



Lamu Old Town

Kenya

Lamu Old Town is located on an archipelago off the coast of Kenya in the Indian Ocean. Once an important trading center in Islamic coastal East Africa, the town dates to the twelfth century and is the cradle of Swahili culture and an important religious center. Lamu is the only cultural landscape in the country included on the World Heritage List. Lamu contains several historic sites, including the German Post Office, Lamu Fort, and Lamu Museum. The architecture fuses African, Arabic, Indian, and Persian building styles, and the stone structures are organized around narrow winding streets. Traditional techniques and local resources, including coral, lime, and mangrove poles, were used to shape the historic fabric of Lamu. The materials are still employed to repair buildings and construct new ones. Many buildings have carved wooden doors and several are decorated with wall paintings, sculptural plasterwork, or special objects from various places along the trade route.

Lamu is threatened by uncontrolled development for anticipated increased tourism. Proposed urban and industrial development pressures, as well as massive infrastructure construction, including a port, railway line, airports, major highways, an oil refinery, an oil pipeline, and tourist resorts will seriously impact the cultural integrity of the town. Next steps should include raising local and international awareness about the significant cultural heritage in Lamu, and opening up the dialogue about the cost of rapid economic development. It is important to promote sustainable development as the city grows and prepares for an increase in tourism and industry.