February 08, 1982
Passage To The Past
From Shimoni to Lamu (shown here), the author travels up the Coral Coast of Kenya, and evokes the ancient Arabs, Vasco da Gama and Papa Hemingway
Robert F. Jones

The old order changeth, but the ghosts linger on. Eighteen years ago, when I first drove down the tarmac from Nairobi to Kenya's Coral Coast, great angry elephants—glowing ruby-red from the ocher they had rolled in—prowled the Tsavo region and lazed in the shade of giant baobabs along the road. Now the elephants are few; the majority were killed by poachers or died during the long drought in the early 1970s. Along the road in those days, one would also see Africans in tribal dress, red shukas over their shoulders, spears and war clubs carried for defense. As one neared the coast, the costumes changed: The women wore Muslim-black buibuis or brightly colored kangas, the men pinstriped kikois.

Not so today.

When, in December, I and my companions, photographer Bill Eppridge and Bill Winter, an old friend and hunting guide, stopped at a Total station in Mariakani to refuel our safari wagon, parked near us at the pumps was a shiny bronze-colored Audi 2000. At the refreshment kiosk—or "key-ox," as many New Africans pronounce it—stood the car's occupants. Mama wore bright red hot-pants and a frilly blouse. Junior, in his shorts and T shirt, was plugged to his Sony Walkman, diddybopping to a rock beat from Dar es Salaam. And the mzee (old man) sported reflector shades and a T shirt no European would have dared wear. It was emblazoned with a chimpanzee in a business suit holding a telephone and saying brightly, JAMBO! BOSS SPEAKING.

To reach the coast, one drives through the Taru Desert, a belt of nyika (thorn scrub) some 200 miles wide. At one point there is a long, dry hill called the Kilima Kiu—the Hill of Thirst. A century ago, coffles of slaves taken in the interior marched down the Hill of Thirst, each carrying a 60-pound load, usually elephant tusks or rhino horns, heading for the Arab slaving ports on the Indian Ocean. The infamous last stop on this trail of tears was the town of Bagamoyo in what is now Tanzania. Translated from the Swahili, Bagamoyo means "lay down your heart." Along with your burden, I guess, and your last hope of freedom. Now we passed places along the route called The Bumping Bar and The Cozy Boy Hotel and debouched finally onto the Coral Coast, near a place called Shimoni.

Over the eons, the Indian Ocean has eaten great caves into the coralline rock lining the beach there. Shimo is Swahili for hole, and Shimoni means "in the hole." Slaves were kept chained in the caves of Shimoni while awaiting the Arab dhows that would carry them to Zanzibar, Aden, Yemen and points north. One evening at Shimoni, hunting for ghosts, I walked at dusk down the dirt road from the Pemba Channel Fishing Club, where we were staying, to the nearest of these shimos. There were said to be bones down there still, and rusting iron shackles. Pale green stalactites glowed eerily in the fading light. A leathery rustling sound echoed up from the cave mouth, underscored by an almost electronic chitter, as of an Atari game gone berserk. Just at dark the authors of this alary alarum emerged: Wave upon wave of bug-hungry bats flew up into the jade-green night like a whirlwind in reverse. Mdudu means bug in Swahili. I bugged-out with the mdudus.

We had come to Shimoni for the fishing, as had Ernest Hemingway some 27 years earlier. That was just after his two plane crashes in Uganda in 1954, and he was still suffering

from injuries incurred in those mishaps—ruptured liver and kidney, a skull fracture and severe burns—so he did very little fishing, even though he had arranged for his son, Patrick, to bring down a boat called the Lady Faye from Mombasa, 50 miles to the north. "It was not a happy camp," we had been told by Denis Zaphiro, the game warden Hemingway had befriended earlier in the safari. "Mary, Pat and I fished a bit but with very little luck. A few red snapper, dolphin and jacks, a yellowfin tuna and a wahoo—but no billfish, which were what we had come for.

"Papa, for the most part, stayed in his tent, licking his wounds and drinking. Three bottles of whiskey a day. The only sign that it was affecting him was that, in the afternoons, he would lapse into his telegraphic mode of speech, his Indian talk as he called it. Then one day a bushfire blew up. Papa went off with the lads to fight the fire. When they came back, he wasn't with them. We followed them out where he'd last been seen and found him, face down in the blackened stubble, covered with third-degree burns. I remember him later, sitting there, pouring bottles of Gordon's gin over his seared head. Probably did him a lot of good, actually. Killed the pain and served as an antiseptic as well. He'd walked straight into the fire, he told me. Deliberately. During the second plane crash in Uganda, he said, when the plane had caught fire and he'd had to batter his way out with his head, he'd feared that Mary had thought him a coward. Walking into the fire here at Shimoni was his way of disproving that."

