



SUBIRA HOUSE ENTERPRISES LTD

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## SUBIRA HOUSE

### History of the House

**Subira House, Former Liwali's House (the big house** behind the Fort). In swahili: nyumba kubwa njuma ya gereza). The area of Lamu Old Town is Mkunguni - means the block around the Indian Almond Tree. This is the square right in front of the big old Lamu Fort.

Subira House is immense, a beautiful and a historical house grade I, with many curled archways bordering the inner courts. The house was built by Said Bin Hamid - a well-known Liwali (governor appointed by the Sultan of Zanzibar) - during the first part of the 1900th century. The multi-court single storey plan of this house is unique and does not resemble any other house on Lamu. There is said to be a copy in Oman. Lamu Fort, a brooding giant between us and the block next to the waterfront, was built at the same time as Subira House. Those were turbulent times and various groups from the Mombasa and Pate townships threatened to seize the power. The population of Lamu - a medley of Arabs originating from Yemen, Oman, the Comoros, and India and settled in the Lamu archipelago since 900 where they traded in slaves, gold, and ivory - asked for protection from the Sultan of Zanzibar who sent a liwali to support them during the greater part of the 19th century.

### **Lamu Town, a UNESCO WORLD CULTURAL HERITAGE SITE since 2001!**

The oldest still existing settlement on the East African coast.

Lamu is impregnated with the Islamic religion - **of Lamu's own kind**. A softened and permissive kind, **lending much power to Lamu's women**. Many people would claim that Lamu is a matriarchy. (Which is not quite obvious, but the longer you live there you'll notice where power and strength are vested. )

At the time, the Muslim liwali was in control of almost everything, taking great decisions and acting as a judge imposing sentences. He received in the Sabule - **the reception room**. You'll find the Sabule immediately to the right after the main entrance. It has 6 windows, all reflected by ogee niches on the opposite wall and is 12 meters long, height 4m 60!!

In 2009 finally this beauty of a room has been thoroughly restored. No cement plaster only soft lime mortar. New ceiling beams, restored wooden teak shutters. Here is now our boutique.

The liwali himself had the bedroom to the left of the open court yard. Now, you will have to imagine a mosaic floor with a murmuring fountain in the middle, shadowed by a slender temple tree in flower. **We don't know...** This may happen – later!

The liwali had his four wives. Their bedrooms were in the farthest part of the house, around the small open court yard. (One of the rooms has been made into a kitchen for our guests, one serves as the entrance hall from a back door and two are guest rooms).

The liwali family owned several other big houses next to ours used as living quarters for the servants.

**Initially Subira House was a single storey house** with a small room (kidari) built above. The walls on the ground floor are two feet thick built of big lumps of coral and held together by lime-plaster.

The ceiling was carried by the very finest wooden beams, square edged mangati beams.

Such beams today cost some 2,800 sh.a piece.

**We try to replace the old ones that were "finished" with new heavy hewed mwangati (iron wood beams).**

**The house was in bad repair when we bought it in 1991.** The ceiling of one room was about to collapse. Two different families lived in two parts of the house and one part was empty. Since the families moved out, we have pulled down many a wall discovering a lot of fine niches that had been walled up. No hidden gold however!

Today the house has two more storeys. This is the maximum height allowed (though there are many who build taller). The two additional storeys were built by us with the exception of the kidari room already in existence.

We have built an additional staircase from the garden and provided the house with parapets and balustrades.

Here, building takes time. All the work is hand made. Transport by dhow and donkeys and of course manpower.

There is hardly any furniture available; you have to go to the carpenter and order what furniture you need, and your command will then have to be supervised so that it turns out the way you wish.

## **Subira**

Patience! As a matter of fact, the word Subira means patience, among other admirable qualities, and taking it easy and enjoying life while waiting. It is waiting with positive overtones.

## **Gardens**

Just outside our main kitchen is the well and a small garden. A very sweet smelling flower – *Kilua* gives out a fantastic fragrance at night. Pick one and put it behind your ear.

