

Malawi's rebirth as a safari sweetspot

After an extraordinary rewilding effort, the country known as the warm heart of Africa is emerging as a new safari wonderland.

Lucia van der Post reports



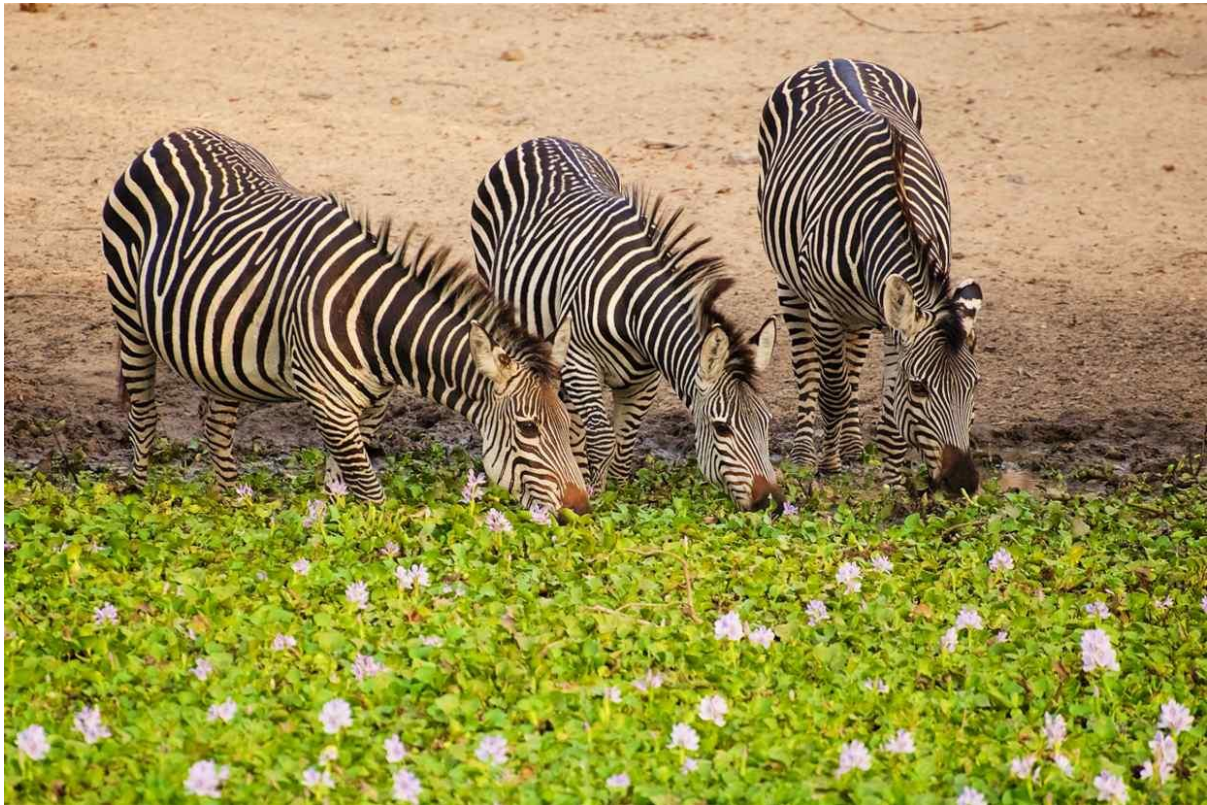
I've long had a very soft spot for Malawi. All through my childhood (though it was then a British protectorate called Nyasaland) it loomed large – a romantically mysterious place where my father, Laurens van der Post, had the overwhelming experiences that formed the basis of *Venture to the Interior*, the book that made his name and showed him that he might, after all, be able to live the life he dreamed of as a traveller and writer. Some years ago my husband and I followed in his footsteps and climbed Mulanje, in the southeastern part of the country, where the dramatic and tragic events related in the book took place, and found it to be exactly as he described – an awesome, magnificent mountain. There was about the whole country a sweetness and an old-fashioned charm; even more importantly, we grew to love its people, who at the time were suffering horribly from a terrible drought.



But nobody then thought of it as a great [wildlife](#) destination. Its lake, its mountains and its plateaux attracted a small set of [tourists](#) who preferred to take the road less travelled, leaving those in search of the “big five” to head off to [Kenya](#), [Tanzania](#), [Botswana](#) or [South Africa](#). However, when I heard that African Parks – a non-profit conservation organisation founded in 2000 to try to save, restore and protect [Africa](#)’s wild spaces – considered Malawi to be one of its greatest success stories, I decided it was time to go back. Malawi’s uncrowded, little-explored charms and its intimate small-scale [camps](#) struck me as a winning combination.

So first to Mkulumadzi, a beautifully set-up [lodge](#) of only eight chalets in the 70,000-hectare Majete Wildlife Reserve, part of Africa’s Great Rift Valley. Shaded by leadwood trees and surrounded by miombo woodlands, the [chalets](#) are all perched above the Shire river, just west of the Kapachira Falls, which foiled Livingstone’s 1859 plan to use the river to get to the heart of Africa. It was African Parks’ first venture into Malawi; its CEO Peter Fearnhead explains to me that the outfit has developed a unique way of working with governments to help them preserve these special places. “Traditionally governments have been the sole player – determining the policies governing these parks and being responsible for the actual management as well,” he says.

“This means there is no accountability built into the system, as no government anywhere is critical of itself. We believe in governments remaining responsible for the legislation and policy, but in African Parks managing the parks. This is a more robust model, as our actions are regulated by government and it can hold us accountable.”



African Parks currently looks after 15 protected areas in nine African countries. Its goal is to manage 20 parks by 2020, protecting more than 10 million hectares. Today it employs over 1,000 rangers in anti-poaching and more than 5,000 other full-time staff.