So there was another ghost to contend with. Our stay at Shimoni, however, proved far more productive than Hemingway's. Since his day, the Pemba Channel Fishing Club has come into being. The channel is a natural fish funnel, a deepwater gut separating the clove islands of Zanzibar and Pemba from the mainland. All three varieties of Indo-Pacific marlin—blue, black and striped—run the gut in season, along with sailfish, wahoo, great schools of yellowfin (called "tunny" by the British) and tiger sharks weighing as much as 1,000 pounds. Along the reefs live huge, slab-sided crevalles known as giant trevally or, locally, karambesi (the record thereabouts is 116¼ pounds), which were recently recognized as worthy prey by the International Game Fish Association.

The club, a sprawl of comfortable bandas (guesthouses) thatched in the plaited coconut fronds called makuti, is situated on a coralline promontory. Its grounds are covered with brilliantly flamboyant trees and frangipani, desert rose and the inevitable giant baobabs, leafless in this season and hung with their huge, cream-of-tartar seedpods. It was opened in late 1962 by Patrick and Maia Hemphill, who knew virtually nothing about deep-sea fishing. "We'd been upcountry farmers all our lives," says Maia, a plump, jolly lady who oversees an excellent kitchen. "But with independence coming and our farm slated for Native Resettlement, we were looking for something new, something that could keep us in Kenya. Commander David Blunt had been running a sport-fishing operation near Mombasa since before the war, and he owned some land down Shimoni way, where he knew the fishing to be first-rate. He offered us a partnership and Pat said yes. I'd been praying he would. People told us we were bonkers to go into this at that time. Still, it's good to go bonkers every now and then."

Just keeping his tackle in shape and his three sport-fishing boats running has kept Pat mildly bonkers ever since. Spare parts, if available at all, are worth their weight in gold in Kenya today. Plain wood screws can cost 80¢ apiece (American) when you can find them, and often they come with no slots in their heads. Hemphill isn't the chattiest of charter-boat skippers, but his African crews are as well trained and skillful as any I have trolled with, from Key West to the Kona Coast of Hawaii. Hemphill personally "shifts his flag" from day to day around his fleet—one day in Pingusi, a 30-foot catamaran; the next in Broadbill, his new single-hulled 46-footer; and then to White Otter, another single-hulled sport-fisherman. In that way, he insures all engines are working properly, and all crews as well. His son, Simon, 21, a marine zoologist, serves as his second-in-command. Simon, in profile, actually looks like an adolescent marlin; while his father is merely taciturn, Simon is

downright mute: He resolutely refuses to tell his fishing clients what he is up to or why he is using whichever lures are out. When he does answer a question, his voice drips with youthful scorn at the questioner's ignorance. As Joseph Conrad wrote, "Ah, Youth..."

