

MSN has retired its earlier pieces so this is the original copy

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Nobody knows for sure why Mumbo Island was never inhabited but the most likely explanation seems to be the uncommonly large crocodiles guarding its shores. Enormous crocodiles and a paradise-like retreat? The two don't seem to go together, do they? And nor did they, until - at least according to legend - some especially intrepid hunters hopped into their canoes, paddled out into Lake Malawi and put an end to this trouble-free world for crocodiles that had allowed the specimens on Mumbo Island [<http://www.kayakafrica.net/>] to get so fat.

Now it's mainly the paradise bit that remains, although, according to Tanya, one of the managers who live on rotation on the island, the very odd croc does still appear. Unwilling passengers, they float over on reed beds dislodged from the mainland during storms. Hippos are more common visitors, though, Tanya said (and more frequently dangerous to people, stomping on them irritatedly with their three-tonne weight) but it depends what you mean by "common": the last one poked its nose above the waters around the island eight years ago.

Still, there was no denying it, as I slipped into those limpid waters, snorkel clinging to my scalp, I was suffering from what they call croc fear. Every traveller to Malawi gets it; it's the thought that there may be no worse way to go than being consumed by a crocodile that makes the condition so catching, along with, I suspect, a certain secret thrill at the idea. The best way to shake it, I discovered, is to succumb in turn to fascination with the lake's other inhabitants, far more readily encountered, namely its gorgeous fish.

We tend to associate the most beautiful, jewel-like fish with the ocean, with reefs, and although Lake Malawi, the country's defining geographical feature, is freshwater it is so vast it is like a sea. Roiling, vicious storms erupt upon its surface, boats float adrift upon it for weeks, and its fish - cichlids, they're called - rival the most exquisite saltwater supermodels.

I had a special interest here, namely that when I was a boy, before I discovered cool, I was a fanatical fishkeeper. I devoured copies of Tropical Fish Hobbyist magazine, with its tales of exotic fish-catching expeditions (and whose editor, I recently discovered, one Herbert R Axelrod, became a multimillionaire from fishkeeping, collected Stradivarius violins and was recently jailed for fraud). For me the height of freshwater fishkeeping, only a step or two away from a far more demanding marine aquarium, was the keeping of cichlids. And Lake Malawi not only had some of the most brilliant cichlids of all the African great lakes but it was also a simmering evolutionary soup with, reputedly, more piscine species than any other body of water on Earth.

So I was swimming among my memories, too, as I swam among the fish of Lake Malawi and the croc fear drifted towards the periphery. Whether it's true that some particularly

intrepid hunters banished Mumbo's crocs, humans never went on to colonise the island. The only signs of habitation among the ancient fig and baobab trees that cover the tiny circle of land an hour or so by boat from the Malawian mainland are the neat, temporary tented flat platforms erected at vantage points to house the fourteen or so guests allowed on Mumbo at any one time. You eat fish from the lake and then retire to one of these barely-there eyries to watch the setting sun coat the lake in gold and blood.

Malawi is a little-known country, most recently associated with ageing pop stars - Hi, Madonna! - trying to buy its children. You can see why they would want to: the people, with their full, symmetrical features, are often very photogenic. They are also very numerous: throw a stone anywhere in the country, they say, and you'll hear an indignant answering yelp. And they are poor: Malawi rises just above a handful of other African countries that are the poorest of all.

That less-than-a-dollar-a-day-ness makes the smattering of luxury tourist properties in the country, such as Pumulani [<http://www.pumulani.com/en/>], perched alone on a forested hillside bordering the lake, and Kaya Mawa Lodge [<http://www.kayamawa.com/>], on Likoma Island, seem almost dream-like in their splendour. (They are both firmly within the tasteful school of luxury retreats, though, it should be said, and make big contributions to the local economy through employment.) The great bulk of Malawians live largely subsistence existences in the kinds of neat but very simple villages that line every road and from whose nooks and crannies kids, endless screaming, smiling kids, pour in a flood when a muzungu - a whitey - appears, becoming almost violently excited when you threaten to produce sweets or biscuits as gifts.

Tea grows in the former (some would say still) colonial plantations, carpeting the suitably damp parts of the country in an iridescent green stubble. And Malawians fish, of course. We visited a fishing village downriver from Mvuu Lodge: the name means hippo in Chichewa, and you awaken there to the grunting of the the pig-like creatures (which are in fact most closely related to whales) from the Shire River and to the sight of mounds of fresh dung near your chalet from when they came ashore during the night.

We had to ask permission of the headman of the Muslim village to come ashore. We were with a national park ranger and there was a certain tension, because the park levied fines on the fishermen for poaching and four of them recently, diving into the river to escape the rangers, had been eaten by crocodiles, every one of them.

It was dusk when we pulled up at the muddy shore, and most of the village was preparing for the evening's fishing. The men, that is; the women looked on, some of them girls with even younger children strapped to their backs - Aids orphans, many of them, apparently. The men and boys sewed nets, hefting up the web of dark-stained twine to frame the sinking orange sun, and one by one the boats set off on to the now inky river.

TRAVEL FACTS

Simon travelled to Malawi with Real Africa [<http://www.RealAfrica.co.uk>] (0845 299 0264), which offers tailor made safari holidays to Malawi as well as safaris that explore both Malawi and Zambia. Prices start from £2,395 per person.