

PART III: *Mozambique – Lichinga, Niassa Park, Cuamba, Quelimane, Caia*

We must have been quite a sight. There we were, the three ‘cheerful ladies’, way into our 60s (some more ‘waaay’ than others), in the middle of nowhere, sitting in camp-chairs in front of our tent, tipple in hand. We had just bet two DoshMs (‘2M’, a popular Moz beer) that hardly a car would pass by that night (Anne had bet 2, Karen 5, me 0 – Karen won) when a LandRover with five mzungus screeched to a halt. The men piled out and came towards us, not believing their eyes. “What on earth are you doing here?” We explain that we’d just crossed the border but, unable to reach Lichinga that day, had decided to camp out by the roadside. We actually had found quite a nice campsite - 12 14.562S 035 28.313E - a flat area shielded by rocks, just off the road, with lots of good firewood. The mzungus turned out to be hunters, having come from a nearby airstrip on their way from Harare to a camp c. 20km north of us. One of them, a Zimbabwean, owned the concession in this area. He told us of the wonderful things he (and hunters in general) were doing for wildlife and people in Niassa Reserve, how amazingly much they had reduced poaching, and how hunting would rescue animals and benefit the country. I argued a bit, unable to see how one could rescue something by killing it, but such arguments are usually quite futile.

The **Lupilichi** border crossing had been easy. We had got visas in Lusaka (\$30, takes 5 working days), paid passport and car fees (MT180 + MT30), and changed money with the Moz border officials (same rate as their Tanzanian colleagues: MT25=\$1). The border station looks very shabby, the officers have to work out of mud-huts and tents, while their Tanzanian colleagues have nice houses, and there is very little traffic despite this being the one and only motorable crossing over the Rovuma, the boundary between Tanzania and Mozambique. There used to be another crossing, at the other end of the country near Mtwara, but the ferry sank two years ago and was never lifted. And, as mentioned before, the Umoyo 1 Bridge near Negomane has not been finished to this day.



One is not supposed to take photos of bridges and border installations, but, being quick about it, we did. The **Umoyo 2 bridge** was said to be a Bailey bridge (an emergency metal span) but it was not. It was quite solid and substantial ... to be officially opened ‘very soon’ by the Tanzania president. Unofficially it had been opened in Feb 2009. Interesting was that there is bus- and chapa-minibus traffic from here to Lichinga, allegedly taking three hours.



Rovuma's Umoyo 2 bridge



Rovuma River at Lupilichi

Well, we took about 8 hours for that 280km stretch through forests and hills, homesteads and villages on perfectly ok dirt roads. This is scenic Yao country and they had a festival going. There were colourful kitenge cloths tied to rooftops and flapping in the breeze, groups of people chanting and dancing with home-made rattles and drums, and clearly the beer was flowing. At times we could barely squeeze through the dancing multitudes. To this day we haven't been able to figure out what festival that was – I even tried Google and Ask – we can only say it looked interesting.

And so we got into **Lichinga** and the hunt for accommodation started again: full, too expensive, a dump, and we ended up 2km out of town at the Kuchijinji Anglican Diocese guesthouse (MT600 pp/n). Which was very nice. We had a house to ourselves, each of us our own en-suite room, with a shared living room. Two English-speaking women of Zimbabwe origin greeted us and offered to cook for us, then Pastor Oscar came to chat. A half hour later they asked me to take him to the hospital. He had suddenly collapsed of an asthma attack. Sadly, he was dead when we got there.

Lichinga looks like many Moz little towns, a dual-carriageway centre, a big market, spread-out compounds, and roads in need of repair. We did some shopping and sight-seeing, bought Karen's winning 2Ms and postcard stamps at the post-office (but never thereafter could find any postcards). There were moneychangers everywhere, offering up to MT30=\$1, but we don't buy on the street (it's illegal and one is too easily conned). We went to Barclays Bank instead (the forex chap was hostile and unreasonable, insisting on bringing evidence of residence), then to the BCI bank (next to the upmarket Girrasol Hotel), where it was fast and easy. We tried the Internet Café near Padaria but it was very slow, most computers not working (we had to pay up front - MT80 for 30mins), and so we gave up and had coffee instead. An old man approached us, having seen our Zambian number plates. He said he was Joseph Chitandu from Zambia. He had taught KK to play golf, he claimed. He told us a long story on how he had found the Lord, was sick and in need of medical care and transport money. We gave him blessings from God. We had another night at Kuchijinji, the Zim women brought tasty chicken and chips, and next day we continued on our journey to Niassa.

