



# MALAWI, MUSIC & ME

*Golden beaches, boutique safari lodges and one of the world's most spectacular festivals: Ben Illis discovers Africa's next big thing*



*Vast tea estates swathe the foothills of Mount Mulanje*

Sinking back into a mound of cushions, as the *dhow* glides into a glittering sunset, I trail my fingers in the inky waters of the lake and let my mind drift back to the three days of festival fun that brought me here. Lake Malawi – aka the Lake of Stars – has given its name to an emerging star of the international music festival circuit for eight years now. Based at the Sunbird Nkopola Lodge, in the southern end of the lake, it has mushroomed from a crowd of a few hundred to over 3,800, with 80-plus artists performing over three days. Run entirely by volunteers (even big-name international artists waive fees

and share rooms), its aim is to promote Malawian culture, focus attention on positive aspects of the country and raise some much-needed cash for all kinds of local projects. And to have some fun.

This being Africa, it is, of course, colourful and vibrant; smilingly eclectic and chaotic. It is also a challenging journey, but it is *so* worth the trek. Overnight to Nairobi and, after a short lay-over, two further hours to Malawi, it's not a bad schedule – especially since flying due south means no jet lag – but punishing nonetheless. At the capital, Lilongwe, the smell of hot earth in the

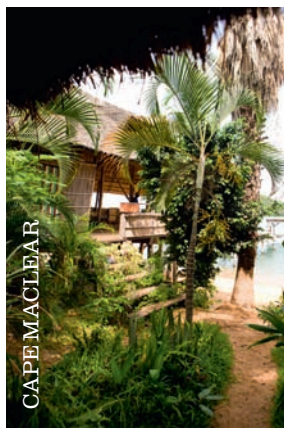
32°C sunshine and the vivid lilac of jacaranda in full bloom is magical. You really *feel* you are in Africa. A national fuel shortage means transfers are erratic, but soon our bus is rattling across a spectacular high plateau for the 98-mile journey east towards the lake. Mud-hut villages are dotted all around; the barren land studded with bizarre silhouettes of dry season baobab trees, playing dead, awaiting rain to burst into verdant lushness.

After a couple of hours of shop and bar-spotting – Aunt Mercy's Hair Salon, God Bless Us bakery and Boyz Bar being three favourites – we descend sharply onto the shimmering lowlands that surround the vast expanse of Lake Malawi itself. At 370 miles long and 50 wide, the lake takes up 20 per cent of this small country, which means that despite being landlocked, Malawi has plenty of beaches.



PHOTOGRAPHS ALAMY, ALISTAIR BERG, BEN ILLIS, GETTY IMAGES, NICK ALDRIDGE, COURTESY ROBIN POPE SAFARIS





Sandwiched between Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania, the country's rural nature is immediately apparent. Communities are demonstrably poor and life is obviously hard here – poverty, access to basic sanitation, healthcare and education are huge problems – yet people are friendly and welcoming. We are told Malawi is considered 'Africa Lite'; I don't know about that, but it's certainly safe, easily navigable and a great place to start for the uninitiated.

The festival itself is certainly eclectic – how often have indie rockers Foals shared a stage with stars of the Chinese Conservatory of Music? With 81 acts from 16 countries, it spans a gulf of musical genres, playing to visitors from all across the globe. South Africans and Malawians take the fore among the mainly 20- and 30-somethings. They're a friendly crowd, many of them pitching tents on site, others shuttling in from other camps and lodges along the lakeside, hitching a companionable lift when the fuel shortage puts paid to the free buses. We're staying in the beach-side Nkopola Lodge, simple but scenic, with 52 rooms and chalets overlooking the lake, and an adjoining campsite with eight chalets and seven tents.

Major acts perform nightly at the main stage, with the beach and village stages



hosting smaller acts throughout the day. It's a heady mix, following a musical journey from reggae to rock, via soul and gospel. A crop of food stalls serve up barbecue, excellent falafel and tasty curries and stews with rice or *nsima* (maize meal), but everything is done at the Malawian pace, so quick bites are hard to come by. Up on the main stage, Foals rock their headline set, while Beverley Knight blows the crowd away with a powerhouse of soul covers that is no less sweet for being all too short. Up-and-coming Brit Seye Adelekan also

*'This being AFRICA, it is colourful and vibrant; SMILINGLY eclectic and chaotic'*

shines. Our 'who'da thought it?' award is shared by The Chinese Conservatory of Music's electrifying fusion and Japanese Taiko virtuoso Leonard Eto's daytime drum and tap. African acts are well represented; special mention must go to Swedish/Malawian afro-electropop combo The Very Best, South African fusioners Freshly Ground, local heroes Maskal and The Black Missionaries. Highlights among 'smaller' talent include the very moving and uplifting orphanage choirs and a dazzling display of kung fu from the Amitofo Care Centre (a Buddhist orphanage). Nights are late, beers slip down, cash flows from pockets and the hotel ATM quickly empties. Fortunately, the lodge changes money, too, so all is well. Flush once more, our days are all about visiting the outreach programmes supported by the festival (orphanages, village businesses helped

## GETTING THERE

Kenya Airways flies from London Heathrow to Nairobi to Lilongwe daily. Return flights from £636, including taxes. Enq [kenya-airways.com](http://kenya-airways.com)

## THE FESTIVAL

Lake of Stars' 2013 dates are to be confirmed, but keep September free. Tickets last year were £85. For the best places to stay, you need to book very early. Accommodation will be listed on [lakeofstars.org/tickets](http://lakeofstars.org/tickets). Camping from £7 (with your own tent).

