

A photograph of a courtyard with a swimming pool, a wooden chair, and a blue door. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day. The pool is on the left, and the chair is on the right. The walls are a light, textured color. The door is a vibrant blue. The overall atmosphere is serene and artistic.

# LAMU CALLING

A remote African island is home to an extraordinary artists' retreat created by bon vivant Nicholas Logsdail—founder of Lisson Gallery and nephew of Roald Dahl.

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**BLUE HEAVEN**  
Logsdail converted a former palm-oil factory in the main town of Lamu Island into an elegant getaway, complete with a lap pool. Anish Kapoor and Marina Abramović are among the artists who have visited and created work there.



COURTESY OF LISSON GALLERY (PORTRAIT)

**SERENITY NOW** From top left: Nicholas Logsdail, who opened Lisson (one of London's first contemporary art galleries) in 1967, at the age of 22; the gallery now has branches in Milan and, opening in 2016, New York City. Interiors at the Factory, the design of which was inspired by minimalist artist Donald Judd and the work of Mexican architect Luis Barragán.

**T**HE VOYAGE TO LAMU, an exotic island off the east coast of Africa, unfolds like an opium dream. After flying to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, I took a propeller plane to a tiny airstrip set among lush mangroves two degrees below the equator. There two Swahili boatmen, Captain Hassan and Titus, escorted me to a nearby dhow, a traditional Arab sailing vessel crafted from wood and favored in myth by the likes of Sinbad the Sailor. As the distinctive triangular sail filled with a gentle breeze, the mysterious buildings of the island's main township rose like a mirage on the horizon—a jumble of ancient whitewashed mansions, mosques, palm trees and bougainvillea, all presided over by the stone turrets of an Omani fortress.

Stepping ashore was like entering Pasolini's *Arabian Nights*. Lamu Town is a medieval labyrinth so perfectly intact it was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001. As we scrambled up stone steps lapped by the waves, past fishermen scaling their catch with curved blades, one declared in English, with a disarming smile, "Welcome to the island!" On the seafront promenade, women in colored veils swept by, followed by traders driving teams of donkeys laden with tea, silk and basmati rice. (The diminutive breed is the main land transport on the island.) It looks as if little has changed here since the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama drifted past en route to India more than 500 years ago.

Hoisting my bag onto his shoulder, Captain Hassan plunged into the maze of alleys, some barely shoulder width, dodging a stream of vendors, hand-pushed carts and braying burros. Finally, we arrived at an unmarked wooden portal in an anonymous wall and rapped a brass knocker shaped like a woman's hand. As the door creaked open onto the Factory—so called from its earlier role as a palm-oil factory—I stepped into an oasis of calm and contemporary style.

Created by Nicholas Logsdail, a highly influential art dealer and the owner of Lisson Gallery, the Factory has been transformed over the past decade into a refuge where international artists can be inspired and create. For 30 years an abandoned ruin, the structure has been renovated using the distinctive building materials of Lamu but with the clean, spare design that would delight many of the minimalist artists Logsdail has represented since the 1970s. After the claustrophobia of Lamu Town, the sense of space and light is exhilarating. On the spot where camels once trudged in circles, tethered to an oil press, a courtyard garden now overflows with fruit trees, ferns and flowers. Around it, studio spaces are open to the air but shaded from the sun. It's no wonder artists such as Marina Abramović and Anish Kapoor have made the pilgrimage to work here.

As soon as I stepped inside, a woman swathed in a silk headdress—an American named Hadija who had converted to Islam—handed me a cell phone. "It's Nicholas!" she said. "He wants to talk to you." We'd had dinner in London the night before my flight to Kenya.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be there to welcome you in person," Logsdail declared, his voice crystal clear. "So I thought I'd do the next best thing and call." (Kenya has skipped a generation, technologically speaking: It is all but impossible to get a Wi-Fi

connection in remote areas, but the 4G coverage is pristine, so everyone from beach boys to Masai shepherds carries a cell phone.) For the next half hour, Logsdail gave me a personal audio tour of the Factory, from the library to the lap pool. A few resident artists have taken their work home with them, he explained, but many *objets* remain—two pieces by Richard Long crafted from antique wooden doors, several faux signs created by Christian Jankowski. For a performance art piece, Jankowski pretended to be a German entrepreneur who planned to revive the Factory as a coconut-oil plant, commissioning local artisans to paint advertisements for his company. "Artists love Lamu," Logsdail said. "It's a marvelous place to work. And no matter how famous, nobody ever knows who they are!"

