



# THE OTHER africa

BY SUE WATT

*It might not receive the attention of its large safari-driven neighbours – Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia, Kenya – but the petite nation of Malawi is proving that you can build and nurture an ecosystem from the ground up.*

**O**n my first game drive in Majete, I see elephants strolling along the river, devilish-looking nyala antelopes glaring at me behind bushes and grumpy buffalo wallowing in mud. But what grabs my attention more than anything is a spider.

A golden silk orb-weaver spider, to be exact. She may be small compared to the big beasts of the bush, but in spider terms she's huge – the size of a splayed out hand that seems to be floating in mid-air, just to the right of the track. Her virtually invisible silken web has been spun between two trees some four metres apart. Even at our distance a few paces away, she looks terrifying yet strangely beautiful with long, banded gold-and-black legs supporting a slim belly, like an arachnid catwalk model. Also on the web, an arm's length away, is her puny male counterpart, roughly the size of a thumbnail. "How do they mate?" I ask Chris, our guide, puzzled by the logistics. "Cautiously," he replies. "He strums a tune on the web to woo her. If she likes it, they mate.

But if she doesn't, she eats him."

In Africa, small creatures can prove equally as fascinating as big ones. But just now, it's the "Big Five" – elephant, rhino, buffalo, leopard and lion – that are justifiably causing a stir in Majete Wildlife Reserve in Southern Malawi. Traditionally, the term referred to the five most dangerous animals to hunt but today it more commonly denotes the most popular wildlife species to tick off on safari, the ones that pull in the crowds.

Majete, a beautiful 700-square-kilometre reserve, hasn't always been home to the "Big Five." In one of Africa's poorest countries, its wildlife had been decimated through poaching, leaving nothing to tempt predators to the region. But in 2003, African Parks, a Dutch non-profit conservation organisation, took over the management of Majete on a 25-year lease, its aim to restock the park and bring revenue to local communities through tourism, making it ecologically, sociologically and financially sustainable before handing it back to the Malawian authorities.



Today, it is African Parks' flagship project and the statistics speak for themselves: US\$13 million (around AU\$12.4 million) has been invested in the reserve and 2,500 animals have been relocated including 217 elephants, 306 buffalo, eight black rhino and four leopards, with a total population now of around 5,000 animals. Nineteen communities consisting of 130,000 people are being supported in health, education and income-generating projects; and 120 full-time staff and up to 100 casual staff are employed, all but three being local. "This is what can be done when all the stars are aligned," says Dorian Tilbury, African Park's Field Operations Manager.

The number everyone is talking about, however, is five, because as of August when three lions were relocated here from South Africa, Majete can proudly call itself a "Big Five" reserve once again. Elephant and buffalo are easily seen, and the leopards and rhinos are monitored daily by a team of trackers. With four rhino calves already born here and the male leopard known to have been cavorting with the ladies, future "Big Five" generations look set to flourish.

Even without them, Majete's scenic beauty would be reason enough to come here, with rolling hills, riverine landscapes, lush Miombo woodland and the majestic Shire River on its eastern border forging its way to the Zambezi. In the dry season, wildlife flocks to the Shire's banks and wades across the water to its evergreen islands for sustenance, dodging the crocs as they go. We take a boat safari amid a concerto of croaking frogs and squawking geese while a bloat of hippos play hide-and-seek among the rocks. Robert, our guide, points out the myriad bird species all around. "These Egyptian geese used to be migratory," he tells us. "But they stay here now – seems they've found the perfect environment in Majete!"

They're not the only ones to have found the perfect environment. Luxury safari group Robin Pope Safaris (RPS) has recently opened an exclusive lodge inside the reserve. Mkulumadzi, named after the river on whose banks it stands, has eight eco-friendly chalets in contemporary safari-chic style, a swimming pool overlooking the river and an excellent restaurant. It demonstrates huge faith in Majete's future, which RPS and their parent company, Molecaten, have themselves contributed towards by donating the funds for the relocation of its newest residents: the all-important lions.

