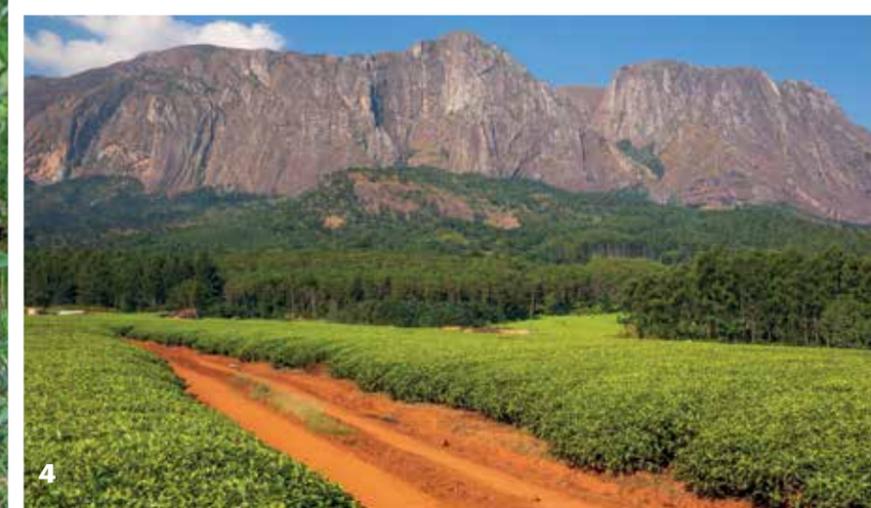


MULI BWANJE?

All visitors to Malawi quickly become familiar with this cheerful greeting. For **Kelly White**, it has accompanied him on many visits during his enduring 26-year relationship with the country. So what keeps him going back?



Malawi was the first African country that I travelled to. That was in 1995, and I've since returned numerous times and also visited most of its regional neighbours. It's been a country of 'firsts' for me and, as the years have passed, the feeling that it was the perfect place to start my African odyssey has only strengthened.

Africa's 'warm heart' quickly established a very secure place in my soul. Malawi offers a flavour of all that appeals about Africa like nowhere else (with the possible exception of the larger South Africa): rewarding safaris, stunning (and varied) scenery, friendly people and even beautiful beaches – and relatively few visitors. Plus, it's small, relaxed and pretty easy to travel around.

Instantly hooked, I soon began working with the tourism industry to

raise the country's profile, and I've been lucky enough to do that since. I was once asked if I have had a 'love affair' with Malawi. My feelings are more paternal, nurturing. I want it to thrive, and for others to see in it what I do.

When I try to describe what makes Malawi special for me, I like to focus on four aspects: the wildlife, the people, the lake and the landscape.

WILDLIFE

My first ever safari (anywhere) was in Liwonde National Park, during that inaugural visit in the mid-'90s. For a wide-eyed first-timer there were more than enough animals to see – a river packed with hippos, elephants rumbling around, impala and warthog grazing just in front of the lodge.

I went on game drives, a morning walk and a boat safari on the Shire River, which Liwonde is famed for, allowing us to get close to the elephants at the water's edge. Until then I'd only ever seen grainy images of these animals on TV, so the thrill of walking amongst them was overwhelming and still gives me goosebumps. That first

foray into the bush provided a memorable baseline for the many safaris that followed, each delivering a different experience.

My guide that day was the legendary Chris Badger of Central African Wilderness Safaris, a lifelong champion of Liwonde. Over the years, I have come to learn that the enjoyment of any safari is largely determined by the quality of the guide. The really good ones keep you engaged and make the most of what there is to be seen.

Whilst we had the adrenaline rush of seeing a bushbuck bucking out from the bushes, and elephants in the distance, Chris also taught us so much about the smaller flora and fauna. I learned about the 'Little 5' and the traditional uses of many trees and plants. I still vividly remember a group of us on all fours peering intently at the ground in anticipation of seeing an antlion.

