

MALAWI – LAND OF THE BICYCLE – Stuart Carliell

Johannesburg - Tshipise

On the 16th December we woke up to rain bucketing down and as we were supposed to depart on our trek to Lake Malawi much debate ensued of whether we should leave or wait until the next day to see if the weather would improve as anyone that owns a Landover would know that the windscreen wipers are not it's best feature.

So after much debate we decided the holiday is too short to let some water interrupt our plans. ~~So~~ After packing the car in the pouring rain, Stuart decided to do the pre departure check and discovered that Mr. Jones coolant had dissipated into thin air, this resulted in round 2 of debating - should we stay or should we go. We decided to go and to keep checking the coolant levels and that before we crossed the border we would make the final decision... So we packed some coolant and a bottle to mix some more in and bid farewell to JHB...

It was wet wet wet all the way to Bela Bela which made for rather slow going but finally we arrived at Tshipise , with its hot pools, Christmas lights and ice cold restaurant. Every time we stay at Tsphise there is one hell of a storm and we were not to be disappointed which also turned out to be the start of a morning ritual for the next couple of weeks.

The next morning after reassuring some foreigners that were camping at Tshipise that Zimbabwe was perfectly OK to travel through, checking on the coolant levels in MrJ and NOT having a shower due to there been no water we set off for Beitbridge.

Beitbridge - Masvingo

It took 4 1/2 hours to cross the border and it was HOT HOT HOT at 39degrees centigrade and with loads of tar there was no respite from the heat. Tania joined the queue while Stuart went off to scope the lay of the land as the previous time we had been through the border we had forgotten (not known) about a few vital pieces of paper and taking one look at the chaos that was prevailing we were not eager to have any issues that would hamper our escaping the heat.

When Stuart hauled out the VODACOM (nothing like a bit of corporate branding Kevin) beach umbrella we became an immediate hit and made many "new friends" who all felt an need to get up close and personal with Tania and the umbrella.

After the queue had not moved for an hour we were convinced that all the border officials had gone on lunch, but finally the queue started to move and there was rather an ingenious system of controlling the left and right queue, and this was an old dude sitting on a chair with a large walking stick that he flicked left or right and when it was your turn everyone pushed forward and tried to get in as quickly as possible

which resulted in you shooting through the door right up the butt of the person in front of you rather like one of those guys that rub themselves against you in packed trains etc.

As normal government officials are there to do nothing else but make happy go lucky citizens COMPLETELY lose their sense of humor. We split up and went to different queues in a vain attempt of making up for the lost time due to the lunch break, but there is no signage as to what to do, where and what pieces of paper are required, so after queuing for a while Tania finally got to the front of the queue to have your passport stamped only to have a piece of white paper chucked at her and informed briskly that this needed to be filled in... The saving part was that Stuart still needed to have his passport stamped and so we would have had to queue again any rate but nonetheless it did get under our skin...

After having to hunt down the police clearance office thankfully a lady with a VERY hairy chest took pity on us and sent us scuttling off in the right direction, we finally had all the necessary pieces of paper stamped and we were out of there.

We headed for Masvingo racing against the sun setting and the approaching thunderstorm as Mr. Jones does not have the best headlights and there are a number of twisty roads and villages that need to be negotiated and it is best not to do this in the dark.

We found a lodge with camping just outside Masvingo that would do very nicely for the night, we were the only people camping but didn't feel lonely as the Rural electrification programme were holding their Christmas party at the Lodge(I use the term loosely don't think of anything upmarket) and had a 100 of their employees attending.

We were rather hot and dirty and so headed for the showers to wash off the grime of the days travelling but alas there was no hot water and a 100 people requiring the facilities on a continual bases lead to a rather quick cold water shower.

After a great braai on our new sputnik and several alcoholic beverages we watched with intrigue as 100 people were loaded into a rather large truck and with much joyous singing departed into the night leaving us in solitude.

Masvingo- Harare

After a leisurely start to the morning we headed out to stock up on a few supplies of things like beer and rice at the local Spar.

Then the long trek to Harare where along the way we saw no commercial farms until just outside Harare but still not what you see when driving through the Free State. In actual fact we saw more farming in Harare than we saw all the way there. Every spare piece of land whether is it a verge, traffic island or rocky outcrop is filled with maize plants. Hate to know what it will look like when the crop has been harvested but it does tell you a lot about the desperateness of the city people for food.

After taking a drive through Harare we headed out to Lake Chivero to find a place called Kumba Shire where we were hoping to camp for the night. Unfortunately it was not on our version of Tracks 4 Africa and so after putting in the co-ordinates, "Sally" routed us down the only road available, so after driving for ages off road (actually the most off-road we did the whole trip) we admitted defeat and stopped to pull out the laptop to look at the maps only to discover that the laptop had taken early retirement and was no longer working. So it was back to doing it the old fashion way of stopping and asking the locals.

