



MALAWI

Lovely lodges, Africa's third-largest lake, dinners served on the beach and big game if you want it. JANIE HAMPTON is captivated by the continent's best kept secret

Go to Malawi, the best-kept secret of central Africa. Don't linger in the capital, Lilongwe, which is a tropical version of Milton Keynes. Head east along immaculate roads sweeping through majestic vistas to the lake, the third largest in Africa. Fifty years ago Malawi was a British protectorate, so they drive on the left and almost the only traffic is cyclists carrying goats, logs, wives and even door frames.

I found Pumulani Lodge, which means 'resting place', hidden among trees teeming with monkeys, near the small harbour of Monkey Bay on Lake Malawi. The friendly staff led me over a footbridge past pied kingfishers splashing in a pool and through Msasa trees to my spacious room, one of only ten. I took a

dip in the unpolluted fresh-water lake, always a constant 26C, and was then served the ubiquitous sundowner of excellent Malawi gin and tonic by Admiral Black Yusufu and Captain Gift Kapaswiche on a traditional Arab dhow. Once the ruby sun had slipped behind the blue mountains bordering the lake, we sailed back in silence, apart from the shriek of a fish eagle wheeling over a baobab tree.

After a five-star dinner under the Southern Cross, Godfrey Lumbe, the manager, turned on a powerful telescope and pointed out the rings of Saturn, against a curtain of shooting stars.

Tourism in Malawi is actively eco-friendly, using solar-heated water, hydro-electricity and locally sourced food such as coffee and 'chambo' lake fish. Each lodge has a relationship with the nearest village and can



arrange visits to the school or the local chief. Décor is muted and tasteful – sisal, linen and wood with splashes of colour from local flowers. Traditional carvings of spirits and village scenes appear on doors, chairs and even chandeliers. I bought miniature working wooden bicycles and road graders from boys beside the road, but wasn't brave enough to try their roasted mice kebabs.

Further south on Lake Malawi, Makokola Retreat has its own air strip and 250 staff tending green gardens, though the high standard of service is still personal. The round detached villas are traditionally thatched, while inside are hand-painted tiled bathrooms hung with locally made fabrics. Step straight out onto the beach, where you can swim, water-ski or explore the lake in an ancient cruiser. I sat under a mango tree filled with busy weaver birds, and watched a wedding party drift over the shimmering sand, like a Fellini film. The bride and her dozen bridesmaids were in flowing 1950s frocks; while the groom and his six best men wore matching white satin suits.

For some solitude I stayed at the exquisite Blue Zebra Lodge on tiny Mukana Island. A motorboat collected me from

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the mainland and at supper my companion was a bush baby who shared my banana. Situated in the middle of a Unesco World Heritage Site, there are hundreds of varieties of colourful cichlid fish to snorkel or scuba among, as well as otters and masses of rare birds.

For a busier island, fly in a tiny Cessna to Likoma, or sail there on *Ilala*, the sixty-year-old ferry that was imported in pieces from Glasgow. Kaya Mawa, the island's only lodge, means 'maybe tomorrow' in Chichewa and you won't want to do anything in a hurry. Over a fine dinner served on the beach,

the lap of waves mingled with crickets chirping in the purple orchid tree. In 1859 David Livingstone described the scene at night as the 'Lake of Stars'. Nothing has changed, except the fishermen now have paraffin lamps on their dug-out canoes, which look like supernova in the inky water.

After an early morning snorkel from the secluded beach and breakfast of freshly baked muffins, I set off by bike down a sandy track past waving



Facing page: Lake Malawi; top: Likoma's Anglican Cathedral; above: Kaya Mawa. The name means 'maybe tomorrow'

children, women weaving grass mats and old men at treadle sewing machines.

The harbour feels like the Caribbean fifty years ago – tiny bars called Hangover Bottle Clinic and Don't Ever Give Up, women selling tomatoes and buckets, boys frying chips over open fires. On the beach, a fully dressed lady lathered herself liberally with soap before plunging in and out of the waves.

The Sunday service was already a riot of singing when I got to Likoma's huge Anglican Cathedral. Built in 1903, it was inspired by Winchester Cathedral. Alleluyah, the verger, led me to a pew among the other women, all in their Sunday best, while men sat on the right and mothers fed their babies in the side aisle.

If you yearn to see big game, the new Mkulumadzi lodge in Majete Wildlife Reserve, has them all, as well as rare birds and leaping deer. After a long, hot drive down a dirt road past kudu, guinea fowl and warthog, I lay in an infinity pool. With a cold beer beside me, I peered at a gang of hippos yawning in the river and an elephant destroying a tree for its supper. Close but not too close. In the morning I walked along the bank of the Shiré River accompanied by a ranger with a colonial-era Enfield rifle to ward off lions and crocodiles. (1)

TRAVEL INFORMATION

FLY TO MALAWI VIA NAIROBI with Kenya Airways www.kenya-airways.com
Malawi Tourist Information Office
Tel: 0115 972725 enquiries@malawi-tourism.com; www.malawitourism.com
Pumulani on Lake Malawi and Mkulumadzi lodge in Majete Wildlife Reserve www.robinpopesafaris.net
Kaya Mawa on Likoma Island www.kayamawa.com
Ulendo flights www.flyulendo.com
Ferry with Malawi Shipping Company Mary.zulu@msc.mw **Blue Zebra, Mukana Island** www.bluezebra.mw **Makolola Retreat** www.clubmak.com **Ku Chawe, Sunbird Hotels** www.sunbirdmalawi.com

No special vaccines or visas needed but take precautions against malaria with medication, insect repellent and long-sleeved clothes. Parts of Lake Malawi are infected with the disease bilharzia but around the lodges the water is treated regularly.