There is a door leading to the big garden with bananas, an avocado tree, two coconut trees and some vegetables. Julius, who works for us, has a little house at the end of the garden. We have started making it into a perfume garden. There is a sitting area by a pond and more fragrant trees; real jasmine, Chinese Honeysuckle and a huge Ylang Ylang. We love gardening. Actually this is the third time to develop a new garden.

### **A new kitchen**

In the autumn 2011 we made an entirely new kitchen.

### **Our house used to have thirteen of Lamu's most beautifully carved doors.**

When it was sold in 1972 for the price of 12.000 shilling (6000 SEK), the new owner removed the doors and sold them to an Italian man for quite a lot of money.

When restoring the house, we try to use traditional building material only and to adhere to the original style of architecture. These houses are very labour-intensive and we keep reminding ourselves that this is an **African dwelling and that we'll have to overlook 1) black spots on the walls** caused by the rains and not yet re-whitewashed, 2) plaster falling down because of too much salt in the plaster, unfortunately 3) all kinds of "dudus" (=insects and other small creeping things) such as the mini-ants and the occasional harmless spider.

**We have realized that we'll have to live with them and that they are truly unimportant!**

### **Private house**

To the right of the big open court is a part of the house that has been developed for private use.

In 2008 we sold our swedish hotel/restaurant business (ecologic) to come and live here.

This three storey building was finished 2010 in March. It used to be part of **the women's quarter**, with a room where they had **their babies and behind that the women's prayer room.**

The kitchen was at the far end of the garden where we have now made a place to eat outside.

The Liwali had an enormous household with lots of servants (slaves); slaughtering one cow a day was nothing unusual.

As far as we know, our house is the only one adorned with a lovely dome over the main entrance and boasting of a lavatory where you can make a fire to heat the water and such a spacious architecture.

### **Captain Jelani**

lives with us, on the ground floor to the left of the main entrance. We know Jelani since 1976. He is from Shela village, a swahili man and he works as a Captain and authorized guide, helping us to organize lovely trips for our guests. Full day excursions with snorkelling, fishing or just sailing, going ashore to do some grilling. Jelani knows all about the Lamu waters, about tides and currents.

**Please don't hesitate to discuss with him any trip in this area;**

You can order a meal out on the sea - Grilled fish and rice cooked in coconut milk and salads accompanied by all sorts of tasty sauces. Remember you have to agree about the pay and also to give

some money to buy the ingredients in the morning already. You will ask for the recipe. There are fixed prices nowadays for all these boat trips. Please consult our folder from Promise/Ahadi in the Reception.

### **Water**

The fresh water well of the house is very deep and has fairly good water, but nevertheless the water will have to be boiled! Well water is used for washing and showering.

**Drinking water** we take from Lamu County Council suppl. From a tap just outside the kitchen. You are welcome to fill up your water bottle and keep in our fridges.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL IDEAS AND GOALS**



**Subira House is eco certified since 2010.**

**We received a Silver Rating by Ecotourism Kenya one among 11 in the country!**

The only eco hotel in Lamu district!

**Our toilets are waterless. They** have been reconverted to the traditional choo pits, a pit dug in the ground. **We don't** use any water at all. Water closets have **shown to be very harmful to Lamu's** ground water. These later installations have **already spoilt so many of Lamu's big old wells. There is** no toilet drainage in Lamu Town.

**Electricity** is a commodity sometimes in short supply. In the evening darkness comes quickly.

Around 6 pm there is wonderful twilight time on the roof.

We must keep in mind that these houses were provided with electricity only during the last 25 years.

A lot of candles in beautiful niches is a delightful sight. Lamu candles burn down very quickly. We usually put the candles in small lanterns. These days we are on a three phase system so not often power cuts. But good to bring a torch. Some streets are still dark.

