

Lake LIVING

Malawi is a delicious slice of Africa with a famous lake, legendarily welcoming people and terrain ranging from subtropical bush to alpine plateaus

BY JAMES BAINBRIDGE

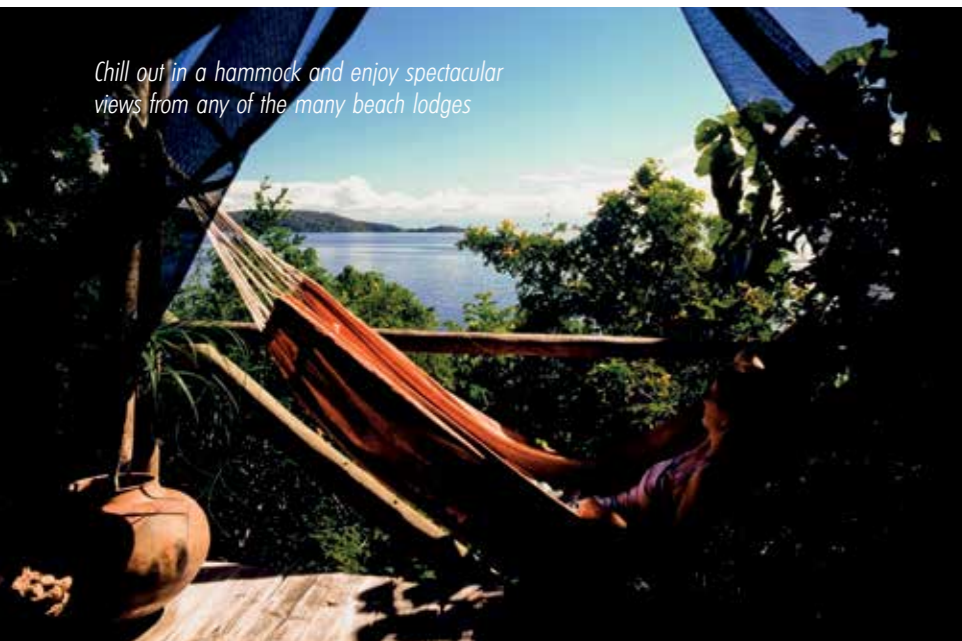
nicknamed the 'warm heart of Africa' for its friendly people, Malawi is also famous for Africa's third-largest lake, which covers about a quarter of the country's 118 484 km², and dominates life in the beach towns, fishing villages and island resorts. This huge body of freshwater has around 1 000 fish species – more than any other inland area of water in the world – and most are endemic, including the famous *Cichlidae* (cichlids). As you are scuba diving in towns such as Cape Maclear and Nkhata Bay, you will see multi-coloured schools of *mbuna* (rockfish) cichlids with their iridescent stripes and dapples fit for an aquarium trance party.

Africa's largest fish family, cichlids are 99% endemic to Lake Malawi, and support an industry of field trips with their complex mating rituals and mouth brooding (oral incubation of their offspring). You might also eat a cichlid in the form of bream-like chambo, which is never far from Malawian braais, while divers can look forward to meeting the dolphin-fish attracted to their torches on night dives. It's no wonder the so-called 'Calendar Lake', which is 365 miles (587 km) long, 52 miles (84 km) wide and fed by 12 rivers, is one of the world's top freshwater dive spots.

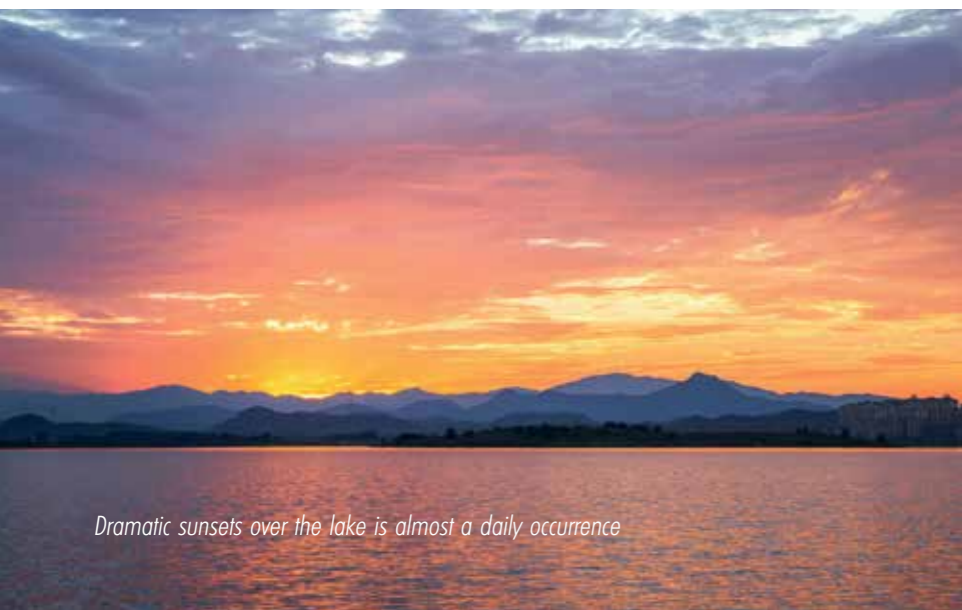
Malawi is also teeming with wildlife above the lake's placid surface. In lakeside towns, thick clouds of lake flies are a common irritation; they form towering black columns, which are so dense that fishermen have been known to jump overboard to avoid choking on them. Enterprising locals also scrape the critters into a patty for a yummy fly burger.



