

Part IV: MALAWI AGAIN

“What are you worth?” asked the Customs officer, emitting strong chibuku fumes after having been sent for. “Excuse me?!” “Yes, what are you worth? Your car, the things inside, your luggage!” Aaah, he wanted to know the value of our possessions. I made up a figure, he noted it down, and everyone was happy. Karen and Anne in the meantime were being ‘processed’ by the Immigration officer who was most keen on yellow-fever vaccinations. We all had our inoculation booklets with long-out-of-date yellow-fever stamps (who needs it these days?), but luckily he didn’t notice the stamps’ expiry date (or chose not to) and we were through. Back in Malawi. Hallelujah! No more struggling with Portuguese, hand and feet, or smatterings of Swahili.

Leaving remote Marka border station - last car through had been a week ago - we noticed busses, lots of them, all going Blantyre-Marka, Chikwawa-Marka, Marka-Bangula, Marka-Nsanje. Wow. We hadn’t realised that there was so much public transport to remote Marka, presumably meaning lively cross-border *foot*-traffic ... because on the Moz side there certainly were no similar transport options.

Our destination for the day was Majete Park. But, seeing the condition of the road – corrugated tracks, deviations, very dusty, lots of roadworks - running all along the Shire River, we had to revise our goal and settle for Mwabvi Reserve instead. It had looked promising in the Hupe Verlag’s Malawi guidebook: camping with view in the hills, interesting game and birds, but on arrival we found that Migudu Camp had no water – yes, the view was indeed lovely – and poorly designed (distance between site and ablution block too great). The other camp, 7km distant Matope, was defunct and not an option. We had paid the park fees already (entry \$5 pp, \$2 car, camping \$8 pp = MK3560), but the guard would not return the money, saying he’d be in trouble with Nat Parks and The Project. Convincing him that he was in much more trouble with us, Anne in atypical temper forced him to return the money.

Near the park’s entrance we had noticed a sign: Chipembere Camp. This was the Headquarters of Project Wilderness Africa (PAW), where we got dorm bed for the night (\$8 pp). We talked to the project managers, a couple recently arrived from S.A., and met a well-meaning British woman whose money and enthusiasm was to rescue the park. Because rescuing it needed. The park was

fringed by villages, a thoroughfare for cross-border traders, and presumably an open field for poachers.

There are more and more parks and reserves in southern Africa that are sponsored, revived or rescued by rich individuals. The next park we came to, Majete Park near Chikwawa south of Blantyre, was another such example. This one is run by African Parks (also represented in Zambia), a Foundation started by Paul van Vlissingen, that is to combine the conflicting interests of wildlife, villagers, hunters, tourists, governments, wildlife authorities, and turn them all into one happy family that lives to conserve game and protect wildlife areas. African Parks had translocated every single animal into Majete, from bushbucks to elephants – even rhino – because, when AP took over in 2004, it had been poached completely empty. AP has built electric fences all around the reserve, a lodge and a camp ground, the income from which was to benefit communities, prevent them from poaching and help to conserve wildlife.

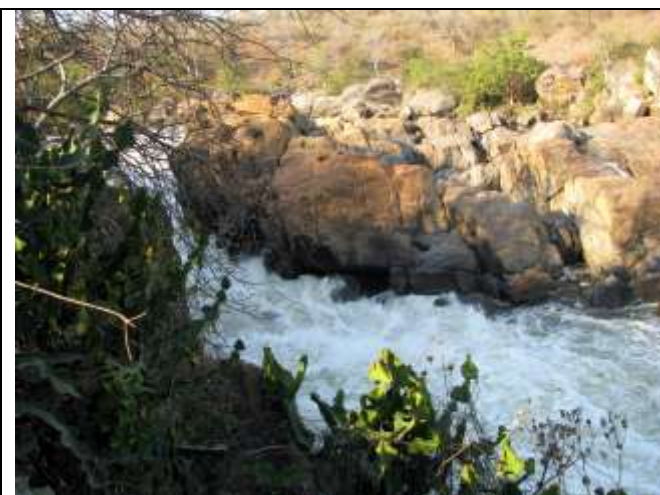
We stayed for two days at Majete (entry MK2000, car MK200, camping MK700 pp/n), drove all around the small park, found a few nyala, bushbuck, elephant, zebra, warthog, impala, sable, and hippo in a pool, and admired the remnants of the once mighty Hamilton Falls that had been converted – 15 years ago – into a hydro power station. We even had a camp elephant that came visiting every morning. There are rhinos here, but these are rarely seen, the Park having been divided into tourist area and reserve - the rhinos live in the reserve.