Fearnhead pays great tribute to Malawi's government, saying its commitment to restoring and **preserving** its wild spaces and wildlife is among the firmest in Africa. When it decided in 2003 to see what African Parks could do with Majete, the place was "a basket case", he says. There was nothing to lose. "There was almost no wildlife left at all. There were no elephants, the last rhinos had been seen in the 1970s, lions and leopards had been eradicated and only a few antelope

were found – and the forest itself was being felled for charcoal. There were no tourists, no income... it was a desolate place.”



With a 25-year agreement to work with the government, African Parks set about training and equipping rangers, initiating counter-poaching and seeing that laws were enforced (where there is proper law enforcement and governance there is a kinder, more stable way of life for the local population). It embarked on community projects, introduced healthcare and education and found alternative livelihoods for many. A full 14 different indigenous species were reintroduced, so today Majete is home to more than 12,000 animals, including several black rhinos and the rest of the big five. Elephants have flourished so well that African Parks was able to translocate 200 from Majete to the Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve further north. And in 2017 more than 9,000 tourists came, bringing in over half a million dollars.



Robin Pope Safaris manages Mkulumadzi Lodge, which has tents as luxurious as any in Africa, great food, wonderful views over the river and terrific guides – as well as the vast terrain of Majete to roam over. I wasn't particularly lucky with cats; although we came upon some elephants, many waterbuck, lots of impala, crocodiles and myriad birds, lions and leopards eluded me. Mustapha, my guide, said he could tell from the roaring that there were interesting politics going on between the 16 or so resident lions: "Two adolescent males are beginning to swagger around the place, causing a potential reordering of the power structure." Most visitors, judging from the visitors' book, had better luck than I did in my one-and-a-half days there. But an afternoon drifting down the river as the sun set was an unmissable treat.



From Majete it was off to see what was happening in Liwonde, one of Malawi's smaller but more popular parks. Chris Badger, who owns and runs Central African Wilderness Safaris, recalls that when he arrived here in the late 1980s (inspired, he tells me, by reading *Venture to the Interior*) he rated the game viewing to be as good as that in Botswana's famed Moremi and Chobe national parks. From the 1990s until African Parks arrived in 2015, he notes, there was steady deterioration with widescale snare poaching denuding the park of its charismatic megafauna. When African Parks took over, it found 36,000 snares, a few elephants and a disproportionate number of warthogs and impala, as the lack of predators had thrown the populations out of sync. Four years later, Liwonde is flourishing again. Law and order – the first thing African Parks establishes – means communities feel safer, as does the wildlife. The snares were removed and hundreds of animals were reintroduced, so today there are frequent sightings of lions, cheetahs, sable antelope, eland, zebras and all the other usual suspects found in a healthy African ecosystem. “Vultures have returned from the brink – a sure sign of the park's increasing health,” Badger tells me. Leopards are due to be reintroduced any day now.



There are two delightful camps to stay at here – Mvuu, which has 14 canvas chalets and tents and is owned and run by Central African Wilderness Safaris; and Kuthengo, whose four tents are managed by Robin Pope Safaris. Both are beautifully sited along the Shire river, giving wide views of river life – birds, elephants coming down to drink, crocodiles and hippos. Night drives are permitted, and our nocturnal excursions were filled with rare sightings, among them pangolins, porcupines, genets, white-tailed mongooses, bushbabies, polecats and a wonderful lingering view of a civet. By day we saw sable antelope, elephants, waterbuck, eland and more.



From Liwonde I travelled to the newest of African Parks' interventions, Nkhotakota, comprising 1,800sq km of pristine woodland – the only such woodland left in Malawi, which is one of the most badly deforested countries in Africa. In 2006, it had large herds of elephants and buffalo, as well as lions and leopards. By the time African Parks came three years ago there were fewer than 100 elephants and little else. Not a single hippo is left in the beautiful Bua river, which Tongole, the lodge, overlooks. One day Nkhotakota will be a fabulous wildlife destination; for now it is to be enjoyed simply for its beauty, a good place to come for some R&R after you've had your fill of wildlife in Majete and Liwonde. Its *Brachystegia* woodland boasts huge trees, some of them more than 80m tall; its river is lovely and there are gorgeous waterfalls where you can safely picnic (no sign of a predator yet). Once African Parks has a better road system in place for viewing the animals, and more are introduced and allowed to multiply and flourish, it should vie with Africa's finest.

I can't, hand on heart, say that the game viewing in Malawi's parks is as abundant, as certain a guarantee, as in, for example, the Maasai Mara or South Africa's Sabi Sands, but what I can say is that you would have to be very unlucky not to see most of the indigenous species and the quality of the experience is, in my view, of an infinitely superior sort. The intimate camps, the absence of myriad 4x4s

trundling round the same circuits, the lack of crowds – all make it seem as if the Africa one feared had vanished forever still exists in precious little pockets.

Malawi's wildlife viewing is improving with every season. Now that peace and security have been restored the animals are multiplying naturally; translocated lions are forming prides and establishing territories; the natural balance between predator and prey is being reinstated; and these once almost abandoned parks are coming to life. And it's not just the wildlife that is benefiting. As African Parks' literature puts it, "Intact ecosystems give rise to a range of benefits – healthy watersheds, clean air, stable weather, carbon sequestration, food security and overall better health for animals and people."

Peter Fearnhead adds: "We are in a race against time to secure the last of the wild before species are lost forever and landscapes are beyond restoration. We believe that in the wake of conserving and restoring wild landscapes lies a better existence for mankind. And where nature is rehabilitated and restored, so too is our own humanity."