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Pilgrim's Way

By *admin* on January 1, 2008

*In Malawi, **Stephanie Rafanelli** follows in the wake of Christian explorer and anti-slavery campaigner Dr David Livingstone*



The fishermen cry out into the blackness of the lake, as if summoning their quarry to enter the nets. Thirty Tonga tribesmen crammed into five small wooden dhows glide through the iridescent waters of the lake, the white lights of their lanterns – all that illuminates the night – jumping on the surface of the water.

From the bow of our vessel we witness the same haunting spectacle that greeted Dr David Livingstone when he first set sail on Lake Malawi in September 1859, an experience that led to him calling it Lake Nyasa, meaning Lake of Stars.

Since then Africa's third-largest lake has gone by many names: Livingstone's Lake, Lake Niassa and the Calendar Lake because its dimensions – 365 miles (587km) in length and 52 miles (84km) across – mirror the days and weeks of the year. But this giant expanse of fresh water – which lies in the African Rift Valley between Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania, covering one fifth of Malawi's 118,484km sq land mass – remains the same vital source of food and water for the villages that line its shores.

Listening to the guttural sounds of the night fisherman float into the darkness, it is easy to slip back in time to Livingstone's first voyage on the lake. Easy, that is, except for the incongruous modernity of our 12m catamaran. In contrast, the subsistence fishing practises of the Tonga tribes have remained all but untouched, though paraffin lanterns have replaced burning clumps of grass as a light source to attract the catch.



In 1858, after 16 years travelling as a missionary in Africa and a brief trip to the UK, Livingstone returned to forge a communications corridor along the Zambezi river, which flows from Zambia via the Victoria Falls to the Indian Ocean, to spread 'Christianity, commerce and civilisation' into Africa. Thwarted by impassable rapids at Cabora Basa, he turned up the Shire river and 'discovered' Lake Malawi.

Here, he focused his attention on the cruelty of the Arab-Swahili slavers who preyed upon the Tonga, Tambuka and Ngoni villages along the lake's shore. He was appalled by what he witnessed of this barbarism, writing of a 'devilish trade in human flesh' that saw the people of the region being brutalised and sold into slavery in places such as Turkey, Yemen and Zanzibar.

Aboard our catamaran we follow in Livingstone's wake around Lake Malawi – from Monkey Bay in the south to Nkhata Bay where, in 1864, Livingstone aborted his mission having been overwhelmed by mosquitoes and hindered by inter-tribal warfare. The legacy of Livingstone can still be felt in today's Malawi. Blantyre, now the country's second city, was named after his birthplace in Lanarkshire, Scotland, and the lake's public steamship Llala honours the place of his death in Lala, Zambia, in 1873.

Partly thanks to the doctor's influence, some 75 per cent of Malawians are Christian and many – including authoritarian yet eccentric dictator Dr Hastings Banda, who ruled Malawi from 1961 until 1994 – were educated at missionary schools. As a result, Malawi has a relatively good literacy rate at 64 per cent.

Livingstone would recognise aspects of the busy shore today. In the red, cracked earth of vast maize fields barefoot boys play with sugar cane sticks and brightly dressed women chatter as they balance giant stacks of maize on their heads. They are dwarfed by tumbling mountains of tobacco – Malawi's only major export – at the side of the road.

Landlocked Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world – ranking 166th out of 177 countries on the Human

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Development Index – and relies heavily on international aid in its national budget. Average life expectancy is just 40 years. HIV/Aids prevalence is 14.2 per cent, according to the UN, but local estimates puts it as high as 50 per cent in some areas.

The country's economic and social problems have been caused primarily by a massive population explosion, which surges in spite of a high Aids-related mortality rate. In 1900 there were around 700,000 people living here, now there are well over 13 million, causing increasing pressure for resources.

We take our catamaran to Cape Maclear, where the Free Church of Scotland under the auspices of Lieutenant E.D. Young established its first mission, the Livingstonia Mission, in 1875. The settlers – struck down with malaria – decamped after six years and just one conversion, moving north to Bandawe and finally to Zombe.

