



Bright times on a faded relic

Although neither luxurious nor speedy, the colonial steamship MV Ilala can still outperform its modern counterparts. How can it do this when its journeys are more accurately measured by calendar than stopwatch? Simple. It allows its passengers both to experience and escape from the frenetic life along the shores of Lake Malawi. Join **Sue Watt** for a cruise like no other.

Above: One Malawian boy's happy grip on lakeside life

Opposite page:

Top: Home away from home? Topsides on the old steamer

Middle left: One of the armada flocking to Ilala's sides at port

Middle right: A sip of the good life on board

Bottom: Lights out over Lake Malawi

Rocking precariously on Lake Malawi's choppy waters, the lifeboat was crammed with people squashed against massive bunches of green bananas, battered bicycles and bundles of sugar cane. Agitated men shouted manically as brightly dressed women wobbled on board, wailing children strapped papoose-style to their backs. All around us, a motley collection of rowing boats and dugout canoes frantically scurried towards the ferry, like vultures surrounding a carcass. Yet this was no life-or-death rescue mission for a doomed shipwreck, this was just the MV Ilala coming to town. When forced to anchor offshore by shallows, this seemingly chaotic scene is repeated each time the ferry's passengers and their wares are brought to or from shore.

For over half a century, this old colonial steamship has loyally trudged along the shores of Africa's third largest lake, an essential lifeline to its remote fishing villages and busy market towns. Her weekly journey, which starts from the southernmost point of Monkey Bay and ends in Chilumba in the north, offers a unique way for visitors to experience life along Lake Malawi. You can choose to sleep in one of the five basic but comfortable cabins, or simply kip on deck.

My partner Will and I had joined the quirky

ferry three days earlier at Monkey Bay. On arrival after a gruelling 10-hour, 200km ride from Blantyre by local bus, we discovered the Ilala was running twelve hours late. Like a bride at a wedding, she's never expected to arrive on time. "Sorry," the port manager apologized. "The Captain decided to take some sugar cane to Tanzania."

Wallowing gracelessly in the dusky waters, the 620-ton ferry eventually emerged, transforming the sleepy quayside into a whirlwind of activity. Rowdy crowds jostled and shouted their way along the gangplank for space in steerage amongst the 400 passengers and 100 tonnes of cargo the Ilala accommodates. A man dressed in pristine white rushed past pushing a wheelbarrow transporting a freshly slaughtered sheep, its skin still glistening with blood. Sweaty deckhands hurriedly loaded onboard bundles of firewood, sacks of maize, buckets of fish, boxes of Carlsberg and mountains of checked laundry-style bags. I could almost hear the old girl groaning under the strain.

In contrast, we sauntered up to the spacious 'first-class' upper deck (reserved for those passengers in cabins or sleeping on deck) with 12 fellow travellers, including an elegant Dutch lady and her

clone-like blonde daughter, an eccentric German and an elderly Japanese man with purple hair and leather trousers. "Welcome to the beautiful Ilala!" our portly, unshaven captain boomed, smiling proudly. Beauty wasn't a word that sprang immediately to mind, as our deck was dominated by a huge black and red funnel and sported a few rickety cane chairs, wooden benches by the tarpaulin-covered bar and flaking painted railings. Suddenly, a deafening bell rang out and a celebratory cloud of smoke belched onto the deck. Our voyage had finally begun.

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Treating ourselves, we'd booked the Owner's Cabin. Formerly reserved for the Ilala's colonial masters, it was small but welcoming, with green floral bedcovers, a maze of pipes and the only en suite bathroom onboard. The restaurant, a cosy saloon with shiny wood panelling still smelling of fresh polish, had four round tables decorated with red plastic flowers. Chatting and laughing over dinner, the captain and first mate always sat at the corner table, devouring chunks of meat. Remembering the wheelbarrow earlier, we chose tasty aubergine stew and vegetarian pizza, accompanied by a delicious Rooiberg Shiraz.

On the open water, life drifted effortlessly, succumbing to the soothing ambience of the Ilala's upper deck. Days were spent lazing on the rickety chairs, watching wooded shorelines and sandy bays gliding quietly by, or, if we could muster enough energy, dipping into a novel. The Ilala gently wrapped us in a cocoon of pure calm, where time simply melted away and sunsets crept up unexpectedly as skies turned deep red, the huge orange fireball sinking silently in the balmy evening water. Even the anchor's chains rattling into the lake in shallow ports couldn't break the spell. We'd fallen hook, line and sinker for the old girl's hypnotic charms and her delightfully shabby dignity.

In another world down two flights of stairs, we'd heard life in economy class was noisy, uncomfortable and crowded. Perhaps guilt-ridden or intoxicated by our blissful zombie-world after months of rough travelling, we didn't explore too deeply. When anchored, however, the Ilala's two worlds mingled happily and we shared Carlsberg lagers with locals at the bar, watching flotillas of smaller boats piling on the cargo in the now-familiar chaos.

After three days, we reached Nkhata Bay. Staying in Mayoka Village, a lively backpackers' lodge, we swam in clear waters above neon-blue tropical fish, strolled around the market and lazed in the sun. Yet Nkhata Bay couldn't compete with the Ilala. Two days later, we rushed to meet her for our return to Monkey Bay. Still twelve hours late, the frenetic loading and unloading of goods and people had started all over again and as we walked onboard, the captain greeted us warmly, welcoming us home. □



Plan your trip

MV Ilala

MV Ilala is scheduled to sail north from Monkey Bay each Friday morning at 10am. Ports of call include: Chipota (1pm Friday); Nkhata Bay (12am Saturday); Metangula, Mozambique (6am Saturday); Cobue, Mozambique (12pm Saturday); Likoma Bay (1.30pm Saturday); Chizumulu Island (7.30pm); Nkhata Bay (1am Sunday); Usisya (7.30am Sunday); Ruwete (10.15am Sunday); Nkhata (12pm Sunday); and Chilumba (5pm Sunday). Return trips to Monkey Bay, stopping at the same ports as the northbound journey, head south at 1am each Monday from Chilumba and arrive at 6am Thursday. These times are all approximate, and MV Ilala can sometimes be up to a day late, particularly at the end of its schedule.

First-class cabins from Monkey Bay to Nkhata Bay cost MK13,610 (£49), while sleeping on the upper deck will set you back MK7910 (£28) for the same journey.

Find out more

Malawi Lake Services (ilala@malawi.net)
Malawi Tourism Marketing Association
(www.malawitourism.com)
House of Wonders (www.malawi-travel.com)
To Escape To (www.toescape.to)

Guidebooks

Southern Africa by Alan Murphy et al. (Lonely Planet, 4th ed, 2007)
Malawi by Philip Briggs (Bradt Travel Guides, 4th ed, 2006)

