

A taste of travel

Perspectives from around the world

with Charis Charalambous

Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique

Summer 2018



Passion Creativity Growth

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Introduction

Four years after my **first taste of sub-Saharan Africa in 2014**, it was time for me to re-visit the continent for a new set of three countries and to explore and interact with the nature, the people, the culture and the daily realities there. Compared to 2014, this time I was going to travel on my own, to have better control over my travel itinerary and my safety.

I know, as it always happens during such trips, that unless the traveler pursues it, a solo backpack traveler, regardless of gender, is never truly solo. There are always other travelers or locals to meet during a journey, and every one of them can have something important (small or big, it doesn't matter) to share with us, if we can open ourselves to receive it.

My travelogue for this trip includes my observations of daily life as I was experiencing it, the joys and challenges of backpack traveling (including from a female perspective) and the content of the conversations I was having on a frequent basis with other people, especially the conversations related to the history, the culture and the socio-economic development of the three countries. It was significantly easier to do so in Zambia and Malawi, where English is used as a language of instruction in schools.

I hope the readers of this travelogue find its content entertaining and informative; I have certainly tried to maintain the most useful but also coherent narrative. Even though it may seem long, I would like to believe, based on feedback I have received, that it's easy to read and digest.

Readers may identify in this narrative, once or multiple times, the following themes: Information useful to travelers who may wish to visit these countries, descriptions of landscapes and soundscapes, issues related to women (health, safety, education, relationships, stereotypes), kind and helpful persons I met during the trip, surreal experiences I had, socio-political issues of various countries, references to previous trips I have made (marked in bold letters) whose travelogues can be found on my website (www.withcharis.com/stories), meals I had, my own kind of humorous take on things that were happening, issues related to the care and education of children, things that recurrently draw my personal attention as a traveler [e.g. school uniforms, fresh grass, swings, small boats for my collection, Orion's constellation, references to the Lord of the Rings trilogy], things that make me curious, things I carry with me (e.g. stickers for children and colored pencils), the pampering I like to have (e.g. in local spas), health concerns I experienced (e.g. on both of my trips to Africa, I needed antibiotics for parasitic diarrhea) and outdoor activities I pursue and enjoy (e.g. hiking).

It is particularly important for me, in my capacity as Global Education trainer, to be informed and aware and to have experience of what happens in countries of the global south, in other words, in the developing world.

Without doubt, regardless of our traveling experience, backpack traveling will most

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likely push and pull us out of our comfort zone in one way or another. Every traveler, no matter how seasoned, carries his/her sensitivities and prejudices, even personal demons (a.k.a. what pushes our buttons) along in his/her luggage. As a female, white traveler on a very limited budget, I was particularly cautious towards the possibility of being “harassed” or of being taken advantage of, during this trip, because of the assumption by locals that I had a lot of money to spend and spare.

Daily reality in the “developing” world is such that, if someone is backpack traveling with a specific timeframe (in my case, I had to make it on a linear journey from the town of Livingstone in Zambia to Maputo in Mozambique in 5 weeks time), having to wake up early in the morning in order to move from one location to another is a necessary evil. Travel times can be long because of delays, bad road infrastructure and very long distances.

Border crossing between countries, especially with public transportation and through less frequented routes, can take many hours and a solo female traveler would mostly want to avoid arriving at a new location after the sun has set. Not necessarily because of a danger of attack but because one should never assume there will be light posts on the side of the road (which may be made of dirt and with potholes) showing her the way to where she wants to go.

For me personally, being able to research, get recommendations and develop a good itinerary so that I am aware, more or less, before the trip, where I would like to go, what I would like to do and what is expecting me on the ground, is important. I might not know all the details in between, because I cannot predict who I will meet and which specific experiences I will have, but I think it’s important not to be completely clueless.

Each (new) experience we have, no matter how simple, can be transformative — even within our own neighborhoods — as long as we are open to registering it as such. In the 5 years that passed between **my first backpack trip to Cambodia in 2013** and this trip to Africa, I know I am more capable of being comfortable with this style of traveling and the realities of the “developing” world which, of course, are global phenomena but to a bigger extent in some countries (e.g. poverty, child labor, poor education, lack of garbage management, diseases, government corruption, post-colonial effects, electricity cuts) and being able to connect with others in spite of these.



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Tuesday, July 31

And so, it began...

I entered Egyptair's tiny blue Embraer plane, which, compared to the Emirates Boeing parked at the gate next to it at Larnaca airport, looked more like a mouse next to an elephant. Or, "David" next to "Goliath", to be more geographically relevant.

Feeling excited, I thought once more of the days ahead in Zambia. The Victoria Falls, the popular pancakes at the hostel in Livingstone, Emilie's invitation (via Couchsurfing) for a possible "going away to work in Uganda" party, the possibility of visiting the privately-housed art collection of 37D Gallery in Lusa.k.a..

A flight attendant with a strikingly emotionless face walked through the aisle and handed out the opportunity to "tattoo" our personal details on the "Head of Nefertiti Queen". The small document, watermarked with the Queen's head, was needed to clear immigration as a "non-Egyptian arrival" in Cairo. Feeling sleepy due to the lack of adequate rest before the flight, I wondered which accommodation arrangements Egypt Air would make for me, for the long transit time in Cairo before the connecting flight to Johannesburg.

The "Seafood Special" meal I had pre-ordered was waiting for me upon my return from the bathroom: a small, blue, shallow dish with some shredded tuna, two black olives, one crab stick and half a small lime. Humble for sure, but a healthier option than the trays with processed meat the great majority of the other passengers were being served. [Pre-ordering a special meal, where available, comes with two benefits: faster delivery of the tray to my seat and, usually, healthier content than in the standard meal.]

We landed in Cairo, a vast, dry megacity expanding towards the desert, the kind of desert I fear Cyprus will turn into in the future. Within two hours, myself, Dimitri (South African with Cypriot roots), Chantal (an Afrikaner) and others, arrived at the Hilton Cairo Hotel, with vouchers in our hands for two free buffet meals, access to a single room and the opportunity to relax and recharge. In between lunch and dinner, I took a nap, had a long conversation with Chantal and found a new USB-port for my phone with the precious help of Madonna, a very kind and very effective Concierge of the huge Hilton/Waldorf Astoria complex. The replacement was needed because I was forced to throw away the non-responsive 15€ gadget I had bought the day before and had used only once at Larnaca airport.

Chantal landed in Cairo dressed head-to-toe in a black chador, as her trip towards Johannesburg had started in Baghdad, where she was running a humanitarian NGO. Our conversation began on the shuttle bus to the hotel, after I shared with her my curiosity about the degree of safety for foreigners in Baghdad. She explained that dressing up in her "Batman suit", as she humorously called it, and behaving like an Arab woman saved her from undesired harassment and earned her more respect from men. I could fully relate to her experience.

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Dressed in a multi-colored, knee-length summer dress over navy-blue leggings that left the lower part of my legs exposed, I had received several uninvited looks from men after we landed.

Looking down at Cairo after the take-off for Johannesburg, I remembered what Chantal had told me regarding property in Iraq. A result of corruption and the absorption of land by those in power, land ownership in Iraq was very expensive. A 50m² apartment was considered a prized possession; Chantal compared this to the 1200m² property she owned in Johannesburg and laughed in disbelief.

Wednesday, August 1

Twenty-four hours after my departure from Cyprus, I landed in Zambia. Unfortunately, I was sitting on the left (a.k.a. the wrong) side of the aisle, so I missed the aerial view of the Falls while we were approaching Livingstone.

At the entrance of the petite airport's Arrivals hall, several local men in khaki pants and blue or white shirts (some decorated with tour company logos) were waiting to pick up freshly-landed visitors, myself included. They were remarkably joyous, talking loudly and laughing. Upon noticing two of them playing chess, I approached them and said in a humorous, ice-breaking mode "It's a game for smart people", explaining that I don't have the mathematical brain to play it. Another man, who was observing them, laughed and agreed with me that "It involves many calculations".

The Faulty Towers Hostel, where I had booked to stay for two nights, consisted of various buildings – one of them a two-story colonial house with beautiful local artwork on its inner walls – surrounding a lush garden, where I sat to relax a bit upon my arrival, with lovely music playing in the background ("In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight..."). The rooms surrounding the garden had the names of trees, languages and birds found in Africa. The taste of the free, plain pancake I was offered at the hostel's Basil Café was not as great as my anticipation had been for it. Still, I devoured it with a bit of sprinkled sugar and stepped-out soon after to explore the town in the remaining daylight.

The central streets of Livingstone seemed generally clean, **compared to other "developing world" locations I had already traveled to**, and the level of dust and exhaust fumes in the air appeared manageable ... well, at first! Within the three hours that followed, especially while walking along the main road during the evening rush hour, it became obvious I should have had carried my face mask with me.

I stopped at busy-with-locals Mulani café across from the Post Office, bought myself a coconut scone and sat there to eat it and partake in some people-watching. Several women were dressed in spring-weather dresses and heels or flat-sole ballerina shoes, even though we were in (southern hemisphere) winter season. Those uncomfortable ballerina shoes were sold for a ridiculous 150 Zambian Kwacha (ZK), about 15\$, at a Bata store; too expensive for their cheap-looking quality and, most likely, for the wallet of many Zambian women.

While walking around, two pretty girls chatting and smiling, wearing their school's light blue skirt uniform, crossed paths with me. The varied, vibrant colors of African school uniforms, compared to the standardized, dark colors students have to wear in Cyprus, always draw my attention. I stopped to admire a large and colorful "Save the Bees" graffiti and, nearby in the Civic Center's grounds, the model of a Chipmunk Aircraft that went obsolete just 4 years after it was purchased – *not* what you would call "un bon marché"! A few moments later,

I laughed at the sight of a big truck with the words “Great Wall Cement” printed on its side, because I immediately thought that Donald Trump could have hired the Chinese to build his wall with Mexico. After all, they *have* the know-how! I would have bet that’s what he had seen – the Great Wall of China – and had felt jealous.

At some point I was stopped by Eduardo, who claimed he was an “artist” selling items he had made. I insisted, being honest, that because it was my first day in Zambia, I hadn’t yet thought of buying any souvenirs, which to him must have seemed like a bargaining trick on my part. So, he automatically lowered the price of two monkey-fruit cups he was holding from 100 to 50 ZK (5\$). Eventually, I said OK to get him off my back, although I would have preferred them painted with vivid colors instead of plain black and beige lines.

While strolling through the aisles of the Shoprite supermarket opposite the hostel, examining local products and the middle-class prices, a young boy hanging from a colorful *chitenge* cloth on his mother’s back, saw me and said “*mzungu*”. [*Chitenge*: colorful fabric women wear to cover their head and bodies, or to carry their infants on their back. *Mzungu*: word in Bantu/Swahili for “someone who wanders aimlessly or is constantly on the move”, associated with being a white person]. **The scene brought back memories of my previous East African trip in 2014.** Up to that point, the adults I had met had not called me that, therefore it was funny to hear an innocent creature call me out like that. Amused, I responded by placing a sticker on his sweater.

One of my dorm roommates was Edmond from Alaska, with whom I had a chat about his impressions on this first African trip of his and his volunteer work with a rural NGO. The NGO was trying hard to secure a sustainable return of adolescent children (especially girls) to school, before their families sold them for dowry or because they could not pay the school tuition fees from 8th grade and up. One in 8 Zambians, Edmond said, was estimated to have HIV – a scary percentage – and many of them were adolescent girls that became pregnant. This reminded me of the conversation I had had with Chantal about South Africa and Iraq, where the extent of HIV infection was denied by the government, because many of the infected men were gay or were involved in prostitution, which were considered taboo topics.

Later in the evening, as I was taking my shower in the hostel’s “new” female bathrooms that left much to be desired in their design (“*Who’s brilliant idea was it to install see-through toilet doors?!*”), the hot water ran for a couple of minutes and then stopped almost completely, giving me an **Isla del Sol deja-vu from 2015**. Luckily for me (again), another female guest was there at the same time and upon me asking for help, she went downstairs and asked someone to turn the water back on.



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Thursday, August 2

*Mosi Oa Tunya**, **BABY!!!**

[* “The smoke that thunders”, in local dialect, is the original name of Victoria Falls]

During the morning drive to the Falls, I asked Joseph, the taxi driver, what stories the locals had to say about British explorer David Livingstone. Apparently there had been no negative stories about him; just a man born in a slum that rose to fame as a renowned explorer and who fought for the abolishment of the slave trade.

The 2000ml water-resistant coating of my hiking jacket was not resistant enough for Mosi’s thunder. Member of a 3-party group of “Greatest waterfalls on the planet” – Canada’s Niagara and Brazil’s Iguacu being the other two, although I would personally add **Iceland’s Gulfoss** to the list – and the longest continuous curtain of falling water on Earth, it seemed to me that this had been the best time to visit the Falls, as they could have been approached from a multitude of fully-dry and fully-drenching viewpoints. An incredible amount of water was thundering down the cliffs into the gorge, slowly eroding and forming over millions of years, and the rainbows were numerous and bright!

I followed the marked routes on both the Zambia and Zimbabwe side (not having to pay to get an entry visa in either country, because of Cyprus being exempt, was a bonus!), with the Zambian side being a very good introduction to the experience and the Zimbabwe side being “the cherry on the icing” with the sheer volume of water.

There was a pestering overhead noise since around 10am – that of helicopters offering an aerial view of the Falls to those that could afford the ride. I didn’t see any micro-flights, probably because the water flow was still strong, which meant that the Devil’s Pool was also still inaccessible. In any case, I felt happy I didn’t end up doing the costly bungee jump from the Victoria Falls Bridge, as I had realized – while making my way over the bridge from Zambia to the Zimbabwe border –, that the jump faced the “wrong” side of the bridge, away from the direct view of the Falls and of the Boiling Point at the foot of the cliff.

I found it entertaining to watch the behavior of the baboons on the sides of the trail leading to the Boiling Point on the Zambian side. It was not funny, though, when one of them approached me with mean intentions while I was hurriedly devouring a bag of fig-flavored snacks. So big was my surprise with the baboon’s swift movements that in my effort to avoid him I almost tripped and fell. Fortunately, a Zambian man that showed up at the right moment ushered the animal away from me.

The information boards located meters past the entrance to the Falls on the Zimbabwe side talked about the “Seven natural wonders of the world”: Victoria Falls, the Aurora Borealis, the Great Barrier Reef, the Everest mountain, the Grand Canyon, the Paricutin volcano in Mexico and Rio de Janeiro’s harbor. With two wonders crossed off the list for me (the Falls and

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the Aurora), the other wonders remain to be explored!

While heading to the exit of the Zimbabwe side, I caught up with a local family, whose youngest member, a boy named Anno (between 2-3 years of age), made me smile at the way he was tagging along behind his mother and siblings. I greeted him and split seconds later one of his sisters turned around, saw us interacting and asked if she could take a photo of me with him. I kneeled at his height and ... *so funny*, he kneeled, too! He topped it off with the V sign hand gesture that his mother showed him. I gave all the kids a sticker from the sheets I had with me.

Later on, a Zimbabwe man walked along with me for a few minutes, trying to persuade me to buy copper bracelets, using the same story that Eduardo had used the day before – that he was an “artist” and blah blah blah. I rejected his offers after joking about baboons not seeming to have passports to cross into Zimbabwe, as I had only seen them on the Zambian side. He corrected my labeling of baboons as “monkeys”, by differentiating between baboons as “dirty” animals scavenging anything they found in their path, and monkeys which were more selective in what they ate.

During our interaction, I witnessed the longest of the day’s rainbows, which rose up from the Falls on my left side, crossed over the road with a vague curve and ended in the fields far to my right side. Alas, it disappeared before I could take a photo of it and despite wishing hard for a reappearance, it never happened.

I returned to the Zambian side by 5pm and continued towards the Royal Livingstone Hotel (R.L.H.), believing I wouldn’t need to walk a long distance before meeting up with Joseph at 6pm. I walked on the side of the main road up to the gate of (Italian-owned and for-the-filthy-rich) Amani resort and asked the guards about the location of the R.L.H. They said I could enter through that gate and get a free shuttle to the R.L.H. At 5:25pm I was sitting at the back seat of a golf cart, being driven along a relatively long distance to the shore of the Zambezi River, where guests were having a drink on the deck, while a band was playing melodic African music just a couple of meters away.

Not really looking my best after a day of being exposed to nature’s appetite and feeling the pressure of time, I snapped a few photos of the river and by 5:40pm I returned with the golf cart to the car park in front of the entrance of the Falls (Zambian side). Since I had 20 minutes to spare, I pleaded with the guard of the R.L.H. to let me inside the official Falls park from the side door, to enjoy the view of the sun setting over the river. By orientating myself through the vegetation, I managed to reach the upstream, marked trail that I hadn’t walked on earlier in the day and saw the sunset over the top of the cliff. *Pas mal!*

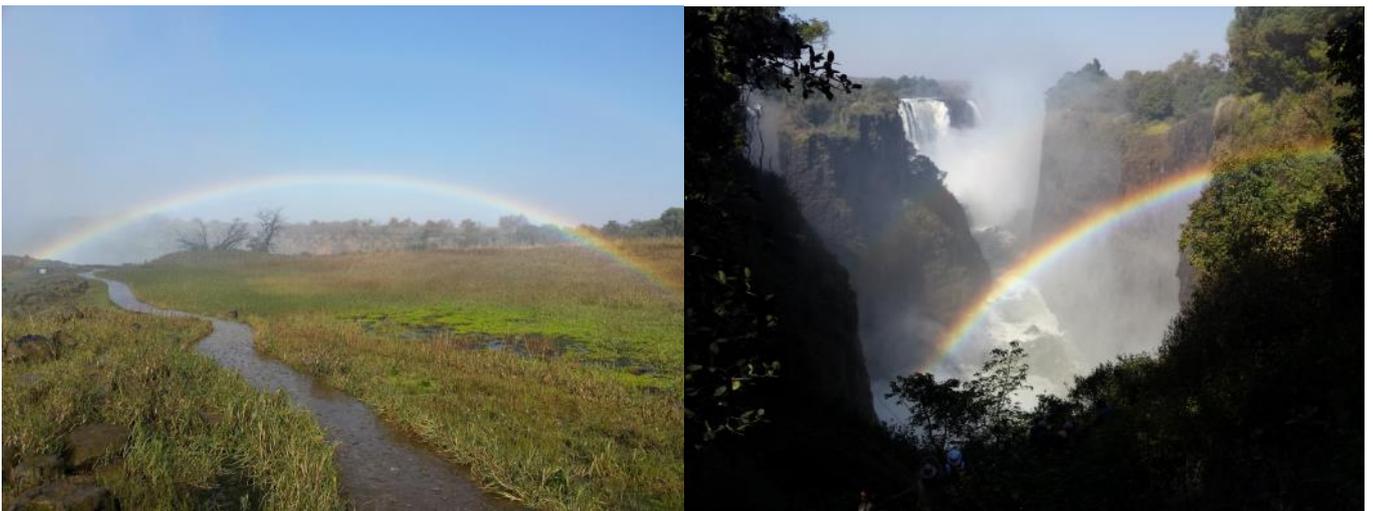
Joseph arrived at the car park as I was talking with a male Zambian souvenir seller who, unlike the other locals I had talked with, didn’t try to sell me anything *AND* was aware of the existence of Cyprus - as a Mediterranean island - because he had Maltese friends.

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Later in the evening, Keone from Trinidad, who had already been to southern Mozambique as part of his 6-month trip from South Africa to Egypt, warned me to check the safety conditions in northern Mozambique, if I was planning to go there, due to tribal conflicts.

My dinner (the “mbuzi” goat meal) at the Zambezi Café was a hearty and tasty one, true to the restaurant’s fame for serving very big portions. The HAVA MUSIC band, consisting of musicians from Botswana and Zimbabwe, was playing in the bar area and the female singer’s voice was simply *incredible!* Looking around the inner yard of the Café, my eyes fell on the country flags and mascots – from the 2018 World Cup – painted high on the walls. “*Africa sure has a thing for painting walls with all sorts of images!*”, I realized.

Born and raised in Zambia, having lived in London for many years, the owner of the Café – with whom I had a short conversation – returned to his home country 5 years ago to help make it a better place and support the Livingstone community by hiring local employees. Initially, he had opened just the Café space facing the road and gradually expanded to the restaurant in the back yard and, beyond that, the bar and the rest of the complex. Clearly, a businessman with a sense of direction!



