

Malawi Livingstone's Lake of Stars still buzzes with the sound of lantern-carrying nocturnal fishermen

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Hi – I'm Kimberly and this is Ingrid." Marooned on a near-deserted African island, enjoying a cool beer in the ochre afterglow of a setting sun, the unexpected greeting of a bikini-clad American blonde siren and her Scandinavian cousin might so easily have been attributed to malarial dreams.

I glanced at Adrian. It was too dark to discern my companion's expression, though surprised might have covered it.

"Is the French coming?" asked Ingrid.

"He's tired. We've worn him out today," replied Kimberley.

"Ah, the French," said Ingrid. "You'll see him later. He likes to be a little bit, well, adventurous."

Waves of cooling air wafted across the water from Cape Maclear, a mile or two away on Lake Malawi's shore, to Domwe Island.

Feeling middle aged and married with children, I left Adrian and the sirens waiting for "the French", and by torchlight climbed from the lake shore to the thatched dining area, carefully noting another beer on my honesty tab.

Along a further steep and rocky path lay the camp kitchen where a fire crackled vigorously outside, throwing up showers of sparks.

Austin, a strong and wiry youth who had helped unload my bags from the boat earlier in the day, tended the flames, while inside the cook, Francis, was already busy about his kitchen. "I will welcome you with fish," he said. "Hey, we're on an island after all." Before we could discuss dessert Austin poked his head inside. "You want to see pig? Come. This way, quietly."

There they were. Two substantial, tusked bush pigs snuffled speculatively among the undergrowth around the back of the cookhouse. "Years ago we composted the scraps and they'd come for this. Now we take everything off the island but still they come," said Austin.

Below I could hear giggling – "the French" had arrived in the form of Jean Baptiste, JB for short. He tells me he and the girls met in Johannesburg and travelled together to the Lake of Stars Festival.

The name Lake of Stars was coined by Scottish missionary and explorer Dr David Livingstone when he saw lantern-carrying fishermen sailing each night on the water. Indeed, Cape Maclear itself was named by Livingstone to honour his friend, the astronomer Thomas Maclear. It's unlikely that either could have envisaged the phrase being co-opted by 21st-century festival-goers.

I wanted to dislike "the French", envious of his youth and good looks, but it wasn't possible – he was a charming young man. "We kayaked across from Cape Maclear today. We're camping just with mosquito nets," he said.



I thought of my comfortable walk-in tent with proper bed, sheets and pillows. Later, though only a little, sleep came easily – the drive from Lilongwe having taken most of the day.

At some unfamiliar hour the raucous banter of the lake's nocturnal fishermen, working hard to put food on the table for their families, had me reaching for an imaginary AK47, but before firing a few shots across the bows of their canoes I was once more lost to my bed's seductive flatness.

Domwe's morning intruded politely into my tent, as a good-humoured tinkling of utensils drifted down from Francis's kitchen, mixing with the faint odour of woodsmoke and paraffin. Bacon, eggs, fresh bread rolls and Malawian Mzuzu coffee – "improves athletic performance", according to the label – arrived for breakfast. Soon we were joined by the

Livingstone's influence lingers in places such as Cape Maclear on the shore of Lake Malawi, the town having been named by the explorer in tribute to astronomer Thomas Maclear

PHOTOGRAPH: ALEXBRAMWELL/ALAMY

international menage – in the light Kimberly seemed older, Ingrid plumper. "The French" was just the same.

"Those fishermen were bloody loud – I'd swear they were doing it on purpose. Or perhaps they were trying to frighten the fish by shouting at them?" said Adrian. "When I'd finally got to sleep a troop of baboons started having a ruckus on my deck."

Francis heated up water for an invigorating al fresco bucket shower. By 8.30am the boat had arrived for the five-mile voyage to Mumbo Island.

"It says here that Mumbo is Malawi's most romantic spot," said Adrian. We eyed each other with profound disappointment. Adrian shut the guidebook and threw it over.

It fell open at the history section and it became quickly apparent that although most of the British Empire was coloured pink, Malawi possessed a distinct tartan streak. From Livingstone's exhaustive explorations, to Presbyterian missions, the

lake's network of Glaswegian traders and the heritage of the country's second city, Blantyre, Scots' links with Malawi were myriad. More recently Malawi had been darkly stained by a graduate of Glasgow's Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, former Renfrewshire GP and elder of the Church of Scotland, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who was deposed in 1993.

"President For Life" Banda's rule was characterised by fear, intimidation, political repression and petty invasions into private lives – women were obliged to wear skirts, men were required to have short hair and foreigners in flares were denied entry. Perhaps even more so than the former colonial masters, Banda perceived his people as children in need of firm discipline.

Approaching Mumbo's jetty we were greeted by Jack Sparrow's younger, more attractive sister, Sylvie. "I came out from Amsterdam a year ago to help a friend start a coffee house. The coffee house didn't work



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out but I'm still here, a little deprived of cheese, but still here," she shrugged.

