

# The Sea Inside

By PETER GODWIN

Freddie the pilot was from Denmark and he was 23. His Piper Cherokee 6 was from Florida and it was 35, “but it got a new engine last year,” he assured me. A diminutive Garmin G.P.S. that Freddie had Velcroed to the joystick was the only concession to the digital age in an otherwise retro analog cockpit arrayed with dials. His current challenge was to coax our single-engine plane high enough in the African sky to skim over the cathedral of cumulonimbus ahead, a worryingly substantial barrier. “No eating until you’re sure you won’t throw up,” the passenger in the seat behind me sternly instructed her daughter, who held a sick bag in one hand and a family-size packet of Simba chips in the other, uncertain which one to go for.

When we finally slalomed through a tiny aperture in the cloud Alp, there, stretched out below us, was a dazzling sight: the sun-beveled silver of an immense inland sea, Lake Malawi, called the calendar lake for its size, 360 miles long and 46 miles wide. The southernmost in a string of lakes that formed millions of years ago along the Great Rift Valley — the tectonic fault line running down East Africa — Lake Malawi drains south through the Shire River into the Zambezi and out into the Indian Ocean along the Mozambican coast. It seems miraculous, set as it is among the arid African hills. And as many European visitors have noticed, the lake and its shores seem to be painted in a soft, almost Mediterranean palette.

Our destination was the small island Likoma, which sits with its companion, Chizumulu, in the north of the lake. From the air, you see just how close it is to the Mozambican bank. Surrounded, in fact, by Mozambican territorial waters, these two islands, with a population of about 15,000 between them, are that rarest of geopolitical entities, lacustrine exclaves — land belonging to a larger territory from which it is cut off by the territorial lake water of another nation.

As we buzzed the bush airstrip, scattering some goats and one weaving drunkard, an astonishing apparition loomed into view, an immediate clue that the island of Likoma was once part of British-ruled Nyasaland rather than the Portuguese-ruled colony next door. It was a vast stone cathedral, built by Scottish missionaries in 1903. The missionaries saw Likoma as a tropical Iona — the small Hebridean island off the coast of Mull — set in this “cerulean lake,” as Chauncy Maples, who was consecrated Bishop of Likoma in 1895, described it in a sonnet. They recognized that it was a perfect base from which to proselytize because, according to the Anglican newsletter, “no one could invade without us noticing first.”

WHEN THE SCOTTISH MISSIONARY explorer David Livingstone first set eyes on this lake, in 1859, he, too, was immediately enamored. He wanted to name it the Lake of Stars, but upon asking what it was called, he was informed by his local porters that the lake was known as Nyasa. So that’s what he stuck with: Lake Nyasa. Only later did he realize that nyasa in the local

language actually meant “lake.” Lake Lake. (So good they named it twice, as Frank Sinatra might have crooned.)

In 1964, the British relinquished their colony, and the new nation’s first black ruler, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, renamed both the country and the lake that defines it: Malawi, which translates as “the glitter of the sun rising across the lake.” Banda ruled Malawi with frowning severity for the next 30 years, famously banning public kissing, Simon and Garfunkel’s song “Cecilia” and bare legs or pants for women. And, according to visa regulations, he outlawed “the entry of ‘hippies,’ and men with long hair and flared trousers.” Banda is gone now, and this lakeside nation is now a democracy of sorts, where all tourists, including bearded, bell-bottomed displayers of public affection, are welcome.

Tourism in Malawi, however, remains a blessedly low-volume affair. It isn’t a Big Five destination and has only a handful of high-end lodges, most of them on the lake and its sandy beaches. The country also remains among the world’s poorest and most densely populated, with almost 14 million people — mostly subsistence farmers and fishermen — in a nation roughly the size of Pennsylvania. Almost half the government budget comes from international aid. Famine-prone in the past, it now relies on fertilizer subsidies to feed itself. But Malawians are astoundingly welcoming, happy to teach you the infernally complex rules of *bao*, their traditional board game, or to walk you to a place you’re just seeking directions to. For once a country’s branding slogan, “The Warm Heart of Africa,” rings true.

It was to Malawi that my father went for his first job in Africa, after World War II. He arrived in Blantyre (Malawi’s biggest city) in October, when the jacaranda trees were bursting with their exuberant mauve livery, and he fell in love with the place. I was born and raised in Zimbabwe, almost next door, but my first real experience of Malawi was when I was 23. I had decided to return from Oxford overland, with a few friends, in an antique army surplus truck (built in 1957), and on reaching Malawi I had a similar reaction to my father’s. It seemed a magical enclave, largely overlooked by time, moving to its own gentle agrarian rhythm, without the chaotic cities of West Africa or the capitalistic clamor of the south.

