

ADVENTURE

Driving Malawi

JUST DRIVE

One oft forgotten, or even ignored, landlocked country in Africa has much to offer the off-roader, Malawi could well be the ideal holiday adventure drive you've been looking for

Words and photography: Nick Redmayne



“Twenty five vehicles rolled by clients. All these have been due to driver error...” It wasn't the 'welcome pack' I'd expected from Safari Drive. Along with this A4 treatise, which could have been subtitled. “Bad shit happens when you drive fast and loose on gravel roads...”, was a full colour picture of a lovely 110 Land Rover Defender... on its roof, offering inelegant views of its sump plug to any that cared to look.

I'd first considered driving around Malawi during a visit in 2011. However, an unfortunate combination of misappropriated aid money, a shiny new presidential jet and the expulsion of

the British High Commissioner had resulted in nationwide fuel shortages as donor nations unaccountably suspended payments. Two presidents on, in 2014, I was back.

Putting aside summary imprisonment, curtailment of press freedom, feeding opponents to crocodiles, prohibition of Simon and Garfunkel's 'Cecilia', and the banning of beards, Malawi's President for Life, the smiling dictator Hastings Kamuzu Banda, did at least build good roads. Perhaps he'd been inspired by Scotland's high roads during medical training in Glasgow and Edinburgh, or even the B-routes around Newcastle when practising as a GP in North

Shields. Who knows? Whatever the rationale, Malawi's roads qualify the country, along with South Africa and Namibia, as southern African states well suited to independent self-drive touring.

“Now this is my favourite tool.” At Safari Drive's Lilongwe depot, having opened the Land Rover's tailgate Sam Morris delightedly pulled out the jack and slotted it into a hole in the bumper, cranking the handle until the Land Rover's near side quarter started to rise. “We don't supply high-lift jacks any more. Too many accidents... But look at that. No digging or crawling about underneath. Great design. Just remember to chock the opposite corner.” The Land Rover was identical ▶



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◀ to the picture in the 'welcome pack', though pristine and resolutely upright. "When you're driving, there's a lot of weight up there," Sam pointed at the roof tent. "You'll feel it most when cornering. If you lose grip on gravel, off the accelerator and it should straighten up..." In the space of an hour we'd gone through a full complement of kit, from sat phone, GPS, recovery strap and shovel, to integral water tank, fridge, gas burner and roof tent. "And you never know when one of these might come in handy," said Sam as he tossed in an off-cut of two by four. "There's a bottle of red wine in the fridge. See you in two-weeks..."

Earlier, arriving from the airport I'd asked Innocent, my taxi driver, about

the main driving hazards in Malawi. "Ah..." he contemplated. "They are many." I pressed for detail. "People, children, bicycles. These small buses," he pointed disdainfully out of the window. "They stop anywhere and start anytime. Then there are goats. If you see one goat just slow down, there'll be more and they never make up their minds."

"What about police," I asked.

"Here they're okay. Just check your documents. Not like Tanzania. Oh... they're hard, stopping you and asking for money immediately."

Driving out of the depot I avoided all goats. As reggae bass beat from Lilongwe's Capital FM battled with engine noise and open windows, I

Top: First morning on the road. Leaving Kumbali Lodge before hitting the M1 southbound

Below left: Small town Malawi

Below right: View from Zomba Plateau over Shire Highlands. Shire River visible as a streak of silver top right

didn't quite cut it as a licensed bush taxi, more like a bush minicab. A wrong turning sending soldiers scurrying at the entrance to Lilongwe's presidential residence of State House served only to confirm his status. It all ended with smiles, and relief.

Late in a very long day, I was far from fresh after the Heathrow flight. Driving at night anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa was not recommended, darkness providing an unpleasant segue between the unexpected and the unavoidable.

Thankfully, only a few corrugated kilometres of red dirt road lay between me and a reassuringly flat bed at Kumbali Lodge. Sitting on the thatched terrace I drank deeply from a big bottle of Kuche Kuche – a beer whose name



roughly translates to 'Goes all night', not at all what I had in mind.

