

# Malawi

With Tanzania and Zambia's big-name national parks and Mozambique's glorious beaches on its doorstep, Malawi has often been left on the sidelines; and when it *has* made a splash on the international scene it's usually been for its HIV/AIDS rate or grim poverty statistics, not for the beauty and diversity of its environment or for the friendliness of its people. That's 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.

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 parks won't quite deliver 'Big Five' excitement, you can get up close to some pretty impressive beasts without having to fight with other cars for the privilege.

Malawi is often described as 'Africa for beginners' and true to form its compact size 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
- **ATMs** In major cities
- **Borders** Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia; all main border crossings are open from 6am to 6pm
- **Budget** US\$20 to US\$40
- **Capital** Lilongwe
- **Languages** English, Chichewa
- **Money** Malawi kwacha; US\$1 = MK141, €1 = MK210
- **Population** 13.1 million
- **Seasons** Cool and dry (May to August), hot and dry (September to mid-November), hot and wet (mid-November to April)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 265; international access code ☎ 101
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 2
- **Visa** Free (for most nationalities) for 30 days; issued at point of entry



**HOW MUCH?**

- **100ml bottle of Nali (Malawi's own chilli sauce)** US\$1
- **Bottle of Malawi Gin** US\$7
- **Folding bike** US\$55
- **Bottle of wine** US\$10 to US\$15
- **Carving** US\$10

**LONELY PLANET INDEX**

- **1L petrol** US\$1.50
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$2.50
- **Bottle of Kuche Kuche** US\$1.50
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$10
- **Plate of chips** US\$1

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Lake Malawi** (p955) 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.
- **Nyika National Park** (p944) Explore a sweeping, magnificent wilderness filled with antelope and zebra on foot, by bike or on horseback.
- **Mt Mulanje** (p952) Scramble up twisted peaks, sleep in mountain huts and soak up the astounding views.
- **Liwonde National Park** (p953) Spot hippos, crocs and kingfishers on the Shire River, or get up close to elephants on foot.
- **Likoma Island** (p947) Escape to dreamy beaches and explore traditional villages, panoramic walks and the magnificent cathedral.

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

The best time to visit Malawi is during the dry season from May to mid-November. From May to July the landscape is attractive and vegetation green and lush, and temperatures cooler. The months of October and November, at the end of the dry season, are the best times for wildlife viewing; however, the temperatures can be uncomfortably hot.

**ITINERARIES**

- **Three Days** Explore Lilongwe (p939) before going down to Liwonde National

Park (p953) for two days of elephant and hippo spotting.

- **One Week** Head down from Blantyre (p948) to the woodland and streams of the Zomba Plateau (p952), then make for Mulanje (p952) for three or four days' hiking across the mountain's misty heights.
- **Two Weeks** Head north from Lilongwe (p939) and explore the wild spaces of Vwaza Marsh (p945) and Nyika Plateau (p944), and the colonial hilltop town of Livingstonia (p944). Then head for Nkhata Bay (p946) for some beachside frolics, before catching the *Ilala* ferry over to Likoma or Chizumulu Islands (p947). 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 (p955) or Senga Bay (p947).

**HISTORY**

Since the first millennium, the Bantu people had been migrating from Central Africa into the area now occupied by Malawi, but migration to the area stepped up with the arrival of the Tumbuka and Phoka, who settled around the highlands of Nyika and Viphya during the 17th century, and the Maravi, who established a large and powerful kingdom in the south.

The early 19th century brought with it two significant migrations. The Yao invaded southern Malawi from western Mozambique, displacing the Maravi, while groups of Zulu migrated northward to settle in central and northern Malawi. This century also saw the escalation of the East African slave trade.

**Enter the British**

The most famous explorer to reach this area was Dr David Livingstone. He reached Lake Malawi in September 1859, naming it Lake Nyasa. His death in 1873 inspired a legion of missionaries to come to Africa, bringing the more 'civilised' principles of commerce and Christianity.

The early missionaries blazed the way for various adventurers and pioneer traders and it wasn't long before European settlers began to arrive in their droves. In 1889 Britain allowed Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company to administer the Shire Highlands, and in 1891 the British Central Africa (BCA) Protectorate was extended to include land along the western