

# Cycle Touring Malawi Between Dust and Water

Leana Niemand

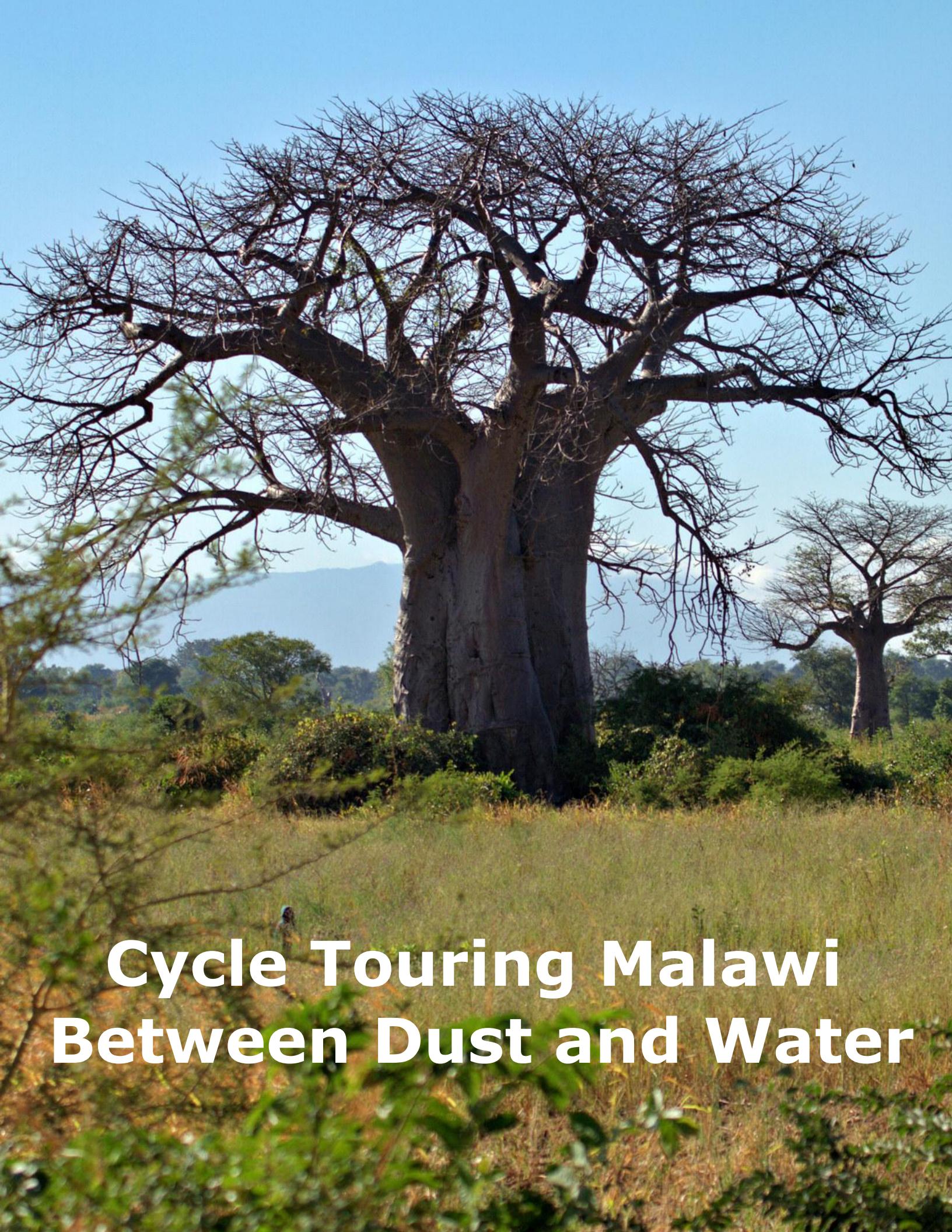


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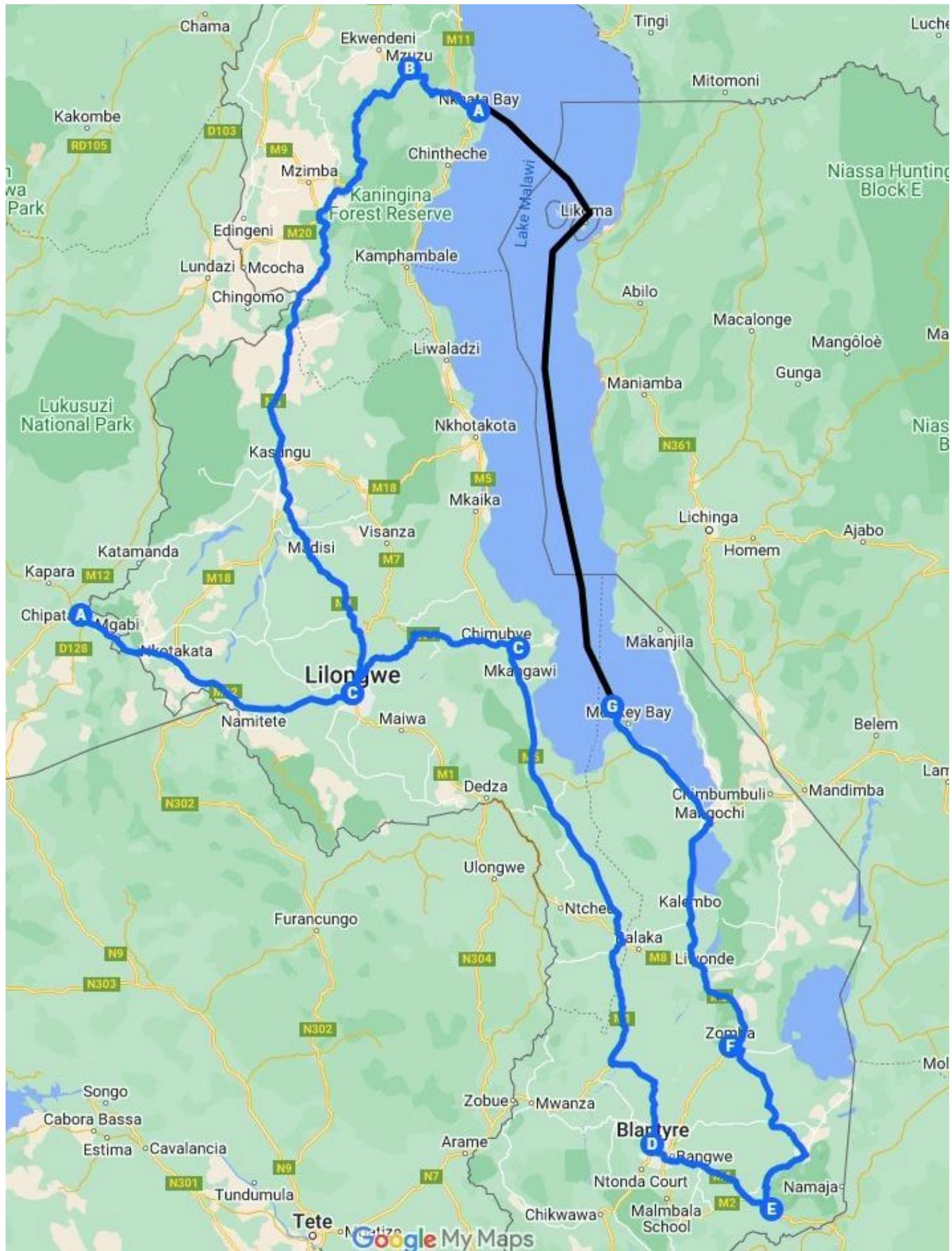
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A large, gnarled baobab tree stands prominently in a grassy field. The tree has a thick, textured trunk and a wide, spreading canopy of bare branches. In the background, there are more trees and hills under a clear blue sky.

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## ***Thank You***

*I am immensely grateful for the kindness of strangers and the random acts of generosity I encountered during my cycle tour of Malawi. It was truly a humbling experience.*

*My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her efforts, there would be no record of my journey.*

*I owe a great deal to my friend Val Abrahamse for managing my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dream.*

*Lastly, a big shoutout to Gerda Van Der Sandt, who made my writing more coherent and patiently tolerated my use of the Oxford comma.*



# **CYCLE TOURING MALAWI**

## **BETWEEN DUST AND WATER**

### **Chapter 1: Into Malawi**

#### **Border crossings**

The border lay scarcely twenty kilometres from Chipata, yet it felt like a passage into another world. A slip of paper, twenty dollars, and a perfunctory nod were all it took to cross. No queues, no PCR tests, no fuss. Africa has its own way of smoothing the edges of bureaucracy, and I found myself pedalling into Malawi with a stamped passport and a sense of curiosity.

Malawi is a sliver of land, narrow and elongated, hemmed in by neighbours and dominated by its great lake. I had imagined it would take little time to traverse, but the country immediately proved otherwise. Borders are not just lines on maps; they are thresholds of culture. Within minutes, the scenery shifted. Sugarcane appeared in abundance, stalks clutched in every hand, chewed with a rhythm that seemed to pulse through the villages. The potholes deepened, bicycles multiplied, and the cadence of life slowed into something distinctly Malawian.



