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North Malawi

Less well known than the rest of the country, North Malawi has so much to offer the visitor. With a lower population density, it is a region for those who wish to experience Africa at its most unspoilt. It has a different character from the rest of the country, recognisable in its scenery and its people. Except for that part of the region, which is occupied by Lake Malawi, the north is characterised by its great highlands and its quite astonishing beauty is the lasting memory of all who explore this unique area.

Nyika National Park is Malawi's largest (1250 sq miles/3250 sq km) and longest established. It extends across the great Nyika Plateau, which is essentially a granitic dome rising to 8000 ft /2400 m with an environment like none other in Africa. The rolling landscapes of the central plateau are described as whalebacks and are rich in

wildflowers. Over 200 types of orchid flower in the rainy season. Nyika is wonderful for trekking and mountain biking, and for conventional 4x4 safaris. The montane vegetation attracts large numbers of antelope from the diminutive duiker to roan and eland, the latter of which can occur in large herds. Zebra are common and leopard, hyena and jackal also live on the plateau. The leopard population is one of the densest in Africa and sightings are regular. Elephants and buffalo usually keep to the lower ground on the edges of the park. For the birdwatcher, the park has a great deal to offer, with over 400 species recorded, including the rare Denham's bustard, wattled crane and red-winged francolin. Other things to see in the vast park include waterfalls, a Neolithic rock shelter, trout pools and even a 'magic lake'. (Accommodation: Chelinda Lodge; Chelinda Camp).

Livingstonia Mission is wonderfully sited between Nyika's eastern edge and the shore of Lake Malawi. From 3000 ft/ 1000 m there are views of incredible beauty across the lake to Tanzania. Livingstonia is a fascinating mission settlement dating from 1894, established by Robert Laws, a disciple of David Livingstone. The Old Stone House, the home of the Laws family, is now a resthouse and museum.

Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve is 400 sq miles/1000 sq km of marsh and plain, with a few rocky outcrops. The reserve has a wonderful mix of vegetation: forest and grassland, thin woodland and marsh. It is this rich habitat which attracts a splendid range of birdlife. Nearly 300 species of birds have been recorded including stork, heron and the white-faced tree duck. For safaris, Vwaza offers the more traditional 'bush game' experience - a perfect complement to Nyika's rolling grassland hills. Herds of thirty or forty elephants are regularly seen and there are large numbers of hippos - particularly found in Lake Kazuni, near the main entrance. Buffalo, various antelope, baboons and many smaller mammals are also to be seen. Lions are the main predators.

Mzuzu the capital of the north, lies in a saddle in the highlands. It stands at the junction of the lakeshore road (M5) and Malawi's main north-south highway (M1). The town, which has grown rapidly in recent times, has an airport and a host of other facilities in the crowded town centre. (Accommodation: Sunbird Mzuzu)

Likoma Island is off the eastern shore of the Lake: a little piece of Malawian territory in Mozambican waters. Likoma's claim to fame is its 100 year old cathedral (the size of Winchester's). This vast building has some interesting features including stained glass and carved soapstone. The island also boasts some lovely beaches. Access to Likoma is by boat or aircraft. (Accommodation: Ulisa Bay Lodge)

Manda Wilderness is an ambitious project on the Mozambique mainland nearest to Likoma Island. This is a 120,000 hectare community reserve of unspoilt wilderness - brachystegia and riverine forest, savannah, swamps and streams, mountains and miles of beaches with crystal clear fresh water. It is an area known for its biodiversity and used to be one of the biggest game areas in the country. Conservation projects are now being run with the local communities in this genuine wilderness area. (Accommodation: Nkwichi Lodge)

The Viphya Highlands are the forested spine of North Malawi, stretching up from Central Malawi all the way to Nyika. This is a wonderful area for those seeking a combination of stunning scenery and solitude. The undulating plateau rises to 6000 ft /1850 m although some peaks stretch a further 1000 ft /300 m higher. It is an ideal area in which to unwind but there are also opportunities for trekking, mountain biking and various other activities. Though not a safari destination, the birdwatching is excellent and there are small mammals and the occasional leopard to be seen in the forests. (Accommodation: Luwawa Forest Lodge)

The Northern Lakeshore is Lake Malawi at its most varied - everything from high cliffs dropping sheer into the lake, to secluded coves accessible only by boat.

