



## Isle of You

For \$10,000 a night, guests can rent Thanda Island off the coast of Tanzania and live in complete luxury—and absolute privacy.

BY ANN ABEL



**Water world: The exotic rim-flow pool on Thanda Island was designed by owner Dan Olofsson, who has a degree in engineering.**

**I**t was Ernest Hemingway who lured Dan Olofsson to Africa. “I read all his books,” says the Swedish technology entrepreneur who heads the consultancy Sigma, and they lodged in his imagination.

So when he and his wife, Christin, decided in the early 2000s to build a winter home someplace warmer than their native Scandinavia, they considered the Caribbean but eventual-

ly set their sights farther south. “There’s fantastic wildlife and nature in South Africa,” the 65-year-old Olofsson says. “You don’t have that in a lot of places.”

Their plans grew to include a guest lodge, at what is now the well-regarded Thanda Safari Private Game Reserve, which opened in 2004. (Thanda is Zulu for “love.”) Soon after, the Olofssons set out to acquire a private island counterpart to their safari lodge and settled on one in the Shungi Mbili Island Reserve in southern Tanzania. After years of negotiation and sustainability-minded construction, it was rechristened Thanda Island and welcomed its first paying guests in August.

The property, which has five bedrooms and rents in its entirety for \$10,000 a night (for up to ten people), is roughly 20 acres ringed by coral reefs in protected waters that teem with sea life, including whale sharks, dolphins and five species of turtles. The closest inhabited land is Mafia Island, home to more spectacular marine life, trustworthy dive centers and traditional villages. Thanda Island’s hospitality director, Antigone Meda, likens it to Zanzibar 30 years ago—and while Zanzibar now has 200-room ho-

tels, Mafia has about 200 hotel rooms. (Thanda guests who don't helicopter in from Dar Es Salaam fly first to Mafia, where Thanda staff greet them and ferry them over in a sleek mahogany boat that would do James Bond proud.)

The Olofssons envisioned the island as a private paradise where they could escape with their three children and eight grandchildren. But the Tanzanian government wouldn't let them buy it unless it would contribute to tourism in the country and protect marine wildlife. The couple complied but remained committed to building a private family home. And here they were inspired by another 20th-century American icon.

"We were at the Kennedy compound in Hyannisport around the Fourth of July three or four years ago," Olofsson recalls. "Looking around, we liked the New England style. Our South African property is more Zulu style. Here we wanted something different, and we decided on New England." The resulting house on Thanda, with its white wainscoting, peaked rooflines and pastel palette, mixes the American with the Scandinavian, with a few African flourishes like bird's-nest lamps in the living room and colorful fabric on the chairs in the library.

The design is intentionally hard to classify. Olofsson invested millions—"Less than 10," he clarifies, though he is unsure of the exact amount—to build something that exists in very few places in the world. That's in addition to the island itself, with its perfect white sand and clear turquoise waters just feet away from the house.

The Olofssons were very hands-on with the villa and two freestanding beach bandas (open-air bungalows, which allow the island to accommodate groups up to 28 people), with Christin designing the interiors and Dan, a civil engineer by training, collaborating with the architects. He was also the visionary behind the villa's most striking feature, a glass rim-flow swimming pool that gleams with blue mosaic tiles and rises up from the deck to form a luminous cube. "This pool was quite exciting to design," he says. "I felt like I was just out of university, even though that was 40 years ago."

The food is far better than might be expected in such a remote location. Much of it is caught nearby. Staff will harvest some of the abundant oysters on demand—and serve them with cham-

pagne. While importing luxury foods and wine comes with a carbon footprint, the island was designed to be self-sufficient. It's constructed with sustainable natural materials, and there's a field of solar panels and a desalinization plant. The house and all its infrastructure were also built in such a way that would allow them to be taken apart and leave no trace on the island.

That eco-consciousness is important to Olofsson, who has invested heavily in conservation in the marine reserve. Thanda is working in partnership with the Tanzania Marine Parks department and a leading NGO, Sea Sense, on research and conservation projects involving sea turtles, whale sharks and coral reefs. It's a continuation of the commitment Olofsson, the biggest Swedish philanthropist in Africa (and plenty generous at home), made when he established the Thanda Foundation in South Africa in 2005; among other achievements, its Star for Life arm has put 110,000 children through HIV-prevention education programs. "We are at a point in our lives where we're able to give back to society, and I think when you're there, you have to do it," he says.

While Thanda has made a point of hiring most of its staff from Mafia Island and is working to improve education there, marine conservation is the main focus. Not that guests would suspect that much of the wildlife is on the endangered species list. There are frequent turtle and dolphin sightings on the boat ride from Mafia, and it's not uncommon for guests to find themselves swimming among a half-dozen whale sharks, the biggest fish in the sea.

That, it turns out, is Thanda Island's greatest luxury: the access to such an ecosystem—and a solicitous staff at guests' disposal to make it easier to commune with it. (They'll even drag a copper bathtub onto the beach for a sunset soak.) "Being a big family on an island to yourself," Olofsson says, "there is a special feeling to that."

And if it's a rainy day, there's still plenty to enjoy—Thanda Island is home to what was the largest Hemingway collection in Sweden, now sitting on shelves spanning 20 feet in a clean, well-lighted place. ✱



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