Finally we made it to discover that the entire off road was not necessary as they were only 500 m off the tar road☺

But for our efforts of persisting in the endeavor to get to Kumba Shire we got to see an amazing display of birds of prey featuring fish eagles, falcons and owls up close and personal. This is their claim to fame; they train birds of prey and are involved in rehabilitating various types of birds of prey and educating local rural people in the important role that owls etc. play in nature.

After that we headed for the camp ground to set up camp and grab a shower. True to form of the holiday so far we experienced the standard issues namely a HUGE thunderstorm and no hot water for showering ...

Harare - Tete

Heading out of Harare we got to drive through the more affluent suburbs and then out into what seemed to be the bread basket of Zimbabwe.

At the border between Zimbabwe and Mozambique we encountered the first hassles, this came in the form of 3 "INTERPOL" officials sitting under a rather dilapidated tent who insisted on seeing our police clearance certificate... This was to be the most trying 30 minutes of our trip resulting in them requesting that as it was Xmas and we would need to go all the way back to Harare maybe we could make some arrangement.. Which led to Stuart requesting names and badge numbers so as that he could inform Harare on his return to collect his police clearance certificate of the incredible assistance we had received at their hands! Needless to say at that point they felt that we had misunderstood what they were saying and that it would be fine for us to proceed without the need for a police clearance certificate.

On the Moz side the difference in attitude was glaringly obvious and it felt good to be back in Moz and with the "assistance" of a very friendly elderly boarder official we were stamped and through in an incredibly short time and \$50 poorer. The crafty old fox took us deluxe and we were none the wiser until our re-entry to Moz at the end of the holiday were we found out what we should have paid.. But I must say he was a pleasure to do business with...

Tete is a place of heat, humidity and rapid growth and a very important point for crossing the Zambezi... When we were there the truck queue was 6 kms long and despite getting directions we managed to not get it right where we were to join the queue. This resulted in a tour through Tete town; at this point we

were so hot and desperate for something cold to drink but with no local currency and no were to change cash... we had to continue just been desperate...

We managed to hit the bridge with perfect timing and it only took 30 minutes to get across which is amazing as sometimes you can wait up to 3 hours as it is rather a complex system of 1 way traffic on the hour from one direction and on the half hour from the other direction in which cars, trucks, bikes and cyclists have all to be catered for.

We met Jeremy who was our lifesaver in Tete and went back to his place, were we spent the afternoon escaping from the heat and flies by sitting in the pool, drinking beer and watching Jeremy tile his rim flow...

We ended the day with a great braai, some excellent company and the ever present storm.....

Tete – Liwonde

We set off for Malawi from Moz in the heat at 7:00 am with a temp already into the 30; s... We had to do an impromptu stop on the side of the road and open the tent as Tania had forgotten her kindle in the tent and we were not sure whether it would get damaged or not..

The border crossing on the Moz side was rather uneventful until Stuart was ripped off by the border touts when he changed money, but in the very LONG drive (no mans land of a couple of km's) between the 2 borders he plotted his revenge for our return...

The Malawian's make the border crossing a little more involved so for first time visitors it pays to have an assistant... Ours even paid for the taxes as Stuart had gone off to check on some other forms that where required and left Tania with no money and in the queue.

Then it was off to the bank to change some cash to pay for the road insurance and also because we had read that at the lake there are not that many places to change cash and even then it was dependent if you are near a bigger town.

The most important thing to remember when changing money in Malawi is that you require rather a large bag to haul your cash from the bank...

Within the first 25 kms inside Malawi we were stopped twice by police and asked for all the relevant paperwork and the proverbial Christmas token... At the second stop we picked up a R75.00 fine for having a defective water washer for those not in the know this means that the water washer does not spray water on to the windscreen... Despite Tania's best attempts to persuade the nice police officer that the hand spray bottle works just fine he was having none of it... Hell it is a landrover after all what does he expect!

So after all this excitement in one day there was a serious case of sense of humor failure and we decided not to head straight for the lake as that would be another 5 hours of driving and we had already travelled for 7 hours that day so we changed our plans and headed to Liwonde.

We planned to camp at the National Park in Liwonde but on arrival we were met by an absolute scholar and a gentlemen by the name of Benson. He explained all about his park and that unfortunately he could not assist us with camping but directed us to facilities just outside the park...

We headed off and followed the signs for Bushman Baobabs, which was nice enough so we grabbed a beer there but in the end decided that we would go back and check out the place that we had driven past which had a dilapidated old Landy parked out front.

