



Main: The view overlooking Lake Malawi from Ntchisi Forest Lodge

Right: Estone, a 70-year-old man from Mpamila village who gives passionate tours of Ntchisi Forest

Bottom: A young samango monkey

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COMMUNITY connections

Sue Watt visits three very different Malawian lodges that are each linked to their local communities and environments in a special way.



Sue Watt fell in love with Africa on a gap year in 2004 and became a freelance writer soon after. She is a regular contributor to *Travel Africa* and newspapers such as *The Independent*.

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In his mid-60s, Senior Mpamila, the chief of Mpamila village, is a slim, dignified man wearing a frayed blazer and navy trousers. Standing barefoot in the mud, as rain pelts down on our umbrella, he speaks with so much warmth that it completely lifts the greyness of the day.

"I've never seen such collaboration between the villages," Senior Mpamila says. "This happened because of their love of the forest. I thank them so much. I really believe we can protect Ntchisi if this continues."

The people he is speaking about are the team at Ntchisi Forest Lodge. Although from very different worlds, Senior Mpamila and the lodge managers share a passion for one of Malawi's last remaining indigenous rainforests, Ntchisi Forest Reserve. With skilful diplomacy and the chief's assistance, the lodge recently organised the first clean-up of the forest's desperately overgrown firebreak since colonial days. All 25 villages bordering the forest cleared the entire 25km firebreak in just one week, even working at night under a full moon.

The manager's zeal for the rainforest shines through as we walk past vines, strangler figs and massive moss-smothered *Newtonia* trees en route to the summit of Ntchisi Mountain on one of the five trails he has marked. Viewpoints reveal expansive vistas of rolling hills below. Swirling mists then enhance a fairy-tale scenario as shy samango monkeys swing across the canopy. In the trees lurks at least one leopard, seen recently by the manager's

wife as it jumped across the path in front of her.

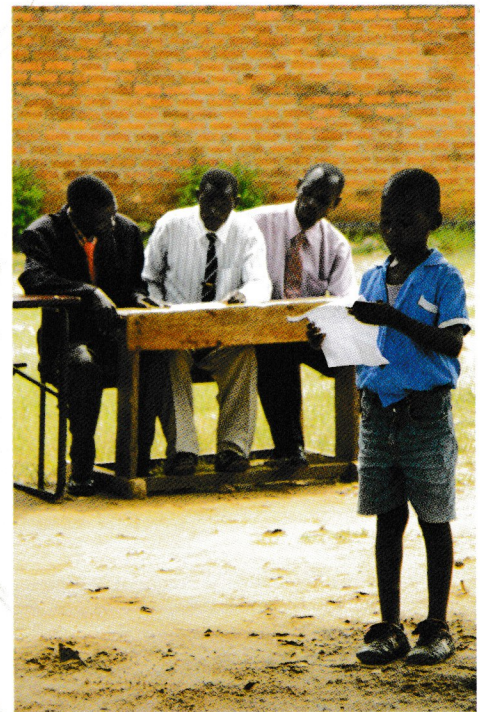
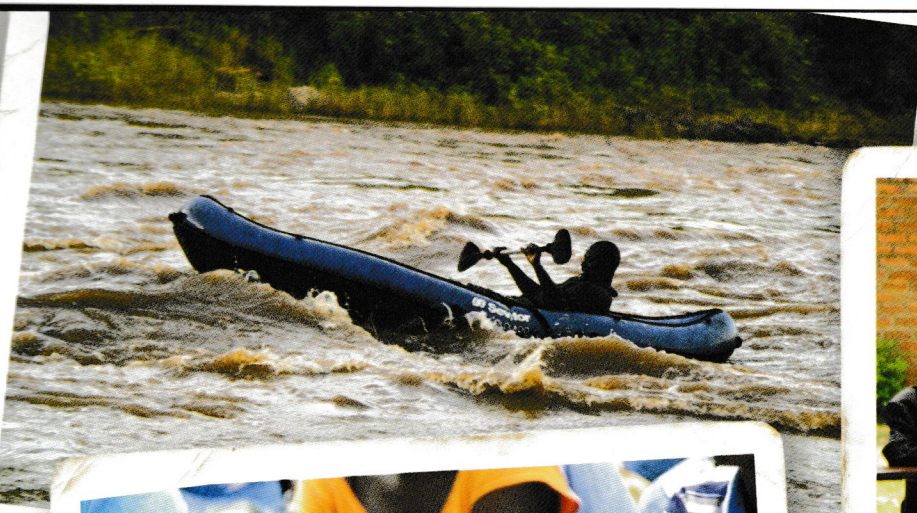
It's a precious place. But protecting the rainforest involves more than a clean firebreak. The Community Trust, first established by the lodge in 2008, aims to alleviate illegal logging by helping with income-generating projects through micro-financing for local people. Funded by guest donations, these include bee-keeping, chicken farms, tree nurseries and macadamia farming. In Mpamila we meet Charles, recipient of a trust loan. In a tiny, bare-brick shop that doubles as his bakery and home, he proudly exhibits his bread, which

