




Malawi

 Resurging parks with a large diversity of landscapes and wildlife, plus lake-side living

 Fly UK-Lilongwe via Nairobi or Jo'burg; flight time around 14 hours

 Apr-Oct - best weather



AFRICA'S **RISING STAR**

The background of the entire page is a warm, orange-brown color. A large, dark silhouette of a lion is walking from left to right across the middle of the page. The lion's tail is long and curved. In the upper right corner, there are some dark, thin branches of a tree or bush. The title 'AFRICA'S RISING STAR' is written in large, white, serif capital letters at the top of the page. 'AFRICA'S' is in a regular weight, while 'RISING STAR' is in a bold weight.

Fresh political optimism, re-stocked and bursting national parks, stunning new lodges – Malawi is undoubtedly on the up

Words **Richard Waters**

Toasting time:
(clockwise) Sundowners
at sunset; a bull elephant
at Mvuu Camp, Liwonde; a
typically colourful local
textile covers a bench



My heart was in my mouth, my leg shaking in the inky light. A mere metre or so away, on the other side of the mesh window – and right next to my head – was the Jurassic-sized trunk of a bull elephant.

He was silent, discreet even given his huge size, as he snaffled fallen fruit from the ground. I wasn't sure if I should move away quietly and risk being heard by those huge ears, or lie there and hold my breath.

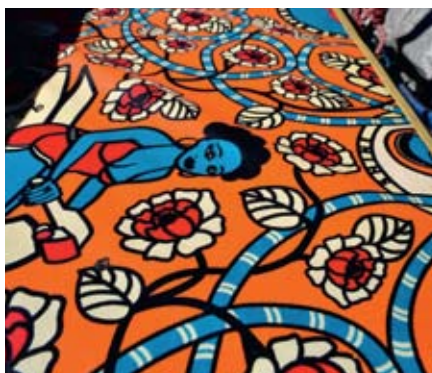
His odour was overpoweringly feral and I wondered if he was in musth, which made my heart beat even quicker: musth equals increased testosterone levels and a bad temper. I craned my neck up to take in his sheer immensity, watching him as he ate. There is nothing more humbling, more awe-inspiring, than being beneath a 4m-tall elephant who doesn't know you're there.

I was in Malawi's Liwonde National Park, staying at Mvuu Camp on the banks of the Shire (pronounced 'Shi-ree') River, which drains from the south of Lake Malawi. Liwonde may be diminutive in size compared to other Malawian reserves, but it certainly packs a wildlife punch. Encompassing brush, bush and wetland, it boasts an impressive tally of 1,900 hippos,

500 water buffaloes and 500 elephants – including my new nocturnal friend.

Enter the lions

I was here on the trail of lions. In summer 2012, Malawi began reintroducing them into two of its nine national parks – Liwonde and Majete. Before this initiative began, the only lions ever seen here were three female cats and one male called Titus who locals believe wandered in from Zambia. At the time of my visit, Titus cut a very lonely figure – the only apex predator in the park, and doing a lot of groaning. Fortunately, after I left, four more female lions and another male were translocated. If all goes to plan they should mark out a territory in the south, increasing chances of a big cat sighting, and attracting more visitors to the country.



This is the aim. Though small-and-friendly Malawi is often dismissed as 'Africa for beginners', an acolyte at the table of great safari destinations – mainly because it had lacked the complete Big 5: lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and buffalo. With lions being reintroduced, the next 12 months could see this changing. In the meantime there's still a menagerie of elephants, hippos, crocs, black rhinos, leopards, water buffaloes, zebra, bushbuck, eland, hyenas and a twitcher's Britannica of exotic feathered things to spot.

Close encounters

In order to meet some of this wildlife, we set out from Mvuu in an open-top Land Cruiser for a Liwonde night drive. The guide seemed to possess infrared vision, spotting eyes all around us, from malevolent crocs to hippos, civets and genets to bush babies and impala. We learned that eyes that coalesce from green to red to yellow in the torch beam signify nocturnal animals, evolved to reflect low-level light; static-coloured eyes belong to animals out past their bedtime – such as the female elephant and her calf who were so quiet we nearly drove straight into them.

