



ROOMS WITH A DIFFERENT VIEW

From an arts-led Newfoundland inn to a far-flung Indonesian beach resort with community activism at its core, a clutch of mavericks – not one of them hailing from the world of hospitality – is turning the paradigm of the independent hotel on its head. **Sophy Roberts reports**



Marrakech may be the most exotic city within the shortest flight-time of western Europe, but it is curiously also one of the most imitative. With the growth in the tourism industry over the past decade, many of the city's riads – those small guesthouses often located in the walled medina – look increasingly indistinct from each other (*tadelakt* walls, beaten-brass sinks, multicoloured tiles), while several of the grand hotels, including La Mamounia, the Selman and the Delano have enlisted the talents of the same French designer, Jacques Garcia, who relies on a glamorous but also fairly consistent set of design signatures. Within this context, hotelier Redha Moali is something of an outlier – turning the Marrakech hospitality scene on its head, not just by challenging familiar aesthetics but by pursuing an ambitious vision supported by institutions as august as Unesco, the US State Department and the French NGO Libraries Without Borders.

"After 9/11 there was this growing connection being made between Islam and violence," Moali says. "I wanted to change that, or at least to promote greater

dialogue." He created the Fellah (pictured overleaf), a 69-room hotel outside Marrakech, but he also launched Dar al-Ma'mûn, which is the more radical venture: a non-profit arts centre with the aim of educating guests and the community about the Arab intellectual scene across Morocco and the Middle East. The two initiatives are linked inextricably because they share the same 11-acre plot, coexisting in a way that Moali hopes might attract a different kind of traveller, including artists and opinion-makers. "It wasn't that I meant to run a hotel. I just saw tourism as a very interesting political tool."

Paris-raised Moali, born to a single Algerian immigrant mother, was formerly deputy general manager of Exan-BNP Paribas in Geneva. He left finance in 2009 to pursue this unusual project, which at best sounds idealistic, at worst pretentious. But on a Sunday afternoon in October last year, shortly after the hotel's formal opening, the place is hopping. There are cool Casablangans hanging around the pool, being brought food by local Berbers who cook up homely tagines from a Club 55-style raw-wood shack. Seventy per cent of the Fellah's staff is employed from the adjoining village of Tassoulante (such as a local farmer, pictured overleaf). Sitting at another table are Moali and Dar al-Ma'mûn's visual arts co-curator, Carleen Hamon. There are children leaping into the pool and brunching artists (the hotel plays host to 15 to 20 international artists each

