

A story about The Aiyana...

Selling The Aiyana means selling a destination, selling Pemba first... But where is Pemba? How many people know about Pemba? Not many, Pemba is the sister island of Zanzibar and Mafia, situated along the Swahili coast of Tanzania. Pemba, green island of spice with its giant bats roaming the sky and its beautiful underwater world... Pemba still untouched by civilization. Raw and pure, Pemba remains the oxygen factory... Go ahead and google Pemba... but you may not get - updated information.

I first came here in 2000 and I fell in love with the authentic beauty of the island. It was maybe the first place in the world where coca cola had not reached at that time, so remote... but not wild, or quiet, full of noise, not human sounds, but the sweet sounds of nature, the wind and the weather.

The government official drove me to the village in an SUV Prado. And that was quite an event! A car! We stopped in a village called Makangale. They were makouti huts around the place, and children... a lot of children. They must have been between 4 and 12 years old. They run to the car as fast as the wind, and in seconds I was surrounded by 40 children. God, I felt sorry, I had nothing with me to give them, no sweets nothing at all, so I started to look around, see if I could buy something. Of course there was nothing, no shop, no tabagie (tuck-shop)... But it took only minutes for me to understand that these children didn't want sweets... Do you know what they wanted? Almost all of them were repeating only two words, the two magical words that changed my life ... "A pen! A pen!"..... They were all asking for a pen.

The children in Makangale don't lack for food as the island is green and there is the ocean... but they don't have the bare necessities that can make their life easier... and that's what they need. *So voila*, I was carried away, and that's when I decided to be part of them, to help them, do something for them. With my family's support, we decided to put Makangale on the world tourism map, do something to sustain them, do something with them and for them, so they can also enjoy what my children and the children in my country enjoy. The will and the gut were there, and I was ready. That's how the idea to

build the Aiyana was born. No water, no power, no phone, no access, it was madness ! Only someone insane would invest here ... And the village of Makangale had found just that person...

After doing the paper work in Zanzibar, the project could begin. The paper work was fairly straightforward; indeed, the officials were very helpful because I am from Mauritius and we are part of SADC (Southern African Development Community), but also because of the Mauritian know-how in the hotel industry. The formalities were completed really quite quickly, and as I said rather easily. I even made some friends who still support me just for the sake of supporting the project.

This site had never been touched; it had remained the same for thousands of years with its symbolical landscapes. So we decided to build 30 villas, all facing the ocean. Having visited Pemba several times, I already had a certain atmosphere in mind, the idea was now to build an architecture that would enhance and not dominate the landscape, and exist in harmony with Mother Nature. Today all our villas are being eaten by greenery.

The architecture has its own personal and individual character due to the forms and facets of the local materials we could find, those materials determined what we could build and eventually determined the Aiyana concept.

The locals still use lime to create mortar for their construction; limestone is burned at high temperature leaving behind burnt lime (quick lime).

The main idea was to create as many jobs as possible, so we decided to use this fascinating technology, which is actually more than seven thousand years old. This industry sustained many agrarian communities before energy became cheap. Tons of lime was used to build The Aiyana. This supported a vast and vital network of the village's small activities, gathering stone from the fields, using carts, cows and barges for transportation and also specialists who monitored the burning.

Ten miles from the Aiyana there is a village called Michewni. That is where we would buy tons of aggregates for our construction. We bought nearly four thousand tons of cokokoto (aggregates) and chipping. I'd like to add that there is no crushing machine in Michweni and the coral stones are broken by hand, with a hammer, mostly by women.

We will never forget our first visit at the stone quarry. Words cannot describe how we felt. It's a real hardship. We decided to help and buy every bits and pieces coming from those stones. Normally

people only buy the bigger pieces of aggregate for cement mortar and the left overs are never sold. So we decided to buy tons of the leftovers. We would wash them and use them in our bathrooms as terrazzo on the wall, and also on the floor. In fact it is a very rich and ecological material, and we are proud that those pieces come from this limestone formed mainly by corals and shells of long extinct sea creatures, squeezed over aeons into solid mass of calcium, and are now in our bathrooms.

Pemba people are very good carpenters. Every village has its own wood workshop for the people. So almost all of the Aiyana furniture, and of course the famous Zanzibar doors, were produced on the island. For years everybody has been using the same design, and to do differently was quite a challenge. After mistakes and failures we succeeded in making them chic and simple.

This hotel was not built with the help of big international contractors, architects or engineers. We did everything alone, with the villagers' help. Five masons came from Mauritius to take up the challenge. They could not speak Swahili, and the villagers couldn't speak French, Creole or English, but they managed and they got on well. Now, after six years of construction almost all the villagers speak a few words of Mauritian, even small children speak Creole in Makangale. "Dressé partou" ("all ok") has become the household phrase that everybody says here in Makangale. It has become part of hakunamatata or hamna matatizo.

