

A New African Diary

(18. 6. – 30. 7. 2007)

Part I: *Riding through Nyika National Park* ***Travelling solo in Malawi***



Sunset behind the Sambian Mountains as seen from the Nyika escarpment

By

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Introduction

Like the diary from last year's travel to southwest Africa this new account from travels (mostly on horseback) in eastern African countries will have 3 parts, each devoted to one country (Malawi, Kenia, Tansania). However, unlike the previous exercise I shall not stick to the day-by-day format. Rather, I will try to give a more coherent account that avoids overly repetition but still provides sufficiently detailed information that might be of use for other travellers in the area. For reasons that I do not wish to discuss here, only the first part on Malawi will be in English, while for the Kenia and Tansania parts I feel more comfortable in German, my mother tongue.

I am deeply indebted to all the helpful people that I met on my way, as well as to my various travelling companions for their kind patience even if not all of them can be mentioned in this text. Travelling on one's own in Africa is not without risk, especially in case of accidents or of diseases. Nevertheless, even in unexpected places, I always encountered helpful people, black as well as white, who made this travel unforgettable.

Prior to describing my wanderings in more detail, I should mention a few facts that make travelling in East Africa easier but are usually touched only superficially, if at all, in the guide books. The first point concerns telephone services. Over most parts of eastern Africa there is a surprisingly well developed grid supporting mobile phones. Moreover, some of the relevant providers like Celtel work in more than one country, such that it is not necessary to buy a new Simcard in each when travelling from Malawi to Kenia. Nevertheless in Kenia the coverage by Safaricom is probably better. Local Simcards are cheap and available everywhere. Unfortunately, in many mobile phones bought in central Europe the Simcard cannot be freely exchanged ('simset'). Hence before leaving home make sure your mobile phone is not linked to a specific company. On the other hand, you are virtually lost without a mobile phone. The service of the local fixnet providers (state-owned PTT) is very poor indeed. In none of the three countries did I succeed in making a call from a public phone, even if supported by locals, and calls from the hotel tend to be tremendously expensive.

Second, let's talk about money. Credit cards were generally not well accepted in all three countries. Everybody prefers cash. Contrary to what is said in most guide books, traveller checks are also not very helpful. Most of the time it's only possible to cash them in banks but the exchange rate is usually much worse than for dollar notes and the procedure is complicated and rather time consuming. Ordinary people, gasoline stations and shops are most comfortable with local currencies, though Safari companies, hotels and fancy lodges often require cash in dollars (or Euros). Local currency is best procured with a Visa-Card (Master-Cards are less often accepted) at ATM's that are available at airports or are associated with banks in major cities. The exchange rate for dollars depends on the nominal value of the bills. Best offers are for 20 and 50 \$ bills. 1 and 5 \$ bills yield bad rates, 100 \$ bills are frequently not accepted. Do not underestimate the amount of money that you will have to spend on tips. Each and every service requires a tip, however small, to let people know that you appreciate their help. Moreover in some places offering services to tourists is about the only available source of cash for the large number of unemployed people.

Finally about renting cars: At least in Malawi and in Tansania the most reliable service is offered by established Safari companies. Many of the local car rentals are of doubtful reputation. If one of the big international rental companies is represented at all, they are

usually prohibitively expensive. Service is particularly important because the cars often have a surprisingly high mileage to their account. Although most main roads are reasonably well maintained in both countries, travelling with a Sedan-type car is risky. I used it in Malawi but experienced several serious touch-downs caused by unexpected pot-holes or on the bumpy access roads to lodges. I was fortunate not to hit any vital parts, but each time cursed my decision not to rent a 4-WD. In the rainy season 4-WD cars are obligatory. Finally, do not start driving without a reasonably precise street map. Road signs in Africa, and especially in Malawi, are sparse and far between. Often they are positioned such that they can be read only from one direction and you will always tend to come from the opposite side....

Part I

Malawi

Paradise lost or The Mpherembe Trail on the Nyika Plateau

When searching for attractive riding trails in Africa you will sooner or later hit the unavoidable list of 'The ten best riding adventures in the world'. For Africa there were 4 entries: The Namib desert trail in Namibia, the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the Mpherembe Trail in Malawi and the Masai Mara Trail in Kenya. Since I already did the first two of them (see my previous diaries) which I found absolutely fascinating, I could not but plan to try the remaining two as soon as possible.

As to the Mpherembe trail, I first had to start an internet search because I hardly knew where to look for Malawi on a map of Africa, let alone localizing the Nyika National Park. It turned out that riding in the Nyika area was exclusively managed by the Nyika Safari Company. All specialized travel agencies (e.g. Unicorn Travels in England) cooperate with this organization and offer the same dates and types of rides, i.e. 8- and 11-day camped safaris. It is also possible to book directly via Nyika Safaris. The prices are equivalent. Since international flights will usually drop you in the Malawian capital Lilongwe, one needs some kind of air-taxi transport to the Chelinda air strip in the Nyika area which is in the far north of Malawi. These internal flights are quite expensive but scheduled flights of Air Malawi to the northern town of Mzuzu are rare and do not fit with the dates of the ride. Moreover, there remains still some distance between Mzuzu and Chelinda where the Nyika Safari operations are located. I booked a date in the second half of June when it is winter and dry season in Malawi.

Although I knew that the Nyika Plateau is mostly above 2000 m, I did not really believe that it would be seriously cold so close to the Equator. However, the winter nights up there proved to be really fresh (sometimes well below 0 °C), so you better bring along a nice thick pullover together with a parka and warm trousers.

When trying to book a flight to Lilongwe, I discovered that there were no direct flights from central Europe. One has to change planes either in Nairobi or in Johannesburg which enhances the risk of getting separated from your luggage. I opted for Nairobi because KLM offered a night flight from Amsterdam. The early arrival in Nairobi makes it possible to reach Lilongwe at midday time and to continue for Chelinda the same day. When checking in at Zürich airport on June 18 for the flight to Amsterdam, I first had to explain the friendly lady at the counter where and what Lilongwe was, a place that she apparently never heard of, I was slightly concerned whether she would label my luggage correctly. But all worked fine and to my utter amazement I could pick up all my belongings at the 'Lilongwe International Airport' which offers ample space to accommodate the 5 or 6 international flights that arrive there per

day. Nevertheless the formalities for visitors entering Malawi took their time. While waiting, I was contacted by an anxious Thai citizen who apparently neither spoke nor understood English and hence was at a loss with filling out the lengthy immigration card. He gave me his passport and the card to do it for him. I was really curious what he was up to do in this country without any means of communication but he did not understand my question. Soon after passing immigration control I was met by a pilot of the taxi flight in Rasta-hairdress and by a French couple which also went to Chelinda.



Departing from Lilongwe to Nyika

We just fitted into the small plane and were soon on our way to the north. While clouds started to pile up in front of us, the pilot told us quite happily that he had only recently passed his pilot examination and this was his first job. Nevertheless, after a flight of about 1 1/2 h, he dropped us without serious problems in the middle of nowhere on the Chelinda airstrip, a slightly foggy, cool and windy place. While it had been nicely warm and sunny in Lilongwe, up here it was overcast and we shivered and fought against rather aggressive ants that tried to climb our legs until picked up by a Landrover that drove us to Chelinda lodge.