At roadside stands, meat sizzled over open flames, chips fried in battered pans. The smell of sizzling oil drifted across the dusty roadside, and as I handed over a few kwacha, the crowd pressed closer, curious to see how the foreigner would eat their everyday food. It felt like the entire neighbourhood gathered as though a circus had arrived. Children shrieked in delight, their voices rising in a chorus of "Azungu, azungu!" — wanderer, foreigner, spirit. The word carried echoes of history, once used to describe restless spirits, now applied to anyone with pale skin. Their laughter was infectious, though tinged with awe, as if my presence cracked open a window to another world.

After 90 kilometres, midway to Lilongwe, I surrendered to the lure of a rest house. The walls were unpainted, the bedding tattered, the bathroom a hole in the ground at the far end of the yard. Yet the rate was four dollars, and the door closed firmly. In Africa, my comfort is often measured not in thread count but in the simple luxury of privacy. I told myself I would shower in Lilongwe.



## **Chapter 2: Smoke and Birdsong**

### **Barefoot Lodge and Kindness**

Dawn arrived with the crowing of cocks and the squeak of doors as guests shuffled to the latrine. Smoke hung low over the village, fires stoked for breakfast, children walking to school, women tending chip stands. The smell of smouldering wood was unmistakably African — earthy, sweet, and alive. I brewed coffee on my stove, watched by curious eyes, and set off once more.

The road narrowed, winding through villages where every purchase became a spectacle. Nearing Lilongwe, a sign pointed to Barefoot Lodge, a place another traveller had recommended. I veered off the main road and found a haven: cottages, a campsite, dorms shaded by trees. Rudolph, the owner, welcomed me with a smile and offered cyclists a free night if they paid for one. I pitched my tent, grateful for kindness, and spent the next day in idleness, though I should have done laundry.











## **A hop and a skip to Lilongwe**

Birdsong woke me the next morning, a gentle chorus that felt like a blessing. I loaded my bike slowly, for the day's ride was short — only fifteen kilometres into the capital. I chose a rural path, weaving through traditional villages where life unfolded in rhythms far removed from the city. Children followed, wide-eyed, their laughter trailing behind me. In Lilongwe, I found Mabuya Camp, a backpackers' lodge shaded by trees, but empty of travellers. The absence was palpable; international tourism had not yet returned to its former pulse.

