

MALAWI THE PLACE MADONNA VISITED TO ADOPT A SON HOSTS A LAKE SO CHARMING IT'S REFERRED TO AS A FEMALE. BY LEO BEAR

Africa's pond of moods

Ariving at Lilongwe airport, the first thing I see is a man selling T-shirts that read 'Adopt me'. It may be a year since Madonna became little David's new 'mum' here but it has clearly made a mark. I'm curious to find out what Madrosians think of the original Material Girl and now, before I leave, to do a you-pop questionnaire to find out what locals think of superstar adoption (see box, below).

It's roughly a two-hour drive from the country's capital, Lilongwe to Lake Malawi, the vast watery mass that dominates 20 per cent of the country.

Along the way we pass trucks carrying what look like giant shaggy leathers, which turn out to be bales of dried tobacco (a major export). Slender women stroll along with buckets on their heads. Boys chewing on mam-long sugar cane, girls and water and farmers stand around swinging lethal-looking machetes.

CROCODILES

Like its neighbours Tanzania and Zambia, Malawi offers safaris.

In the south you can see the 'big five' but in the unexpected north, where we're headed, you may struggle to spot five tourists. It's as if the modern world has yet to find it. No electricity, no GPS, slow internet. I may not be able to see elephants but,

according to our Malawian driver, Pike, there are hippos and crocs in the lake.

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BARE ESSENTIALS

Malawi in south-east Africa has a population of 12million. Lake Malawi, bordered by Mozambique and Tanganyika, is called the Calendar Lake as it is 305miles long and 53miles wide.

Currency: E1 = 202 kwacha
Languages: English and Chichewa

takes away. When we pull up at Scapa Bay, an orange sandy beach lined with baobab and mango trees. I lay eyes on the lake for the first time. She's magnificent, vast and intensely blue. Our home

for the next six days is a ten-metre catamaran called Mufasa. She's

resplendent with a tall, blue sail and surgically clean deck. Passing fishermen stop and stare - Mufasa is

the only transport vessel on the lake apart from the hulks - a towering

Victorian steamship.

Our grounded South African skipper, Howard

Massey-Hicks, sneaks all the miles he has sailed on the lake in the past

ten years would take him around the world twice.

We also learn from Howard that 'chambo' is the local fish in Malawi (not to be confused with 'chambo'

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On golden lake, brimming with fish as dusk moves in, Lake Malawi is to locals a much-loved 'she' who is in turns calm and angry

hushhums. There's nothing like lathering up when all that's between you and the untamed jungle is a thin bamboo wall.

On our last day we anchor down in a quiet cove called Chitwa Bay on the eastern shore. Howard goes about setting up a beach house (wood fire grill) and a bottle of Carlsberg ('green') all around. By a quarter to six we are plunged into the kind of darkness you only get in places where there is no electricity.

HORSESHOE FORMATION

Fishing boats start to collect a few hundred metres away in a horseshoe formation. We watch the fishermen throw down their nets and allow bright lamps into the water to attract fish. Listening to the men calling out to one another makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. It's as if they are crying out to the lake herself. This is Africa at her most real.

Back on board, we lie out on Mufasa's deck with the Milky Way plainly visible above us. As Howard lights his final cigarette of the evening, he points in turn to Jupiter, the Southern Cross and Scorpio's spotted tail.

Remembered, I understand why the famous explorer David Livingstone named this lake the 'lake of stars'. Silly me, it was nothing to do with Madonna.

Leo Bear to Lilongwe with Kenya Airways (01764 688 222; www.kenya-airways.com). Return starts from £448. Danitroh Waching (+205 966 0077; www.danitrohaching.com) provides tailor-made sailing safaris on Lake Malawi. To Escape To £671 711 5262; www.foresight.com) offers tailor-made holidays. For more on the country, visit www.malawitourism.com

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