



DRINK | KENYA

A right muddle

It's dawa o' clock in Kenya's Tsavo East National Park. The sun is ebbing, the sky is blushing, the legendary elephants of Tsavo will soon be arriving for a drink. The humans are parched, too.

"What can I get for you?" asks Joel Makau, Satao Camp's bar manager.

It's a simple choice, really: I'll have Kenya's favourite cocktail, dawa. Makau beams. Dawa is one of the most refreshing cocktails around, he says. But drinking it entails ritual.

"This is how we go about it," he says, getting to work.

He fills a glass with crushed ice, douses it with vodka and adds lime wedges to the brew. Then he dips a honey-soaked "dawa stick" into the glass and demonstrates the most important step in the ritual.

"You stir slowly, slowly – in Swahili, pole, pole," he says. "You make the right motion – and then, you enjoy your dawa."

The tinkle glows copper in its glass, echoing the landscape surrounding me. Following Makau's instructions, I stir the dawa diligently, take a sip, and watch the elephants' advance party – zebra, kudu, a distant caravan of giraffe – ambling towards the waterhole not far from my feet.

The dawa is equal parts potent and invigorating. Its origin story is every bit as intoxicating. The sundowner began as an experiment in Satao founder Mike Kirkland's garden in Mombasa – the steamy coastal city four hours' drive east of Tsavo. Here, decades ago, English expatriate Debbie Marvin introduced Kirkland to Brazil's national cocktail, the caipirinha. Also present at the soiree was Chris Seex, founder of Mombasa's famed Tamarind Restaurants. Marvin tweaked the caipirinha, swapping cachaca (Brazilian rum) for vodka and sugar for honey. The trio



This national cocktail of choice started out as an experiment in a Mombasa garden, writes Catherine Marshall.

cut sticks of bamboo from Kirkland's garden with which to muddle the potion. The more they stirred, the better it tasted. So revitalising was the blend, Kirkland christened it "dawa" – Swahili for "medicine".

Seex started serving the elixir at his Mombasa establishments – and at the Tamarind Dhow, the floating restaurant he and Kirkland later launched together. The tinkle attracted a luminary following: it's a mainstay at Richard Branson's Mahali Mzuri in the Masai Mara – part of the Virgin Limited Edition portfolio. Small wonder, since the lodge's general manager, Wilson Odhiambo, became acquainted with dawa as a student in Mombasa.

"The time I was studying hospitality, that's where you learn in college to make dawa," he says. "I was working in [Mombasa restaurant] White Sands. I went to check out the competition – Tamarind Dhow."

Odhiambo verifies the drink's medicinal properties: the limes are vitamin-rich, the honey cleansing, the ice refreshing.

"It was invented in Mombasa – a very hot place," he says. "Nowadays, I prefer to not even crush the ice – it melts!"

It's not only upmarket lodges that prize this heady blend; now beloved countrywide, dawa is sipped by barflies and wedding guests alike. Not bad for a little drink brewed in a garden in Mombasa. Kirkland –

who is also the founder of Southern Cross Safaris and chairman of Bench Africa – is happy his compatriots have joined in the revelry.

"Debbie Marvin's introduction of this delightful concoction marked the beginning of what is now an enduring legacy," he says. "Its journey from my garden's bamboo sticks to the hands of barmen all over the country is a testament to the power of a shared passion for good drinks, good company, and ongoing traditions."

The bamboo muddlers have been replaced by more durable replicas; sometimes they're decorated in Masai beadwork. Otherwise, the ritual remains unchanged.

"You can also take it without the alcohol," Odhiambo says, "but of course you want it with alcohol – double shot, actually."

He concedes that the best place to enjoy Kenya's favourite cocktail is Mombasa's Tamarind Dhow, "or at Mahali Mzuri, by the pool, during the day when it's hot. But it goes well after dinner or as an aperitif."

I'm savouring my dawa at sunset, stirring it pole pole, as Makau advised. Not far from me, the legendary elephants of Tsavo – among them descendants of Big Tuskers – are converging on Satao's waterhole for their own evening drink. **T**

The writer was a guest of Bench Africa.

Joel Makau, bar manager at Satao Camp – the dawa is the cocktail on the left; and an impala near Satao Camp (below).



THE DETAILS

Bench Africa's itineraries include trips to Mombasa, Tsavo East National Park and the Masai Mara, with stays at Satao Camp and Mahali Mzuri. See benchafrika.com. In Mombasa, try dawa at Tamarind Dhow. See tamarind.co.ke