Fish eagles soar overhead as we power northwards past the Livingstonia Beach Hotel, busier now Banda's ultra-conservative dress codes have been locked away in the wardrobe of history. The dictator famously banned women from wearing trousers and skirts that fell above the knee, and men from wearing flares – for foreigners as well as citizens.

From Nkhotakota – once a centre for slavers – we push further north, exploring fishing villages on horseback. A group of fishermen sits under a giant acacia tree mending their nets. They are worried about their catch. 'There are no more fish in this area,' one of them says.

Only two of Lake Malawi's fish species are edible – the chambo and the kampango – and the nation's population explosion has resulted in depleted stocks. The village men must search for new fishing territories, venturing further into the lake at night to find fish.

We sail to the eastern shore to visit the Malawian island of Likoma, surrounded by Mozambican waters. In 1879, the Universities' Mission to Central Africa led by William Percival Johnson settled on the tiny remote island littered with baobab and mango trees. In 1903, work begun on St Peter's Cathedral – approximately the same size as Winchester Cathedral in England.



The imposing stone church with its intricate stained glass windows remains the central focus of the community – 3,000 of Likoma's 7,000 inhabitants attend mass every Sunday. Further evidence of Malawi's Christian heritage is to be found at Bandawe, near Nkhata Bay on the north-western shore.

Here, chief Alex Manda takes me to see the neatly tended graves of the missionaries who founded Old Bandawe Church. Nearby is another much larger burial area, some of whose graves have been newly dug in the red earth. Manda oversees 1,000 villagers in three villages, having inherited his position through his mother's line, and he has seen more than his fair share of tragedy in recent years.

'Everyone has lost a member of their family to HIV,' he says. 'Two of my own five children have died, leaving seven orphans. Nearly every household has taken in a neighbour's orphan. It is a great strain on those families.'

While 100,000 of Malawi's HIV sufferers are now receiving antiretrovirals, the stigma of Aids is still a barrier to

treatment. 'No one here wants to get tested or admit they have HIV,' Manda says. 'And people are still shy about using protection.'

Back at the village, a group of boys play football with a blown-up condom. Women huddle together in the earth peeling cassava. Once peeled, the starchy, nutritionless root is then dried in the sunlight to break down the cyanide it contains. Cassava – or maize – is ground into a paste called nsima, the basis of the Malawian diet.

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'Malawians are vulnerable to HIV because of their poor diet,' says Michael Keating, UN resident coordinator for Malawi. 'Poor farmers grow maize to guard against famine. But this does not provide the vitamins the body needs to reduce vulnerability to disease. Farmers also grow cassava and other crops, but not enough, despite the evidence that variety in diet is critical to good health.'

At Bandawe, Makuzi Beach Lodge supports a fruit tree-planting programme in chief Manda's village. Nkwichi Lodge – an eco-lodge on the Mozambican shore of Lake Malawi – also runs an agricultural project which has already trained 350 farmers, teaching them how to diversify their crops, among other things. The lodge – which runs several projects with the local community – employs 100 staff each of whom support around 15 family members.

'Everyone is talking about eco-tourism. With the falling tobacco market, that is what the government sees as the future,' says McDonald Ganisyeje of Land and Lake Safaris. 'Malawi does not have the Big Five, but it does have Lake Malawi. Eco-lodges' community projects are transforming the lives of the people of the lake shore.'

And so, just as Livingstone's voyage changed the direction of Malawi's past, the key to the country's future could well lie in the iridescent depths of his Lake of Stars.



HOW TO GET THERE

Kenya Airlines flies from Heathrow to Lilongwe via Nairobi.

www.kenya-airways.com

WHAT TO DO

Exsus Travel offers a variety of programmes in Malawi

www.exsus.com Danforth Yachting provides sailing tours of the lake

www.danforthyachting.com

WHERE TO STAY

Nkwichi Lodge

www.mandawilderness.org Kaya Maya

www.kayamawa.com

Makuzi Beach

www.makuzibeach.com Livingstonia Beach Hotel

www.sunbirdmalawi.com

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