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FRESH WATER THINKING

Aaron Gekoski cuts his salt intake and heads to the clear waters of Lake Malawi. Is it time to swap megafauna and coral for tropical fish and granite boulders, he asks?

PHOTOGRAPHS AARON GEKOSKI





GIVEN MY LOVE FOR THE OCEAN, I DON'T GENERALLY CARE MUCH FOR SALT WATER. IT STINGS MY 'DELICATE' BRITISH EYES, FRIZZES UP MY 'LUSCIOUS' BLONDE LOCKS, PLAYS HAVOC WITH MY 'PRICEY' UNDERWATER HOUSING, AND ROCKS DIVE BOATS MAKING ME PUKE. IT CAN ALSO BE COLD, MURKY, SWELLY, SMELLY, AND FULL OF THINGS THAT WISH TO STING YOU.

So when the chance arose to dive Lake Malawi, I jumped at it - both fins first. I'd always been seduced by the thought of diving the "great lake". It contains more freshwater fish species than all of North America and Europe combined. The water temperature rarely falls below 22 degrees. And you don't need to dunk your gear, or soak your camera system after a dive. Granted, there may be the odd parasitic worm (more about these nasties later), but overall Lake Malawi is sparkly clean.

As my stepmother's country of birth, the reasons to visit Malawi also ran a little deeper. Belinda has spent years furnishing me with stories of tea plantations in the south, mountain ranges to the east, forests in the central regions, hills and plateaus in the remote north - and of course that lake.

It was never a case of if I should visit, but more a case of when. Step up the magnificent Kelly White of the UK's Malawi Travel Marketing Consortium, Malawi's own The Responsible Safari Company, and sponsors Cedarberg Travel who combined forces to set up a comprehensive tour for me and Gem - my partner in crime.

After six cold, miserable months in the UK, the trip couldn't have come at a better time. Snow in April? That's just not cricket. So we were off to the Land of Smiles, intent on doing a fair bit of smiling ourselves.

ESCAPE MACLEAR

I fly on my own to Blantyre from London. Gem was held up editing a film we've been working on about Zimbabwe's elephant problems, Grey Matters. Named after Scottish explorer David Livingstone's place of birth, Malawi's commercial capital is a buzzy, fairly nondescript city. There are faces everywhere; people line the roads three deep on either side; men struggle with giant bags of charcoal on bicycles; women carry even larger, longer bundles of wood on their heads; children throw ninja poses at the passing car. Today's Malawi is a very different place to the one Livingstone found over 150 years ago. In the last half a century alone, the population has increased from 4 million to over 15 million.

After a couple of days acclimatising to Africa's inimitable ways, I head north to Cape Maclear, where I see the lake for the first time. Nobody's sure when the African tectonic plate split to form Lake Malawi - it was somewhere between 40 000 and two million years ago. What we do know is that a giant tear formed in the landscape, filling over time to create one of the most beautiful bodies of water on Earth. 580kms long and 75kms at its widest point, it is now the

third largest and second deepest lake in Africa.

I finally understand Belinda's passion for the L-word. It's beautiful: an aquatic sheet of platinum that pulses with activity. Fish eagles - Malawi's national bird - scour the lake for goodies from the trees, as women clean clothes along sandy beaches below. Fishermen prepare their nets and lanterns to catch usipa, or lake sardines, in the same way they did hundreds of years ago. The fish, attracted by the lights, rise to the surface where they are ensnared in giant nets. The twinkly reflection of the fishermen's lanterns prompted Livingstone to coin it the Lake of Stars, a term still overused by travel writers and marketers today.

Cape Maclear is now one of the first stops on the backpacker's circuit through Malawi and perhaps its most touristy. Pushy beach hawkers and children playing homemade instruments, cute at first, noisy and annoying soon after, make relaxing on the beach difficult. One particularly irritating child - smashing a guitar made out of a plastic water holder - is saved a dunking when I remember that parts of Cape Maclear harbour schistosomes, the minute worms that cause bilharzia.

Instead of exposing the child to these unpleasant parasites, I decide to go on a dive; an activity far less likely to land me in jail on counts of abuse. Cape Maclear Scuba operates a professional outfit. Divemaster Louis takes me to Aquarium, which lies off Thumbi island, less than a kilometre from the shore. Our trip to Thumbi is the marine equivalent of a stroll in the park. The lake's flat as a pancake, there's barely a ripple. Louis warns me that the water is a little cooler at this time of year - 24 degrees - hence the 3mm wetsuits. In summer the water temperature can reach 28 degrees so a pair of boardies normally suffices.