Friday, August 3

At 10:30 in the morning I placed most of my belongings behind the hostel's reception desk and headed out the door. Destination: the train station. On the way there, I passed outside a colonial house serving as the offices of a safari company that promoted lion petting. I had already read a magazine article about how lions intended for petting by tourists were first raised in captivity and then sold to the huge hunting market when they became too dangerous for humans. As if that wasn't enough, lion bone was a much-desired commodity in the Asian market. "*Fuck the Asian market!*", was the immediate objection inside my head when I had read that line.

My attention was also drawn by a printed image, randomly hanging from a metal gate, of an African family (parents and two children) sitting for a meal at the table. Very westernized image, very nuclear, very 1950's; I wondered what the purpose of it was. Further on, I saw the outdoor setting of Chitima restaurant, whose biggest attraction was its *indoor* dining area: a small, vintage train wagon. I was tempted by the thought of returning for a sit-down meal inside the wagon, but eventually I arranged with Tina, the owner, to pick up my take-away dinner from there later in the afternoon, before the evening train ride to Lusaka.

At the train station, I reserved my personal cabin on the sleeper cart of the Kafue train and made my way back towards the town's center. While walking, I was approached by a tout trying to sell me Nyami Nyami necklaces. He started telling me a story about the figures on the necklaces; the moment the words "Devil's pool" and "the (Victoria Falls) Bridge", came out of his mouth, catchwords for unsuspecting tourists, I interrupted him to point out that I hadn't seen a single Zambian wearing such a necklace. "If it was indeed so important, they would *all* be wearing it!", I proclaimed, so ... "goodbye"!

Approaching the Post Office, I was drawn by the live drum music played by the Tusole group, a happening organized by the Livingstone City Council, "to attract and inform the city's residents and newcomers about the services we offer", as one of the Council's female employees informed me. I stood for a few minutes to enjoy the music and then went to the colonial building housing the Department of Health's Walk-in Center, which I had spotted while exploring the town the day before.

The Center's Counselor/Intaker I was sent to talk to, in my capacity as a colleague, was rather cold and distant, and not really willing to answer my questions about the kinds of issues they had been dealing with. It seemed she was more interested in completing the paperwork/number-crunching she was doing when I had knocked on the door of her small office. To my question regarding the percentage of HIV-infected persons, she said "it's more 1 to 10" than 1 to 8. And to my observation that I had seen several men sitting and doing nothing throughout the day, she responded that "they might not be unemployed because maybe they are waiting for something" and "everyone has to make a living for themselves". The topic of "men sitting

idly” was among those I had already discussed with my dormmate Edmond, as he had also observed this phenomenon during his volunteer work.

Next stop for me was Emmanuel Restaurant on John Hunt Way. From their standard menu of “fish/beef/chicken with n’shima/rice/fries”, I chose to try n’shima for the first time, accompanied by vegetables (at a cost of 30 ZK/3\$). I was the only person there for lunch, possibly because I had arrived a bit early. A man sitting at the bar and staring down at his phone told the woman running the kitchen (in dialect, without shifting his gaze from the screen) to ask me to wash my hands. That’s when I first understood the purpose of the small sink in the corner of the room.

I sat down opposite the large screen TV, which was showing a German-language documentary of the Deutsche Welle Channel, regarding Nicolas Maduro and the socio-political situation in Venezuela. I asked the woman, who had also sat down to stare at her phone, if they spoke German. She replied with a plain “No” and refrained from explaining their choice of channel. *Peculiar and funny!*

N’shima, served in the shape of a hand-made ball, had a rather bland taste, which I had been prepared for, based on the pre-trip planning I had made. Together with the cooked greens the woman brought me, I managed to eat half of the mixture with my fingers, licking them constantly along the way to clean them from the food traces. “There *must* be a less messy way!”, I kept on thinking.

After lunch I made my way to the outdoor market, lined with several stalls and small shops behind the SPAR supermarket. I stopped at two of them to check-out chitenge fabrics. For 95 ZK (about 10\$) I could have bought a heavy roll (5.6 meters) of a beautiful color combination I saw, but its weight was quite deterring to carry in my backpack for the next 30+ days. “Maybe I can find the same in Malawi...”, I settled the dilemma with myself. While walking away from that market, looking around at its dusty ground and very basic infrastructure, I had an “Aha! moment”: I had become quite acclimatized to the daily conditions of such “developing” regions of the world.

Later in the afternoon, I released myself in Pauline’s caring hands at the hostel’s beauty salon, hoping that her services would be as good as her gentleness. The day had been full of walking up and down and I needed some pampering, but the end-result was quite disappointing for the price I had paid. The second “let-down” was at Chitima restaurant, where I had stopped to collect my take-away meal on the way to the train station. Tina charged me 85 ZK (instead of 30) because the lower price was for chicken with n’shima, not with rice, which was apparently more expensive. When I reached the station, I realized she had filled my entire expandable bowl with rice. *Fair enough!* That quantity of food, together with the delicious banana muffin I had bought from the Zambezi Café earlier in the afternoon, ensured my dinner, breakfast and lunch for the 18-hour train ride to Lusaka.

The compartment next to mine on the “Golden Jubilee Michael Chilufya Sata Express Train” was occupied by two loud men, one of whom insisted that I should have been willing to talk to them. As a solo mzungu traveler on a train loaded with black Africans, I stood out like the full moon in the night sky. This meant I had to come up with several ways to protect my privacy, like staying inside my compartment with the door locked for most of the time, only stepping out, as inaudibly as possible, when I needed to use the dirty toilets. I ended up hanging my blanket in front of the door to block the indiscreet looks of men that were trying to pull my door open without asking first for my permission, which had happened on at least 3 occasions in the first hours on the train.



Saturday, August 4

The evening “sleep” on the train was a very shaky one. My sarong came handy to cover the compartment’s window in full or by 50% like a curtain, to hide me from curious eyes and give me some camouflage for taking photos and videos without being noticed. Admittedly, I wanted others to be a “victim” of my curiosity and not the other way around. In the end, if you think about it, we are all an attraction for each other, regardless if we are ready for it or not.

Between sunrise and 11:15am when the train stopped at Lubombo village, we had passed through a semi-arid landscape, dotted with baobab trees, corn fields and dry bushes. The settlements consisted of either round, thatched-roof huts or very small, exposed-brick houses. I saw several people, most of them women, carrying loads on their backs and heads, working in the fields, cooking over an open fire, washing clothes or spreading them around to dry.

With every stop the train made, I looked out the window and noticed how most of the children running or walking barefoot on the side of the train had dust-covered skin and were wearing dirty and torn clothes. Children as young as 4 years of age were perfectly balancing baskets of fruit or bread or grilled meat on their heads while trying to sell their goods to willing passengers. It didn’t take much to think that this was the image of a deprived life most economically-secure children in the western world would never experience.

The train remained motionless in Lubombo and eventually I found out why: a cargo train, which could very well have been two kilometers long, was derailed right on our tracks and so it had to be moved out of the way, otherwise we couldn’t go anywhere. Soon after, it became obvious that moving the cargo train out of the way was not an option. Plan B was that the Zambezi train coming from Lusaka in the direction of Livingstone would give our train its “contents” and we – passengers, luggage, cargo – would have to move to that train and continue to Lusaka. That meant it would be a few more hours before these “contents” were fully exchanged across the length of the three trains.

I couldn’t get any signal on my phone and the message I tried sending to Elson, my Couchsurfing host in Lusaka, to check on the status of him hosting me and inform him of my delay, was not going through. That stressed me somewhat, but I couldn’t complain, as I wanted to live the “real, local experience” rather than simply take the 7-hour tourist bus from Livingstone to Lusaka.

Upon hearing the noise from two compartments down the corridor, I came out of my “shell” (a.k.a.. “Compartment C”) and intervened with a smile, some sheets of lined paper, some stickers, a pen and a red pencil to calm down two-year old Justin who was crying and giving his young mother a hard time. Well, I struck gold; Justin “can spend hours drawing”, his mother said, so the materials I had with me worked like magic to dry up the little boy’s tears.

At about 2:30pm, the *Great Colorful Migration* began. Hundreds of people, young and old, with suitcases, fabric bags, fresh produce, live chicken, etc., started moving parallel to the Golden Jubilee and the derailed cargo train to grab their place in the grass next to a dirt trail and wait. I remained close to Justin and his mother to help her carry her things and for the relative comfort of having a local person with me. Fortunately, we found a grassy spot in the shadow to sit, but by 4:15pm the temperature was starting to cool down as the sun was getting ready to set.

As a mzungu woman that could carry her heavy backpack on her own, I was certainly an amusement for the locals. And it was OK because I was equally amused by everything that was going on. At some point, a man walking along the dirt trail saw me and asked me “How’s the situation?” to which I replied, smiling, “The same for everyone!” Finally, at 4:45pm the Zambezi train arrived and unlike the hoi polloi that had to rush and fight over available seats in the Economy carriages, the very few of us that had a compartment in the sleeper carriage simply had to locate it.

It wasn’t until 7:10pm that the train finally started moving. Two hours later, the lights in the compartments went off and it wasn’t clear when they would be turned back on. Only some of the lights in the corridor and the toilets were working, until about 9:50pm when those went out as well. *At least we were not sinking like the Titanic!* I had been under the impression that the sleeper cabins of the Zambezi train would have been better equipped than the Golden Jubilee, but it was quite the opposite.

With me I had the Zambia guidebook I had picked up at Livingstone airport. “Lying in the tropical belt of Southern Africa, Zambia covers 752,614 sq.km, an area the size of Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Hungary combined”. *Wow!!* And all this land is home to *only 14 million* people!!

Our stop at Kafue station was also quite long. Having already exterminated 4 small cockroaches in my cabin and still without a sign of Elson (the system seemed to have been “down in general”, according to the station’s manager), I started to lose my patience. Very sleepy and without a shower for 52 hours, I felt more like an animal than a human being. Plus, I had no idea what I was going to do and where I would spend the night once we arrived in Lusaka.

During the wait, I spent about 40 minutes “educating” one of the train’s staff on Development issues related to Africa, the world-wide crisis, China’s expansion and the problems of Cyprus. The poor man was disillusioned that corruption exists *only* in Africa!



Sunday, August 5

The train arrived in Lusaka at 2:30am, making the 30-hour ride my longest stay in one transportation medium so far, the previous No. 1 being **the 19 hours I had spent on the plane from Munich to Buenos Aires in 2015**. Still without success in reaching Elson, the only person I could locate on the phone at that time, late at night, was Emilie, a girl I had found through Couchsurfing before departing from Cyprus, and who had invited me to a “going away to Uganda for work” party she had been planning to organize. The party was supposed to happen the night before, so obviously I had missed it. I apologized to her when I called her because it was clear she had been deeply asleep. I told her what had happened and asked if she had a taxi driver to recommend. She said “No”; then again, *where would I go with the taxi?!*

For safety reasons, I had to wait at the train station until daylight, with the station’s on-duty police officer a few meters away. I tried to sleep in my sleeping bag lying on a series of seats in the roofed waiting hall of the station, but without much success. The seats were not so much the problem; although made of metal, they had a thin pleather layer on the sitting part. The biggest issue was the cold wind (the waiting area had no walls on the sides) and the noise made by staff of the railway company, especially after sunrise. Well, *at least* I had access to the bathroom!

At 8:30am I sat down with a cup of hot chocolate inside the Hungry Lion fast food restaurant of Oasis Mall across the Lusaka Central Bus Station. I couldn’t understand why the residents of Lusaka thought it was a good idea to have fried food at 8 o’clock in the morning. To kill time, I bought a local sim card from the bus station and checked which bus companies went regularly to Lundazi, with departures between 4-5am.

I returned to Oasis Mall and switched to the Chicken Slice fast food restaurant, where I went “loca” using the Wi-fi to update fellow travelers, and finally managed to reach Elson. Eventually, I was picked up by a friend of his that drove me to Meanwood, a guarded residential area, quite far (about 20km) from the city center. Once there and with Elson not scheduled to return home until the afternoon, I took a much-needed shower and washed my very filthy clothes. In the meantime, Barnabas – the Development expert my friend Louisa had suggested I met with – got in touch with me and we arranged to meet at the Twin Palms Mall, where I could finally grab something to eat as I was starving.

It took me about 45 minutes on foot to reach Twin Palms Mall, including a short stop at a tailor’s shop to get some local advice on how to differentiate between good quality chitenge fabrics and the imitation ones, the latter coming from China and West Africa, as the tailor informed me. Further up on the road, I was approached by a young, wonderfully-fragranced Zambian man named Costa, who asked me if I was a “missionary” (*because of the way I looked?!*) and wanted to talk to me about his thoughts regarding religion. He shared a dilemma he had about the church he was attending, “Jesus Christ Embassy of ... Whatever”, and

Take a journey with me ...

mentioned a parabolic story from the Bible where a man took a lion's feces and fed it to others. I argued in favor of critical thinking and questioning what one was being served as "knowledge" in the name of a church or religion, using Cyprus' money-driven, racist Archbishop as an example to avoid.

The meeting with Barnabas over Development in Zambia took place over a box of just-what-I-needed pizza from South African chain restaurant Debonairs. His counter-argument to my impression that China was planting and expanding itself in Africa was that if it hadn't been for China, several roads and schools in the country wouldn't have existed. He agreed the country had taken a loan to pay back for that infrastructure, but he expressed hope that Zambian youth would bring the country forward. As to my argument that the Chinese seemed to be polluting the ground where they mined, he responded with the example of a Swedish company with mining rights in the country, that had also polluted the waters in the area it had been active. In his eyes, the Chinese were employing local workforce when developing infrastructure and if there were strong policies in place to protect against corruption, then the money earned could go where it should. He agreed with me about the great gap between the poor and middle class/affluent Zambians and mentioned a social program that was in place to raise the socio-economic status of rural areas. I suggested they also did something about the quality of car fuel, as the air pollution from exhaust fumes was giving me a very sore throat!

After the meeting, I went inside the Shoprite supermarket to buy some food for the following two days, this time more conscious of the higher-than-Cyprus prices of several items, including vegetables. By the time I had entered the vast, gated Meanwood property where Eison resided, it had gotten dark and after many failed attempts to find the correct turn to his housing complex, I ended up being picked up by him on his way home from work.



Monday, August 6

I was awakened at 9:30am by a woman tapping on my bedroom window for me to let her inside the house. As I discovered later, this lady visited Elson's place 3 times per week to clean the house and cook for him. I felt sorry for her having to kneel to wipe the entire floor with a piece of fabric and a bucket of water ... just because the regular mop was broken. *"Well, fix it, man, she's not your slave!"*, I thought, regarding Elson's indifference.

With August 6th being Farmers Day, a public holiday in Zambia, the arrangements I had already made to visit 37D Art Gallery, which was hosted in a private house in Lusaka, had to be rescheduled. So, the day included the completion of necessary to-do's, like adding credit to my Zambian MTN sim card, finding a Bureau de Change with a good exchange rate (9.94 ZK per 1 \$), booking myself in Lusaka Backpackers Hostel for the following night and indulging in packets of pricey musli and dried fruit from the Food Lover's Market in Levy Shopping Mall. It would have been hard to not notice the great amount of western-style shopping malls in Lusaka, another indication of South Africa's influence on its northern neighbor.

On the return way home with Elson, I asked for his opinion on the issues I had discussed with Barnabas. As a native Zimbabwean with a background in the finance sector, his view was that as long as corruption was present (in Zimbabwe, Mugabe's former Deputy was in power, using the same oppressive tactics as his predecessor) and resources were being pulled out of Africa, real development of the continent could not take place. He described himself as among the fortunate to have a well-paying job that afforded him "a vacation every 3-4 weeks".

During a South African radio program Elson had playing in his car, it was reported that in 24% of South Africa's public schools not a single learner could achieve the basic level of learning in Mathematics tests (compared to 2% in Botswana's public schools). That sounded like a troubling percentage for a country with one of the strongest economies on the continent.

I spent the afternoon in the house, relaxing and trying to treat my gradually worsening, aching throat. If that wasn't enough, my lower (intestinal) brain continued to act as it pleased, regardless of what my upper (cerebral) brain commanded. I made sure to consume about two liters of detox tea, in my effort to "force" some sort of cleansing movement in my intestinal tract.

Tuesday, August 7

After an uneasy night of throat pain and bad dreams, in which ants were eating me alive (most likely inspired by Elson's *ant-infested kitchen!!*), by 7am I was ready for him to drop me off in the city center on his way to work. There was a lot of morning traffic on the road and it took more than one hour to cover the 18km distance. Looking out the window, I was impressed by the immense size of a housing estate being built, with luxury apartments and houses, and I wondered who could afford to live there, after having seen the level of poverty in the countryside and in the outskirts of the city. The differences in socio-economic status were obvious when it came to life *under ground*, as well: for those that could afford it, their dead body would be housed in a secured, walled property, whereas the poor just received a tombstone in an open field, among bushes and grass.

We drove past a store called "Marie Stone – Italian garden statues and pots" which, to me, felt culturally out of place. Moments later, a funny scene I saw included three young men walking on the side of the road, dressed in shirt and dark pants (*Going to school? To work?*), the shortest of which was walking with a distinctively "dancing" rhythm.

At Lusaka Backpackers Hostel, I lounged in the front garden for a few hours, before I could settle in the female dorm room. Afterwards, I had a chat with my only other roommate, a Dutch woman studying to be an eye doctor, who had been volunteering in Zambia for a few weeks.

Around noon, I headed out towards Levy Mall in search of food. I passed in front of Lusaka's version of the Roman Colosseum and made a short stop to chat with two men playing checkers and their two onlookers. Further down the road, I was spotted by young Elias, who wanted to find out where I was going and what I was doing. He said he was studying at a nearby College of Applied Arts and Sciences, some topic related to the Environment. He walked with me until the mall and in our short conversation I shared my thoughts regarding the strong connection between the state of the environment and people's psychological well-being.

My nose had been so blocked that I hadn't realized, until much later, that the plastic cup of green bean salad I had bought at Food Lover's Market – together with a pre-packed chicken meal, plus bananas and carrots – had been loaded with crushed garlic. My next stop was the bus station where I reserved a seat on a bus to Lundazi and found a taxi driver that agreed to take me to 37D Gallery, and wait to bring me back. He also agreed to drive me from the hostel early next morning, so that I could depart with the 5am bus.

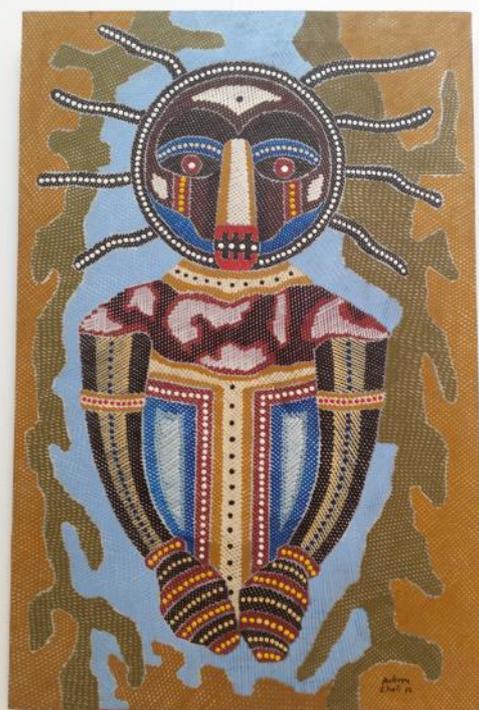
On the way to the gallery, we passed outside the huge estate which served as the residence of the Zambian president and through streets with luxurious houses, one of them with an EU flag on a pole behind its high fence. The gallery was located on one of those streets. True to my expectations, the collection was very interesting. Olivia, the curator, welcomed me

and gave me an introduction to what I was going to see, while a group of black children were sitting with white adults at a big table and were working together on an art project. Olivia explained that Art Education was not offered extensively in local schools as the materials were expensive to buy. The stART Foundation Trust that supported the Gallery offered the opportunity to children from the local compounds to attend free art classes.