I walked to the city mall, withdrew kwacha — one US dollar equalling a thousand — and bought supplies for the journey south. The streets were alive with informal trade. At traffic lights, vendors sold jeans, brooms, fruit, vegetables. Commerce spilt into every corner, vibrant and unrestrained. I loved the ease with which people moved, the improvisation of daily life. Back at Mabuya Camp, I repacked my panniers, preparing for the road to Blantyre, where Caron would join me for three weeks of shared adventure.



## Chapter 3: The Road to Blantyre

### The Road to Salima

The road from Lilongwe to Salima was a narrow 110-kilometre ride, hemmed in by hills that demanded patience and strength. Each incline slowed my pace; children ran alongside, their voices rising in a chorus of “Muzungu, muzungu, give me money!” At first their demands grated, but I discovered that a simple greeting — a smile, a question about their well-being — dissolved the tension. Connection, even fleeting, was stronger than coins.

The final descent carried me toward Lake Malawi, the country’s beating heart. The air shifted, cooler and damp, as the horizon opened into blue. Villages along the way revealed rectangular huts, a legacy of colonial encouragement to build “proper” European-style homes. Yet, I thought of the circular huts I had seen elsewhere in Africa, their geometry echoing communal life: circles around fires, circles of elders, circles where no one is hidden. Round walls resist the wind; they resist exclusion too.

Salima offered a courtyard guesthouse, inexpensive and unpretentious. My laptop gave up the ghost that evening, a cruel twist for a writer on the road. I hoped Blantyre’s repair shops might breathe life back into it. For now, I surrendered to the rhythm of the land.







## **Ceremonies in Dust**

A 80 km bike ride to Kolomoti carried me past baobabs, their trunks swollen like ancient guardians, and women balancing baskets of pumpkins on their heads with effortless grace. Men herded cattle along dusty tracks, and roadside markets spilt colour into the landscape.

Then came the ceremony. Drums thundered, dust rose, and dancers stamped in unison, their bodies adorned with masks and tribal cloth. The air vibrated with energy, a spectacle both mesmerizing and intimidating. I longed to capture it with my camera, but the crowd pressed close, demanding money for each click. The atmosphere shifted from celebration to claustrophobia, and I slipped away, carrying the rhythm in memory rather than pixels.

That night was spent in a modest lodge down a dirt road. I paid 7000 kwacha for a room. The scrutiny of villagers was intense, but the door closed firmly, and I was content. Privacy is a currency of its own.



## **Headwinds and Silence**

Breakfast was a feast: chips, eggs, salad, porridge, coffee. I needed every calorie, even though the road to Balaka was short only 85 km it was punishing. A headwind pressed against me, relentless, and each kilometre felt doubled. Villagers reacted to my presence with fear — a woman dropped her bundle of wood and fled into the bushes, children carrying water buckets scattered at the sight of my camera. One slipped down an embankment in panic, a moment that left me stunned. I tucked the camera away.

Yet amid the unease, there was peace. The countryside carried a rhythm of its own, unhurried and self-contained. Life here was not harder, I thought, merely different. The concrete jungle has its own burdens; the rural path its own serenity.









## Toward Blantyre

From Balaka to Zalewa, the road climbed steadily. I bought mandasies — fried dough balls — for fifty kwacha each, and the purchase drew a crowd of curious eyes. Every transaction was theatre. Later, the asphalt ended abruptly, replaced by uneven gravel. Vendors sold grilled mice on sticks, bamboo cages with bright birds, curiosities of survival and trade.

The wind rose again, and fatigue pressed hard. I surrendered to the lure of an upmarket guesthouse, pricey but promising a warm shower. Blantyre lay only sixty kilometres ahead, and Caron would not arrive for several days. I had time to pause.

In Blantyre, I waited for Caron, and after her arrival, we ambled into town for a SIM Card and a few needed items.





## **Chapter 4: Mulanje – The Mountain of Spirits**

### **Across the tea plantations**

We pedalled out of Blantyre well-fed and rested, panniers bulging with supplies for the days ahead. The road toward Mulanje carried us past tea plantations, their luminous green stretching endlessly, workers bent low as they plucked leaves with rhythmic precision. The chaos of market towns gave way to quiet paths, and by evening we reached Likhubula, where guides and porters waited beneath the shadow of the massif.

Mulanje is no ordinary mountain. Its granite shoulders rise abruptly from the plains, cloaked in cedar forests and mist. Legends speak of spirits dwelling in its ravines, and as we arranged our hike, I felt both anticipation and reverence. Vincent, our guide, greeted us with calm authority, and a porter shouldered our bulging pack. We were ready.



## Day One: Into the Clouds

Fog lay low as we set off, walking sticks freshly carved and engraved. The trail wound upward through dense woodland, damp earth releasing its scent beneath our boots. Soon we emerged at a waterfall, its spray cool against our faces, before climbing higher still.

By midday, the mist parted, unveiling peaks that pierced the sky. Chambe Hut awaited us, a simple refuge with a caretaker who brewed tea and heated water for washing. Caron took the shower gratefully; I chose to remain unwashed, content to sit by the fire with a Carlsberg beer, watching the sun sink behind the ridges. The mountain had welcomed us gently.





## **Day Two: Fragrance and Fellowship**

The morning dawned bright, and we set off at a leisurely pace. Shrubs brushed against our legs, releasing herbal fragrances, while cedar trees perfumed the air. Birds sang unseen, their melodies weaving into the silence.

At midday we paused at a hut, sharing lunch with two hikers from New Zealand. Later, at Tuchila Hut, we met a Belgian traveller who had brought not only a guide and porter but a cook. Her meal included dessert, while ours was instant noodles. We laughed at the contrast, envy softened by camaraderie. Travel humbles and delights in equal measure.





