



# AN ANTI-PLASTIC PILGRIMAGE

A dhow sailboat made entirely from plastic waste sailed 500km down the East African coast to create awareness of the long-term consequences of single-use plastic. *By Carinë Müller*





### THE BIRTH OF A #PLASTICREVOLUTION

And so commenced the huge undertaking of designing and building a dhow entirely from plastic waste and sailing it down the East African coast to shine a light on the world's plastic problem and what it means for the oceans of the planet. More importantly, this journey would educate local communities of the effects that plastic has on their own lives, and teach them how they could make a difference on home ground. The Flipflop Project founders, Ben Morison and Dipesh Pabari, approached the legendary local Lamu wood wizard, Ali Skanda, to build this auspicious boat. Ali was immediately intrigued – being involved in several conservation projects already. He felt that merging the past with the present was almost poetic. ‘The dhow is one of the world’s oldest forms of communication,’ he says. *This exceptional dhow would be carrying one of the most important messages of our time across the Indian Ocean.*

But first he had to build it...

In light of Kenya's ban on single-use plastic bags, which made global news at the time, this boat was sure to bring more media attention. When Nairobi product design engineer Leonard Schürg read about the build, he wanted in. Utilising the knowledge of the traditional boatbuilders, the team decided to use the keel design of the original 20-metre dhow to build a 10-metre prototype, and Leonard perfected the process of sorting, shredding, melting and moulding the plastic waste for the keel, ribs and other parts of the boat. The methods used were low key, local, and quite miraculous. Through a gruelling process of trial and error, and with a healthy dose of

blood, sweat and tears, they proved it possible to build a boat constructed entirely from plastic and that the process is a viable solution to recycling existing plastic waste from the ocean.

The project made so many headlines that UN Environment decided to back the Lamu-Zanzibar expedition through its Clean Seas initiative. The massive global problem of plastic waste has since demanded so much attention that in 2018 ‘single-use’ became *Collins Dictionary's* Word of the Year. Its effect on the ocean can no longer be ignored, with eight million metric tons of plastic entering the sea every year ‘on top of the estimated 150 metric tons that currently circulate our marine environments’, according to [oceanconservancy.org](http://oceanconservancy.org).

This was the main goal of The Flipflop Project: to create awareness. Although the expedition would naturally influence local communities along the route, the main aim was to engage governments, the general public and the private sector in the fight against marine plastic pollution. The partnership with the UN Environment Clean Seas campaign was a perfect fit and would help in creating global awareness during the sail.

### SAILING THE MESSAGE

With the sounds of the swoosh of the water and the groan of a tightly spun rope, our plastic dhow set sail on her journey from Lamu. Our team of 20 crew was separated into three groups initially. Ali would captain *The Flipflop* for the first stretch with our best Swahili dhow sailors. The rookie sailors, scientists and film crew were stationed on *Lamu Dhow*, Ali's magnificent wooden dhow and the expedition support boat, while our communications team remained on land to ensure that events and partners were adequately activated for our first few arrivals. We anchored at Malindi, where we celebrated our very first expedition sail success with beers and

**W**e were floating on the clear water. It was a crisp, still day and the thin thread of the horizon drew a circle around us, separating the ocean and the sky. I couldn't help but marvel at how utterly privileged we as sailors are to experience the magnitude of the ocean, where all you can see is water and nothing else seems to exist in this complex world we live in. To experience life saturated with a million shades of blue is some kind of magic. You almost forget about the boat that is the one thing keeping you afloat, except that the boat itself is a riot of colour – a celebrity among sailing vessels and a warrior for the ocean we revere.

