

From the bedroom terrace, typical low fluffy African clouds can be seen travelling slowly over the mangroves of Manda Island. Modola named the house Kilamawingu, which in Swahili means 'every cloud'

Claudio Modola, expeditionary, part-time safari guide, romantic – and designer – spent time living in the bush and Africa before settling down in his newly renovated family home on the Kenyan island of Lamu. And, for the moment





## THE ADVENTURER RETURNS

riding camels across East  
at least, the Italian is happy to have swapped the picaresque for the picturesque. Text and photography: Tim Beddow





**AS A DESIGNER,** Claudio Modola is just not the type to be seen tweaking cushions or re-arranging the furniture. As a self-confessed 'adventurer/romantic', Modola treats his house in Shela village, on the Kenyan island of Lamu, as a haven for his family and friends, from where he can work, plan forthcoming projects and, of course, relax in the special and particular atmosphere that blows over this island.

His is an erratic and eccentric way of life that reminds one of the 1930s French rogue Henry de Monfreid, who smuggled hashish in dhows along the Red Sea. Modola is not such a shady character, but the long black hair, intense blue eyes – and offbeat use of the English language – do give him a somewhat inscrutable air.

It was in 1985 that Modola first came to the shores of Africa, inspired, as he says, 'by a pure sense of adventure'. His first scheme, a riding-safari outfit based in Kilifi to the south, foundered because horses have never adapted to the coast and his were no different. African horse sickness, tsetse flies and the climate proved too much. He sold it off – 'a financial disaster!' he says – and began exploring the country in his Land Rover, sleeping under the stars and occasionally working as a safari guide. He settled on Manda island adjacent to Lamu, building himself a camp near the lodge at Ras Kitau, whose owners had asked for his help in refurbishing the location.

But bush life had him under its spell. He dreamed up a plan to ride from the Indian Ocean to Lake Victoria with camels. 'You know, I had virtually no idea what a camel was in the beginning,' says Modola. Clearly there is no love lost between him and the 18 camels he then bought from the Northern Province: 'Excellent desert vessels, but my God, what unpleasant animals!' When the camel train finally arrived at his home on Manda, having reluctantly crossed the channel at low tide, the Kenyan military launched an assault on the island, fearing a Somali invasion.

Ras Kitau then ran into financial complications and Modola realised it was time to move on. Across the channel, in Shela village, Gerald Johnson, a Briton who loved this part of Africa, had decided to sell his house.

Top: a view from the terrace. Middle: a collection of swords from Congo, Yemen and Ethiopia adorns the walls of the *baraza*, or meeting place, on the first floor. The ceiling beams are mangrove poles. Left and opposite: in the space next door stand a lamp from western Kenya and a West Indian-style chaise-longue









The idiosyncratic collection of stone buildings that comprises Shela has been in existence since the 14th century, when Lamu town overtook it as the main trading station on this piece of coastline. Its distinctive Friday mosque was built in 1829. In the late 1960s a few *mzungus* (foreigners) began to discover the charms of the island, of the secretive and intensely exotic Lamu town, and of the sweet, more obviously tropical Shela, 3km away, with its virgin beach arcing 10km into the distance. And so it has continued.

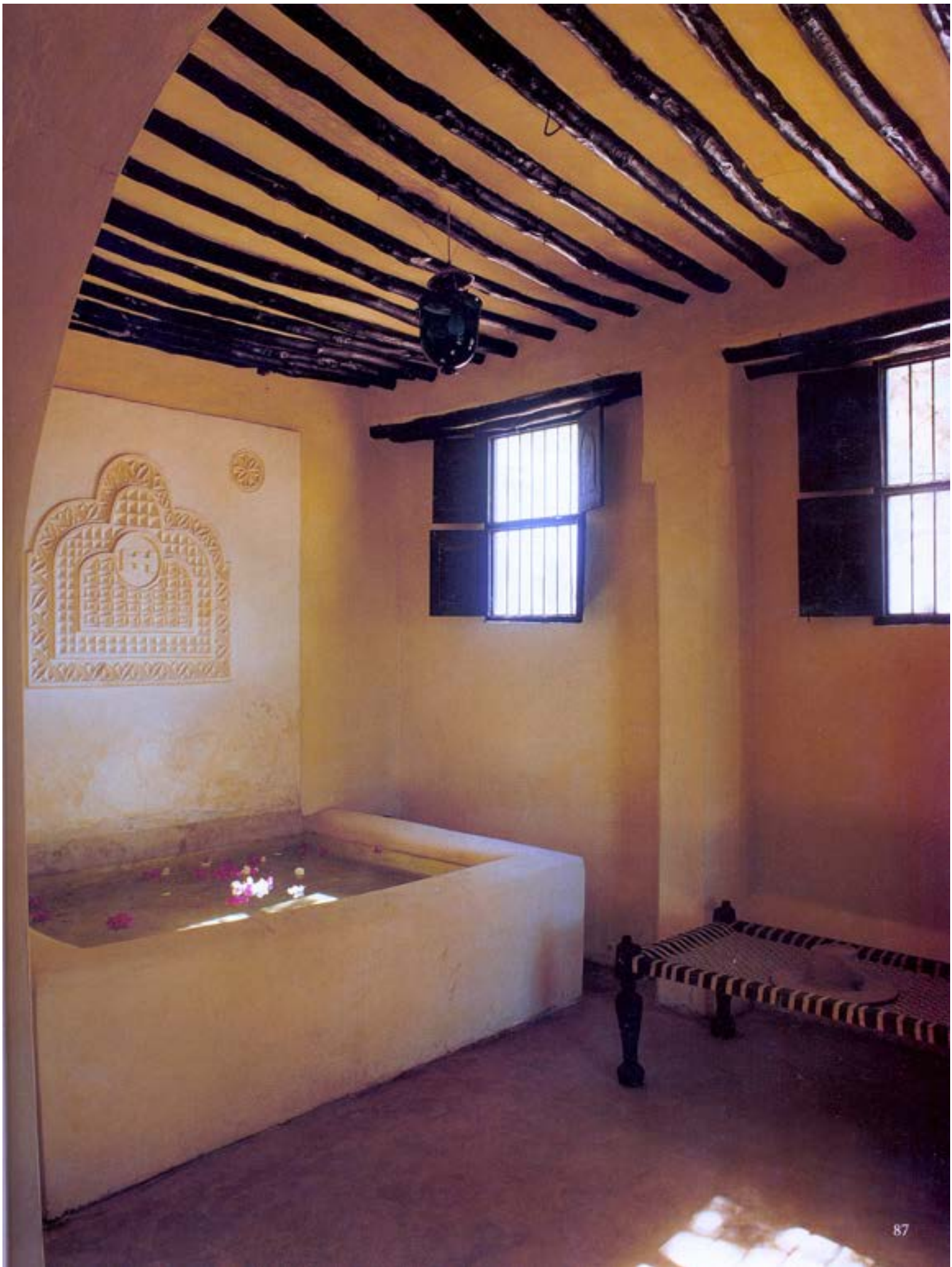
With the arrival of the Prince and Princess of Hanover, their building projects and friends in the 1980s, Shela's low-key chic has 'gone global'. But, as a Muslim community with over two dozen mosques, there is no alcohol (aside from at the Peponi Hotel bar and Petley's Inn). Night life is restricted to stargazing and – save for the odd rampaging donkey overloaded with sand sacks – there are no traffic accidents. With no bridge to the mainland, and internal airfares monopolised, it has escaped the ravages of mass tourism.