Next day, GPS co-ordinates set, I headed south. According to the map it was the M1, but not as we know it. Along with erratic minivans, beaten up and crammed with passengers, bicycles made up the majority of traffic. However, the peloton of Team Sky would not have found a happy home on Malawi's roads. Unless of course they'd become adept at carrying a week's worth of firewood, a brace of protesting goats strapped across their rear mudguards, or indeed moonlighted as licensed taxis, bolted-on padded cushions ferrying demure maidens about town side-saddle. Elsewhere, Mondeo Man minus the Mondeo, pedalled earnestly in business suit, shirt and tie, saddle often too low and legs too long, no more ridiculous than logoed lycra bodysuits.

As rural Malawi unfolded, a patchwork of cultivated land spilled away from the road. Scattered gatherings of single story mud brick houses and one room 'shopping centres' characterised a population dependent upon low-tech agriculture. Beyond the villages dramatic rocky mountains erupted abruptly from the plain and defined a landscape that needed no interpretative brown sign to label it as Africa.

"Ah, Sir. You see we have a problem." I'd pulled over at the insistence of a diminutive uniformed policeman's raised palm. "You have committed an offence. The speed limit is 50 kilometres," he continued.

"Where's the sign?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

He looked thoughtful for a moment, "In this country we have problem. We put a sign, and then somebody come and they take it." However, this 'problem' didn't amount to a valid defence. "Anyway, the fine is 5000 Kwacha. Pay my colleague," he stated. "This money is for the government. He will give you a receipt. May you have a good journey."

I paid. A smiling constable sitting on a grassy hummock handed me a slip of

official-looking paper pre-stamped with 'This is Not a Valid Receipt.' "Are there many of you chaps on the road today?" I enquired.

"Yes," he mentally totted up the speed traps, "Maybe three teams on this road," he smiled disarmingly. As the penalty amounted to less than £8, I could afford to smile back.

Arriving at the one-time colonial capital of Zomba, I parked by a memorial to the King's African Rifles. Wide tree-lined avenues and pastel buildings harked back to a grander era, languid tropical air propagating an atmosphere of benign neglect. Around the base of the clock tower names of the fallen were recorded on brass plates. A dozen or so British officers and some 1300 Malawians, had either been killed in action or succumbing to disease during WW1 campaigns in East Africa. "Here, lookie," an elderly caretaker put down his brush and pointed inside the clock tower, up some narrow stairs. Beyond a silent and dusty mechanism a balcony opened just below the clock faces. The old man seemed as satisfied with the view as I was. "Pocket money. Lunch?" he enquired quietly. It would have been churlish to refuse.

Back at ground level I called up Tom Inch. Malawi's tarmac was impressive but I wanted to go to the bush. Tom had offered to guide me in a scramble along forestry tracks up onto Zomba Plateau, the immense brooding monolith of almost 7000 feet that dominated the town and the surrounding Shire Highlands. "Yeah, come up to the lodge for lunch," said Tom's partner, Petal Wimbush. Despite good directions, I found myself again on the wrong road, the satnav proving to be something of a false friend. At a police check, after looking over my licence, an efficient female officer hitched a lift and pointed out the correct turning. Further reassurance to "Just go righty," was provided by a helpful soldier and, avoiding boys rolling substantial 10 foot tree trunks down the road, I left tarmac and picked up the signs to Zomba Forest Lodge. Twenty minutes



later, emerging from shady forest, I arrived, among stands of red-leaved Poinsettias on steroids, at Tom and Petal's delightfully off-grid lodge.

"Sometimes people arrive without booking," said Petal. "One Belgian couple turned up late and we were full. It was dark and the woman burst into tears. In the end they had our room and we camped in the garden." Over an excellent lunch Tom extolled the virtues of Malawi for self-drivers, "It's relatively compact. And one advantage of the denser population is that you're hardly ever in danger of getting really stuck. You may have to spend a little money, but Malawians are genuinely inclined to help you out."

The logging track Tom directed us onto was not an aid to digestion. "Probably best to engage low range now," he hinted. "This road hasn't been maintained since Banda". We lurched upwards over compacted red soil, which had cemented rounded boulders of sump rock steadfastly in place. "These new vehicles," said Tom, "with all their electronics. It's not what you need in Africa. I've got a Prada, one of the last with manual hubs, and a Tata pick-up. If I can't fix it myself I don't want it."