I glanced down at the deck of *The Flipflop*, marvelling once again that here I was in the middle of the ocean on a boat made entirely from garbage washed up on the shores of Kenya. The concept never ceased to amaze or excite during our 500km Indian Ocean voyage from Lamu, Kenya, to Stone Town, Zanzibar. Some say it was a crazy undertaking to build a boat from plastic trash, but the cause cemented the resolve of the 20 crew members: plastic is killing the ocean, and we need to do something drastic to inspire a call to action.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Finnegan Film; Daniel Snyders and Carine Müller



THE  
FLIPFLOPI  
FACTS

**Founders and expedition leaders**

Ben Morison and Dipesh Pabari

**Master builder and captain**

Ali Skanda

**Engineer** Leonard Schürg

**Industrial designer, workshop manager and first mate** Katharina Elleke

**Crew** Hassan Shafii, Mohammed Obo, Bakhari 'Uncle Bob' Bake, Ahmed Bakhari, Mbarrak 'Bayaka' Salim and Abu 'Rashidi' Bakar

**Team** Shyam Radia, Rebecca Faber, Victor Béguerie, Jack Wood, Simon Scott-Harden, Daniel Snyders, Carinè Müller

**Construction** *The Flipflopi* is 10 metres long and weighs seven tons. Ten tons of plastic, collected from the beaches of Lamu and other areas of Kenya, were sorted, shredded, melted and moulded into the keel, ribs and other parts of the boat. The hull and deck are covered with 30 000 repurposed flip-flops.

**Journey** *The Flipflopi* sailed 500km (270nm) to Zanzibar, then back to Mombasa. From there the dhow travelled by truck to Nairobi to spread her message.

The total journey was 1 800km.

**Education** More than 5 000 school children encountered *The Flipflopi* during presentations, recycling workshops and beach clean-ups.

**Support** The UN Environment Clean Seas campaign supported the Lamu to Zanzibar 2019 expedition #CleanSeas #SolveDifferent

**Global reach** With media coverage by BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, Reuters and *National Geographic* in addition to regional media, the expedition had an estimated reach of 850 million people across the world.

**The future** The Flipflopi Project is currently raising funds to build a 20-metre dhow to sail to Cape Town and beyond.

**Get involved** Visit theflipflopi.com, @TheFlipflopi on Instagram and Twitter, and The Flipflopi Expedition on Facebook #plasticrevolution



dinner at Che Shale beach retreat before our early morning departure to Watamu. We were enthralled by the beauty of this bay. After our first beach event success, we had some time to relax and reflect on the impact we were having on the coastal communities.

We could never have imagined the positive response we would receive with each mooring along our route. People were very taken by this iconic and colourful boat, which seemed to give a dire situation a positive outlook. At every stop we were welcomed by cheering crowds and we kept hearing how our journey gave people hope about the future of single-use plastic, rather than spreading doom and gloom about a lost cause. Our workshops and message seemed to inspire resolve and the promise of lifestyle changes in individuals as opposed to an attitude of despair and finger-pointing, which is a common response to an anti-plastic campaign.

It was incredibly rewarding to see children's reactions to the boat. On arrival at Kilifi Creek we had a particularly special encounter. We were all exhausted yet elated after a long day's sail and our entire crew spontaneously jumped into the water. The two boats dropped anchor side by side, and the crews shared stories while swimming. Ali appeared carrying a tray of oranges above the water and a group of young local boys joined us for a diving competition from the deck of *The Flipflopi*. This type of camaraderie is priceless; we lived for these moments on our trip.

The true sailing adventure commenced when our communications crew finally joined us on the dhows, and we set off for Mombasa, Diani and Shimoni. We had to

learn the Swahili names for all sailing terms, boat parts and general sailing lingo and slept on deck at each stop, our legs touching the shore purely for events, engagements, plastic workshops, beach clean-ups and to restock. Dhow life had us cooking our meals on deck over open fires, preparing the same fare under the same stars as ancient Arabian and Swahili sailors had done before us. It emphasized the importance of our journey in that it became abundantly clear how different the shores look now compared with how they did when sailors first discovered the East African coastline. We were met with a deluge of plastic at each stop, and the research our scientists collected along the way demonstrated that plastic is everywhere – even where we couldn't see it.