Chelinda lodge had been build by a private foundation a couple of years ago on a hillside close to a huge pine plantation with a beautiful view onto a small valley and the undulating hills of Nyika plateau. It consists of an assembly of about 6 log cabins with a central building accommodating a dining hall and living rooms. The architecture is truly fascinating and highly appealing. The individual very comfortably furnished cabins provide ample space for a family of 4 or 5 in two floors. I had one of these cabins all to myself. Best of all, at evenings and early in the morning appeared a friendly lady who started a welcome fire in the romantic

fireplace. Actually, the fire provided the only light after 10pm when the generator delivering electricity stopped working. So, reading in bed was only possible with a suitable head torch.



Partial view of Chelinda Lodge. In the foreground one of the log cabins for guests, in the background the central building.

The first dinner in Chelinda was quite formal with two of the lodge managers and two young ladies that later turned out to be in charge of the horses and the organization of camping safari. David, the head of Nyika safaris head dealings with the Tourist Ministry and could not attend. I learned that the nice French couple and I myself were the only participants of the trail ride. Apparently the groups are never larger than 6 or 8 and nobody complained that the whole logistic operation had to be run for only three people. We enjoyed very nice food but to my surprise all cooking and service was done by males. Only a few women were providing room service in the cabins. We were told that it was customary for this area that women manage household and children but are not expected to take up work outside the house. All the members of the black support staff for the lodge, the stables and the National Park organization, totalling about 400 people lived together with their families in their own quarters within the park and only rarely visited their relatives in outside villages.

We had two days in Chelinda to choose and to get accustomed to a horse and to explore the area around the lodge on horseback. The stables, a quarter of an hour drive from the lodge, appeared well maintained and the horses spent a large part of their time on extended pastures. In dry weather they also run free at night. Due to height and the low temperatures at night there were practically no insects. The horses numbered about 30 and represented all kinds of breed, colour, size and temper. Most were somewhat smaller and much lighter than our Swiss partbreds, but tough, surefooted and not difficult to handle. Gaits were ok, although quite a

few had somewhat short strides while walking. When we arrived in the morning all tacking (mostly English) and grooming had already been done.



In the surroundings of Chelinda



Typical Roan antelope near Chelinda

Quite a few big ravens all decoratively carrying a white collar observed us as we started with a party of 5: Manuel, a black guide, Sue, the stable manager that we had met the night before and we three guests. We rode through part of the large plantation of Mexican pines before we reached the hilly grasslands that cover most of the Nyika park area. Now in winter which is also the dry season the grass was partly withered but still looked like providing ample food

for grazing wild and tame animals. Close to the lodge there was an amazing density of wildlife.



Curious
Roans
near
Chelinda

In particular the large Roan antelopes were grazing in large groups including young and even joined the horses on their pasture. I would have guessed that calving would take place only in the rainy season, but apparently food was so abundant even now that they did not care. Moreover bushbucks, the small reedbuck and warthogs did show themselves albeit not in the same numbers as the Roans. We learned only later that wildlife was most exuberant around Chelinda because the animals felt secure from poachers. Animal density or, at least, visibility, decreased almost exponentially with the distance from Chelinda.



Burchell's
Zebras in the
surroundings
of Chelinda

We returned for lunch and then had the chance to try another horse in the afternoon. A similar program waited for us the next day. Having the possibility to test 3 or 4 horses prior to embark on a lengthy safari offers a tremendous advantage. Indeed, nobody later complained about his or her horse in contrast to most of my other trail experiences. Since all the horses went barefoot, we rarely used bush roads or tracks but went straight across the country only taking care not to fall in any of the holes made by various kinds of animals starting with ants

and ending with warthogs and aardvarks. One of the rides led us mainly through the pine plantation, a leftover from late colonial times. In the late fifties the original idea looked perfect. The trees would provide logs for building huts and for firewood in an area that had badly suffered from deforestation. However, it turned out that the transport of the wood would have required building of new roads and overall would have made the wood much too expensive for the prospective users. Consequently, the pine plantation is now over-aged and underused. Only the lodge, the stables and the local people living in the park seem to profit. On the other hand, lots of dead wood and fallen trees constitute a horrible threat of devastating wild fires.



Mexican pines
growing in the
Chelinda plantation

Another ride led over the rolling grassy hills to the only natural lake on the plateau. The lake was neither particularly large nor particularly deep. Therefore, it was possible to cross the whole body of water with the horses, although it proved somewhat tricky to stay dry. A roan antelope that took a bath when we arrived left the lake protesting.



The only natural lake on
Nyika plateau (can be crossed
on horseback)

On the way back we crossed large areas where the long grass had been burned down on purpose and under control. It is done during the dry winter season as a precaution against wildfires. The wild animals liked to stay on the burned grassland because of the fresh green tips sprouting out of the blackened rootstocks. But for me riding through miles of burned grassland was less attractive. Nevertheless it was much easier to see and to avoid the countless adamant anthills that otherwise doubled as stumbling blocks for the horses. For the first time we had a clear sky and the African winter sun proved quite warm at least as long as we remained protected from the gusty wind.



Areas of
burned grass
around
Chelinda

At the dinner table we met an English couple which had just arrived from Zambia and seemed to have travelled about any African country one could think of, including the Congo. They talked about their travels with a level of understatement that seemed to exceed even high English standards. They intended to join us for the first day of the safari.



Sue, commander-in-chief of the
safari

The true safari started on the next day with everybody on her or his favourite horse. I mounted Mpherembe a relatively small but very friendly and zealous horse with a fast walking gait that served me very well throughout the whole trail. It was said to come from Zimbabwe and had been selected to feed crocodiles before it was rescued by David, the Nyika Safari manager. Si no è vero è ben trovato. We were supposed to move to a new camp site every second day, while on the intermediate days we would take a round trip in the area of the camp.