Our first day out in the Pemba Channel we had neither Pat nor Simon to contend with, but rather one of Hemphill's African skippers, a chatty young Vumba, the son of a fisherman, from nearby Wasini Island named Saidi Ahmed. Within minutes we were into fish, sharp-spined five-fingered jacks, mainly, which we would use for marlin bait. The sea was calm, with a greasy swell rolling down from India on the gentle push of the kaskazi (the northeast monsoon), and the sun had an equatorial weight to it that should have pushed the big billfish down into the cooler depths. Yet, at straight-up noon we got into marlin.
"Samaki!" yelled Saidi from the flying bridge. "Fish!" He clapped his hands to alert us. Two of our five trolling rods bent and our reels squealed to the strikes. I dropped my bait back with the fish, the reel in free-spool, thumbing the spool to maintain tension, and when Saidi reckoned the marlin had turned the bait to swallow it, I locked up the drag even as Saidi two-blocked the throttles. Winter, on the other working rod, did the same. Simultaneously, the two marlin jumped, far out and heading in opposite directions. It's one of the most thrilling sights in fishing: that great silver, black and electric blue spearhead powering up out of the sea, the maniacal scream of the drag, and then the fish pounding back into the water—"like a horse thrown from a cliff," as Hemingway described it. I counted a dozen jumps before my fish settled down for the fight. Though I would have preferred to fight the fish California style—i.e., standing up the whole way, from a dead boat, using only a rod belt to socket the tackle—Saidi insisted I take the fighting chair. With the weight of the sun in those latitudes, a sun far hotter than that off Baja or even Hawaii, he was probably right. I would never know. After 10 minutes, and still running deep with no slack on the line, my fish pulled out.
But Winter's marlin, the first of his life, was still on. Winter, 50, is a hunter, not an angler. Since 1971 I've made many safaris with him, all upcountry, with gun and camera, and in either situation he's as fine a guide as you can hope to find in Kenya. At deep-sea fishing, though, he's a rank neophyte. Still, he proved a quick study. The fish, we could see, was foul-hooked just above its left pectoral fin, and Bill had it on 50-pound test line, which made for a dangerous fight. Hooked as it was in the side, the fish could go virtually wherever it wanted. Bill had to keep the line taut and yet not pump so hard as to pull the hook through the thin layer of skin that held it. Five times he brought the marlin in close enough for us to count its stripes, and five times it sounded again, stripping off all the hard-gained line Bill had reeled in. It struck me, as I coached him, that our usual safari situation was reversed. Hunting dangerous big game, he backed me up with his skill and his big rifle. As the marlin came in the sixth time, I asked him the question: "Do you want me to go in after him with the .458?"
He laughed through the rolling sweat.
Moments later Saidi gaffed the fish and brought it in. A 133½-pound striped marlin on light line, not bad for a first effort.
We fished another day, with Surly Simon, but caught only three bonito. Of far more interest was the snorkeling at Kisiti Island's Marine National Park, 10 miles off Shimoni. Visibility wasn't as good as it might have been—the monsoon rains had clouded the water a bit—but the reef itself was vast and variegated. Squirrelfish, damsels, sergeants major and rock lobsters abounded. Spear-fishing isn't permitted in the Marine Park waters, but the fish were so wary that I suspect poachers must come in anyway. Toward noon a junk pulled up and disgorged a horde of German tourists and soon the water was full of bulbous pink bodies in scanty bikinis. So we cleared out to avoid the suntan-oil slick.
We lunched that same day at the Wasini Restaurant, an open-air, thatched-roof establishment on the island of the same name. It has a fine view of nearby Tanzania, and

we ate excellent mangrove crabs (Squilla serrata), which are every bit as good as Florida stone crab, but bigger. One monster had a carapace the size of a serving platter and a dominant claw that must have weighed three pounds. After lunch we visited Wasini village, an Arab town with the oldest still-functioning mosque in the area. The town is coastal Arab—the thick-walled buildings have arched windows that encourage a venturi effect on the air and provide a form of rudimentary air conditioning; there are ancient graves beneath the baobabs, some marked with the typical Arab phallic monuments. In a vast tidal flat beyond the village birika (water catchment), strange coral heads stood like an oddly eroded Stonehenge.

From Shimoni we pushed along the Coast Road to Mombasa. The coastal strip, about 10 miles deep, is a different world from the rest of Kenya. At least a thousand years of Arab influence shows in everything from agriculture to architecture—even in the faces of the people. Members of the dominant Swahili tribe are paler than their inland Bantu cousins, with the hawk noses and high cheekbones of their Semitic ancestors commonplace. The word Swahili derives from the Arabic sawahil, meaning coasts or shorelines. Swahili is a coastal language made up predominantly of Bantu, with strong Arabic influence. Ethnographers believe that traders from Persia and the Arabian peninsula have been visiting the East African coast for 2,000 years. The first reference to the region in classical literature comes in a book called Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, written by an Alexandrian Greek in the second century A.D.

"There is evidence that the Egyptians were here as well," says Edward Rodwell, 74, a Kenyan journalist and an enthusiastic amateur historian whose column, "Coastal Causerie," has been appearing in the African paper The Standard since 1940. "A painting dating from about the 23rd century B.C. depicting the Land of Punt in one of the tombs along the Nile shows Egyptians catching sailfish. 'Punt' may come from pwani, a Swahili word for this coast, and certainly sailfish do not occur north of present-day Somalia."

The first European to visit these shores, in 1498, was Vasco da Gama. Meeting a hostile reception from the Sultan of Mombasa, the Portuguese established their first East African "factory" at Malindi, some 75 miles north. Not until the late 16th century did the Portuguese capture Mombasa from the sultan and begin building their great red edifice, Fort Jesus.

