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It’s the Warmth of the Heart
Small is beautiful, as E.F Schumacher famously proclaimed. Nowhere is this more true than of Malawi. One of the smallest countries in Africa, it is tucked between three giants, Tanzania, Mozambique and Zambia. Malawi is so small that it is often overlooked, and that’s partly why it is such a magical destination.

Malawi is a distillation of the true African experience. Here you see the kind of heart-squeezing scenery that has made Central Africa famous. Here is the region’s highest peak. Here you can view families of elephants as they splash in the shallows of one of Africa’s majestic rivers, and see the great ginger form of Pel’s fishing owl in a forest of palm trees. You are then on the route taken by Victorian England’s hero Doctor David Livingstone as he battled slavery and disease in a country where his efforts shaped history. You too can discover his beloved, and challenging, “Lake of Stars.”

Sit on a perfect beach. Let your eyes feast on the wide wonder of turquoise water, blue sky and a distant shoreline of misty mountains. Rocky islands float on the water as fragments of fantasy, capped with jungle. The whisper of waves provides a background for the haunting cry of the fish eagle and, if you’re lucky, you may glimpse the glossy form of an otter as it slips home among the rocks.

Lake Malawi is the most beautiful feature of a beautiful country. Along the south-western reaches, the lake, somewhere in its two million years of existence, has drawn away from the edge of the Rift valley leaving a wide level plain dotted with baobabs, palms and umbrella trees. The water’s edge is lined with golden beaches, irresistible to holidaymakers, and the sparkling water is alive with the most beautiful fresh-water fish in the world.

Even the prices are good! Although the country can now boast world class tourist accommodation, when translated into hard currency many of Malawi’s lake-side lodges and forest rest houses are astonishingly inexpensive. Malawi attracts adventurous spirits, many of them budget travellers, and there are plenty of establishments providing adventure activities - fuelled by hearty meals - at low prices - as well as simple accommodation, perfectly in keeping with the surroundings.

Although there are six local languages in Malawi, Chichewa being most commonly spoken, the official language is English. Wherever you go in this gorgeous country, you are more than likely to be understood. And where you are not, the real wealth of Malawi will come to your aid – for this is the warmest, friendliest nation in all of Africa. And gifted too. Malawi wood-carvings grace museums, art galleries and churches around the world. You will find you can’t go home without a small memento of what is sure to be your most memorable visit to Africa.

Malawi is undisputedly the Warm Heart of Africa. Loving it is inevitable.
**An African Romance**

**MEETING MALAWI**

One of the smallest countries in Africa, Malawi is the epitome of a vast continent, the very essence of Africa.

Not quite east, central or southern African, it has elements of each: a touch of East Africa’s sensual magnetism, some of the mystery of Central Africa’s tropical forests, and the sheer delight of southern Africa’s exuberance.

Malawi is a country of startling contrasts. Landlocked, it is a nation of fishermen, one fifth of the country taken up by Lake Malawi, the third largest lake in Africa. Trapped in the Great Rift Valley, it laps like an inland sea at the foot of wooded escarpment hills, in a setting of haunting beauty. In its uplands, the undulating plains of the central African plateau give way to dramatic *inselbergs* and spectacular highlands - the Mulanje massif, the highest mountain in central Africa, and Zomba Mountain in the south, and northwards, the forested Viphya plateau and the superb rolling grasslands of the Nyika.

The many and varied habitats are protected by nine separate wildlife reserves. Offering more experiential than conventional game viewing, there is a range of thrills for nature lovers, from the orchids of Nyika to the cichlid fish of the lake, from Pel’s fishing owl in the Shire Valley to the blue flycatcher in the rain forests.

The least exploited of African tourist destinations, Malawi has now been “discovered”. It has all the traditionally prized features, such as sun-drenched beaches and sparkling palm-fringed water, as well as scuba diving, rock climbing, mountain biking and other adventures for the young at heart. Its exceptional scenery lends itself to road travel, for the main roadwork is in excellent condition. This provides the best of all opportunities to experience the real warmth of Malawi, its wonderful people. You are bound to leave a part of your own heart in the Warm Heart of Africa.
GETTING TO MALAWI

From Europe and North America
Airlines flying to Malawi to/from Europe:
Ethiopian Airlines (via Addis Ababa),
KLM (via Nairobi with Kenya Airways),
South African Airways (via Johannesburg)

African airlines flying to/from Malawi
Air Malawi, Air Zimbabwe, South African Airways,
Kenya Airways, Ethiopian Airlines

Airports
Most international flights land at Lilongwe, Malawi’s capital,
but several flights, especially those from Johannesburg and
Harare, land at the business centre of Blantyre in the south.

There are internal flights throughout the country.

Visas
Visas are required by all entering the country except nationals of Belgium, most
Commonwealth countries, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Japan, Portugal,
Scandinavia, Spain, and the USA. Check with your travel agent or a Malawi Mission abroad;
regulations change from time to time. Your passport should be valid for at least six months.

Customs and Immigration
Officials try to make your arrival and departure as trouble-free as possible and baggage handling is efficient and fairly fast. The usual personal allowances are granted.

Travelling overland
Malawi has become a very popular staging post for trans-Africa travellers and it is a very good country in which to begin an African trip. Many tour operators offer packages into and out of Malawi and there are regular coach services from Johannesburg and Harare.

When to visit
Malawi is always beautiful. The cooler months (May to August/September) are more comfortable for travellers from the northern hemisphere, but the lush, green summer (November to April) is also a good time to visit if due care is taken to avoid mosquito bites. May and June combine the best of both seasons - cooler, still green with great visibility - and are especially good for photography. Country dirt roads are sometimes impassable to normal vehicles during heavy rains.

