

# TRAVELS ON THE WILD side

It's a little-known destination. But those who find their way there are rewarded with a plethora of treasures – water and forest, exciting horizons, fearless wildlife, and the knowledge that their visit contributes to the wellbeing of the 20 000-strong local community. Mozambique's Manda Bay Wilderness Reserve may *really* be one of Africa's last wild places, says **Lee Middleton**.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEE MIDDLETON



A finger's length of crystal-clear turquoise water is all that separates our plywood canoe from the treacherous submerged shards of the granite headland. Above water, we glide past cormorants and egrets perched on jagged peaks, thick as ornaments on a Christmas tree. The late-afternoon sun pumps amber and rose into the atmosphere, burnishing the lakeside's thick green forest and temporarily calming my anxiety over both the possibility of smashing our boat, and our uncertain location at this increasingly late hour.

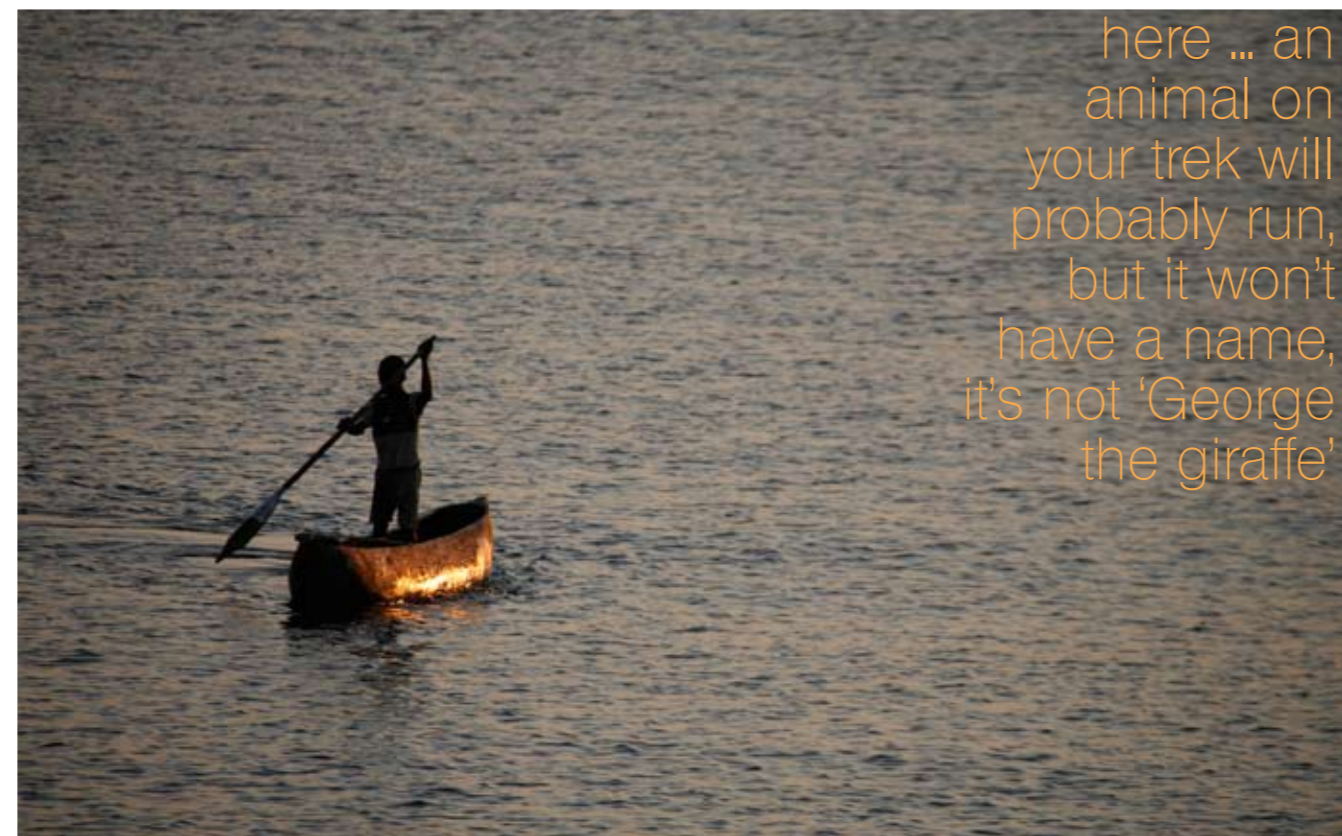
Having launched a canoe from Malawi's Likoma Island early this morning, Bruce Anderson and I have been paddling Lake Malawi's north-eastern waters for more than eight hours (the last four against an increasingly fierce south wind). In the fast-dimming light, another empty stretch of lakeshore rolls south, and another bolt of hot pain shoots through my shoulder. And then, finally, a hint of white sand and ... a dozen people playing volleyball?