ON LIKOMA, I STAYED on the southern tip of the island at Kaya Mawa (it means Maybe Tomorrow), a small lodge on land that had belonged to 13 residents, who, with the help of the local chief, entered into a partnership with a couple of Britons. With just 10 cottages, Kaya Mawa is nonetheless the largest single employer on the island after the government (the island is renowned for its boarding schools), with a staff of 70. Its managers spread the jobs around among families to avoid jealousy. Unlike many upmarket eco-lodges in the third world, this one isn’t a luxury prison, hermetically sealed off from the local population. Yet there’s no theft and no hassling, no peddlers, no begging.

The rooms at Kaya Mawa were possibly the most romantic I had ever encountered. To reach mine, you walked along a suspension bridge strung between little islands. The bed was scattered with bougainvillea blossoms, the tablecloth with marigolds. At night I fell asleep to the sound of the water gently lapping against the granite pedestal of the cottage; the flapping of the white damask at the windows as the Mwera wind freshened from the south; the murmur of the fishermen out on the lake, reed flares hanging off their dugout canoes to attract fish. The island’s

main historic attraction is the behemoth of St. Peter's. It's the size of Winchester Cathedral, built entirely by hand, and stands at a spot called Chipyela, the Place of Burning, where locals once executed suspected witches. The altar sits on what used to be the whipping post of the old slave market — Likoma was a way station on the slave route from the interior to the coast — and the wood of the crucifix over the pulpit is carved from the banyan tree under which Livingstone's heart was buried. His two loyal bearers, Sussi and Chuma, cut it out of his corpse, according to his wishes, before they desiccated the rest of his body and hauled it 1,500 miles to the East African coast and put it on a ship to London, there to be entombed in Westminster Abbey.

Alleluia Chitanda, an appropriately named cathedral guardian, unlocked a heavy iron gate and handed me "the stick of the bishop," which had an ivory crook inlaid with heavy silver sheep, fluttering pennants, saints, fleurs-de-lis and rubies. Three barefoot altar boys in white surplices carried candles down the chancel of a side chapel, and a side man swung a chained silver thurible in a full circle, leaving a liturgical contrail of incense. Birds chirped in the eaves (tin has replaced the original thatch roof), and there was a gentle whooshing around us as volunteers from the Mothers' Union, stooped in pious pairs, swept the stone floors with sheaves of elephant grass. Many of these folk are the descendants of Livingstone's original followers.

More than a century of proselytizing hasn't quite supplanted traditional beliefs on the island; there are several healers — so-called witch doctors — still practicing here. One of the island's most famous, William J. Kumpalotta, attracts clients from all over the country.

Still, along with most of Likoma's 9,000-strong population, he can be seen in church most Sundays, his matted dreadlocks tucked neatly under his turban.

Alleluia led me up some steep, rickety wooden stairs in the dark, through the brick choir loft, with its skin drums and Malawian maracas (woven-grass boxes filled with dried maize kernels) and above, to the bell tower. The view from there was commanding. On one side was the cathedral courtyard fringed with bougainvillea, flame trees and mango trees and beyond that, the cobbled market and town, the tiny dock and the glittering turquoise waters of the lake. On the other side, without preamble, was bush — thick, hungry African bush, crawling right up to the monumental brick walls. It felt as if only the women below, bent double, insistently sweeping, sweeping, were keeping it at bay. Alleluia tugged on the frayed green cord and the bells tolled out over the bush, rustling the leaves and briefly booming the cicadas into silence. But as the last peal died, they started up once more, reclaiming the foliage for themselves.

Everything on Likoma revolves around the water, which the people here call their garden. Fishing is the primary protein provider, and the lake is home to an astonishing variety of fish — 600 endemic species, more than any other lake in the world. They're mostly neon-colored cichlids, those staples of domestic tropical aquariums the world over, coexisting in a delicate and finely calibrated ecosystem, with each species carving out its particular niche. Among them are cannibals, which specialize in snacking on a particular body part; there are eye biters and fin munchers, for example. The vivid fish and the pristine water — unlike some other parts of the lake, the water here is still blessedly free of bilharzia, parasites that travel around on snails — make for brilliant diving, and you don't even have to hose down your equipment afterward. At

night you can swim with the giant catfish, measuring up to eight feet long, which ascend to the surface from their deep-water lairs.

Perhaps it is encounters with huge catfish that have fed the persistent myth about the straits off Likoma, which locals regard as a kind of Charybdis, where Malawi's equivalent of a Loch Ness monster is reputed to prowl. It's a myth nurtured too by the dark, ethereal tendrils that you sometimes see drifting across the horizon like smoke from some phantom steamer — in fact dense clouds of lake flies. Although not exactly the movement of wildebeest across the Serengeti, this is actually the greatest migration on earth: midges numbering three billion in a single cloud, so tightly packed they have been known to suffocate a man.