Hamilton Falls, harnessed as power station



Second falls, Majete national park



Below the falls



The Shire River



Camp elephant at Majete



Cactus in flower

The community campground was ok, solar-powered, and staffed by village males. Trouble with many of these community-run camps is that knowledge and initiative is lacking. In this case they couldn't even replace a shower light without the Project doing it for them. And, despite assurances at the gate, the hot water was not working (the Rhodesian boiler had burst and was being repaired by AP). Generally, the facilities were ok ... there was even a bar and a dining room ... and the staff friendly enough. For sundowners we went to the 5km distant Thawale Lodge, located near a floodlit waterhole, where we met and talked to Hanneke, Majete's marketing manager for AP, who told us of the park's history and AP's aims.

On the second day we ran into other campers, a Paul Taylor of Malawi Wildlife Society with friends, who knew our friends the Russells. On the last morning a delegation from Rwanda came to look at the Majete set-up; they're planning to revive and upgrade Akagera Park with AP's help.

We left for Blantyre via Chikwawa and the Shire River bridge, climbed up the impressive escarpment hills that lead up to the Blantyre Plateau, and were in the big city just a couple of hours later. We had a quick sightseeing tour of the town, tried to buy stamps for sister Karla but the post office with philatelic stamps was always somewhere else, and used the newly tarred short-cut road to Dedza, the famous pottery plus lodge, that we aimed for that day.

Then misfortune struck. At the T-junction of short-cut and Balaka roads the traffic police nabbed me. Very 'uncompromising' he was, this Captain Zuze, insisting that my car insurance was invalid. We had passed many road blocks, many borders, and nobody had questioned my Zambian SADC insurance. Only now, one day before leaving Malawi, we encountered this individual. I should have done what some travellers do in such situations: pull out camping chairs and table and block all traffic. But I didn't. Instead I argued, Zuze grabbed my car papers, fined me MK10,000 (c. \$80), which of course we didn't have. So we had to drive 17km back into Balaka, find a bank that was still open, change money, return and pay! And then I even had to start looking for Zuze to get my papers back! He had given them to a colleague and had disappeared. Gosh, was I ever cross. I was so mad I couldn't talk. I swore vengeance. Only the thought of nice cakes at Dedza Pottery kept me going.

Which I *did* have when finally we arrived in mid-afternoon: lovely raspberry cheesecake and real filter coffee. Anne and Karen had buttery marmalade scones and tea instead. The accommodation was super, a big room with three beds, breakfast included (\$28 pp), with great views of the Dedza mountains. We toured the pottery, bought souvenirs, nuts and fruit, enjoyed a true sundowner sundowner (i.e. had drinks while the sun was actually setting), and had a really nice dinner. Next morning we headed towards Lilongwe and the Zambian border, and had a brief stop at Mchinji to spend our last few Malawi Kwacha on fuel and Amarula (a fruit liqueur). We crossed the border without major problems (just brief arguments about visas which we didn't need and yellow-fever which we had) and headed towards Petauke, our last overnight stay before getting home. The newly opened Rift Valley Lodge on the road into town is very nice and welcoming (K180,000/room). By lunchtime on September 3rd we were home, five weeks after having set off.

The total cost of our journey was \$891 pp (that included car repairs - \$350 + \$150 + \$120), i.e. without this we'd have done the whole trip for c. \$700 pp. Not bad! Next year we'll do it again, this time going to Angola where none of us has ever been before. That will be another adventure!