The collection included the wooden hyena and impala sculptures by Pam Guhrs-Carr (a female artist living in Luangua Valley), the ceremonial masks from the Eastern Province (which were, in fact, very light in weight, even though they seemed very bulky), Patrick Bentley's black & white photos from the South Luangua park (one of them of a glorious eagle, resting on a wooden branch with its head lowered), pottery by Cypriot artist Andrew Makrymallis (Olivia was amused when I told her the meaning of his last name), the metal sculptures by David Makala (a self-made artist from one of the nearby impoverished compounds), as well as very beautiful paintings.

I returned to the hostel, feeling drained from my persistent cold symptoms. Sitting on the built-in sofas in the hostel's front yard was Sarah from northern Germany, who had been traveling southwards from Uganda in the last 3 months. We talked about how the prices and lifestyle (malls, fried food) in Lusaka – Zimbabwe and Botswana as well, based on her experience – seemed to have been affected by South Africa. Sarah had also taken the train from Livingstone – her ride lasted 20 hours – and she had seen endless piles of garbage on either side of the tracks when they were approaching Lusaka. I missed those because it was already dark when we were passing through that area. The conversation turned to the non-existent management of waste we had witnessed in Sub-Saharan Africa; when she was living/volunteering in Uganda Sarah had to burn her own waste, as no other option was available.

I wrote down Sarah's useful travel advice for Mozambique and by 9:30pm I was in bed, with my alarm set for 3:25am.



Wednesday, August 8

The time was 4:12am and I was standing outside the gate of Lusaka Backpackers waiting for James, the taxi driver I had arranged the day before. But James didn't honor his part of the deal. Feeling the pressure of time, I called the man that had sold me the bus ticket to Lundazi and had him send a taxi for me.

The bus left the station on time, with me having won the battle of not paying extra to store my backpack in the luggage compartment. Instead, it was placed next to the driver, where I could keep an eye on it, as I was sitting right behind him. Feeling tired, I dozed off on my travel pillow several times throughout the 11+ hour ride.

The numerous settlements of small brick houses or round huts, most of them with thatched roofs and a few covered with iron sheets, couldn't escape my attention as we drove past them. I imagined that those collections of small structures were: the main area for sleeping, the kitchen/cooking space, the toilet (if any), the water well (if any), the animals' den, the family gathering space and the business-related space (if the family had anything to sell).

At 8am we made a short stop at the Luangwa Bridge market, but I chose to remain on the bus, conscious that I was missing out on a close look of the weaved baskets, the grilled fish and what seemed like fruit for sale at the road-side stalls. During the ride, a sequence of very kitschy, low-budget music videos worshipping Jesus was projected on a TV screen above the driver. When added to the "Believe", "God gives", "Psalms No. xxx" quotes, I had already seen painted on walls and taped on cars, I couldn't help but think that these people had been brain-washed to the bone by the missionaries. Before we reached Sinda at 11am, the kitschy music videos were replaced by an equally low-quality, Chino-African action movie.

Not long before arriving to Chipata at 12:45pm, I noticed a sign on the side of the road that read "LET'S SEND BOTH BOYS AND GIRLS TO SCHOOL, END CHILD MARRIAGES!" *Good idea!* What would make it even better, I would add, would be to abolish fees for, and raise the quality of, public education.

By 4pm we reached Lundazi, after we had driven on a tarmac road that could have used some (or a lot of, in places) pothole filling. The landscape of dry savannah remained the same along the way, so did the types of settlements. The only real landscape changes were the hills and piles of boulder rocks I had seen in the distance towards the border with Mozambique and the river we had crossed over.

Even though the Lundazi Castle Hotel was the first among the three reasons for which I had wanted to visit the town, my attempts to contact the management and find out if accommodation was in fact available, had been unsuccessful. So, while I was on the bus, I asked an old man sitting next to me for his recommendation on where to sleep in town. When we arrived, the old man began walking with me towards the castle. It so happened that the hotel's

manager was walking towards us, so the old man introduced me to him and before long I was setting my bags down in one of the property's twin-bed, ground-level rooms, with access to a shared bath and toilet. I could only afford to pay 12\$ for each of the two nights I was going to stay there and for what I was getting, considering the castle's need of renovation, it was enough.

Feeling exhausted and with a pounding headache, I ate something to restore my energy levels and then went outside towards the nearby lake, to catch a glimpse of the sunset and a video of the soundscape. Soon it became obvious that I would have had to battle with myriads of mosquitoes hiding in the tall grasses, so I made my stay short.

With the castle being full of corridors and hobbit-sized doors, I felt tempted to look for any secret pathways and to have a peek inside the other bedrooms. To no avail, however. The funniest thing I spotted were two 1980's stickers for the long-time ceased Zambia Airways: one for flights to Rome and the other for Larnaca. *Of all the airports in the world, there was a sticker for Cyprus' Larnaca!* What a weird coincidence!

A bucket bath later, the necessary laundry wash, and taking care of my online to-do's and I was ready to retire to my "royal quarters" for the night.



Thursday, August 9

The day started with me peeking out through one of the castle's open windows and observing a young girl sitting in front of an open fire while her mother was patiently filling two big buckets with water from a faucet. The scene was taking place inside the yard of their house, a few meters away from the castle. The girl, wearing a dirty yellow cardigan, appeared in the corridor later, while I was having my breakfast and an intense conversation with Akran, the hotel's kind receptionist.

Stimulated by a mutual desire to have questions answered, the conversation centered around religion and the scientific evidence vs. biblical beliefs of how humans appeared on Earth, why Africans had adopted the story of "white" Jesus (basically switching from tribal gods and spirits to another subject of adoration), the effects of colonialism and corruption, the history of Cyprus and my plans to enter Malawi.

Precious – that was the girl's name – was timid to approach me, at first. I called her over and offered her a slice of bread with butter, but she said "No". I proposed to bring her some stickers after I had finished my breakfast and to that she agreed. When her older sister, Dogas, came to get her, Precious obeyed but with tears in her beautiful eyes; it looked like she wanted to stay near me a bit more.

I got myself ready at a lazy pace, offered some pieces of soutzioukkos for Akran and the rest of the staff to taste, and walked over to Precious. She was laughing and excited to see me. I offered her some stickers and one pack of my Nature Valley bars to share with her sister.

Within a few minutes after coming onto the tarmac road, I found myself among piles of second-hand clothing in an open space market. Shocking amounts of clothes, unsorted and not necessarily clean. I asked one of the vendors where those items were coming from; he said, "from China". In retrospect, I should have asked if they were buying and reselling those clothes or if they were just handed out to them for free. I also should have inquired about indicative prices.

While walking around in search of a place to exchange fifty of my dollars into Malawian kwacha (MK), a poster stapled to a tree caught my eye. It was announcing the "Grand New Opening" of a shop with "high quality second-hand clothes and shoes from Europe". *As if the piles of second-hand clothing I had seen earlier had not been enough!*

Outside the police station I saw a van with a dusty windshield on which someone had written what seemed like a complaint. A man passed by me with his bicycle and I asked him if he knew what that was about. He said he didn't, but at least he knew where the Rejoice restaurant was and he was willing to lead me to it. We chatted along the way. Named Jairos, he said he was "a pastor by calling" and "a teacher by profession", managing a pre-school with 30 children, aged 1-6 years, close to the border with Malawi.

Jairos' wife had just given birth to their first child after a series of miscarriages, a boy they were planning to name "Testimony". Upon hearing my name, Jairos remembered that when he was in college, he had seen it in a list of names as synonymous to charm, gratitude, favor and grace, and had thought that when he would have a child, he would name it so. I laughed and suggested that if he ever had a daughter, he could name her after me. He asked me if I would like to visit his wife and newborn at the hospital. I answered positively, but first I wanted to go back to my room and get a sheet of animal-themed stickers (for the children in his school) and a small gift for the newborn (a pair of decorative pins from a Cyprus museum).

I pre-ordered my "n'shima with relish and grilled sea bream" lunch with the restaurant's female manager and continued my exploration of the town. Apart from finding a way to exchange money, I had to find out my transportation options for getting to Jenda, the first Malawian town one would reach after crossing the border. Someone I asked at the bus station led me to a tall man named Boyd, who said that there were departures for Jenda at 6am. I said that would be "too early for me", not wanting to rush it so much, as Livingstonia, my destination in Malawi, didn't seem so far away, plus, after I spoke with Akran I understood I could depart at 8am, so Boyd offered me a 9am departure. I agreed and took his number.

My attempt to exchange money had not been equally easy. At the hardware shop where Malawian kwacha were available, the employee suggested I first change my dollars into Zambian currency at the bank and then use the ZK to get MK through him. I was hesitant to do so, knowing I would lose money in the exchange process.

Upon re-entering the castle, I was greeted by a group of large, beautiful black-blue butterflies but, hyperactive as they usually are, they wouldn't sit still for a photo. By 1pm I was back at Rejoice, run as an income-generating activity for people living with HIV/AIDS. My meal was delicious, and I dived in it with a full appetite, after having done the hand-washing ritual, at the sink in the corner, a couple of times. I remained at the restaurant to catch up on my journal notes, drawing the attention of the other guests and of the women working in the kitchen. Being the odd one there, I could feel them stare at me or talk about me, but I wasn't bothered.

Jairos came by the restaurant looking for me, while I was eating. I had misunderstood the visitation times for the hospital and visitations were ending soon. So, I handed him the stickers and my gift for the newborn, for which he didn't seem very thrilled.

The second reason I chose to visit Lundazi was the Community Markets for Conservation (COMACO) shop, located a few meters away from the restaurant. The company promoted the "It's Wild!" brand of honey, peanut butter, rice and other commodities, which were purchased from local farmers under a scheme to encourage sustainable nature conservation. I bought a small jar of smooth peanut butter; combined with two white buns I bought from the bakery, I had my breakfast ready for the next day.

Among the shops in town, it was hard not to notice the Willy's Corner franchise (butchery, bar, office, etc.), each shop with a "GOD IS GREAT" painted on the front wall. Many times during the day, the wind blew dust up from the ground; I used my bandana to cover my nose but couldn't do much for my clothes and shoes. Walking up and down I couldn't escape being noticed, which earned me the usual "Hey, mzungu!" to "Hello, how are you?" to "Are you married?", to which I instinctively answered "Yes" to avoid any on-the-spot marriage proposals.

The newly built PEP store, a South African brand selling clothes, shoes and kitchenware, among other things, was among the places I entered. I was curious to see what they were selling and the prices of their products, unsure about who would buy things from this shop after I had been around the town's low-budget market. The differences between this shop and the second-hand clothing spread on the ground that I had seen earlier, were striking. I browsed through the corridors; 50 ZK for a bra, 20 ZK for a tank-top. Even these seemed too "expensive" to me and the fabrics seemed like they wouldn't last long. Besides, I needed to save at least 50 of my left-over kwachas for the ride to the border with Malawi.

I walked out of there and into the stationery shop, where I bought a pack of 8 small crayons and a notebook that I wanted to take as a gift to Precious and Dogas. Without realizing how I had not seen it already, moments later I entered the town's open-air vegetable market, which was quite big and spread out into several streets. Apart from vegetables, there were sellers of all kinds; shoes, hardware, burning fuel, metal pots, hair products, plastics and so forth.

Although I went around a couple of times, I couldn't see a significant variety of vegetables or fruit. It was explained to me that because it was the winter/dry season, only some fresh produce was available for sale. There were tomatoes (neatly arranged in small pyramids), beans of various colors (priced according to the size of the plastic bowl they were in), piles of dried fish (covered by flies), along with potatoes, onions and ... dried black worms. *Yikes!*

Among the fruits for sale was the mbuyu from the baobab tree; shaped like an oversized pear and with seeds inside that, when shaken, sounded like a musical instrument. I regret that I didn't get one to try! What I couldn't understand was *who* was, in fact, *buying* from all these stalls which seemed like a copy-paste of each other.

I passed through some covered rows of dry fish for sale; Mr. Felix Banda, who knew the location of Cyprus on the map, explained how the fish would be typically cooked. Among his products was a type of fish that looked like a snake's head with a very short tail. One more photo I should have captured but didn't, together with other missed images: the large baskets of live chicken, cartons of 24 eggs balanced on the vendors' heads, babies hanging from their mother's back, the variety of hair extensions exhibited for sale in hair salons.

My next chat was with Agnes (a.k.a. Aggie), the “Vice Chairperson” of the market sellers union, whose presidential-pose photo was hanging inside her corner shop. The two wooden stalls outside her shop were set up exactly like everybody else’s. She asked me about my trip so far; I explained that if I had been living in Lundazi, it would have been much easier for me to shop for food from the market. Aggie also introduced me to her daughter, who showed up as she was explaining that the beans were from the Lundazi area and the tomatoes were imported from Malawi.

A few moments later I entered the hair salon next to Aggie’s shop because the three women sitting there saw that I was an attraction and expressed the desire to meet me. I joked with them that I had just discovered the secret of their amazing hairdos: *they are not “theirs”!* Curious to know, I asked them if the men actually noticed it when they had changed their hairstyle. They responded “Yes”. I guess when they went from straight black to purple braids overnight, it would have been hard not to notice!

At some point I saw the first man to carry his child in a chitenge cloth on his back. I walked up to him from behind and with the intention of complimenting him on being the exception to the rule, I began saying “Sir, I think...” – *nope, it was just a woman with very short hair!!!* I quickly aborted the mission, mumbled an apology and kept walking. 😊

Close to the yellow pipe where women were pumping water from an underground water well and filling several buckets with well-practiced movements, some other women, sitting on the ground, were selling what seemed like “fuel bombs”: tube-shaped buckets filled with a brown substance. One man asked me to smell some kind of brown powder, claiming it was “tea”. I could tell he was lying from the way the women were laughing. I laughed as well, made a joke about it and moved on through an alley. Suddenly, a man started talking to me in Tubuka language. I responded using Cypriot dialect, saying I couldn’t understand what he was saying, and this unusual exchange went on for a couple of sentences, entertaining the female owner of a nearby shop. Already accustomed to the intricate handshakes of the region, I held his hand long enough and said with a smile “At least we can communicate in English!”.

My last stop in the market was Mirimo’s wooden stall. I had stopped there when I first arrived at the market, so we had already made a connection. She was curious where I was from (a typical conversation starter) and stated she wanted to come to my country “to study”, even though she knew nothing about Cyprus. Her desperation to get out of Lundazi, escape her country’s corruption and have a decent future made me think of Barnabas and his hopes for Zambian youth. In fact, I texted him to ask if he knew of any initiative or support mechanism, within the country, that could have helped her. Sadly, he never responded.

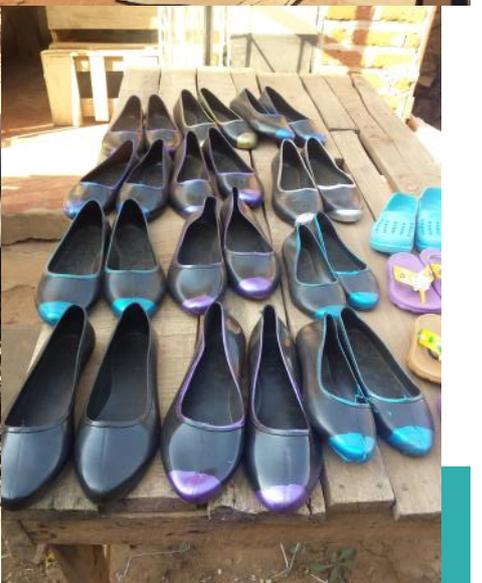
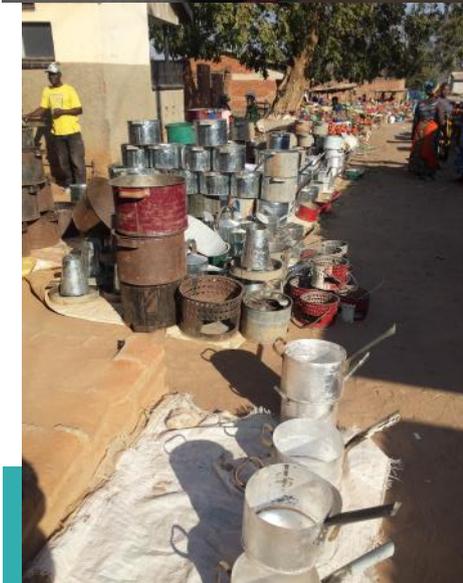
Mirimo’s brother James approached her counter as she was talking to me and asked me to explain the difference between “I like you” and “I love you”. I gave him my perspective on the matter, in good spirits. He spoke to me about his 4-year old daughter and I agreed that I

would have liked her, if I had actually met her.

By 5pm, I was back at the castle, recounting the day's colorful experiences and more details of Cyprus' history with Akran. While I was standing in front of the reception booth, one of the bees buzzing around the light bulbs on the ceiling, fell on my head and got trapped in my hair. A rather comical scene ensued, with me trying to make the bee go away, Akran looking at me from behind the booth's window and telling me something I couldn't pay attention to, me becoming more frustrated and shouting at the bee, the bee, I imagine, becoming more frustrated with my stupid hair and eventually stinging me and dropping dead on the floor.

Akran run to the kitchen and came back with a piece of tomato that he rubbed on my finger, saying "it helps". Well, I had no recollection of ever being stung by a bee, so I had no idea if I have a bee allergy. The swelling and the pain persisted through the night but, luckily for me, I had no other symptoms. Between getting ready for my departure to Malawi the next morning, giving Akran a small souvenir related to the archaeological history of Cyprus, using up my remaining MTN internet credit, taking a bucket bath and going to bed, I made a futile attempt to kill all the blood-sucking mosquitoes (out of zillions) I had my eyes on.





Friday, August 10 (Zambia)

The minute I replied “No, it’s too early” to Boyd the previous day, about leaving Lundazi for Jenda at 6am, my instinct rang the bell. And it was right, even though I chose not to pay attention to the warning. As the events of the day unfolded, I had to “pay” somehow for my desire to sleep a bit more.

At 8:20am I said goodbye to Akran and the manager of Lundazi Castle Hotel and headed for the bus station. As soon as I showed up loaded with my backpacks, I was asked where I was going and in order to see if more opportunities would come up, I shared my travel plan. I was directed to talk to the drivers of two pick-up cars that were leaving for Jenda once they were full with passengers and goods. In other words, at some unspecified hour of the day.

I returned to the bus station’s waiting area and kept asking around to see if I had other options. Of course, I didn’t. When Boyd appeared in a dented, white Toyota Corolla at around 9:20am, he was not being very clear about who else would be going with us. As the clerk at the hardware shop was still refusing to change my dollars into Malawian kwacha, Boyd drove me to the supplies shop of an Indian man, who also said he couldn’t help me. I didn’t really believe him; seeing him seated behind the counter of his busy enterprise, it was clear to me this man had financial power and connections.

Eventually, my only option was to change my 50\$ into Zambian kwacha at one of the local banks, at a worse rate than the one I would have gotten in Lusaka. Knowing that I had ZK in my hands because he had driven me to the bank, Boyd insisted I paid him 250 ZK to drive me to Jenda. As if I had ever told him that I wanted a private taxi to get there! So, I left him behind and walked to the hardware shop where I exchanged the ZK into Malawian currency. I ended up with 36000 MK in my hands. In wasn’t bad, in retrospect; the maximum I would have gotten with a better rate would have been 37000.

Feeling pressured and worried I was going to be scammed, I went straight to the police office inside the bus station and complained that ninety minutes had passed from when I was supposed to join a ride to Jenda in a shared vehicle. At least, that’s what I imagined was going to happen and I was prepared to pay up to 70 ZK for it. Officers Banda, Mwale and Leepona (a Lozi tribe woman that had her feet up on the desk, shoes off), seemed willing to help me. After listening to my story, they sent someone to bring a driver; he came back with a guy that said he wanted 70 ZK from me to take me, together with 4 other passengers. Mwale strictly pointed out that they shouldn’t take advantage of me just because of my skin color.

The “driver” ended up being Boyd’s brother and he was going to drive the Toyota Corolla I had seen Boyd drive earlier. After another hour of waiting and enduring the radio-style ads of “Arkay Investments Ltd” store, repeated from loudspeakers across the street, the run-down Corolla that was supposed to take 5 passengers was loaded with 9 adults (including two Big

Mamas), plus 2 children sitting on the laps of women on the back seats, plus our luggage that was overflowing from the trunk and strapped so that it wouldn't fall out.