Twice a week, real tendrils of smoke float across the horizon announcing the arrival of the Ilala, which interrupts the lazy rhythm of the island. This 57-year-old Scottish tramp steamer throbs around the lake at up to 8 knots, stopping at 15 harbors. At 620 tons, it can take 400 passengers and a seemingly endless amount of cargo. Around the ship, lighters bob and ply like minnows, their crews shouting and haggling. I followed First Officer Tom Chisenga as he threaded his way through the throngs on its lower decks until we emerged under a dark velvet sky on the top deck of first class, at the bar. "How late does it stay open?" I inquired. He said, "Until everyone is tired," his "duh" barely unspoken.

The next morning was a Sunday, and I was due to cross over to the Mozambican mainland. I waited for the immigration officer at the wonderfully named Hunger Clinic, its sign painted on the gnarled, plump pulp of a baobab trunk. The cafe's menu featured nsima — maize meal porridge — with meat, fish, chicken, sausage, eggs or vegetables. A satellite dish propped up on the beach was feeding a fuzzy game of soccer to the television set, while the locals sipped "greens," Carlsberg or Tuborg in green bottles. Wooden dhows with triangular lateen sails made of stitched-together maize bags skittered past. The market stalls around us sold small dried fish, molded plastic shoes from China, kitenga wraps from Zambia, jeans, secondhand clothes, bundles of wood from Mozambique, yams, tomatoes, dried cassava, bananas. A dead baobab, choked by a sarcophagus of strangler fig vines, served as a storeroom. Behind it was a large hand-painted Pepsodent ad and a center for AIDS orphans. Malawi has not been spared this scourge, which currently afflicts about 12 percent of its people.

It took only 20 minutes in our inflatable boat to skim across the straits, the silhouetted ramparts of the distant Livingstone mountains in view, over to the tiny Mozambique town of Cobué (population 400). Immediately I felt the different heritage — one of war. St. Miguel Arcanjo, the Roman Catholic church here, was not as fortunate as Likoma's Anglican cathedral. Its burnt-out hulk was roofless, its walls pockmarked with bullet holes. Goats grazed in its grassy nave. The church was decapitated by Renamo guerrillas during the decades-long civil war, which finally ended in 1994. Today the Mozambique flag fluttering over the town still bears an AK-47 as its central emblem.

I'd had my own run-in with Renamo guerrillas during the war, when I tried to follow up allegations that they were using Malawi as a springboard for attacks. As President Banda didn't usually take kindly to journalists, I came into Malawi as part of a foreign press contingent covering a tour by Prince Charles and slipped away to the Mozambique border. While asking

questions in a border trading store, I was kidnapped by bandoleer-swathed guerrillas and marched to their base inside Mozambique. There, upon hearing my name, the Renamo commander remembered that my mother, a bush doctor on the Mozambique-Zimbabwe border, had vaccinated him as a child. He toasted her with warm cherry cola poured from a venerated Mateus rosé bottle, and I was escorted back to the Malawian side on a Suzuki trail bike.

These days, church services in Cobué take place under a mango tree by the beach, which is where I found the traditional chief Miguel Minofu, wearing a brown polyester suit, a striped tie, a baseball cap and a goatee. He explained to me how Cobué was ruled. “The chef de poste” — the local official — “has the power of government. But I am the ruler of this place. If I say chef de poste go away, he goes away.” Mozambique is rebuilding steadily, but since the extreme west is so far from the coastal power center and the roads are cut off by the rains for months each year, places like Cobué still feel very isolated and are the last to see development. Cobué seems more firmly tethered by the lake to Malawi, and many of its people only recently returned after sitting out the war there as refugees.

After stopping at Immigration in Cobué, we got back in the boat and headed south around a rocky bluff. “Nkwichi,” the boatman announced, grinning. In the local language, mchenga nkwichi means “squeaking sands,” because when you walk barefoot on the broad, pristine white beach, your feet squeak (you can hear the onomatopoeia in nkwichi). The lodge itself is barely visible from the lake, so well is it etched into its natural forest of the 250,000-acre Manda Wilderness Reserve. It is accessible only from the lake, with no road leading to it.

Like Kaya Mawa, Nkwichi is a serious effort to create a self-sustaining, community-oriented lodge. A joint effort among villagers and five British friends who fell in love with the location in 1996, Nkwichi now employs 75 locals who directly support another 1,250. Five percent of what you spend here goes straight to the Manda Wilderness Community Trust for the 15 villages in the surrounding area, which has so far helped to build five schools, a maternity clinic and a maize mill, and to put roofs on two churches. It also goes to assist in Nkwichi’s agricultural training program, created to help wean local farmers away from monocrop cultivation, which leaches the soil of its vitality and is one of the curses of African agriculture.