- Chintheche has a concentration of small Lakeshore resorts, making the most of some of the best beaches on the lake - long stretches of white sand. Nearby is an area of cultural interest, the Bandawe Mission site. (Accommodation: Chintheche Inn; Makuzi Beach Lodge; The Beach House)

- Nkhata Bay is a vibrant port town in the North of Malawi often referred to as the gateway to the islands. It has a wonderful carving market and a bustling (almost Caribbean) feel to it. Just a 3 minutes drive away from the town is a beautiful sand beach where there are a number of lodges to choose from. With plenty of small shops and a bank / ATM as well as internet cafes, restaurants and bars, Nkhata Bay, despite its size, has a lot to offer. (Accommodation: Safari Cottage)

- Karonga has a fascinating new museum telling something of the interesting history of the area back to prehistoric times. The skeletal remains of the Malawisaurus dinosaur have been unearthed nearby as have been the oldest human remains in the country. Karonga's 19th Century history is equally of interest.

Central Malawi

Central Malawi is a region of special importance. It is the point of arrival for most international visitors and home to the country's capital, Lilongwe. Access to the rest of the country is easy and this is an interesting region in its own right. Most of the region is part of the Central African Plateau, gently undulating around 4000 ft/1200m before descending to the Lakeshore at the edge of the Rift Valley. The plateau is crossed by numerous rivers and, here and there, isolated hills known as inselbergs, punctuate the gentle landscapes. The scenery in Central Malawi is less dramatic than elsewhere in the country but it has the same attractive variety that makes Malawi a wonderful place to tour.

Kasungu National Park is in the west of Central Malawi bordering Zambia. It's an 800 sq mile/2000 sq km area of natural woodland and bush with occasional stretches of more open grass. Kasungu used to be Malawi's premier game park but poaching has reduced animal numbers. However, there is still wildlife to be seen and the park is relatively easy to drive to from Lilongwe.

Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve is a vast 700 sq miles/1800 sq km of rugged terrain crossed by a number of rivers which tumble down the edge of the escarpment as they make their ways to the Lake. Most of the reserve is miombo woodland with occasional grasses and rainforest. This is a wonderful example of true wilderness. There is a wide range of mammals, including elephants and lions. While access and viewing has been difficult in the past there are exciting developments taking place. Two lodges are now open and African Parks took over the management of the reserve in 2015, promising conservation initiatives and a re-stocking programme that will see Nkhotakota transformed. This is destined to be a very popular safari destination with the added attractions of prolific birdlife and angling on some of the rivers. (Accommodation: Bua River Lodge; Tongole Wilderness Lodge)

Ntchisi Forest Reserve contains some of southern Africa's last remaining rainforest and is famous for its orchids, birdlife and liana-swinging samango monkeys. The Reserve has excellent hiking, with breathtaking views from

Ntchisi Mountain, while the surrounding villages offer a picturesque and untouched experience of the real Africa. (Accommodation: Ntchisi Forest Lodge)

Dwangwa is split in two by the M5 road. This is very much a company town, influenced and determined by its giant sugar estate. (Accommodation: Ngala Beach Lodge)

Lilongwe was made Malawi's capital by the country's first President, Dr Banda. The Old Town is very different to, and distinct from the newer Capital City - the two parts separated by a nature sanctuary. The City's gleaming modern buildings, in their spacious garden-like settings, contrast with the hustle and bustle of Old Town. The craft market in Old Town is especially popular with visitors. Most of the main safari/tour companies have offices in Lilongwe and there's no shortage of good accommodation. Lilongwe is the usual start-off point for trips across to Zambia's Luangwa National Parks. (Accommodation: Sunbird Capital; Sunbird Lilongwe; President Walmont Hotel, Crossroads Hotel; Korea Garden Lodge; Kiboko Town Hotel; Mafumu Hotel; Africa House Malawi; Barefoot Safari Lodge; Heuglin's Lodge; Kumbali Country Lodge)

Dzalanyama Forest Reserve is an extensive area of highlands cut by rivers and cloaked by woodland. Most is Brachystegia but there are significant areas of evergreen forest. There are animals to be seen though mammal populations are much reduced from days gone by. The forest does, though, provide some of the best birdwatching in the country – a veritable ornithologist's delight just an hour from the capital. (Accommodation: Dzalanyama Forest House)

Dedza is a wonderful forest town, overlooked by the Dedza mountain and surrounded by the hills south-east of Lilongwe. As well as the scenic beauty, the town is home to the Dedza Pottery where craftsmen can be viewed in the workshops and factory, producing a variety of items, from mugs and dinner services to table lamps and tiles. Many are decorated with brightly coloured designs or local scenes and all are sold at the factory shop. Dedza Pottery products are found all round Malawi, as well as being sold for export. With a charming tea shop selling delicious cakes, the pottery is a popular stop between Lilongwe and Blantyre.