Pete's place is less well decorated but a place is not just the furniture it is also the vibe of the people and this was definitely a better bet for us...

Some other people arrived in the evening that where from the Northern Cape, after chatting with them we discovered that they knew friends of ours Debbie and Andre, the 6 degrees of separation at work...

The familiar rainstorm made the next morning interesting as we had camped under some trees across the road from the ablutions and to get to the loo you had to cross a mud field of sticky black goeey stuff that was as slippery as hell... You should try doing that when you are desperate!!!

Liwonde – Fat Monkeys

Mud Mud Mud that was the start to our journey to the lake... We stopped to fill up petrol and learnt very quickly that before they start filling another vehicle or container you must first agree on the quantity and price... Stuart had experience of this at the very first petrol stop where the petrol attendant tried to add R170 to the bill and even with Mr. J that is a bit steep... Petrol R12.00 / litre...

Fat Monkeys was empty and we managed to get a great spot under a huge mango tree metres from the water's edge...

Then it was off to the bar to organize the priorities, beer and an artist to paint Mr. J...

We spent the afternoon chilling in our hammock reading, drinking beer and listening to the waves roll in... A perfect treat for a long drive...

The next morning we woke to rain and so enjoyed a nice lie in, once the rain stopped the few overlanders that where there packed up and headed out, this gave us an opportunity to move campsites and get closer to an electrical point ... Which in hindsight was a very good move...

We met an American couple called Erin and Chris whilst sheltering from the rain in the bar... Ended up going on a fantastic snorkeling trip with them to the island then back for lunch at one of the other

resorts on the lake shore and ended the evening with doing a roast on the sputnik and drinks with them...

Whilst we were off gallivanting the artist did the first phase of painting on Mr. J...

When we came back from the snorkeling we were faced with an overrun camp site of South Africans with all the toys and off road caravans that had made a lager of the rest of the campsite including the original spot we had stayed in...

We were woken to Erin bringing us banana pancakes which we can highly recommend... We spent the day wondering through the village, having lunch at Gecko lounge and generally not doing much... In the evening we went for a walk along the beach and discovered a great boy band (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiMCSDzRfMg>) and Tania had her hair braided...

Senga Bay

We set off on the 24th Dec for Senga Bay and some luxury as we were going to stay at Mike and Sue's cottage on the lake...

We arrived to the most gorgeous cottage in a stunning tropical garden and after unpacking we settled into the Jacuzzi with colonial G&T and nothing more to do for the day but to chill.

Christmas day was a lazy start of Xmas cake and coffee... Followed by a walk along the beach and a great finder of the perfect fixer upper...

After our swim we hit the hammocks... Thank goodness for Bobo who came to our rescue when we ran out of beers which in that heat is a REAL tragedy but he happily hurried off to the local shebeen for us and returned with ice cold greens.

Christmas evening was spent in true tradition complete with a roast, crackers, champs and Xmas pudding and custard...

Senga - Chintheche

We had lazy start to Boxing Day as it was yet another truly spectacular African day, real warm but nothing that a long lazy dip in the lake could not sort out.

After which we set off for further up the lake with no firm destination in mind. Along the way we drove past vast rubber plantations and spectacular views of the lake, the further you go up the lake the more beautiful it becomes.

Stopped at a place called Chintheche that Stuart had read about in the guide book and it was perfect, under populated, with grassy lawns for camping 50 metres from the water.

Once again we found a massive mango tree to park under right at the start of the beach, changed into our costumes next to the car and walked into the water..

We ran into a couple from South Africa that practice law in Bellville and know Etienne Kemp yet another one of Karen's brothers and further example of the 6 degrees of separation theory .

In the early hours of the morning we were woken to a mother of all wind storms that despite us been in the tent was lifting the mattress right up.

After chatting to a German couple about some advice where to go next we headed off for another day of travelling.

Chintheche – Vwazi Marsh

The plan was to head for the Nyika highlands which are apparently stunning but after chatting to the German couple there was some concern about the fact that it is a long trip and if the mist comes in you can't see anything of the view.

The long trip part was completely understated and after driving for 3 hours and then hitting a gravel road that was going to take another 2 hours and having temperatures of 38 degrees C there came a point of complete and utter humor failure on the part of Tania and so to save the day Stuart recommended that we go to the National Park at Vwazi Marsh which in the guide book sounded reasonable. But unless you are an avid lover of Hippo and tsetse fly I would NOT recommend it and if anyone wants to know why I am willing to show the bites incurred as valid reasoning.

But despite all the above there were some interesting moments like Stuart standing on top of the Landy so as to attain cell signal to warn the American couple that we had met not to come as this was not the best experience that we had of Malawi.