Following a sundowner beside a brace of hippos starting to rise on the nearby shore – always a good time to take your leave – we shuttled back to the cosy lodge to swap stories and listen to the distant trumpeting ➤

**‘There’s nothing more humbling than
being close to a 4m-tall bull elephant’**



Malawi

◀ of elephants. Did they ever wander into the lodge, I asked as a warthog trotted past reception. And what about the crocs and hippos, how vigilant did we have to be?

The magic of Mvuu is that in the main lodge you feel safe under the watchful eye of hidden armed guards, but are completely unfettered by fences – at any time a hippo or elephant can make an appearance. In some cases these animals even break through the sleeping compound's barriers – as my elephant visitor proved.

However, my favourite moment in this reserve was not the comfortable lodge or my close nocturnal encounter, but the dawn walk through the bush the next day.

It was a little after 7am; eerie yellow fever trees glowed in the half-light and, without the protection of a vehicle, Liwonde felt more edgy. Suddenly a giant eland raced by in a graceful blur, followed by a thundering male elephant straight out of *The Jungle Book's* dawn patrol. I was hypnotised by his immensity, stirred only by the scout whispering, "Quick, behind the tree! Hide!"

Later, fully exhilarated, we took a river ride past a basking croc, its teeth daubed in fresh blood, and a few of the park's resident hippos. Forget the cuddly depictions in kids' stories: hippos can be pretty menacing – as illustrated when a bull guarding his brace of cows and calves snarled and charged our boat. Fortunately the guide at the tiller was as vigilant as I was alarmed, moving gently away before the giant could tip us over.

King of the jungle

I may not have spotted a lion in Liwonde, but a short hop away, 70km south-west of Blantyre, was Majete Wildlife Reserve – the second place where the big cats are being introduced. When I visited the reserve, an established pride of four were pending arrival from South Africa.

‘Hippos can be pretty menacing – a bull guarding its young charged our boat’



Bank deposits:
(clockwise) Pulling in the fishing nets at Lake Malawi; the view from the balcony at Mkulumadzi Lodge, Majete; crocodiles and hippos provide good photo opportunities and even greater danger





Lions aside, this place is the new star in Malawi's firmament. It is one of the country's largest protected areas, occupying 700 sq km, much of it brachystegia woodland. Prior to 2003, when African Parks and the Malawi government took it over, the park's resident wild things had been hunted close to extinction and the reserve was being encroached on by human cultivation. Since then the park has been restocked with over 3,000 animals, the entire perimeter electric-fenced and 250km of roads laid and visitor figures have quadrupled.

Majete also now has a superior stay option: in 2011 Robin Pope Safaris established Mkulumadzi Camp here, at the confluence of the Mkulumadzi and Shire rivers. After wobbling over a riverine suspension bridge, I took in the camp's elegant main building, kidney-shaped swimming pool and grass-roof eco-chalets. Enjoying the aesthetic could wait though: I had a date with the wildlife.

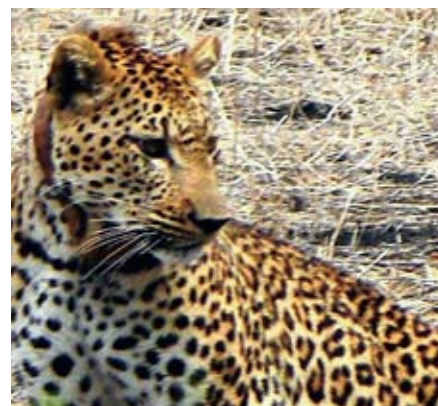
Within an hour of arriving I found myself bumping along on a game drive with camp manager Chris. Bushbuck leapt past, their backsides bearing white rings that made them look as if they'd sat on freshly painted toilets. A solitary male water buffalo, demented as a Minotaur, bulleted across our path.