Game viewing is best in the hottest times of the dry season when the animals are forced to visit water sources, but the countryside is more attractive in the wetter, greener months. Bird watchers enjoy their best sightings in October and November. Check for school holiday dates, particularly for those in South Africa when more tourists visit Malawi and resorts fill up.
**David Livingstone’s**

**LAKE OF STARS**

David Livingstone first saw Lake Nyassa, now Lake Malawi, in 1859 and was bewitched by its beauty. “The lake of stars”, he called it, as a myriad winking galaxies glittered from the crystal facets of the water. It’s a wonderful description, as exact today as it was almost a century and a half ago. Sit on a perfect beach, and let your eyes take in the wide wonder of turquoise water, blue sky and a milky distant shoreline of mountains. Rocky islands float on the water like fragments of fantasy, crowned with jungle. The whisper of waves softens the yelping call of fish eagles, and if you’re lucky, you may glimpse the glossy head of an otter as it heads for a home among the rocks.

In Livingstone’s time, the lake was dotted with dhow sails, sinister as sharks’ fins, ferrying slaves and ivory across to the eastern shore for the long march to the coast. Today, peaceful dugout canoes range the length and breath of the lake, no longer fearful of Arab traders, intent only on harvesting the silver bounty of fish. A meal of the country’s favourite, *chambo*, served with golden chipped potatoes, is a must for visitors.

Lake Malawi covers almost 20% of the country, and provides much of the country’s protein. The third largest lake in Africa, and one of the deepest in the world, its water is particularly pure. Fish prefer the shallower, southern end, so it’s no surprise that the human population is denser in the south. Here too, the brightly coloured *cichlid* fishes, *mbuna*, abound, making rocky island shores an open-air aquarium for snorkellers and scuba divers.
What to wear
Beach resorts are very informal, however it is well to remember that Malawians are conventional, even conservative, people and visitors should respect local customs and traditions when visiting villages and markets. Light clothing is essential. You won’t need to make a fashion statement, but you will need to feel comfortable when the temperature rises - and when it drops. Business meetings are usually more formal and those combining work with pleasure should keep this in mind. Long sleeved shirts and light trousers help to keep the mosquitoes at bay in the evenings. Take a jersey for cool weather and late nights - especially when visiting the highlands. A hat, sun block and comfortable walking shoes are essential. Remember any medication you use regularly (other medical recommendations are discussed later), contact lens fluid and insect repellent.

What else to take
Lots of reading material if you are not going to be near the city bookshops in Blantyre and Lilongwe. Binoculars for birders. Swim fins and goggles, if you have them. Camera, spare batteries memory cards or film.

Electricity
Malawi uses the British three pin square plug and a 240 volt supply, so take adaptors and a transformer if necessary.

Security
Malawi has long been famed as the friendliest country in Africa - and this is still true. But be aware that urbanisation, poverty and changing social values have brought a rise in crime statistics. Be careful. Take the same precautions you would take in any other part of the world.

Money
Malawi’s unit of currency is the kwacha, divided into 100 tambala.

Foreign exchange can be converted at branches of, INDEbank, the Standard, National, First Merchant, NBS, MSB, Nedbank, and Eco banks and there are several licensed/authorised bureaux de change in Blantyre and Lilongwe. Credit cards are sometimes accepted in the cities and around the Lake, but the use of both foreign exchange and credit cards can be difficult outside major centres.

Banking hours
Mondays to Fridays 08.00 - 15.00 hrs. Most banks open on Saturday mornings. Most hotels of international standard offer money-changing facilities.

Health
The same simple rule applies to health as to security. Take care. Be aware. Check on immunisation and anti-malaria medication well in advance of travel to Malawi or anywhere else in Africa, and pack a reasonable first aid kit to enable you to deal with small emergencies and upset stomachs. Try to use licensed accommodation units and restaurants. Do not drink tap water in resort areas, rather plenty of bottled water and keep out of the midday sun as much as possible.
The Southern Lakeshore

IN LIVINGSTONE’S FOOTSTEPS

Long and lithe, Lake Malawi was once known as the “calendar lake”, measuring 365 miles in length and 52 miles across at its widest point. The conversion to kilometres has made the name outdated, but it’s still a useful aide memoire for those who like to know. The lake gathers most of its water from rivers to the west, and has only one outlet, the Shire River.

The Shire (pronounced like “shirry” rather than the English “shire”) drains the lake at its most southern point, opposite the town of Mangoché. Established on the east bank in 1891, the little town was a garrison against slave traffic.

Mangoché

This town lies on the Shire River (you can often see hippos from the lovely new bridge) and has a market, shops and a busy, happy atmosphere. The Lake Malawi Museum is here. As Fort Johnston, Mangoché was once an important anti-slaving centre and later a colonial administrative town. Broad tree-lined streets, part of the earliest town planning in Central Africa and some remaining, dilapidated, buildings are evidence of a colonial heritage. A colonial monument to Queen Victoria stands near the new bridge, and overlooking the river are two mementos of Lake Malawi’s rich history - a gun used in Britain’s first naval victory of World War I, and a memorial plaque to the 145 people who drowned in Lake Malawi’s worst shipping disaster, the sinking of the m.v. Vipya during a storm in 1946. There are places to stay for the passing traveller, a supermarket and banking facilities.

Lake Malawi’s shores between Mangoché and Monkey Bay have long been a favoured holiday destination. There are many tourism enterprises catering for all markets along this 80km shoreline. The visitor chooses between a dozen lodges and hotels set on beaches of golden sand.

Excursion opportunities, too, are many. These include very successful commercial fish farming by Maldeco Aquaculture near Nkopola Lodge and tropical palms at Tropex near Club Makokola. Koma Croc is a crocodile farm which welcomes visitors. Boadzulu, a rocky island off Club Makokola, mentioned by David Livingstone in his Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambezi and its Tributaries and the Discovery of Lakes Nyassa and Chilwa (London, 1865), is well worth the short cruise to see giant monitor lizards basking on the rocks. The population of fish eagles on this shoreline is said to be the densest in Africa and their haunting cries are heard everywhere, dawn till dusk.

THE LAKE OF STARS MUSIC FESTIVAL

Inspired by world famous events such as Live Aid and Glastonbury, the Lake of Stars Festival was created by Englishman Will Jameson in 2004. The aim remains, as at first, to raise money for a developing economy, help promote Malawi as a tourist destination and expose Malawian artists to international crowds. A platform for both local and international artists, this award winning festival, usually held in September/October, has something for everyone.