If the idea of an English dreamer creating an artists' enclave on a faraway African island sounds

in the art world knew my uncle," Logsdail said. "Some liked him, some didn't. But for me, he was my hero." They would also go to London galleries. "We'd pop into Cork Street, and a dealer would say, 'Oh, Mr. Dahl, I've got something lovely I've been keeping aside for you.' And then she would pull out a Gauguin watercolor! Art was all so much cheaper then." Dahl introduced Logsdail to the artist Sir Matthew Smith, who taught him to paint and encouraged him to join the Slade School of Fine Art—a career track that took a different turn when Logsdail opened the Lisson Gallery in 1967, at the age of 22.

"I was so young," he said, laughing. "But at that age, you are open to anything." Lisson Gallery rose from a shoestring start to become a multimillion-dollar international operation that today represents many of the world's most renowned artists (in addition to Kapoor and Abramović, Sol LeWitt, Tony Oursler,

"THERE IS SOMETHING ENCHANTED ABOUT THE ISLAND. I WAS CAPTIVATED. AND IT WAS AN EXPERIENCE I FELT I WANTED TO SHARE WITH OTHERS." —NICHOLAS LOGSDAIL

plucked from the pages of a Roald Dahl story—*Nicky and the Palm Oil Factory*, perhaps—that's entirely fitting. Logsdail is Dahl's nephew, and as a child he heard stories of the "dark continent" from his uncle, who lived in the wilds of Tanganyika (now Tanzania) and Kenya for several years in his 20s, long before his short stories or children's books had become famous.

I had discovered this family connection several months before, when I first met Logsdail at his favorite Manhattan restaurant, Lucien, in the East Village. Over a luncheon of braised rabbit and Sancerre, the 70-year-old Logsdail showed me the plans for his first New York gallery, under construction at a location near the High Line. Before long, we had digressed to his childhood in rural Buckinghamshire in the 1950s, where his eccentric Uncle Roald, who lived in a cottage nearby, would fire Nicholas's imagination with stories of his African adventures as a youth. Dahl also trained as a fighter pilot in Kenya during World War II and crash-landed in the deserts of Libya, a tale vividly told in one of his memoirs, *Going Solo*.

Dahl became young Nicholas's mentor, introducing him to a world far richer than the one offered by his father, a financier in London. "He was the best uncle a boy could have," Logsdail said of Dahl, who brought his nephew model airplanes and extraordinary gifts. On one occasion in the mid-1950s, Dahl met the director John Huston in London, where Huston was filming some final ocean scenes from *Moby Dick*, using a wooden clockwork model of the white whale thrashing its tail in a water tank. "So what are you doing with the clockwork whale when you're finished?" my uncle asked. "Nothing!" the director said. And so Huston kindly gave it to me, and I stared at the marvelous object in wonder.

Crucially for Nicholas, Dahl was also an art collector, and he encouraged his nephew's interest in painting. The pair would drive into London in an old Vauxhall Velox to visit the Tate, the National Gallery or the studio of Dahl's friend Francis Bacon. "Everyone

Tony Cragg and Robert Mangold); two gallery spaces now stand on either side of a single block in the West End, with a branch in Milan and another to open in New York next year.

When we met in London, Logsdail invited me to join him at an exhibition by one of his highest-profile clients, Ai Weiwei, at the Royal Academy of Arts. The Chinese provocateur had just arrived, on his first trip outside Beijing after house arrest, and posed for selfies with Logsdail by the Thames. We ended up wandering London from one atmospheric *boîte* to the next. "I think that's someone famous," a guest whispered as we entered Soho House on Greek Street, with Logsdail towering above the crowds in a tailored tweed blazer, scarf and black fedora.