I couldn't believe what was happening; it was surreal to see how all of us were stacked in that car, especially the two men that were *sharing the driver's seat* in front of me! The young woman sitting next to me said "Now we can start playing" and I responded with "*Play what?!*". But what she was in fact saying was "pRaying"; it was a funny reminder that locals in this part of Africa can not easily produce the "R" sound in their speech, especially when it is being preceded by a "P".

My mind went back to the scene in which the police officer ordered I shouldn't have been taken advantage of. In the end, all the passengers in that vehicle were being taken advantage of and I wished the police would actually do something to change that, as I felt sure they had known what was really going on. After all, we were only 50 meters away from their office.

By the time we had reached Jenda, having driven for about two hours on a road of loose red dust that was coming to us from all possible directions, I was no longer a *mzungu*. Instead, I was a brown/orange potato, with my face, the bandana and the white cardigan I was wearing reflecting exactly that. So did my 25lt black backpack that was sitting on my lap, and half of my 70lt black backpack; the other half was sort of saved by the red rain cover I instinctively strapped on to it before it was loaded in the trunk of the car.

The only thing I regret not experiencing in Zambia and Lundazi in particular, were the tribal celebrations the day after, for which I believe they were practicing next to the bus station, judging from the sounds of drums ...



Take a journey with me ...

Friday, August 10 (Malawi)

The 20-minute stop at the border between Zambia and Malawi, for me to get a visa into the country, was uneventful, other than my curiosity to look at a (as if from the 1970's) "Touristic Map of Malawi" posted on a wall of the run-down immigration office. The officers politely took my 75\$, without trying to scam me into paying more.

Unsurprisingly, Jenda was also in a dusty and decadent condition, unfavored by its position as a less-frequented border town. While I was walking towards the main road to find a ride north to Mzuzu, I turned to my left and saw a wrinkled, poor-looking woman sitting on the ground next to a man, on the side of the dirt road. What made the scene surreal for me was that her dehydrated breast was hanging out of her dirty blouse and a bare-bottomed toddler she had in her lap was sucking at it.

It didn't take long to find a seat in a car – correction: a *proper* seat in a *proper* car – for the ride to Mzuzu. The driver, of course, was not respecting the speed limit, despite passing by four different long trucks that were either overturned on the side of, or stopped in the middle of, the road. On top of that, he became upset every time he was being asked to stop at a police roadblock but, unfortunately, he suffered no consequences that would make him think twice about his dangerous driving practices.

Sitting next to me at the back of the car was another woman, holding a young girl (about 8-9 years of age) on her lap. The girl had her "pet" in a box on her own lap; a live, grown chicken. I was impressed by the little creature; not the chicken, of course, but the girl. Nicely dressed, clean, wearing earrings, fluent in the English language with what seemed like an American accent, she looked a world apart from all the children of low socio-economic status I had seen since August 1st.

The other thing that made an impression on me, a positive one when compared to the dry land I had experienced in the previous days, was the Malawian landscape. Forests of pine and other trees, rolling hills and a main road in decent condition; very quickly I became curious about the kinds of hiking trails one could find in this part of the country.

We arrived at Mzuzu's hectic open-air market/minibus station at around 5pm. By 5:30pm I was sitting inside a loaded minibus, with its passengers stacked like sardines (no surprises there), and heading north towards Kasonga and my final stop for the day: Chitimba Bay. The thirty minutes before departure were enough for me to buy the minimum necessities: an Airtel sim card from one of the many airtime-selling booths and four bananas for 100 MK (0.14\$) from a girl selling them window to window.

I couldn't believe the nerve of the driver and his assistant to keep loading people and baggage inside the run-down vehicle, despite having everyone stand or sit in very uncomfortable positions. "Slave trade practices were abolished in south-eastern Africa ... *yeah, right!!*", I thought. Plus, I couldn't believe how the police, despite the numerous roadblocks, allowed

the vehicle to pass through, after making us wait for a few minutes (for them to be bribed, perhaps?). I did express my frustration for the sardine-piling by telling the driver that the next person he picked up would have had to sit *on his lap* because that was the only free space left, but of course he ignored me completely.

The smooth tarmac that impressed me on the way to Mzuzu gave its place to a road full of potholes that, combined with the non-existent maintenance of the minibus, made my buttocks and lower back suffer a lot. I placed my flight pillow behind me to help me manage through the 2.5 hours of squashing and bumpiness, but with little positive effect. In the end, I forgot it on the minibus after I came out at the turn of the main road towards Livingstonia. This marked the second time I left something behind after hurriedly coming out of a bus, **like in Peru in 2015**. *Mental note: make sure to check, check and check again!*

I asked the police officer that was sitting at the roadblock where I got off, for directions to Hakuna Matata and he called someone from the nearby shops to help me out. I should have guessed that “Frankie the woodcarver” would have expected money from me (“guiding fee”, as he called it) for showing me the way in the dark, claiming he was taking me through a shortcut. I gave him 1000 MK which was way more than enough, but I was too tired to think clearly after a long day on the road.

The one thing that reimbursed me for the whole day’s discomforts was the view of the night sky; in the limited light pollution of the area, the Milky Way was distinctly visible. I took my shower, washed half my laundry and fell asleep in a room with 5 empty beds, soothed by the sound of the lake’s waves rolling out onto its shore at a very short distance.

Saturday, August 11

The sound of the waves woke me up at 7am and it was so strong, I could have sworn I was near a rough sea or an ocean. I walked towards the water to see what was happening, passing next to trees whose pink/orange seeds in curvy pods were creating interesting, artistic shapes. I grabbed a pod as a souvenir and reached the shore where, about 50 meters away, a fishing boat had just arrived and many locals, young and old, had encircled it.

I moved in that direction, wishing to take photos of the fishing boats and nets beyond the gathered crowd. One of the men ran towards me and introduced himself as Wisdom, Sirivo's brother. Sirivo was the Hakuna Matata (H.M.) staff member that had opened the gate for me the previous night. As the news traveled fast, he had told Wisdom that I was planning to head up the mountain in the direction of Livingstonia and Wisdom tried to sell his guiding services to me. I was very skeptical if those services were in fact needed, especially at a price of 10\$.

A middle-aged European couple with two dogs walked by me and I expressed my happiness to see them, as by that moment I had felt very much a victim of "mzungu with money" attitudes. I jumped at the opportunity for a chat and found out the man was the brother of Chitimba Camp's Dutch owner, visiting with his wife for two weeks. They had done the trek up to Lukwe EcoCamp and said they liked it more than Mushroom Farm. We wished each other a good trip and I headed back to H.M., with Wisdom asking me if I would use him and willing to negotiate his price. Still, I had not been convinced.

At H.M. I met with another staff member, that gave me the story of it not being safe going up to Lukwe on my own, and then with Willie, the camp's owner. Willie was, as I realized that moment, among the group of white persons I had seen in the morning when I went to the "bar" area, looking for a place with electricity to charge my phone. The other man in that group had been standing in front of my dorm room when I woke up, saying a prayer with two of the local staff. As Willie mentioned in our long conversation, that man was a missionary whose self-built mission station had been confiscated by locals and had gone from 73 students at that time to only 3.

Willie was adamant that local people were not able or willing to manage a business. Born and raised as an Afrikaner in South Africa, he left his country after governmental power had been removed from white South Africans. Out of the 3800 farms that had been managed by Whites until then, he said, only 20% remained as the black South Africans that took possession of the land had sold the machinery and had started renting it out – as camping grounds without proper infrastructure – to immigrants from other Sub-Saharan countries.

He gave me a bit of history on how the Dutch had arrived to south Africa, created farms and turned the arid inner parts of the region into "gardens", before they fought the British for

possession and power. He added that the first Dutch settlers of Cape Good Hope had met with the Khoi/San bushmen, whereas other tribes, like the Zulu, were inhabiting the mountainous, water-rich areas of the eastern coastline.

Willie shared his opinions in a loud and determined voice, aware that he was not expressing appreciation for the mental/inventive/managing capacities of black Africans and that his opinions could have gotten him “deported”, as he said. I tried to balance his arguments, proposing that white colonization removed many natural resources from the continent, leaving very little behind. His own belief was that the indigenous tribes had been walking on the diamond-, gold-, uranium-rich soil without realizing what was under their feet. And that the companies exploiting the mines, at least in South Africa, had contributed to the economy by employing locals, building infrastructure and paying mining rights.

He showed me a BBC news report that South Africa was “a bomb ready to explode” as the 20% of the land owned/managed by the whites was going to be taken over without appropriate reimbursement by the (black) government. He also gave examples from Malawi, where the president, who had been a teacher in the past, had declared a possession of 8 million dollars in savings at a New York bank and a lot of money had been poured into Malawi as Development Aid but had gone down the drain (a.k.a. politicians’ pockets). According to Willie, Malawi’s 6 million poor or unemployed people were not willing to work, to develop farms and contribute to the economy. Neither had they been educated to do so. And even if they had been educated, he added, they would not have been given the opportunity to make a real impact.

Willie’s opinions stuck with me, on the one hand feeling he was a racist and on the other hand thinking I needed to investigate the raised issues further. Eventually, I packed my small backpack, left the bigger one behind at H.M. and headed out for Lukwe EcoCamp at 12 noon. I stopped on the asphalt road at an Airtel Money booth to ask for help in figuring out why the sim card I had bought in Mzuzu wasn’t working. They couldn’t help me, but I did earn a “Congratulations!” from an older man about managing through the dusty, long trip from Lundazi. Apparently, the only man in Chitimba bay area that could have been able to assist me with the sim card was up in Livingstonia for that day, attending a tribal chief’s funeral.

When I turned the curve of the road in the direction to the mountainous town, I responded with a strong and rather aggressive “Hello” to the greeting of a man that was sitting idly together with others on the curb and who, I felt certain, was going to pester me to hire a guide.

I reached Lukwe after 3.5 hours. I experienced zero safety issues (other than the exhaust fumes of the occasional minibus or truck car), found a number of shortcuts to the multiple hair-pin turns of the road (but missed the entrance to Mushroom Farm because of the last shortcut I took) and generally took my time, especially when I found a stream of water with beautiful butterflies flying around it. The only real problem I faced was that I was walking under the sun; luckily, my water sufficed, albeit it had become warm by the time I had arrived to

Take a journey with me ...

Lukwe. What I hadn't realized during the planning of my trip was that the town of Livingstonia was another 4km walk further up the road from there.

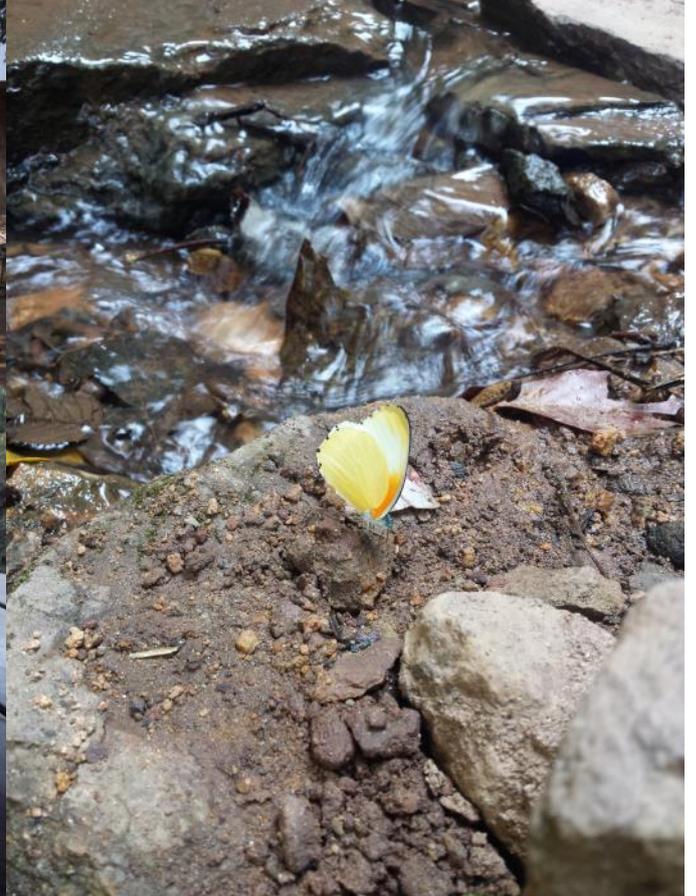
Although it was very expensive for my budget (I assumed Mushroom Farm would cost more or less the same, even though I hadn't seen it), I decided to pay the 20\$/night price to spend two nights in one of Lukwe's wooden, on-stilts, chalets and sustain myself with the little food I had carried with me. The first thing I needed to do before darkness fell was to make myself something to eat. I had to pay even for a few hot coals from the kitchen to boil water for tea and a pack of instant noodles with leftover carrots from the 1kg bag I had bought in Lusaka (Zambia) several days earlier.

That was enough for the day and I hoped I would find a local meal to eat the day after. I then had my shower in a mountain-view wooden cabin — where, if someone had come to the adjacent shower, I would have had no way of hiding my naked self —, I set up my things in my chalet and then sat at the dining area to write my travel notes and talk with Gill, the Eco-Camp's temporary manager.

Canadian Gill landed in northern Malawi one year earlier, to work as a volunteer. This meant that in those 12 months she had developed a sufficient impression of what had been going on in the region. I told her about my conversation with Willie and she offered similar perspectives of, small to severe, difficulties in the local population in starting, managing, or preserving large-scale projects or in adequately responding to attempts for improving inefficient sanitation, nutrition and education practices.

Many locals, Gill explained, didn't see a need to change in relation to the transient ways their ancestors had lived in the past; even if that meant that their mud huts were destroyed by termites or heavy rains every so often, or a tarmac road was filled with potholes. When it came to Christianity, the Bible was the first and only book many people had in their possession, so that was what they usually had available to read. Gill added that Malawians didn't seem to have a middle ground in their mentality, neither in their language; you either did something or you didn't. For example, you either drank a lot or you didn't drink at all, not understanding the concept of recreational drinking. The whole conversation made me even more thoughtful about the country's socio-economic situation.

By 10pm, I was in my comfortable double bed, thinking that the romantic feel of that "luxurious" place would have been very suitable to share intimately with a male partner.



Sunday, August 12

The morning light coming through the cabin's large front window woke me up around 6am, and although I didn't have direct view of the rising sun, it was still magical to open my eyes and immediately see the mountains below and the Lake further ahead, covered by a blanket of clouds.

My breakfast was an oat cookie from the half-empty pack I had brought with me; it was delicious ... until I noticed an ant walking on my hand. My eyes turned immediately towards the inside of the cookie pack; it was full of ants! *Yikes!* I spit the piece I was still chewing out of my mouth and cleaned the pack from the rest of the ants. Feeling "safe" again, I proceeded to eat the remaining two cookies, as I couldn't afford to throw them away.

I stepped out into the chilly atmosphere and walked towards the camp's permaculture gardens to check them out, as well as to have a look at the Manchewe waterfalls from the camp's viewpoint. The gardens were very pretty and I conversed a bit with one of the staff members living in a wooden house within them and caring for them. When he showed me their bushes of fresh red berries, I jumped right on them, eating as many as I could. I also snipped a few leaves of their fresh cilantro, feeling fully nostalgic for my large, home-made, cilantro-based salads.

The view and sound of the waterfalls were also very nice, as one could expect from the soothing effects of flowing water. I returned to the restaurant area to wait for the sky to clear up and in the meantime had another chat with Gill and a look into her Brandt Malawi guide-book. Well, maybe I sat for too long as when I headed out again through the gardens the temperature was already significantly warmer.

Gill described to me the process of a local funeral in the format she had witnessed it: a whole-day event, where people mourned, ate and gave condolences, in repeated cycles. In addition, they read or said eulogies for the deceased. Apparently, the long line of people I saw walking on the side of the road, while I was on the bus going from Lusaka to Lundazi, was a funeral procession. The previous day's funeral of a local tribal Chief in Livingstonia must have been a big event for the community.

The second time I walked through the gardens, towards the exit for the road to Livingstonia, the scenery had changed drastically. The sun made the water lilies bloom and everything looked more radiant and alive than in the cloudy morning. By 11:30am I had entered the Manchewe Falls area and, after paying the 500 MK entrance fee, was given an adolescent boy, named Sandres, as a guide.

The first two waterfalls Sandres led me to were OK, but nothing to be impressed with. They probably looked somewhat better in high flow season but still, no Victoria Falls there. A long downhill hike came next, in which Sandres, wearing a bright red track suit and flimsy *flip-*

flops, was flying over the slippery, rocky ground, while I, wearing my hiking shoes, was trying to be careful in my steps. I kept thinking that he would make an excellent mountain runner!

We reached the bottom of the fall, which offered a nice cool mist and the lush color of green moss growing behind the watery curtain. There, we met up with an older guide, with whom I had a short, light-spirited chat regarding corruption in the country and their demands for money from white visitors, based on the belief that all white people are rich. I told him he could ask for money from the country's president, citing Willie's information for the money the president had in the bank, and if he wasn't good enough, then to vote him out. As the man told me, presidential elections were going to take place in 2019 and opposition voices were not being welcomed.

The three girls the man was escorting were sitting on the rocks, closer to the waterfall. He said they were staying at Mushroom Farm, so, feeling curious, I approached them to find out more. They said the evening communal dinner was tasty and sufficient in quantity and that there were dorms to sleep in for 5\$/night. I said I would check it out and maybe stay one night, and returned the favor by describing upscale Lukwe to them.

During our return, I asked Sandres if he had been going to school. He responded he didn't have money for the school fees and that his parents had died in a traffic accident. I couldn't tell if he was telling me the truth. His clothes were new and clean and it was obvious someone was taking care of him. When we met with the three girls again, I asked them if they were going to give their guide more money than the entrance fee to the falls. They said their guide's fee was included in the 3\$ each paid Mushroom Farm for the tour. Feeling embarrassed for my budgetary restrictions, I gave Sandres 500 MK as a tip, even though he asked for 2000. If I had given him that much, I wouldn't have had enough kwacha to make it through the three days before going back to Mzuzu.

Upon coming back to the main road, I chose not to proceed to Livingstonia due to the heat and to not having enough water for the road; the water flowing from the Falls was not potable. I checked again to see if Mr. Banda's restaurant, which was recommended in travel blogs, was open but had no luck. In fact, it seemed like the place had been closed indeterminately. By around 2pm I was back at Lukwe; feeling very hungry, I ordered the "egg sandwich with garden salad special", which was tasty but little in quantity, for the price I was paying and my dire need to "refuel".

Several guests kept coming and going at the restaurant area, throughout the rest of the day, many of them from North-Western Europe. Seeing what they were ordering, I felt quite sure my travel budget was significantly more restricted than theirs. As Gill mentioned, Lukwe was popular with United Nations workers in the country, some of whom asked for receipts to claim as part of their per diem work allowance, even though they visited the area *while on vacation*. "*Wait till I'm UN Secretary General (or, Super Girl)*", I thought, "*and I'm going to cut those absurdly high allowances by 80%*"!

Monday, August 13

Up with the first light of the day, I ate my remaining pack of Nature Valley oat bars and sat for note-writing on the swinging sofa, facing east to the mountains and the lake. When a Dutch missionary and his wife showed up to have breakfast, I seized the opportunity for a one-on-one, regarding their own impressions of the local life and local population. As they mentioned, within the public education system, the children were just expected to copy what was given to them and not ask questions. They had seen children at the age of 8-9 years who could not solve a puzzle that would have been very much within the capabilities of a western child of the same age.

They added that local parents didn't seem to know how to tell their children the truth; when the children were upset, the parents soothed them by promising things they could not do or offer, thereby teaching them unreliability and dishonesty. People in Malawi, the couple had observed, lived for the "now", not even for "today"; they didn't know the concept of maintaining what they owned, planning ahead and saving for the future. If they were given money, they would spend it immediately or share it with other members of the family or community, the mentality being "if you have it lying around, you don't need it". To support their argument, they gave the example of their own gardener, with whom they had agreed to save part of his salary, so that he could refrain from spending it and therefore afford to buy something his family really needed.