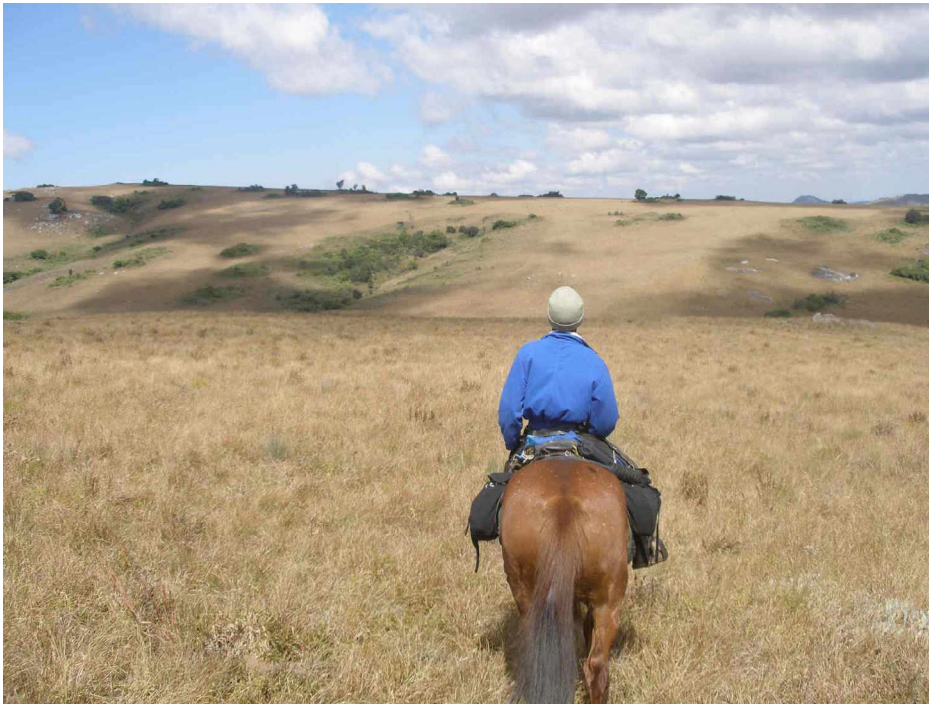
Elen antelopes

We crossed wide grass lands with lots of antelopes and zebras. Most impressive were groups of the large Elen antelope. These animals are larger than horses but in spite of their considerable size and weight easily cross high fences. They are equipped with relatively long screwed horns that they used very dexterously to scratch their backs and to help the birds that sit on their backs to catch parasites.



On Safari. Roans and a zebra in the background

From the hilltops, some of which carried picturesque rocky outcrops, we had a beautiful view into the many valleys most of which harboured small patches of wood and usually a smaller or larger creek.



On safari: Riding behind Robert, our guide through Nyika

Crossing these creeks was quite an adventure: Some required jumping, some proved rather deep and large and others had such steep banks that the horses would hesitate to move down. Often we had to cross bush land with grasses higher than the horses but unlike in most other part of Africa we rarely met thorny bushes. The lack of acacias and the like made cross country riding a lot more comfortable. Several bushes and perennial plants were still flowering in spite of the present dry season and dotted the land with colour.



Flowering Aloe on one of the rocky outcrops

‘Nyika’ according to some people means ‘wildernesses’ while others maintain it means ‘where the water comes from’. Both explanations would fit: No human being and no settlement as far as the eye could reach but many valleys each with it’s creek or small river. Even the animals got scarcer with increasing distance from the lodge. The riding was quite relaxed although we had trots and fast canters. Robert, our guide appeared energetic and confident though not particularly talkative. Also Sue, the nice English girl is riding with us. She takes overall responsibility for the safari and the smooth coordination of staff services. In the afternoon Robert got quite exited when he spotted a group of mountain elephants in the far distance at the slope of a valley. Few elephants live that high up and for a long time none had been observed. Yet, they were too far away for us to get any closer contact. In the following days we met repeatedly traces of the presence of elephants but we never again met them in ‘person’.



Carole and some
Burchell zebras
looking at each other

Finally, at about half past four, we reached the first camp site where Mary had been in charge to prepare the camp. The walk-in tents were already pitched, the kitchen tent in a small distance was busy with preparing hot water for the bush showers, and the mess tent offering fresh drinks. The weather had been remarkably warm as long as the sun was out and we enjoyed the rest.



Descending
through high
vegetation to one
of the many
creeks

As soon as the sun vanished behind the surrounding mountains the temperature briskly went down. We were glad to wrap ourselves into wool blankets when sitting at the fire side or at the dinner table. Nevertheless we went through a 3-course meal which everybody enjoyed except Frank, the male part of the French couple. He had to stop smoking abruptly because Chelinda lodge did not sell any cigarettes and now his belly revolted. After dinner we had to draw very close to the fireside to fight the cold of the night.



One of the tents in our first camp- while the sun was still shining

A little later in the tent we found our beds beautifully warmed up by a nicely hot warm water bottle that I would not have expected to meet in the middle of Africa. Already half asleep I thought how poor Livingstone, when he first travelled this country 150 years ago, would have loved this comfort.



Flowering Erica Massonii (Massonheide) close to the camp

After a frosty night with my washing tissues solidly frozen, a bright morning promised a warm day. Since we would stay in the same camp tonight and we would ride only half a day, there was ample time for an extended English style breakfast including the classics eggs and bacon. The mess tent even boasted a small set of books on wilderness flowers and animals in Nyika so we could try to identify all the strange plants we encountered while strolling through the bushes.



View of our first camp with the toilet in the background

The camp was situated on the gently sloping side of a valley in front of a prominent rocky hill that was to be the destination of the afternoon walk. The morning ride led us through beautiful landscape and high grass dotted with acacias and other small trees in a wide arc around this hill.



View over
Nyika hills on
day 2 of safari

In spite of the winter season many of the bushes and trees still kept their green leaves while others already started to foliate again. We spotted only very few animals. The guides remembered a time when antelopes were much more numerous in this area. The park has gone through a period of heavy poaching and more stringent anti-poaching measures have

only been established recently. In the late afternoon we walked and climbed up the hill right through a remarkable variety of flowering plants and bushes. Judging from the large numbers of porcupine quills on our way there must be quite a few of them around but we never observed a single one.



Flowering Cap
heather



View from the hill
into Nyika

From the rocks on the top we had a grandiose view in all directions and on top of that could enjoy one of those impressive African sunsets adorned with red wine carried up by one of the indefatigable girls. We reached the camp only with the very last rest of daylight. For dinner

the staff had organized some kind of gas heaters that made the meal slightly less uncomfortable even though we still had to wrap into woollen blankets to avoid freezing.



One of the
spectacular
African sunsets

At the camp fire after dinner Sue told the downright frightening story of the shaky future of the Nyika Park. Apparently the licence of the David's Safari Company that is managing all tourist activities since more than 10 years is up for renewal by the end of this year. When the application for prolongation was submitted, it became clear that a competing offer by the Emirate of Abu Dhabi would also be considered. Originally the emir had suggested buying the whole National Park in order to transform it into a private hunting ground and to build a comfortable residence for himself. When this suggestion had been declined by the president of Malawi, the Arabs applied for the park licence promising to maintain the tourist operations and the animal protection program. Representatives of the Malawian Government were invited to Abu Dhabi and treated very well in an attempt to win their support. Simultaneously the minister for tourism in Malawi was replaced and the new holder of this office requested that all licence applications had to be submitted once again. That was the state of affairs by the end of June 2007. The fate of the Park being in limbo, all the employees appeared highly concerned. Whether the Arabs are prepared and willing to maintain high standards of nature preservation and wild animal protection remains totally unclear. Of course everybody hopes that this transformation will not take place. However for a state as poor as Malawi a financially attractive offer of the immensely rich golf emirate may be extremely difficult to turn down. It would be a bitter irony of history if a country that has suffered so much from Arab slave trade would yield to the financial temptations of the descendents of their former archenemies. However the deal will work out, I am afraid no European newspaper will take notice. Only if the Nyika safari company will stop taking bookings next year we will know what happened.