Like his uncle, Logsdail is a born raconteur, with a repertoire of colorful anecdotes. He also has a philosophical bent and often interrupts his tales for musings on fate. "Everything important in life happens as a result of chance," he said at one point, before adding: "Of course, these things may seem like coincidences, but one has already done the groundwork, perhaps subconsciously, to make them possible."

So it was with Lamu. Despite his childhood fascination with East Africa, the success of his gallery meant that he was too busy to make a journey to the continent. The opportunity suddenly arose in the dark London winter of 2000, when Logsdail, then in his mid-50s, was chatting over lunch with a Mexican-Italian friend who mentioned that she was taking a long journey to a sunnier clime. "I asked where she was going, and she said in her lovely accent: 'Darling! Best kept secret. Not St. Moritz. I'm going to Africa!' Then she said, 'I don't know you very well, but you seem like you would be a good companion. Would you like to join me?'" Logsdail had already planned a trip to New York, but when he returned to his office that afternoon he discovered a fax saying that his appointments had been canceled. "All of a sudden I had two weeks empty in my diary," he marveled. His friend was entirely unsurprised when he called.

“There is a Kenya Airways flight to Nairobi this evening,’ she told me. ‘I’ll meet you for breakfast.’ And so I did! I was quite shocked at myself. I hadn’t taken a holiday in years.”

After going on safari, the pair flew to Lamu, which at the time had an improbable reputation as Africa’s most exclusive getaway, even though the airport on the archipelago was a thatched hut manned by a lone Masai warrior. Logsdail remembered that the warrior leaned on his spear when he arrived and intoned, “Welcome to paradise.” “Well, paradise Lamu was not,” he recalled. “But it was incredibly laid back. There is a lovely Kiswahili phrase, *pole pole*—slow down,” he said. “There is something really very enchanted about the island. I was totally captivated. And it was an experience I felt I wanted to share with others.”

Logsdail returned in 2002 to purchase a palatial 18th-century residence, Utulivu, in the heart of Lamu Town, which he renovated in the traditional style of Gujarati craftsmen—walls of plaster mixed with lime and sand, polished smooth, and windows covered by ornate latticework. He enjoyed the process so much that he couldn’t resist a second opportunity in 2006: the town’s derelict palm-oil factory, the ultimate fixer-upper, filled with tons of debris but sound in structure. “I had no intention of buying the factory, but it fascinated me. Who built it? Why had it been abandoned? The owner, who had three wives and 14 children, came knocking on my door, offering it for sale. I should have sent him away, but my curiosity got the better of me.” When Logsdail turned down the first offer, the owner kept returning with ever-lower prices—for two and a half years. “I started thinking about it,” Logsdail said. “I love doing architectural work. Slowly the idea of renovating the building took hold.”

Today, the Factory’s color palette and building materials are traditional Lamu, but the aesthetic is contemporary, inspired by the artist Donald Judd’s minimalist spaces in Marfa, Texas, and the work of Mexican architect Luis Barragán. From the start, Logsdail envisioned the Factory as a casual artist’s refuge rather than an official colony or residency. Invitations are extended personally and informally, and artists usually stay while Logsdail himself is in Lamu over the summer or holiday season, so he can join them for conversation, dinners and screenings of films on a courtyard wall. (Logsdail has three sons and a daughter from two marriages, all of whom visit Lamu often; Rory, a filmmaker, and Alex, who works with his father at the gallery, have taken a particular interest.) It is intended as a place “where work and pleasure can seamlessly collide,” Logsdail said. “So far 25 artists have taken up the offer.”

The results have been striking. In 2010, Marina Abramović filmed a video, *Confession*, which involved her staring into the eyes of a donkey and telling it her life story. “I spent three days looking for the right donkey,” Abramović says now, laughing. “You have to have the right chemistry. Some donkeys you like, others you don’t.” Her second marriage had just ended, and

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**BAY WATCH** The view over the rooftops of Shela. Starting in the '90s the village became popular among jet-setters.



Logsdail invited her to Lamu to get over her divorce. She stayed for nearly a month. “It’s an incredible mix of cultures,” she says. “There are Masai warriors straight out of a *National Geographic* magazine, women in colored burqas. And I loved the names. One official was called Pineapple. A guy who ran the local bar was Satan. The cook was Robinson Crusoe.” Lamu turned out to be an ideal place to rethink her life. “It’s far from home, far from everything,” she says. “And I had all this time. I went into a different space.”