Named after Livingstone’s epithet for Lake Malawi, the numbers attending the festival have increased greatly each year, mainly thanks to efforts by the organisers and the sheer attraction of the shimmering waters and the palm-fringed shores of Lake Malawi. Starting with a few dozen Europeans and some locals, attendance has increased to over 3000 and the festival now forms part of the itinerary for many, including those on overland trips from countries such as South Africa and Kenya.

A three-day festival of fun and cultural exchange, it is a time for sampling the delights of local cuisine and curios while enjoying a diverse roster of performances and jamming sessions. A time for getting lost in the Warm Heart of Africa while soaking up the unique atmosphere only good music and Malawi’s majestic lake can offer.

“This has been a life changing experience for all of us. Come here for the people, come for the music, come for the famous Malawian hospitality, come here for that lake if nothing else, but just make sure that you come here some time…” - Jo Good, MTV, Oct 2007. www.lakeofstars.org
Malawi is a poor country. The population is presently estimated at 12 million. Average population density is 105 per km$^2$, one of the highest in Africa. Urbanisation continues as fewer people are able to make a rural living, and there are large concentrations of people around the cities - the capital, Lilongwe, business centre Blantyre, the first, and still the academic, capital of Zomba and the fast growing northern city of Mzuzu.

In the south, there is more intense cultivation - and population - while in the north people live in widely scattered villages and the traditional way of life still prevails.

Nationally, Malawi’s economy is strongly agrarian with most people involved in farming projects, or as subsistence farmers. Tobacco (right), sugar and tea are the main exports and coffee (below) is increasingly grown, with much success. Rural smallholder farmers grow tobacco for sale at the huge auction floors in all three cities, and also plant maize, millet and rice, bananas, citrus and vegetables.
The Lake of Stars is to David Livingstone, and so what better than to name the first promontory after his friend, the Astronomer Royal, Thomas Maclear? The name, Cape Maclear, once applied just to the promontory that includes Domwe Island, now refers to the entire area, from Monkey Bay in the east to Kasankha Bay in the west. This is the Nankhumba Peninsula, containing the Lake Malawi National Park and Chembe village.

Here was the site of the first mission station, the original Livingstonia. Little remains today but a few neglected graves. The mission soon moved up the lakeshore to Bandawe in the hope of evading malaria and black water fever, but there too, they suffered. Today the village of Chembe is bursting with people, eking out a living from fishing and tourism in one of the most beautiful places on earth. The first freshwater National Park in the world (1984), it is a World Heritage Site.

Lake Malawi National Park was established to protect the cichlid fish unique to this area. Much prized as aquarium fish, there are estimated to be close on a thousand different species of these little jewelled wonders, many as yet undescribed. Taking advantage of this blaze of biodiversity, snorkelling and diving around the islands is a must. There are Government trained tour guides at Cape Maclear; ask for their identity cards if you require a guide.
The m.v. Ilala (below) sails from her home port of Monkey Bay - one of the most popular destinations in Africa for backpackers and overlanders. The town is built around the harbour installations, with spectacular views over the wooded lakeshore. It throbs with life on departure and arrival days and attracts huge crowds of well-wishers as well as passengers. From Monkey Bay, most travellers make their way, by a narrow scenic road, to the beaches at Cape Maclear.

Inside the Park an easy walking trail from the Golden Sands Rest Camp takes you up to Otter Point, a lovely view site.

Kayak Africa in Chembe village take their clients on well-organised overnight or week-end trips out to the islands in sea kayaks, with diving and snorkelling options. Island camps on Mumbo and Domwe are dream beautiful, and set up with exceptional sensitivity to the environment. If you fancy a stay in luxury tents on stilts above tropical waters, this is paradise. Kayak Africa has laid out walking trails on the islands, and there are birding specials to look out for, like the green coucal.

Danforth Yachting is an up-market yacht charter and luxury lodge, operating out of Cape Maclear. A luxury 38 foot catamaran, the m.v. Mfasa (left, seen moored at its Cape Maclear base), fully equipped and crewed, sleeps eight in style. Danforth’s dive and sailing centre has all the necessary scuba diving equipment, several sailing dinghies and a resident dive instructor.

MONKEY BAY AND CAPE MACLEAR

Often described as the longest freshwater yachting race in the world (over 500km), this event, which is really more of an endurance test than a yacht race, takes place each year in July. It is at this time that the mwera blows strongest up Lake Malawi from Mozambique and the south-east. The powerful winds can produce some very rough water indeed and this competition is not for the faint hearted sailor. Already in its 25th year it has grown steadily in popularity to the point where 30 yachts and crews, from all over southern Africa and further, entered the 2009 competition. Starting at one of the resorts dotting the southern lakeshore, the event takes entrants northwards and across to the islands of Malawian islands of Likoma and Chisimulu within Mozambican waters and ends on the beautiful silver sands of Chinteche just south of Nkhata Bay. There are plans to make the event even longer in its 25th year, perhaps as far as the northern limits of the lake and through the stretch, north of Nkhata Bay, where the Africa Great Rift Valley narrows within dramatic mountainous scenery and the powerful winds are funneled to even greater fury.

The Yachting Marathon is at its heart an endurance test, the mwera can be as unpredictable as a child’s temper, and the testing of crews and their yachts is as comprehensive as the pace and conditions. The competition is open to all and any, and the usual rules apply: crew, quality, technique and preparation. There are two main classes of yachts: the club boats, which are limited to 21 feet overall, and the larger yachts, which are limited to 38 feet overall. However, the race can be divided into shorter legs, and these can be tackled by any boat that adheres to the rules and conditions. It is a race that tests the spirit, endurance and skill of the sailors who take part, and it is a race that is not for the faint of heart.
The road from Lilongwe to Salima is a good one, winding gently down the Rift escarpment to the distant shimmer of the lake. Beside the road, craftsmen weave beautiful rattan-type furniture, binding the stems of a wild creeper onto bamboo frames. Salima itself is not a destination for visitors, but Senga Bay, fifteen kilometres farther on, is one of the loveliest on the Lake.