In many African destinations, time spent chilling on the coast after safari has become the norm, the classic "bush-and-beach" combination. Tiny, landlocked Malawi may not have the Indian



#### MALAWI MOMENT

**This page, clockwise from above:** Beachside at Pumulani lodge, on the shores of Lake Malawi; village life.

**Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** Tracking rhinos at dawn; you're guaranteed an impala spotting on safari in Malawi; views from the terrace at Pumulani; buffalo are a common sight in Malawi; the Mkulumadzi River; poolside at Pumulani.

**Opening spread:** Malawi's golden orb spider.

Ocean as its eastern border like Kenya or its neighbour Tanzania. But it does have Lake Malawi – the 10th-largest of its kind in the world and somewhat akin to an inland sea – that measures 600 kilometres long and up to 80 kilometres wide, with beautiful natural beaches. Mkulumadzi's sister lodge, Pumulani, lies on its shores near Cape Maclear, a scenic six-hour drive away.

Pumulani means "to relax" in the local Chichewa language, and it's difficult to do anything else here. Our villa curves around the contours of the hillside that overlooks the private beach and on arrival, we watch from our terrace as the setting sun turns the waters into shades of deep purple, red and orange. Inside, hues of lilac, cream and pale driftwood add to the chilled ambience and an elegant slipper bath in the feature window with views down to the lake provides the finishing touch.

Known as the warm heart of Africa, Malawi is famous for the friendliness of its people. I'm reminded of it time and again when we walk to Mbeya village with Loyce, one of the



waitresses at Pumulani. The lodge offers a village tour with Loyce, and they couldn't have chosen a better person. She's permanently smiling, like she's found the secret ingredient to happiness. After finishing her shift, and despite being heavily pregnant, she returns home to look after 29 children mostly orphaned through HIV/AIDS. "I love coming home to them," she says. "They're my best friends and I've promised to continue helping them when the baby is born." Unsurprisingly, guests don't begrudge donating to her charity.

As we walk around the village of mud, brick and thatch houses, children rush up to us pleading to take their photos, old ladies sitting on the floor sieving maize nod politely and young men cycle past with a nonchalant wave. In Loyce's back yard, we meet the children, some silent, some loud and boisterous, all pleased that she's back. They show us how they make paper out of elephant dung (brought to them from Mkulumadzi), and jewellery from recycled bottle tops or bits of wire. These aren't

#### WHATEVER FLOATS YOUR BOAT

Right: A traditional *dhow* setting out to explore Lake Malawi.

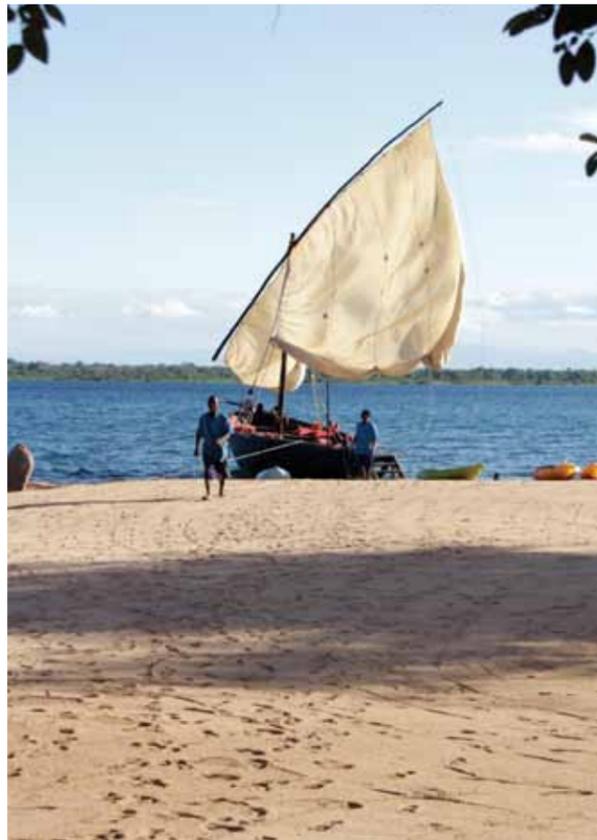
just tasks to keep them occupied, although it helps to push the trauma of their lives away for a while. It ensures they have some kind of craft or skill to earn their own money in the future. Their jewellery and paper, along with Loyce's paintings, are sold in Pumulani's gift shop.