The night was less chilling than the previous one but during the morning the sky remained overcast and a fresh wind was blowing while we took a long 6-hour ride to reach the next camp site further to the west and close to the western escarpment of the plateau. We crossed a

spectacularly untouched landscape with no human being or any settlement. We met a group of mountain zebras that tolerated our approach but, nevertheless merged so completely with the surroundings that they made hardly any contrast on my photographs.



Carole and
Frank
cantering
uphill

Finally we reached a ridge immediately adjacent to the escarpment with breathtaking view over the wide valley, almost 2000 m below, and beyond into the Zambian mountains more than 100 km away. Robert our guide points out to us his home village barely visible on the bottom of the valley.



View from
the edge of
the
escarpment
into the
Sambian
mountains

A few klipspringer antelopes move with incredible dexterity in the rocky outcrops at the edge of the escarpment. In the late afternoon we end up in the new camp hidden in a romantic valley and difficult to spot from afar. The horses did not show any sign of exhaustion even at the very end of the ride.



Our party on day 3 of the safari

A strong wind that comes up at night made it difficult to stay warm, even if wrapped into blankets at the campfire. Sue and Mary make perfect hosts, never ill tempered and full of African stories. Although I have absolutely no problem sitting alone at the fireside watching 'bushman television', they would never retire before I do. Frank and Carol, the French couple, being not overly fond of English conversation, usually preferred the warmth of their beds over freezing at the campfire.



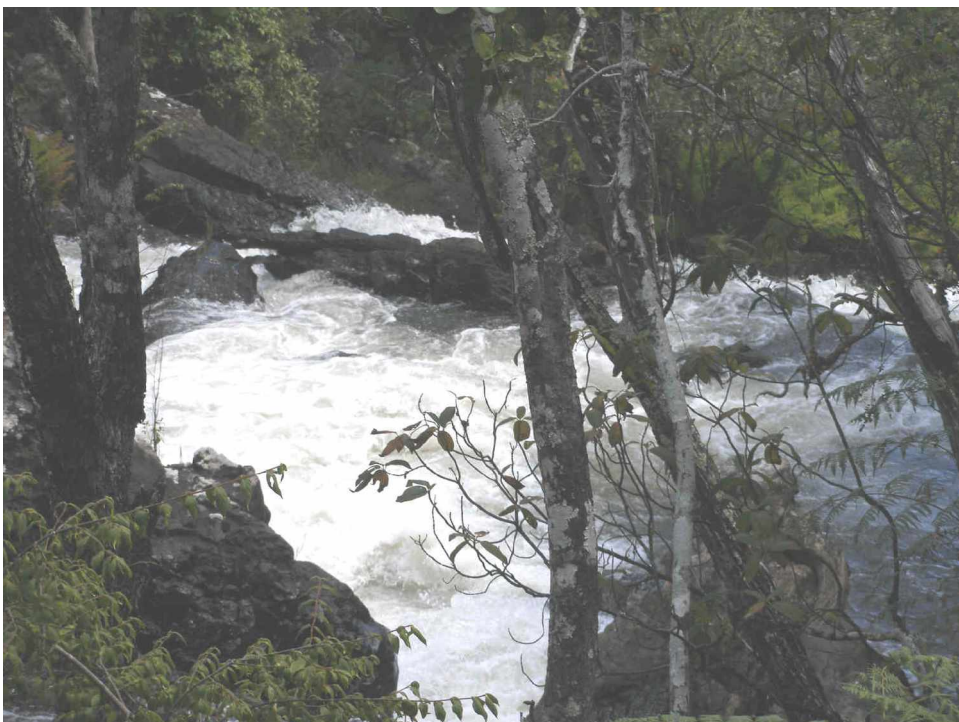
The second campsite

The next day saw us on a more relaxed, though windy, ride to the site of a waterfall where the Epupa River leaves the plateau through a gorge. The path leads us for a long time along the edge of the escarpment until we descend through an evergreen wood into a deep valley.



View from the escarpment down to the Rift valley

Many of the trees are infested by termites and doomed. Close to the bottom of the valley the horses are tied to trees and we proceed on foot to the rocky cañon where the surprisingly large river leaves the escarpment in several large waterfalls. There is no path along the river and it is quite difficult to reach the water and to catch a good view onto the falls.



At the Epupa falls

Nestled into the rocks we spent a romantic lunchtime. Back at the horses we found them in clouds of wild bees. What looked quite frightening for us left the horses surprisingly quiet. Apparently, these bees do not sting but only feast on the sweat. Anyway, they left us unharmed and we soon reached a gently sloping grassy track that allowed long canters back to our camp. Frank had finally overcome his nicotine withdrawal symptoms and had regained much of his spirits.



Fruits of a strange tree (*Englerophytum megalismontanum*, or Transvaal Eisenbaum) on the way to Epupa



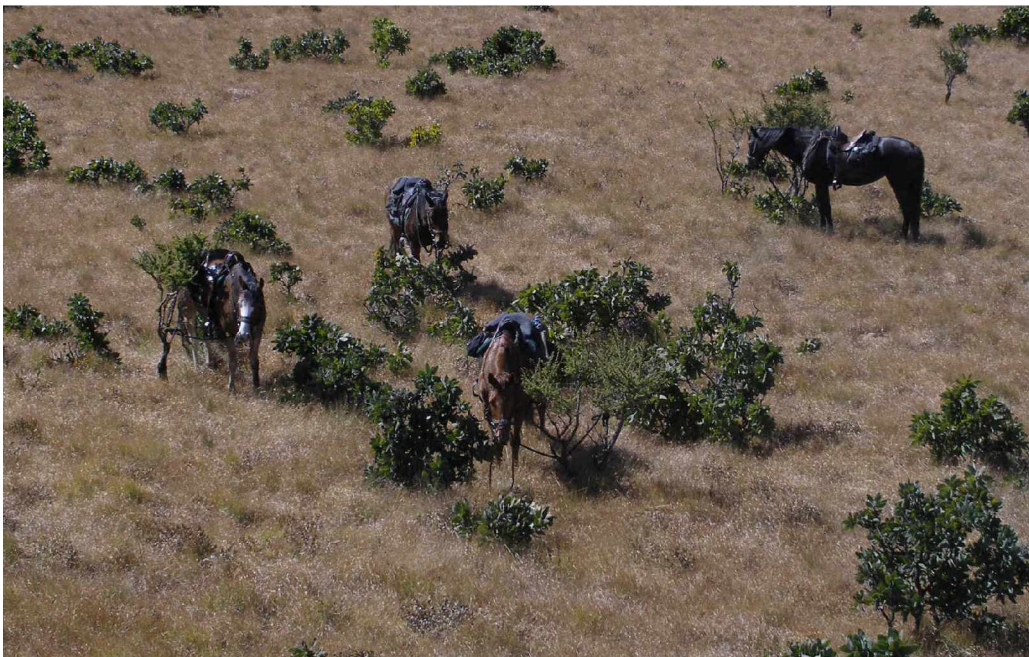
Another view from the escarpment on the way back to the camp from Epupa

The next morning Sue's horse went lame. One of the grooms had to lead it back to Chelinda (a march on feet of several hours across rough terrain) while Sue would return by car, fetch a

fresh horse and meet us at dinner time in the next camp. Therefore Robert started with the three of us, first along the escarpment with beautiful views into the deep valley 1500 m below and then across large stretches of burned down grassland where only the small groups of evergreen trees along the creeks made the landscape somewhat less desolate.