The man also said it was likely that Malawians were spending 50% of their income on "airtime" (credit for phone calls and surfing the internet). Having observed with my own eyes the frequency with which the locals were using their phone and the high occurrence of air-time-selling booths in Zambia and Malawi (for example, at the open-air market in Mzuzu), I had no option but to accept this information as (most probably) valid.

Later on, Gill gave me an example of a World Food Program project, where a free portion of porridge had been provided as breakfast to the families of malnourished children that had not been performing well in school. The families were giving the porridge to the children but were depriving them from access to the day's main meal at lunch time, believing that the child already had his/her meal of the day, thus making the children more hyperactive. It was observed that some families had been selling the porridge to others or that the community chief had been capitalizing on it himself. Therefore, the project was discontinued.

By 10:30am I was out the door, and on my way to Mushroom Farm. First, I made a stop at the Mountain Mamas workshop/Well-Wishes Nursery School building, where American woman Maddy (one of the owners of Mushroom Farm) explained to me how the building had been constructed after a successful 10,000\$ fundraising campaign. While the Mamas were sitting on the floor or working on sewing machines on the right side of the workshop space, in the other half the men were creating jewelry. As Maddy said, the workers were receiving a

proper salary for their work; the project was also funding teachers for the nursery school and business skills workshops for adults.

Feeling impressed once more about people that can develop projects from scratch, I reached Mushroom Farm. It only took a few minutes for a first look at their premises and their prices, plus lending an ear to my hungry stomach to decide that I was going to spend the night there. After a banana-peanut butter-honey-nuts smoothie and two pieces of toast with peanut butter and jam spreads, I was re-energized and ready for action.

An hour later, I decided to walk towards the Chombe Plateau overlooking Lake Malawi, thinking I would go up the mountain if time and daylight allowed, and if I could find the way on my own. While I was walking on the dirt road, a female expat in a 4WD stopped and asked me if I needed a ride. To save some time on the road and find out who she was, I accepted. Naomi said she had been living and running projects in the area. This was not the first time I had heard of her name; she was mentioned in Mushroom Farm's brochure as one of the persons that had supported the construction of a community-led hydroelectric power station in the area.

I came out of Naomi's car with a handful of macadamia nuts, from a full bucket a local had offered her as an expression of gratitude; I couldn't help but wonder what would have been the price of that bucket in a western market, knowing the high price of macadamia nuts! Four hours later I was back at Mushroom, only having gone up to the base of Chombe mountain.

The most memorable, albeit momentary, encounter I had during those four hours took place when a woman coming from the opposite direction turned towards me and blatantly said "Give me money". She was clearly a woman that needed assistance; her clothes were dirty and torn and she didn't seem very healthy. Yet, she knew nothing of my own circumstances, even if I looked "with money" to her. I responded to her demand with my own plead "Give you money? Who's going to give *me* money?!" and moved on.

The communal dinner at Mushroom Farm was preceded by conversations and socializing with the other guests, such as Wendy and Berni, two British ladies, and Martin, a German expert in the Development field. I shared with Martin that I had been troubled by many thoughts and questions, regarding Malawi's socio-economic situation, especially after the conversations I had with expats. He agreed with me that the country's situation had many complex sides – the government's corruption that pushed international donors away, the deficiency of tertiary education graduates that could help develop the country, the lack of access to information regarding citizen rights and to rights-supporting bodies, the lack of a fair and strong judicial system, even the very high import taxes that didn't allow businesses to grow with the necessary equipment.

"Malawi's national debt is at 20-25% of the country's GDP", Martin said, which was a

Take a journey with me ...

huge percentage closely related to the so-called “debt crisis”. What the Chinese did was that they accepted to build infrastructure in Malawi with loans from the Chinese Development Bank, provided that the contracts were with Chinese companies. Martin added that in the 60s and 70s, the country’s economy was a closed one and performing quite well. But when the West asked them to open up their market in exchange for financial aid, the economy collapsed as they couldn’t compete. Agriculture didn’t seem enough to help build the economy (tobacco being the country’s biggest agricultural export), perhaps only to feed the local population. Overall, however, we both agreed that the international Aid given to the country created dependency.

As Martin informed me, Nigeria and Angola were doing well because of better government and good natural resource (oil) management that brought income back to the country. Very probably, Lake Malawi, the second deepest on the African continent, has oil hiding in its ancient basin, but if drilling for such a resource is not well managed, it will destroy the lake, its biodiversity and the income it generates (fishing, travel, tourism). The same would apply for the great quantities of lithium on Malawi’s territory.

The communal dinner was tasty but it was not warm when the plates came out of the kitchen. Myself, Martin and Ina (his girlfriend) wanted a bigger portion, so when the Dutch doctor, sitting at our table with his midwife spouse, said he didn’t want half of his meal, we gladly shared it amongst ourselves. The German couple, the Dutch couple and two independent travelers from Toledo had bonded while traveling on the Ilala Ferry from Likoma Island to N’khata Bay, a journey that had lasted thirty-four (!) hours. Their experience had been similar to other Ilala-passenger stories I had read online when I was preparing for Malawi: sleeping in chilly weather under the night sky on the “1st class” deck, rough “sea” (definitely *Lake Malawi’s* identity crisis) and the opportunity to swim during some of the ferry’s long stops.

After-dinner socialization continued with a conversation with Ina about how it was like for me to travel as a solo female (vs. in a couple format like her and Martin), my midlife-professional crisis, her impressions from their trip and her desire for a career change from the world of Finance to Herbal Medicine. And later with a conversation with Berni, who told me the beaches of Cape Maclear were too touristy (which I had already suspected), and not as fine as the beaches of the Mediterranean (which I had also suspected). And that it was wiser to take the anti-bilharzia pill six weeks after entering the lake than to skip it completely.

This was a first trip to Africa for both Ina and Berni, and they both shared with me that they were feeling pleased, despite the challenges inherent to such a trip. As Berni had put it, “Malawi is Africa for beginners”. I didn’t have an adequate experience of the country yet, nor of the whole continent, to have a strong opinion; I certainly hoped I would also enjoy my time in Malawi.



Take a journey with me ...

Tuesday, August 14

I was among the first to arrive at the lounge area for breakfast, but my “eggs on toast” did not arrive until 50 minutes later. Slowly, the place became crowded and, while sitting on the sofa and writing my notes, I observed the socialization unfolding, as if from an “outsider” viewpoint. The “Ilala Ferry group” around a coffee table on my left, a Spanish couple and a solo female traveler at opposite ends of the dinner table on my right, the two British ladies and the group of Americans straight ahead on the lower deck. Consumed by my own thoughts, I remained introverted and missed an opportunity to polish my Spanish-speaking skills.

I felt envious that my budget did not allow for a bigger meal like the others were having, still not over the fact that the same amount of dollars (20\$) for one night’s sleep at Lukwe was equal to one night’s sleep, one smoothie, two separate toast dishes and one dinner at Mushroom. My alcohol consumption had been consciously limited, the only dose being a glass of wine with my meal at the Zambezi Café in Zambia, first to save money and also because I did not want to ascribe to the “drinking tourist” culture.

In any case, at 10am I said goodbye to Mushroom Farm and made my way down, taking fewer shortcuts than when I had gone up the mountain. By 12pm I had arrived to lake level; a child that saw me from a distance shouted at me “Give me money!”, which again, pressed my frustration button. “Give me money!”, “Give me more!”, “Give me your bottle!”, “Give me your pen!” ... *it was really getting to me!*

I stopped at the restaurant next to the Airtel booth and asked the female owner for the price of lunch: rice, fish, beans and greens for 1500 MK (2\$). Within one hour I was back at the restaurant, as I had promised her. Walking back from Hakuna Matata where I had gone to drop off my things for the night, I took a shortcut through fields of cassava, with a short stop at “Mama Jill’s Nursery School”, a small brick house of 4-5 small rooms where the bare ground served as the “floor”. A woman standing at the entrance said she was a volunteer teacher there; herself only attended education up to secondary school level. She showed me some of the “40 children” she said were attending the nursery (sleeping on straw mats laid on the ground), and the desk/office area where their books and materials were kept.

The “class” space had pieces of soap carton or rice bags spread on the ground, where the children would sit during lesson time. Some of the children’s drawings were displayed on the wall, as well as the school’s weekly program, hand-written on an A0-size paper. The woman showed me a letter signed by “Gabi” from Hamburg, where she was suggesting to foreign visitors to contribute to the school by buying some food or stationery supplies, taking for granted “we have money for buying beers”. “*Not everyone has money for buying beers!*”, I protested inside my head, yet told the woman I would look inside my bags to see what I could offer for the children.

The bag of sliced white bread and three tomatoes I bought from the road-side market would serve as my dinner, breakfast, and lunch (if needed). Hoping for smooth waters in the lake to enjoy an afternoon swim, I washed my very dirty small backpack (knowing the bigger one was definitely dirtier) and then took a nap. One hour later, I was in my bathing suit, covered in short leggings and a t-shirt, and heading barefoot to the beach. The plan was to enter the water in my outfit, so that I wouldn't leave any belongings unattended on the beach.

As my bad luck had been already that summer regarding adequate swimming opportunities, and with Poseidon, the God of the Seas, routed against me for unknown reasons (*maybe he no longer sympathized with anything related to Goddess Aphrodite?!*), just as I entered the water the wind started picking up. Within 20 minutes, the waves forced me to come out, because I risked getting water in my eyes and on my contact lenses. I started walking back to H.M., keeping my distances from a group of boys that had run towards me earlier, after I had entered the water, shouting at me to "stop" (which I didn't obey). But seconds later I changed my mind and decided to walk along the shore for a while.

I passed by some men resting on the beach, people fishing, a woman and man taking a soapy bath in the lake, and sections of the shore with reeds and shallow water – bilharzia breeding ground! When I returned to H.M. to change, there was a Toyota Hilux parked outside the room and backpacks on the other beds. Apparently, I had acquired some roommates. Upon hearing that they were going to Mzuzu the next day, I asked if they could give me a ride. They said "yes", on the condition that we would depart "early" and that we would make a stop at a fish farm in Rumphi. No problem for me!

While those three French young men were having their beers around a fire near the beach, I sat at the bar area to do some trip planning. By 10pm I was in bed, but the noise from the nearby bars made it very difficult to fall asleep. I was happy I was leaving from Hakuna Matata the next day. Afterall, Willie didn't seem to make sure the place was properly cleaned. For example, I found the women's bathrooms and toilets in the same unkept condition they were when I had first arrived 5 days earlier. This general, average-to-low level of maintenance seemed to lead to a small number of guests, compared to his popular neighbor (Chitimba Camp).

So basically, even if he said black Africans couldn't manage a business properly, Willie seemed to have been losing the skill himself, if he had ever had it in the first place. From what Mandy had told me up at Mountain Mama's workshop, she and her brother used to hang out with Lisa that had been married to Auke, the owner of Lukwe EcoCamp. And I was sure I had noticed the name of a woman next to Willie's on the road sign leading to Hakuna Matata, but she was nowhere to be seen. A woman's touch might be necessary in the end ...

Wednesday, August 15

By 6:20am I was up, as I wanted to have breakfast and be ready before the early departure the guys had said we were going to have. Well, breakfast I had, but an “early departure” it wasn’t, as we left a bit before *noon*! The guys had believed two locals when they claimed that they would “quickly” carve them one bottle opener with one of the guys’ name on it and as that was in “Malawian time”, we waited and waited and waited. I would have left earlier with a matola (minibus), but my bags were locked in their car while they went searching for the woodcarvers.

I had my three tomatoes, bread and peanut butter and another long chat with Willie regarding my stay at the two mountain camps. To Willie, Mushroom’s owners were making a lot of money in the 5 years they had been running the place, with the guests they had at the Farm and profits they were making from selling the Mountain Mamas products in the US. He believed they were “upsetting the system” with the “high” salaries they were giving to the locals. He said they took over Lukwe’s staff and he didn’t like the plans to build a hydroelectric power plant in that area, as it would lead to more bars opening, drinking and noise. He was also against giving money to “orphans” since he believed those did not exist and the money raised was being used for other/private purposes.

In any case, I went over to Mama Jill’s Nursery School with a sheet of stickers, two pens I had brought with me and two toothbrushes I had from Egyptair’s in-flight passenger pouches. When I went there, I could swear the children I saw were older than nursery-school age, which made me wonder which children the setting actually catered for.

Back at H.M., I caught a glimpse of a newspaper article praising the government for funding a subsidy program supporting poor rural families to build a permanent (vs. the traditional mud brick, thatched-grass roof house) with iron sheet roofs, burned bricks and cement (vs. exposed earth) floors. Indeed, one of those houses was being built right outside H.M.’s gate and when we finally left with the Hilux, I started noticing even more of them. Surely an improvement compared to the temporary nature of traditional huts, but still a long way to go for the absence of running water and proper sanitation.

The three young, French men were studying Biology, hence their curiosity to check out the “cichlid fish farm” they had identified on the map. Unfortunately for them, what they found was not what they had imagined; it was just a regular farm of edible fish. After a short pit-stop for lunch, we continued towards Mzuzu, receiving the “BREAKING NEWS” from a huge billboard that said “JESUS IS COMING”. *Okaaay...!!*

By 2:30 I had been dropped off at Shoprite supermarket in Mzuzu, where I finally found the Airtel office and had the phone configured to work with internet bundles, went to a Forex office, and then started walking around in circles, trying to locate the AXA Bus office. I finally

did, bought my seat on a night bus to Blantyre and left to catch a matola for N'khata Bay. Well, I did get inside a matola but I didn't think fast enough, because it was almost empty. So, it took a long time, driving around in circles, until the driver picked up enough people so that we could *actually* go to the Bay.

Luckily, I arrived to Butterfly Space Hostel before it got dark but apart from the beef burger communal dinner I had there, which was tasty enough, I never felt really connected to the place in the 24 hours that had passed before I left.

The ant infestation, the zillions of "light flies" and other insects, the stinky toilets (regardless if they were based on compost which was more ecological, they were not cleaned regularly), the lack of running water at the toilet sink and the whole way-too-hippie atmosphere weren't for me. The people attending the bar area seemed to have their own sub-culture and were significantly younger in age, compared to the crowd at Mushroom Farm, so I didn't feel that I was fitting-in.

Thursday, August 16

It wasn't until around 11am that I moved my bags from the dorm room, as I was waiting for my wet clothes and laundry to dry. I had gotten up a bit before 6am with the intention to have a morning swim in the lake. Like the previous time at Chitimba bay, I went in with my clothes, not wanting to draw attention to myself in just my bathing suit. Two local men were exercising at the hostel's outdoor "gym" when I walked towards the rocky beach. Soon after I had entered the water, one of the hostel's staff sat on the rocks and started soaping a bucket a few meters away from me. *Oh, great!*

The lake didn't keep me for long after that, as the wind started sending waves my way. Poseidon had taken this bad joke a bit too far; soon after I came out, the lake started acting like a rough sea. *"Hey, if I wanted a rough sea, I would have stayed in Cyprus!"*, I complained to the wind. I placed my big backpack in the reception room, surfed the internet for a bit and then left to explore the bay area.

While I was passing through the souvenir stalls lining the road to the central market, a man selling flattened bottle cap earrings asked me where I was from and quickly identified Cyprus as an island north of the African continent. A few hours later, while I was returning to the hostel, the man called me "Sister from CypLus!" (another "r" that went away on vacation). 😊

I stopped for a few minutes to check out the well-made wooden carvings of Mr. Mbwe, whose work was mentioned in the Bradt Guidebook. With very few items on display and a small counter where he was working on, it was a very humble business.

I bought myself some bananas and later some mandazi (filling but rather tasteless fried dough balls) that the French men had first told me about when we had stopped to get some from a street vendor on the way to Mzuzu. I tried to explore the streets and the shore as discreetly as possible; from difficult to impossible when you stand out due to appearance (e.g. skin color), again making me feel embarrassed to take photos.

At some point I decided to detour down to the lake where a woman was washing clothes and 30 meters to the right some men were washing themselves and possibly also 'relieving' themselves in the lake, from what my nostrils could tell. A significant amount of garbage was lying around on the shore. Upon returning to the main road, I met a woman working at a bank nearby, who led me to the HotSpot-y restaurant. On many occasions during the trip, I had heard local Africans add an -y to words ending with "t". Judging from her body language when we went in, I supposed the woman was related to the restaurant owners.

On the street across from the restaurant, the men selling fresh butterfish insisted I should buy some. I came out again to the shore, passing by "mamitas" (**like in South America**) with very simple benches and infrastructure, offering food from different pots (I would have tried if I wasn't concerned about hygiene issues) and a group of men playing Bawo, a game

with glass balls on a wooden board with several rows of holes. I chatted for a few minutes with a man that was watching them and moved on towards the beach again, where three men were cleaning the labels off “zivania-sized” rectangular bottles which they said were going to be sent to Tanzania.

A man approached me and automatically, together with saying “Hello” to him, I said I was not interested to buy anything from him. I left the action of the coast behind me a few moments later, defensively keeping my hands in my pockets to avoid all the handshakes of curious men or touts. Far fewer women, if any, would have extended their hand toward me for a typical handshake with “Hello my friend (or sister), how are you? Where are you from?”

By 1pm I was sitting down at HotSpot and ordering a tasty meal of rice with greens, sauce and fish for 1800 MK (2,5\$). After I finished eating, I took advantage of the restaurant’s wifi to browse the internet for an extra hour and eventually returned to the hostel to relax a bit. However, that was not really possible as I couldn’t find a very comfortable place to sit and after trying to close my eyes with the sound of the waves for about 20 minutes, I got up and left with all of my belongings. With the weight of 20kgs on my back, it was a struggle to go up the hostel’s built-in, tall steps that, I had no doubt, had been constructed with LeBron James’ height in mind!

It wasn’t long before I was in an empty minibus which, of course, was not going to depart “now” as the driver claimed. We left the bay towards Mzuzu one hour later, when the minibus was almost full. At least I was sitting comfortably at the back row, on my own for most of the trip. We stopped at a gas station, near which a big road sign reminded me of what German expert Martin had said: “The EU and the World Bank are paying peanuts in relation to what the country really needs”. And the aims and goals of the funded projects, as they had been written on those signs, “are usually too ambitious and unobtainable”.

At 6:15pm I was dropped off near the AXA Bus office, with Mzuzu being almost entirely in the dark from a power shut down. I had just enough time to visit the toilet before being squeezed in a very narrow seat on the bus. What began at 7pm was surely the most physically uncomfortable of the rides I had experienced up to that day since August 1st. There was not enough space in my seat, not enough space for my feet either, but plenty of an *incredibly annoying loud noise* – supposedly disguised as film and music – coming from the bus’s TV screen until after 2am.

The earplugs I had with me only worked a little and certainly couldn’t help me with having to sit upright all night. One hour into the journey, the bus hit a person that was moving in the dark on the left side of the road. It was obvious the driver would have kept going undisturbed if a female passenger hadn’t yelled at him to stop and check what had happened. Eventually the police arrived and after an hour of waiting, we moved on, with the driver catching speeds that would have easily qualified him for Formula1, making me fear about our safety.



Friday, August 17

The first morning light found us driving through the outskirts of Blantyre; at around 7am I finally came out of the bus. After a visit to the toilet and some quick-thinking, I left my big backpack at AXA's offices (claiming I was going to be back in a couple of hours) and headed to Mandala House. By 8am I was there, after short stops to capture a long graffiti of traditional village life and to find out more about an exhibition at a French-related cultural office.

The magical, calm, beautiful gardens of Mandala House captured my heart right away! I didn't care that I hadn't yet brushed my teeth nor washed my face after the evening bus ride. I wandered about the gardens, tried out the two swings, smelled the fresh basil and mint grown there (and cut a few leaves for me), took photos of the paintings and tribal masks on the outside walls, explored the artifacts for sale inside the gallery and sat for a pot of fresh, home-grown lemongrass tea and a slice of carrot cake, to relax and write notes.

A bit before 11am, I half-heartedly said to myself "Ok, I *guess* I have to get back to the city center now", but a man working in the garden stopped me to greet me and stressed I should visit the Archives on the top floor. So, I did. And if I could, I would have stayed there for the entire day, as I became fascinated with some of the books, like a 1938 volume titled "An African Survey". The book addressed several issues related to the African colonies of that time, the geography/geology of the continent, the languages, the cultures of the tribes, the attempts by missionaries to translate the Bible (thus, dictating preferences for some tribal languages over others and planting seeds for tribal conflicts), plus relevant maps of that time.