Plus the rather stunning shower that Stuart rigged up amongst the Mopani trees which was so appreciated after been bitten to within inches of been driven out of your skull.

But the drive there and back was interesting from the point that we had headed up into the highlands which involved VERY narrow rollercoaster roads that the resident drivers felt that the best approach is fast, swooping and taking up the full corner.

We stopped in Mzuzu which on the way up we had taken the wrong road and ended up driving through the local market place with streets that could barely fit MR J through and so took all of Stuart's driving skills for that one so as not to collide with a single stall, cyclist or errant child running across the path...

We were also needed to change money as original bagful was getting low, this had to be the easiest legal money change that we have ever done ... Right back to basics: cash and passport is all that is required and REALLY prompt...

Shopping in local grocery stores like the People's Superette holds a treasure trove of interesting local products, which in this case involved coffee, tea, rice and the most amazing chili sauce all at ridiculous prices. . PLUS the whole experience of interacting with locals is one of the reasons we love to travel, there is so much to be learnt from all the different people that make up this planet we call home!

Mkuzi Beach

The plan was to stay at Nkhata Bay, the guide book has some stunning pics of it but for us this was really a case of the right angle can seriously make a photo, we really struggled to find a place to camp and when we did it was such a letdown as all it was a large parking lot on the edge of a cliff high above the lake and in that heat I was not keen to have to do a 1 km hike up and down a mountain... Spoilt brat I know!!!!

So we high tailed it out of the Bay Decay after a rather horrendous trip to the campsite that we were hoping to stay at ...

From there we headed back down the Lake to Kande Beach a place that we had seen from the road on our way to Chintcheche which advertised hammocks strung around a bar overlooking the Lake, for us we could not think of a better combination...

This time we got as far as paying our money and finding a "suitable" camping spot, but Stuart had not even turned off the engine when the security guard came trotting across the dusty parking lot to kindly inform us that we could not park there as 2 overland truck groups were arriving that afternoon and the parking spot was allocated to them. As there was 1 overland truck already parked next to the ablutions the thought of another 2 trucks full of people brought home the reality of there would be no spending time lazy away the afternoon in the hammock strung up in the bar next to the water but rather it would be a bun fight to even get a beer. So we headed back to reception to go retrieve our money and headed out in search of a place to stay.

The old adage of third time lucky surely applies in this case... From the moment that we turned down the dirt road to Makuzi Beach we had a good vibe about the place and we were not wrong, as at the end of the road lay a little bay of paradise.

What ensued was 3 days of lazing in the sun, kayaking, snorkeling sitting on the deck eating gorgeous food and just whiling the time away.

The weather played its part with the standard daily storm happening at about 4:30 am ensuring that by the time we surfaced at 8ish the sky was blue the water warm and the sun bright..

The general mood is one of opulence and indulgence and up until now it has not had any camping and instead has been a rather expensive, exclusive resort for those that have many € and or \$ to their name. The place is now been run by a very laid back RSA couple who have opened it up to camping but on a very restricted basis and the bonus is the camping is cheap (\$10 per day) .

After 3 days we sadly had to depart for the start of the trek back home and so with great reluctance we headed towards Senga Bay.

Cool Running's

We made good time back to Senga and thankfully so as the guys at Makuzi Beach had recommended that we try stay at a place called Cool Running's but that the number of people allowed to camp was strictly abided by and we had not made a booking...

We arrived just in front of another two parties that were also looking for a spot to camp and this been New Year's eve most places where full.

Cool Running is a "gated estate" set in the most stunning tropical gardens that has big tree's and lush lawns... It was extremely hot so we rigged up the hammock between the car and a tree and spent the afternoon lying in the hammocks in the shade reading our books and just generally chilling which by this time we had perfected the art of...

That evening in honor of New Year's Eve we opened the last bottle of Champs made some diner and got ready to go party ..

For a number of years we have not had hectic New Year Parties and we didn't intend to this year either, but the idea does not always filter through to the actual event...

The evening started gently with a few drinks at the bar and an introduction to the Senga Bay rugby team which I will not expand upon here but suffice to say it is not the traditional type of rugby team. From here the tone of the evening was set, we met an interesting motley crew of individuals that some like us where travelling through be it a short trip like us or an extended trip across Africa like Eddie and James. Others where local Malawians and a whole group of expats that gave a new meaning to the word colonial, but a wonderfully out of the ordinary bunch of people that made the New Year eve party of 2011 a thought provoking diversion from the ordinary.

The evening came complete with a fireworks display that lit up the sky for at least an hour while we sat on the beach drinking and chatting.

We finally stumbled into bed nearing 4 am having had a remarkable evening to end a fascinating trip...

Follow the link for the photos:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/hippysquared/sets/72157626098175975/detail/>

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