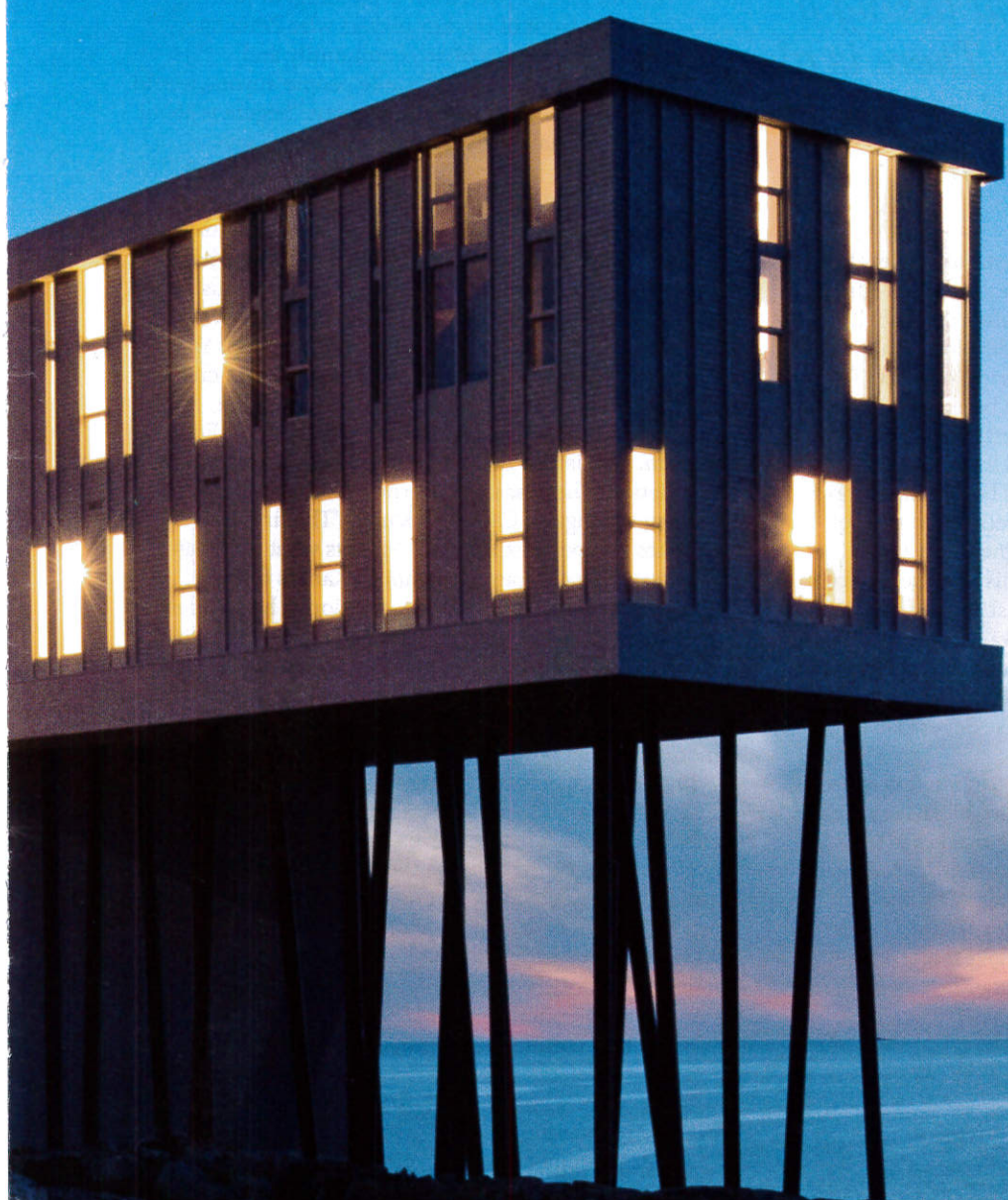
year, with six of them invited to use the Fellah as their working residence for up to five months). In the library, which comprises some 9,000 books put together by the Moroccan scholar Omar Berrada, I meet Juan Asis Palao, a Spanish academic. He oversees the research centre for literary translation of ancient and modern Arab texts, as well as the literacy programme, which currently reaches around 260 locals a week.

Initially I'm confused by these different dynamics. Movies on Tuesdays, lectures on Thursdays, poetry on Sundays. There are donkeys braying next to 21st-century sculptures, the odd piece of land art (*Mud Brick Spiral* by Icelandic artist Elín Hansdóttir) and pictures of celebrities from Hollywood and the Maghreb. The gym is a boxing ring. The spa is overseen by Thai masseurs from Bangkok's Wat Pho temple (Moali gave them free rein to decorate it, which accounts for the slightly kitsch gilded buddhas). There isn't any Garcia or pseudo-souk-made furniture. Instead, there are mid-century chairs dating from the years when Morocco was a French protectorate, which Moali has picked up from flea markets.

Guests seeking straightforward luxury – toothpaste delivered to their room because they've forgotten it, a reception that handles requests seamlessly the first time in asking – should, in truth, probably stick to one of the big hotels. But if the Fellah's service is imperfect, at least its soul is compellingly original. "The Fellah is about something you can't find in Beverly Hills, New York or Paris; yet stay here, and you still feel you're in touch with a contemporary way of thinking," says Moali. That part works: the Fellah is cool – really cool when accessorised with those Casablangan weekenders. But to Moali it only becomes relevant – a success – if it can provoke a change in a guest's way of thinking. "To me, this is the best possible compliment this project could be paid," he says. "But it needs to be a movement in two directions. The locals must benefit from the exposure as much as the professors who visit. Travel has to be about otherness, difference – a means for personal, cultural and political development."

If visitors are hungering for more meaningful engagement, then Moali is part of a small but significant group of maverick hoteliers creating a sort of new caravanserai to help feed – and inspire – the change in appetite. These inns for traders used to mix up merchants from Africa, southern Europe and the Middle East. They brought people together in raw dialogue. Moali and his fellow game changers recognise this same ancient impulse, but what Moali's crowd is doing is entering the business of hospitality in order to manipulate the conversation to benefit bigger, community-based ambitions.