Thumbi, like many of the islands in these parts, is made up of giant boulders and miombo woodland. But it's below the surface where the action takes place. I lean over the side to inspect the site: a sandy bottom, some 20m beneath, clearly visible. The only thing impeding the view are loads of colourful fish. Lake Malawi is cichlid heaven.

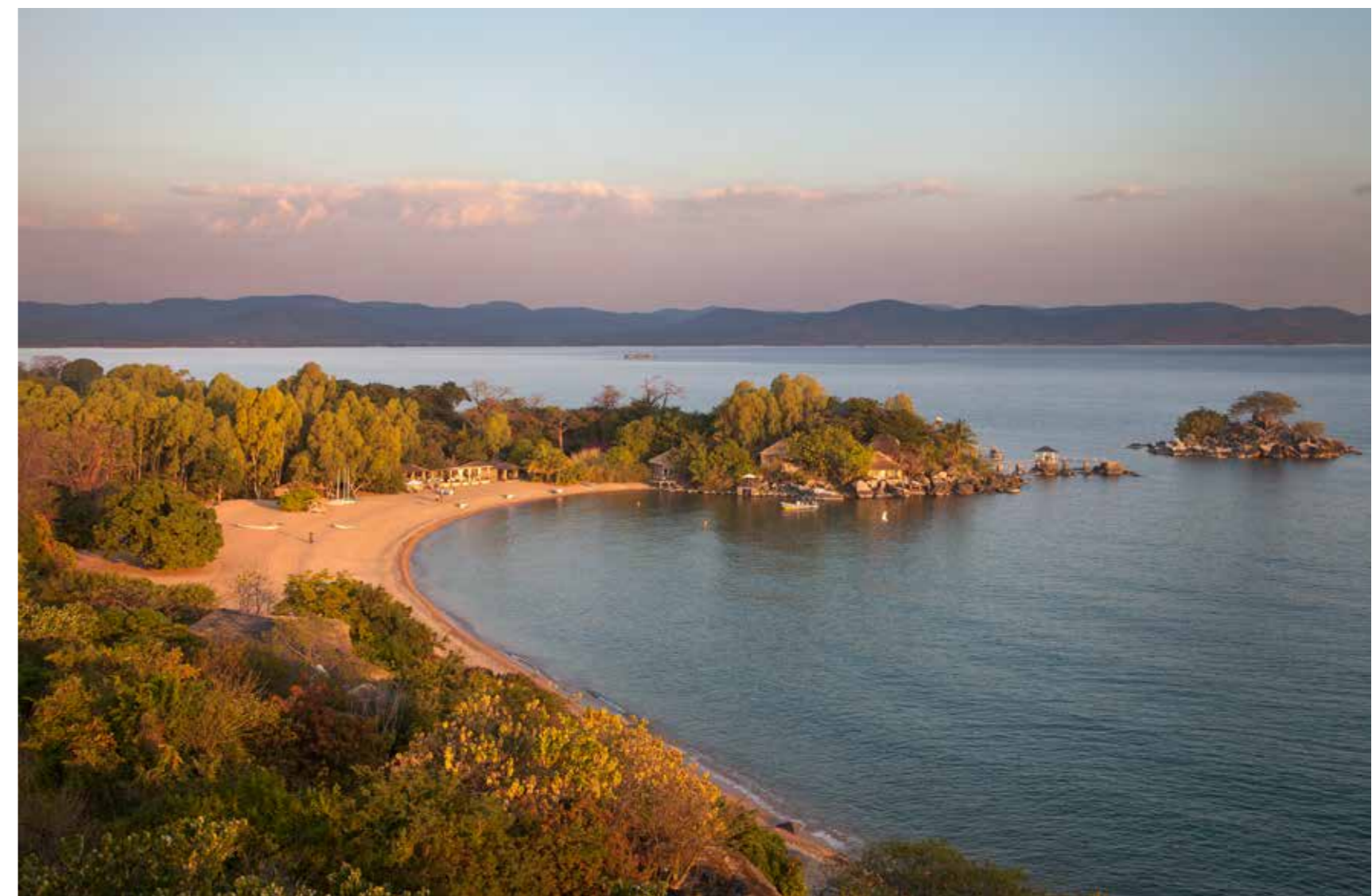
There are nine families of fish in the lake, but by far the most prevalent are cichlidae. In fact, it is believed there are around 2000 species of cichlid here, many of which are yet to be described. They are, undoubtedly, pretty to look at, but dig a little deeper and cichlids display some fascinating behaviour, particularly when it comes to mating.