The road to Niassa is beautiful tar and very scenic. Inselbergs were everywhere, interspersed by forests and elephant corridors, tobacco sheds and maize fields. And, on the first part of the drive, we saw many more celebrating Yao villagers. The Yao are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group of about 2 million, spread over three countries, Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania. They have a rather interesting history: When Arabs arrived on the east coast of Africa they began trading with the Yao people, mainly

slaves and ivory in exchange for cloth and guns. They became one of the richest and most influential tribes in Southern Africa and large Yao kingdoms came into being. Yao chiefs took control of the Niassa province of Mozambique in the 19th century. The most important result of the great chiefdoms was the turning of the whole nation to Islam around the turn of the 20th century. Today the Yao are as poor as other tribes but they have retained Islam.



Yao revellers with home-made drums, rattles



Dancing Yao on roads, note kitenge on huts



Inselberg landscape near Lichinga



Yao village near Lichinga



A frequent sight, women carrying thatch



... across the first Lugenda bridge

We left the dancing Yao and reached **Marrupa** in record time, and continued onwards, now on good dirt, to the Lugenda Bridge and the entrance to **Niassa Park**. No park entry fee! We were

surprised. We only had to sign a book, then were directed to Park Headquarters at **Mbatamila**. We had made enquiries about accommodation – I even had emailed with the ridiculously expensive Lugenda Wilderness Camp (\$675 sgle, \$450 dble pp/n) – but everyone said there isn't any. We went on anyway, past many villages and many cyclists, and found Mbatamila without problems. On the way we saw a beautiful large-horned male sable antelope, a good sign we thought.

At Park HQ we found Mr Mbumba Marufo, the Community Development Assistant. He spoke good English and kindly allowed the use of a staff tent in their Maputo Camp (\$8 pp/n) – 12 10.567S 037 33.038E. It was most comfortable, with 3 beds and lights at night and shared facilities (ablution block, kitchen), in a shady wooded area surrounded by large rocky outcrops. We stayed for 5 nights, heard elephants and buffalos, saw bushbuck and many birds - right in camp.

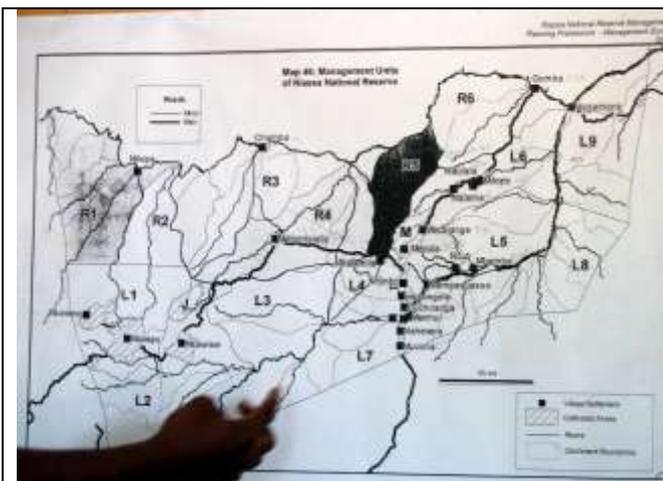


Niassa park entrance



Snares and elephant tusks

The next day Mr Marufo talked to us at length about the Reserve and the government's zoning plans for it. He showed us wall-maps of the park's recent expansion to the Lugenda River. Niassa is not really a Park at all, having gone from Tusk-Trust-supported conservation area to being a SRN (Societas Reserva do Niassa) hunting concession, supported by Flora and Fauna International. About 50,000 people live in the Reserve, in scattered villages and homesteads, and all roads are public thoroughfares. There is even a motorable track to 350km-distant Lichinga, though most of the bicycle-trader routes are shorter, 50-100km. Two-thirds of the Reserve's area is concessioned off to safari hunters (amongst them a Zambian, Jamie Wilson), though villagers are allowed to hunt too. They get a quota for game, and project scouts do the hunting for them. The Tusk Trust had introduced electro-fencing of villages to protect them from wildlife. Alas, now all fences are down, turned into snares - they are displayed at HQ. There are no plans to open the park to tourists, to develop lodges or establish designated game-viewing loops, Mr Marufo said, though visitors are allowed to camp. He then showed me photos of the Umoyo 1 Bridge which he'd seen in early August and which I was curious about. It still is far from completion – November maybe – and self-drive tourists coming from Tanzania have to go long distances to reach Niassa. [NOTE: it is now finished and passable]



