



BLURRY LINES

with Tony Natif

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The floating bars of Lamu and walking on water

A watering hole that perpetually sails the ocean, offers unbridled fun, debauchery, plenty of sun, open starry night skies, copious amounts of *nyama choma* and an all round good time? Check. Giving all this, right alongside defying the laws and restrictions of man, while obeying the laws of physics; specifically the ones on buoyancy? Dreamy!

This weekend, that is the promise a wooden, grass thatched bar and restaurant in Lamu held for me. Let us call it Mama Njeri floating bar. Njeri being the name of the proprietor who in 2014 rescued it from the ruins, following extensive Al-Shabaab activity in this region which nearly destroyed tourism, a major economic pillar here.

Clearly, it is a place of defiance against the odds. Little wonder I found it charming. A short dhow sail removed from the oldest and best preserved Swahili settlement on the East African coast, the old town of Lamu, and the pristine, bohemian white sand beaches of Shela, Njeri bar stands out as some sort of refuge to visitors with an unquenchable beer

thirst on the archipelago that is just more than 80 percent Muslim. In Lamu, one might find it easier to dig up a needle from donkey hay than grab themselves sustained pints, so Mama Njeri stands in the gap. It seems like a place built to be far removed from the laws of man and the social implications of the real world around it and yet offers you access to modernity; or whatever we call a car-free, donkey riding, 12th Century UNESCO heritage site.

Lamu has a feel that I can only describe as childishly enchanting; untethered from the land, paying no rent save for sea vessel permits to the Kenyan government to allow it continue floating on 200 air-filled drums and entertaining revellers like yours truly to no end. It is a place where rising and falling tides open up streets on the beds of the Indian Ocean. Streets where locals walking under the back-drop of star-filled midnight skies might fool you into thinking you were back to Jesus times where the son of God and his buddy Peter went on a casual stroll on the Sea of Galilee.



We got to Mama Njeri on Saturday night at about 9pm, on a boat named Lady Gaga. The music was deafening, perhaps in an attempt to shut down noise from a full moon party in Shela, a few miles to the north. A few aging white men with some nubile African ladies were perched on the deck, whispering in each other's ears while swinging back endless shots.

The waiting staff were friendly. The DJ even more so. He seemed to immediately read the room; that these party hungry Ugandans had invaded the joint. The music quickly switched to Moze Radio, Joshua Baraka and Bobi Wine. He let us have our way with the selection. The drinks flowed, my fellow Ugandan bar crawlers danced to their fill; the grinding only briefly interrupted by poor attempts at throwing around broken Swahili compliments.

One of our seemingly shy Ugandan guys was told by a Kenyan belle we were with; "allow women to take advantage of you anytime. You will not get pregnant". I almost spilled my drink laughing. I walked back to the deck, partly to avoid making my

self look silly from laughing but also because I was amazed at the lines of people making their way through the ocean bed. I found it mesmerising because only a few hours ago, this place was filled with water. But then again the tide here swings through different heights in a matter of hours.

I looked at the stars. Venus was showing off. I felt a warm fuzzy feeling inside. The tide came back up. I feared I was living on the edge but could not bring myself to walk back. I wanted to go for a swim but my better judgment took over. I fear I might not resist the urge next time.

To say I was wildly entertained would be an understatement. I went to Njeri's expecting to find a rusty barnacle-covered, salt sea water covered, fish-smelling mess with warm beer that tasted like piss. I left, rather grudgingly, with great memories after a night to remember. Lamu really is different. The night even more so. I will be back for a lot longer; for a lot more than learning about the centuries old craft of hand wood curving. Who needs gated communities and Bandali when you have this? This is the life!