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he breaks into chunks for customers who are too poor to afford a whole loaf. Future trust plans involve training in small business management, permaculture vegetable gardens and a sewing project for HIV-positive women.

A charming former hill-station on a steep escarpment, Ntchisi Forest Lodge overlooks Lake Malawi and Mozambique beyond. Solar-powered and candle-lit at night, it has a warm, relaxing ambience. ▷





Guests can hike forest trails, visit Mpamila village and school supported by the lodge, or go foraging with the charismatic Estone, a wise and wonderful 70-year-old who is incredibly passionate about the rainforest.

From rainforest to bush, our next base is the new Tongole Wilderness Lodge in Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve, three hours north of Ntchisi. Established in 1954, Nkhotakota too has suffered neglect over the years, but its scenic beauty and true wilderness spirit make it a haven for adventure lovers.

We climb Kasukusuka, the region's second-highest peak (1068m), gasping at the extent of the 1800-square-kilometre reserve spread out below us, then kayak cautiously in the Bua River where we'd spotted a crocodile the day before. Hiking through miombo woodland and along the riverside, we see trampled grasses revealing the direction of elephants earlier.

The lodge itself, overlooking the Bua River to the mountains on its far bank, is as naturally beautiful as its surroundings. In the dry season the river is a magnet for wildlife and up to 55 elephants at one time have been seen drinking here.

As part of a project jointly funded by Tongole and Malawi's Department of National Parks and Wildlife, another 300 animals are soon to be relocated to Nkhotakota. Zane Volker, Tongole's manager, shows us a verdant glade due to be transformed into a secure and sustainable sanctuary for these newcomers, with clumps of woodland and an all-important year-round natural spring – it's an ideal location for Tongole's fly-camp, which is pitched overlooking the waterhole.

To succeed, conservation programmes must also benefit local communities: the two are inextricably linked and there's a special, personal connection between

Top: Kayaking the Bua River within the Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve

Above: Two young girls at Mwala wa Tongole Primary School

Right: A boy reciting poetry at a ceremony to thank Tongole Wilderness Lodge for their contributions to the community

the lodge and communities here. Bentry Kalanga, a local Malawian and now Tongole's managing director, tragically lost his son Vitumbiko in a car accident in the UK. Two British philanthropists, David Cole and David Gridley, who knew Vitumbiko well, decided to develop a legacy in his honour, one that would benefit the people of his homeland. That legacy is Tongole, and its charity, The Tongole Foundation, is already making an impact.

We visit Mwala wa Tongole Primary School where guest donations are funding new classrooms that are badly needed. Hendricks, the headmaster, shows me a tree with some stones scattered underneath for children to sit on. "This is one of our classrooms," he says.

