

Type: SAFARI

Best from: LILONGWE/ BLANTYRE

You need: 2 WEEKS



▶▶ The Land of Smiles: Malawians are amongst the happiest and friendliest people in all of Africa. PICS/STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

MALAWI: MAGICAL LAND OF SMILES

'The warm heart of Africa' boasts hungry hippos, genial people and a lazy beach, all packed into a country smaller than Tamil Nadu

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LONG before I boarded my flight to the 'Warm Heart of Africa', I had heard talk of a tiny African nation renowned to be home to some of the friendliest people on earth: a small slither of land-locked Africa boasting plentiful wildlife, an idyllic climate, warm water and tropical beaches.

Malawi lies a thousand miles from the nearest ocean, making its surprising claim to being a major beach destination sound somewhat extravagant. After spending considerable time trying to decide whether the country's reputation of being tropical beach paradise was warranted or simply marketing hype, I decided that the only way to find out for sure was to

jump on a plane and head off to explore this off-the-beaten-track tourist destination for myself.

After two flights and a connection through Johannesburg I was tired (not to mention a little irritable) as I descended the aircraft stairs and crossed the apron at Malawi's Lilongwe International Airport. I was gearing up for the interminable hassle and usual bureaucracy associated with airports and modern-day international air travel.

I marched determinedly towards the arrivals entrance: head down and sunglasses on. I was so focussed on getting through the airport with the minimum of fuss that I almost missed the smiling gentleman sporting a Wilderness Safaris uniform and a board that

announced he was looking for me.

"Mr Steve, you are most welcome to 'The Warm Heart of Africa'! My name is Zac and I'm so happy you chose to visit my country. How was your flight? Please let me carry that bag for you. Come now; follow me."

Well-connected Zac marched me straight up to an empty VIP immigration counter and ensured that my arrival formalities were taken care of effortlessly. I was stunned to notice that even the immigration officer managed to flash me a smile before I was whisked on through customs and into what is, undoubtedly, Africa's friendliest nation.

Variety is the spice of Malawi

The drive into southern Malawi

took us across a surreal landscape of rural villages and subsistence smallholdings peppered with gigantic granite inselbergs that towered over the undulating farmland below. First stop on my itinerary was a visit to Thawale Lodge and Majete Wildlife Reserve where an ambitious wildlife-restocking project has recently resurrected this previously denuded wilderness area.

The reintroduction of close to 4,000 animals (including elephants and rhinos) has transformed Majete into one of Malawi's top wildlife-viewing destinations. After taking a couple of enjoyable safaris in open-top Landcruisers, I decided to join five other brave souls to track an elephant bull on foot. Our armed guides used a radio transceiver to help them



▶▶ Mvuu Lodge offers discerning Malawi safari goers exceptional service and comfort in the midst of the African wilderness. Mvuu means hippo in English

pinpoint the location of the feeding elephant, while we attempted to sneak through the bush as quietly as possible for a better view. Crouching behind a tree and watching six tonnes of elephant on his terms was a truly exciting experience. Especially when barely 20 metres away, the behemoth pushed over a tree, showed a large branch into his mouth and began chewing noisily!

After my thrilling elephant encounter, I felt I almost deserved the pampering and opulence of the gorgeous Mvuu Safari Lodge. Although, with its enviable location on the Shire River in the heart of Liwonde National Park, my first night carried on where the elephant left off, and I was lulled to sleep by the sound of hungry hippos munching grass right outside

my luxurious safari tent.

Star-studded safari

Next morning, I found myself in the capable hands of Mvuu's head guide, Julius Chiomba. With 13 years of experience in Liwonde, he proved to be the perfect person to safely and knowledgeably guide me around his park. When I enquired what was the best activity, he replied without hesitation, "Boat safaris are the most popular, especially if you like close up views of crocodiles, hippos and elephants drinking!" This proved to be the ultimate understatement as our little boat bobbed barely metres from an endless procession of basking crocodiles and sleepy hippos — no doubt the very same ones that had chomped noisily around my tent the pre-



▶▶ The warm crystal clear waters of Lake Malawi are teeming with colourful fish and offer adventurous visitors the opportunity to go sailing, kayaking, swimming, even diving

vious night! And, in addition, we enjoyed great views of elephants and antelopes slaking their thirst at the river's edge.