The canoe scrapes over a tideline of smooth quartz pebbles the size of eggs and we pull up onto a blinding white sandy beach as the sun disappears behind Malawi's mountains.

'Welcome to Nkwichi Lodge,' says a volleyball player, extending a hand.

Set on the north-eastern shore of what most people know as Lake Malawi (Lago Niassa in these parts), Nkwichi Lodge is the last western (in terms both cardinal and cultural) outpost of an unfenced and sparsely inhabited African wilderness extending east to Mozambique's Niassa National Reserve and on to the Indian Ocean, and north via Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve almost to Dar es Salaam.

Drinking what may be the most rewarding ice-cold beer I've ever tasted, I tell Patrick Simkin, one of Nkwichi's owners, how we ended up disturbing the staff volleyball match on this patch of powdery sand. ▶



here ... an animal on your trek will probably run, but it won't have a name, it's not 'George the giraffe'

It all started on the Ilala ferry. Having boarded at Malawi's Monkey Bay, we intended to disembark at the lake town of Metangula in Mozambique, from which point we would hike northwards, camping along the lakeshore, until we reached the next 'major' town of Cobué, or possibly Tanzania. The whole mission was foiled when Metangula's immigration officers wouldn't let me disembark, saying visas were only available at Cobué, where the ferry no longer docks.

Forced to travel onwards to Likoma Island, Bruce and I made the deck-side observation that our intended route appeared flawed anyway: in the 50 kilometres between Metangula and Cobué, the forest I had imagined as tumbling down to a largely uninhabited lakeshore was in fact sometimes as much as a kilometre inland from a coast that was dotted sporadically with small huts and, on occasion, villages.

All was not lost however. On Likoma, the good people at Mango Drift backpackers' hostel hooked us up with a canoe for hire and urged us to find Simkin, the best go-to man for would-be explorers 'that side'.

**T**he go-to man has just dropped us off in Mandambuzi village, about 10 kilometres inland from Nkwichi.

'Take this, it will be indispensable,' says Simkin as we part ways, handing us a panga, adding it to the compass, advice and topographical maps already contributed to what will be a five-night expedition through the Manda Bay Wilderness Reserve.

Having nixed the coastal hike concept, we will instead trek through the riverine forest and savannas of this 120 000-hectare community-established reserve. In Mandambuzi we hire porters who know the forest and spend the night camped by a pretty little pond.

The next morning, we set off through the high grass. It is the cool dry season, but a smattering of clouds overhead provides welcome relief from the sun. The path ascends into dry brachystegia miombo woodland where unfamiliar proteas and tiny pieces of broken quartz speckle the earth. Within an hour, signs of people have vanished.

The porters Matheus Kamwendo and Peter Mandala walk at fairly breakneck speed through the forest, finally slowing

upon arrival at a river that flows deep and quiet. 'This is Rio Lukambwe,' Kamwendo announces, indicating the jade-coloured milky water. The banks are green and shady with huge stands of bamboo. A trumpeter hornbill flies overhead and numerous butterflies flit through the dappled light. Elephant trails furrow the riverside and from now on they will lead the way.

