



VOYAGE *of* HOPE

THIS IS THE STORY OF A BOAT MADE FROM FLIP-FLOPS, TOOTHBRUSHES AND WATER BOTTLES, WHICH SAILED DOWN THE EAST COAST OF AFRICA FROM KENYA TO ZANZIBAR TO SAVE OUR SEAS

WORDS BY **CARINÉ MÜLLER**

The *Flipflop* dhow heads towards Diani Beach, the fifth stop on its journey along the Kenyan coast. Navigating the entrance to the beach was a tricky undertaking through a maze of coral.

Daniel Snyders & Cariné Müller, aka Fimegan Film, sponsored by ORMS

it was pitch-dark as we weaved our way through the tiny streets of Shela on Lamu Island in the early-morning hours – with all our gear on our backs and adventure in our hearts. The *Flipflopi* and her support boat, *Lamu Dhow*, were docked outside the Peponi Hotel, waiting for the 18 crew members to board.

Most of us had only met each other during the launch event the day before. Soccer games, dhow races, speeches and merriment (and our first taste of the media deluge we'd be met with at every stop on our journey) culminated in an expedition briefing and crew introductions.

We were a bunch of plastic fanatics from all over the globe – a crew as colourful as the *Flipflopi* herself, including scientists, communications specialists and an eco-warrior or two. My partner, Daniel Snyders, and I became the last two crew members after just two e-mails and a phone call. We had stumbled upon the Flipflopi Project while researching a documentary we're making about the history of dhows.

The *Flipflopi* – so named because the hull and deck are covered with some 30 000 repurposed flip-flops – is the world's first sailboat made entirely from waste plastic. It's an example of what can be done with all the plastic in our ocean; that it can be reused to create something useful, and pretty cool. The Flipflopi Project is also the first of its kind in Africa, a crusade against single-use plastic with a positive slant, encouraging and inspiring a circular economy of recycling.

At 3am, with only two hours' sleep behind us, it was time to get down to business. Logistics and security required that we leave before daybreak, so we donned our life vests and slipped away to sea with the moon lighting our path. With a 120-kilometre journey ahead of us, we were experiencing high wind speeds and pretty rough seas.

'We were a bunch of plastic fanatics from all over the globe – a crew as colourful as the Flipflopi herself'



ABOVE The Flipflopi Expedition was supported by the UN Clean Seas Initiative. **OPPOSITE TOP** Nautical charts were used to plan the open-ocean route to Wete on Pemba; almost 3 000 school children came aboard to learn about how and why the *Flipflopi* was built. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Carinë on a taxi boat in Lamu; captain Ali Skanda at the helm, assisted by Ahmed Bakhari. Ali's family has lived in Lamu for over 300 years, generations of traditional carpenters whose work can be seen all along the coastline (including at Fort Jesus, Mombasa).

It's not ideal to start a two-week sailing trip with a case of severe green gills. Despite my own shortcomings, the *Flipflopi* was showing her worth. I watched boatbuilder and captain, Ali Skanda, steering his rainbow-coloured pride and joy through the Kenyan waters he knows so well. As he began to sing his own version of Rod Stewart's 'We are sailing ... we are sailing', I knew I was in good hands.

After a rejuvenating night at Che Shale Lodge, just north of Malindi, we set out early to make our big entrance at the first of many events along the coast. The aim of the expedition was to educate residents along the way about the ocean's plastic plight, and several local eco-warriors on our route got 'on board' with these beach gatherings. At Watamu, and our next stop at Kilifi, thousands of children, tourists and locals flocked to the boat. >

Finnegan Flint, sponsored by ORMS





ABOVE An aerial view of the *Flipflopi's* anchorage off Stone Town, Zanzibar, with support boat *Lamu Dhow* moored behind her.
TOP VIP aboard! The president of the UN Environment Assembly, Siim Kiisler (in the colourful shirt), with the three expedition founders and crew.

'At night we'd pull out mattresses and sleep on deck under the stars'

It was evident that these East African beach communities are taking matters into their own hands, with eco-businesses utilising the plastic pollution – literally making money from litter. The pride we saw locals taking in saving their homes from waste plastic, and teaching others to do the same, cemented our challenge for the next stretch of our journey. The problem is massive, and we knew we would have to reach the policy makers to make a real difference in terms of proper waste-management systems.

By now we were becoming seasoned and sea-legged dhow sailors – learning local terms and tips for day-to-day boat living from Captain Ali and his crew. We all had to pitch in with the sailing, and help around the boats as much as possible. Daytime meals were bountiful with fresh fruit, pancakes and *mandazi* (spicy, coconut-flavoured doughnuts); for our communal dinners, we had scrumptious Swahili curries and chapatis prepared over a fire. There was a constant flow of super-sweet Kenyan *chai* (tea), no matter the conditions.

You learn fast when you have to do whatever you're doing (tying knots, writing reports, checking the science equipment, making *chai*, chopping veggies, washing yourself or preparing for workshops and events) on a moving boat. At night we'd pull out mattresses and sleep on deck under the stars. This is when you appreciate the sway of the boat rocking you into a sailor's sleep...

Our two-day stop in Mombasa was most productive. No less than 17 hotels in the area pledged to ban single-use plastic, and it started to feel like we were gaining ground in turning the tide on ocean pollution.

After a stint at beautiful Diani Beach in southern Kenya, complete with musicians, acrobats and the softest sand known to mankind, a gentle sunrise signalled our departure for Shimoni. As if to usher us into the most exquisite part of our journey, a trio of whale sharks swam up to our boats for one of the more memorable 'hellos' of the trip.

The leg I was particularly excited about lay just ahead: crossing the open sea to

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Pemba Island and the last stretch to Zanzibar. Our dhows would be making the same crossing that Arabian traders had done for many centuries.