For Modola, in the early 1990s: 'Shela was the perfect opposite to all the tent and bush life I was heading into. Gerald was a friend and I loved the house. It was just the right time to buy.' Soon after, he transferred his expedition from Manda down to Kilifi and departed on a four-month trip – along with his ten-year-old son, 21 porters, 18 camels, eight horses and his brother – up country to Lake Victoria. His wife, Patrizia, remained in Nairobi monitoring their progress on the radio, as they were 'persecuted' by lions most of the way. Nevertheless, 'it was one of the best things I have done in my life,' he says. 'It certified my relationship with Africa and the bush.' Once they had completed the trek – double the intended distance as they were made to skirt the national parks – Modola returned to work on the Shela house.

The ground floor was the original house, built by the notorious white hunter Bunny Allen for a retired English biddy called Maisie Munro Davis. She died there – found stiff in her bed by Lars Korschen, the owner of the Peponi Hotel. Gerald Johnson bought it from her estate and, with the help of Korschen, initially added on the main living-room level with its pillars and huge slatted

Top: black Colonial-style shutters decorate the main dining room on the first floor. Middle: a coral-block seat is found next to the kitchen door. Left: stone steps lead up to the shaded entrance hall. Opposite: the *birika* (fountain) was designed by Modola. The day-bed is made from woven *makuti* or coconut-tree palm









black shutters. A second floor was subsequently built, with extra bedrooms, under a huge *makuti* (coconut-tree palm) roof. Johnson was based there for the best part of 20 years, developing Kiwayu – to the north – into the sophisticated barefoot camp it is today, and building Kipungani, a similar Robinson Crusoe-style camp on the other side of Lamu island.

When Modola acquired the house, it felt 'somewhat abandoned'. He reconfigured the top floor so that his bedroom had its own bathroom and private terrace, and the spare bedroom its own loo. On the roof he made a large bed for afternoon siestas, with views of the main channel and Manda island.

On the first floor he opened up the corridor wall to the comfortable *baraza* (meeting place), covered the floors with *mashupati* (palm strips sewn together), and brightened it all up with a yellow-tinted limewash. With Ian Cameron, an antique dealer living in the village, Modola went against the grain of using Swahili furniture. Tall earthenware pots from the Kisumu region in western Kenya were made into lamps, solid 'up-country' pieces were brought down and a collection of swords used to decorate a wall.

It is his creative flair and ability to see things through that led directly to unusual building commissions. One of the former owners of Ras Kitau asked him to propose a scheme for a large plot of land on the beach just beyond the Peponi Hotel. Modola conceived the idea of a residential Omani-style fort and then embarked on a two-year programme to see it completed. Such was its success that he then designed a Chinese pagoda-style building, stepped into the dunes nearby, for another client. Now he has his sights on constructing a Saracen tower on a nearby island.

Modola's life seems destined to continue like this, bouncing from one place and project to another, wherever adventure and exciting challenges beckon. The only constant might well be this house, which he proclaims he 'will never sell, because the family adore the place'. Knowing Modola, this might be a rash statement. But then perhaps, as with all good Italians, the family will come first. We shall see ■

Top: stairs lead up to the roof from a landing decorated with masks from Cameroon. Middle: a locally made bed and a low bench constructed from driftwood feature in this bedroom. Left: two members of Modola's staff pose in the kitchen. Opposite: on top of the house, a daybed is sheltered by a *makuti* roof