It has been wonderful to see how the park has flourished since African Parks took over its management in 2015, increasing its size and reintroducing several species.

Similarly, African Parks dramatically revived Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve, the oldest and largest in Malawi. Most notably, in 2017 they carried out one of the world's

most ambitious wildlife translocations here, bringing in 500 elephants and 2000 other animals from Liwonde and Majete.

But there is probably no better illustration of Malawi's recent wildlife transformation, nor of how effective well-managed conservation can be, than in Majete Wildlife Reserve. I first visited many years ago, when there were no tourism concessionaires present to protect it. That

Thankfully, even with the transformational impact of African Parks – the animal translocations, the return of predators and the burgeoning wildlife numbers – safaris retain the same character as when I first visited. This is not the place to sit in pampered luxury with a ticklist, or drive around in minibuses: in Malawi you get out into what still feels like raw, untouched areas of wilderness. I love the

This is not the place to sit in pampered luxury with a ticklist, or drive around in minibuses: in Malawi you get out into what still feels like raw, untouched areas of wilderness

week there were two visitors and we saw no animals. On my most recent visit, after a decade of management by African Parks, just on the drive to Robin Pope Safaris' riverside lodge, Mkulumadzi, I saw half a dozen different species of antelope. I felt so proud to have been witness to such growth. And since then, rhino, lion, cheetah and giraffe have been reintroduced.

unmatched thrill of discovering wildlife here and, selfishly, feeling it's a fairly exclusive experience, without crowds of tourists.

PEOPLE

'The Warm Heart of Africa'. Malawi's marketing slogan has stood the test of time because it really does capture what makes the country so special: its people.

Anyone who has travelled around Africa will tell you the vast majority of people they encounter are friendly and welcoming – but those attributes seem to go up another notch in Malawi.

For me this friendliness really shines through in everyday lives: broad smiles are everywhere and people genuinely want to welcome and help visitors. Unlike in many European cities, whenever I arrive in Malawi I immediately feel relaxed and safe, knowing that I am surrounded by friends – for in Malawi it feels like everyone is my friend. There is nowhere better for a carefree and sincere interaction with local people, to get a real feel for what daily life is like.

Over the years, I've driven all over Malawi, usually in an ordinary saloon car. Inevitably there have been some 'mechanical issues', but that's when the helpful nature of the Malawians has shone through. On one trip, heading south from Lilongwe, a strange noise →



1: View from Zomba Plateau over the Shire Valley **2:** Lions have been reintroduced to Majete Wildlife Reserve **3:** A roan antelope in the Nyika National Park **4:** Mulanje Mountain dominates the landscape over the southern tea estates **Inset:** Fish eagles are commonly seen



1

KAYAK AFRICA



2

AFRICAN PARKS / FRANK WEITZER



3

ZOMBA FOREST LODGE



4



5

ROBIN POPE SAFARIS



A GUIDE'S TALE

EMMANUEL KANDIERO,
TONGOLE WILDERNESS RETREAT

From the age of three, Emmanuel Kandiero was being taken on walking safaris in Nyika, Vwaza and Liwonde national parks by his father, who worked as a game scout. He recalls fondly these trips, learning about the bush and the art of scouting.

As a young boy his favourite animal was a leopard, until one appeared at their kitchen door one day, snarling its alarm. Today, having trained as a guide and now general manager of Tongole Wilderness Retreat in Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve, his favourite animal is the elephant, which he admires for its intelligence, herd communication and noticeable emotions.

With his scout training, Emmanuel is also an honorary ranger, able to explore Nkhotakota with guests on walks, treks or game drives. The reserve is relatively new to wildlife tourism, having benefitted from the rehabilitation programme implemented by African Parks, and Emmanuel thrives on showing guests its elephant and buffalo herds, sable, roan and other antelope, among others. The reserve is also a haven for birds, with 280 identified species.