Niassa Reserve, zoning map



Typical road, burnt forest inside Niassa Reserve



Mr Mbumba and Anne, Karen, Ilse at Mbatamila



Karen in tsetse hat, in front of our tent



Lugenda bridge at park entrance



Niassa wildebeest: white chevron, light behind



Niassa park cyclist



... transporting plastics

We spent three days in the park to explore it thoroughly. After all, it would be our one and only visit there. We drove to the nearest 'town', **Mecula**, which has streetlights, some shops and cotton fields, and was in the process of getting cellphone towers. We went further and, NE of Mecula, we found a Lusaca village and school– 12 01.351S 037 45.227E. We turned back and looked for game nearer to camp. We found the rare, endemic Niassa wildebeest at Mbatamila airfield, where we also saw impala, hartebeest, and zebra. Further away from the airfield there is nothing but tsetse flies in burnt-out miombo woodland. Each day we took a different road into the park but, apart from a flock of crested guineafowl and a fast-disappearing elephant behind, we saw nothing. Most disappointing. We had gone NE to Mecula and beyond, N to Nyati, W to Matondovela (the track that goes all the way to Lichinga) and SW towards Metapiri.



Mecula monument



Salaula, hanging high in Mecula

While driving around, we chanced upon a remote house on a hill, the Project Operation Director Wim Ebersohn's house. He wasn't there, so we talked to his wife Charlene instead and were offered tea. She, a lawyer and educationist, lives here in splendid isolation with her two little kids. Later we met Italian consultant Marco Pani who had come to Moz three days ago to advise the government on wildlife/elephant conflict! What does the man know after only three days in the country, we asked ourselves? At least he saw what had happened to electro fences – all snares now – so surely he won't recommend that particular solution (we talked of other people-wildlife-conflict solutions that other countries have experimented with, like chilli-fences, and he said he'd be recommending

a combination of all). He also saw the fresh tusks from a 'problem' elephant that Mbumba had to shoot reluctantly.

Niassa Reserve had been our final destination (that's why I wrote at length about it), and now we had to turn back and slowly make our way home. We drove south through Marrupa to **Maua Mission** (an abandoned mission station with an impressive church – 13 49.018S 037 12.411E),



and onwards on 350km good-but-corrugated gravel to **Cuamba**. We decided to stay at the Vision2000 Hotel (\$50 sgl \$75 dbl, run by Els, a Dutch ex-volunteer in Mansa who'd been in Moz since the civil war), the other guesthouses in town all looking very shoddy.

While at the telephone office (all towns in Moz have TDM telephone containers – they literally *are* containers - for international calls) a kind gentleman alerted us to diesel leaking from our tank. Oh dear, not again! This was already the third fuel tank I'd had installed, this time a very expensive stainless steel one from S.A., but indeed, "diesel falls" were splashing again . They had splashed merrily on Karen's and my last Moz trip, necessitating repeated visits to various fundis in various towns, and now history was repeating itself. Els recommended her own fundi to fix it; he came and escorted us to his 'workshop' (a dusty road-side place in a compound), where he and his sons proceeded to rip the tank off its brackets, weld it, and put it back. That took all day, with me patiently sitting nearby and watching proceedings and passers-by, while Karen and Anne went sightseeing and shopping.

Before we left Cuamba, Els invited us to see her garnet mine, 5km out of town, where we could admire the huge machinery that scrapes garnet-seams out of the ground, separates worthless from semi-precious stones, and in manual labour sorts garnets by size and quality (3 qualities: rondavo, abrazzio and prato, exported in bulk). We even got a few stones as souvenir. Els plans to transform that mine into a tourist attraction, build a camping ground with facilities and maybe even add a restaurant. Good idea that.



Garnet mine machinery: digger



... and crusher



Garnets, unsorted



Anne checking garnets at Els' Cuamba mine

She then suggested a shortcut to **Gurue** (turn left at Cuamba airport) which proved to be a good and fast dirt road via the unfinished Lurio R. bridge, much better than the main road via Mutuali. In many places we saw people transporting huge yellow jerry-cans and we wondered what they could possibly contain (in Zambia it'd be cooking oil). Finally we asked a group of people, resting with their cans by the roadside: it was *kachasu*! A highly potent spirit distilled from *chibuku*, maize-beer.

We arrived in charming Gurue, located amongst rolling hills and tea plantations, much too early to stop for the night. So we carried on to **Mocuba**, having been told the road to be fine. It was, at first. Nice tar. Which then got broken and more broken until, after **Nampevo**, only a huge-potholed, heavy-traffic gravel road remained. We were crawling along at 10-20kph and still, again and again, hit unavoidable potholes. An ominous clonking developed underneath the car. And, to top it all, it was raining!