## WHERE TO STAY

- Nkopola Lodge, Chipoka. Doubles from £95, room only. Enq [sunbirdmalawi.com/sunbird-nkopola-lodge](http://sunbirdmalawi.com/sunbird-nkopola-lodge)
- Pumulani, Lake Malawi. Ten luxury villas overlooking the lake. Doubles from £224, including full board and all activities. Enq [pumulani.com](http://pumulani.com); Robin Pope Safaris [robinpopesafaris.net](http://robinpopesafaris.net)
- Mvuu Lodge & Camp, Lake Malawi, Liwonde National Park has eight tents and 12 chalets. Mvuu Camp, doubles from £170, Mvuu Lodge from £210 pp, including full board and safaris. Campsite £10 per tent (pitch only, tent hire on request, meals and safari extra). Enq [wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com)







LAKE MALAWI



MVUU LODGE

by micro loans), kicking around with kids at the Book Bus ( which provides them with free books) and, of course, chilling on the lake's golden sands.

As any festival veteran will know, post-event decompression is crucial, and after three days of partying we jump at it. If you have plenty of time and a high discomfort threshold, you could manage on the cheap but rather ramshackle and unpredictable local bus network; otherwise hiring a car with a driver at £65 a day is a good investment. There is accommodation for all budgets across Malawi and it is easy to tailor

your trip to your pocket, mixing rough and ready with some achingly good deluxe. Exclusive Pumulani in Lake Malawi National Park has no cheap wing, but nearby lodges on the Cape Maclear islands, one of Malawi's best-known retreats and backpacker havens, offer simpler access to this watery heaven. Pumulani means relaxing, and it is certainly that. Villas flanked by decking sprawl atop stilts, creepers trained over roofs so they appear to melt into the jungle. The infinity pool is spectacular, food is a tasty Euro-Asian fusion, and service the perfect balance of friendly informality and razor-sharp efficiency. Speeding across the lake, snorkelling with jewel-like

fish and feeding sea eagles (for that elusive money shot) all stand out, along with, of course, the sublime sunset *dhow* trip.

It wouldn't be Africa without safari and around 93 miles south of the festival site, Liwonde National Park, on the River Shire (pronounced Shi-ray), offers Malawi's best. Mvuu Lodge and Camp cater for all budgets, and if you've ever

fantasised about a tented safari, Mvuu Lodge will meet your every expectation. The 'tent' takes luxury to new levels, while our private viewing deck with outdoor shower will stay with us forever. Mvuu means hippo and these comically majestic beasts feature heavily on boat safaris and, if you are lucky, graze the

riverbank below the communal bar. Crocodiles abound and we have never been closer to bathing elephants – a truly memorable experience.

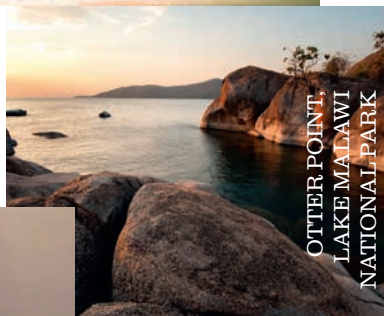
Malawi is short on predators, but fills that gap with endangered antelopes and other species in the super-protected rhino enclosure, to say nothing of myriad brightly-coloured birds. Sadly, rhinos prove elusive, although other guests are lucky enough to catch a glimpse. Right from the 5am wake-up, your day is full here, and with such delicious food on offer, your waistline may also be glad of a break. Come sundown, the comfort of your bed readily envelops you.

And then our trip is over; we barely scratched the surface of this beautiful country. Africa is often a tricky proposition, but Malawi rather stole our hearts. As the festival organisers take a year off to produce a bigger and better event for 2013, here's hoping they can build on what they have and pull even more punters in, because it is really, really worth it. ■