Looking at the track ahead, this wasn't crossover territory. Attempting the ascent in anything without high clearance and proper low ratio four-wheel drive, particularly in a rented

Top and left: Start of forestry track up onto the plateau

Above right: All Safari Drive's Land Rover's have a name, mine was Attenborough.



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◀ vehicle, would have been delusional. "It's still used by logging trucks," said Tom. "Difficult to believe they get eight wheelers up here, but they do." Malawi has suffered widespread deforestation in large part because wood is the main source of fuel for domestic cooking and heating. "There is legitimate logging here," described Tom. "Though it's poorly organised. It's allowed for the village women to collect dead wood. You get a feel for what's legal."

We forded a stream that had gnawed its way across the track, lost traction and slued to the right, wheels turning ineffectively. "I'll try that again," I said, through an exhaled breath, as much to reassure myself as Tom. Backing up, I chose a more careful line and as we lost grip, spun the steering wheel, searching for purchase, which thankfully revealed itself. A few hundred yards on the route levelled out on an open



stretch of coarse grass. "I'm just gonna have a smoke," said Tom.

Following a rustic handmade sign pointing to Chingwe's Hole we avoided the black void of a peaty washout and again tackled a steady climb. The cloud base had lowered and sunlight was dimmed and diffused by gentle drizzle. "There it is. The hole," announced Tom. A thicket of dense scrub almost completely encircled the dark chasm of a sinkhole. I parted some of the prickly

branches and looked down. I couldn't see the bottom. "The gates to hell according to some locals," said Tom. "Others think Banda had his enemies thrown in, but there are no skeletons down there." Walking on, three chilly-looking young men roused themselves from a campfire within a roofless shelter to stand by an impressive selection of minerals, from agate and amethyst to feldspar, gypsum and quartz.

Looking beyond their lonely souvenir stand, the real gem was the view. "There's the Shire River," Tom pointed through watery sunbeams, down into the valleys and across acres of farmland far below, to a distant shining streak of silver. Smoke from stubble fires on the plain below rose almost vertically. Light was fading and drizzle was becoming rain. Time to descend.

Tom asked to be dropped off a little way from the lodge, maintaining he liked a walk in the evening. As he got out I asked whether the track had deteriorated since he last drove it?

"Me?" he replied, "I've never driven up there..."

Back in Lilongwe after two weeks, I'd kept the Land Rover upright and despite a tense moment with an errant pig, avoided other traffic. Malawi will continue to be overshadowed by near neighbours or confused with those farther away. However, for drivers keen to independently explore a small part of 'real' Africa without embarking on a Cape to Cairo expedition it rates highly as an achievable adventure. **4x4**

HOW TO DRIVE MALAWI

Air: Kenya Airways (0208 283 1818; kenya-airways.com) operate daily flights from Heathrow to Nairobi connecting onwards to Lilongwe and Blantyre in Malawi from £773 return.

Land: Nick Redmayne's Land Rover was provided by Safaridrive (01488 71140; safaridrive.com). The company offers 16-day self-drive tours of southern Malawi from £2,414pp (based on four people sharing a 4x4 vehicle) including lodge and camping accommodation, many meals, a starter pack of provisions and a first tank of diesel.

Stay: In Zomba Nick Redmayne stayed at Sunbird Ku Chawe (+265 (0) 1 514 211; sunbirdmalawi.com). Double rooms with Dinner, B&B from \$235 per night, an excellent restaurant and stunning views from Zomba Plateau.

4x4: Zomba Forest Lodge (+265 (0) 992 802 702; zombaforestlodge.com) – no electricity, no wifi, and no TV. Full Board from \$95pp per night. Co-owner Tom Inch offers to accompany drivers up onto the plateau, while partner Petal Wimbush cooks a storming lunch. Booking essential.

Read: Malawi (bradtguides.com; 2013)
More: Malawi Tourist Information Office (0115 972 7250; malawitourism.com)



Top: Set up for the night. The only drawback of a roof tent is once it's up you're not going anywhere...

Above left: Yup, I'm off-road and the bridge has a hole in it... Thank you for the heads up Miss Garmin

Below left: A room with a view. Morning from my balcony at Sunbird Ku Chawe Hotel, Zomba Plateau