## Day Three: The Break

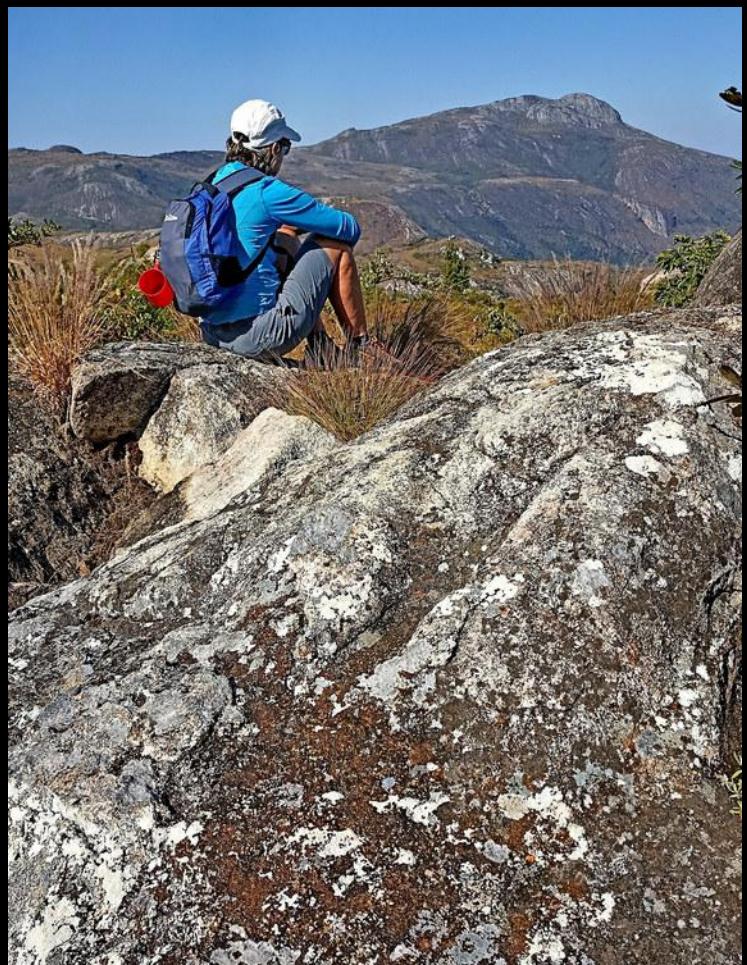
The morning was glorious, sunlight spilling across granite outcrops. We descended into fern-filled ravines, the air cool and damp. Then came the slip. My foot lost grip, and I fell hard. Pain shot through me, and when I looked, my wrist bent at an unnatural angle.

It is a terrible thing to see your own body betray you. I wanted to cry, to rage, but neither would help. Caron's holiday shattered in that instant, yet she remained calm, steady. Vincent tried to push the bone back into place — agony beyond words — before fashioning a splint from tape and wood. We cooked pasta that night, speaking little. I felt the weight of guilt, of inconvenience, of fragility. The mountain had turned from companion to adversary.









## Day Four: Descent

The final walk was slow, each downhill step a trial. My shoes lacked tread, my wrist throbbed, but the scenery remained magnificent. Tea plantations stretched luminous and endless, a reminder that beauty persists even in pain.

At the trail's end, Vincent arranged a ride back to Likhubula. The hike was over, not as planned, but complete, nonetheless. Mulanje had given us vistas, fragrances, fellowship — and a broken wrist. It was a lesson in humility, in the unpredictability of journeys. We stowed our bikes and began to plan the next stage, knowing that resilience would carry us forward.





## Chapter 5: Casts and Kindness

### Zomba

We left Mulanje with my wrist bound in a makeshift splint, Caron steady at my side. Pain pulsed with each movement, but there was nothing to do except soldier on. A small car carried us and our bicycles to Zomba, its backseat crammed with panniers and frames. The driver laughed at the improbable load, yet somehow it fit.

Pakachere Backpackers welcomed us with dorms and camping, and I slowly pitched the tent, each task a reminder of my injury. Caron, ever resourceful, arranged a day trip to the plateau while I sought medical help.

The hospital was a labyrinth of ramshackle buildings, patients bleeding and limping through corridors. Equipment squeaked, offices resembled storerooms, and yet care was given freely. X-rays revealed the fracture, and a half-cast was applied. "Return in three days," they said, "once the swelling subsides." The bones did not align, but concern seemed minimal.

Zomba itself was cool at 1000 metres, the air crisp. We borrowed blankets, wandered dusty markets, searched for food and a backpack for my bus journeys ahead. On the plateau, Emperor's View opened wide, named for Haile Selassie's visit in 1965. Rastafarians still climb to honour the place, pipes in hand, smoke curling into the sky.



Back in town, I returned reluctantly to the hospital. The swelling had eased, and a full cast was applied. My arm was heavy, awkward, but secure. We ended the day with beer and chips, small comforts against the weight of circumstance.