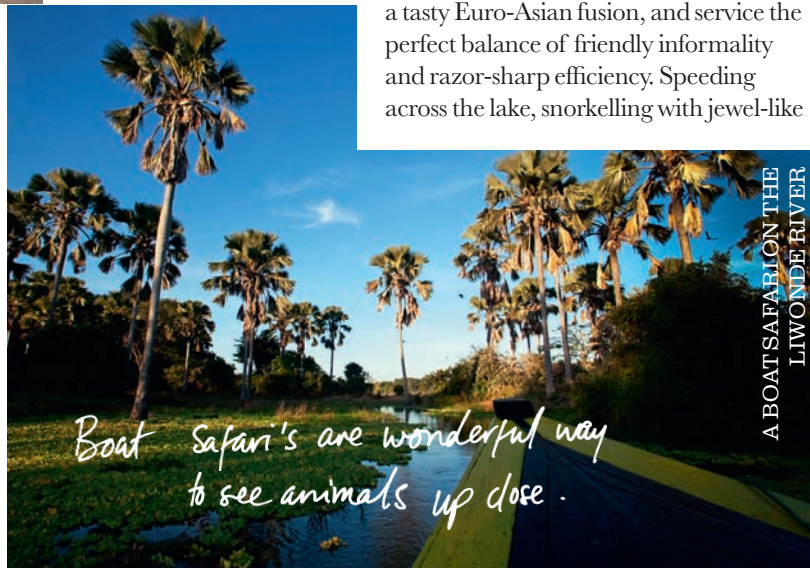
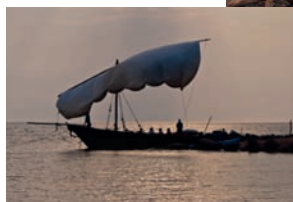
*'It is easy to tailor  
your TRIP to your  
pocket, mixing rough  
and ready with  
GOOD deluxe'*



LAKE OF STARS  
FESTIVAL



OTTER POINT,  
LAKE MALAWI  
NATIONAL PARK



A BOAT SAFARI ON THE  
LIWONDE RIVER

*Boat safaris are wonderful way  
to see animals up close.*





## MALAWI: THE NEED-TO-KNOW

- The experts: Malawi Tourist information, (0115) 972 7250. Enq [malawitourism.com](http://malawitourism.com), [enquiries@malawitourism.com](mailto:enquiries@malawitourism.com)
- The transport: SS Rent A Car, vehicles from £45 per day, £65 with driver. Enq (00 265) 175 0112; [ssrentacar.com](http://ssrentacar.com)
- The book: *Malawi* by Philip Briggs (Bradt Guides), £15.99, is indispensable. Enq [bradtguides.com](http://bradtguides.com)
- Visas: none necessary from UK
- When to go: the rainy season runs December to March so the best time to go is June to December.
- Before you go: take medical advice on malaria prevention and vaccinations. If swimming in Lake Malawi there is a risk of an infection called bilharzia but usually not near main beach hotels
- Safety: Malawi is considered safe for women. Topless bathing and swimwear away from the waterside is frowned upon
- The music: The Lake of Stars Music of Malawi site launches this month to publicise Malawi's cultural highlights and give the lowdown on all the best musicians. Enq [musicofmalawi.wordpress.com](http://musicofmalawi.wordpress.com)

## MORE THAN MUSIC: 10 THINGS TO DO IN MALAWI

### ARTS

As Lake of Stars takes a break till 2013, check out Blantyre Arts Festival, 5 to 7 October. Enq [blantyreartsfestival.org](http://blantyreartsfestival.org)

### BOAT SAFARIS

Both of Malawi's main game parks, Liwonde and Majete, have the river Shire running through them, perfect for boat safaris. With animals congregating at the riverside and less fearful of anything on the water, it's a wonderful way to see them up close.

### DIVING

Lake Malawi is the world's first freshwater national park, teeming with tropical fish. Don a snorkel mask or scuba gear and you can get so close you can almost touch them.

### LOCAL LIFE

Check out a village: Malawians are very friendly and happy for you to look around.

ELLEtravel

Pumulan's spectacular infinity pool

### TREKKING

With mountains and plateaux reaching 10,000ft, Malawi's landscapes are stunning; short forest walks, safaris and week-long hikes are all possible.

### RHINO

Walk through the African bush searching out the magnificent, endangered black rhino. Available in both Liwonde and Majete parks.

### WATERSPORTS

Kayaking, sailing, water-skiing, sailboarding... Lake Malawi has everything – though the waves aren't usually big enough for surfing.

### ETHICAL TOURISM

Almost all of Malawi's lodges have schemes to support their local communities and guests can easily get involved and make a real difference to one of the poorest countries in the world.

### BIKING

Malawi's varied terrain makes for exciting mountain biking and its small size (and safety) means that you can fairly easily explore the country by bicycle.

### TEA PLANTATIONS

Vast tea estates swathe the foothills of Mount Mulanje, and you can stay in the old colonial managers' cottages – a real nostalgia trip.

For more information on these and for other ideas check out [malawitourism.com](http://malawitourism.com)

PUMULANI, HOTEL

ELEPHANTS IN THE SHIRE RIVER

PUMULANI HOTEL

Right: Noisettes perform at 2010's Lake of Stars festival. Below: Safari tents at Mvuu Lodge



If you've fantasised about a tented safari, Mvuu lodge will meet every expectation

MVUU LODGE