**Please help Lamu save electricity, close fan and lights when not in the room!**

**In your room there is a basket for shopping.** Please don't bring plastic or other packages back into the house.

Early mornings are fantastic. To see the sun rise from the Top top roof shortly after six o'clock! The birds. The braying of donkeys. There are some 6000 donkeys on the island. And 22 mosques calling out over

loudspeaker ..... Allah Akbaar!

Praying time is five for a true muslim. At around 4.30, 12.30, 4, 6, 8 oclock.  
By the way here we tell the time differently. Saa moja = one o clock is 7 in the morning.  
The first hour of the day. Same thing at night.

### **Accommodation capacity**

We have seven guest rooms and 9 showers-lavatories. Two kitchens. There are some more terraces and galleries. Up to 16 – 18 people can stay here.

### **Down stairs**

**In Subira you'll find downstairs at the back the former "harem": two double-rooms**, the small cool room and the Long room with a bath tub! And with room for an extra bed. 1 separate bathroom and a kitchen. A staircase leads up from the small open court yard to the first floor. The rooms on the ground floor are original airy and have very high ceilings - cooler and darker.

**On the first floor are rooms 1-4**; four double-roms. Prices are per person and include breakfast, bed linen, towels and spacious terraces. All our beds have mosquito nets and fans.

We make special group prices and reduced prices for prolonged stays. There are high and low season rates.

Minimum stay is 4 nights.

**On the second floor, the "Top Top roof" there is a new self contained** apartment where you pay a bit more, you have your bed room, an open air terace, a sitting area under tiled roof with a sea view and your bath room. Tip some extra and your breakfast will be served up on the terace.

**In our opinion 14 – 18 people in the house is a maximum.** You can comfortably sleep 5 downstairs and 8 upstairs and 4 on the Top Top.

Something else to keep in mind:

everything takes time here, and there may be things you need that are not available. Remember that Lamu is a remote island.

### **Staff**

Julius, Kennedy, and John are working for us taking care of Subira House. They look after our visitors water the garden and make breakfast. For breakfast we serve lots of local fruit - papaya, banana, mango - African honey, fried eggs on toast, home made youghurt, home baked bread and mango jam, tea or coffee.

Michael, is our great experienced cook. He has done 20 years at famous Peponi's in Shella and is now trained by Paul to fit into our health concept. All of them are from the mainland and not Muslims.

### **Dinner at our Karkadeh Restaurant.**

With space for only 12 guests we opened our new restaurant specialising in dishes from fresh local produce. No imports. We follow our old footsteps –the spirit of the Slow Food movement as we did in Sweden. GOOD – CLEAN- FAIR food!

Lovely dishes from local ingredients, no chemicals, and from ambitious farmers.

Our cook is Michael a very skilled cook. **With our own 30 years' experience running the Swedish restaurant** we have found a good way to cooperate.

You can order your dinner the same morning to be served at 7 pm.

### **Alcohol licence.**

Also we have beer and wine licence and drinks can be ordered.

**Tips** Normally here in Kenya the staff expects some tips to show your appreciation.

### **Medicine:**

Lamu now has two pharmacies. Ordinary medicine such as aspirin, and similar medicines are available, but we would recommend that you bring plaster, wound cleaning, sterile dressing, white tape. And - **don't go around with bare legs and arms in the evening. The malaria-carrying mosquito** operates at night. Today there is very little malaria on the island. Really not at all what we hear. Getting malaria is not the end of the world either, there is medicine for that, but it is always wiser to protect oneself. There are some very helpful private doctors in town.

We have very bad experience of the malaria profylax containing Lariam and the Malarone seems to create stomach problems and head ace. It can give you terrible dark dreams, bad paranoia, loss of appetite, headaches and ruin much of your holidays. Better to stay away from it.

### **Clothing:**

Bring or buy some good khangas to use as dressing gown, towel etc., a long skirt/dress, a light jacket or cardigan, a pair of thin slacks, a hat, a scarf, a t-shirt, **that is about all you'll need.** There is something of a Thousand-and-one-Night atmosphere on Lamu; beautiful clothes and heavy oily perfumes and incense.