Like many of lake-side towns in Malawi, Salima was an Arab trade centre in Livingstone’s time. In those days, only Muslims were safe from the threat of slavery and today Salima retains a predominantly Muslim character.

Just northwest of the town is Malawi’s first wildlife breeding station - Kuti Wildlife Reserve. Established by the Game Breeders’ Association in 2001 on an ex-government cattle ranch it began with a handful of nyala and wildebeest. It is one of the few places in Malawi where giraffe can be seen, since they do not naturally occur in the country.

About 80 kilometres south from Salima on the M5, you will be startled by larger-than-life figures of Angoni warriors in full battle regalia, feathers streaming, leopard-tail kilts flying. These are the work of craftsmen trained at the Mua Mission.

The first Roman Catholic Mission in Malawi, established by the White Fathers in 1899, Mua today is synonymous with Father Claude Boucher. “Fr. Bushy”, as he’s known to his flock, has channelled his passion for Malawi into a sculpture school and a rich museum of Malawi culture. Don’t miss either of them!

Mua Mission, Chamare Museum, and KaNgoni Art and Craft Centre
www.muamissionmalawi.com

The intrepid traveller can return to Lilongwe via Dedza and the remarkable pottery there, by taking the newly surfaced Golomoti Road, behind Mua Mission. This beautiful scenic route threads up the Rift wall, giving stunning views out across the valley and the lake. Stop to admire the workmanship of the Golomoti craftsmen and their delightful models of road-making equipment.
Malawi’s fish are a great tourist attraction to divers and snorkellers. There are more species of fish in the Rift Valley Lakes than in any comparable areas of water in the world - in fact new species are discovered every year. The majority of them belong to the family known as cichlidae and they have adapted and evolved to fit highly specific niches within the lakes. Cichlids are generally small, and the most attractive are the colourful, flashing, striped and decorated fish, seen to best advantage at Cape Maclear and around the islands.

The local fishing industry relies on a whitebait-like fish called usipa and utaka, more like sardines, caught in large quantities in deep water. Visitors will see the catch on drying racks near Malawi’s many fishing villages. Larger species like mpasa (lake salmon), and kampango are eaten, but the gourmet favourite remains the bream-like chambo.
MISSIONS, BEACHES AND BAOBABS

Imagine a Gothic cathedral on a tiny island in a tropical sea. St Peter, holding the keys to the Gates of Heaven, gazes across the rocky shoreline edged with indigo and ultramarine, to the mountains of Mozambique. The biblical rooster at his feet looks remarkably African.

This is Likoma Island, a patch of Malawi in Mozambican waters, since the Island was the headquarters of the Universities Mission (Anglican) in the late 1890’s. Chosen as protection from constantly warring tribes, a rocky castle with a natural moat. The first bishop, Chauncey Maples, drowned shortly after his appointment when his boat capsized in a storm. He was on his way to this place, though the cathedral itself was built some ten years later.

Stay, if you can, for the service on Sunday, when the grace of bricks and girders are fleshed out by joyful African voices raised in harmony. It’s a stirring experience for tourists and believers both.

The island boasts very few vehicles but many paths criss-cross it. Walking among the baobabs and mango trees, keep your eyes peeled for the little crimson-rumped waxbills, unique to Likoma.

Boats will ferry you round the island, across to Mozambique, or to the smaller island of Chizumulu (see opposite page). Beware of crocodiles, though, in this seeming sea. And know that there are sudden fierce storms - between here and Nkhata Bay the newly launched m.v.Vipya sank in 1946.

On the south-western shore, luxury eco-lodge Kaya Mawa basks in the glory of granite boulders, sandy beaches and baobabs, an intoxicating blend of English fairytale and African legend.

A visit to Likoma, on the ubiquitous m.v. Ilala or by private air charter, is unlike any experience anywhere else. Here the heart slows to a different rhythm.

Opposite Likoma and Chizumulu islands (right) is the bustling port of Nkhata Bay. There, and around Chintheche to the south, are dozens of other small, often simple, lodges built of local materials and right on the lovely silver sand beaches. Activities here include snorkelling, wind gliding, kayaking, diving, fishing, boat trips, bird-watching, mountain biking and equestrian sport/horse riding. Government trained guides are available at Nkhata Bay but best check their identity cards before hiring.
Although Malawi has not yet yielded much in the way of hominid remains (to date, only one jawbone dated at around 2.5 million years) it is in this region that the earliest ancestors of humans lived. The roots of language, story and communication were formed here.

Before recorded history, movements of peoples swept central Africa and national boundaries were not recognised. Only with the colonial influx were borders and nations established - often with little reference to the people who lived there.

Africa was involved from earliest times in trade with places as far away as Arabia, India and China. Slave taking and the exchange of gold, ivory and other tropical products for desirable exotic goods took place long before travellers arrived from Europe.

There is a strong Islamic influence, especially around the lake, from these early contacts, which predated a powerful Christian initiative into the region through missionaries such as David Livingstone and many others.

During the colonial period, the country was incorporated into the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, achieving independence in 1964 with Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda as Prime Minister, later (Life) President.

Malawi held democratic elections in 1994 for the first time since independence and the three decades of government by the nation’s Founding Father, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. After three such elections, true democracy is well established, amid the rule of law and order. The current President, re-elected in 2009 with a resounding popular victory, is Dr Bingu wa Mutharika.
**Mulanje**

**THE PEAKS**

Malawi is dotted with isolated outcrops of rock, or *inselbergs*. It is part of the landscape’s charm, and much of the natural diversity of the country is due to these elevated islands offering unusual habitats.

One can think of Mount Mulanje in almost the same way. It is an isolated granite massif, covering over a thousand square kilometres. From a distance, it’s hard to believe Mulanje is not a range of mountains; it seems long, rather than high. Yet it is so tall that it creates its own climate, and is known to be unkind, even lethal to those who dare take the mountain for granted. The summit, the highest in south-central Africa at 3000m, is called Sapaiva, which is said to mean “Don’t go there!” The warning challenges the determined climber. Sapaiva does require experience, though often testing endurance rather than technique. The west face of Chambe peak is the real challenge, offering nearly 1700m of roped climbing and said to be the longest rock climb in Africa. There is a guide book with routes for climbers and walkers on this unique massif.