After our Pemba Channel crossing, we found a haven of pristine beauty. The Manta Resort and its environmental endeavour, The Kwanini Foundation, has demonstrated how a love for the ocean and a passion for ecotourism can result in a successful conservation effort for the future of the Pemba Island community. Waste management is a key pillar of their sustainable and circular tourism conservation philosophy – and the result is a paradise above and below water. This is one of the most breathtaking dive destinations in the world – and a true example of what can be regained with dedicated and meticulous waste management. We enjoyed a relaxing anchorage here, a welcome break that included scrumptious food, beach games, a beautiful sunset and laughter. What an inspiration before setting sail for our final destination.

An important event awaited us in



ACTIVISM LEISURE

TRAVEL TIPS

**Lamu** (and neighbouring Shela and Manda)

A stop at this northern Kenyan island and mecca of traditional dhows invokes a nostalgic and rich travel experience that conjures the exotic days of Sinbad. It offers a picturesque combination of Swahili and Muslim cultural influences. Take a stroll down the pier to find plenty of shops and restaurants or explore Old Lamu Town with its maze of winding roads (watch out for the busy but beautiful donkeys). There are plenty of accommodation options in Shela, with the infamous **Peponi Hotel** also being the ultimate Shela Beach waterfront sundowner location.

**Diani**

30km south of Mombasa lies Diani Beach, one of the most beautiful in the world. It's a vast, pure and magnificent stretch of coastline. There is a fun and frivolous vibe among the musicians, acrobats and kite surfers, and there are beach bars and resorts dotted along the shore. Head to **The Sands at Nomad Hotel** for relaxing afternoon drinks and delicious dishes and snacks.

**Pemba Island**

Pure, unfiltered paradise. This is the ultimate island holiday because it's tucked away, far from the crowds but close to dive sites, pristine forests and the most immaculate private beaches – and it has an island culture bar none. Nicknamed the clove island, Pemba is home to approximately 3.5 million clove trees and it's also where you'll find The Manta Resort's tropical underwater room. Book through **The Manta Resort**, and you will have a private 360° view of the underwater world of your dreams.

**Zanzibar**

This ever-popular island destination caters to all travellers, whether you opt for Nungwi in the north or more traditional Stone Town to the west of the island. Visit the Forodhani Gardens food market in Stone Town for a traditional street food experience (think lots of seafood and Zanzibari/Swahili fare) to tempt your taste buds or laze away your days on the beaches. Take a stroll through town and browse the market stalls before having a romantic dinner at the legendary **Emerson Spice Hotel's** Secret Garden.

Zanzibar as members of The Flipflopi Project would have the chance to discuss safeguarding the ecological future of East African shores with policy makers and officials from the Zanzibar government as well as the president of the UN Environment. Our boats were dwarfed by the bustle of the Zanzibar harbour, but we were elated at having communicated our message to an audience of over 850 million people via global media networks – our efforts had not been in vain. We later joined in the annual Sauti za Busara festivities where islanders and tourists join together in a massive celebration of music and culture in an electric atmosphere.

**THE PAST AND THE FUTURE**

With her successful journey and the media coverage and support she brought, *The Flipflopi* set in motion a wave of change for the future of the Indian Ocean and beyond with governments, policy makers and businesses all pledging their allegiance to the #PlasticRevolution. *The Flipflopi* attracted the attention of hundreds of dignitaries and representatives from around the world at the fourth session of the UN Environmental Assembly (UNEA), becoming a beacon of change and a true

poster child for its 'Innovative Solutions for Environmental Challenges and Sustainable Consumption and Production' theme.

The future of *The Flipflopi* looks as bright as her hull, with plans and funding drives already underway to build her big sister: a

20-metre plastic dhow that will sail from Lamu to Cape Town and beyond – working towards creating a beautiful, boundless and immaculate ocean for future generations of sailors and sea lovers to enjoy.

8•1