Examples include an intimate resort in eastern Indonesia that's using the exchange with guests to help address child poverty. Or one in Newfoundland, where





Canadian tech entrepreneur Zita Cobb recently created Fogo Island Inn (pictured on previous pages, with its Lighthouse Suite), which opened in June last year and includes a heritage library, art gallery and cinema. The hotel was jump-started by Cobb's cultural philanthropy, and 100 per cent of all profits from operations are reinvested in the surrounding community. The inn works alongside Fogo Island Arts, where visitors and locals come together, including artists in residence (such as New Zealander Kate Newby, pictured on previous pages). The intention is that the cross-fertilisation of ideas will regenerate the islanders' confidence in their own culture as well as the economy (in the case of Fogo, dramatically eroded by the collapsed cod-fishing industry). Or there's Mashpi Lodge in Ecuador (pictured overleaf), spearheaded by Roque Sevilla, a former Quito mayor and orchid collector who has helped rescue the Cloud Forest from logging (Sevilla bought the 3,200 acres in 2001 before leaving politics for the travel industry). The lodge has turned locals, who used to work for the logging companies, into naturalist guides (pictured overleaf).

But perhaps the most influential example of all is Segera (its Paddock House and Explorer Lounge, both pictured overleaf), a very different kind of Kenyan lodge where not only the activities on offer but the owner's challenging collection of 21st-century African art subvert all the post-Blixen clichés. This becomes clear to me as I sit on feather-plumped cushions beside Segera's open fire in what used to be the farmstead's stables but is now an elegant, open-sided sitting room. Opposite me sits Segera's owner, German entrepreneur Jochen Zeitz, a director at luxury-goods conglomerate Kering and



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chairman of the Kering board's sustainable development committee. Also present is his curator, South African Mark Coetzee, who used to look after the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, and is now developing a new Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, on Cape Town's V&A Waterfront. Afternoon tea is being served: scones with cream as thick as Dorset's best, homemade strawberry jam, Earl Grey poured from a silver teapot into fine bone china. The scene is both of this world and of somewhere else entirely, because in view of this perfect colonial tableau is some video art by Zimbabwean Kudzanai Chuirai: his *Iyeza* sequence, which uses the allegory of The Last Supper to deliver a disturbing commentary on civil war. Thus the very moment I might be getting sucked into a comfortable cliché, I'm also being challenged to think of Africa's post-colonial complexities. Because Segera isn't just

a lodge, and Zeitz certainly wouldn't call himself a hotelier: "I always saw Segera as a vehicle to transport a bigger meaning."

The kind of traveller the resort therefore might attract would include art collectors, environmentalists, intellectuals and engaged, second-timer visitors to Africa. They might require luxury (a pool, spa, gym and good organic food) but they would also be interested in the issues surrounding wildlife and habitat conservation (Zeitz is working to protect 50,000 acres), culture (he is one of the largest collectors of 21st-century art from Africa and its diaspora), technology and politics. "I want people to leave not with a better understanding of tribal masks, but the day-to-day challenges of these areas, as well as inspirational, contemporary ideas about Africa," he says. Importantly, Segera also asks guests to give something of themselves. "Usually a tourist doesn't share their story with a community. It's more or less a one-way street," says Zeitz, who, like Moali, believes development can only happen if the conversation runs both ways. "Staying here is not just about taking a photo of an elephant or lion. There is also an opportunity for a cultural exchange, in order for both sides to benefit."

In practical terms, this means bringing in artists who can work with local craftspeople (such as the women in the Satubo Beading Group project, pictured overleaf); taking visitors into the schools that the Zeitz Foundation is building; or putting guests in front of the key players who Zeitz has employed in terms of art, community and conservation – knowledgeable people anyone would wish to sit next to at a dinner party. "Segera is about taking the narrative of Africa outwards," says Coetzee: "It has a more ambassadorial approach."

This two-way immersion defines Campi Ya Kanzi in Kenya. The safari community eco-lodge in the Chyulu Hills brings local Maasai's issues into the heart of every meal – as well as every experience in the bush – and is led by the ethnic group, 15,000 of whom own the 280,000 acres that guests have the run of. Campi Ya Kanzi's high level of straight-talking engagement creates in its turn a global tribe of acolytes, including the initiative's most high-profile supporter, the actor Edward Norton, who is also the president of the US arm of its foundation, The Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust, that runs alongside Campi Ya Kanzi. "The first 10 minutes we spend explaining to guests what we do and why," says Luca Belpietro, Campi Ya Kanzi's founder. This former hunter-turned-conservationist had no desire to become a hotelier. He only entered the business to prove to the Maasai the commercial power of wildlife. "At least half, if not two-thirds of our guests want to see behind the scenes," says Belpietro. "They want to know more. And that proportion is increasing."