When we finished our mock up villa, every one visited the room. They were so happy! We could see the pride and sense of ownership lighting up their eyes. They were proud to feel that they had done it. Most of them had tears in their eyes. Their names should be written somewhere in the hotel. The best of part of the hotel is our spa called "Maji", meaning water. It is inspired by the local makuti houses in the villages. For the roof we decided to use coconut brooms so as to keep it naturally cool and ventilated. For several months, the entire village was collecting coconut brooms for the spa roof. We used approximately one hundred thousand brooms for our spa. This idea supported many families in the neighbourhood.

Pure and chic, The Aiyana has been designed and built around the concept of "simple materiality and consummate craftsmanship". The vernacular architecture, high ceilings, pastel white colours, fragrant gardens, natural forms and traditional African building materials blend together perfectly and melt into the sublime natural décor of this little slice of heaven.

Pemba, being a coral island, our site is just hard coral stone only 200 mm topsoil. Hundred years of nature's hard work covers the stone, so doing a trench or excavating for a basement or digging a pit

for septic tank or dogging a hole to plant a tree or a palm was big challenge. We managed nevertheless to plant thousands of different adult palms from 3 meters to 10 meters trunk height and hundreds of trees, flower plants, full of fragrance with a gorgeous combination of ylang-ylang, frangipani, jasmine which fill our pathways with tempting aromas. In fact, our garden is a temple!

Most of the original evergreen forest of Pemba has been destroyed. The largest part of it, now surviving is the Ngezi forest Reserve and we are just 2 kilometers from it so we decided to create the man made forest for our guests to have the feel of Ngezi in our resort

We have brought plant species from Mauritius, Thailand (from the garden of the famous landscape architect Bill Bensley) Bali, France (exactly from the Champs Élysées round about), Zanzibar and from many different villages of Tanzania.

We have almost changed the microclimate of our site with our vegetation. There are now many bird species flying around in the resort. It's important to know that Pemba has 183 species of birds, some very rare, some vulnerable, some endangered, some near threatened and some endemic. Pemba is also a choice destination for bird watchers. There is an island in the south of the main island Pemba called "kalwa", a home for thousands and thousands of different types of birds as well as a touchdown point for all of those who are migrating across the world.

Over the six years of construction, we would celebrate our staff's anniversaries and weddings on the beach, just sharing and exchanging our music... Music! What a beautiful language! What beautiful memories and ambience... now it has become an on-going ritual.

We believe that the spirit of art and culture we have developed and integrated in The Aiyana will help the development of the younger generation and will bring them fortune.

While we were building the Aiyana, we were very lucky a journalist came, and The Aiyana had its place in two famous TV documentary programmes, "50 minute inside" and also "Envoyé Spécial"

We are now open and are ready to welcome plenty of guests who will come to discover Pemba. We are committed to sustain as much as we can the locals, we have started to educate them, to grow new crops and we are also planning to support an 'adopt farmer' scheme.

We have also started to raise the awareness of the importance of the ocean and the beauty of Pemba Channel. We are in front of a Marine park, which shelters brilliant coral reefs, tropical fish and amazing underwater plants. We want to extend and protect the area and by doing so, we will also protect their livelihood. We wish the young generation to respect the valuable role that the underwater plants and corals play in our ecology.

Tourists bring in money and jobs but they can also mean disaster if not handled correctly. We have learned from many other areas that tourism has hurt more than it has helped. For Pemba we have a vision and we will work hard to keep the Aiyana sustainable.

Being a family-run luxury hotel, we do a lot to minimize its social and environmental impact and to maximize community benefits. We are trying hard to build a loyal and skilled workforce. Our staff comprises of mostly locals and they are our biggest assets because they are full of gratitude.

We are all inclusive, generally all-inclusive holiday create limited local economic benefits, we cannot do otherwise in such a remote place, however, we believe that there is considerable way to improve the benefits to the local communities by sharing.

We source fresh, quality local produce for our catering, and we offer sensitive planned excursions, which are all good for local people.

The Aiyana partners with the village, arranges visits and offers a variety of eco friendly activities.

A special place is dedicated in our hotel for local artefacts and for local artists.

We do not want to be the resort that sequesters most of its guest's cash leaving little behind in the local community.

We believe that the mere act of travelling can make a difference. If one can travel and ensure the benefit of the local people from his stay, he can get more out of his holiday. We would wish to have guests who will recognise and support the Aiyana culture and the Aiyana community footprints.