Being a generalist guide helps in these environments, he says, as it allows him to share a broad spectrum of knowledge. Humility is also important, helping him to manage guests' expectations and differing levels of bush experience.

"Nkhotakota is unique in its variety of activities," he says. "There is canoeing on the river, nature drives, night drives, walking trails of different durations and difficulty, and hiking Kasukusuku and Chipata mountains. The latter is the only place with blue monkeys because of its Afro-montaine vegetation."

Guests also visit the local schools, which are supported by the Tongole Foundation, proving the considerable impact of tourism on the wider community.

"I am very proud to be Malawian. I was raised to be a conservationist and I believe Malawi is the best country for observing wildlife," he continues. "It has a peaceful history and very friendly people. We all have different religious beliefs, but respect each other and live in harmony. It is a country that is developing slowly, but this has helped retain our traditional legacy."

started emanating from one of the rear wheels. Neither I or my companion had any mechanical knowledge, but we pulled over to take a look anyway. Within moments we were surrounded by a group of young men. In most places around the world I'd be pretty anxious in such a situation, but not here. They were all smiling and keen to help. They knew little more than we did, but they insisted on jacking up the car to take the wheel off, not wanting us to get our hands dirty. After inspecting the wheel and axle intently, they admitted they didn't know what was wrong, put everything back as they'd found it and gave us directions to a 'tyre doctor' a few miles away. Truth be told, we didn't go much further before calling the car rental company, who quickly brought out a replacement vehicle so that we could carry on our journey safely.

Later on that same trip, driving through

the sugar estates in the Lower Shire Valley, we skidded on a muddy patch of road and ended up in a roadside ditch. Despite the fact that we hadn't seen any people for a while, it didn't take long before half a dozen smiling faces appeared from the bush as if by magic, pushed us back up onto the track and waved us on our way.

Wherever you might be and whatever your situation in Malawi, there will always be some friends around to help. They never fail to put a smile on my face, which lasts throughout my time there.

LAKE

Unless you've been to Lake Malawi, you may assume that it's just a lake like any other, but you'd be wrong. There really is something magical about it.

I've taken international tour operators to the shores of Lake Malawi only to be asked: "but Malawi doesn't border the Indian Ocean, does it?" Nope. Malawi is landlocked, but when you look out across its vast expanse, you can't see land on the other side. With gentle waves lapping on soft sandy beaches, it's easy to see why people get confused.

And then there are the fish. Lake Malawi is known for its small, colourful cichlids, familiar to aquarium owners around the world. It still blows my mind to think that there are more species of fish in Lake Malawi than in all of the lakes and rivers of Europe and North America put together.

And here it's so easy to see them in their natural habitat. On my first visit to Mumbo Island, in the Lake Malawi National Park (the world's first freshwater national park and a UNESCO World Heritage site), I stood calf-deep in the water and the fish were swimming between my feet.

The first time I tried snorkelling was here. I'm not a particularly confident swimmer, but when you are somewhere so inviting you have to try these things. It took me a while to make myself breathe normally, without panicking, but once I was calm I was able to marvel at the number of fish so close, feeding from the rocks, ignoring me. Now I try to make sure I snorkel on every visit.

Mumbo Island is one of my favourite places in the world. Indeed, my most treasured moment in all my travels was sitting on a rock on Mumbo, with my future wife, beer in hand, watching the sun set. It

is quite simply one of the most relaxing places to be. It's difficult to describe the sense of calmness I get simply being on the island. The stresses and strains of my everyday life are so inherently remote that my subconscious must realise that there is nothing to do but enjoy the moment. And so I do; blissfully ignoring anything beyond the island itself.

That's not to say that the lake is only a place to relax. There is a wide range of water activities available - so many that I confess I've not tried them all. But I will always make time to go kayaking. The water is generally calm enough for a gentle paddle and exploring the islands is great fun, though I've also done a three-hour journey from the mainland to Mumbo.

