

Malawi

With Tanzania's and Zambia's big-name national parks and Mozambique's glorious beaches on the doorstep, Malawi has often been left on the sidelines while her neighbours bask in the limelight. And when she *has* made a splash on the international scene it's usually for the HIV/Aids rate or poverty statistics, not for the beauty and diversity of her environment or the locals' friendliness – a shame, because this small strip of land has serious crowd-pleasing potential.

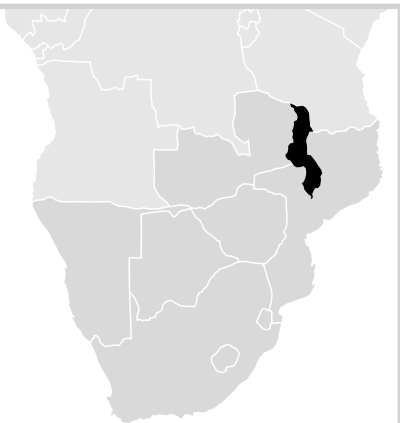
Slicing through the landscape in a trough formed by the Great Rift Valley is the third-largest lake in Africa – Lake Malawi. A shimmering mass of crystal water, its depths swarm with clouds of vivid cichlid fish, and its shores are lined with secret coves, pristine beaches, lively fishing villages and dark, forested hills. Diving, snorkelling and kayaking can all be had here, and when you're done there's everything from backpacker-friendly beach huts to glamorous five-star resorts in which to lay your head.

It's not all about the lake, though. Suspended in the clouds in Malawi's deep south are the dramatic peaks of Mt Mulanje, criss-crossed with streams, waterfalls and walking trails. Head north and you'll find the wild wilderness of the Nyika Plateau, where you can hike through rolling grasslands to reach a colonial hilltop town. And while a safari in one of Malawi's many national parks and reserves can't match her neighbours for sheer 'Big Five' excitement, you can get up close to some pretty impressive beasts without having to fight with other cars.

Malawi is often described as 'Africa for beginners' and true to form its compact size, decent transport links and relative safety make it easy to get around. What's more, the legendarily helpful locals and stunning backdrops will make sure that you'll have a fantastic time doing so.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 118,484 sq km
- **Capital** Lilongwe
- **Country code** ☎ 265
- **Famous for** Lake Malawi, friendly locals, Madonna's adoptive babies
- **Languages** English, Chichewa
- **Money** Malawi kwacha (MK)
- **Phrase** *Muli bwanji?* (How are you?)
- **Population** 13.1 million
- **Number of endangered species** 154



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Lake Malawi** (p189) Soak up the sun in private coves, glide over glassy waters by kayak, or head beneath the surface and discover a world of impossibly brilliant fish.
- **Viphya Plateau** (p184) Wander past vast granite boulders and hike through sweeping valleys in this gorgeous highland area.
- **Mt Mulanje** (p205) Scramble up twisted peaks, sleep in mountain huts and soak up the astounding views.
- **Liwonde National Park** (p192) Spot hippos, crocs and kingfishers on the Shire River, or get up close to elephants on foot.
- **Likoma Island** (p183) Escape to dreamy beaches and explore traditional villages, panoramic walks and the magnificent cathedral.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Spend a day getting acclimatised in Lilongwe (p167) before going down to Liwonde National Park (p192) for two days of elephant and hippo spotting.
- **One week** Head down from Blantyre (p197) to the woodland and streams of the Zomba Plateau (p196), then make for Mulanje (p204) for three or four days' hiking across the mountain's twisted peaks.
- **Two weeks** Head north from Lilongwe (p167) to hike, bike or simply soak up the cool, highland atmosphere of the Viphya

Plateau (p184). Further north and you can choose between the wild spaces of Vwaza Marsh (p179) or Nyika Plateau (p177) and the colonial hilltop town of Livingstonia (p176). Then head for Nkhata Bay (p181) for some beachside frolics, before catching the *Ilala* ferry (p214) over to Likoma (p183) or Chizumulu Island (p184). Charter a flight or wait for the *Ilala* to take you back to the mainland.

- **One month** With more time on your hands you can take in all of the highlights above and add a few more: perhaps the southern beach resorts of Cape Maclear (p189) or Senga Bay (p187); or head to the little-visited but beautiful wilderness spots of the Majete Wildlife Reserve (p207) and Mwabvi Wildlife Reserve (p208).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Malawi has a single wet season, from November to April, when daytime temperatures are warm and conditions humid. The best time to visit Malawi is during the dry season from April or May to October. The months of October and November, at the end of the dry season, are the best time for wildlife viewing; however, the temperatures can be uncomfortably hot. Average daytime maximums in the lower areas are about 21°C in July and 26°C in January. In highland areas, average daytime temperatures in July are between 10°C and 15°C, while in September they reach 20°C and above. See p745 for climate charts.

HISTORY

The precolonial history of Malawi is linked to the history of Southern Africa as a whole. For more detail, see p32.

Early Migrations

Since the first millennium the Bantu people migrated from Central Africa into the area now occupied by Malawi. Migration to the area stepped up with the arrival of the Tumbuka and Phoka groups, who settled around the highlands of Nyika and Viphya during the 17th century, and the Maravi people (from whom the modern-day Chewa are descended), who established a large and powerful kingdom in the south.

The early 19th century brought with it two more significant migrations. The Yao invaded southern Malawi from western Mozambique, displacing the Maravi, while groups of Zulu

HOW MUCH?

- **100mL bottle of Nali (Malawi's own chilli sauce)** MK350
- **Bottle of Malawi gin** MK1000
- **Bottle of wine** MK1000-2000
- **Carving** MK1500
- **Folding bike** MK8000

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** MK210
- **1L of bottled water** MK300
- **Bottle of Kuche Kuche** MK250
- **Souvenir T-shirt** MK1200
- **Plate of chips** MK150