For the less dedicated, Mulanje offers equally great rewards. Spectacular views across tea plantations to Mozambique, sheer drops down gullies laced with waterfalls; glades shaded by forest trees where purple crested locusts and sun squirrels scuttle along the branches; montane grasslands dotted with ground orchids and gladioli and alive with butterflies; forests of fragrant Mulanje cedar trees.

Beautifully sited mountainside accommodation can be found at KaraO’Mula in Mulanje town, Likhubula Forest Lodge and Thuchila Forest Lodge.

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**THE MOUNT MULANJE PORTERS’ RACE**

Are you strong and adventurous enough? Like running up mountains? Then the Mount Mulanje Porter’s race may be the ideal challenge for you. Originally, the Porters’ Race was a competition limited to the superfit porters and guides, who escort tourists up the mountain. It has now become an annual event attracting any interested runner, male or female over 18 years old, who feels fit enough to run a rocky and rough route up the mountain for a distance of about 25 km. Hundreds entered in 2009 which was sponsored by the local NBS bank and others. The Race starts at Likhubula Forest Office and climbs to Chambe Plateau, about 2500m a.s.l, before proceeding (via Chambe plateau) to Lichenya Plateau and back to Likhubula.
Mulanje

Mulanje is within easy reach of Blantyre on a beautiful new road, making it a superb day outing for visitors. The drive through the Shire Highlands is satisfying in itself. Some tea estates, like Satemwa, (113213.233@compuserve.com) in Thyolo and Lujeri, on the lower slopes of Mulanje (lujeri@lujeri.com), offer gracious guest houses for those who would like to spend more time exploring the area. The tea plantations have a haunting beauty, and the relic bush, that clings, despite deforestation, to the stream banks shelters a wealth of specialised flora and fauna.

On the mountain itself are six climbers’ huts, maintained jointly by the Department of Forestry and the Mountain Club of Malawi. (mcm@saints.mcula.co.uk) Malawi’s famous tenda-tenda, (porters, literally “those who carry”, the term was also used to refer to the postal runners in the old days) will be more than happy to carry your luggage or pack on your climb but make sure your chosen guide has a Government issued identity card indicating he has been formally trained. It is good manners to employ at least one porter per person, even if you carry little more than a day pack. Friendly and out-going, the tenda-tenda know every nuance of the mountain, and the guides will prove invaluable in the sudden changes of weather to which Mulanje is prone. Laurens van der Post’s Venture to the Interior has a harrowing account of one such occasion, where the advice of the guide was fatally ignored.

For authoritative advice on Mulanje, visit the website of the Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (www.mountmulanje.org.mw, mmct@malawi.net)

CEDAR

Mulanje Cedar, Widdringtonia whytei. Threatened by logging in the past, the cedars may not survive the next half century. In the late 1890’s the offices of the Commissioner of British Central Africa, as colonial Malawi was then called, were roofed with beams and shingles of Mulanje cedar. Visitors can still buy beautifully carved trinket boxes and chests of this pale, beautifully scented wood.
Islands in the Sky

HILLTOP HAUNTS

**Zomba**

For many, Malawi’s mountains are the most magical aspect of the country. Just stand on top of the Zomba plateau and gaze across the Phalombe plains to majestic Mulanje, and you’ll soon agree. Stop at the Sunbird Ku Chawe on the sheer lip of the plateau, at least for a cup of tea. Curled at your feet lies the charming town of Zomba, one time capital, and now Malawi’s university town. The bowl of the mountain top is a forest reserve, and has a primitive beauty. Among the plantations are patches of indigenous forest, cool streams and high grasslands, and from the view points, Malawi laid out like a relief map. Hike, fish or ride, but take your binoculars and camera.

Zomba is about an hour from Blantyre. The Mtenga-tenga Postal Museum is a must for philatelists, and art lovers should look out for road-side stalls selling hand-made clay pots and whimsical “mud heads”.

As you enter Zomba, there is the King’s African Rifles War Memorial, to the men who gave their lives in the two World Wars. About half an hour north of Zomba at Chingale are the craftsmen who specialise in carving chief’s chairs. Each made from a single trunk, the chair’s simple design is ornamented by bas relief carvings.

These are uniquely Malawian.
Dzalanyama
Less than 50km west of Lilongwe, Dzalanyama is about two hours away by car. Like Dedza, Dzalanyama is a working forestry area, with both pine and gum plantations. There are also wonderful areas of unspoiled forest and bush, with plenty of scope for mountain biking and hiking, or simply enjoying the fresh mountain streams and waterfalls.

Dzalanyama has great significance for many of the people of Malawi who believe that it is the site of creation - the footprints of the very first man are still, they say, to be seen in the rocks where God set him down. This forest range is the catchment area for most of Lilongwe’s water supply.

Ntehisi
The rewards in getting to Ntehisi make it well worth the effort. The Reserve includes one of the few true relic rain forest areas in Malawi. Cathedral-like glades of buttressed trees are hung with lianas, and butterflies dart like fish in the leaf-filtered gloom. The call of a green bulbul or the hollow “chonk” of a samango monkey echo through the mossed stems. Not long ago elephants used to wander around the Lodge, and leopards still prowl among the rocky outcrops.

Be warned: do not go walking alone in the rain forest. Several of the game trails can have pit-fall traps in them. It is safest to take a guide with you.

Dedza
To the south of Lilongwe, Dedza Mountain rises almost 2200m above the Great Rift Valley. From the summit, a glorious view of Lake Malawi is possible. Accessible, almost to the very top, by a 4 x 4 track, Dedza is a bird-watcher’s delight. Pockets of indigenous montane forest tucked into gullies between rolling grasslands provide a wonderfully varied habitat. Make it a full day’s outing from Lilongwe, visit Chogoni rock art - a world heritage site, and have lunch at Dedza Pottery’s garden tea-room in the village below. Here is Malawi’s biggest pottery where items may be designed to customer’s specifications and shipped anywhere in the world.
**In the North**

**Viphya, Nyika & Vwaaza Marsh**

**Nyika National Park**
Almost the entire Nyika Plateau is a National Park, Malawi’s largest, and one of the most unusual in Africa. Mainly high rolling grassland, Nyika is a wonderland of flowers. Ground orchids, proceas, irises, aloes… it’s a botanist’s paradise. Nyika has a scale of its own. Everything seems dwarfed by the vast landscape, trout dams seem mere puddles, and the pine plantation at Chelinda clings to a rise in the ground like a skull cap. Herds of eland, the largest of the antelope, seem most perfectly proportioned here.