'What we have here at Manda is original wild Africa. An animal you come across will probably run, but it won't have a name, it's not "George the giraffe". Game can move freely,' Simkin had said before we left. 'And that's got value.'

Not only is Manda part of one of the last great African wildernesses, it is the first Mozambican land claim where local communities have successfully petitioned for management rights from the government under new legislation intended to encourage better local stewardship of natural resources.

It's day three of our trek, and we've just run into three African wild dogs in a stand of bamboo. As a fluffy canine tail disappears into the forest beyond, I can't help but agree with Simkin that walking through wild Africa carries a unique thrill. It is true that we haven't seen loads of game, but in a way that doesn't matter. The animals are out there, and you never know what you'll see. There's also the freedom of movement – we can walk wherever we choose, as long as we can, searching for the most beautiful spot to make camp each day – and the uncertainty inherent in this type of unmediated exploration is what transforms a hike into an adventure.

The region's traditionally low human population is a result of topography and history. The quartz and ancient sedimentary rock that makes Nkwichi's beach so picture-perfect renders the surrounding land poor for farming. ▶



OPPOSITE, ABOVE Nkwichi Lodge is fringed on one side by the clear waters of Lake Malawi, and on the other by a tangle of forest.

OPPOSITE, BELOW A lone fisherman fishes the lake's waters. It is hoped that revenue generated by the lodges in the community-managed Manda Bay Wilderness Reserve will help local villagers to improve their lives.

PREVIOUS SPREAD The author pauses in her paddling to admire the view.

## FACT FILE MOZAMBIQUE

Area 799 380 square kilometres, divided into 10 provinces

Capital Maputo

Population More than 23 million

Natural resources Mineral deposits include coal, salt, iron ore, phosphate, gold, copper

Conservation Years of civil war and poaching have dramatically depleted wildlife, but restored interest in conservation and cautious development of the country's gazetted protected areas (some 11 per cent of the total surface area) are having a positive, if slow, effect on numbers.





TRAVEL NOTES

Currently, the only place offering accommodation in Manda Bay Wilderness Reserve is Nkwichi Lodge (above), which provides accommodation for 14 guests in seven chalets, each with its own en-suite bathroom. [www.mandawilderness.org](http://www.mandawilderness.org)

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OPPOSITE, ABOVE The vegetation in Manda Bay Wilderness Reserve comprises mainly riverine forest and long-grassed savanna.

OPPOSITE, BELOW Cormorants are plentiful on Lake Malawi and can usually be seen perched on the jagged rocks at the lake's edge.

what has suddenly become a footpath. Soon afterwards, we pass a simple snare of plastic cord, and then a few more. Less than an hour from the first snare we come across the first cassava field. And just like that, we're out of the wild.

We stop to pay our respects to the chief of Mcondece village, an old man in tattered clothes who is far friendlier than my preconceptions of a chief would have him. Our guides regale him with tales of our adventure while we all gnaw on chunks of cassava dipped in rock salt.

The village is extremely spread out. Plots of cassava planted around charred tree stumps extend in all directions. We stop beneath a large

Mozambique's civil war further depleted the region and distance from the capital of Maputo has largely ensured that it has stayed that way.

When Simkin and his partners arrived in 1998, they were the first outsiders to promote development and tourism in this seemingly forgotten corner of the country. After meeting with and receiving permission from all the communities in the area, they applied to lease the land for Nkwichi Lodge, and five years later were able to begin operating. During this time, with the help of a local NGO called União da Camponesas e Associações de Lichinga, Simkin also started the process of helping the communities to organise committees that collectively would have the power to start making changes in their own lives.