### **Food:**

Do try the small restaurants of Lamu Town. Reserve a table, and maybe food as well, with the compliments of **Christina and Paul at Subira House and you'll be well taken care of.**

Visit Baraka's Coffee shop for some really good coffee, ice-cream or other goodies **that you won't** find anywhere else on Lamu. Give them our compliments as well. The Lamu World hotels have a very nice top quality restaurant Moon Rise Restaurant, in the Northern part of town.

Or why not a simple fish lunch or just some juice at the Hapa Hapa or the Seafront Restaurant on the quay.

And of course you are so welcome to try our KARKADEH Restaurant of Subira House, but remember to book in advance at least the same morning.

### **Beer and wine:**

If you wish to go out for beer or wine you'll go to **Wisper's** or Moon Rise Restaurant. Or simply enjoy your beer or wine up on our roof. Lamu is Muslim so there is not always alcohol in a restaurant.

### Money:

Be careful with your money and don't forget to lock the doors. This applies everywhere. Don't bring a lot of money or other valuables to the beach. If you do want to bring your money, there are lockers available at Peponi's hotel's shower room for a small sum. Peponi accepts credit cards and the bank gives you money in a new ATM machine in town – VISA card only.

Remember that we have so much and other people next to nothing. Take good care of the house key and don't forget to close the front door. The bar will be put at around midnight so inform us if you wish to come back later.

Be prepared for reaching the end of the world when you come here, relax and enjoy the feeling. You will realize that nothing is what you used to believe it was, which will be greatly enriching.

### Culture:

I say there is some thing for every one in Lamu.

Lamu Museum is a must and maybe the Swahili House Museum and the Fort as well. Lamu's culture is extremely rich - for you to discover! Take your time!

### Excursions:

Make a tour around the island by motor boat, visit the little boat builder's and basket weaver's village Matondoni on the other side and have a grand lunch at the Kipungani lodge (reservation) or the Kizingo Beach restaurant. Finish off with a swim at the point before going home either by taking the same way you came or rounding the island. Your captain will advise you. A particular-ly luxurious and wonderful day.

Another day you may choose to take a walk to the beach and the open sea. Lunch or dinner at the grill of Peponi Hotel at Shella Beach. And maybe go home by dhow ( 200-400sh /person).

**ATTENTION! Don't** bring any valuables to the beach!

And why not spend one day in town just taking it easy.

Or take the boat over to Manda to visit Taqwa Ruins, a ruined town dating from the 9th century.

Lamu town has something to offer for anyone.

We have a really nice yoga teacher at Banana House in Shella. A morning tour with yoga and a dip in the sea after that!

Recently we have aquired a shamba. This is a piece of cultivated land. Ours is 45 min walk diagonally towards the long long beach behind Shella Villagae.

We grow coconuts, mangos, cashewnuts, and so much more. It is a very relaxing trip to go there.

If you have the time we can arrange a shamba walk early in the morning.

Finally, you can go snorkelling at Manda Toto, which is a whole day tour. Talk to Jelani for all the necessary arrangements. He organizes motor boat and sailing tours.

**ATTENTION! Don't** forget sun protection.

Diving is possible at Shella.

You can use e-mail for communicating with Lamu, sms works perfectly, cell phones are now much used. Subira House has its WIFI network so you can be connected by your laptop. Mostly!

Welcome!!!!

Christina and Paul Aarts

> Please pay

> 1)

in Euro to our Euro bank account in Lamu.

> Kenya Commercial Bank

> SWIFT: KCBLKENX

> Lamu Branch Account 1115115464

> Subira House Enterprises Ltd or

2)

> **in Kenya Shillings** to our bank account in Lamu.

> Kenya Commercial Bank

> SWIFT: KCBLKENX

> Lamu Branch Account 1108102638

> Subira House Enterprises Ltd.

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VERY WELCOME TO LAMU!



