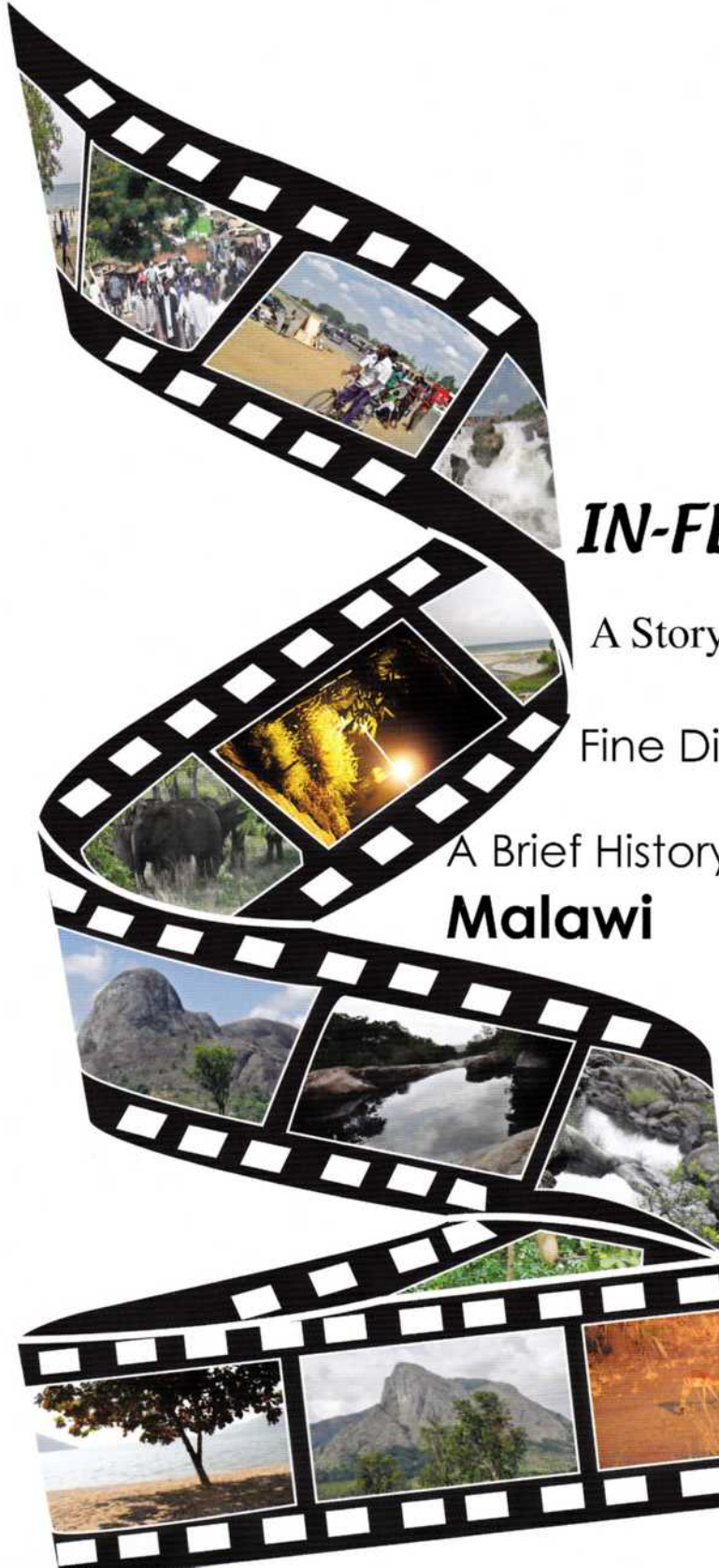


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Malawi is for the True Safari Enthusiast

Sipping my Malawian gin and tonic, I look out over the silkily smooth Shire River as the sun dips behind the Mangochi hills and sparkling rays of light shimmer across a graying sky. Around us we hear Cape doves and the soft rustling of palm trees. Our guide entertains us with stories of aggressive black rhinos and his favorite elephant herd.