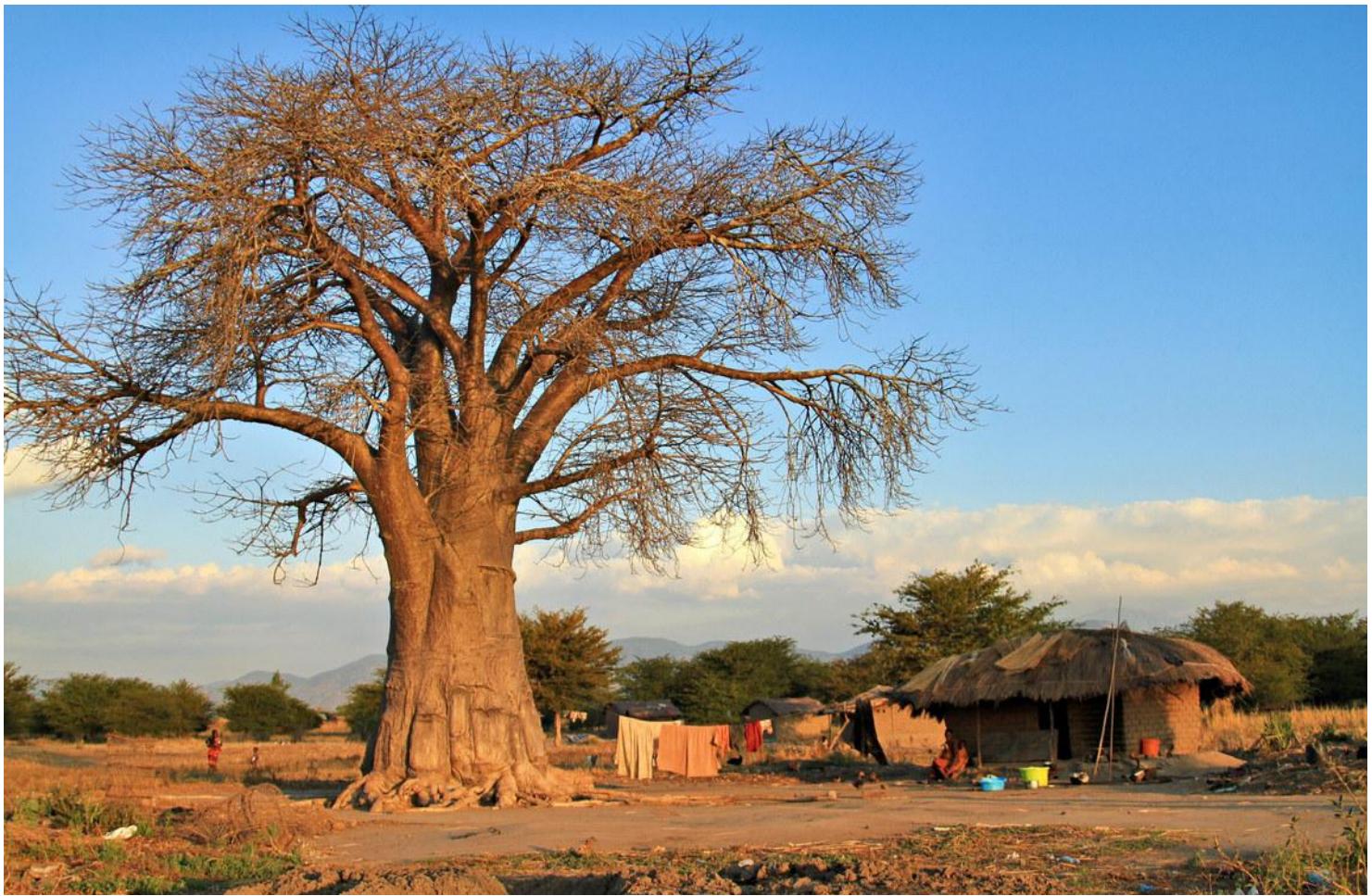
## **Liwonde — Hippos and Elephants**

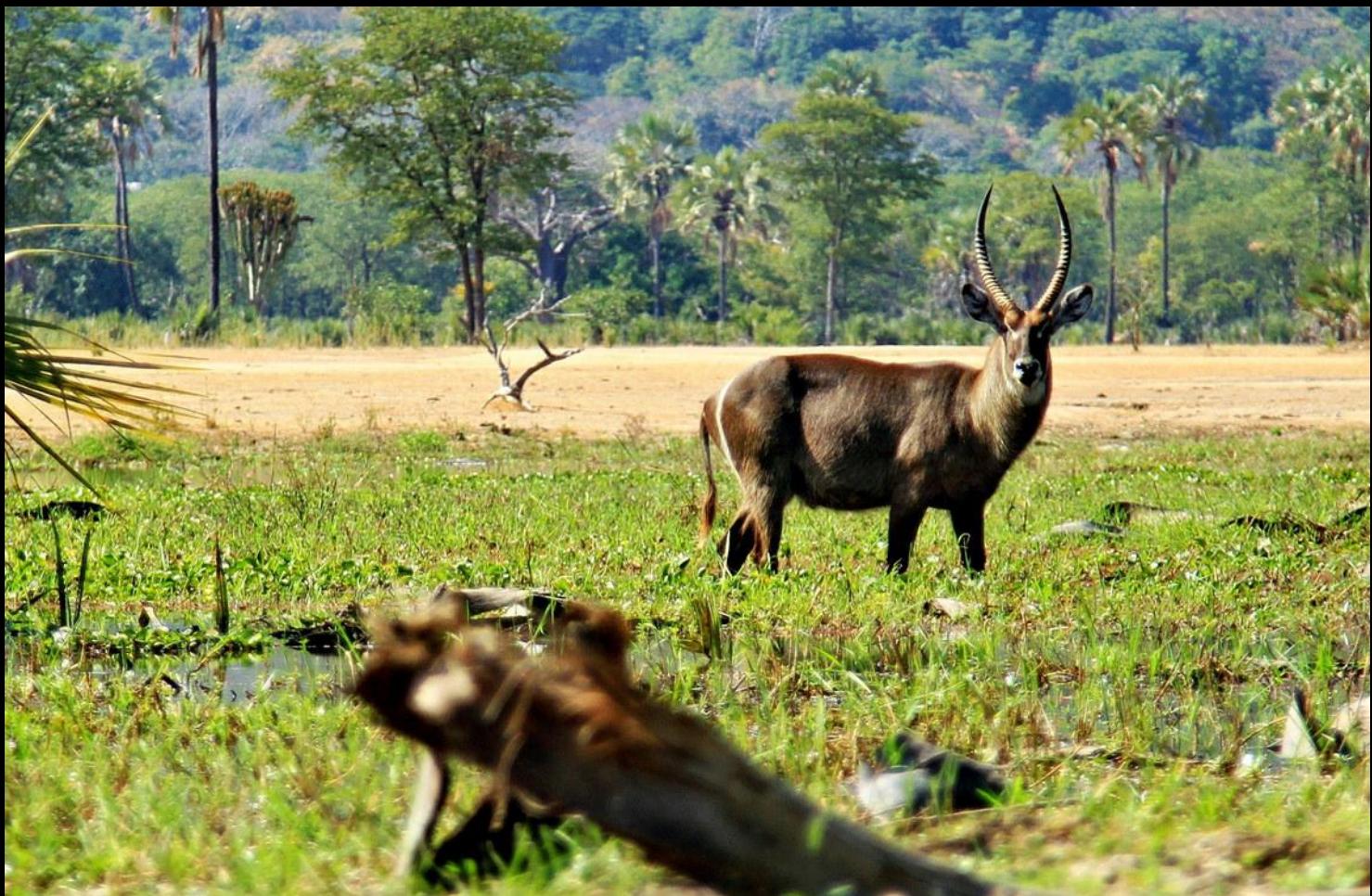
Caron set off bravely on her first solo ride, pedalling toward Liwonde National Park. I followed in a minivan, my bicycle stored safely in Zomba. The road was rough, potholes deep, but kindness smoothed the way. A helper carried my bag on her head, laughing at my astonishment.