In a lively ceremony to thank Tongole, attended by local dignitaries and around 200 pupils, children dance, sing, drum and recite poetry, including a dramatic

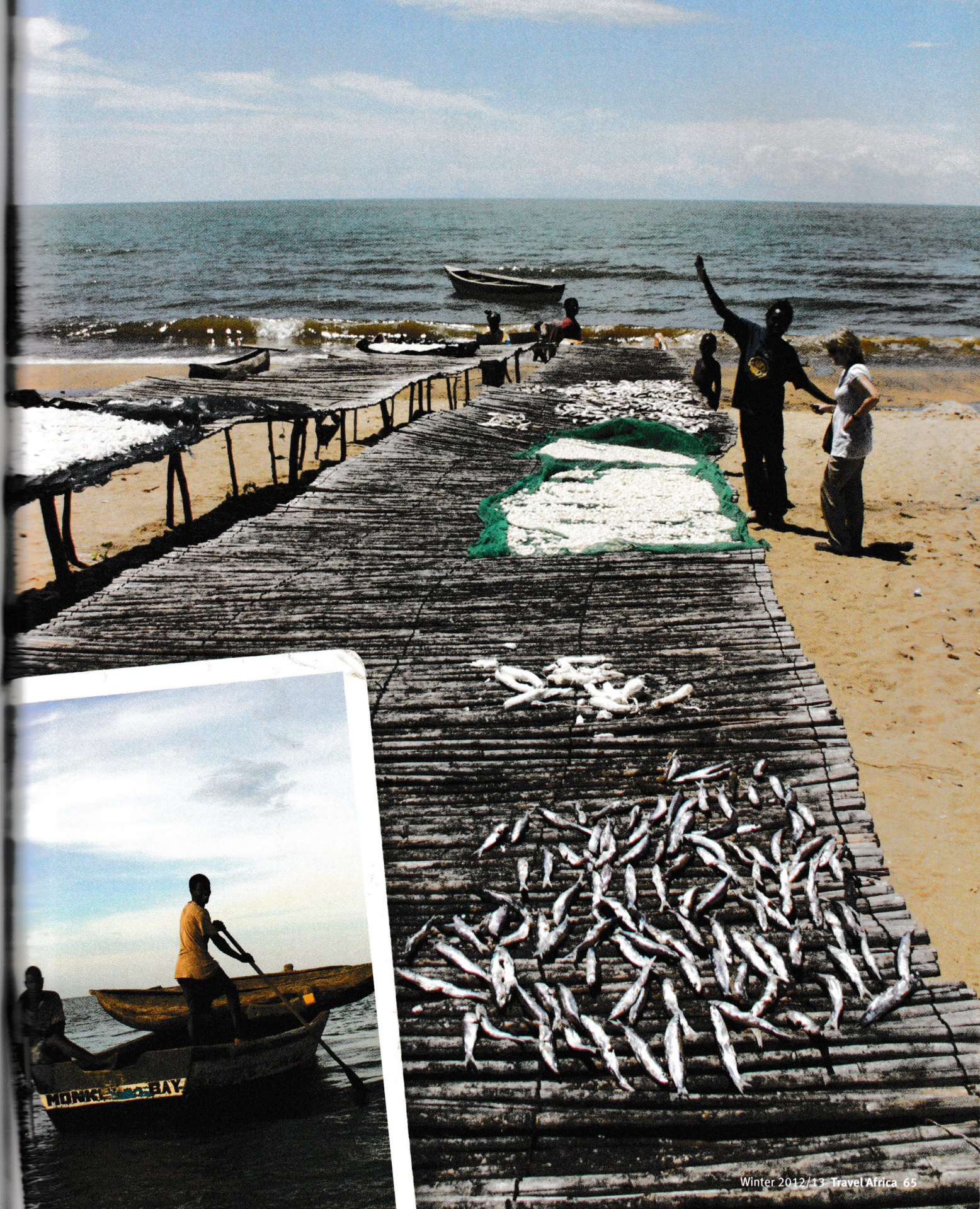
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rain pelts down on our umbrella, he
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English poem called *Stop the Poaching*. You can sense the warmth here between village and lodge, and the tangible hope for the future of both.

No trip in Malawi would be complete without visiting the lake. It's there that we meet Sandi Webb and Chris Buckley, a pair who forged strong connections with their village when they bought Ngala Beach Lodge in 2008. Choosing to employ only locals in its refurbishment, they hired 100 villagers including

Main: Sue seeing the fish drying facilities on the beach during her tour of the village at Ngala

Below: A couple of fishermen head out onto the lake's waters





Plan your trip

Getting there

Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) flies from London to Lilongwe daily via Nairobi. Self-drive is possible although you would need 4WD for the country roads to Ntchisi, especially during the rains, and in Nkhotakota.