Part of the attraction of Lamu was spending time with Logsdail, whose London gallery Abramović first visited in the early ’70s. “Nicholas is incredibly faithful to his artists,” she says. “He doesn’t discard them like dirty socks. And he really believes in art.” The pair spent days aimlessly wandering around Lamu, as Logsdail shared his passion for the island. “I love talking to him,” Abramović says. “He combines a Nordic

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sensibility with London eccentricity. He says exactly what he thinks.”

Anish Kapoor also spent time on the island and completed a series of gouaches there. (“What Nicholas has done in Lamu is wonderful,” he said. “It has an African intensity.”) Other visitors include Jorinde Voigt, Wael Shawky and the emerging Kenyan artist Gor Soudan. Still, the artist whose work is most in evidence at the Factory is a local, Asha Thamu, whose deceptively simple paintings capture Lamu’s dreamy atmosphere. “In an age of conceptual cleverness, Asha has a natural knowingness,” Logsdail said. “She paints what she sees, in a vernacular way.” (“Nicholas told me, ‘Don’t you ever go to art school!’” Thamu told me with a laugh, when I met her at the Factory. “I asked him what he liked about my paintings, and he wouldn’t tell me. He said it would change the way I work.”)

The Factory has also provoked excitement in Nairobi’s incipient art scene, where one of Kenya’s only contemporary galleries, the Circle, opened in early 2015. “It’s a wonderful thing for Kenya what Nicholas is doing,” enthuses the gallery owner, Danda Jaroljmek, who has also created an annual art auction that connects regional artists with collectors. She hopes that there will be a chance for her city-bound artists to broaden their cultural horizons. “It would be wonderful if our Nairobi artists could go to Lamu and meet Nicholas’s superstars,” she says. “Kenyan artists very rarely have the opportunity to travel and meet individuals of their caliber.”

**F**EW OF LAMU TOWN’S official “attractions” would make it on any TripAdvisor list—there’s one haunted museum with rusty cannons by the door and some antique artifacts on display, and the imposing Omani fortress. The true allure of the town is its otherworldly atmosphere: The look of the alleyways is Arab, the faces are African, the pungent perfume of spice and curry, Indian. The

mansions of Omani ivory merchants loom like citadels, their doors carved with exquisite ornamental detail and studded with defensive brass spikes. Even the animals have a fairy-tale quality: The hundreds of alley cats staring with suspicious eyes are called Egyptian because their breed is the only one that resembles the cats in hieroglyphics.

As in ancient Greco-Roman towns, houses in Lamu Town have no numbers. There are no lights in the back alleys, so on moonless nights I wander for hours through dark, silent passageways, glimpsing candelit rooms through silk curtains. At strategic corners, Swahili men in white robes and embroidered *kofia* caps play dominoes under swaying lanterns. By day, I pay visits to the eccentric expats living in town. The most memorable is the writer Errol Trzebinski, a grande dame from Nairobi who purchased an Omani mansion in the mid-1980s for £1,750 (then around

\$3,500), after her research on the Danish writer Karen Blixen (a.k.a. Isak Dinesen) and her lover Denys Finch Hatton became a key source for the love story in the film *Out of Africa*. “I was feeling affluent then!” she says, with a laugh. Cradling her porcelain teacup with aristocratic poise, she politely explains why Lamu is addictive. “Yes, I sometimes do wonder, What am I doing here living amongst all this garbage and donkey s—? But then I’ll open the door to somewhere like the Factory, and one enters another world. The town is filled with such hidden treasures.”

For a burst of light and blue sky—and a taste of Lamu’s jet-setting “golden age”—I hire a dhow named the *Lady Gaga* to take me two miles south to the beach village of Shela. No sooner have we left the dock than we are racing sea turtles through crystalline waters, the memory of dark alleyways scorched away by the equatorial sun. The boatmaster (known only as Captain Cappuccino) points to an array of ravishing villas set above a stretch of golden sand. It was in Shela that Lamu’s improbable celebrity era took off in the mid-1990s, when Prince Ernst August of Hanover (soon to wed Princess Caroline of Monaco) decided to buy a mansion—the first of three. An entourage of European aristocrats and wealthy admirers followed in the newlyweds’ wake, turning Lamu into Africa’s most exotic hideaway. Soon stars from Sting to Kate Moss and Jude Law were renting out villas and partying with the beau monde by Shela’s eight-mile-long beach.