LANDSCAPE

I chose to study geography, so it should be no surprise that I'm a sucker for a beautiful landscape. For me, there is nothing better than taking in the grandeur of what mother nature has produced, and this continent has more than its fair share of stunning and diverse vistas.

I was as naïve as many on my first visit,

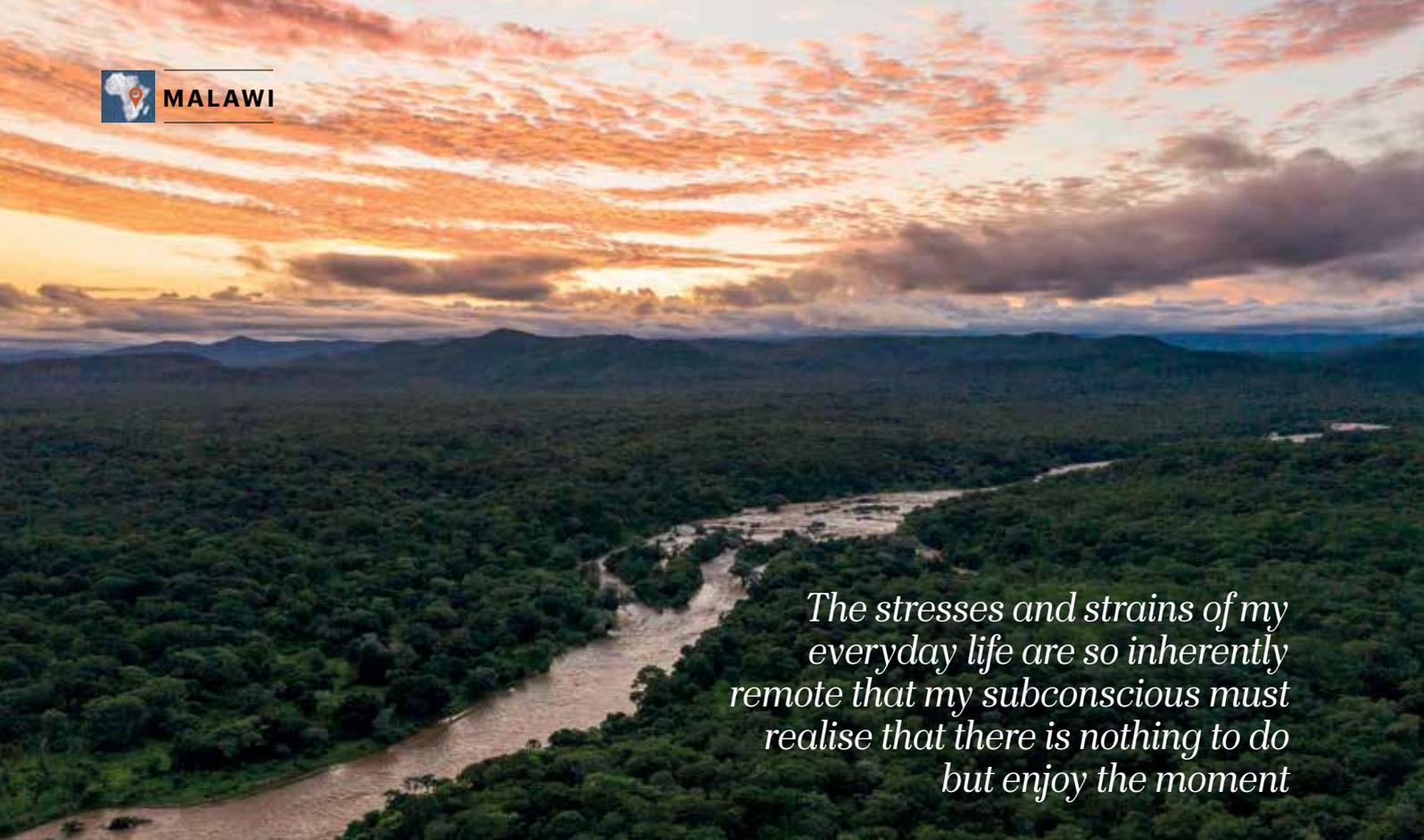
so the beauty and variety of Malawi's scenery was probably what surprised me most. In a country smaller than England, highlands, plateaux and mountains abound, punctuated by dramatic rivers and, of course, a lake or two!