The texts included observations that African subjects, "had smaller brains and performed worse in mental examinations in relation to European subjects". But no definitive conclusions could have come from such (limited) observations. Interesting nevertheless, it made me wonder why those differences existed in the first place. Another book that drew my attention was "Grappling with change in Africa: The Dream of Prosperity Using African Wisdom", whose author made reasonable statements about the issue. At least that's what I got from the few pages I had a look at. Again, if I had more time, I would have stayed to read through the book.

I left Mandala House around noon and went back toward the Peoples Supermarket to buy food for me plus toilet paper, as per my Couchsurfing host's request, because he didn't have either in his house. *Okaaay, why did he offer to host me if he was in such a predicament?!* Anyway, feeling quite worried that I was running out of kwacha after paying more than 8000 at the supermarket, I went in search of the Victoria Forex office for the best rate (1 \$ = 740 MK).

Eventually, I made it to Chris's pig farm; literally, as the first creatures I saw when Mimu, the taxi driver, opened the gate for me were several pigs! The "pig farm" continued inside, but this time the animals were tons of mosquitoes and tons of little spiders in all corners

of the house. I thought of the trouble I would go through to prepare my own house before receiving Couchsurfing guests. This host apparently did the opposite.

Feeling hungry, I made 1.5 portions of fried eggs with tomatoes (flavored with the leaves of basil and mint from Mandala House) and gave Chris half a portion to taste a Cypriot dish, while I devoured the rest of it. He claimed he didn't have food in the house, but there was a pan of cooked minced meat in his "fridge" (which was not cold inside because of the frequent electricity shutdowns), that he later ate with boiled rice. For a man that claimed he could live on \$1 a day in Malawi, I found his "lack of food" inexcusable.

I struggled to feel any sympathy towards him for not being a well-prepared host, because during our conversation he mentioned several big purchases he had made (the forty pigs he owned, a new 13-seater car, a plot of land on the lake shore) while, at the same time, building additional rooms and floors to his house. He run a consultancy business and had asked for tax and duty waivers to own the plot of land on the lake, as he believed that in Malawi "you can do anything if you negotiate about it". He shared his plans to build an elderly persons' home for Europeans on the shore and capitalize on them needing at least €3000/month for such services in Central Europe.

His views of Malawians echoed those of Willie and others I had spoken to: Malawians were forgetful, they lived for the "now", they couldn't fix technical problems because technical schools didn't exist, the government was corrupted hence the electricity cuts happened because they were taking funds from the Electricity Authority, the 25\$/day that Mount Mulanje guides received from foreign hikers were too much and I should give them only 25\$ in total. Despite these not-so-positive views on locals and the fact he missed quality cheese and wine, he felt that life in Malawi was quite relaxed, unlike the stress of making a living in Europe.

At some point in the evening, Alan, the man using the guesthouse, and his African girlfriend, Wongy, a fashion designer, came over and brought with them several pieces of chitenge. One 6m piece in particular was identical in weight and quality and similar in colors to the one I had really liked in Livingstone (Zambia), but Wongy intended to sell it for 15000 MK (\$20), double the price of the one in Livingstone, to cover transport costs from Dar el Salam and also make a profit. I asked her how much she would charge to make an A-line dress for me but never really received a response. I think Alan understood what I was asking (the idea being that she would sew the dress while I was away hiking on Mt Mulanje) but she didn't. At the same time, considering the price of the fabric, I was a bit afraid to know how much she would want in total, as my budget remained very limited.

Chris claimed I was tired from the long travel day, as an excuse to send the couple away so that he could go to bed. The bed I was going to sleep on was an adjustable sofa. I rejected the idea of replacing the disco ball on the ceiling with a walk-in mosquito net because I believed I would have been fine with the pieces of net I was carrying with me.



Saturday, August 18

The start to the day was slow because I had been tortured by the mosquitoes during the night and couldn't sleep properly, on the one hand feeling very warm under the quilt and on the other hand not being able to keep myself protected with just my two separate pieces of mosquito net. I should have taken Chris' offer after all! Lesson learned!

After a lot of scrubbing, I cleaned my white top, which had remained unwashed and very orange from the border-crossing trip, and by 1pm I was ready to exit the house. I reached the city center after a very nice and leisurely walk, through quiet streets with walled estates and lush gardens. For part of the distance, a local woman hiding herself from the sun with an umbrella, walked alongside me. At some point she said "I want to be your friend, we can chat on Whatsapp or Facebook". I was not interested, nor could I understand the motives behind her request, so I replied "Sorry, I only use Whatsapp when I travel". That was a lie, but the request caught me unprepared for any other response. Soon after, I took a right, south-bound turn and left her behind.

It didn't take long to reach Henderson Street, after passing outside a garden with a Tabebuia tree whose fallen yellow flowers had formed a carpet on the grass below it. Being on "a mission stirred from curiosity", I found the Henderson Street Guesthouse and checked out what they offered. Even though their bedrooms were spacious, albeit not top-notch, it was their large, well-groomed garden that had me drooling.

My next major stop was the DAPP clothing store (DAPP standing for Development Aid from People to People), where each piece of clothing was sold for 1500 MK (pieces from Lidl and H&M included, from what I saw) and each pair of shoes for 3000 MK. According to Chris, the DAPP managers made a lot of money and lived luxury lives by being unfair competitors against those that may have wished to open a clothes-selling business and would have had to pay taxes. DAPP received the clothes for free, as donors had been covering the freight costs.

I made a stop at a bakery shop looking for something sweet to eat but nothing "rang my bell", so I proceeded to the chaos of Mibawa Market, where I arrived right at the moment when a group of rowdy, probably drunken men were throwing a dead animal in the direction of a woman passing by. The locals sitting nearby didn't seem amused, which confirmed my first impression of them. In trying to figure out where the minibuses to Limbe started from, I used the tactic of asking women which seemed to be of middle-class, so that they wouldn't need to scam me.

A group of two women and a man responded to my question and one of the women indicated a spot for the minibuses and said the cost was 300 MK. The moment I saw the large number of minibuses, I pictured in my mind how all the touts would jump on me if appeared looking for one the following morning. So, I decided it would be smarter to look for a loaded minibus that would be ready to set off (a.k.a. lesson learned not to take an empty one again!).

My next task was to check out the covered part of the market.

Well, it was love at first sight! There was fresh cilantro, bell peppers and other vegetables on sale; if I was ever a resident of Blantyre, I would be a regular customer. In true African style, the market blended vegetables with beans, fruit, fish, clothing, wooden items, live chicken, hardware, etc. I left with a little bunch of short-stemmed cilantro, a bowl of red berries, a bowl of strawberries and a bunch of bananas, all for 1150 MK (1.5\$) in total. I was surprised to see watermelons, considering it was still springtime.

While I was exiting the area and crossing a short bridge over a stream, I noticed the piles of garbage on the rocks and in the water and the slum of wooden constructions/stalls/houses (couldn't be absolutely sure) in the short distance on my left-hand side. "Do people *live there??!!*", was my immediate thought. Once more, a tragic realization regarding the level of poverty millions are living through, the mismanagement of plastic and people's lack of awareness that plastic doesn't rot the way banana leaves do.

I made my way back towards Chris' house, trying to get my bearings right to reach Henderson Str. While walking toward the guesthouse, I noticed a row of trees in the distance and felt the strong desire to find that "public park". Alas, how often can one find such things as public parks, especially freely accessible, clean areas with grass, benches and other amenities, in this part of the world? I turned the corner and ended up facing the Blantyre Golf Club, where I assumed an entrance fee had to be paid and where the golfers wouldn't really be happy that I just wanted to lie on the grass!

So, since I didn't have many options, I grabbed two mandazi from a woman on a curb and sat down under a tree to take care of my search for, and communication with, Mt. Mulanje guides that were recommended on Tripadvisor. The locals looking at me while passing by might have wondered why I had chosen to sit under the tree, as most white people in those neighborhoods had their own estates and gardens. Oh, well, I didn't!

When the day's light had turned into a gentle orange, I returned to Chris' house, where a group of children were playing with a ball on the street and another group was sitting in three rows on the sidewalk, facing two blackboards, one with mathematical equations and the other with sentences to complete in English. *What a lovely scene!!!*

Apparently, the teacher was Chris' gardener and he supported this group of seven or eight 8-13-year-old children that were still in primary education. I offered to assist one of the children that was wrongly making subtractions in his notebook, instead of additions. We used our fingers, plus some wooden sticks, and he got the answers right. However, he couldn't readily understand that $4+6$ was the same as $6+4$ but in reverse. I was also unsure if he could understand the multiple ways one could use to get to a sum of 10 (i.e. $7+3$, $8+2$, etc). The same thing happened with another boy that showed up and started answering the equations.

Next, I helped the oldest child in the group with the fill-in sentences he was copying

Take a journey with me ...

from the blackboard. I wanted to check the description given by the Dutch missionary at Lukwe, that children were only taught to copy but not to think. The boy was completing the sentences correctly (e.g. You will not be my friend, will you?), but after I offered each of the children a farm-themed sticker, he did not have the vocabulary to tell me something about the tractor he had picked and needed assistance by the teacher. I also asked the boy I had assisted with his math to explain why sheep (the sticker he had chosen) were useful to humans. He got most of it right, but in Chichewa.

From this short example, it seemed to me that there were shortages in critical thinking and comparison skills (although the young persons that sold products in the market did manage to handle money quickly and gave the correct change) and that the basic, conversational English vocabulary of children often did not extend beyond “What’s your name? Come here! Where are you from?”

This “Come here!” command from children frustrated me quite often. I figured the command was a combination of them not knowing what else to say, and/or thinking it was a socially proper command to give, and/or calling me as something they felt entitled to. The commands were often followed by a whistle to draw more of my attention.

The gardener/teacher suggested that he needed support in buying chalk. I said I would get him some if I found any, but in my head, I said “maybe getting the children some new notebooks” would also have been useful. It also depended on what I could afford.

When I went inside the house, I started preparing my 2-portion dinner. The second portion was going to serve as my next day’s meal for the trip to Mount Mulanje. While I was simultaneously cooking my boiled green beans (and two eggs, to save on electricity) for my tomato/cilantro/canned tuna/bean salad, Chris had a meeting in the living room with his local fixer, named David. I found it strange when Chris asked David to talk to me, telling him “she doesn’t bite”, as he did it with a rather ironic tone of voice. David came into the kitchen and I diffused the awkwardness that Chris had suddenly created, by offering him fresh strawberries and exchanging a few sentences with him.

My main concern for the evening was to prepare my 70lt backpack with only the essentials for my Mulanje hike, shield myself from those god-damn mosquitoes and catch up with my note writing. Meanwhile, it was crucial to see which of the 5-6 guides I had contacted would actually be available for the 3 days and to stress to them that being in contact was not equal to me choosing them as my guide. By 11pm I was ready for sleep, well protected against the vicious, noisy blood-suckers!



Sunday, August 19

Having slept more and better than the previous night and feeling both nervous and excited about my visit to Mt. Mulanje – **a lot more relaxed, however, compared to how miserable I was feeling before hiking on Mt. Meru in Tanzania four years earlier** –, it was easy to get up at 6am and by 8am leave Chris' house to walk to the city center. It was a quiet Sunday morning, with only a few people on the street.

I passed in front of a man standing next to a vacuum cleaner and wondered if he was renting it out. "Chris' house could definitely use a couple of days of vacuum cleaning", I thought. I also saw a woman with a big bucket balanced on her head – one of hundreds of such images seen on my two African trips – and then a 4-member family where the woman was carrying a rectangular suitcase horizontally on her head and possibly a baby on her back, while the husband was simply holding a child walking next to him by the hand. *Seriously?! Why isn't the man the one carrying the suitcase?!*

I walked towards Independence Avenue, made my way past one of the openings to the Mibawa minibus chaos and kept going until I got to the Peoples Supermarket roundabout and asked for directions to the next "stage" for the minibuses to Limbe. I walked for a few minutes and before long I was seated comfortably in a minibus for 200 MK (cheaper than the 250-350 range that various locals had quoted for me).

The music on the ride was to my liking – "Don't worry, about a thing... 'Cause every little thing gonna be alright..." –, setting the stage for a nice day. In fact, the music was good on the minibus from Limbe to Mulanje, as well. It made an impression on me that fellow passengers were eating raw corncobs. It didn't make a good impression, though, that they were throwing the leaves and "hair" of the corn straight on the road, or even under their seat on the minibus. At the same time, I thought "I should try eating raw corn, too".

With my attention split to the different views outside of the minibus windows, I didn't notice the InjoMulanje building, which meant I had no option but to get off at the next stop: the Mulanje minibus depot. *No problem!* The views of the mountain with the lush green tea plantations spread out on its feet were majestic, as I walked back towards InfoMulanje. I couldn't get a clear view of the mountain while we were approaching the area on the minibus (mist and maybe smoke had created a hazy cover), but up close it was much better. *Mt. Mulanje, BABY!*

Because of the need to organize my days on the mountain and select an appropriate route, I sat down with a pot of tea at Mulanje Pepper, whose free-standing chalk board in the front yard self-declared it "Home of Best Pizza in Malawi", followed by "Chicken and Masala chips". Knowing how obsessed Italians can get about pizza, I was pretty sure it would have been hard to find an Italian person that would have been willing to try such a pizza *outside of Italy*.

I asked two mountain guides, Lewis and Harry, if they could join me to discuss our potential collaboration. Lewis played hard to get, saying he would have had to pay 1000 MK on a motorbike taxi to come meet me, whereas Harry showed up just two minutes after I had sent him the message. It didn't take much time for me to decide that this name twin would be my guide. He sufficiently answered the questions I had prepared and recommended a route based on my needs to enjoy myself, be close to flowing water, see flowers, trees and landscapes in general. We agreed to do Likhubula House to Lichenya Hut, Lichenya to Chambe Hut and Chambe down to Likhubula. We signed a contract and he arranged for another guide to give us a ride to Likhubula House. He said the ride would be free but I gave Henry, the driver, the money that I was prepared to give for a seat in a minibus. The slow ride on the dirt road gave me the opportunity to see the west side of the mountain and snap some pics.

Upon arriving to Likhubula House at 2:20pm, I stood for a few moments to have a close look at a model village made by the children of the Likhubula Children's Choir and to admire the slow, yoga-like movements of a green locust on the floor of the Reception room, before entering Dorm 4, where I was going to spend the night. My next task was to enjoy the green bean-tuna salad I had carried with me with a view of the mountain and, soon after, explore the area.

I went for the natural river pools, immediately drawing the attention of a group of children splashing in the water nearby. They run through the vegetation to come towards me and I decided not to sit where I initially wanted, as I knew they wouldn't leave me in peace. I was also afraid they would start asking me to give them something. The moment I got up to leave, they started talking to me in Chichewa and followed me on the trail. I had to be quite direct with them that I wanted to be left alone and eventually they got the message.

The views of the mountain side, the colors of the vegetation, the sounds of the forest, the sounds of the water, made for a pleasant opportunity to relax and condition my legs uphill. I stopped for a few minutes to look at a clear pool created by the river; a dip in the water would have been excellent at that spot! I wondered if it was going to be included in the route Harry had planned for me. Suddenly, a man appeared from the other side of the pool, carrying a long wooden log on his right shoulder. *Impressive!!* He crossed the river swiftly and kept going.

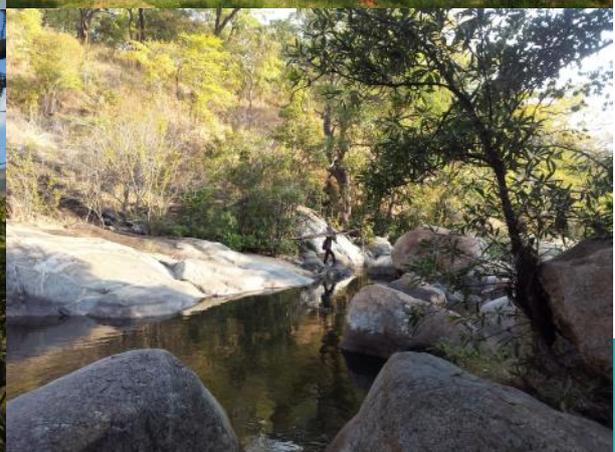
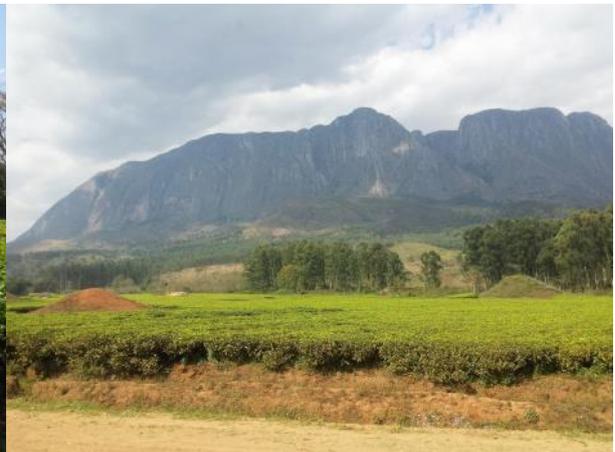
I returned to Likhubula House to write my notes and prepare for the next day. As electricity was down, I left my phone on the charger, hoping it would charge eventually before the morning, and went to the balcony of the conference room, trying not to disturb the group of women that had arrived earlier. As I was writing, one of them, named Gloria and carrying a baby on her back, approached me and I grabbed the opportunity to find out who they were: secondary school teachers, who had come to the House for a week-long conference/training on how to reduce the early school leaving of girls from Secondary Education. I shared with Gloria some of my thoughts on the issue and said I was collaborating with teachers myself.

Take a journey with me ...

She asked if I wanted to talk to them and, excitedly, I said “Yes!”.

I should have been better prepared, though, as they had already been frustrated and complaining that the 6000 MK daily stipend they were getting for attendance, was not enough. From their body language, I understood they didn’t seem eager to get to know who I was, and, feeling nervous, I kept on talking, which they didn’t seem to appreciate either. They claimed they only ate meat once every month and mocked me when I said I had already eaten a salad (as a response to a question if I was going to have dinner). I tried to empathize with them but I wasn’t getting much beyond their laughter, so I wished them well and went inside.

In the end, I did have dinner (rice with beef), thinking that the extra “fuel” would have been useful for the next day. After that, I returned to my room with a candle and sat under its light to continue my notes. By 10pm I was asleep, without mosquitoes to bother me. It was a shame that, again, I didn’t manage to practice my Spanish with a group of hikers that had arrived in the evening.



Monday, August 20

Luckily for me, electricity came back overnight and so my phone was fully charged when I got up. I had my boiled eggs with bananas and some of the berries for breakfast and by 7:30am was ready to go. Harry arrived on time with news that Lichenya Hut was full and so he had arranged for us to stay at Hope Rest Hut, which was going to cost “80 dollars”. *“Eighty dollars?! I don’t have that much money!”*, I said, but he replied it was going to be ok.

No, it was just 8\$, but that wasn’t clarified until much later in the day. Pronunciation got in the way and, in Malawi fashion, the “eight” acquired a “y” tail.

So, off we went and by 2pm we arrived to Hope Rest, a hut with beds and blankets (vs. what the other huts offered), plus a basic kitchen and the opportunity to charge phones. In the 6.5 hour ascend from Likhubula, we went up to 2000m (a 1200 meter ascend) and descended 200m. Beautiful landscapes, with flowing water, butterflies, eagles, flower gardens, open fields, forests, fig trees (whose fruit had unfortunately not matured yet), but also signs of deforestation. We came across barefoot men and women, chopping wood with machetes, carrying big planks and cutting dry grass to make brooms.

I managed the weight on my back, but was quite dusted by the time we had arrived to Hope Rest. We rested a bit, I washed my white, long-sleeved top which had become soiled when I slipped in one of the streams, had some bread with very gluey peanut butter (the “It’s Wild!” brand had been way much better than the cheaper brand I had bought at Peoples supermarket) and then Harry took me to Linje Pool and the viewpoint looking down at Chitakale and the tea plantations. An extra pool below us, possibly accessible with a rope and offering amazing views, gave extra points in my head to the whole scene and led me to think I could revisit the mountain with hiking friends from Cyprus.