Bushman's Baobab camp was closed, but fortune intervened. Across the road, a half-built lodge offered us a vast room at the price of camping. We settled in beside the Shire River, lulled by the grunts of hippos in the night.

At dawn, we set out by canoe. The riverbanks teemed with life: elephants moving with gentle grace, hippos surfacing with snorts, their skin glistening in the sun. They cannot sweat, I learned, but secrete a reddish oil that acts as sunblock — the origin of the myth that hippos sweat blood. The air was alive with birdsong, the water rippled with movement.

Here, amid wildlife, my broken wrist seemed insignificant. Nature carried on, vast and indifferent, yet profoundly soothing. The elephants reminded me of resilience, the hippos of adaptation. I watched them for hours, forgetting pain, remembering wonder.







## Monkey Bay — Edge of the Lake

Caron pedalled onward while I wrestled with the unpredictability of public transport. Minivans sputtered, broke down, and transferred passengers mid-journey, each hiccup a reminder that riding a bicycle could be simpler than relying on engines. By the time I reached Monkey Bay, Caron was already there, smiling despite fatigue.

Mufasa Lodge sat at the water's edge, a haven of simplicity. Our days dissolved into idleness: chasing monkeys who tried to steal our food, watching the lake shift from silver to blue, debating whether its waters were colder than legend claimed. Lake Malawi, part of the Great Rift Valley, stretched vast and ancient, home to more fish species than any other lake in the world. Its immensity humbled me.





## Cape Maclear — Nets and Sunsets

A short ride carried us to Cape Maclear, where Fat Monkeys Lodge offered shelter. The village pulsed with activity: fishermen mending nets, children splashing in the shallows, women washing clothes in the lake. The wind was strong, boats stayed ashore, and we watched as the rhythm of life unfolded in communal tasks.

We joined the crowd at sunset, beer in hand, as the sky blazed red. The lake mirrored the fire above, and for a moment, everything stilled. Malawi's beauty was not in grand monuments but in these ordinary rituals, shared and repeated across generations.