The eastern edge of the plateau forms the wall of the Great Rift Valley. It is possible to hike all the way down to Livingstonia, and going on foot is the very best way to appreciate the scale of Nyika without overlooking the exquisite detail. There are rainbow trout in the dams, and mountain bikes for hire. Accommodation at all levels, from a luxury lodge to camping, is available at Chilinda in the middle of the plateau.

**Viphya**
The undulating Viphya Plateau lies between 1500 and 1800 m with inselbergs thrusting even higher. To the north-west is Nyika, reaching an impressive 2600m. The two great plateaux are separated by the South Rukuru River as it carves its way to the lake. On the northern edge of the Viphya before it drops down into the Rukuru valley, lies Mzuzu, the capital city of the Northern region.

The Viphya pine plantations are said to have been the largest in Africa. Patches of indigenous forest survive between the marching rows of pines and the original open heathland in the east of the plateau, making it a wonderful area to explore on foot, or mountain bike, even by four wheel drive on remote tracks. For bird-watchers, Malawi is at the interface between east and southern African bird distributions, and many unusual birds are easy to spot here. Contrast the serene forest and the exhilaration of physical adventure by combining a birding safari with a mountain bike trail down the Great Rift escarpment on a newly re-opened track to beautiful Chintheche on the Lakeshore.
Vwaza

Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve is a must if you visit Nyika by road. To the west, between the Viphya and the Nyika plateaux, it lies in a flat alluvial plain. Where the South Rukuru River leaves the park, it forms Lake Kazuni, a meagre lake by Malawi standards, but hugely attractive to wildlife. Vwaza Marsh was one of the most renowned source areas for ivory in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and it is now again one of the best places to see elephant in Malawi, and buffalo, too. A guided walking safari will add to the delight of your stay.

Looking over Livingstonia Mission station and Lake Malawi to the 3 000m Livingstone range in southern Tanzania
**The Upper Shire**

**WATERWAYS**

The Shire River drains Lake Malawi to the south. With the giant lake as its headwaters, the Shire is already a muscular river at its origin, Mangochi. It is the north-south axis of southern Malawi, and through history has functioned as an umbilical cord of the evolving country. People and trade goods, formative influences on the region, travelled up this silver ribbon of water - Eastern traders and ivory hunters, Portuguese explorers, Zulu impi, Arab slavers and their arch enemy, the Scots missionary explorer often credited with laying the groundwork for the country that was to become modern Malawi, Dr David Livingstone. He was, in turn, followed by a stream of missionaries and businessmen.

Heading south from the Lake, the Shire River spreads into a lake of its own making, shallow Lake Malombe (right), before picking up speed across the uneven floor of the Great Rift. From Lake Malombe to almost the outskirts of the town of Liwonde, the river cuts through the western edge of Liwonde National Park. The river is at once the focus and mainstay of the park. In the wet season, when roads are impassable, the Shire provides access to the Park on powerboats and specially designed riverboats. In the dry, its strong perennial waters provide green flood plains of winter forage and water for the parks animals.

Mvuu Lodge is built on the most spectacular riverbank site in the park, with views fringed with palm, fig and fever trees against the distant backdrop of the blue Rift Valley wall. Elephants splash knee deep in reeds, and hippo honk and yawn in the shallows. Secreted elsewhere in the woodlands and thickets behind the lodge are the rest of the Big Five, but with four hundred species of birds already recorded in the park, you might not have time to look for them!
LIWONDE, RHINO AND TRANSLOCATION

Taking stock of success

Liwonde, when Livingstone was still exploring the area, was renowned as a hunting paradise. Rare elephant hunting classics were written about the prolific wildlife on the Shire’s riverbanks as early as 1868. This resulted in the loss of nearly all larger mammal species by the turn of the century.

With Malawi’s independence wiser counsel prevailed; conservation became the target. This unique riverine area was declared a National Park in 1979 and ambitious translocation was started into the Park of many of the original species. In the late nineties a breeding pair of black rhino was re-introduced and there are now nine of that species. Other species too have multiplied very successfully - to the extent that Liwonde now supplies animals to the newest conservation areas in Malawi, such as Majete and even to South African parks. A remarkable conservation success.
**The Lower Shire**

**DOWN SOUTH**

Linking the southern tip of Lake Malawi with the Zambezi system, the Shire is a python of a river, snaking across an almost flat landscape. But midway between its origin above Mangochi, and its end in the wide Zambezi basin, the Shire drops down a series of dramatic cascades and falls, and the broad and handsome river is squeezed to fury by unrelenting rock.

The last of these is the rapids that form the Kapichira Falls, the Murchison Cataracts as David Livingstone called them. From this point the river again breathes easily, and makes its stately way through the wide flood plain at the foot of the Thyolo Escarpment.

Close to the falls and the hydro-electric scheme which now harnesses their energy is the entrance to Majete Wildlife Reserve, an area of 70 000ha. It is 65 km south-east of Blantyre and set in an area of undulating and hilly country. First established as a Wildlife Reserve in 1955 the Reserve suffered heavy poaching and by the mid-nineties virtually all the wildlife had been destroyed.

From 2003, Majete has been developed and protected by the African Parks Foundation, restoring it as a flourishing conservation area. The wildlife of Majete today includes close to 100 elephant, over 350 buffalo and many waterbuck, sable antelope, nyala, eland, zebra, Liechtenstein’s hartebeest, kudu, impala, duiker, warthog, baboon and vervet monkey. Hippo are commonly seen sheltering in the quieter waters of the fast-flowing Shire river which borders the reserve. After the challenging relocation of seven more last year, Majete is now also home to a total of nine black rhino!