We returned to the hut, I cleaned myself up and cooked a packet of ramen noodles with carrots and a handful of usipa dried fish. It was fine! Harry had brought a portable speaker with him and played music outside. Earlier, after we arrived and I was having the bread with peanut butter, Harry and the other men cooked n’shima and invited me to eat with them. I thanked them but declined, explaining I had to lighten the load in my bag. Men and women were living next to the hut in wooden cabins and in tents covered with plastic bags.

Throughout the day, I had chatted with Harry about Cyprus, Malawi and Mulanje, and the chat continued after my dinner and tea. His plans for a family, how others expected him to share the money he would be getting from me, that his widowed mother was raising the children of his divorced sister, the impressions I had heard regarding Malawians not planning or saving for the future, the educational system and the lack of technical skills. Harry said he knew couples that had 6-7 children yet could not feed nor educate them. He also mentioned the problem of girls leaving school early and men drinking and not working.

After a check for Orion in the night sky, again with no results but with a very distinct constellation I couldn't recognize, I went to bed in my dorm room. I set up my sleeping bag, the hut's blankets as extra cover and as a pillow, and after a couple of careless bumps of my head on the upper bunk bed frame, I was ready for sleep.



Tuesday, August 21

As I was getting ready for our 8am departure, I watched from the dorm window the chitenge-covered women also preparing to set off for chopping and carrying wood or dry grass. The watchman asked me to sign the guestbook and added that his salary was low, implying he wanted a tip from me. Harry then said it more directly but I responded that such expenses (tips) were included in our contract. I could sense they were both not happy with my response; the conflict between feeling justified and guilty consumed my thoughts while we were walking uphill.

I settled my inner dilemma with *“Hey, I had put it in writing that I wouldn’t pay more than 100\$!”* and chose to stick to that. The only thing I knew I had to pay Harry more for, was for breaking in three pieces, the day before, the wooden walking stick I had borrowed from him. I had lost my footing while we were descending toward Hope Rest and had fallen on it with my body’s 52kg, plus the weight of my backpack. The lightweight stick didn’t stand a chance of staying intact.

Eventually, we exited the silent mode, especially after we had reached the top of the hill and had started to descent with a full breath. By 1pm we were almost at Chambe Hut, with direct views to the impressive rock face opposite the hut. Even though the route was shorter, it had more ups and downs than the day before. Again, the landscape varied from open fields to flowers, burned land, chopped forests, rainforest and boulders scattered all over the place, together with pine and local cedar trees, particularly near the hut. Again, we passed through streams of water, which, in my own “stream” of thoughts, reminded me of the urban legend I had read that author JRR Tolkien had been inspired by Mulanje in writing the Lord of the Rings.

As we were ascending towards Chambe Hut from the intersection with the trail to Chisepo Hut, the clouds had already covered the peak behind us. Harry explained that it was not a problem to be on Sapitwa Peak (3002masl) in cloud cover because the guides knew the way; the problems began in rainy and slippery conditions. He shared the exemplary story of a foreigner who had visited the mountain in the past, bragging about his hiking abilities and insisting he could ascend the peak on his own. He tried to do so against the regulation that hikers on this mountain must always be escorted by a guide, and ended up losing his life in his big-headed attempt.

The landscape included vegetation I had never seen before, like a tree that looked like the combination of a palm tree and a fern. A group of noisy, white-necked ravens and some fat-bellied lizards were the animals my eyes first zoomed-in on upon arrival to Chambe Hut. The ash-covered, laminated brochures of the Mulanje Conservation Trust gave some fascinating information about the uniqueness of the massif. I teased Harry that he must have been sleeping during his Mountain Guide training regarding the animals on the mountain, as, accor-

ding to the brochures, there were two snakes on the massif; one of them venomous but not dangerous to humans. That was relieving to know, because my hiking friend Theodosia's recent incident with a poisonous viper bite in Cyprus had lingered on my mind.

Soon after arriving to the hut, I ate my two leftover bread slices with sticky peanut butter, gave the rest of it to Harry and carved "CYPRUS" on the wall of the cabin, following the example of other hikers before me. I then did a 40-minute exploration of the surrounding area on my own, discovering some pretty blossoms (which seemed like an orchid) among the vegetation and making a stop at the Forestry Department's tree nursery, where attempts to grow many pots of the country's national tree, the endangered Mulanje Cedar, were made. In the distance, a fire was burning near the trail we had taken the previous day.

When I went to the outdoor toilet, an undesired surprise was revealed to me, as with still a week left to go and with limited supplies in my backpack, my period decided to pay me a visit. *NOT FAIR!* This immediately meant that I was going to lose the dips I had hoped to make in the river's pools during our descent the next day.

Harry and I left the hut to check out what seemed like the outline of a "human face" on Chambe Face, but the fire in the distance was growing stronger, so he proceeded faster through the skirted-pine trail to get a phone signal and alert the forest station. Back at the hut, I took care of my dinner (again, noodles with dry fish), enjoyed the orange colors of the sunset behind Chambe, looked for Orion again but without luck and tried to play Bawo with Harry without any success. I felt incompetent to understand the reasoning and rules of the game. *Oh, my practically-minimal mathematical skills!!*

The day's chats with Harry, while on the trail, had varied from the traditions regarding dowry, divorce, child care-taking among the tribes of Malawi, the problem of unplanned pregnancy leading young girls out of school, individual vs. community needs, Malawi's tribal systems of living, my idea to ask UIAA's Steve Long if the organization could donate two of its books to the Mulanje Mountain Guides' Association, my suggestions to Harry about creating a career based on the mountain and starting a newsletter. Added to all that was my pitiful attempt to speak in Chichewa, as I got to the first line, enthusiastically greeting some men with "Muli Bwanji!" ("How are you?"), only to mess up the response to "I'm fine, and you?" and giving everyone a good laugh.



Wednesday, August 22

Up with the first morning light, I was happy to see Chambe Face lit with it, a brighter view than the previous day's cloudy afternoon. By 7:40am, we were on our way, as I was feeling the urgency to return to Blantyre and to my feminine "supplies". Going downhill on Chapaluka path felt easier to me than what I imagined would be a much more demanding uphill hike, as on many occasions I was coming down using my hands and buttocks.

If we had taken this route from Likhubula House on the 1st day, while carrying a heavier backpack, it would mean having to pull myself up on steep and rocky ground. No wonder a porter is usually recommended for the uphill hike! Throughout the walk, I kept thinking of possible routes and logistics if I was to return to the mountain with others. Before leaving from Chambe Hut, I noticed the pink blossoms of the peach tree next to it. I imagined their fruit was probably small in size, as the peach seeds used in the Bawo game seemed significantly smaller than the core of peaches in Cyprus.

While we were walking, Harry asked me what I thought he should have been doing with his life. I stressed that this was up to him and no one could force him to change if he didn't want that for himself. I gave him my own example, whereby at that stage in my life I had to find a new/better direction, personally and professionally. Earlier, I had mentioned the need to save and earn scholarships to be able to earn my degrees. I suggested he could note down his skills and what he needed to improve and to work on those. If he really hadn't received his graduation certificate from secondary school, as he had told me, then instead of sitting around and being idle when he was not guiding on the mountain, he could try to study to pass the exam. I couldn't help but comment on the hard-working lives of women while men were just sitting around doing nothing, from what I had seen on my trip.

Again, the route we took included rainforest, flowers, waterfalls and pools I would have loved to enter and swim in; *damn period!* Too much unfinished business for me on Mt. Mulanje!

By 11:30 we arrived to Likhubula House and Harry gave me a ride to the InfoMulanje intersection. I gave him 1000 MK for that, beyond the 100\$ of our contract and the 3000 MK extra for breaking the wooden stick. Harry shielded me from the persisting touts that jumped on me the minute I got out of the car and put me on the minibus to Limbe.

During the ride, I had one mandazi, 5 bananas (which I basically grabbed for 100 MK, literally stunning the woman selling them on the side of the road) and a "raw" (or what I *thought* was raw, when in fact it was simply boiled in its leaves) corn cob. I saved the leaves in my bag as a gift for Chris' pigs. In Limbe, I had to orient myself towards the Kapenga minibus area, while keeping an eye on my backpack as I had also saved the Blantyre woman's warning in my memory: "Be careful with your bag in Limbe, there are thieves".

The minibus entered the chaos of Mibawa market, where the driver's assistant asked me to pay 300 MK, instead of the 200 MK I gave him, but because he had gotten into a discussion with another man, I swiftly escaped the scene. Instead, I headed towards the bakery where I got myself a piece of apple pie, and then walked to the Tourism office and picked up some flyers and a map of Mulanje and of the country. My next stop was the Peoples Supermarket, where I wanted to buy eight 80-page notebooks for the gardener's students and a bar of soap, but could only afford the notebooks with the cash I had on me. So, the soap stayed behind, as I figured I could find other ways to keep myself and my clothes clean.

There were a number of beggars (some of them children) between the bakery and the supermarket and some sitting right outside the door of the PEP store adjacent to Peoples. I sternly told one of the children that approached me with an open hand "You should be in school, not here begging!". When I came out of the supermarket, a black man with what seemed like a big, flashy (gold?) watch on his wrist was walking, in an indifferent mood, by that same child. I couldn't be sure if he was from the area but I thought it was provocative that he was showing off *that watch*.

My next stop was Chris' house, to which I arrived after walking past a colorful stream of women that came out of one of the side streets onto Hardman's Round and kept walking on while I turned left on Chipita Drive. I couldn't tell why they were walking as they weren't holding any signs, nor shouted any slogans. I asked one of them what was happening but didn't get a response. Among them was an albino African woman. [Albino Africans have been victims of persecution within their countries].

I found the children and the gardener sitting for the day's lesson on the side of the road and, contrary to the frustration I felt of being pursued with an annoying and repeated "How are you?" by a group of scarcely dressed/scarcely cleaned children while I was approaching, I was very excited to see them. I said a first "Hello!", rushed to the bathroom and came out with the new notebooks and a funny sticker on each one. The kids accepted them with both palms open, joined and facing up and said "Zikomo". I asked if any of them needed help and went to the 13-year old boy I had a conversation with on Saturday afternoon.

He was turning a list of verbs into the past tense. I used the past tense verbs to tell him the story of my visit to Mt. Mulanje, then he repeated what I had said and tried to make up sentences related to him using the verbs in the present tense. That kind of helping, to support a child in growing his/her communicational vocabulary, was a great experience. In fact, I thought of checking, upon my return to Cyprus, if there were any relevant EU-funded jobs in Malawi. [Upon my return to Cyprus, I applied for a two-year Teacher Trainer position in Malawi, in a Development project funded by the German government. I made it to the interview stage but did not receive the assignment.]

It wasn't until 4 hours later that I could take a shower, as darkness came but electricity

didn't, at least not until 8:40pm. So, I relied on my torches and four candles to give myself some light and a more romantic ambiance for the mosquitoes as they were having their dinner: *me!*



Thursday, August 23

The planned 8:30am departure for a ride to Mibawa so that I could get the minibus to Limbe and from there to Mangochi became an 8am departure for a meeting Chris had with Mr. Newton Kambala, who eventually gave me a private ride to Mangochi in his Toyota Hilux. Mr. Kambala, founder of Mkaka Constructions, turned out to be the Interim President of UTM, the political party that had recently been formed to support the presidential candidate (Saulos Chilima) that was at that time Vice President to corrupt President Mutharika.

Before leaving Blantyre, we made a stop at the Mibawa Market, as Newton had to get a shave at a barber shop and I grabbed the opportunity to buy some wooden spoons as souvenirs and a bowl of strawberries for the ride. When I entered the barber's shop, I couldn't help but comment that he had posters of both Liverpool *and* Manchester United on the wall (*Go Liverpool!!*) and that, according to another poster, the country's first President was in office for about 30 years up to the age of 96. *WTF!*

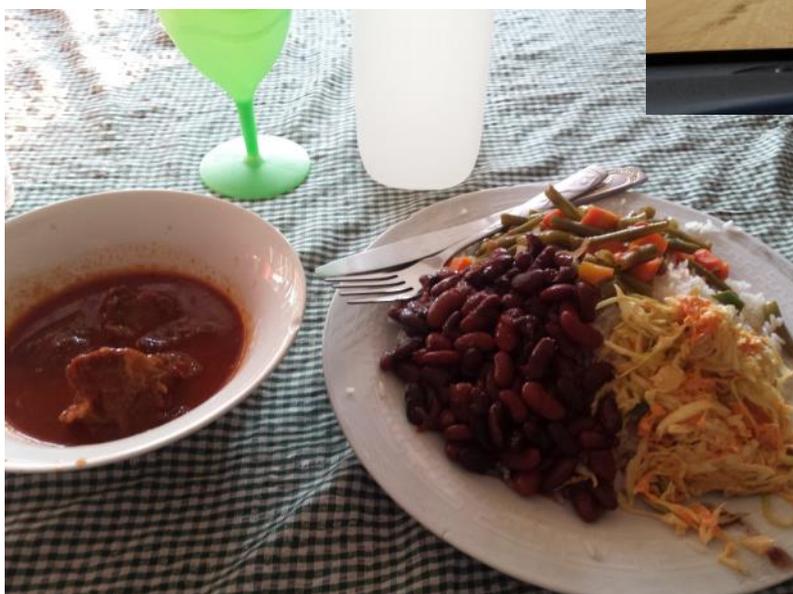
Newton commented that a President at that age can drink tea and I argued that a President should be doing much more than that! It turned out he was being ironic, as our conversation later in the car evolved to include politics, the problems of Malawi, his personal life and UTM's agenda if it became government. He seemed like a very reasonable man, who had created his own business and who declared (to me) that he didn't want to be Malawi's version of Miltiades Neophytou (a Construction Company owner who had earned public contracts because of his affiliation with a former Republic of Cyprus president). I shared my observations of the country, the conversations I had had up to that point, the experts I had met, my own life choices and life/politics in Cyprus.

On the way, we stopped at a village where Newton had a short meeting with UTM members, while I practiced the "art" of pressing a water pump to fill a bucket of water from a ground hole. The task was being undertaken by a group of children, who didn't speak any English. It took me 51 (!!) pushes to fill just one 20-litre bucket of water and I couldn't help but wonder how many pushes were needed for the filling of tens of buckets children and women were carrying daily. [In 2019, this bucket-filling experience, together with the piles of used clothing I had seen in the outdoor market in Lundazi (Zambia), inspired an EU-funded, Global Citizenship Education project, titled "Performing their Story", that took place in Cyprus].

As we arrived to dusty Mangochi at 2:30pm, Newton offered me a "sponsored" night at Jakara Lodge, whose bedrooms apparently went for 20,000 MK/night without really deserving that price for the services they provided. I accepted the offer (to avoid having to search for alternative accommodation) and promised to reciprocate. I left my things in the room and soon left for the Airtel office in town. Airtel was out of electricity, which was making the temperature in their office, and my own stress about my data bundle not working since we left Blantyre, hit the roof.

Despite the “Data Geek” (that was the logo on his shirt) Airtel employee’s promise that I would be re-registered to their network, nothing happened during the evening. I stepped into the pharmacy next to Airtel and bought three bilharzia pills. The young man that sold them to me said I should have taken them before going into Lake Malawi! I convinced him to charge me 1500 MK (instead of 3000 MK) for the pills, by stating that in Mzuzu they were selling each one for only 300 MK.

Amid tens of bicycle taxis, I went searching for the Victoria Forex office, but with the sun preparing to set, I opted to go eat instead and leave the search for the next day. Upon entering Mama Ruby restaurant for a tasty “rice with beef and vegetables” meal, I was stricken with the awkward image of the female owner sitting on the ground in the front yard and receiving the payment from the restaurant’s patrons as if she was some kind of Queen Bee. There was certainly no lack of chairs in the restaurant, so it seemed strange to me that this woman chose a more “primitive” approach to where she would sit.



Take a journey with me ...

Friday, August 24

My 7am breakfast of a small omelet, a small sausage, fries, bread and a banana, was not very healthy but still enough to fuel me for the morning, so I ate it all, packed my bags, checked out and moved myself to Perfect Lodge a few meters away. When I discovered it the day before, and heard the price (5500 MK, with breakfast) which was within my budget even though it didn't provide warm water in the shower, I said out loud "*Perfect!*". It came with walls painted a bright green and something like ancient Greek columns in its inner courtyard.

I headed again for the Airtel office, with a stop first at another pharmacy, to confirm what the young man had told me the day before. So yes, that pharmacist also said I should have taken the pill before entering the lake and quoted me a price of more than 1000 MK for each pill.

It took a bit of waiting at the Airtel shop to get me back on track with the network, while a number of locals were waiting to pay/put money in their accounts. The bundles system seemed interesting to me, but still much more expensive than having a stable monthly package with limits on minutes and data use. For the locals, who could pay little by little and with a tendency to live for the "now", it seemed to work.

Victoria Forex was my next stop, to check if they had any meticals for Mozambique. The answer was negative; the National Bank didn't have any, either. Some meters down the road, I couldn't resist having a look at the pieces of chitenge hanging at the entrance of a clothing shop. As the prices were gradually going up during my trip, and the quality was going down, I settled for 2 meters of a fabric that seemed good enough and sufficient for a summer dress.

Mangochi was a treasure box of interesting images of local life. Creepy butcheries of exposed meat getting "seasoned" with dust from the road, exhaust fumes and insect bites. Cute and very simple bicycle repair shops. Trees used to hang handbags for sale (*who needs stores, anyway?!*). Pieces of tree trunks or blocks of cement used to exhibit shoes for sale. Kids practicing dance moves with music from sound systems placed on the side of the road.

I visited the Lake Malawi Museum where Mr. White Mambala gave me a tour of the place. He also informed me that, at the age of 47, he was waiting for the results of his Secondary Education Certificate test to come out. He shared with me his belief that Education is important and his wish to get an upgrade in his job or even a position as a History/Geography teacher. He had stayed up studying for many nights, wanting to be a positive example for his two daughters.

A member of the Mgoni tribe, White moved with his wife to Yao tribe-led Mangochi for work. I congratulated him on his views about education and vowed to return to the Museum with a gift for him. White was not the only man whose efforts to pursue a better life were

inspiring. Before going to the Museum, I had stopped at Fort Johnstone Hotel to ask what “wapansi” meant, as it seemed to be related to a sort of “Camino” between Mangochi and Lilongwe. The woman at the hotel’s reception informed me that the owner of the hotel was a man that in 1955 walked from Lilongwe to Mangochi with almost nothing in his pockets and managed to build himself up into a hotel owner. “Wapansi”, written on a mural on the outside wall of the hotel, symbolized his journey.

Another man that was building something was the owner of a restaurant-to-be. He was busy putting up a roof of dried grass on a simple, red-brick construction. I asked the young man selling airtime in a booth nearby if this was a risky idea, as grass tends to leak with rain and he responded with “he will put a lot of glass”. “Glass!!!”, I thought, “wow!!!”. But within milliseconds I realized he was not talking about sealing the roof with glass under the thatched roof. He meant putting a lot of (dried) gRass. Duh!! The African mispronunciation of the letter “R” caught me off-guard once more! 😊

Newton had encouraged me to look for and eat “chambo”, a local specialty, so the young man asked, on my behalf, a woman passing by, if the Mpsa Lunch Center (a.k.a. thatched-roof, road-side food joint) was serving it for the day. She said “No”, because they had served it the day before. I proceeded towards the Mangochi District Social Welfare Offices, where I had a short chat with a female Social Worker, regarding the social difficulties they were dealing with as a service, whether the state offered financial assistance and if they were facing any challenges entering people’s homes during home visits.

That Social Worker seemed much more willing to converse with me compared to the woman I had talked to at the walk-in Clinic in Livingstone, Zambia. I spoke to her and her colleague about UTM’s agenda being a good one for the country and encouraged them to vote for them in the next elections. I even said I would ask UTM to visit them and listen to their ideas. Soon enough, I messaged Newton about this promise I had made, as well as about White Mambala’s story.