When to visit

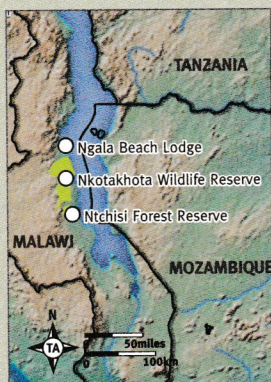
April to October is the best time to visit, with wildlife easy to spot at the waterholes and Bua River.

Visas

Tourist visas are not required for most visitors.

Health

Malawi is a malarial area and prophylactics should be taken. Bilharzia is present in Lake Malawi, particularly in reedy areas and areas with high populations. You should be tested three months after your departure from the lake. Or you can buy the antibiotic Praziquantel from chemists in Malawi and take the course three months after exposure.



Books

Bradt's *Malawi* (5th ed, 2010) by Philip Briggs is the best guidebook for trips to Malawi.

Find out more

Malawi Tourist Info. (www.malawitourism.com)
Ntchisi Forest Lodge (www.ntchisi.com)
Tongole Wilderness Lodge (www.tongole.com)
Ngala Beach Lodge (www.ngalabeach.com)

Author tip

If you're interested in making donations to schools or community groups, contact the lodges beforehand to see what items are needed.

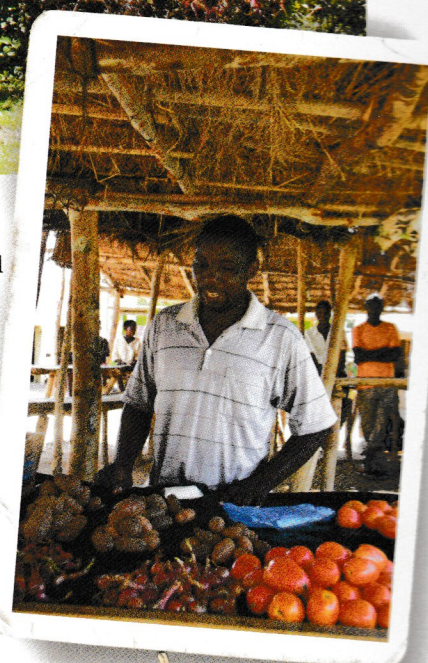
thatchers, builders, carpenters and women to restore the lawns. The project supported a third of Ngala's community, and today it is still run with entirely local staff. The lodge is a popular, friendly lodge renowned for serving Malawi's best pizzas, with chalets opening onto beautiful gardens that lead to the beach.

Sandi arranges walking tours around Ngala village. After visiting the primary school and health clinic, both very basic and desperately under-resourced, we wander around market stalls selling tiny dried fish, chunks of barbecued goat, and finger-sized sachets of cooking oil and salt to customers who can't afford larger quantities. Children rush up, desperate for photos, while their mothers smile warmly as they carry on sieving maize or grinding flour.

Our walk reveals just how much Ngala Beach Lodge is involved with village life here. We meet orphans supported by guest donations and women washing clothes at the borehole that Ngala Lodge maintains. The headmaster at the secondary school explains how volunteers, staying free of charge at Ngala Lodge, help with building and teaching English to the children.

Sandi also supports local people who provide fresh produce for the restaurant, helping them with initial supplies and business advice. Over dinner, we watch the lights of fishing boats twinkling like stars on the lake and chat about the farmer who now provides her fruit and veg. When Jussar Banda first met Sandi he was barefoot and in ragged clothes, but his life and his family's fortunes have been transformed. Today, he's suited and booted and he's put all his children through school. "In its small way, it's a real rags-to-riches story," Sandi tells me.

It may be in a small way, but these relationships between lodges and locals have far-reaching consequences at grass-roots level. In the rainforest, bush and beaches of Malawi, they are making life a little better for people in the beautiful, warm heart of Africa. ○



Top: Ngala Beach Lodge

Above: One of the merchants working at the Ngala vegetable stall

* Sue travelled with tour operator Naturally Africa (www.naturallyafrica.co.uk) who arranged all accommodation and transfers between lodges. Special thanks also to Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com), Air Malawi (www.airmalawi.com) and Kumbali Lodge, Lilongwe (www.kumbalilodge.com).