The male starts off by creating a nest that looks a little like a

“ IF YOU COULD DIVE ON THE MOON, IT WOULD SURELY LOOK A LITTLE LIKE THIS SHALLOW SPOT, WHICH IS COVERED IN GIANT CRATERS.”



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crater. To attract a mate, he will erect his fins and do a seductive wiggle. The female, whipped into a lustful frenzy, releases her eggs into the water, which she then proceeds to Hoover up in her mouth. Now the cool bit: on his derriere are a series of dots that look remarkably like eggs. Shaking his booty in the direction of her mouth, she is fooled into believing these are eggs that need gobbling up. The saucy male then goes on to fertilise the eggs in her mouth. Thankfully, the female's not a swallower and holds the fertilised eggs in her mouth until they hatch. Some species continue to protect their offspring this way until they're old enough to fend for themselves.

Locating 'mouthbrooders' is an art that Louis has perfected. They can often be seen chasing away predators, swimming furiously in circles, as their young seek safety in numbers. If the mother feels particularly threatened (like when a massive bubble-blowing Englishman approaches), she will suck her kiddies into her mouth. The scene has endless potential for great photography and I make it my mission to get a decent shot of these skittish cichlids mid-slurp.

So far so good. Next stop: the emerald waters of Kayak Africa's famous Mumbo Island Camp. Tucked away on its own island amongst Flintstonesque rocks and 40 minutes by boat from Cape Maclear, Mumbo is one of the most "eco" eco-lodges you could wish to find. The lodge has no electricity – just windup

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torches and solar power, which enhances the feeling of isolation and, um, eco-ness. It is built entirely of timber, thatch and canvas. Showers come courtesy of a tin bucket filled at your request with warm water by chirpy staff. Toilets work on a dry-composting system, so even the waste doesn't go to waste here. The impact on the island is so minimal that if the lodge was to pick up and move tomorrow, it would fairly quickly look as though it never existed.

Mumbo's rooms also offer some of the most impressive views of any lodge, anywhere. I could have kicked back, sipped local beer Kuche Kuche and swung happily in my hammock for hours on end, but those waters were just too tempting.

The manager Robin, a fun 20-something South African, takes me on a leisurely shallow dive outside the lodge. We spot another couple of mouthbrooders. When we approach them, two things happens. The one mother sucks her babies up before we're anywhere near enough to get a shot, the other mum dashes off in fear and predators munch her youngsters.

Feeling incredibly guilty and wishing to avoid further fish genocide, we concede that the only way of approaching them is very, very slowly. In theory this should allow her time to get used to our presence. This approach fails miserably and after a handful of dives I give up trying to get the perfect shot.

It's not all doom and gloom though, as Mumbo turns out to be an underwater photographer's wet dream. I snap a crab clutching onto a fish, dinner, for dear life. A monitor lizard, often seen swimming towards a rock to sun itself in the midday heat, makes a beeline towards us: part lizard, part snake, part torpedo. I react just in time to capture a shot of its bottom.

With a week to spend there, I get creative and shoot a fish eagle – from underwater – catching a fish above. After numerous attempts lying a couple of metres below the surface, my finger hits the trigger at precisely the right moment. But what should have been a National Geographic contender ends up an indecipherable blue and white blob.

Invigorated, stimulated and thoroughly refreshed, I leave Mumbo and head to the capital, Lilongwe to meet Gem at the airport. Our next mission is to follow in the footsteps of David Livingstone for an Africa Geographic article we're working on. To cut a long story short, we planned to; scale the highest mountain in South Central Africa, Mount Mulanje; visit the emerald tea plantations of Satemwa; go on safari at Liwonde and Majete; get taken on a Slave Trade Tour and have pottery making lessons in Nkhotakota; hike rainforests in Ntchisi; and see enough cultural dances to last a lifetime.

Along the way we stay at superb luxury resorts (wholly unLivingstonian, but pretty damn fun) including Tongole, Mvuu, Mkulumadzi, Latitude 13 and Huntingdon House. The service is, without exception, seamless, the food inventive and tasty, the staff some of the most professional we have encountered throughout Southern Africa. Yet somehow our trip was to get even better.