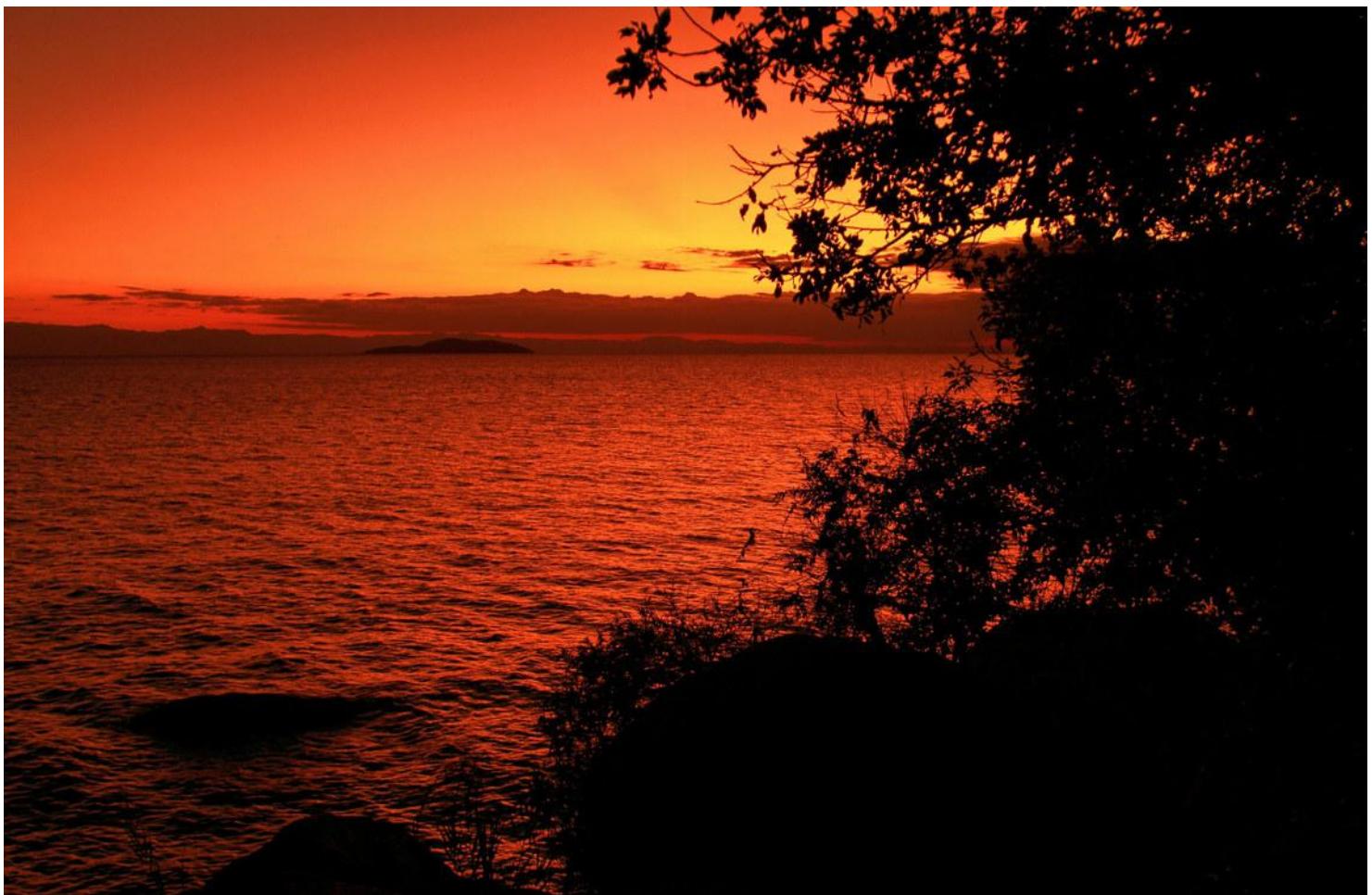


## Chapter: Domwe Island — Silence and Solitude

Caron paddled across the bay in a kayak, her strokes steady, while I followed by boat with our gear. Domwe Island lay only five kilometres offshore, yet it felt worlds away. The camp was rustic, perched on wooden platforms beneath thatch, and we were the only guests.

There was little to do but listen: to the wind rustling through trees, to the lap of water against rocks, to silence itself. We tried swimming, but the lake's chill drove us back quickly. Instead, we lingered in hammocks, grateful for solitude. Two days passed like a dream, unmarked by clocks or obligations.









# **Chapter 6: The Ilala Ferry across Lake Malawi**

## **A Floating Theatre**

Monkey Bay's pier was alive before dawn, a hive of bodies and bundles. Bags of tomatoes, potatoes, and maize flour balanced on heads, children clutched chickens, traders shouted over the din. Caron and I joined the throng, tickets in hand, and were swept aboard the MV Ilala.

The ferry was old, more than seventy years, and famous for delays. Its cabins were crowded, its decks chaotic, but it offered a perspective no road could. At each lakeside village, the Ilala's arrival was spectacle. Only a few harbours had piers; elsewhere, fishermen's boats ferried passengers and cargo through the waves. Goods were shoved, lifted, balanced, shouted over. Boarding and disembarking became theatre, performed in the glow of lanterns or under the stars.

By the time we reached Nkhata Bay, it was two in the morning. Disembarking was slow, bodies pressed together, bags tumbling. At last, we stumbled into Mayoka Village, a cliffside lodge overlooking the lake. At four a.m., exhausted, we collapsed into bed, lulled by the sound of waves against rock.







## Chapter 7: Cliffside Kindness

### **Nakata Bay**

Back on terra firma, I received the heart-wrenching news that my mother has passed away, and it struck me profoundly how a mother embodies unconditional love. Despite my tumultuous journey and frequent missteps, she remained my unwavering anchor, always there, steadfast and solid as a rock, offering support and warmth.

Mayoka Village clung to the cliffs above the lake, its huts and terraces tumbling toward the water. For three days, we lingered, doing little but watching the rhythms of life unfold. Caron paddled kayaks across the bay, her strokes steady and sure, while I sat with my cast, listening to the waves slap against the shore, thinking of my mum. Always there, never demanding, never loud.

The lodge itself was a marvel of ingenuity. Showers were heated by “donkeys” — fires lit at sunset, keeping water hot until morning. Toilets were eco-friendly, ash and sawdust replacing flushes. It was simple, sustainable, and oddly luxurious.

Each walk into the village brought encounters with curio sellers and Rasta men offering “meditation cookies.” Tourism had not yet returned to normal, and their optimism in the face of hardship was humbling. Seeing my arm in plaster, they instinctively placed their hands on their hearts, saying softly, “I’m so sorry.” Their compassion was immediate, uncalculated. Malawi’s kindness was everywhere, woven into daily exchanges.







## **Chapter: Mzuzu — The End of the Ride**

Caron's time in Malawi was running short. We loaded panniers once more, she on her bicycle, me in a shared taxi. The road to Mzuzu wound through hills, fifty kilometres of effort for her, a cramped ride for me.

Umunthu Lodge welcomed us with comfort and good food, a fitting place to pause. For Caron, Mzuzu marked the end of her cycle ride. Ahead lay buses, schedules, and the return to Lilongwe. For me, it was another reminder of how journeys shift — from wheels to feet, from freedom to farewell.

Just when I believed life couldn't possibly take a darker turn, I received the heartbreak news that my dear friend Dawn's husband, Dan, had passed away. During the long, isolating nights of the two-year COVID-19 pandemic, we spent countless evenings together, laughter and stories shared over frosty beers. They were more than just friends to me; they were true comrades, an inseparable part of my chosen family. The loss hit me like a thunderclap, leaving me utterly devastated and grappling with a profound sense of emptiness.

