonal slats, creating a pattern of light and shadow. Two built-in wooden platforms serve as seating areas, each covered with a light-colored cushion and several decorative pillows in shades of brown, tan, and yellow. A low wooden table is positioned between the two seating areas. The overall atmosphere is warm and traditional.

**BLUE EMPIRE COTTAGES,  
MANDA ISLAND, LAMU**  
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“Lamu’s architecture is a combination of four distinct cultural and aesthetic inputs: Arabic, Bantu, Chinese and European.”

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FUNGUA MOYO, SHELA, LAMU





FUNGUA MOYO, SHELA, LAMU







EL YAFIR, SHELA, LAMU  
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KILAMAWINGO, SHELA, LAMU





KILAMAWINGO, SHELA, LAMU

**T**he enchanting island of Lamu, located off the coast of Kenya in the Indian Ocean, is the definition of boho-chic and stealth-wealth style. With its wild, empty beaches, crystal-clear waters and UNESCO-protected old town, it is no wonder that international jet-setters, including Princess Caroline of Monaco, are happy to make the inconvenient journey: arriving at Lamu (population 25,000) is by air or boat only, and cars are banned on the island.

## CLAUDIO MODOLA'S GUIDE TO LAMU

### When is best to visit Lamu?

Definitely January, February and March. However, I would not underestimate the rainy season (May and June) for a writer, painter or somebody in need of a meditative setting.

### What are your favorite things to do when on the island?

Lying back on the veranda outside of my Arabic tent on the beach at sunset with a bubbling bottle and good friends, or to have a late night fire on the beach under the stars - all of that is still possible in Lamu.

### Which is the best hotel?

No matter what other accommodation crops up, Peponi Hotel has the fantastic combination of a human touch and efficiency. Of course, Pierre Oberson at Kijani is also a man who has been in love with Lamu for 30 years, and in Kijani House you can feel it.

### Which are your favorite restaurants?

For a traditional Swahili dinner, Baitil Aman, definitely. And of course, Peponi.

### Which is your favorite beach?

Manda Beach is almost private at this point, apart from the fantastic picnic parties of Swahili families from Lamu, from time to time, which make for a wonderful, colorful change. Otherwise, the 8 miles of beach from Peponi to Kipungani - very dramatic and very empty. Lawrence of Arabia would have loved that beach.

### What would you say are real "insider's" tips for visiting Lamu?

Gracefully accept the local eccentricity, respect the local culture at all times, and do not wear Velcro-strapped sandals with a kikoi.



Of the many stylish houses on Lamu, the most exquisite are designed by the Italian architect Claudio Modola. His unique designs – which mix Islamic, Asian and European architecture and range from the simple and organic to the grand and palatial – are defining the coastline of these remote shores, including the neighboring island of Manda, which he calls home. In the age of the starchitect, he is the local equivalent of Nouvel, Gehry and Calatrava all rolled into one.

As the space for new buildings on Lamu becomes increasingly limited and the opportunity to own one of these masterpieces diminishes, Claudio Modola shares with LuxuryCulture his thoughts on island life and the luxury of isolation.

**How would you describe your architectural style and philosophy?**

As a way of satisfying and not completely disguising an intimate desire for “grandeur.”

**Are you influenced by traditional Lamu architecture?**

Lamu Architecture is a combination of four different cultural and aesthetic inputs - Arabic, Bantu, Chinese and European. They all retain slight traces of the will of travelers to recreate tiny fragments of their home in unknown territories, both geographically and culturally. I find the spiritual, almost Cambodian atmosphere of some 14th- or 16th-century courtyards in homes in Lamu irresistible. A Lamu home reproduced in London would not have the same aesthetic or emotional impact on anyone. We need the level of humidity, the perfume of jasmine in the night hours, and the unobtrusive sounds of the people going about their business in the streets to get the feeling that goes along with Lamu architecture. An executive mansion in Lamu reflects the desire of a successful merchant seaman or pirate to testify, in a tangible way, to personal power after significant achievements in unpredictable and dangerous times along the East African and Arabian Monsoon trade routes.