It is day five when we arrive at the Mcondece River, the waterway Simkin suggested we should follow northwards. Clear tea-coloured water runs shallow between steep sandy banks thick with palms. The light filters through the fronds in stripy patterns that bring to mind an interior designer's idea of 'exotic Africa', circa 1970. We skirt the river, alternately walking in elephant tracks made during the last rains, hopping gulleys and scrabbling up hills covered in thick grass.

After four days of seeing no sign of people, I now notice an unnatural break in the bamboo forest, and then a tangle of bird's eye chillies and melons growing beside

tree sheltering a bench and a pigeon coop in a compound that strikes me as extraordinarily organised and tidy. Eventually a man with a goatee appears. Extracting a dove from the coop, he hands it to Mandala and gives Kamwendo a huge smoked catfish. He turns out to be the secretary of Umoji (which means 'as one'), an association of individuals elected from each village's natural resource committee to manage the Manda Bay Wilderness Reserve and their collective land claim. The local communities established the reserve in order to multiply benefits like those they've received from Nkwichi. With their only livelihood options being fishing, farming unproductive soil and selling firewood (mostly to deforested Malawi), the possibility of additional lodges brings the chance of income from land rental (Umoji has legal title to the lands here), the supply of materials and jobs.

Simkin hopes that Nkwichi Lodge and what is now known as the Manda Wilderness Project will offer a model for 'real ecotourism'. That is to say, a tourism product that adheres to green principles while also catalysing sustainable local development and conservation.

In addition to the jobs and other income generated by the lodge, five dollars of every visitor's bed-night fee is donated to the Manda Trust, which runs small-scale development projects like building schools and installing a local maize mill.

Meanwhile, with advice from Simkin and the NGO partners he has brought in, the communities have created the game reserve, and though the rules around resource management are not always followed, the fact that there *are* rules is a critical first step (Umoji actually expelled police officials who were hunting illegally with guns in Manda).

Finally, the lodge itself is a wonder of green principles realised. Solar-powered, built with local materials where possible and employing all fathomable recycling methods, Nkwichi has an almost zero carbon footprint. And green does not mean uncomfortable: the lodge resembles a luxury grown-up version of your favourite childhood forest-fort. And, amazingly, its structures remain almost invisible from the water, leaving its breathtakingly pristine location – the most beautiful I have seen on the lake – unmarred.

It turns out that my earlier deck-side impressions from the ferry were not entirely correct. Beautiful deserted beaches do in fact exist between Metangula and Cobué. However, having a canoe makes it much easier to find and access them.