View back
to the camp



The horses
at
lunchtime

Finally, beyond a high ridge of hills we reached a deep and wide, very attractive valley that we followed for a good part of the afternoon till we reached the camp at a particularly nice location. The place is called the 'North Rumph Valley' and represents one of the most characteristic formations within Nyika. The camp was placed in an area that had been added to the park only in 1978 when it was enlarged to its present size of more than 3000 km². The inhabitants of the area were relocated to new villages outside the park. In some places terraces of former gardens and houses were still visible at the hillsides. The people living in this remote place had fled, more than 150 years ago, from the Ngoni, a Zulu tribe that had invaded the Malawian shore of the Nyassa-lake terrorizing the local population.

The whole area, and in fact the whole of Nyika, looks like perfectly suited for cattle or sheep farming. The pasture would provide ample fodder for both wild and tame animals. The antelopes and zebras would tolerate cattle much better than poaching (as obvious in the Masai mara and from the peaceful co-existence of horses and antelopes in the Chelinda area) provided overgrazing is avoided. The local people all earn their living from farming their small piece of land and animal husbandry is almost nonexistent. Many families are extremely poor and poaching is done out of need. When they are caught, they usually cannot pay their fine and if put in prison their family will starve.



View down to
North Rumph
valley

In the evening Sue returned from Chelinda with a fresh horse and hence, will be able to accompany our party to the peak of the highest mountain in northern Nyika (2607 m) that can be reached on horseback and that is the target of tomorrow.



Seeing the camp from afar



Our highly efficient kitchen

The morning came amidst wafts of cold mist drifting through the valley and most of the time hiding the surrounding mountains. However, when we met for a late breakfast at 9 am, the sun had eaten up most of the fog and warmed our backs.



View from the camp to the target of today's ride: the highest hill in the background

Over grass-covered steep slopes we gained successively more height and were rewarded by ever more impressive views. We came across all kinds of interesting plants and birds but

barely any other wildlife. Even after 2.5 h of ascent the horses did not show much fatigue and were even ready for a fast canter up to the small plateau that forms the top of our mountain.



The author and his brave horse on the top of the mountain

Since it was surprisingly warm and not windy, we spent a comfortable lunchtime in the company of the horses and of two huge ravens. Far down in a distance we could spot our camp. In all other directions the Nyika hills extended as far as the eye reached. The way back down the steep slopes following another trail proved less difficult than expected. Except for the unavoidable red-winged francolins that always made a noisy start only 15 cm in front of the advancing horses we did not see a living soul. When we reached the camp quite sweaty and exhausted, I turned down a friendly offer for a bath in the ice-cold river in favour of a hot shower. Already at half past five the shadows reached the valley and soon we assembled freezing around the fire.



View back to our mountain in the clouds

By now, we were already fairly well acquainted with each others life stories yet, we did not run out of things to talk about. I keep being impressed by the two girls organizing our safari. Like other young women that I met in Africa, they are of a daring and self-reliant breed. They went to Africa on their own more or less right after college and got addicted to a lifestyle that requires them to shoulder responsibilities and to face problems well beyond everything they would be exposed to at home. Above all, they succeeded to gain the respect and the cooperation of the black staff, all males and all significantly older and more experienced. Although they were not overly enthusiastic discussing their personal fates and future plans with us, they were much too polite and too open minded to avoid such topics.

The foggy morning of the next day found us preparing everything for the return to Chelinda. Although the fog filled the whole valley, the hills were supposed to catch some sun. We started relatively early riding as the crow flies, crossing on the way quite a few ridges and valleys.



Frank on the way back to Chelinda



On the way back to Chelinda

The closer we came the more animals we encountered, especially Roans that we had not met anywhere else. We reached Chelinda around midday time and took a grateful farewell from our black guides and the whole staff that had cared for us so well. Most amazing had been the cook and his helpers preparing all kinds of perfectly tasting and decidedly English dishes in spite of the fact that they themselves did not like at all this type of food. At the stable we also had a chance to meet David, the head of Nyika Safaris, who had been away on business when we left for the trail. He lives with his family in a chalet close to the stables and made a very nice and reliable impression. We arrived in the lodge just in time for a rather luxurious lunch that felt quite strange after the frugal safari lunches of the past days.



The final race
on the airstrip

In the afternoon we again mounted our safari horses for a final race on the airstrip. In anticipation of this event, the horses, in spite of a rather exhausting week lying behind them, got more and more nervous as we approached the 'racing grounds'. When we finally started, they speeded off like hell.



Goodbye to Nyika

Even my brave little Mpherembe gave his best even though he could not keep pace for the whole distance with the larger horses. Carole (on 'Emma') won with a small margin. The last evening came with a festive dinner and a farewell to Mary, the camp manager. Her time-restricted visa required her to leave the country for some time prior to coming back. So she decided to see a friend in Zambia.

Our own flight, i.e. the one for Carole, Frank and myself was scheduled for 10 am the next morning. We left in a tiny plane with a very nice black pilot leaving behind our dedicated and incredibly caring hosts and carrying with us memories of a magnificent and forlorn piece of Africa. May the efforts of all the people in Chelinda and of their supporters elsewhere succeed in protecting this beautiful spot from greed and destruction!

Hartmut Porzig, 9. 1. 2008

Postscriptum

As it turns out I was extraordinarily fortunate in succeeding to take part in one of the last riding safaris in the Nyika Park. In early 2008 Nyika Safari Company had to give up her operations due to losing her fight for licence renewal. The Mpherembe trail ride will no longer be possible.

Malawi solo or travelling on my own in southern Malawi

My next big step in this African voyage was supposed to be a riding safari in Kenia. But this would start only in a week's time from now. Hence, I had a couple of days left to experience some more aspects of the country and the people than just a remote national Park inhabited almost exclusively by wild animals.

Of all the African countries formerly under British rule Malawi has probably conserved most reminiscences from colonial and pre-colonial missionary times. Most people have some basic knowledge of English and where else in Africa would you expect the largest city (Blantyre) to carry the name of an obscure town in Scotland from where some missionaries originated?

