



Malawi

Having battled back from the brink, Malawi's wildlife parks and reserves offer not just incredible encounters away from the thunder of mass tourism, but hope for the future of conservation in Africa, writes Sue Watt

Known as the 'warm heart of Africa' for its friendly welcome and people, Malawi has added another string to its bow in recent years. This sliver of a country is the setting for one of Africa's most inspiring conservation success stories, and it now punches well above its weight as a wildlife destination.

For the past 20 years, a remarkable renaissance has taken place here, transforming once eerily empty parks into thriving sanctuaries. Two of them – Majete and Liwonde – are now also home to the 'Big Five' (elephant, rhino, leopard, lion and buffalo) that are so coveted by safari-goers.

In the past, Malawi lacked the resources to protect its wildlife, and by the late 1980s and '90s it had become a poachers' paradise. In 2003, the government took the bold decision to restore Majete Wildlife Reserve to its former glory in a pioneering 25-year partnership with conservation organisation African Parks (AP), which was then a fledgling non-profit harbouring big ideas to revive the continent's depleted wild habitats. Today, the renowned NGO manages 22 parks in 12 countries. And it all started with Majete.

After fencing the entire reserve, AP translocated some 2,500 animals, including elephant, buffalo, rhino, leopard

and antelope. They reintroduced tourism, bringing much-needed income along with classrooms and health clinics to local communities, garnering their support for conservation. Following on from Majete's success, African Parks took on both Liwonde National Park and Nkhosakota Wildlife Reserve in 2015, both then struggling with poaching and in dire need of TLC. They too are now thriving.

Nine national parks and reserves make up Malawi's tapestry of habitats, spanning mountains, plateaus, grasslands, wetlands, lakes and rivers, attracting over 650 avian species. The best birding destinations are the forests and grasslands of Nyika Plateau, the wetlands of Liwonde and Lake Malawi, and Nkhosakota. Other wildlife isn't as prolific as in big-hitter safari destinations such as Serengeti or Kruger, but nor are the tourists. There's no mass tourism here: game vehicles never crowd around sightings and you'll soon start to feel like you have these wild places to yourself.

Malawi operates at a gentle pace. Don't bring a tick-list; do bring an open mind and a sense of curiosity. Enjoy the warmth of the people you meet and the feel-good factor in knowing that just by being here, you are part of the remarkable rewilding story that makes a safari in Malawi so special.

Life in the Shire (this page; top to bottom) The Shire River runs through a number of Malawi's wildlife parks and reserves, offering up-close encounters with bathing hippos and thirsty elephants; this lilac-breasted roller in Liwonde National Park is just one of the 650-plus bird species that you can see in Malawi





Majete Wildlife Reserve

The granite hills, miombo woodlands and riverine landscapes of Malawi's flagship reserve host all the 'Big Five', with elephant and buffalo the easiest to spot. Some 12,000 animals share this home, among them reintroduced giraffe and antelope species such as waterbuck, impala, nyala and eland. The Shire River offers great wildlife sightings, especially in the dry season. Explore via guided game drives, boat trips and walking safaris, or even on 4WD self-drive trips, taking a community guide to make the most of it.

Best for: Predators, which have made a comeback here. Some 70 to 80 lions roam the 700 sq km reserve, along with cheetah and wild dogs.

Stay at: Game Capture Campsite or Thawale Tented Camp, which are both run by African Parks (visitmajete.org). For a touch of luxury, try Mkulumadzi Lodge (robinpopesafaris.net).



Liwonde National Park

Studded with bulbous baobabs, Borassus palms, towering mopane woodlands and fever-tree forests, Liwonde is Malawi's most attractive park. The Shire River, curving gently through the floodplains, is its soul. Of the 'Big Five', leopards are particularly elusive but the floodplains teem with wildlife, particularly antelope species (including rare sable) and buffalo, which are best seen on game drives (self-drive is possible). Walking safaris in the early morning light are a joy.

Best for: Boat trips. With 400 bird species to spot, you can spy everything from tiny malachite kingfishers to huge Goliath herons from the water as you pass elephants slurping from the riverbank.

Stay at: African Parks' self-catering Chimwala Camp (visitliwonde.org), the longstanding Mvuuvu Camp and Lodge (cawsmw.com), or the upmarket Kuthengo Camp (robinpopesafaris.net).



Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve

Having been almost poached dry, Malawi's largest (1,800 sq km) and oldest reserve has a starring role in the country's renaissance, thanks to African Parks' translocation of 500 elephants from Liwonde and Majete, along with some 2,000 other animals, including sable, kudu, buffalo and zebra. Wildlife isn't as easy to spot as in Liwonde, but with over 320 avian species, birding is especially rewarding. Look out for myriad kingfishers, palm-nut vultures and even Pel's fishing owls.

Best for: Adventure. Trips range from gentle nature walks along the riverbank to watching for hippo as you kayak the river, to rigorous hikes up Mount Kasukusuka and Chipata Mountain.

Stay at: Livezi Wilderness Camp, run by African Parks (visitnkhotakota.org); Bua River Lodge (buariverlodge.com); or the beautiful Tongole Wilderness Lodge (tongole.com).

WHERE ELSE?

Nyika Plateau and Vwaza Marsh

Malawi's largest national park, Nyika Plateau, is best known for hiking and sensational vistas, and you may well spot antelope and zebra as you go. Nearby Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve is home to nearly all of the 'Big Five', except for rhino.

Kasungu National Park

Kasungu once teemed with wildlife, including 2,000 elephants, but a dearth of resources and extreme poaching saw it struggle for years until the International Fund for Animal Welfare and the government stepped in. Nearly 700 animals were reintroduced last year, with 263 elephants translocated from Liwonde.

Around Lilongwe

The highly regarded Lilongwe Wildlife Centre (lilongwewildlife.org) offers tours of its forest reserve, home to 200 rescued animals. Just 60km away, Dzalanyama Forest Reserve is a great birding area that is best explored on foot or by bike.

Lake Malawi NP

Lake Malawi, the world's ninth-largest lake, is known for its varied birdlife and is home to more types of fish than any other lake on Earth, including 875 species of tiny, multi-coloured cichlids that are mesmerising to spot while snorkelling. **W**

Need to know



When to go

The best time for wildlife viewing is the dry season, which runs from April to late October. It's particularly good between July and October, when there is little water and the animals come to the rivers to drink. Birding is possible throughout the year, but November and December are better for migratory and colourful species.



Getting there & around

Kenya Airways (kenya-airways.com) and **Ethiopian Airlines** (ethiopianairlines.com) fly to Lilongwe or Blantyre via Nairobi and Addis Ababa respectively. New flights are also available to both cities from Johannesburg, South Africa, with **Airlink** (flyairlink.com).

Car hire can be found in Lilongwe and Blantyre or via local tour operators such as **Land & Lake** (landlake.net). There is a good transport network of minibuses and coaches.

Tour operators offering tailor-made safaris to Malawi include **Expert Africa** (expertafrica.com), **Safari Consultants** (safari-consultants.com) and **Wildlife Worldwide** (wildlifeworldwide.com).



Visas & currency

Visa: UK nationals can get a visa (evisa.gov.mw; US\$50/£39 single-entry) in advance or may buy one on arrival (US\$75/£59).

Currency: Malawian kwacha (MWK), currently MWK2138 to the UK£.



Further information

Malawi (Bradt Guides, 2019) by Philip Briggs
Africanparks.org
– African Parks website.
Malawitourism.com
– National tourism board.