African Parks emphasises community work in helping the people living around Majete to benefit from the Reserve as well. Developing income generating activities such as bee-keeping, rabbitry, baking and forming traditional music groups are some of the activities undertaken.

From Majete, moving south, the low flat valley captures and intensifies the heat; baobabs stand silent sentinel in rolling plains of sugar cane, the blue escarpment shimmers in the heat haze. West of the cane belt lies Lengwe National Park, where the Shire flood plain can be seen as it was in Livingstone’s day. A picturesque mosaic of open parkland and thicket around enchanting shallow pools, the park was created as a haven for the shy and beautiful nyala, at the northernmost limit of its range. Numerous other animals regularly seen include buffalo, leopard, kudu, warthog, nyala, impala and many other smaller species. Over 300 bird species have been recorded in Lengwe, an ornithological paradise.
MORE TO SEE

Kapichira Falls
These were the rapids that put an end to David Livingstone’s up-river exploration in the ill fated paddle-steamer Ma-Robert. Today the falls are harnessed to provide part of Malawi’s hydro-electric power. Purists bemoan the fact, yet the construction has been achieved with considerable sensitivity. Looking back from further down river, the wall is barely visible and there is almost no sign of powerlines. Elephant are frequently seen cavorting in the dam.

Nyala Park
At a time when it seemed that the number of nyala in Lengwe was diminishing alarmingly, SUCOMA set aside a tract of land and a small breeding group of nyala were moved from Lengwe into this area. The nyala thrive and prosper, and other game has been introduced also, notably giraffe, an animal not naturally found in Malawi. They look strangely short under a canopy of towering fever-trees, one of the most remarkable scenic pleasures of Nyala Park. The Park not being open to the general public, visitors require permission from SUCOMA.

SUCOMA
Sugar is a fairly modern cash crop in Malawi, despite the fact that the first sugar mill was erected in Zomba before the close of the 1800’s. The Sugar Corporation of Malawi is one of the largest industries in the country. The road between SUCOMA and Blantyre is kept in good condition. SUCOMA has a well-run Sports Club with a restaurant, bar and limited accommodation, and is a useful stopping point when exploring the area.
Tea is Malawi’s second biggest export crop, and is grown mostly in Thyolo and Mulanje. The contrast of green moss-like tea plantations, so controlled and neat, with the soaring jagged bulk of blue rock and wild darkness of natural forest is magnificent. The small town of Thyolo is about half way between Blantyre and Mulanje, and is an arc of colonial-looking shop-fronts on a bend of the highway. Many visit tea estates such as Satemwa as a half day trip out of Blantyre, but if you wish to spend more time in this beautiful area, several of the tea estates, have opened their guest cottages to the general public (see page 15).

Thyolo Forest Reserve on Thyolo Mountain is under intense threat from illegal logging and general wood poaching. It is the only home of the Cholo alethe, which makes it a must for twitchers. A local guide is recommended.

The road down to Elephant Marsh around the meandering southern reaches of the River shire – a fascinating area in itself, beloved of photographers - strikes off from the main road in Thyolo town, an unsurfaced road that winds over the hump-backed Thyolo escarpment, and past the most remote estate in all Malawi - Zoa Tea Estate. From the gardens of the main house othere is a stunning view across the Ruo valley between Thyolo Mountain and the Mulanje Massif.

Zoa Falls on the Ruo (right) can be reached on foot from Thekerani Station. It’s a little off the road route to Chiromo. It is extraordinary that an area so physically close to Blantyre should be so utterly remote, but that gives a clear indication of the difficulty of the terrain.
Further south lies Mwabvi, till now the Cinderella of Malawi’s parks and reserves. It is the smallest and most remote of Malawi’s wildlife reserves. It is indeed an expedition to reach it, still not to be attempted unaccompanied or in an ordinary sedan.

The Mwabvi Wildlife Reserve is set to become the fourth privately managed Reserve on independent funding. It is proving to be a reliable conservation area providing sanctuary for a number of vulnerable plants and animals. Close to wilderness, and a bush connoisseur’s delight, it boasts hilly terrain, interspersed with sandstone ridges and rocky gorges. It is possibly the most beautiful of all Malawi’s parks, with rivers cutting through rugged gorges and riverine forest, and open glades ablaze with slanting sunlight and butterflies. Mwabvi was made a Wildlife Reserve in 1953 but years of neglect, uncontrolled hunting and deforestation had led to such a serious depletion of mammals and plants that, by the year 2000, it was in danger of losing its status as a Wildlife Reserve.

Kenneth Smith, of Barefoot Safaris in Lilongwe, visiting Mwabvi in 2003 to assess the remnant wildlife assets, was encouraged to embark on its rehabilitation by the guttural whoops of the hyena and the felon cry of the many wild birds.

He gained the support of a regeneration agency in the UK specialising in delivering social and economic regeneration and with the community, local and international volunteers, the Malawi Government’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife, the new pairing created Project African Wilderness (PAW) to save precious, yet so threatened, Mwabvi.

Since then PAW has upgraded and built a new campsite, six camping places, each with its own braai, running potable water and rubbish bin. A borehole has been sunk with submersible pump and water tank. The reception, ablutions, hide and bar will be completed in 2008.

None of the Lower Shire Parks should really be attempted in the rains, when dirt roads can become impassable. Majete is the possible exception, depending on the progress of upgrading but that should be checked prior to a visit. However, since the dry season provides better visibility and slightly fewer insects, the period April to September is the best time to explore the region.
**Cities & Centres**

**Starting Points**

**Lilongwe**

With northern Malawi increasingly favoured by international tourists and Lilongwe the kick-off point for regional destinations such as Zambia’s Luangwa valley and the resorts on the Mozambican side of the lake, many flights into Malawi touch down at Lilongwe, the capital. Being some distance from town, the drive in affords the visitor a preview of the Central African highlands countryside, through mostly ‘mango savannah’.