Typical Moz village, built alongside roads



Driving into Gurue



Lurio bridge, still unfinished



Umoyo 1 bridge near Negomane, also unfinished (photo Mbumba)

By the time we made Mocuba it was getting dark, too late to scout for decent accommodation. We ended up at the Muslim-run Pensao Rosa (MT600), a terrible dump, the worst on this trip. The bathroom smelt foul, doors wouldn't lock, the mattress consisted of cardboard, and there was no water (when asked for we got it delivered in a bucket). For dinner (which we'd assumed to be prepared on the premises) a chap ran to the market, got some dry reheated chicken and cold limp chips, and it was the first time ever that we were served a 'pre-owned' *salaula* bun ... a breadroll that had contained a hamburger before the meat was taken out and the roll served to us.

Next morning, when taking a quick spin around town, we found that the nice place, Pensao Cruzeiro, was just around the corner. Well, it couldn't have been helped. We usually *do* get into towns long before dark to leave ample time to look for accommodation, but this time ...

We beat a hasty retreat from Mocuba and, once more on good tar, got into **Quelimane** two hours later. The countryside was now flat and coastal; we definitely had left all hills behind. Alas, all hotels in Quelimane were full. Only Pensao Quelimane had space (MT750), a modest, slightly seedy hotel. We looked at the town and its colonial buildings, its harbour and old railway station, then decided to drive the 35km to Praia do Zalala to see the ocean. The streets in town and out to Zalala are terribly potholed, the worst of any town we'd seen, and full of cyclists, vendors and pedestrians. Zalala beach is long and sandy, and apart from an insecure camping place, has no hotels or B&Bs.

On the way back the clonking underneath the car got worse and we decided, before heading towards Malawi, to have a fundi have a look. I went to the local Toyota garage to get it done but they don't deal with Pajeros they said. At Toyota's Reception a young English-speaker offered to help and took me to a compound workshop. They put the car on a ramp and the full horror was revealed: the tank had torn off its brackets, the fuel hose was ripped spewing diesel, and the frame was cracked. "Are you German?" asked one of the fundis, in German. "Ja" I said, very surprised. It turned out that Mr Eusebio had trained in East Germany in the 1980s, had lived there for 8 years till 93, married a German and had two kids, but had been repatriated when the troubles in Germany and Mozambique began – minus wife and kids – and had been unable to see them ever again. No money, no visa, no permits to travel. He by now was a grandpa, he told me proudly, and kept in touch only by occasional correspondence. He had married again, and so had she. A sad story. But, lucky for me, I had someone to talk to apart from the young English-speaker, a driver on leave, who hang around me all day. Because that's how long the repairs took, the welding and searches for a new fuel hose. That night we had great pizza at Restaurant Romana da Estacao, a friendly place that also rents rooms.

We set out early towards **Caia**, admired the new bridge across the Zambezi (motorists have to pay MT100 for each crossing) and asked directions to the Malawi border: turn NE 8km from bridge, drive N for 52km on unmarked road to **Morrumbala**, turn W then S to the Chire R. ferry at **Chipanga**. We didn't quite make the ferry (not marked on maps, even Google Earth says 'no ferry'), and so we camped by the roadside, with a nice view of Morrumbala Mountain and a few surprised villagers as spectators. On the last few miles to the ferry we passed some hotspots, seemingly a defunct spa with remnants of old Portuguese buildings. We had seen many such ruins in many towns and settlements, and wondered why people hadn't taken over these nice houses. Instead they had built traditional houses nearby and let the colonial buildings deteriorate. Odd.



Ferry near Chipanga



Ruined Portuguese house

The ferry was fast and easy (MT100) and, crossing the cattle- and palmtree-studded Shire-Zambezi floodplain area, we reached **Mutarara** with its 3.6km "longest in the world" Dona Anna railway bridge. The bridge is nearly completed – a few more weeks the workers said – but unfortunately the railway tracks are not. Trees and shrubs sprout among the sleepers, and it'll be a long time yet before any trains can pass. The last stretch of road to the rarely-used **Vila Nova de Fronteira** border post was sandy and bumpy, running for 40km along the railway line.



Dona Anna bridge, "longest railway bridge in world"



Newly laid tracks and sleepers



New bridge over the Zambezi River at Caia



Access road with sign 'Zambeze'



Turn-off to Malawi border at Mutarara



Kids selling teensy amounts of cooking oil

The Moz exit was easy, the Malawi entry not quite. **Marka** border is so little used (the last car had passed a week ago) that officers are usually not around when someone comes. They have to be called, then are grumpy at having been disturbed. The customs chap was drunk though managed to collect all the right fees and duties. He wanted to know the precise value of the camping equipment we were importing ... and the immigration chap was keen on yellow-fever booklets. We made up a figure for our old camping stuff, produced some out-of-date vaccination books, then everyone was happy and we could go. Interestingly, there is bus traffic to this border even though there's nothing, no town no transport, on the Moz side. There must be some cross-border small-scale trading going on, but we didn't see it. Only saw lots of busses marked 'Marka'.