Mua Mission was established by the White Fathers over 100 years ago. It is presently home to a thriving community, including an arts and crafts centre whose students create Malawi's finest wood carvings and who go on to make a living from their own handiwork throughout Malawi. Mua also works to preserve the local cultures and has the country's best cultural museum.

The Central Lakeshore does not have quite the variety of the Northern Lakeshore, nor the number of lodges found to the south, but there are still a number of places of scenic and historical interest.

- Senga Bay is the point on the Lakeshore closest to Lilongwe and is reached via Salima, a busy town at the junction of the M1 and M5 roads. Senga Bay has a range of hotels from the truly luxurious to small lodges and campsites, each overlooking a lovely beach. It is also home to a breeding facility for Lake Malawi's colourful cichlid fish, and is backed by a forest reserve. (Accommodation: Sunbird Livingstonia Beach, Kumbali Lake Retreat)

- The Marelli Islands consist of three uninhabited islands located opposite Senga Bay that fall under the protection of the Lake Malawi National Park. Due to the large array of habitats present, from rocky shorelines to small wild sandy beaches and from wooden hillsides to reedy lagoons, the islands are home to a wide range of animals species. The islands are exceptionally beautiful, with views across to the rift valley mountains, lively fishing villages, the northern coastline and a grand endless vista of the lake to the north. (Accommodation: Blue Zebra Lodge)

- Nkhotakota is some 70 miles/112 km north of Salima, along the Lakeshore. It is often described as the largest traditional village in Africa, Nkhotakota is rich in history. Visited by Dr Livingstone in 1863, it was then a centre for the slave trade. In 1960 Dr Banda chose Nkhotakota for his first political rally on his release from prison prior to Malawi gaining independence. South of Nkhotakota is an interesting Pottery, the twin of that at Dedza (see above)..

South Malawi

The most populated, developed and varied region of the country is its southern third. Much of South Malawi is dominated by the River Shire which snakes its way from the Lake while remaining within the Rift Valley. It crashes over falls and rapids and has leisurely stretches though broad plains. This is the region of Malawi's highest and lowest points - just 70 miles/110 km apart but 10,000ft/3000m difference in altitude. A mixture of highlands and plateaux, this is also the region with the most visited game park and most popular stretch of lakeshore.

The Southern Lakeshore has Malawi's greatest concentration of lodges and hotels, as well as being home to the Lake Malawi National Park.

- Monkey Bay is a Lake port with a sheltered harbour. Round the headland is Cape Maclear and the world's first freshwater national park. (Accommodation: Norman Carr Cottage)

- Lake Malawi National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, includes a land area as well as the Lake waters and islands. Here is a veritable aquarium of tropical fish providing a colourful kaleidoscopic display. The countless thousands of freshwater fish, the mbuna, are more abundant and varied here than anywhere else in the world. Boats are available for hire and the fish will feed directly from the hand. Kayaking, sailing, snorkelling and scuba diving are just some of the activities on offer, as well as relaxing on a beach. (Accommodation: Pumulani, Robin Pope Safaris; Danforth Yachting; Mumbo Island Camp; Domwe Island Camp)

- The Mangochi Lakeshore, at the southernmost end of the Lake, has the greatest concentration of hotels and lodges. Along this stretch are a number of low rise hotels, some with adjacent camping sites. They vary from sophisticated properties with golf courses to more simple resorts. The splendid sandy beaches are uncrowded and a bewildering range of lake activities is available. (Accommodation: The Makokola Retreat; Sunbird Nkopola Lodge)