The lodge’s model farm is the program’s centerpiece. It’s run by a local manager and instructors, along with British volunteers who live in grass cabanas farther up the beach. On my first day, Jason Kanyenda, a local staff member, walked me along the white sand to the farm. Like so many Africans, he is thirsty for news of the outside. Mostly he’s curious about carbs. “What about in New York? People are growing maize there or cassava? Do they eat rice or pasta?”

The farm grows a riot of crops: passion fruit, onions, arugula, lemon grass, radish, carrot, banana trees with their bunches bagged against raiding monkeys, tomatoes, oranges, lemons. A foot pump irrigates it from a small dam — a treadmill with a mission. Everything is put to use here, right down to the empty wine bottles, turned upside down and stuck in the sand to form the borders of plant beds.

The lodge itself is completely off the grid. It uses solar energy to charge the gel batteries that run the freezers, refrigerators and lights. Mirrored sun ovens bake the bread, cook casseroles and boil

water; they're supplemented by small earthenware stoves, made at the farm kiln, that use miserly amounts of wood. And accommodations consist of free-standing teak framed cottages with tall thatched eaves, bamboo sides and glassless windows, all constructed of local materials. Mine was called Ilala (like the ship, both named after the ubiquitous Ilala palm), and it had no right angles. Everything came straight from nature, except the L.E.D. reading light attached to a bedside branch, and even that was solar powered. Natural rocks were an integral part of the room, and furniture was more like wooden sculpture: a dugout canoe as a table, chair arms made of paddles, an open-air shower built into a tree, a bathtub in the natural indentation of a dammed boulder.

At Nkwichi, you can fish, kayak or visit nearby villages. And you can explore the surrounding wilderness, as I did on my last morning, accompanied by McDonald Ziada, another local employee. Walking the bush with him was an education — it was like wandering through a grocery store. The twigs of one tree, the nkulu, explained Ziada, “we use to clean our teeth when we don't have money to buy a toothbrush.” Tombudzi bark is used to make envelopes. The fruit of the mlombwa tree cures ringworm.

Finally we reached our destination that morning, the big mlambe (or baobab) tree. It was vast: 95 feet in circumference, reputedly the second biggest in Africa, and some 2,000 years old. Its gray bark seemed molten — living lava full of odd polyps and protuberances, folds, wrinkles and veins. It was here when the Bantu people swept down from the north and ousted the aboriginal Akafula residents, here when the Angoni warriors swept up from South Africa. It witnessed the slave caravans and Livingstone's expeditions. And of course it features prominently in local lore. Ziada told me, “Our grandparents believed that if your children went missing, you had to run here to look, because a big snake lived in the hollow of the tree and it ate children.”

“A big snake like a python?”

“No, more like —” He looked around, suddenly a little fearful. “More like a lake monster.”

## **ESSENTIALS MALAWI**

**PLANNING** There are no direct flights between the United States and Malawi. You'll need to connect to Lilongwe, the capital, via Johannesburg, Nairobi, Addis Ababa or elsewhere. There's a direct flight from London to Lilongwe on Air Zimbabwe, but it's notoriously unreliable. If you need to overnight in Lilongwe (frankly, there's not much to see there), Kumbali Country Lodge ([kumbali.com](http://kumbali.com)) is the best in town, and Madonna's hotel of choice on her adoption commute. It can also help arrange your trip from Lilongwe; a charter costs around \$280 per seat one-way or \$755 for the whole five-seat plane. Or it's a 90-minute drive from Lilongwe to the lake, where you can board the steamer ferry Ilala at Chipoka Bay ([inet.mw/mls-web/index.htm](http://inet.mw/mls-web/index.htm) for schedules). Technically you need a yellow-fever-vaccination certificate to enter Mozambique, but you may never be asked for one.

**LODGES** Kaya Mawa, on Likoma Island, has 10 romantic waterfront cottages, all done in traditional African style (011-265-931-8359; [kayamawa.com](http://kayamawa.com); doubles from \$320, including meals). The lodge will pick you up from the airstrip or the boat. There's a more rudimentary

backpackers' lodge up the beach, Mango Drift, also operated by Kaya Mawa. Nkwichi, on the Mozambique side of the lake, consists of seven nature-embracing bungalows ([mandawilderness.org](http://mandawilderness.org); doubles from \$480, including meals). The lodge will send a speedboat to Likoma from Mozambique to take you over the straits.