BAOBAB ISLAND

Likoma is as romantic and enchanting an island as one could wish to find. Although it lies just off the coast of northern Mozambique, this 18km² dollop of loveliness is worlds away from a clichéd paradise island. Think baobab forests instead of palm trees, beaches of golden nuggets rather than powder puff sand, giant granite boulders as opposed to coral reefs. Likoma also has a beachfront, hassle-free market (set amongst baobabs) and – perhaps most surprising of all – even boasts an elaborate cathedral, built by missionaries in 1903.

A friend of mine, Kevin Clark, works here as a dive instructor and manages Mango Drift, an idyllic little beachfront lodge that's low in frills, but high in charm. Gem and I like it so much we decide to spend six weeks there, which includes a few days of indulgence at Kaya Mawa, a lodge voted one of the ten most romantic in the world by Conde Naste magazine.

After settling in we get down to the serious business of diving. The first site Kev takes us to is Chinunwe on the other side of the island. If you could dive on the moon, it would surely look a little like this shallow spot, which is covered in giant craters. Apparently the bigger and more pristine the crater, the better for attracting mates. Kev likens this to "having either a Ferrari and mansion, or donkey cart and bamboo hut." On the way back from our dive we're treated to the rare sight of otters paddling on the surface.

We dive Ndamo Point the following week, which has more, if smaller craters. This is also the best site to watch dolphinfish (or Malawi blue dolphin cichlids), hunt at night. Aided by our torch light, these incredibly shy, long, thin fish pluck cichlids out from between the boulders for munching. Further afield is Christian's Point, which has gorgeous rock formations and plenty of mouthbrooders.

But the best site on Likoma, by some way, is Masimbwe, a tiny island close to Kaya Mawa. The site drops down to about 70m, but most of the action can be seen in less than 20m of water by swimming all the way around the island. A giant catfish, known locally as kampango, minds its business under a rock, until a camera is placed next to its whiskery mug, causing it to reluctantly skulk off. Gem rubs her belly: they may be funny looking, but in Lake Malawi's clean waters catfish meat becomes dense and rich.



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It tastes like monkfish crossed with lobster. Kampango curry is a regular on Mango's menu.

Male cichlids are not the only ones to use a sneaky trick or two. Catfish have been known to lay their eggs amongst a mouthbrooder's - when she sucks them all up, the catfish will hatch first before eating all the eggs in her mouth. One can only imagine the shock she must feel as she spits out some rather full baby catfish.

Another of Masimbwe's draw cards is a mysterious rock carving, which looks a little like a hamburger. No one's clear about the meaning, though similar carvings - thought to act as warnings to opposing tribes - have been found in Ethiopia and date back thousands of years.

This site also turns out to be an excellent spot for mouthbrooders. A decent shot, however, evades me until our final week on Likoma, when I catch one at the perfect moment. The fatalistic expression etched on its face says, "there you go you persistent swine, you've got your shot - now leave us in peace!"

We pack our gear away and head back to Mango to reflect on our trip. As anticipated, warm waters and reliable visibility make for comfortable diving and provide a refreshing change to the norm. Giant boulder formations create a dazzling amphitheater for the cichlids, catfish and dolphinfish. In short, there's definitely enough to keep visitors - in particular underwater photographers - entertained for quite some time.

But I have a confession to make: I'm ready for a return to ocean diving, despite its unpredictable ways. The whales, dolphins, sharks, mantas, multicoloured slugs and seals: they're definitely worth a little saltiness.

FOR YOUR RESEARCH

★ **Mumbo Island:** www.mumboisland.com,
www.kayakafrica.co.za

★ **Kaya Mawa:** www.kayamawa.com

★ **Mango Drift:** www.mangodrift.com

★ **Flights from Lilongwe to Likoma:** www.ulendo.net

Aaron and Gemma flew from London to Malawi with Ethiopian Airways (www.flyethiopian.com)

WHEN TO VISIT: The dry winter months are between June-August when the water temperature is at its coolest and you may need to wrap up at night. Expect some strong easterly winds, known locally as Mwera during this time. Temperatures rise markedly from September to October, whilst the rainy season can last from December to March. Algae bloom from January to February can cloud the water.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on Aaron and Gemma's work, head to their conservation film and PR agency www.ecomentaries.org, or visit www.aarongekoski.com. They would like to thank their sponsors for making this trip possible: Cedarberg Travel (www.cedarberg-travel.com)

ALONG WITH: Responsible Safari Company (www.responsiblesafaricompany.com)
Malawi travel Marketing Consortium (www.malawitourism.com)

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