Just as the light was beginning to fade, we found ourselves in the midst of at least >

Dreamstime: MalawiTourism.com; Richard Waters; Wilderness Safaris (Dana Allen)



On guard
Zebras keep on the look out for their many predators in Nyika NP; (right) The Nyika leopards have a reputation for being bold with open windows



◀ a dozen elephants. As the females and calves calmly crossed the road, we were charged by a bull, ears flapping and kicking up dust. Fortunately he was a youth eager to prove himself and, as in most cases, his 'charge' was pure bluff. Chris diplomatically stood his ground then slowly edged us away from the herd, talking softly to the bull as he did so.

As it turned out it wasn't the day's last encounter with a mischievous elephant. That night we found ourselves marooned inside the restaurant as a huge bull made his presence known outside. Recognisable by his shortened trunk (courtesy of a bite from a crocodile when he was a baby), this elephant had a particularly nasty reputation. And you can't usher a 7,000kg bull – you just have to wait until he moves away. At 2am that morning, we finally found our way back to our chalets.

Land of the leopards

I may have arrived at Majete too early to see the lions, but my hunt for felines was still on. I left the reserve to head to the far north of Malawi, to the country's largest and oldest national park – 3,134 sq km Nyika. Here there are more leopards (over 100) than anywhere else in the country; plans are afoot to introduce cheetah and eventually lions too.

I had hired a sturdy 4WD to navigate the rough roads. As I drove I looked in awe at the

unfathomably diverse landscape: from heather-clad plateaus, woodland and tropical rainforests to soaring mountains and the bottle-green expanse of Lake Malawi. All of this was tossed and sculpted millions of years ago by the epic upsurge of the Rift Valley.

A frisson of expectation tingled up my spine as I arrived late afternoon and passed a steaming mound of elephant dung. The temperature was much cooler due to the rising altitude, the landscape slowly morphing into ghostly grasslands and glittering granite boulders. I was marvelling at a horizon of amber hills washed in magic-hour light when a huge male eland suddenly appeared in front of the bonnet; through the tall grass I noticed the flicker of zebras. I quickly wound up my window, remembering what I'd heard about how brazen the leopards are here.

Finally I reached Chelinda Camp, nestled in the lee of a valley beside a tree-shaded lake. Inside my cosy timber cabin I discovered a crackling fire and a hot-water bottle warming the bed; after the long drive I could have happily curled up and gone straight to sleep, but rest was not on the agenda. Sam, the camp manager, spirited me away in a Land Cruiser to join the night drive. As we rattled through the twilight savannah, he said we had a good chance of seeing spotted hyena, zebra, bushbuck and elephant.

More exciting was the fact that on a night drive you have an exceptionally high chance – around 40% – of spying leopards. There are scratch marks on one of Chelinda's chalets where a male developed a taste for voyeurism: he'd sharpen his claws as he watched guests take a shower, later helping himself to the stores in the camp's kitchen. Eventually he had to be darted and transmigrated.

With cats in mind, we continued to bound along, the stars bright and myriad through the open roof. We watched with bated breath as the nocturnal jigsaw presented us glimpses of its mystery: a swatch of black-and-white zebra; an eagle owl eviscerating a mouse; the back end of a lumbering bull elephant – but no leopard.

A rising star

Back at the lodge, a fire burned, hot cocoas were clutched and I chatted to the staff. Times, it seems, are changing in Malawi: the country's first female president, Joyce Banda, had been in office just a few months and has already started solving some of the corruption and inflation problems left by her despotic predecessor, Bingu wa Mutharika. Once again this country often referred to as the 'warm heart of Africa' has something to smile about.

From my veranda the next morning I watched a veil of mist lift off the valley opposite to reveal a herd of zebra; I'll never forget it. I didn't mind not seeing a leopard, not a bit, for the epic drama of Nyika – the rarefied strangeness of the place – more than compensated. The place haunted my thoughts for days.

Just as I was leaving Malawi, I heard some news from Majete: the lions had arrived and were about to be released. It's believed the dominant female, named Shire, will come into season soon. I just hope her little brood flows thick and fast as the river after which she is named, and that Malawi's star continues to rise. ■

Richard Waters is a freelance travel writer who has written for *Sunday Times Travel Magazine*, *CNN Traveller* and *The Independent*

'I was marvelling at the amber hills when a huge male eland appeared'