Caron and I walked to the bus station together, the air thick with diesel fumes and chatter. The ride south would carry us back toward the capital, but the memories of Malawi — its lake, its mountains, its ceremonies, its kindness and my losses — would remain etched deeper than any map.







## **Lessons from Malawi**

Malawi was never just a line on my route. It was a country of contrasts: potholes and laughter, ceremonies and silence, hardship and losses,, but also generosity. It was the place where my wrist broke, where I lost my Mum, lost a trusted friend, lost a member of our COVID tribe, where Caron's resilience shone, where strangers carried my bags on their heads and offered sympathy without hesitation.

Travel is not about perfection. It is about surrender — to breakdowns, to delays, to kindness, to awe. Malawi taught me that fragility and resilience coexist, that our time here is fleeting, that beauty persists even in pain, and that the simplest gestures — a smile, a hand to the heart — can carry more weight than money.

As we boarded the bus south, I knew the journey was far from over. I did not conduct myself well. But Malawi had left its mark: a chapter of dust, sadness and water, of laughter, regret, loss and struggle, of kindness that lingers long after the road ends.



# About this Blog

## Welcome to My Cycling Adventure in Malawi!

Join me on my ride through the captivating landscapes of Malawi! This blog is your peek into my cycling adventure, sharing the roads, experiences, and stories I've gathered along the way. While this route might not be the ultimate path for every cyclist, it certainly offers an exhilarating glimpse into what Malawi has to offer!

Here's What to Keep in Mind:

### **Distances:**

These daily odometer readings may not always follow the shortest route; after all, sometimes it's the detours that lead to the most incredible discoveries. You'll find plenty of twists and turns in my daily distances, but rest assured, every kilometre is accurately logged.

### **Time of Year:**

I soared through Malawi between May and June 2022. Just a heads-up: the scenery might look different now. Roads could have been improved, charming stops might have changed, and places I once loved could be upgraded or gone.

### **Insurance:**

Don't hit the road without a travel insurance policy! It's your safety net against loss, theft, and medical emergencies. Just make sure to scrutinise the fine print—some policies may not cover activities like scuba diving, motorcycling, or trekking.

### **Clothing:**

As the sun beats down in Malawi (especially away from the higher elevations), packing smart is essential! Comfortable, high-quality padded cycling shorts will be your best friends on long rides. I recommend lightweight hiking shoes or breathable sandals. And don't forget those personal essentials—bring insect repellent and anti-chafe cream to ensure a smooth ride. Most importantly, strap on a cycling helmet for safety—your future self will thank you!

### **The Bicycle & Gear:**

Choosing the right bike is crucial for comfort during your adventures. I ride a mountain bike equipped with a sturdy Merida frame, reliable Shimano Deore components, strong Alex wheel rims, and tough Schwalbe tyres. My secret for smooth travels? Tubus racks and Ortlieb panniers—they may cost a bit more, but they're built to last. And before you hit the trails, brush up on how to fix a puncture. A phone holder on your handlebars will keep your map handy (I personally rely on Organic Maps or Google Maps). Plus, don't forget a handlebar bag for your camera and any must-have items throughout the day!

### **Recommended Further Reading:**

If you're looking to dive deeper, check out the Lonely Planet e-book. It's budget-friendly and packed with handy tips!

### **Recommended further reading**

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.



## About Malawi

(Please refer to your favourite travel guidebook or the internet for a more in-depth overview)

### **Capital City:**

Lilongwe is the capital of Malawi; Blantyre is the country's commercial and industrial centre and its second-largest city. Lilongwe became the capital in 1975 and is the administrative and political hub, while Blantyre is the oldest urban centre and handles most commercial activities

### **Currency**

The kwacha is the currency of Malawi since 1971, replacing the Malawian pound. It is divided into 100 tambala.

### **Language:**

The official language of Malawi is English, while Chichewa is the national and most widely spoken language. Other major languages include Tumbuka and Yao, alongside a variety of other minority languages spoken throughout the country.

### **Religion:**

Malawi is a predominantly Christian country with a significant Muslim minority, and most Christians are Protestants. The largest Christian denominations are Roman Catholic and the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). About 14% of the population is Muslim, and there are also smaller numbers of people following traditional faiths, Baha'i, and other religions.

### **Location and Size:**

Malawi is a landlocked country in southeastern Africa, bordering Zambia, Tanzania, and Mozambique. It has a total area of approximately 118,484 square kilometres. The country is long and narrow, stretching about 900 km north to south, with its western border dominated by Lake Malawi, Africa's third-largest lake.

### **Population:**

The population of Malawi is estimated at 21.1-22.4 million in 2025, with a high population density and a young age structure. The country's population growth rate is approximately 2.6% annually, and its median age is around 18.1 years.



## About the Author

Born and bred in Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist. However, her love for cycle touring ignited in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique, a race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and had no idea what she was getting herself into. To her surprise, she cycled every inch of the way to Cape Town. On her return, she found it surprisingly challenging to return to regular life and decided to continue travelling by bicycle.

Leana, accompanied by Ernest Markwood, left Cape Town at the end of March 2007. What was intended as a long bike ride became an around-the-world cycle ride. Initially, they cycled together most of the time. Eventually, each found their own pace and direction in life and on the road. The journey was not without its challenges, from extreme weather conditions to navigating unfamiliar terrain, all of which added to the adventure.

In the process, Leana has cycled Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe (including the UK), Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia and Australia. Her adventurous spirit led her from Australia to Ushuaia, Argentina, where she spent the next few years cycling in South, Central, and North America. Afterwards, a year was spent visiting the larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, each journey filled with excitement and new experiences.

At the time of writing, Leana found herself back in Southeast Asia.









**Cycling touring is not just a sport; it's a lifestyle.**