"Apart from the fort, you don't see much Portuguese influence left on the coast," says Rodwell. "Before World War II, though, they still held bullfights on the island of Pemba. I photographed one once. They would bring out the bull, on a rope, throw it down and shout obscenities in its ear. Quite colorful. That's about the extent of my sporting knowledge of the coast, except in the other sense of the word. Some years ago that fellow S.J. Perelman came through here. He had heard that there was a brothel on the coast called Eskimo Nell's, and he was determined to find it. I assured him there was no such place in Mombasa. Later he cadged a flight to Lamu, a town way up the coast, to continue his research. I doubt that he found Eskimo Nell there, either."

One highly evident influence on the coast is that of the jinis, those malicious spirits that accompany Arab culture wherever it goes. No sane African or Arab will remain in Fort Jesus after sundown. The people at Diani, a resort area south of Mombasa, warn Europeans not to venture too far offshore in their boats. "There are jinis out there," an old man told me in all seriousness. "Little men with hooked noses and big tumbos [bellies] who live in the mud. They will lure you into the mud. All the evil of the world comes from those mudbanks." He looked around conspiratorially. "They have rockets," he whispered.

Farther north, Winter bumped into one of his old game scouts from his days as a warden. The man was now stationed on the coast. "Must be nice down here," Bill suggested.

"Oh yes, very beautiful, Bwana," the man said. "But it's so damned expensive. All those goats and chickens."

"What do you mean?" Bill asked.

"Because of the jinis," the man said. "Every day my wife tells me something else they've done. So I have to make sacrifices." He shook his head wearily. "Too expensive."
The hulking presence of Fort Jesus at the entrance to the old dhow harbor in Mombasa is enough to convince even the most skeptical Westerner that some powerful evil influence is at work here. Now a national monument, the fort was begun by the Portuguese in 1593 and completed 30 years later. Its 50-foot-high walls, built of coral blocks cut from the reef, limed over and then daubed red with ocher, appear bloodstained in low light. And indeed they are. The fort has changed hands many times over the centuries, usually by treachery. From 1696 to '98 it underwent siege by Omani Arabs that only ended when plague got loose among the garrison. Portuguese and Arab graffiti overlay one another in the gloomy man-made grottoes within the fortress; at one corner is a deep pit into which prisoners were dropped—sometimes Arab, sometimes European. Blue and yellow agama lizards live in the mouths of old cast-iron cannons, flicking their forked tongues from shadow into harsh sunlight. Hooded crows circle raucously over the twisting, narrow streets of surrounding Mombasa, as if in search of carrion. One expects to see Peter Lorre or Sidney Greenstreet ducking down a shaded alley.
If Fort Jesus represents the coast's glamorous—if bloodstained—past, the Baobab cement factory at Bamburi, just north of Mombasa, symbolizes the present. From the highway it would appear to be just a huge hole in the ground, wreathed in white dust and grumbling with the engines of giant dump trucks. But within the fringe of feathery-needled casuarina trees that masks the 60-acre factory from the beach hotels, a fascinating ecological experiment is taking place. The coral bedrock left after the cement miners have finished is being turned into a game park and fish farm.
Already a small mixed herd of eland and fringe-eared oryx has been established in the casuarina grove. A pond upon which swim Egyptian geese, white pelicans and fulvous tree ducks also sports a 6-year-old hippo named Sally, who guzzles milk from a gigantic baby bottle. "She's been fed on milk since she was a baby," says Tony Armitage, an assistant to Rene Haller, the Swiss agronomist who developed the park and farm. Armitage scooped a handful of rich brown loam from beneath the casuarinas. "This is the key to it all. The casuarina can root in just a few inches of coral." Then he pointed to an 8-inch-long millipede, black with orange legs, crawling through the casuarina duff. "That chappie turns the needles into humus at the rate of as much as an inch a year. Already in some places we have eight inches of topsoil, so we can grow other trees as well, like the conocarpus and the algarroba, which are salt-tolerant. The algarroba comes from South America. It produces a sweet, very edible pod. Our monkey population has considerably increased since we put the algarroba in. Goats, sheep, eland, even hippos thrive on it." We sampled a pod, which tastes like carob.
The black and orange millipede, omnipresent along the coast, is known locally by many names: bongololo, chungalulu, jongoo, the Tanganyika train, the Mombasa bus. For a while the casuarinas were threatened by an insect, the longicorn beetle, that was killing the trees. Haller solved the problem by introducing a squadron of eagle owls that quickly scoffed up the beetles. Similarly, an invasion of biting wasps, to which some people are intensely allergic, was countered by bringing in a variety of spider that weaves tough webs. "That took the sting out of the situation," says Armitage.