We followed Sylvie's ensemble of dreadlocks, tattoos and piercings along the boardwalk to Mumbo's shady bar. In the strengthening sun we took her advice and gave up the beach to a pale sprinkling of elderly Germans – a hike around the island's interior seemed in order. Working up a sweat disturbing the leafy habits of monitor lizards and skittering fat-tailed skinks, we wandered for an hour describing an uncertain figure of eight among dense undergrowth. It was supposed to be a circular walk but even on an island as small as Mumbo it was easy to get lost.

Back to the beach and navigation-wise we fared little better with kayaks. "My rudder is stuck and I'm taking on water," I signalled. Pondering that this same trouble sank the Bismarck I bailed hard with a large sponge. "Mine's leaking too. Just keep paddling," answered Adrian. Navigating a clockwise course out of the small bay, from its lofty perch atop a cliff face an African fish eagle noted our awkward splashing progress, eventually turning away with understandable disdain.

Further, beyond Mumbo's thatched cabins, cormorants stood unconcerned on rocky outcrops, their wings hung out to dry, while elsewhere a metre-long water monitor motored purposefully through the wind-ruffled water. Around the next rocky spit a cove hid a cabal of fishermen. They called us over, no doubt to share their favourite hunting spots – close to some Johnny Foreigner's tent on Domwe Island? – and teach us the traditional Lake Malawi technique of night shout-fishing. I ignored them. Battling my kayak's preference to ply a course in the general direction of Mozambique, I was paddling unevenly towards the shore when Adrian yelled across. "Hey, there's a big crocodile here. It's as big as my kayak. Blimey – look at it." In truth I didn't see the canny reptile before it slipped beneath the water but our stroke rate on arrival at the bay was brisk enough to surprise the still-lolling Germans.

"Yes, we saw a baby croc swimming in the bay earlier," said Sylvie. "You must have found Mum."

That evening on Domwe we mixed G&Ts with Malawi's famous gin, flavoured with locally grown juniper, and watched a raft of otters cavort in the shallows.

By the time my glass was empty a soft, breezy darkness had fallen, while in the kitchen Francis was already consumed by bidding us adieu with chicken.

When travelling it's counter-intuitive to highlight a dearth of amenity. However, lacking electricity, air-conditioning, running water, telephone, TV and internet, Lake Malawi's engagingly alternative island life fulfilled a set of restorative criteria most of us would find hard to define – certainly a case of less being so much more.

Travel notes

Getting there and where to stay

Close Encounters Africa (southern-africa.co.uk, 0844 415 0155) offers seven-night Malawi self-drive tours combining Lake Malawi's Domwe Island, Majete Reserve and Dedza from £2327pp, including accommodation, car rental and flights from Glasgow or Edinburgh. Nick Redmayne travelled from Glasgow to London King's Cross with East Coast (eastcoast.co.uk) – return fares from £34 – and flew from London Heathrow to Lilongwe with Ethiopian Airlines (ethiopianairlines.com) – return flights from £616 or £820 from Glasgow, including BA connections. **More information** See visitmalawi.mw.

THE GETAWAY



THE GLENISLE HOTEL
LAMLASH, ARRAN

My throat is burning and my legs feel like lead weights as I pedal uphill and inland from Brodick, the steep incline making the shortish route to Lamblash feel more like a leg of the Tour De France. That bottle of Arran Blonde I indulged in on the ferry from Ardrossan seemed a good idea at the time. My pain is soon forgotten, though, after we reach the crest of the hill and freewheel down to Lamblash, where the Glenisle Hotel and a view across the bay towards Holy Isle lie in wait.

We receive a warm welcome and with bikes safely stored are shown to our room. The hotel dates from around the middle of the 18th century, and at one point our room was part of a prison. This fact could make for an, er, interesting theme, but thankfully the room is decked out in a crisp, modern style with charcoal colours which complement the coastal location. During a quick tour I learn that the Glenisle was thoroughly revamped in 2008 after the current owners bought it, and the visual variety across the range of rooms is a welcome break from the norm.

After a swift aperitif on the patio, catching the last of the sun, we head for the restaurant. I replace the calories burned on the ride over with cullen skink followed by pan-seared sea bream, though it's a hard choice given the menu's refreshingly broad selection.

The next morning I am ordered to fill up by my partner before we embark on a day on the bikes. Surely the beautifully cooked breakfast (with veggie option) and masses of fruit will power me up the hills to come?

From the hotel we take the Ross Road, which cuts across the south of Arran. After a gentle start the incline turns brutal, but the day is crisp and clear and views spectacular. We even spot a couple of red squirrels.

After crossing the island we turn left, winding up and down through Lagg and past Kildonan. At Whiting Bay more fuel is required so we make a pit stop at the welcoming Coast cafe/bistro, wolfing down tasty burgers in the cool autumn sun.

A short ride later we're back in the comfort of the hotel, where a hot bath and a warming dram in the snug soon refresh the legs. For now, the return leg to Brodick can wait.

Katherine Pentney was a guest of the Glenisle Hotel, Lamblash, Arran. Visit glenislehotel.com or call 01770 600559. Double rooms from £108 per night.

BY KATHERINE PENTNEY