We reached Pemba just before lunch, where Tanzanian authorities met us at The Manta Resort, on the northern tip of the island, for the best customs experience I've ever had. The owners of the lodge were so thrilled with our mission that they invited us for lunch, which turned into sundowners and games on the beach, which turned into an invitation to stay the night. The opportunity to decompress on this pristine island was a reminder of what we were fighting for: a clean ocean with thriving and healthy marine life.

We sailed the next morning past the wild Ngezi Forest, through a network of islets

LEFT The dhow's arrival in Zanzibar happily coincided with the Sauti Za Busara music festival, and a band came on board to shoot a plastic-awareness music video.
BELOW Some of the products produced by Real Precious Plastics, which were used at the workshops to show what can be made.

and water channels, and anchored next to an outlying island. It was like a scene from a movie. Here I was, living my lifelong dream of anchoring the most romantic of sailboats next to a remote, tropical island. We all experienced an extreme 'happy attack', jumped into the water, laughed like children and swam about while fish darted around us and the sun sank into a golden sea. We swam back to the dhow with intense gratitude in our hearts.

Dhows have been around for centuries, an iconic part of East African coastal culture and history. Which is exactly what made the *Flipflopi* such a significant way to spread the #plasticrevolution message. Founders and expedition leaders Ben Morison and Dipesh Pabari always hoped that the *Flipflopi's* happy hull would draw attention to her purpose, but they didn't realise to what extent people would be attracted to this plastic pilgrimage.

On our final leg to Stone Town, Zanzibar, a pod of dolphins escorted the *Flipflopi* and islanders ran to the shoreline. Our vessel was dwarfed by cruise ships in the bustling harbour, but who wouldn't notice this bright boat with the loud cheering, high fives, hugs, hoots of happiness and yelps of victory? In a historic moment that signalled a successful voyage, Zanzibari dignitaries and the president of UNEA (United Nations Environment Assembly) stepped aboard to make their 'plastic pledges'.

The *Flipflopi* went on to inspire thousands of change-makers at the UNEA conference (she was transported by road to Nairobi) and to teach the world that 'waste isn't waste until you waste it.' As Captain Ali said, when he handed the *Flipflopi's* repurposed plastic steering wheel to Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta: 'Where there's a wheel, there's a way.'

✿ *The expedition had an estimated reach of 850-million people across the world. The Flipflopi Project is currently raising funds to build a similar but larger 20-metre dhow to sail the message from Lamu to Cape Town and beyond. theflipflopi.com >*



Plan your trip

GETTING THERE

Silverstone Air and Skyward Express fly from Wilson Airport in Nairobi, Kenya, to Lamu, Mombasa or Malindi. Around R1 700 pp return. silverstoneair.com, skywardexpress.co.ke
Auric Air connects Pemba and Zanzibar, from R1 525 pp return. auricair.com

NEED TO KNOW

Captain Ali Skanda hosts guests on his *Lamu Dhow* for short cruises around Lamu or longer trips along the coast. Prices vary depending on the itinerary. asklamuwood1@hotmail.com

STAY HERE

✦ **Jua House** on Lamu is a beautiful haven built in typical local style. Relax on the rooftop and drink in the sounds of Shela, and enjoy fresh bread daily from the on-site bakery. From R535 pp sharing B&B. juahouse.com
Che Shale Lodge near Malindi has picture-perfect, eco beach huts with an island feast of a breakfast included. From R720 pp sharing. cheshale.com

✦ **Distant Relatives Ecolodge** is on a lush hill overlooking Kilifi Creek, offering adventure and delicious food. It has camping, dorms, safari tents, rooms and beautiful en-suite *bandas* to suit every budget. From R85–R565 pp sharing. kilifibackpackers.com
The Manta Resort on Pemba is an exclusive spot for special trips. A stay in the one-of-a-kind underwater room will set you back R24 000, but other rooms start at R3 540 pp including all meals, drinks and a daily spa treatment. themantaresort.com

DO THIS

On Lamu This island is a true gem, with Swahili culture, donkeys and cats, mystery and magic. Lamu Old Town, Shela and Manda Island are a triptych of discovery, connected by dhows and boat taxis. Visit the square at the fort in the evenings, where locals gather for movies and games. The Seafront Cafe (at the harbour) serves pancakes, incredible coconut milkshakes and Swahili fare at good prices.

At Watamu Visit Eco World, the Watamu Marine Association's community-run recycling centre, where waste plastic is turned into art and more.

At Diani One of Africa's leading beach destinations, this pristine spot also draws kiteboarders from around the world. ✦ Stay and learn at Kenyaways – a three-day course with B&B accommodation costs from R3 100 pp. thekenyaway.com

At Shimoni Pilli Pipa, the 'Firefly Ocean Camp', specialises in snorkelling and diving dhow safaris to the immaculate Kisite Marine Park. A full-day trip with snorkelling and lunch costs R1 855 pp, which goes towards coral conservation. pillipipa.com

On Pemba The Kwanini Foundation takes care of the ecology of the island, and with the Kwanini Marine Protected Area established five years ago, Pemba is a paradise above and below water. The Manta Resort provides access to some superb dive spots and offers island tours and kayak safaris. kwaninifoundation.org

FLIPFLOPI FACTS

- She's 10 metres long and weighs seven tons.
- About 10 tons of plastic, collected from Kenya's beaches, were used to construct the keel, ribs and other structural elements by shredding, melting and moulding.
- The *Flipflopi* sailed 800km to spread her message.



Entering the Kilifi Channel, with the 'manta' next to the dhow trawling for surface microplastics. A team of scientists conducted ocean plastic research throughout the voyage.

Finnegan Flinn, sponsored by ORMS