**Why have you chosen Lamu as the center of your operations?**

Lamu, for me, has been a matter of destiny, a mysterious alchemy of people, successful and unsuccessful circumstances, love and passion and my own interpretation of what a contemporary adventure should be. My projects extend over the entire archipelago.

**What attracts your clients to Lamu? And then to you as an architect?**

Lamu is the end of something and the grand door to something else. Its charm is irresistible; one can move ideally or theoretically through an immense, wild territory eastwards, ending in Cairo, or southwards, through the most profound black Africa, or navigate the ocean up to Java and Sumatra. I believe this is sufficient to attract an elite with a discerning aesthetic sense. I am perhaps a humble interpreter of an almost lost memory, or maybe I am lost in it.

**Lamu's remote location suggests that visitors really do want to get away from it all. How is this idea incorporated into your architecture?**

The executive clientele shares with me the idea of a kind of isolation being the ultimate privilege. Faulty telephone lines and unpredictable internet connections are, after a few days of craving, an unusual means of escaping, perhaps in a childish way, from the routine of responsibility. This, in my view, is a supreme form of luxury.

**Parts of Lamu are protected, and there is speculation that new buildings will soon be banned. What effect does the environment have on your work?**

In reality, my operations are moving quite significantly to the Middle East. There is limited space for new projects in Lamu and the surrounding area. However, my projects are presently oriented toward organic or semi-organic options. The quality of my clients is also a guarantee of architectural choices with a sustainable environmental impact.



**Which are your favorite houses on the island that you have designed? And by other designers?**

In a different form, I do love all of my projects in Lamu. Each one represents a milestone in my life and my professional career. I do particularly like the work of Bernard Sperry, who designed Chris and Roberta Hanley's residence. Its fortified structure has followed perfectly as a natural evolution from what was my first fortified residence, Fort Ferro on Shela Beach.

**Which has been the most ambitious project?**

Definitely Fort Ferro, which required 140 workers, often day and night, for a period of 16 months, in one of the most environmentally difficult situations. It was a long fight against the monsoon, the sand, sometimes the ocean and the usual African logistical problems. It was an emotional high for all of the people involved and a childish game of sand between my client and me. At the end of the project, I donated a Japanese sword to Dr. Ferro - it was a sort of ritual, which was correctly interpreted by my client, just one year before his death in the right eastern tower.

**You must be particularly skilled at building on remote islands. What challenges does the remote location of Lamu present?**

Generally, in Africa, any building process needs the right strategic or tactical approach. As long as the technical side of a project is sound, we must gracefully accept possible day-by-day setbacks. Africa will always play like a malicious child with ambitious and not particularly flexible Europeans.

“The construction of Fort Ferro required 140 workers, often day and night, for a period of 16 months.”

**What are your current projects?**

A Moorish mansion for an Irish client on Mombassa's south coast. A residence for a high-profile French figure and his beautiful actress partner. A fort for Oman and an organic residence for the head of a European principality.

**You have commented on the importance of the architect-client relationship. How do you approach this?**

I do not market myself; my work is based on a sort of gentle chain reaction between clients and their friends or relatives. This sort of mechanism is highly satisfactory from a professional point of view and has so far kept me very busy.

**Lamu is often tipped as a cool, emerging holiday destination. How do you think the island will develop?**

Lamu Island is now under the UNESCO-protected umbrella. This status, together with the progressively sharper environmental consciousness of the local population, guarantees a good level of protection against major mistakes in architectural terms. The price of land also does not attract a mass-tourism-oriented developer. The airport has very limited reception, and accommodation options are somewhat limited. All of this will naturally protect the island and encourage the right type of investment.

**More Information:**

[www.claudiomodola.net](http://www.claudiomodola.net)

**Rent El Yafir:**

<http://www.journeysbydesign.com/projects.asp>

**Rent Blue Empire Cottages:**

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