

This is Africa

Taking a ride in the back of a pickup truck, getting a waft of the cool African air, I thought to myself, “This is Africa”. The Elephant Lodge Hostel owner, Birget, and all the hostel residents arrived at a bar about ten miles from Monkey Bay, Malawi, which was just off the main road yet still felt remote. We piled out of the pickup truck and into a bar with an open room containing a pool table and a decent selection of beer and spirits.

We were greeted by the bar owner, a British friend of Birget’s, who immediately started complaining, “I went for a walk today and I got attacked by a hyena, I just made it to my truck.”

Birget, pretending to be sympathetic, replied “You’re very fortunate; you need to be more careful.”

Birget then turned me to and whispered, “My friend tends to exaggerate at times, it was probably just a jackal.”

Africa: at times beautiful, at times brutal, never boring. Malawai gives visitors a sense of what Africa is. There are no major tourist sites, no real reason to come, but those who go to Malawi, understand Africa.

Monkey Bay is a typical Malawian city as it contains one main street and several dirt, side roads. Nothing in the city stands out, but it is located right next to Lake Malawi, a beautiful lake. The locals also slaughter pigs every other Wednesday, so Birget bought part of the pig and prepared it for us. “Us” included two young medical students from Denmark who were volunteering and a couple Scots who were volunteering at the local school. Birget is a middle-aged German who came to Malawi twelve years ago and never went back. Her boyfriend, Keith, was an Aussie who had just arrived and wasn’t going back home either.



Birget attempted to help the people through better education and health services. She helped sponsor children to go to high school as only grade school education is free. She also conducted HIV prevention through promoting and explaining condom use. One time, while explaining how to use a condom, she did not have a wooden prosthetic, so she just unrolled the condom on a tree branch. The men paid attention and all nodded when Birget asked if they understood how to use the condom. Satisfied that she may have saved lives, Birget left the village. The next day she returned and was disheartened when the entire supply of condoms was unrolled on the village’s trees. This is Africa.

The group walked to the next village along the lake, where we saw several great views and were also met by several monkeys in the trees, which explains the name of the city. The nearby village was like any other. It did have a nice school with doors and small, square holes in the wall for ventilation. The village included dried fish, harvested



grain and a meal at the village chief's house. He had a battery-operated radio which he was proud of and his house was clearly the best in the village. We taught the children a couple of songs and let them touch our strange, fine hair, in contrast to their course hair, although many had shaved heads because of fungus that had grown in their hair. Swimming in the lake is an option; however, one of the girls who was changing behind a rock was met by a black mamba, a snake whose venom would have killed her in twenty

minutes. This was just a gentle reminder of the dangers that lurk in Africa.

Lake Malawi can be enjoyed by traveling on the Ilala ferry which carries passengers and cargo once a week. The trip illustrates the frustration of traveling in Africa. There is only one ferry a week, leaving Friday at 11 a.m. However, the cargo doesn't get loaded until 10:30 a.m., already one hour late. Then, when the company has collected enough money from passengers to buy food for the three day trip, they then go to the market and buy food. Two hours late. Then some of the women get sick of waiting so they go to the market also. When the ferry finally leaves, the women are still at the market and when they have come back, they are brought to the ferry by rowboats. Three hours late. However, despite these frustrations the lake is beautiful.

One of the nicest places to visit is around the city of Zomba. Zomba was the capital of Malawi until the mid-1970's, but doesn't have the hectic feel of capital cities. The city itself is relaxing and is typical of a city in Malawi: a couple churches, a couple mosques, a busy market and occasionally electricity at night. Walking the streets of Zomba at night is both mysterious and a wee bit worrisome.

However, most people who visit Zomba don't visit for the candlelit streets but for the nearby Zomba Plateau. The Domsai Valley splits the valley in half, with most visitors hiking in the southern half which is closer to the city of Zomba. The hike is made easier by the cool weather and at times a mist. Of interest is the forests in the area, several waterfalls and the views of the countryside after reaching the top of the plateau.

Meeting people while hiking in the plateau is also of interest. Many people carry wood for heating and cooking down the plateau on their small bikes. I assume this is a daily chore. On the way down people can't ride the bike down because of the weight of the wood and must get off and brake using just flip-flops. Nearly all people will want to visit and many will ask to be pen pals as they are looking for immigration sponsorship.

The second most populous city is Blantyre, which is the commercial center and has some social possibilities but is a somewhat bland city. My hotel also had a lively bar which addressed the social possibilities, which is good because walking at night is not recommended. There are a couple of interesting churches to look at as well as a sports

club. The inner city has a little bit of a “Rasta” feel as there are people selling trinkets and drugs.



In contrast to the city is the more conservative suburbs and countryside. There are many preachers in the country, proselytizing to whoever will listen. It seems the poorer the country, the more the people rely on religion. Malawi fits into this category and thus outwardly is fairly conservative as far as dress – most men wear dress shirts and pants and women are covered up. Religion then, is part of the fabric of Malawi and can be one of the highlights of a visit. I vividly remember walking around the countryside in the morning hearing what seemed like the whole

village singing gospel music and seeing them dancing to the music in a small church. It was another “This is Africa” moment.

The capital of Lilongwe is small by capital standards and does not have a lot to see. There is an interesting market and a nature sanctuary that is worth seeing. Some areas of the old city don’t have regular electricity, so illumination is accomplished by fire. While this is interesting at times, the city is a bit dodgy so security is an issue at night.

One advantage of going to Lilongwe is being able to choose from a variety of restaurants and a variety of food. Lilongwe provides for grocery stores, European food and Arabic food. Typical food in the eastern part of south Africa consists of a large serving of mielie meal, with small helpings of meat (usually chicken or tough beef) and vegetables. Mielie meal is ground maize that tastes and looks like grits except a little thicker; you could throw it against a wall and it would stick. After three weeks of eating mielie meal every meal for every day, I really did want to throw it against a wall. Although filling, mielie meal is bland and not terribly nutritious.

In addition to grinding up maize for mielie meal, it is placed in the extremely thick and sometimes chunky traditional beer. The beer is sold in large red-and-blue cartons, similar to those used for popcorn in movie theaters, and sold with the slogan, “It’s Hygienic”. Whether it’s hygienic is debatable as many locals leave the beer in the sun during the day to make the brew stronger. The maize expands due to the warmth of the sun and thus the carton may explode if you shake it, which does happen at times.

Exploding cartons of beer is part of Malawi. So is waiting three hours for a ferry to leave. So is getting attacked by a black mamba or a hyena or a jackal or whatever animal it was. So is hiking in the beautiful countryside, hearing preachers preach, people chanting and singing, having a beer at a bar in the middle of the Bush after eating a slaughtered pig.