Malawi's lowest point is 100ft above sea level and its highest is 10,000ft, and these extremes lie less than 70 miles apart. The latter is in the impressive Mulanje massif, the 'island in the sky' which boasts another twenty peaks over 8000ft. It's a beautiful corner of the country, in the far south.

But my favourite landscape in the world is right up the other end of Malawi: the unique Nyika National Park. My introduction to this wonderland was perfect. We'd spent most of the day driving up from Lilongwe, negotiating the last few miles after the sun had set. Whilst

driving on winding, climbing, gravel roads after dark isn't usually advised, in hindsight I'd highly recommend such an approach for Nyika. For the following morning its full majesty was revealed, and it was genuinely breathtaking.

Nyika is an 8000ft-high plateau of rolling grassland hills with pockets of forest, and it is particularly beautiful in the early morning light as the mists clear. I was captivated. Nyika is unique in Africa and



The stresses and strains of my everyday life are so inherently remote that my subconscious must realise that there is nothing to do but enjoy the moment

Bright point: One of the world's most ambitious animal translocation programmes has seen Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve restored as a rewarding safari destination

AFRICAN PARKS / NAUDE HEUNIS

often compared to hilly wilderness areas of Europe – but with the added advantage that it's also a game park, where herds of roan and eland are seen, amongst others.

Nyika provided me with another personal 'first', which was riding a horse. Sadly, the activity is not currently available (though it is hoped they will return one day), but back then it was a popular draw, offering an unrivalled way to explore the open plateau and get close to zebra and antelope, even for novices like me.

As a British protectorate, Malawi was not subject to the same colonial influences as some of its neighbours. It remains a country very much of its own character, and attitudes to the British remain positive.

A few colonial reference points have become an accepted part of the country's history and attractions. One such place is the scenic highlands of the Zomba Plateau, in the south. As a slab plateau with elevations up to 2,500ft, it's easy to get to the top of Zomba – there is a good, tarmac road. But before this two-lane highway was built, there was a strict policy of using alternate half hours for travelling up or down, so you had to time your journeys properly!

Once up on top, the road that follows

the edge of the plateau is more challenging, as it is used mostly by logging trucks. But it affords some wonderful views over the Shire River Valley (the only river to drain Lake Malawi) and the town of Zomba, the former colonial capital. One viewpoint still carries the name 'Queen's View', after a visit by the late Queen Mother. At the time, Zomba was said to offer the "best views in the British Empire".

On an early visit here I encountered a great character, sadly now departed. Colonel Brian Burgess had served in

the colonial government but stayed on in Malawi after independence and ran a dressage school on the plateau, as well as giving flute and fly-fishing lessons. When asked how often he returned to the UK, his response was one of incredulity: "The UK? I don't even go down to town [Zomba]! Why would I ever leave this fabulous place?"

Why, indeed? With all its charms, Malawi does that to you. 🐦

WHY MALAWI?

"Over the last twenty years the government has partnered with organisations like African Parks and The Peace Parks Foundation to develop our key reserves. They are now better protected, with an enhanced infrastructure. Wildlife has improved immeasurably and more companies have invested. We feel we now offer as complete a wildlife experience as our more well-known neighbours. But Malawi is so much more than a wildlife destination. We have such varied scenery – bush, beach and mountains – and different experiences all within a few easy hours' drive of each other – plus the friendliest people. The travel between places is an essential part of the experience, stopping in a village or at a viewpoint to ensure Malawi doesn't pass you by. Soak it up: the journey can show you rural Africa in all its colour, energy and chaotic friendliness."

CHRIS BADGER, CENTRAL AFRICAN WILDERNESS SAFARIS