Farther along in the park is a family of spotted serval cats, aloof and suspicious, intermixed with large tortoises from the island of Aldabra in the Seychelles. "The servals have been breeding like mad," Armitage says, "but we can't get to the kittens quickly enough. The male eats them." The servals are fed with culls from a chicken farm, also on the cement factory property. Nearby is a pond full of crocodiles, somnolent and vacant-eyed in the heat.

"A very valuable product, the old croc," Armitage explains. "We feed them with tilapia guts from our fish farm, which is the real center and raison d'être of the whole operation."
A series of ponds, all kept at 29° Celsius, contains tilapia of every size up to six pounds, although those bred for commercial use generally weigh less than a pound. The tilapia, an excellent food fish, looks like a cross between a bluegill and a crappie, and thrives in captivity. It's known among East African epicures as Bamburi trout. The local water isn't right for true trout; they will die if the oxygen level in the water falls below 35 percent. "Tilapia can live with only 15 to 20 percent oxygen," says Armitage.
During our tour of the tilapia tanks, we passed Armitage's Honda MT-5 motorcycle. A peacock was preening on the seat, admiring himself in the rearview mirror. Just beneath his gorgeous tail stood a mound of green droppings. "Makes for a bit of a mess when you dash out after work and leap onto the bike for the ride home," Armitage said. "Got to think ahead in this business."
North of Mombasa's sprawl the country turns agricultural again: miles of coconut groves and sugarcane interspersed with stands of cashew, mango and papaya trees and vast hillsides spiky with pineapples. A food-lover could lead an ecstatic life here existing only on fruit, nuts and the abundant seafood—tiny and slightly metallic-tasting oysters, langouste and especially the huge prawns done in a spicy style called piri piri. The fragrant mangoes, ripened on the tree and a rich orange in color, are alone worth the price of the visit.
Now we come to the Snake Part. Anyone suffering from herpetophobia had best skip ahead. Ever since my son insisted on keeping a rosy-tailed boa constrictor as a pet for two years—or until it graduated from a diet of mice to hamsters—I've been fascinated with snakes. Bill Winter's friend, Peter Bramwell, is a snake catcher and we had arranged a visit to his serpentarium at Mnarani, on the south side of the Kilifi ferry crossing an hour north of Mombasa. Tucked in among the key-oxes that clutter the ferry slip, selling everything from wood carvings to cashews, the serpentarium is a bit scruffy in appearance, but the snakes are in excellent shape: big-eyed boomslange and slate-gray spitting cobras; a racy, whip-tailed green mamba the color of a lime Popsicle; squatty, swollen puff adders and a tangle of pythons thicker than fire hoses.
Bramwell, 53, is a wiry man with a graying spade beard and thick spectacles—the result of too many encounters with the spitting cobra (Naja nigricollis). "His first line of defense is to shoot for the eyes," Bramwell says. "It's a neurotoxic venom, of course, and strongly acidic. I've tested these snakes and they can spit 19 to 21 times before they run dry. At 18 feet, they'll spray you from head to foot, but at 12 feet they'll hit you dead in both eyes every time. Because they're nocturnal hunters, you have no warning of their presence. Within four seconds after a hit, you're reeling out of the way with pain. I always carry eyedrops—adrenaline, one in 2,000 parts—and with that you can stop the pain in 10 minutes. Untreated, it will last five days. Unsweetened milk is the next best treatment—the sugar in sweet milk will stick the venom to your eyeballs. Water is less effective, but often the only recourse, and in a real pinch, ugly as it sounds, you could have a companion urinate in your eyes—anything to wash out the venom. It's also a good idea, when going after spitting cobras, not to shave. That's why I have the beard. A drop of that toxin in a shaving nick and you've had it." In deference to his wife, Jan, Bramwell hasn't caught any poisonous snakes since 1977. That was the year he was bitten by a black mamba, one of the most dangerous snakes in the world. "Until then no one had survived the bite of a black mamba," he says. "I'd been bitten by boomslange, puff adders and a green mamba and pulled through, but when the black hit me, I thought I'd had it. It happened on a Sunday, and I should have known better. All my bites have come on a Sunday."
Bramwell was at home that day, near Kilifi, when one of his staff reported a snake lurking near the rabbit hutches. "It was up on the rafters and I could see it was a black," he recalls. "I got the tongs—they're rather like the device grocery clerks use to remove packages from high shelves, but padded so as not to injure the snake—and got the leather-necked