Diving in Lake Malawi is a colourful experience



Chill out in a hammock and enjoy spectacular views from any of the many beach lodges



Dramatic sunsets over the lake is almost a daily occurrence



Lace up your hiking boots and tackle Mount Mulanje

AFRICA

IT'S GOT GAME

More appealingly, Malawi is coming into its own as a wildlife-watching destination, thanks to the work of African Parks in Majete Wildlife Reserve, Liwonde National Park and the Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve. The non-profit conservation organisation translocated four lions from South Africa's Pilanesberg National Park and Madikwe Game Reserve over to Majete in 2012, making the southern reserve Malawi's only big-five park. They also recently made conservation history by relocating 500 elephants from overpopulated Liwonde and Majete to Nkhotakota.

The well-run reserves offer a classic experience of the African bush with fewer crowds than the likes of the Kruger Park, and accommodation options range from simple campsites to luxurious lodges. Covering more than 500 km² of savannah and forest alongside the Shire River, Liwonde is one of Africa's best river-based game-watching destinations, offering boat trips into the wildlife-rich region (500 elephants, 1 800 hippos and countless sunbathing crocs, plus more). The park also has a great variety of bird life (the last census recorded four endangered lappet-faced vultures); there's a black rhino sanctuary, which recently welcomed two new calves; and cheetahs that were translocated from South Africa.

BEACH BREAKS

After those dawn game drives, there are numerous destinations at which to kick back with a bottle of locally beloved Carlsberg and experience the culture of the Chewa, Lomwe and Malawi's other ethnic groups. In northern Malawi, Nkhata Bay is a stop on the decrepit weekly Ilala ferry, which serves the lakeshore and the islands of Chizumulu and Likoma. With its reggae-infused Caribbean feel, the town is a great base for snorkelling, kayaking, feeding the fish eagles and doing a dive course. After dark, an

WHERE
to stay
GUIDE

BUDGET

▶ **Funky Cichlid** is a buzzing Cape Maclear backpackers with a beachfront terrace and water-based activities on tap. thefunkycichlid.com

MODERATE

▶ **Bushman's Baobabs** is a great-value bush lodge near the southern entrance to Liwonde National Park, offering activities from wildlife walks to canoe trips. bushmansbaobabs.com

LUXURY

▶ **Kaya Mawa** lies way out in Lake Malawi on Likoma Island. This dreamy getaway offers cliff-side chalets, plunge pools, spa treatments and candlelit dinners on the beach. kayamawa.com

international crowd of travellers and aid workers parties at the beach lodges and Kaya Papaya Thai restaurant.

Up in the hills, Livingstonia is a mission station established in 1894 by the Free Church of Scotland, after its missionaries kept succumbing to malaria at two previous lakeside bases. It's named after Dr David Livingstone, who is depicted with his sextant, medicine chest and local companions against a backdrop of Lake Malawi, in the stained-glass window of the church – just one of the well-preserved stone buildings on



the dusty lanes. Climbing 900m from the lakeshore, the 20-bend switchback littered with wreckages of bakkies entails some well-earned hammock time at a permaculture eco-lodge perched on the escarpment. After taking in the sweeping lake vistas, wander to the 125m Manchewe Falls, visit coffee plantations or hike three days to Nyika National Park, a breathtaking slice of highland scenery where antelopes stand in rolling grassland at 2 000m.

MUA MISSION

At the southern end of the lake is the equally fascinating, and more accessible, Mua mission station, founded by the Roman Catholic Church in 1902. Facing the terracotta-tiled mission building that's fit for the Tuscan hills, the Mua mission station is a lively place to learn about the Malawian culture. In one room, there are lots of ceremonial Gule Wamkulu masks, as impressive as a school of cichlids. It's a short drive to Cape Maclear and Senga Bay, both beach towns where backpackers, lodges and cabanas overlook fishermen drying their nets on the sand. Both are popular for snorkelling, diving or just hanging out, and Cape Maclear

is the launchpad for escaping to the nearby Mumbo and Domwe islands by kayak or boat.

MALAWIAN MOUNTAINS

Bearing testament to the surprising diversity of this pint-sized nation, the terrain and activities change yet again in Malawi's deep south. Lace up your hiking boots and ready your belay for Mount Mulanje, a misty massif of some 20 peaks climbing to 3 000m, with mountain huts enabling multi-day hikes among the waterfall-fed valleys, black eagles and endemic Mulanje cypress. These mountains are fringed by emerald-green tea plantations offering tours and tastings, for example the Satemwa estate with its veranda-wrapped Huntingdon House guest house and restaurant.

In a similar vein to Mulanje, the nearby Zomba Plateau climbs 1 800m above the surrounding plains, with hiking trails and horseback tours that lead to viewpoints and waterfalls. From the lake to the mountains, there is much to discover in Malawi and, to experience the classic Africa of dusty roads and big smiles, it's well worth saying *moni* ('hello' in Chichewa) to South Africa's friendly near neighbour. ✨



▶ CURRENCY

Malawian kwacha (R1 = MK56). Carrying US dollars will save you some money on the conversion to kwacha. Avoid relying on ATMs, which only dispense small amounts, and frequently malfunction.

▶ SAFETY

Malawi is mostly safer than SA, but crime is an issue in Lilongwe and Blantyre, where you should take the usual precautions.

▶ HEALTH

Malawi is a malaria zone, so take prophylaxis and update your travel vaccinations before leaving home.

▶ GETTING THERE

Malawian Airlines (malawian-airlines.com) and South African Airways (flysaa.com) connect Joburg to Lilongwe and Blantyre. South Africans do not require a visa to visit Malawi.

▶ GETTING AROUND

The easiest and safest way to travel around is by car, despite the potholed roads and erratic minibus taxis. Sharing a private taxi, or hiring one for a few days, can be less hassle than renting a car, and costs about the same.