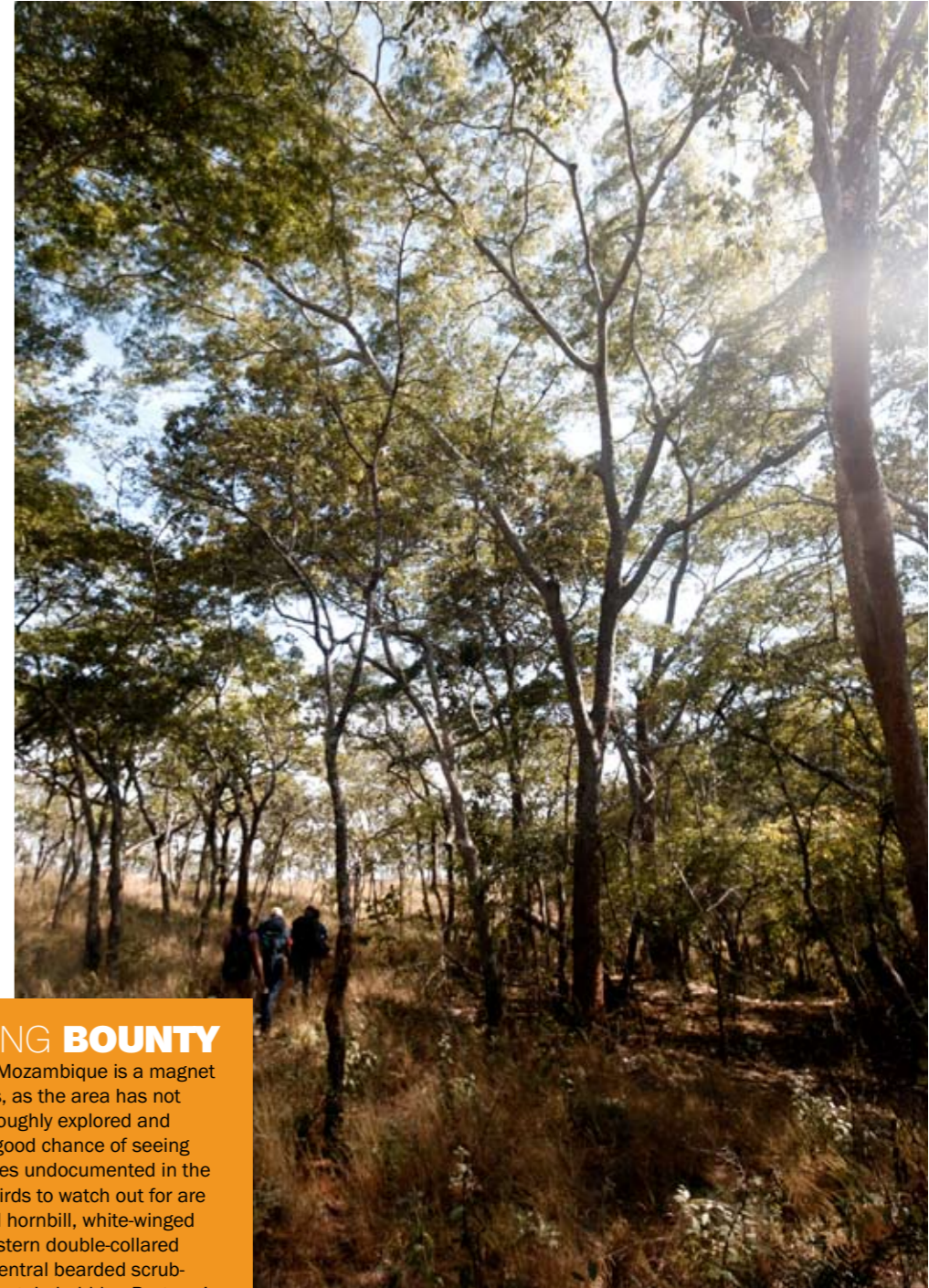
Several days have passed since our trek concluded in Cobué. We bade farewell to the porters there and walked back to Nkwichi along the coastal path, a short journey that proved surprisingly pleasant. Picking up our canoe at Nkwichi, we began paddling the wild side.

With forest-covered hills to our left, we glide past stretches of clean beaches punctuated by small huts, the mast of a dhow usually poking from reeds thick with cormorants, egrets and pied kingfishers. Fish-eagles dive from their perches on baobabs to soar above the lake, which swarms with cichlids whose familiar colours and forms give snorkellers the impression of swimming in a vast aquarium.

Pulling our canoe over the sand onto a tiny piece of lonely paradise, I think back to my original plan, and am reminded how the best trips are often those riddled by unforeseen changes. Discovery is a wild and wonderful beast.

BIRDING BOUNTY

Northern Mozambique is a magnet for birders, as the area has not been thoroughly explored and there's a good chance of seeing new species undocumented in the country. Birds to watch out for are pale-billed hornbill, white-winged apalis, eastern double-collared sunbird, central bearded scrub-robin, mountain babbler, Bertram's weaver and Zanzibar red bishop. Birders visiting Mozambique are invited to submit their observations to the Mozambique Atlas Bird Project, being compiled by Vincent Parker at the University of Cape Town. Go to [www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu](http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu) to find out more.



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