

Best of Malawi

James Bainbridge discovers why this diverse country should top your 2018 travel bucket list





You may see schools of *mbuna* (rockfish), cichlids with iridescent stripes and dapples, or eat a cichlid in the form of bream-like *chambo*, a staple of Malawian braais.

With operators and lodges offering diving courses and equipment in spots such as Nkhata Bay and Cape Maclear, Malawi is an affordable place to give this a try, with dependably warm water, calm conditions and decent visibility. Get ready to learn all about the cichlids' complex mating rituals and mouth brooding (oral incubation of their offspring), and the dreaded lake flies that form black columns.

HIKING AND CLIMBING

Away from the lake, hiking and climbing routes await at Mount Mulanje. This misty massif – where some 20 peaks climb to over



Whether you're diving the clear, cichlid-inhabited waters of Lake Malawi, hiking the dramatic peaks of Mount Mulanje, or hippo-spotting at one of the new safari destinations, a visit to 'the warm heart of Africa' and its friendly people will deliver the experience of a lifetime.

ATTRACTIONS INCLUDE DOLPHINFISH, WHICH SWARM TOWARDS DIVERS' TORCHES

ON THE LAKE

For diversity and richness of wildlife, it's hard to beat the 'calendar lake' – as Lake Malawi is called for being 365 miles (587 km) long, 52 miles (84 km) wide and fed by 12 rivers. This watery Serengeti is one of the world's best freshwater dive spots, with around 1 000 mostly endemic fish species – more than any other inland body of water in the world. Attractions include dolphinfish, which swarm towards divers' torches at night, and the multicoloured members of Africa's largest fish family, the *Cichlidae* (cichlids).

3 000 m amid waterfall-fed valleys, black eagles and endemic Mulanje cedars – is fringed by emerald-green tea plantations. Mountain huts enable multi-day hikes, and you can relax afterwards with a tour and tasting on a tea estate such as Satwema, where the 1930s Huntingdon House serves afternoon tea overlooking its croquet lawn.

Also in southern Malawi, the Zomba Plateau sits at 1 800 m near the elegantly decaying town of Zomba, with hiking trails and horseback tours leading to viewpoints and waterfalls. Up north, Nyika National

Park is a breathtaking slice of highland scenery located at 2 000 m above sea level, where photogenic antelope and zebras pose in the rolling grasslands. Tour coffee plantations and explore the Nyika Plateau on guided walks and drives, with the prospect of spotting a member of the large leopard population after dark.