catching bag ready. Then I grabbed him. Too far back. About 18 inches of his neck and head were forward of the tongs. As I went to close the bag, my hand was too near the lip. The snake was still on the tongs but he got his head over the edge and hit me on the hand. Twice. I whipped him out of the bag and killed him. I recall shouting, 'I've killed you, you bastard, but you're not killing me.' "

That was about 9:30 a.m. There was no pain—"Neurotoxic venom doesn't hurt," Bramwell says, "but the bite of a puff adder, which is hemotoxic, makes you feel like you've got a toothache from the top of your head to the soles of your feet." Within 20 minutes Bramwell was feeling "pins and needles" in his extremities. Neurotoxic venom attacks the autonomic nervous system, ultimately shutting off the victim's ability to breathe and sometimes even stopping the heart. Realizing that their Toyota Land Cruiser was too slow for the emergency run to the nearest hospital, Jan borrowed a neighbor's car and drove Peter to Mombasa at 85 mph. Fortunately, a snake-bite expert from Europe was at the hospital when Bramwell arrived. "He pulled me through," says Peter. "Three days later, I learned that a chap in South Africa had also survived a mamba bite. We were the first to do so." But the aftereffects have left him weak, lethargic and without much zest for the hard physical work he used to enjoy.

"The effect of these poisons is cumulative," he says. "My uncle, Alan Tarlton, was a snake catcher here for years. During World War II, when the demand for antivenin was very high, he never had fewer than 400 puff adders in his cages. He was bitten 45 times by old Bids —that's the puffer's generic name. He claimed that after the 43rd bite he was immune, but the 45th bite finished him."

Peter took up full-time catching—"this silly business," as he calls it—in 1964 after a varied career in the bush as a hunter, game warden and police officer, mainly in what was then Tanganyika. While stationed near Kisumu, on the north shore of Lake Victoria, where the Kenyan government had a prison, he witnessed a massacre by snakebite that still leaves him chilled. He spins the yarn in a deep voice, as hypnotic as a cobra's sway, with the cadence of a story in the Boy's Own Paper.

"In those days," he says, "a lake steamer called the Rusinga served the town periodically. One week it was long overdue and everyone worried, when finally we saw a plume of smoke slowly approaching through the channel. It was Rusinga, all right, but embedded in a huge floating island of papyrus she had collided with en route. Unable to back out, the skipper pushed the island into Kisumu. It was a proper island, complete with thorn trees growing on the thick, matted reeds. The prison warden deputed a work party of the hardest cases in jail to cut the steamer free. The prisoners went over the side with their pangas and began chopping. Suddenly there came a hideous scream—then another and another. Snakes? No, crocodiles. The snakes came later. Scads of them, in the trees, the reeds, living on the island like the crocs. Cobras mainly. More than a dozen men died before one side of the ship was cut free. Then the survivors went over the other side. They were back in a flash, shivering with fear. Under one of the thorn trees lay three lions."

The lions, more fortunate than the prisoners, were shooed ashore and their lives spared. Over the years, Bramwell figures he has caught more than 1,000 snakes. His best single day came on a 60-acre plot along the coast in Kilifi, when he caught 15—mainly green and black mambas—in one morning. The poisonous snakes were sold to producers of antivenin, black mambas in those days bringing Bramwell about $25 apiece. "Pythons are the most expensive," he says. "In the '60s and early '70s, they brought 100 bob—about $14—a foot. Now the skin alone is worth more."

What becomes of the pythons?

"A lot of them end up in zoos, others become purses and footwear. I'm told the Chinese eat them, but I've never had an order." Bramwell pauses, then grins. "Maybe the Chinese don't order out."