With Lake Malawi National Park literally on our doorstep, it would be unthinkable not to spend some time here in the waters of this UNESCO World Heritage Site. We drift languidly on a dhow cruise at sunset and the following morning Glyn, our speedboat driver, takes us to see fish eagles. I'd imagined we would witness them soaring a safe distance above us. But Glyn has other ideas. Selecting a fish from his bag, he blows into its mouth like he's kissing it goodbye, bloating it so that it floats on the surface when he throws it in the water. Then he emits a piercing whistle and right on cue, a giant fish eagle appears above us, swoops down to within a metre of the boat, wings wide open, and picks up the carcass in his talons. It's a stunning spectacle, but I'm quietly pleased when the next fish eagle refuses to come so close, relieved they still have their boundaries.

I decide to try snorkelling for the first time. Jumping clumsily from the speedboat in mask and flippers, I enter another world – one where all I can hear is my own breathing. But what makes it so surreal is the fish, hundreds of tiny multi-coloured fins all around me. Some scurry away but others nibble bread from my hands, tickling my fingertips with their mouths. When the sun shines into the lake, the diminutive animals shimmer like jewels in the water – purple, blue and yellow, or like flashes of gold and silver, some striped like zebras, some with neon turquoise lines searing through them. These are Lake Malawi's cichlids – with 875 different species, there are more types of fish here than in any other lake in the world.

Malawi may be tiny compared to most African bush and beach destinations, but it punches, quietly, well above its weight. As the golden orb spider and cichlids prove, you don't have to be big to be beautiful.

Photography by Will Whitford.



## travel facts

### GETTING THERE:

Kenya Airways offers daily flights from Sydney to Nairobi, capital of Kenya, with onward connections to Lilongwe in Malawi. 1300-787-310 and 61-2/9767-4310; [kenya-airways.com](http://kenya-airways.com)

Under a code-share agreement, South African Airways (SAA) and Qantas fly direct from Perth and Sydney to Johannesburg. From here, SAA offers connecting flights to Lilongwe.

- South African Airways. 1300-435-972; [flysaa.com](http://flysaa.com)
- Qantas. 131-313; [qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au)

### GETTING AROUND:

Robin Pope Safaris offers a seven-night/eight-day "Bush & Beach" package in Malawi staying three nights at Mkulumadzi Lodge in Majete and four nights at Pumulani in Cape Maclear. 265/1794-491; [robinpopesafaris.net](http://robinpopesafaris.net)

Tour companies offering guided tours through other African safari destinations include:

- Cox & Kings. [coxandkings.co.uk](http://coxandkings.co.uk)
- Expert Africa. 1800-995-397 (Aus); 0489-46885 (NZ); [expertafrica.com](http://expertafrica.com)
- Wildlife Safari. 1800-998-558; [wildlifesafari.com.au](http://wildlifesafari.com.au)

### WHEN TO GO:

Mkulumadzi is open all year, Pumulani is closed from January through March. Malawi's dry season is from April to September, the best times for wildlife spotting, although it can become extremely hot and humid before the rains. During the rainy season from October/November to March/April the landscape is lush and green, but it is consequently more difficult to find the wildlife.

### FURTHER INFORMATION:

Talk to Malawi Tourism Board for additional tips on travelling to Malawi. [malawitourism.com](http://malawitourism.com) or [visitmalawi.mw](http://visitmalawi.mw)