A solid week of early morning game drives, boat cruises and walking safaris meant I had earned the right to kick back and relax on Malawi's most well-known tourist attraction: 'The Lake of Stars'.

Pumulani Lodge was advertised as 'the brightest star on the lake' and it would be hard to disagree. Five star luxury and first class service, combined with breathtaking views over the lake and a private beach,

made this the ultimate place to unwind and recharge the batteries. Although the lake is clean, clear and safe for swimming, I opted for lazing in their infinity pool with a view to die for and its sensible location mere metres from the bar!

Mumbo Island is a rustic 10-bed lodge on a private island in the waters of the celebrated Lake Malawi National Park. The lodge trades extravagance and opulence for an idyllic location, golden sand beach, and laidback island vibe. The island is small and can be explored on foot; however, stable sea kayaks offer an attractive alternative. A paddle around the island took me past secluded rocky coves, prolific birdlife and frolicking otters. Looking down through the crystal clear water, I watched colourful cichlid fish

swimming under my kayak without even having to don a mask and snorkel. After three days of enjoying Mumbo I was so addicted, I would happily have stayed another week.

Smiles all around

My final stop was Likoma Island, renowned as home to the friendliest communities in a country famous for beaming smiles and easy-going people. The recently upgraded Kaya Mawa Lodge, with its prime location on a boulder-strewn peninsula wedged between two



▶▶ Sunbathing hippos litter the muddy shores of the Upper Shire River in Malawi's Liwonde National Park

sandy beaches, was the perfect blend of rustic charm and lavish comfort. Kaya Mawa, meaning 'maybe tomorrow', offered further opportunity to lick back, relax and leave all my worries and stresses until 'maybe tomorrow'.

Unfortunately, however, I have an aversion to too much rest and a phobia of staying still for too long, so kayaking, snorkelling, scuba diving, quad bike excursions and cultural visits to the surrounding villages kept me active and entertained. Likoma Island's action attractions, friendly faces and sunny smiles have me wanting to return again already.

The happiest place in Africa

Dynamite is said to come in small packages and Malawi, smaller in size than Tamil Nadu, is exactly that: a tiny country boasting a surprisingly diverse array of attractions centred on its azure waters and idyllic beaches.

After my two-week stay, I was left in no doubt that Malawi is the perfect destination for visitors wishing to experience one of the most beautiful and welcoming countries in Africa. From the moment I touched down in the 'Warm Heart of Africa', Malawi opened up and treated me to her legendary hospitality throughout a pulsating holiday.

HAVE FAQS?

Getting there

South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) offers a convenient Mumbai via Johannesburg and onto Lilongwe or Blantyre service. Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) is a good option with connections through Nairobi. Air Malawi (www.airmalawi.com) has limited international and domestic service. Malawi is also well suited to road transfers.

Stay, eat, do

Thawale Lodge (www.majete.org), Mvuu Lodge (www.wilderness-safaris.com), Pumulani (www.pumulani.com), Mumbo Island (www.kayakafrika.net) and Kaya Mawa (www.kayamawa.com).

Driving safaris, walking safaris and boat cruises provide wildlife viewing opportunities. Cultural visits to traditional villages and local schools are also available. Kayaking, snorkelling, diving, fishing and dhow sailing trips are offered on the turquoise waters of Lake Malawi. Alternatively, enjoy sipping delicious cocktails while lazing on idyllic golden beaches. Log on to www.malawitourism.com or www.wilderness-safaris.com/country/malawi to organise your tailor-made itinerary.