Before leaving the serpentarium, I was presented with a necklace by Bramwell's African assistant, George. The necklace consisted of two live pythons, together weighing 130 pounds. They coiled cool and smooth around my neck, distributing their heft so evenly over my arms, back and shoulders that I had no sense of their weight. As one python stared into my eyes and tested my nose with his tongue, a small African boy stared with popping eyes. "That mzee," he said to his companion, "is not a coward."
Little did he know.
After a day of bird watching in Kilifi Creek—we saw thousands of egrets, ibis, white pelicans and kites leaving their roosts—we pushed the 25 miles north to Watamu, a fishing and diving resort. Watamu is around the corner from the famed Blue Lagoon, where the original film of that name, with Jean Simmons and Donald Houston, was shot, and the snorkeling is excellent. It's a strange sensation to pop up for air after watching barracuda feed along the reef and see a man in a turban leading a camel up the beach. Old colonial types stroll the sand in the cooler hours, sometimes coming into conflict with the ubiquitous German tourists who throng to the Malindi area in midwinter. Not long ago an elderly lady who had spent most of her life farming in the Kenyan upcountry was walking primly along the beach at sunrise when she came upon a nude and brazen German. Recoiling in horror, she wielded her rubber-knobbed cane like a cavalry saber, striking at the man's most vulnerable (and evident) parts. "When I made contact," she told her friends, "there was a most disgusting thump."
Winter and I spent a day light-tackle fishing aboard the Honeylulu with David and Jeni Slater, accomplished charter boaters who put us into wahoo, kingfish, yellowfin and dolphin. Known elsewhere as dorado and mahimahi, the dolphin here is called felusi, from the Arab word flus, for gold. Though we saw two blue marlin and a sailfish, they wouldn't take. The marlin run larger than the billfish at Shimoni, with the Watamu record for blues being 754 pounds.

It's possible to drive from Malindi to Lamu, the northernmost town of consequence—possible but not recommended. The road threads the delta of the great brown Tana River, and the slightest spit of rain can turn the roadway into an impassable morass. Shifta—heavily armed irredentist raiders from Somalia—still interdict the road, and while we were there stopped a bus near Witu and robbed the passengers. So we flew to Lamu.
Founded as far back as the 10th century A.D., Lamu is the purest of the old Arab towns on the Kenya coast. The people for the most part are pale-skinned, beturbaned Omani types, and the streets resound to the clangor of Arab cottage industries. Door carvers chip and saw like a nest of carpenter ants, metalsmiths pound out gold and silver ornaments, great piles of mangrove poles—used in construction up and down the coast—stand along the quays awaiting the dhows that will carry them as far north as the Red Sea. The smell of charcoal and open drains pervades the narrow winding streets around the old fort, built in 1821 and now serving as a prison. Down the quay from Petley's Inn and the Lamu Museum, shipwrights are putting the finishing touches on the hull of a new dhow—a giant of a ship, fully 100 feet long. The whole town will take part in its launching, which will entail hauling the ship by hand down to the water. Smaller dhows and jahazis cruise the harbor day and night. No motor vehicles are allowed in Lamu, which is situated on an island of the same name; all traffic is either by boat or on foot.
My accommodations at the Peponi Hotel, a short dhow ride from the town of Lamu, were called The Palace—an old, renovated suite of rooms that was once the home of an Arab merchant. From the back window I could see the minaret of the Friday Mosque, one of the oldest on the island. Each morning before dawn I would be awakened at the sound of the muezzin climbing the steps to the minaret. He suffered greatly from catarrh, and his hawking and spitting echoed out over the sleeping town like the voice of a sick raven. But

then, miraculously, would come his call to morning prayer: "Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar." Pure and clear and as old as Islam.

One morning, as if in answer to the muezzin's call, I heard a howl—faint and distant—coming from the island of Manda, just across the channel. Oooo-WEEP! Oooo-WEEP! I recognized it at once from my time in safari camps upcountry: It was the call of a hyena. That day I asked one of the boat boys about it, and he told me, yes, there was a lone hyena on Manda. There had been two, but one died. Now the survivor called each night, and got no answer.

That evening I heard the hyena again as I lay in the coffee-scented dark. Suddenly, I felt a wave of nostalgia for the cold, high country of the interior, the camps and the smell of raw meat and gunpowder, the chill of rain and the pounding of the high, dry sun of the Northern Frontier. Yes, the coast was fine for a change—hot and humid, bright and rich with exotic foods, glamorous with its Arab past and its tourist present. But for me, Africa will always be the up-country, the night cry of the hyena.