For the few days of our safari in Liwonde National Park, it is as if we are the only people in the world. I feel like the lazily moving river, the sandy flood plains, the dense woodlands, and the wildlife were all put into place, just for us, just for this visit. We drive for hours, never seeing another vehicle. Our guide spots a bird that is so rare, even he gets excited and brings out the books and binoculars so we can all appreciate the moment. During our boat safari along the river, we slowly creep down a small creek, coming across elephants swimming across the lagoon. This is the magic of going on safari in

Malawi - being surrounded by wild and unique beauty and having it all to yourself.

Malawi is increasingly becoming known as a dream location for true safari enthusiasts. Some of the more prominent parks on the safari circuit are expensive, crowded, and full of tourists hoping to cross off their 'big five'. A trip to the Serengeti can cost hundreds of dollars a day just in park fees. A recent trip to South Luangwa was spent chasing one leopard with 11 other packed safari vehicles. A friend visiting the Ngorogoro Crater counted 18 vehicles surrounding one lion pride. While these parks are leaders in conservation and have done wonders for wildlife and tourism, it leaves true safari enthusiasts looking for a more individualized, unique experience. And this leads them to Malawi.

In Malawi, you are a traveler, not a tourist. You quickly come to feel that you are both at home and discovering an unspoiled, unexplored world.

Malawi has rich and varied conservation areas, including five national parks, four wildlife reserves, six conservation areas, and sixty-five forest reserves. Nyika National Park, Malawi's largest, is often described as one of the most unique places in Africa. Centered on Nyika Plateau, the landscape of cool rolling hills has been compared to the Scottish highlands. Large herds of antelope and zebra are often spotted grazing on the plains and the plateau hosts one of the largest leopard populations on the continent.

Two of Malawi's Wildlife Reserves are under private administration, a cutting-edge approach to conservation and resource management. Mwabvi Reserve, in the southern most part of the country, is now overseen by the Mwabvi Wildlife and Community Trust (MWCT), funded by Project African Wilderness Trust. The MWCT is improving park infrastructure, upgrading facilities, and even reintroducing lions to the park, including lion cub Moran. Majete Game Reserve suffered severe poaching during the 1990's, but has been brought back from the brink by the African Parks Foundation (APF). The APF took over Majete in 2003 and has set about rehabilitating the reserve. Today, Majete is flourishing with over 4,000 heads of big game, a thriving black rhino population,

and careful plans to reintroduce lions and leopards.

Back on our safari in Liwonde National Park, our guide is explaining to us that because there is no guiding school in Malawi, those who chose this profession do so because they have a real obsession for wildlife and the environment. Malawians have to seek out their training, apprentice with experienced guides, and be creative in finding opportunities for education and development. Some guides go to guiding school in Zimbabwe or Zambia and then return home to work in Malawian parks. Others learned to understand and appreciate their environment from their fathers and grandfathers and train on the job. Each guide has to take a comprehensive exam that includes everything from flora and fauna to first aid and car mechanics. Known for being knowledgeable, considerate, and entertaining, Malawian guides are passionate about their work.

As we head back to camp and darkness has fallen, our spotter sweeps the bright light across our path. He and our guide confer for a minute and the guide slows the vehicle. We hear a rustling in the bush just to the right. Our guide asks us to be as quiet as possible and we wait on the edge of our seats in anticipation. After a few long seconds, the animal bursts from the bushes, crosses in front of the vehicle and stands in the spotter's light, staring at us; a black rhino. He blinks several times and takes off, sprinting away into the night.

While black rhinos are almost extinct in Africa, Malawi hosts several healthy populations and sightings like ours are frequent. Though Malawi flies under the radar in the safari circuit, it hosts some of the most elusive flora and fauna on the continent. Wild Dogs, for example, are now returning in packs to Kasungu National Park. Careful research has led to a greater understanding of the wild (or painted) dog and those who quickly checked off the 'big five' are now looking to see the most endangered large carnivore on the continent. Malawi also caters to the bird watching enthusiast. With over 700 recorded species, visitors have an excellent chance of seeing birds that are rare and endangered, including the African skimmer, Boehm's bee-eater, Livingstone's flycatcher, and the wattled crane. These highlights are in addition to all of the other magnificent wildlife found in Malawi.

Our safari in Liwonde National Park comes to an end. Leaving with new friends, beautiful photographs, and unforgettable experiences, I know that Malawi is a place to come back to again and again. For those looking for an excellent gin and tonic, a chance to explore, to see rare wild and birdlife, to discover an unspoiled paradise, Malawi is Africa's best kept secret. 🍷

