

By Michel Behar (May 2023)

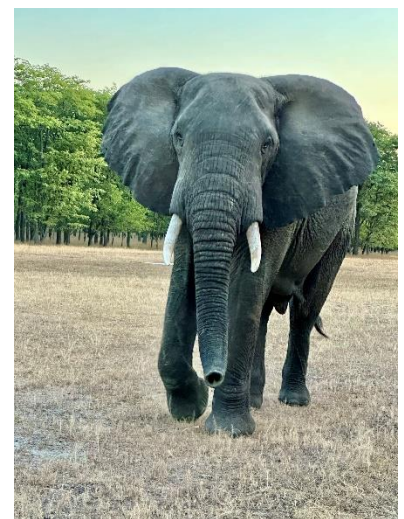
Malawi is a treasure and a surprise for multiple reasons. Three things come to my mind when I think of Malawi: the fantastic natural wonders, upscale lodges, and the hospitable Malawian people.

One of the first things you will note about Malawi, is that the country is blessed with breathtaking natural beauty. The centerpiece is Lake Malawi, a massive freshwater lake with crystal-clear waters. Its golden beaches, snorkeling spots, and opportunities for water sports make it a must-visit destination. Additionally, the highlands, plateaus, and national parks offer scenic vistas, lush forests, and cascading waterfalls. If you seek adventure, Malawi won't disappoint. Lake Malawi is a playground for water sports such as kayaking, sailing, snorkeling, and diving. Cape Maclear is particularly renowned for its underwater diversity, including colorful fish and vibrant coral reefs.



Malawi is home to an array of wildlife and boasts several national parks and game reserves. Liwonde National Park is renowned for its diverse wildlife, including elephants, hippos, crocodiles, and a wide variety of bird species. Majete Wildlife Reserve and Nyika National Park also offer incredible safari experiences and the chance to see the "Big Five" animals.

All of our lodges were like our own mini paradises. The high quality of the service is stunning. Also, an important aspect of the lodges is the surprising silence they bring. This enables one of my favorite details: the sound of animals can be heard very consistently throughout the night. People would spend years trying to recreate this experience if they ever heard the real thing.



It cannot be overstated how incredible the lodges are. In Lilongwe, for example, the lodge we stayed in is the same lodge that Madonna calls home when she visits Malawi. The Mvuu lodge which has hosted celebrities such as Prince Harry, is located on the bank of the Shire, Malawi's major river. It's a tributary of the Zambezi river, and the only outlet of Lake Malawi. Therefore, the whole park is teeming with hundreds of species of birds and crocodiles. And it attracts many mammals as well, such as large herds of elephants who come to the river to drink, where they keep sufficient distance from the hippos. The hippos often carry a bird on their back, which frees them of parasites.



This brings me to another note about the lodges. The lodges are immersed in the wilderness, without a surrounding fence to provide the security some of us are accustomed to. Whether it was a monkey, hippo, or elephant, most of the local animals have a chance to just appear as if out of nowhere. I can understand how this may be deemed a little too close for comfort, but I can also understand the exhilaration this may provide for others. That being said, we were strongly discouraged to leave our lodge in the darkness. But hospitality is a theme throughout Malawi, and all we had to do was clap our hands a few times, and someone would appear right away to accompany us to the restaurant.



Malawi is known for its peaceful and friendly atmosphere. It has a relatively low crime rate compared to other countries in the region, making it a safe destination for tourists. However, as with any travel, it's essential to take basic precautions and follow local advice.



The warm hospitality, fluent English spoken, and wonderful meals prepped by our hosts gave off a feeling as if we were at home. Like all of our family dinners growing up and similar to how it would feel to have a strong relationship with one's neighbors. It is hard to put into work how hospitable everything was. I guess we should certainly buy-in to all of the reasons they call Malawi "The Warm Heart of Africa."

Indulge in the flavors of Malawian cuisine, which primarily features staple foods such as maize, fish, beans, and vegetables. Don't miss the chance to try the national dish, nsima (a maize porridge), along with local specialties like chambo (a delicious freshwater fish).

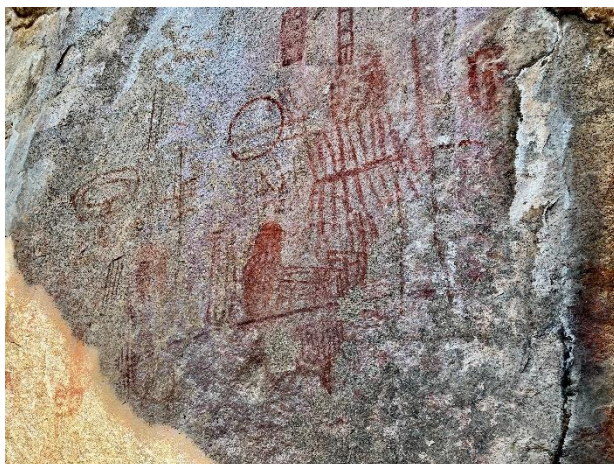


In both lodges, we did two guided safaris a day. At the Mvuu lodge, one is done in a car, while the other is

done as a river cruise. The afternoon safaris included a sundowner. Upon arrival in Lilongwe, meet the local representative and transfer to the Kumbali Country Lodge, a private lodge on a 1600-acre forest reserve and dairy farm just 10 minutes from the city for check-in and overnight.

The charm of Malawi is that it is one of the few countries in Africa, despite a small size, to host the previously mentioned Big Five, and the small, yet mighty Little Five. The Big Five consists of elephants, lions, buffalo, leopards, and rhinos. The Little Five features elephant shrews, leopard tortoises, buffalo weavers, Rhino beetles and ant lions. The Blue Zebra is on a private island in a national park in Lake Malawi and can only be reached by boat. There are only a dozen spacious bungalows, a restaurant, a bar and a pool, and nobody else lives on the island. We hiked on the trail around the island in a little over an hour, while some of us kayaked.

Overall, visiting Malawi as a tourist offers an enriching experience where you can connect with nature, explore diverse landscapes, embrace local cultures, and make lasting memories. The country's warm and welcoming atmosphere, combined with its natural wonders, make it a hidden gem in Africa's travel destinations.



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