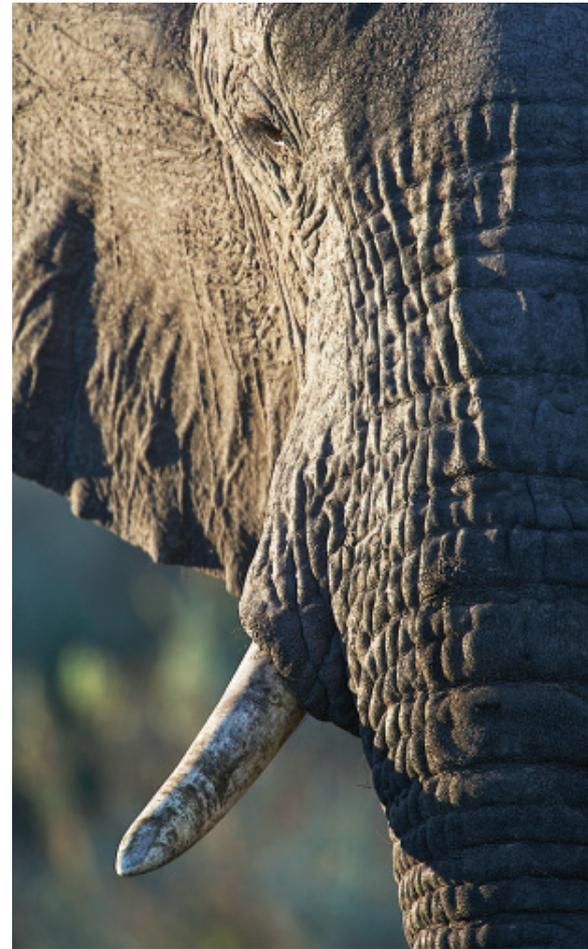
SAFARI BUZZ

Mozambique’s northern neighbour usually evokes images of its great lake and is less often associated with sightings of magnificent lions and elephants – but that is slowly changing with the involvement of African Parks. Currently managing Malawi’s three major wildlife parks, the Dutch NGO recently made conservation history by relocating 500 elephants from overpopulated Liwonde National Park and Majete Wildlife Reserve to Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve. Even Britain’s Prince Harry, president of African Parks, got involved – the rugged royal spent nearly three weeks carrying out tasks such as helping anaesthetised elephants to the ground and affixing radio collars. This followed the translocation of four lions from South Africa’s Pilanesberg National Park and Madikwe Game Reserve to Majete, making the southern reserve Malawi’s only big-five park; Majete and Liwonde are set to receive more lions and cheetahs this year.

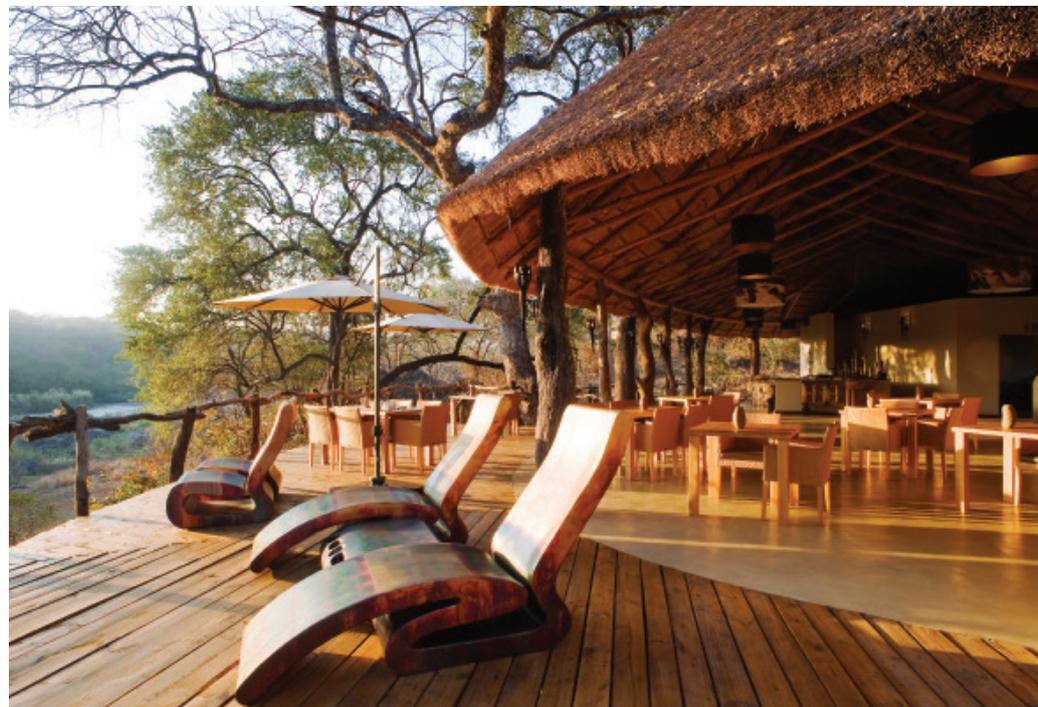
Happily for one of the world’s poorest countries, the arrival of these animals is creating a buzz about Malawi as a safari destination, with Robin Pope Safaris setting up its new Kuthengo Camp in Liwonde and Kachenga Bush Camp opening in Nkhotakota. The country duly featured on lists of the top destinations to visit in 2018, compiled by everyone from *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* to *Esquire* and *Vice*. Rough Guides named it the world’s third best pick for travellers; while Nkhotakota’s Tongole Wilderness Lodge and Likoma Island’s dreamy Kaya

Mawa collectively won five of the 16 ‘Best in Africa’ awards at the 2018 Safari Awards, with the latter rated ‘most romantic property’.