In this era of greenwash, what is true of all these mavericks – and Belpietro is among the best examples – is how easy they are to believe. There's a frank integrity to their endeavours, because they declare the good and the bad, while more often than not investing their private wealth in the hope that their vision will not only be financially sustainable, but will above all spread ideas to bring wider benefits to others. I experience this

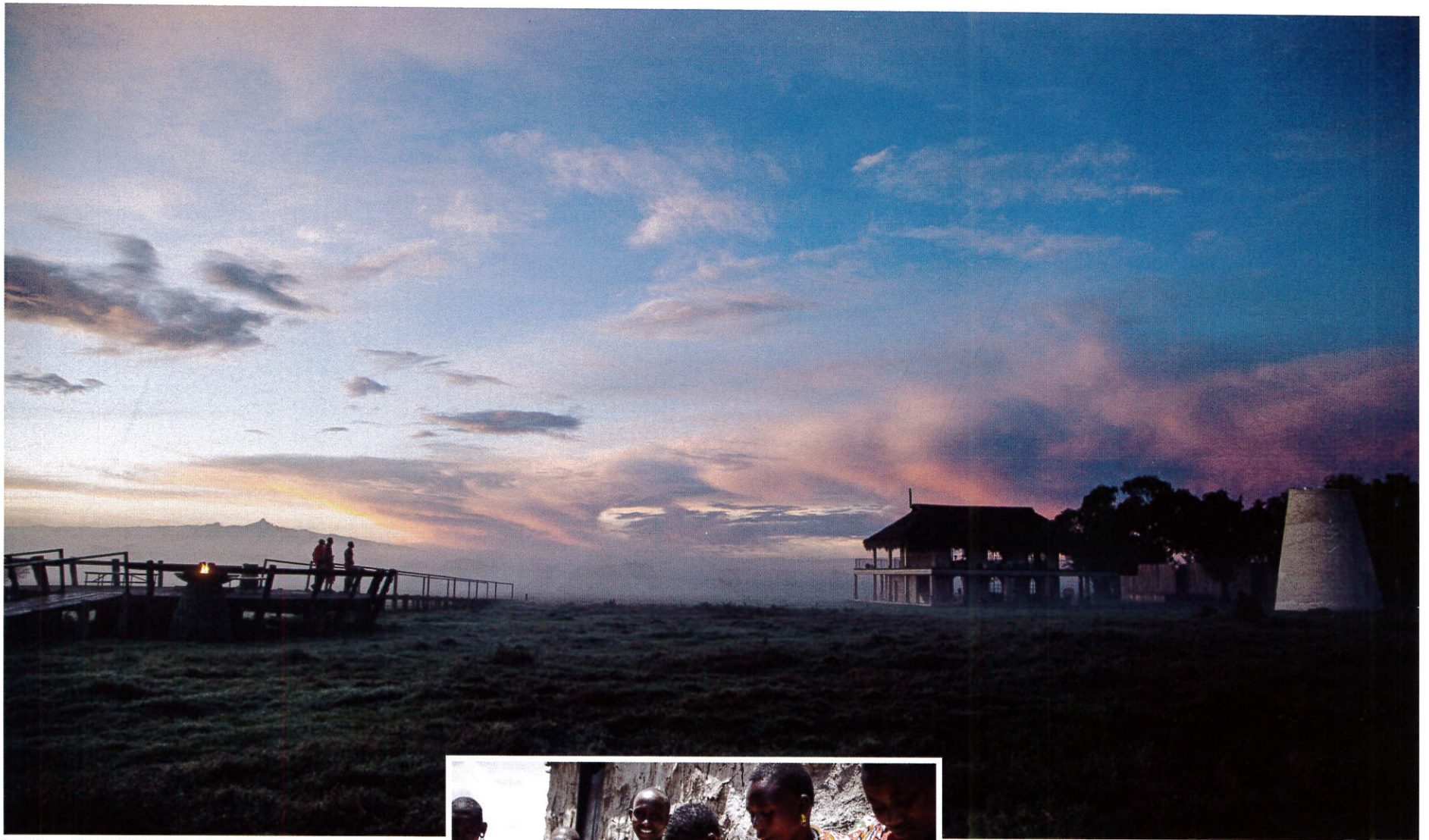
agenda in its more conspicuous form on my first night at Nihiwatu, a small luxury resort on the island of Sumba, an hour's flight from Bali.