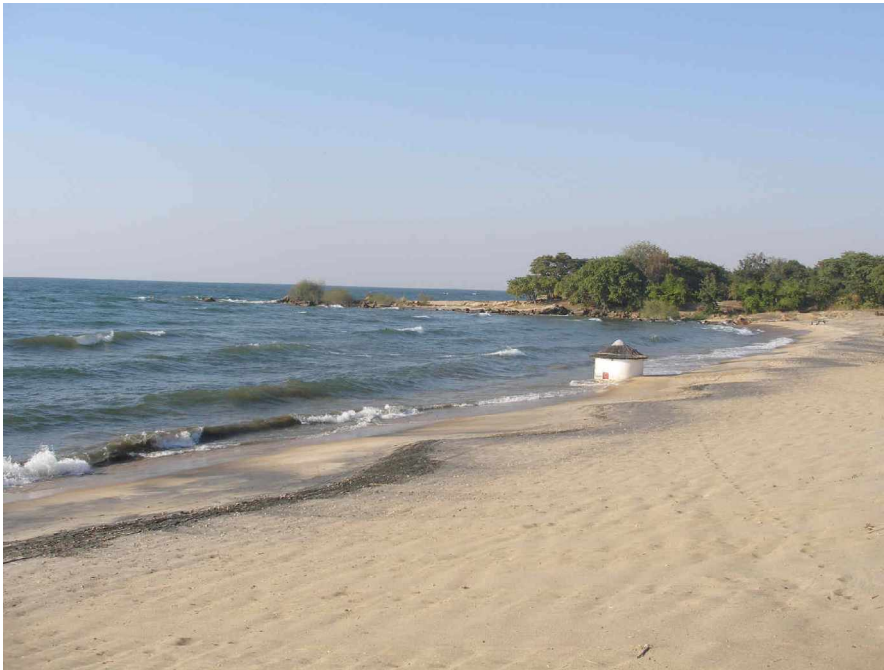
I had booked beforehand a few modest lodges and a car from 'Land and Lake' Safaris that had their main office in Lilongwe. Originally, they had promised to bring the car to the airport such that I could have started immediately for the shore of Lake Malawi at Nkhotakota. However, when the nice pilot of the small Air-Taxi delivered me safely at the airport, I did not meet with my rental car but rather with a representative of the safari company who organized a taxi to drive me to their town office. At the end I lost almost two hours until I could finally start driving in the direction of the Nkhotakota Safari Lodge. If everything went smoothly, I could still hope to arrive during daytime and avoid the nightmare of driving at night on unknown roads in the middle of Africa. Unfortunately, the quality of Malawian streets and, much more so, the distribution of sign posts along them, is highly unpredictable. Thus I missed the direct road and had to go a long way round. My road map indicated that the only alternative possibility would require taking the road from Kasungu to Nkhotakota. But although Kasungu seemed to be a sizable town, the main road circumvented the place and avoided any hint as to where I would have to branch off. When I finally found myself driving in the correct direction, the sun was already disquietingly close to the horizon. My guide book mentioned that this road had been refurbished only recently and that it would take me across the Nkhotakota game reserve. There was also a strict advice not to stop or to leave the car

within the reserve bolstered by the tragic story of an European woman who had been attacked and deadly injured by a lion while driving through the reserve with a bicycle a couple of years ago. I arrived in the wooded reserve shortly after sundown, just in time to realize that the tarmac of the road had partially dissolved or was littered with deep potholes. I cursed my decision to take a normal car rather than a 4-wheel drive but moved on across the by now dark forest only lit by a full moon. Occasionally, my poor vehicle suffered serious touch-downs when I was too late to avoid one of the potholes. Yet, I did not stop until I reached a road-block that marked the entrance of the reserve near Lake Malawi. Fortunately, I managed to remove the road block manually and, after a short distance, to reach the main road that leads along the lake shore from Salima up till Nkhata Bay. Since my lodge was supposed to be situated at the lake shore, I drove on to reach the shore beyond Nkhotakota which is situated about 1 km inland. This large village proved to consist of an irregular assembly of small dimly lit huts and even smaller shops but with nothing that looked like a centre. At last I stopped by one of the little shops to ask for the way. Two young bystanders immediately offered themselves as guides. With their help and after quite a bit of additional driving back in the direction of Salima, I reached a horrible carriage way leading us to the Nkhotakota pottery that was managing the lodge. Actually the pottery is managing two lodges. One is immediately adjacent to the pottery and mainly houses the participants of pottery workshops (fittingly all the inviting en suite chalets in the long stretched brick building carry names from characters of the Harry Potter books). The other one, called Safari Lodge, is located only some 400 m north of the pottery but separated from it by a small river that could not be crossed by cars. Sure enough it turned out that my reservation was for the latter lodge that took a further drive for at least 10 km along a highly adventurous rocky dirt road in pitch darkness and several additional ugly touchdowns until I finally arrived at my destination for today. In spite of the late hour people were very nice showing me my Malawian stile thatched round hut with a comfortable bed and serving me, the only foreigner in the whole place, an excellent dinner with a fish fresh from the lake. The hut was very close to the lakeshore and my first sleep was accompanied by the impressive noise of the surf that did not fall behind the one of the Mediterranean. This illusion was also nourished by the mild temperature, quite a contrast to the rough climate of the Niyka.



My hut at
Nkhotakota
Safari Lodge

The next morning revealed a breathtaking view from my hut over Lake Malawi. The mountains on the eastern shore are barely visible. Although the fine sandy beach and the clear water appeared very inviting, I did not dare to go for a swim because of the Bilharzias. Breakfast was served on the attractive pottery products of the nearby manufacture. A little later I met with the pottery manager, an exceptionally nice and cordial man, who promised to organize a trip to the nearby game reserve. It turned out to be a little expensive for Malawian standards because everything (car, driver, and guide) had to be organized exclusively for my person and the costs could not be shared with other guests.



Lake Malawi from
my hut at the Safari
Lodge

He then ventured to show me around the pottery. The factory is an affiliate of Dezda potteries founded in 1987 by Chris Stevens, a British professional potter and his wife. They started with 7 people but now occupy more than 270. They have in-house training programs for potters and painters and run courses for amateur potters. All the material comes from local sources and the whole manufacture looks like the ideal example of an industry fully integrated in the local traditions.



Bua River in the
Nkhotakota game
reserve

Much of the forms and decorations have a strong local touch, most of it tasteful and perfectly fitting any European table. Indeed, they export their stuff all over the world. Look at their home page (www.dedzapottery.com/index.html)! Of course all dishes in the restaurant are served on beautiful home made pottery.