Malawian safaris are more affordable than those in some neighbouring countries, and the parks’ gravel roads are generally quiet. There’s accommodation to suit every budget, ranging from luxurious retreats such as Majete’s Mkulumadzi Lodge, with grass-roofed chalets overlooking the Shire River, to the more affordable A-frame tents at Bushman’s Baobabs in Liwonde. The three parks offer diverse experiences: Majete and Nkhotakota are classic chunks of African bush, with guided canoe safaris available on the latter’s crocodile-inhabited Bua River. Liwonde is the country’s premier safari destination and one of Africa’s best locations for river-based wildlife watching, with boat trips to spot some of the 500-plus elephants and 2 000 hippos. The 584 km² park also has Malawi’s largest black rhino population, seen against a backdrop of baobabs and lofty Palmyra palms amid the fertile floodplains, dense woodland, and lagoons sustaining more than 400 bird species.



MALAWIAN SAFARIS ARE MORE AFFORDABLE THAN THOSE IN SOME NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES





HISTORY AND CULTURE

You will find impressive churches built more than a century ago – generally by Scottish missionaries – everywhere from Blantyre to Likoma, where the Anglican St Peter’s Cathedral is one of Africa’s largest churches. Another big surprise is found among the flame trees at Mua, with its Roman Catholic Church mission founded in 1902, distinguished by a terracotta-tiled mission building fit for the Tuscan hills. Established by the church, Mua’s Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art is a knockout, offering exhibitions; workshops; a botanic garden; and sporadic Chewa, Yao and Ngoni song, dance and theatre.

Don’t miss the ‘tree of spirits’ in the centre’s Chamare Museum, hung with 280 brightly painted Gule Wamkulu masks, with interpretive panels explaining the ceremonial Chewa masks’ meanings. Ask around in central and southern Malawi to see a Gule Wamkulu dance, performed at celebrations and funerals by costumed members of the Nyau brotherhood, who pass on messages and morals from the spirit world.

Malawi’s most famous mission station is Livingstonia, named after Dr David Livingstone, who is depicted with sextant, medicine chest and local companions, against a backdrop of Lake Malawi, in a stained-glass window of the church. It was established high in the hills, as



DON’T MISS THE ‘TREE OF SPIRITS’ IN THE CENTRE’S CHAMARE MUSEUM, HUNG WITH 280 BRIGHTLY PAINTED GULE WAMKULU MASKS

the Free Church of Scotland missionaries kept succumbing to malaria at two previous lakeside bases, and the road here is a 20-bend switchback littered with the wreckage of bakkies. Nonetheless, this tortuous 900 m climb from the lake shore is worth it to lounge at Mushroom Farm or Lukwe EcoCamp, the

permaculture eco-lodges perched on the escarpment, and wander the well-preserved stone buildings on Livingstonia’s dusty lanes. Tackle the journey safely by visiting on a 4WD tour with Willie Louw, the South African owner of Hakuna Matata lodge in lakeside Chitimba, at the bottom of the switchback.



NEED TO KNOW

Currency

Malawian kwacha (R1 = MK62). Carrying US dollars in cash will save you money on the conversion to kwacha and avoid you relying on ATMs, which only dispense small amounts and frequently malfunction.

Safety

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

Health

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

Getting there

Malawian Airlines (malawian-airlines.com) and South African Airways connect Joburg to Lilongwe and Blantyre.

Visas

South Africans do not require a visa to visit Malawi.

Getting around

Ulendo Airlink (fijulendo.com) operates Cessna flights between Lilongwe, Blantyre, Liwonde, Majete, Nkhatakota, Likoma, Nyika, the lake shore and beyond. Otherwise, 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 of a hassle than renting a car, and much the same cost.

ON THE BEACH

When it’s time for the beach, Lake Malawi’s many resorts, beach towns and fishing villages are tempting spots at which to hit the hammock or cruise to an island such as Mumbo or Domwe, both a few kilometres off Cape Maclear. Choices range from Cape Maclear, Monkey Bay and Senga Bay at the

southern end of the lake to northern Nkhata Bay, Likoma and the Chintheche strip. All are inviting hang-outs with a Caribbean feel to their reggae bars and fisherman’s nets drying on the sand. Snorkel, kayak, party at the lodges, watch the decrepit *Ilala Ferry* pass by – you’ll quickly get used to Lake Malawi’s mellow subtropical pace. ●

BEACH TOWNS AND FISHING VILLAGES ARE TEMPTING SPOTS AT WHICH TO HIT THE HAMMOCK OR CRUISE TO AN ISLAND



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