I'm with my family drinking mojitos, our feet in the sand, listening to stories told by one of the Australian water-sports instructors as the sun sets. Among the crowd is a family from Silicon Valley on a two-year sabbatical. The mood is light, happy. Above the conversation I can hear The Wave – the famous surf break that initially lured Nihiwatu's co-creators, Claude and Petra Graves, to set up in this remote spot. That was in 1988. Twenty-six years later and Claude is instructing the yoga teacher, Ka'ale, to play the film created by The Sumba Foundation, the



Clockwise from top left: traditional Sumbanese houses in west Sumba, Indonesia. A pool villa at Nihiwatu, Indonesia. A farmer who supplies the spice shop at the Fellah, Marrakech. One of its suites





resort's philanthropic initiative. The bar chat settles and soon runs to silence. The video, lasting no more than 10 minutes, gives the numbers on child mortality, illiteracy and such like. It tells us we are guests of these people – some of the poorest in Indonesia – and what the foundation, in large part funded by guests of the resort, needs to do to improve their lives. The footage pulls no punches, the laughter replaced with a different tone that is carried through to the conversation at dinner.

Nihiwatu, currently being renovated with new villas and pavilions for an April reopening (pool villa pictured on previous page), knows the risk they're taking by being so upfront. It's like showing a video of starving Africans on Christmas morning. But Graves also knows it's a risk that pays off: so far guests have contributed 90 per cent of the total \$5.2 million raised by the foundation. Indeed, ask Graves and he'll tell you the luxury bubble has no place in our society any more, that guests aren't afraid of confronting the world's tough realities, even on holiday. Rather, they embrace it – and put their hands in their pockets.

A few days later, I visit a local market with Dato, Nihiwatu's Sumbanese guide, before going on to see some of the villages where the foundation is working (traditional Sumbanese houses, pictured on previous page). I bump into the mother from Silicon Valley and her young daughter, also

with a guide from Nihiwatu. I'd already learnt how she and her family were spending much of their sabbatical hopping between Amanresorts and the like. Now I was seeing a different side to their travels. "How could I not come?" she says. When I relate this story to Chris Burch – the American retail magnate who recently bought Nihiwatu, working alongside owner partner James McBride – he describes being at his 50th birthday in Manhattan with all the right people, the right canapés, in the right perfectly decorated penthouse. And how extraordinarily lonely it made him feel, despite his successes. Then he came on holiday to Indonesia. "I had no interest in buying a hotel," says Burch. "It just sort of happened. Nihiwatu is not a

project to make money. It is beyond money." Thus one maverick hotelier begets another maverick hotelier; and perhaps the next run of influencers will follow. ♦

INDEPENDENCE STAY

Sophy Roberts was a guest of Campi Ya Kanzi and Segera Retreat, and travelled as a guest of Ampersand Travel to Nihiwatu Luxury Retreat, and as a guest of Butterfield & Robinson to Mashpi Lodge. **Ampersand Travel**, 020-7819 9770; www.ampersandtravel.com. **Butterfield & Robinson**, +1866-551 9090; www.butterfield.com. **Campi Ya Kanzi**, PO Box 236-90128, Mtito Andei, Kenya (+2544-5622 516; www.maasai.com), \$750 plus \$100 conservation fee, per person per day. **Dar Al-Ma'mûn and the Fellah Hotel**, Km 13 route de l'Ourika, 40000 Marrakech (+212525-065 000; dam-arts.org and www.fellah-hotel.com), from €170. **Fogo Island Inn**, 210 Main Street, Joe Batt's Arm, Fogo Island, Newfoundland and Labrador A0G 2X0 (+1709-658 3444; www.fogoislandinn.ca), \$960.50. **Mashpi Lodge**, Mashpi Reserve, Pacto, Andean Cloud Forest (+5932-400 4100; www.mashpilodge.com), from \$750 per person per day. **Nihiwatu Luxury Retreat**, Desa Hobawawi, Kecamatan Wanukaka, Sumba Barat, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia (+62812-392 90789; www.nihiwatu.com), from £5,260 per person for a 10-day stay. **Wilderness Collection Segera Retreat**, Laikipia, PO Box 180, Nanyuki, 10400, Kenya (+2711-807 1800; www.wilderness-collection.com), from \$1,090 all inclusive.

Clockwise from right:
Mashpi Lodge, Ecuador. One of its nature tours. The Explorer Lounge at Segera, Kenya. Its Star Deck and Paddock House. The Satubo Beading Group, a local community project



ALEX FRADKIN. DAVID CROOKES. GABRIELE SPADINI. MASHPI LODGE. STEFFEN JACENBURG