Shortly after lunch appeared my friendly manager together with a driver and a lorry announcing that he would himself accompany me because the head ranger of the reserve was his relative and he wanted to take the opportunity and pay him a visit. African families are truly large and whoever achieves a position tries all he can to secure a salary for other members of his family. The plants on the small green fields along the road back to Nkhokota turned out to be Kassawa plantations. When I confessed that I had never tried one my guide immediately embarked on a lecture concerning all possible uses of Kassawa roots. Then he decided to visit the local market to buy one and to prove that it will taste even in its raw state. Nkhokota has a huge market which even boasts a long array of roofed market huts that have separate sections for textiles, hardware or vegetables and fruits. In smaller markets all the commodities are usually spread on the bottom. My guide seemed to know many of the market people but finally he spotted an elderly farmer who was just about to leave with a big load of unsold Kassawas. He made him unpack his stuff and carefully selected two or three roots that we then washed at the pumping well in the middle of the market before we again mounted our lorry. The fresh roots tasted quite ok, its almost pure starch, but they cannot be stored for long time. Therefore it is usually converted in some kind of flour that can be stored and is used for cooking. Except for the market, Nkhokota does not have any remarkable attractions even though it has an ominous reputation as one of the centres for the slave trade that Livingstone, 150 years ago, made a courageous attempt to abolish, albeit to no avail. The magnificent fig tree under which Livingstone met the most powerful and cruel of the slave traders still exists within the old mission compound. It lasted until in 1890 Harry Johnston, commissioner of the British colonial administration could stop this business that had devastated the western shores of Lake Malawi for so long.



Bua river falls
in Nkhokota
game reserve

Meanwhile our lorry moved slowly into the wooded hills of the game reserve using one of these crazy roads that no normal car can master. Before we finally reached the Bua Camp of the rangers, we picked up a group of children that belonged to the ranger families and were on their way home from school. The distance between camp and town must be at least 20 km one way. They had bicycles but the way back is much too steep to use them. The camp consisted of a few simple houses among trees for the rangers and their families. Their number appeared utterly low to take care of the very large reserve (more than 1000 km²). The chief ranger was a handsome, relatively young man who made a very sympathetic and reliable impression. He was expecting us and let us - past a young woman washing clothes in the river relatively close to the crocodiles - through beautiful evergreen woodland along the wild and rocky Bua River coming down from the mountains of Sambia. It was clear that in such surroundings the wild animals had ample hiding places. Consequently, we spotted only a few baboons and some crocodiles but not even elephants in spite of the fact that we moved constantly along fresh elephant paths. It is said that helicopter patrol flights spotted more than 1000 elephants living in the reserve. However, the untouched river valley with waterfalls and natural water basins in between compensated for the lack of big game. When we returned to the camp we first had to finish a big lunch before we could start our travel back. Hence, we reached the lodge only in the dark.

My next destination was the Liwonde National Park at the river Shire south of Lake Malawi. But before I could start, the nice people in Nkhotakota Safari Lodge had a hard time to put my bill together. Although I had booked and did pay the room in advance, it took three people and a lot of discussion to figure out how much I would have to pay for the meals and how to handle a credit card payment. Since I was the only customer, nobody was distracted by other duties from giving comments and 'support'. It was not particularly early in the morning when I finally paid the tips. Following the advice of the friendly pottery manager, I distributed a collective tip declared as 'sharing' in front of witnesses to be sure the actual recipient did not keep the whole amount to him/herself. After about 5 min driving on the horrible dirt passage that led from the lodge to the main road along the lake I picked up an elderly woman who returned from her piece of cassava land to her farm and desperately signed to get a lift. In this part of the country the farms are generally very small. Farmers live in reed-thatched assemblies of tiny clay brick huts that look quite picturesque, but apparently everything is done by hand. There are no machines whatsoever and, except for some chicken and an occasional goat, there is almost no husbandry. The woman was quite happy to get a lift but we did not get far before she pointed out some other members of her family walking along that I was expected pick up as well. Apparently, in Malawi a car with free seats is considered an intolerable luxury. A minute later my car was crowded with 3 more people and it was again starting to touch the rocks for lack of ground clearance even when driving very slowly. Hence, after 2 km I had to stop and to throw everybody out. They were somewhat astonished but left the car without protest. I was quite relieved when I finally reached the tarmac road that allowed driving without the horrible noise of touchdowns.

As on all big roads in Malawi that I used there was very little motorized traffic except for some hopelessly overcrowded minibuses. However, on both roadsides an incessant procession of mostly female pedestrians carrying bags and market goods mixed with, mostly male, people on bicycles often transporting grotesque loads was trying to reach some unknown destination. I was told that a large fraction represented migration to and from market places that were often far apart. So people start in the morning, walk a couple of hours, sell or buy some goods and walk back some hours until the day is over. Others offered goods at the roadside, at this time of the year mostly potatoes, carrots, tomatoes and charcoal. Because of the uninterrupted crowds it is almost impossible to stop with the car without getting surrounded in no time by lots of friendly and highly curious people.

Nevertheless, this time I found my way to Liwonde National Park without many difficulties, even though I had to ask several times until I found the small side road leading to the park entrance. My destination for the next three nights was the Chinguna Hills Lodge.



A somewhat macabre welcome at Chinguna Hills Lodge

There are only two lodges within the confines of the park, the luxurious and very expensive Mvuu Lodge that can be reached only with 4WD vehicles and Chinguna Hills, situated relatively close to the southern park entrance that is much cheaper and easier to access. After having paid the park entrance fee I indeed managed to reach the lodge before dark. Along the road I encountered quite a few impalas which even tolerated stopping the car and taking photos while two huge hornbills took flight when I approached. The lodge which originated from a park warden's house is completely hidden beneath large trees and bushes and became visible only after I stepped out of the car on the small parking lot. A friendly black receptionist took care of me and showed me into a nice and spacious room. The single storied house had as its centre a large attractive and comfortable hall full of all kinds of African requisites, wood sculptures, carved chairs and hunting trophies. The host, a white African, showed up a little later. Taking tea together on the terrace he talked a lot about his lodge and the animals around it, especially the elephants to which he had developed a special relationship. After dark the lodge, having no electricity, is only lit by paraffin lamps that made it somewhat difficult to read in the evening. Around dinner time two additional guests showed up, a young English couple travelling through Africa since a few months. They stayed at the Camp site that belongs to the lodge, a few hundred meters uphill into the wood. It turned out that they had visited Nyika the week preceding our riding safari. I was somewhat surprised when they, as well as our host, inquired about the tragic accident that had occurred in Nyika shortly prior to our arrival. Apparently several English tourists and the pilot had been killed in a plane crash while taking a sightseeing flight around the park in a plane. Whether the plane belonged to Nyika Safaris was not quite clear. However, during our whole stay no one had ever mentioned this accident with a single word, probably to avoid disquieting the guests. Nevertheless, I felt somewhat embarrassed by a solicitousness that treats us like children that are too frail to endure any harm. While I waited for the dinner to be served I had a chance to

listen to the varied sounds and noises from the wood outside the lodge. Quite close an elephant tried to overturn a tree generating quite some fuss. After dinner and as the only in-house guest I had a long chat with my host, a seasoned African who had spent most of his life in Southern Africa. He had reconstructed the present lodge from a rundown park ranger's house; he had built the attractive campsite and seemed to have invested most of his money and heart. He was full of bitterness about an ill conceived program to reduce the elephant population in the Liwonde Park and knew countless anecdotes about typical African deficiencies and organizational absurdities. In his lodge he seemed to lead a rather paternalistic regiment where the black staff was kept under strict control. He offered three kinds of activities: early morning walking safaris, game drives and boat trips on the Shire River Lagoon. Since I had two days available, I decided to try all of the three.