There was extensive indigenous woodland before the construction of the capital, copses of which are still carefully conserved in the Lilongwe Nature Sanctuary. This area, now known as the Lilongwe Wildlife Centre, boasts a wildlife rehabilitation and care facility, nature trails through 65 hectares of pristine wilderness area, where the released wildlife can be seen, environmental and life skills education facilities and a beautifully appointed lodge for overnight guests.

The new city, three kilometres north of the “Old Town”, has been laid out with an eye to future development and a keen sense of green space, particularly along the wide natural drainage lines. The street layout has avoided the colonial grid-pattern, making it at once more interesting and attractive to the eye, if more confusing for the visitor.

**Blantyre**

Some international flights land at Chileka International Airport near Blantyre, the centre from which to explore the southern region. Blantyre, seen right, below, from its leafy suburb Nyambadwe, is Malawi’s oldest and largest city and commercial capital. Vibrant and bustling, it is slowly losing its quaint, older buildings which lent a flavour of the past. Nevertheless, its tree-lined streets, often jacarandas (below), and high elevation, surrounded by hills, give it a distinctive beauty.

**Zomba**

The charming town of Zomba was for many years the capital of Malawi, and retains a little of the colonial flavour. Threaded by streams and shaded by ancient mbawu (mahogany) trees, it’s Malawi’s university town. Tucked into the base of Zomba Mountain, the town peers out across the Phalombe plain towards Mulanje, with Lake Chilwa to the north. Sir Harry Johnston, the first Commissioner of British Central Africa, later to become Nyasaland, placed his residency here, saying that Blantyre “was pretty, but Zomba was superb.”

Zomba is still superb. The original Commissioner’s Residence of 1886 is still standing, now functioning as the colonial-flavoured Hotel Masongola. Apart from the University, Zomba still is a centre of considerable importance as the headquarters of many government departments. Its biotic
wealth make it a “must” for eco-tourists, birders will be especially thrilled as the town and the mountain boast, between them, five species of bulbul, five sunbirds, two twinspots, two unusual flycatchers, pygmy kingfishers and the redfaced crimson-wing.

**Karonga**

Even further north is the historically fascinating town of Karonga. Lying close to the northernmost point of the Lake, this was the headquarters of the slave trader, Mlozi, and the scene of many battles. Karonga saw the first naval action of World War I! To crown its historical claim to fame, it has fossil beds which have yielded a fragment of humanoid jaw-bone roughly 2.4 million years old, and Karonga’s pride, a dinosaur about 100 million years old, called *Malawisaurus*. A reconstruction of this dinosaur is housed in the special cultural museum in Karonga.

Karonga lies en route to the remote mountains and reserves of southern Tanzania and is the gateway to the Misuku Hills, which are a botanist’s and bird watcher’s delight and where, increasingly, superb coffee is grown.

The Cultural Museum Centre, where you can book historical tours of Karonga, is part of the Uraha Foundation. Tel 01 362 579 or 574, uraha@malawi.net

**Mzuzu**

Mzuzu is the capital of the Northern region. It is the fastest growing urban area in Malawi and from tiny developments in the late forties, centred on tung growing, at the time an essential oil for paint, it is now a thriving small city. It is increasingly a base for tourism to the surrounding high plateaux, such as the Viphya, (Elephant Rock, below) and the even higher Nyika Plateau. See page 18. It is also very close to the best beaches on the shores of Lake Malawi, to the north of Nkhata Bay and south around Chintheche.
Malawi is not a wealthy country, but there are riches in the people. These are the most polite, patient and friendly folk the visitor is ever likely to meet. Their peace-loving nature fosters a need to please, and often their personal sensitivity towards a stranger makes them seem almost psychic. As a crowd, their sense of humour overcomes their sensitivity, and a discomforting moment, like a collapsing chair, is greeted with joyful hilarity. Malawians might have invented retail therapy, since buying and selling is, to them, not so much an economic exchange as an essential social transaction.

Malawian loyalty is also legendary. One need look no further than the fact that as an ex-colonial independent state, Malawi still honours the man who initiated colonisation. Dr David Livingstone is commemorated in Blantyre, named for his birthplace, the motor vessel *Ilala* still remembers his death, and the name Livingstonia continues to celebrate his concern for the people of this country.
Livingstone was an extraordinary man. If the Victorian British public took him to their hearts as a missionary explorer / hero and modest family man, the Africans saw him as a saviour, a man of iron will and unflinching bravery, a medical man who gave his life for the betterment of the African.

With your eyes crinkled against the dancing light from Livingstone’s Lake of Stars, you can almost catch a glimpse of the figure in a three piece, blue serge suit despite the heat, hands arrogantly on hips, peaked cap squarely set, walrus moustache bristling irritably.

Malawi, in fact, seems to straddle time. In rural areas life continues much as it did centuries ago: the men will hunt perhaps, or fish; women will draw water, hoe the fields, pound grain or cassava into meal, gather indigenous plants for relishes or cures. If there is too little to go round, as is increasingly the case, the men will go in search of work, and come face to face with the other, urban and very modern, Malawi.

Malawi’s loveliness touches the heart. Landlocked and isolated by rugged terrain, it has a balmy year-round climate and wonderfully fertile and productive land. It once had tall forests of beautiful trees as far as the eye could see, and the Lake was a magic pot producing endless quantities of fish and sparkling fresh water. Its very isolation afforded some protection. It was a fecund, flourishing little paradise, and in many ways, it still is.

But, in the meantime, Malawi remains a mostly undiscovered African jewel. The name is said to refer to “reflected light”. Some feel this means the burning light from the lake, some think it’s the reflected fire of dawn.

Dawn and dusk do coax magical reflections from clouds, especially over the gently breathing swell of the Lake. Towering meringues of apricot and peach, shot with lilac mother-of-pearl, or molten rivers of volcano red and tongues of orange fire lie across strata of banked cloud, the shifting mirror of water a deepening echo of the splendour.

In the hazy midday, when the mountains of Mozambique or Tanzania melt into misty sky and the edge of water fades away, lake, sky and earth are one seamless continuum, a dreamlike whole. Reality shudders in the heat-haze. Malawi itself seems as ephemeral as reflected light, and how you respond to it reflects yourself.
For Further Information on Malawi, go to:

www.malawitourism.com