For a little nostalgia, I drop by the sunset happy hour at the beachfront Peponi Hotel, which has been the center of the expat scene since it first opened in 1967. Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall once lounged on its veranda; Yehudi Menuhin serenaded dinner guests with his violin. Today, the ambience of the Peponi is decidedly more sedate than what it was in its heyday. Lamu’s social scene collapsed after 2011, when a string of violent incidents traced to neighboring Somalia provoked travel warnings from the U.S. Department of State, British Foreign Office and

almost every other First World nation. The crimes were horrific—an elderly French woman seized by pirates in her house; a British couple kidnapped, the husband shot dead, the wife ransomed after six months of captivity; a village raid by jihadists that left over 60 dead. The result was like turning off a faucet—overnight, travelers simply stopped going to Lamu. The island economy was devastated.

To Lamu’s expats, the travel warnings were the result of a geographical confusion in the Western press, which did not distinguish between events in the 2,500-square-mile Lamu County on the mainland of Kenya from those on the island. (Lamu is the name of the 108-square-mile island; the Lamu Archipelago; and Lamu County, which also encompasses a vast swath of the mainland.) “Nothing violent whatsoever has happened on Lamu Island!” said Logsdail, who shares the frustration. “The incidents all occurred in Lamu County.” Logsdail has continued to bring his family to Lamu every year, without the slightest trouble. What’s more, the U.S. maintains a naval presence in a counterterrorism base only a few miles from Lamu. “The island is far safer than any American city,” he pointed out.

There are signs that tourism is returning. “We’re almost booked out for Christmas–New Year,” says Carol Korschen, the owner of the Peponi Hotel, adding that the luxury rental villas lining the sands of Shela were reporting similar comebacks. But the five-year collapse has taken its toll in other ways. Lack of funds is threatening the ancient architecture: The Global Heritage Fund in 2010 had already identified Lamu Town as one of the world’s 12 most endangered historical sites due to “insufficient management” and “development pressures.” Many parts of the town have gone beyond poetic decay to serious structural decline. Some crumbling houses are propped up only by mangrove poles; others lean chaotically across alleys, so that residents on either side can nearly shake hands.

Meanwhile, the Kenyan government is coming up with a string of dubious development projects. For years, plans have been in the works to construct an enormous \$25 billion port on Lamu Island to export oil pumped in a proposed pipeline from Ethiopia and South Sudan. Although it will provide desperately needed employment, environmentalists are horrified by the potential damage to the fragile marine ecosystem—and the even more fragile society, ending its dreamlike isolation forever.

Although a small activist group called Save Lamu opposes the port, few islanders feel that they have much say in the matter. “Everything has to change,” sighs the local artist Asha Thamu with resignation. “Our children will see a different world.”

On my last afternoon in Lamu Town, I wander through the busy marketplace in search of souvenirs when my cell phone rings; it’s Logsdail calling from London to see how my stay has been. After we exchange news and gossip, he is excited to report that ground had just been broken on the New York branch of the Lisson Gallery and that its opening is on track for 2016. It is a timely reminder that Captain Hassan is waiting with a dhow bound for the airport—and the long, slow journey back into the 21st century. ●



**LOCAL COLOR**  
Left: A dhow at anchor in Shela; the traditional Arab vessels still ply the waters of the Lamu Archipelago. Above: Veiled women in the narrow passages of Lamu Town. Right: Henna tattoos at Lamu market.



**WATER WORLDS** Above: A villager loading cargo from a donkey onto a dhow, near Lamu Town. Right: A villa on the far end of Shela with sweeping views of the harbor. In the '90s, Princess Caroline of Monaco and Prince Ernst August of Hanover owned real estate in Shela; an entourage of European aristocrats soon followed.