Flood plains of the Shire in Liwonde National Park



Impala lily flowering in the Liwonde Park woods

A quarter to 6 on the next morning I was knocked up not without having a pot with hot tea deposited in my room. Twenty minutes later the English couple had arrived and we started

with a guide (walking in run-down low shoes that did not seem overly suited to the task) towards the flood plains of the Shire. At that time the animals were expected to leave the woods and to start grazing in the plain that was covered with thick high grasses. Indeed, there were quite a lot of animals, mainly bushbucks, impalas, warthogs and elephants. However, the distance at which the animals get alerted and move away is much larger if they are approached on foot rather than on horseback. Moreover we encountered baboons, lots of birds, a swarm of wild bees and army ants. The guide turned out to be very nice and knowledgeable. After a belated though rich breakfast I felt too lazy to start any major activity but I visited a romantic tree-house (for animal observation) and the very attractive camp site both in the surroundings of the lodge.



Camp site at
Chinguna Hills

The camp site features a number of reed-covered huts with beds in tents suspended under the high roofs. Other buildings contain kitchen facilities and lounges that make for a comfortable stay during the rainy season. Overall a beautiful place! At midday time a group of young Americans showed up who had been picked up at Liwonde by a car from the lodge and had spent the morning on a longer walk-and-drive safari. They turned out to be sociologists, partially students, involved in evaluating people's attitudes towards AIDS and how they might be altered by local AIDS projects. Spending a free day in the park seemed really to cheer them up after having worked for a period under difficult conditions. After a long discussion on AIDS in Malawi they went of to the canoe trip that I had planned for the next day.

In the following night it started raining in spite of the fact that we should currently experience the dry season. Nevertheless I was awakened at a quarter to 6 for the motorized game drive. A young Belgian couple had also arrived to start for the walking safari. However the two guides considered the weather unsuitable for game viewing – it was certainly unsuitable for the type of shoes they were wearing – and kept us waiting till after 8 when we finally started our separate safaris. I mounted a totally run-down landrover whose instruments had given up long ago on measuring anything yet, it still moved. Shortly after starting we picked up a rather elegant young man, probably a friend of the guide, who soon fell asleep and would not awake until shortly before our return. The guide-driver was quite nice and knowledgeable and drove

me a long distance towards Mwu and to the waterfront but we did not see much except for some waterbucks, impalas and a fair number of Tse-Tse flies that tried to get our blood. Although the guide assured me that they did not carry sleeping sickness in this area I was not very keen to have them all over me.



A waterbuck watching from the roadside

When we returned around midday time the canoe guide informed us that the weather was too windy for canoeing but he promised to take us early tomorrow morning because I would have to leave for Lilongwe after lunch. In the early afternoon arrived a family of black tourists, a rare event in the lodges. They seemed to be quite important people judging from their body mass index. Nobody is fat in Malawi except those few people in important positions. Unlike in Europe or the US where the lower classes are disproportional prone to put on weight, in all African countries that I visited, only the well-to-do can afford to eat much. Later more new guests were arriving in the number: a Dutch irrigation engineer with his family of three and a group of French students who had been travelling with a priest as their guide through Mozambique and Zimbabwe.



Start for the canoe safari

The dinner table was almost too small to accommodate everybody. The French priest turned out to have worked for many years in the missionary service in Cameroon. Therefore, his

group was able to travel in areas with no tourist infrastructure by using missionary stations for accommodation. After dinner they started a very attractive guitar playing session until late in the evening our host arrived back from Blantyre where he had been on business for the past two days. After breakfast on the morning of my last day in the Malawian countryside we (i.e. the dutch couple and I) set out for the canoeing trip with the same guide who had led the walking safari two days ago. At the edge of the lagoon where it bordered the autumnal mopane wood the landscape reminded me to one in the Okavango. The open water was surrounded and interrupted by large areas with high reeds that the hippos used as hiding places and that were populated by large flocks of cormorants, egrets and storks.



Among hippos in the Shire lagoon

The boat was pushed forward by a special stick as long as we passed through the reed but was propelled by oars on the open water. Shortly after reaching the open lagoon we encountered a 'school' of at least 11 hippos of various sizes standing in the water while others in the reed made themselves heard by their loud and varied grunting noises.



More Hippos

The ones in the open tolerated our approach without showing much disquiet. Of course, we all wanted a photograph with a hippo opening his huge mouth to reveal his teeth and throat but they used to do this only when nobody was ready to take a picture. Further across the lagoon we reached the Shire River that is connected to the lagoon but the wind became so strong that the waves made it difficult to keep course. On the opposite side the park only covers a stretch of about 1 km in width along the river. After about 3 hours we are back to the lodge and I could start for Lilongwe after having paid my modest invoice.

The distance was only about 170 km but I was not sure about road conditions through the Dezda highlands. However, the road proved to be in perfect order with the usual procession of people walking or cycling on both sides of the street and stunning views into rocky, mostly deforested mountains and valleys or plains with small Malawian farmer's villages. The reed-thatched houses looked very much like those that Livingstone may have seen 140 years ago.



Beautiful water lily in the Shire lagoon

The farming plots seemed tiny and with little obvious husbandry I wondered how much tax revenue the state might collect in rural Malawi. Small wonder all road construction activities carried an instruction plate indicating the support by developmental aid from European countries.



Malawian village in the Dezda highlands

Half finished stone buildings along the road usually explained themselves as churches, mosques or schools built by religious institutions. I could not help wondering whether the spiritual needs of these poor farmers really required churches of at least three or four different

denominations in each village while the state is unable to pay reasonable salaries to school teachers, let alone to train those teachers according to modern standards. According to people whom I met during my trip through this beautiful country and who did work as teachers in the Malawian schools, the deficits in the educational system are appalling. In spite of obligatory primary school education the level of achievement with the children is said to be very low due to poor teaching (and not because the children are uninterested or unintelligent).



Landscape in the
Dezda
Mountains



A last view on a
Malawien
village from the
air after a late
lift-off

After three and a half hours I reached Lilongwe, delivered my car and was transferred to the 'Korean Garden' hotel which appeared clean but rather sterile. The flight to Nairobi was scheduled for the next morning. Indeed, all went well until I arrived at the airport only to

discover that the plane was late because of 'technical problems'. After we had finally boarded, new technical problems became apparent. We waited for 2 h in the plane before we all disembarked and continued waiting in the airport building. At 18h in the evening we were finally informed that a spare part had to be procured from South Africa and we would not start before tomorrow morning. With some delay busses were organized and all passengers were transferred back to Lilongwe to spend a further night in a hotel, fortunately paid for by Kenyan Airlines. Thus, I would not be able to reach my hotel in Nairobi, nor would I have a chance to meet with Offbeat Safaris as planned. After much further delay and stopovers in Harare and Lusaka we reached Nairobi the next day only well after dark. I started wondering how I would reach my next riding party in the middle of the Masai Mara.

Hartmut Porzig

25. 2. 2008

Continued in part II: A ride across the Masai Mara Savannah



A beautifully decorative brush close to my hotel in Lilongwe