Liwonde National Park, although only 210 sq miles/310 sq km, is the most popular of all Malawi's game parks. It is about 100 miles/160 km from Blantyre and about half that distance from the Lakeshore. Game viewing is enhanced because the River Shire flows along its western border. This allows boat safaris as well as the usual

ones by 4x4 and on foot. Wildlife includes quite large numbers of elephants and the river attracts countless hippos and crocodiles. Antelope include kudu, sable and bushbuck. Black rhino have been re-introduced and more re-stocking is expected after African Parks took over the park management in 2015 – safeguarding its future and allowing it to develop even further. Birdlife is exceptionally varied. (Accommodation: Mvuu Lodge; Mvuu Camp)

Zomba, former capital and seat of government of Malawi is just 40 miles/65 km north-east of Blantyre. In a beautiful setting below the plateau of the same name, this was the first settlement of the colonial administration. As well as being home to the University of Malawi, Zomba has some interesting buildings such as the old Gymkhana Club, the barracks of what were the King's African Rifles (now the Malawi Rifles), the old parliament, and one of the country's State Houses. (Accommodation: Sunbird Ku Chawe)

Zomba Plateau overlooks Zomba town and dominates the skyline for miles around.. A great slab of a mountain rising to 6000 ft/1800 m, it has vast tracts of cedar, pine and cypress but elsewhere the vegetation is wild and mixed. The plateau top is criss-crossed by streams and there are tumbling waterfalls and still lakes. There are driveable tracks right round the top from which are views that were described in colonial times as "the best in the British Empire". As well as forest walks, mountain biking, fishing and horse riding can be arranged. (Accommodation: Sunbird Ku Chawe)

Blantyre and Limbe are now a continuous built-up area - the country's commercial capital and largest urban area. Blantyre has its origins with the Scottish missionaries and was named after David Livingstone's birthplace. Blantyre's centre is compact with most services and shops around a triangular core. Attractions include a major museum, a church with Livingstone connections, some interesting old colonial buildings and the shops and markets. There is an international airport just out of town. Many of the country's safari/tour companies have offices in Blantyre. (Accommodation: Protea Hotel Ryalls; Sunbird Mount Soche; Villa 33; Palm Valley Executive Lodge; Game Haven; Fisherman's Rest)

Thyolo, east of Blantyre has vast areas of Tea Estates. Tea has been grown here since 1908 and the primly trimmed bushes give the area the appearance of a neatly kept but vast garden. Looking up to Mulanje on one side and down into the Lower Shire Valley on the other, these estates have really stunning scenery. It is possible to stay at some of these plantations and see something of their daily work. The Thyolo Mountain Forest Reserve offers a haven for walkers and birdwatchers. (Accommodation: Huntingdon House; Chawani Bungalow; Palm Valley Executive Lodge; Game Haven)

Mount Mulanje, east of Thyolo, is Central Africa's highest peak. This magnificent mountain is a large massif of basins and peaks, valleys and forests, streams and waterfalls, sheer faces and slopes of all gradients. It towers to almost 10 000 ft/3000 m, dwarfing all that surrounds it. Everything from gentle walking to serious climbing is possible. Once on the mountain the vegetation changes with altitude and there are various small mammals and, of course, a variety of birds to be seen. (Accommodation: Kara O'Mula Country Lodge, through InfoMulanje)

The Lower Shire Valley, south-west of Blantyre, is deep, broad and flat. Much is cultivated, including sugar estates, and the scenery greatly contrasts with that in any other part of Malawi.

- Majete Wildlife Reserve is an area of pristine African wilderness, from beautiful grassy glades and riverine areas to wet Miombo woodland and Marula savannah. African Parks has ecologically restored and rehabilitated this into one of the best in Malawi, now a 'Big 5' reserve. It boasts an impressive array of wildlife from elephants, black rhinoceros and sable antelope to leopards and lions. Open all year round, guests are able to enjoy the park in their own vehicles or join in a variety of activities such as game drives, bush walks and boat rides along with a day visitors centre, restaurant and education centre. (Accommodation: Mkulumadzi, Thawale Lodge, Majete Community Campsite)
- Lengwe National Park has the attraction of easily driven and signposted tracks near the main gate and a number of hides from which to see game at waterholes. In the dry season game viewing is good and there is an especially interesting variety of antelope including the beautiful Nyala. (Accommodation: Nyala Lodge)
- Mwabvi Wildlife Reserve was being developed as a community based conservation project, providing accommodation and programmes for tourists, though this is currently stalled. Nearby, Elephant Marsh, once the home of thousands of elephants, is now best known for its birdlife.