As it was only 11:15am when I left the Museum (with White’s recommendation to have lunch at “Aunt Mary’s place”), I chose to walk the length of the Bakiri Muluzi Bridge over the Shire river. The other end of the bridge was the start of a messy, road-side market with typical stall vendors. I turned to the left to look at the river bank and realized that plastic garbage “grew” not only on the ground, but also on trees, judging from how the poor trees were, heart-breakingly, covered in blue plastic bags.

I didn’t walk further into the road-side market as I didn’t want to be a tout victim, plus I wasn’t out for shopping. While crossing the bridge back towards Victoria Block Tower, I noticed some benches and fresh grass in the distance on the river’s banks, outside what seemed like a bar. *Precious BENCHES and FRESH GRASS!!* I simply *had* to go check the place out.

A woman was laundering clothes that she was drying on the grass with some help by

Take a journey with me ...

the sun. To diffuse my mzungu presence with humor, I asked her why she was doing all the hard work while about a dozen men were sitting lazily around, looking at her. She laughed but, if I understood correctly, that was her job, so I didn't say anything else, took a few photos and left with a possibility to return later.

When I spotted the office of YONECO (Youth Network and Counseling), I immediately thought "Time to talk to someone about what they do!" and asked someone to call for their officer. Next door, the Red Cross office, had only the basics. YONECO's female officer said the organization was headed by an Executive Board and financially supported by a Dutch organization. As I was waiting for her to show up, I had a look at a March 2018 newspaper article posted on their notice board, regarding a project they had run to reduce early school leaving of girls through theatre. The woman said she had started at the organization as a volunteer, then received Counseling training and was later hired as a paid staff. Although I was very curious, I refrained from asking more details about the Counseling training she had received, as her English was of average strength.

I left from there and searched for Aunt Mary's place. She wasn't offering chambo but had other things on the menu. So, shortly after, I took a bicycle taxi, went back to Perfect Lodge, grabbed the gifts for White, sent a photo to my (seamstress) mother for the chitenge I had bought and went back to Aunt Mary's with the same bicycle taxi. In other words, within 40 minutes I sat on a real, moving bicycle for more time than I had sat in my 40 years of life! I felt a bit nervous about the crazy traffic, but my driver was careful as I had warned him about my bicycle-riding cluelessness.

Lunch at Aunt Mary's was a banquet buffet experience, considering the array of pots and pans on display over two long tables and the many varieties of food available. Beans, okra, greens, groundnuts, fish, chicken, beef, rice, n'shima, peas! For 1500 MK, I served myself two scoops of rice with a scoop of usipa fish in tomato sauce, a scoop of peas, a scoop of okra, a scoop of red beans and a scoop of groundnut leaves. I skipped the chicken, because after seeing all the live chicken that were roaming and eating from the garbage piles on the side of Mangochi's main street, I had doubts about the quality of their meat. What I chose was all tasty, although I feared the onion pieces in the groundnut leaves would have my intestines "fired up" by the evening.

Alas, ultra-fired-up was the result of taking a bite of one of the small orange peppers Aunt Mary had on the tables. *Oh shit, demasiado picante!* I gulped on my water and hoped my meal would help me overcome the heat inside my mouth. Thankfully, it did, so my tongue's temperature was soon restored to default.

I wanted to stay longer at my table and work on my travel notes, but I was sort of "kicked out" by the next customers that wanted to sit down and eat. With just 5-6 tables and a steady clientele, including men in suits and uniforms, Aunt Mary couldn't afford to lose any

money.

Feeling sleepy from the digestion process, I went to the Museum and joked with White that if there had been any fresh grass in the Museum's front yard, I would have definitely lied there to take a nap. No grass, unfortunately, but some pretty pink-white flowers instead. And a mightily heavy ship anchor on the porch of the museum's colonial building.

White was thankful for the gifts (a bookmark with Cyprus' main historical points since antiquity and a bottle opener with artistic detail from an ancient pot) and gave me his contact details with a request to send him a letter from Cyprus. Before we said goodbye, he told me the story of an American man he had helped after other tourists had stolen his money at Monkey Bay. *A fine man, this Mr. Mambala.*

In the search for fresh grass to lie on, I went back to the river bank with the benches. I laid down on my spread-out sarong, my khaki safari hat flat on my face to protect me from the sun. However, I had nothing to protect me from the gossipy and noisy local men sitting and drinking nearby, one of whom came over to pose the usual questions but without having the knowledge nor the language skill nor the social skills to understand where Cyprus is, what Cyprus is and that I wanted to be left alone to take my nap. Eventually, he got the message and left me alone and I was able to close my eyes for about 25 minutes, although I could still hear them all bubbling about my presence as if I had landed there from another universe.

When I sat up again, some groups of ducks started coming and going and they were quite funny to watch. Either by choice or by accident, one particular line of ducks consisted of a white, a black, a white, a black duck and so forth. Despite not being able to enjoy it in full peace, it was still nice to be there with the view of the river.

One pair of men had arrived while I was lying down, and one of them later asked me if I was a writer, when he saw me scribbling in my notebook. Calmly, I said "No, I'm not a writer. Just because I write doesn't mean I'm a writer. Just because you drink, doesn't mean you are an alcoholic." With that, the questions stopped.

I left the riverside around 3:40pm, making my way back to the lodge before it got dark. While walking, a pair of girls dressed in similar blue-white dotted skirts appeared in front of me and to be able to take a photo of them I had to pretend that I wasn't going to take a photo of them! So, I paused to "read" the announcements on a tree along the way (which were actually interesting, because both were for separate vacancies for primary school teachers and I was curious about the required qualifications) and when the two girls stopped near the entrance of the local University, I was able to snap the photo.

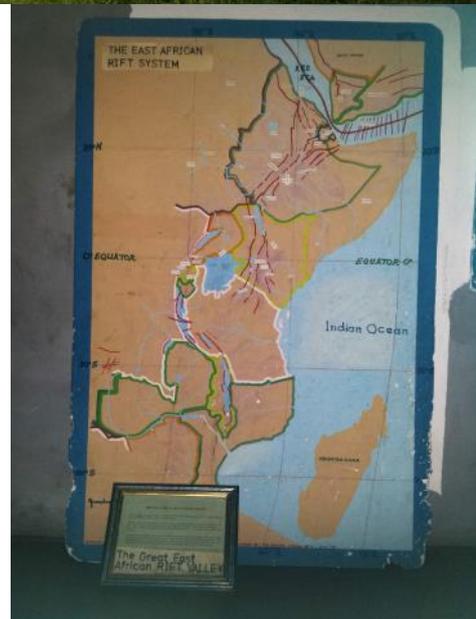
Soon after, my data bundle snapped itself out of existence again and never came back throughout the night. *Damned Airtel!* If that was how this Saulos guy (the Vice President) was planning to run the country – after boasting for managing Airtel in the past – *then they would be screwed!* Indebted to Newton Kambala though, I did promote UTM again, during my chat

Take a journey with me ...

with the two men at Perfect Lodge's reception office and they felt "enlightened" by what I had to tell them. I hoped I was right! [Saulos Chilima became Vice President to President Lazarus Chakwera in June 2020, after the 2019 elections, which Mutharika had won, were overturned by the country's Constitutional Court because of "widespread irregularities".]

When I went back to Perfect Lodge, I realized that I had not seen again the fully-naked young girl that was oddly walking down the street outside Jakara Lodge the day before, just at the moment of my arrival with Newton. She had been carrying rocks in her arms, pushed against her bare breasts. When we both saw her, Newton thought she was going to throw the rocks at his car, whereas my thought was that she was completely out-of-place as the first naked person I had seen on my trip up to that point.





Saturday, August 25 (Malawi)

I devoured my “fried eggs with fries, warm milk, bread and butter” breakfast around 7am and soon after went for the third time in three days to the Airtel Express (express only in name) shop to get my sim card fixed once again. This time I “showed them my teeth” and, after an hour of waiting, left from there with 50MB given to me for free to replace the MB I lost when my bundle expired and 370 (out of the 390) MK that I still had in my account. *Well, yeah!*

By 9am I was back at Perfect Lodge, grabbed two mandazis from the street vendor, strapped my backpacks on me and climbed on a bicycle taxi towards the place where minibuses departed for Chiponde. The minibus driver said he was going to depart “in 10 minutes”. I said “10 minutes ... *Malawi time?!*”. We both laughed. He knew I was right.

We eventually departed around 10am and I was hopeful, based on my previous border-crossing experiences, that I would make it to Cuamba in Mozambique before sunset. At the back row of the minibus where I sat, three different women with their infants sat quietly next to me, without talking to their babies. “How poorly”, I thought, “this can affect the child’s brain and social development”. Within the span of just one hour of interaction with a caring adult, a child can acquire vocabulary about its surroundings, a language of physical and emotional connection and the capacity to relate to foreigners. That was probably too much to ask, without first educating these women to gain awareness.

By noon, we arrived to Chiponde, where I had to respond with several defensive “*NO!*” to pay 2000 MK for a motorbike ride to the Mozambican border post, to change my remaining MKs for a horrible rate and to be hassled in general. While I was getting my passport exit-stamped at the Malawi immigration office, the officers informed me that the best kwacha-to-meticals rate I could hope for from the money changers across the border would be 0.085.

Saturday, August 25 (Mozambique)

Despite the challenge posed by the heat of the midday sun, I chose to walk the 1.5km stretch of the border between Malawi and Mozambique. The bribe-prone, asshole officers at the Mozambican border post were much worse to bear than the sun, as they first claimed that I had to pay 75\$ for the visa and when I complained that the visa was in fact 2000 meticals (MT) – about 30€ – they dropped the fee to 50\$ and handed me a receipt slip for that amount before I could protest any further. It took them one whole hour to process my visa, as they didn't seem to be in any hurry, while I started roasting in anxiety that I was not going to make it to Cuamba with daylight. *Filthy bastards!*

I felt certain that the money changer standing at the border post, whose exchange rate was bad but just a little bit better than the money-changing thieves on the Malawian side, was giving the filthy bastards a commission. I exited the border office and started walking towards Mandimba, feeling confident that a ride would appear along the way. It didn't take long to hear the typical "Sister!" from a middle-man. For my remaining spare change of 880 Malawian Kwacha, I rode at the back of a motorcycle taxi to Mandimba.

Upon my arrival, the money changers caught the smell of "fresh meat" and jumped on me. For 35000 MK, I bargained my way to 2800 MT, which was the best I could hope for under the circumstances (a rate of 0.082). I then walked 100 meters to the departure point of chapas (minibuses) to Cuamba. Within the two hours of waiting time, I bought a street-side bowl of fries with 3 pieces of chicken and a bit of white, shredded cabbage. *Yep, 5-star cuisine!* The kid that sold the food to me gave me back my change full of grease from his hands. That was when I noticed metical bills were made of plastic.

Sweaty and dusty (i.e. in true border-crossing-day fashion), I sat under the big tree where others were also waiting, to devour my lunch. I also tried and almost managed to communicate, in a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese words, with a pair of male and female municipal police officers about which minibus I was supposed to take for Cuamba, as initially I thought I was going at the back of an open truck. *Thankfully, I wasn't!*

I also bought myself a Movitel sim card, avoiding to invest a lot of money on a data bundle and configured my phone on my own. *Good riddance, Malawi's Airtel!* The man that sold me the sim card said he wanted to be "friends" with me. Needless to say, I acted as if his words went in one ear and straight out the other.

Between 3:45 and 7:35pm, I experienced an "Ultra-Fast and Furious" (*UFF!*) ride in a chapa that was ready to split horizontally in two at any moment, on a dirt road that could not have been called a road but a series of short hills, with a driver that once dreamed (or maybe was, in his free time!) a Formula1 champion and with people coming inside the minibus from all openings, the sides and back! It reminded me of that **insane bus ride from Lushoto to**

Arusha (Tanzania) back in 2014, in that I was sitting at the back row again, right above the wheels, which meant four-hours of my buttocks jumping up and down, while trying to hold my two backpacks in one place.

Yet another man claimed he was interested in me and wanted to “be my friend”. *Sorry pal, the feeling is not mutual!* However, if the beautiful sunset behind us had asked to be my friend, I would have said “Yes!” right away. On a couple of occasions, especially when my head touched the inside roof of the minibus, I thought I should alert Stergios and Alexandra of World Vespa about the horrible quality of this bumpy “road”.

The scenery we went through was similar to what I had already seen across the 3 countries: savannah, dry grassland, mud huts with thatched roofs. What I saw more of during the UFF ride, were several fires, especially more visible when the darkness fell. Once more, there were people madly risking their lives by walking on the side of the road in pitch-dark. What a big difference it would have made for their safety, I thought, if they at least wore something reflective – a vest or an arm band. That was an idea I shared in a message to Malawi’s Newton Kambala a few days later.

Even though I wasn’t terribly hungry, upon arriving to Cuamba I walked inside Iman’s take-away restaurant that seemed decent enough and chose what seemed like the simplest to eat: rice with pork in tomato sauce. The rice was provided in such a big quantity that I placed half of it in my expandable bowl, after I cleaned it from the grease of the street food I had bought in Mandimba. It would serve me right for the train ride between Cuamba and Nam-pula, together with some sauce.

Liverpool FC was playing against Birmingham on the restaurant’s TV screen. I found it funny that the local men were watching the game with BBC commentary, even though they probably didn’t speak a word of English. Not that they needed to, of course, to be able to understand what was going on. As part of the restaurant’s front window, a young man in a booth was selling rolls of white bread for 2.5 MT each (practically for free!). I bought two for the train ride.

The light of the full moon plus some sense of confidence coupled with necessity, led me to Pensao San Miguel, the only accommodation option recommended in the Lonely Planet book. Right in front of it, a fiesta organized by Frelimo [a political party] was taking place. Correction: right in front of a restaurant that didn’t have “Pensao” posted anywhere but that Google maps sort of pointed out as the accommodation place I was looking for.

The man at the restaurant reception initially said their rooms cost 2000 MT but I immediately pointed to the Lonely Planet paragraph that said 1000 MT. So, he called another man and told him to show me the 1000 MT rooms, pointing out, from what I could figure out, to only take 1000 from me. We walked for about 20 minutes and, at some point, I started wondering where on Earth he was leading me to. Eventually, we reached a guarded line of rooms

and I was led into one that included a double bed and the promise of warm water.

I opened my wallet, took out five 200 MT bills from the bunch I had and gave it to the man. I didn't enter the shower right away, as I needed to take my time to relax first, knowing at the same time that I would need to get up at 3am because of the train ride. Upon entering the room, I forgot to check if the light was working in the bathroom; it wasn't. And when I decided to take my shower, there was no running water. So, I told the guard and, in turn, he informed the man that had led me there, who apparently was staying in a separate room two doors down from me.

They turned on the water again and I went in under the light of my torches. I cleaned myself as best as I could, considering the amounts of the day's dust on my hair and nails, and then went to bed.



Sunday, August 26

Up I was at 3am; alarm-wise. My intestines had sent me to the toilet with cramps and diarrhea for two times already. Not to mention the loud party music from the Frelimo fiesta that was still going on at 3am, making me envious as I would have been very willing to dance to some of the disco songs they played. The absence of running water (again) forced me to leave for the train station without clean teeth and face. At least I had electricity for charging my phone throughout the night.

Despite my initial reservations, I walked the straight 10-minute route to the train station in safety, happy that there were functioning lamps on the street. In fact, when we were approaching Cuamba in the chapa the day before, it seemed like there were more street lights there, even as a rural area, compared to Malawi. I wondered if this had been an effect of Mozambique earning its independence from Portugal in the mid-1970's (instead of the early 60's, like other colonial territories) and thus more infrastructure had been put in place.

By around 3:45am, I was at the station and as I placed my bags on the ground near the ticket office and looked up at the sky ... there he was. Orion, my starry guardian. 😊 *Hey, I've been looking all over for you!!!*

Just a few moments earlier, as I was figuring out my bearings in the station, with a long, tight queue of passengers waiting for the gates to open, a couple of idiots selling water and other drinks called on me. Frustrated with their imbecile attitude, I told them I already had water with me. After 30 minutes of waiting though, I thought it might have been a good idea to buy an extra bottle to carry along for the 10+ hour train ride. So, I went to the stall of a sleeping young man, opened my wallet to give him the 50 MT he wanted ... and realized that at least 600 of my MTs were missing. *F...ing bastards!*

I couldn't believe it and busted my head for several minutes to retrace my memory of what I had spent and what I had done since receiving the 2800 MT at the border. I had my eyes on my smaller backpack all the time ... except from the minutes I had spent taking a shower. That asshole that led me to the room must have seen what my wallet looked like and where I had put it after I paid him for the room. I was sure I had more money on me when I arrived to Cuamba than the 325 MT that remained in my wallet. He must have entered the room while I was taking a shower, as he knew when that took place: when he re-started the water flow for me.

Feeling certain that I was going to give Lonely Planet a piece of my mind for recommending those thieves, and that I was going to name and shame them, I kept on waiting for the ticket booth to open. The crowd was already becoming frustrated that the gates were not opening. I could swear the Head of the station was still at Frelimo's fiesta, as that's where I had noticed him when I first had arrived to the Pensao's restaurant.

A neatly dressed man that was also waiting in the queue, told me, when I approached and asked him, that the ticket booth was closed and that I should ask at the gate to be let in, with a possibility to pay for the ticket with a card. I went to the gate, the police officers saw me, I explained I had to pay for the ticket with a card and they let me in right away. I went to the Executive wagon but no cabins were available, as I had expected. Just airplane-style, non-reclining seats.

I noticed a couple which looked Mediterranean and proceeded to sit two rows behind them. Soon enough, I was chatting with Judith and Girard in Español about their 4-week trip in South Africa and Mozambique and my own travel adventures up to that evening.

The train eventually departed at 5:10am and from where I was seated, I could see an orange-hued full moon getting ready to set and give its place to the sun on the other side of the horizon. During the 10+-hour ride to Nampula (we arrived at 3:30pm, fortunately with daylight), the whole journey seemed more like a socio-cultural-economic event than an attempt to get from A to B as fast as possible. The train moved quite slowly, although without derailment issues, as the rail lines seemed to be in much better condition than those in Zambia.

The train stopped every few kilometers, giving the locals on the train the chance to shop anything they could get their hands on (many times, anything they could grab from what was being thrown at them!), as if this was their last chance on Earth to do any kind of shopping! Carrots, roots, bananas, onions, cabbage, nuts, tomatoes, garlic, drinks, fried chicken, bread rolls, you name it! Plus, countless plastic bags to put all these items in.

The scenery was pretty and green for the most part, with some granite outcrops dotting the background. One of them seemed quite spectacular and, if scalable, it would make a really nice challenge for rock-climbers. I kept dozing off throughout the journey, feeling cramps and malaise in my intestines, although I was lucky not to have any episodes of diarrhea.

Eventually, I had to brush my teeth and wash my face, but managed only the second in the absence of running water on the train. *“Executive wagon” my ass!* However, when I glanced at the 2nd-class passengers that were standing crammed in the corridor of the next wagon, I realized we were practically moving in luxury, compared to them. Looking at the garbage piled up beyond the rail lines, I couldn't help but make comparisons in my head with filth-and-garbage-producing Cypriots that like to call themselves “clean and civilized” but don't make use of garbage collection options, even though they actually have *access* to them, unlike the residents of African countries.

The Spanish couple had bought a dozen bananas for 30 MT at some point, and later gave me 4-5 of them, which I consumed along with my leftover rice. Watching the cash I had left on me so that I wouldn't splurge, I bought only a small bottle of water.

Before my phone battery died completely at 12:50pm, I managed to hear from Mwaura, whom I had asked via Couchsurfing to host me for the night in Nampula. As he was going to be out of town, he declined but offered to host me after August 28th, if needed. I wrote back that I would need him before flying from Nampula to Johannesburg in early September.

When the ticket officer eventually showed up in the wagon, I told him what happened with my money in Cuamba and since payment with a credit card was not possible on the train, I vouched to do so either upon arrival in Nampula or the next morning when I would find a Forex office. To be honest, I never followed through with my promise.

At some point, a cargo train that seemed like it was a few kilometers long, rolled parallel to our train, heading in the opposite direction. I couldn't remember ever seeing such a long train in my life before! When we made a stop at around 1pm, I was sad I didn't have access to my phone anymore, as I wanted to capture the "typical" image – from what I had seen up to that moment – of men chewing some kind of root and throwing the peels in a big pile all around them. A genuinely comical scene.

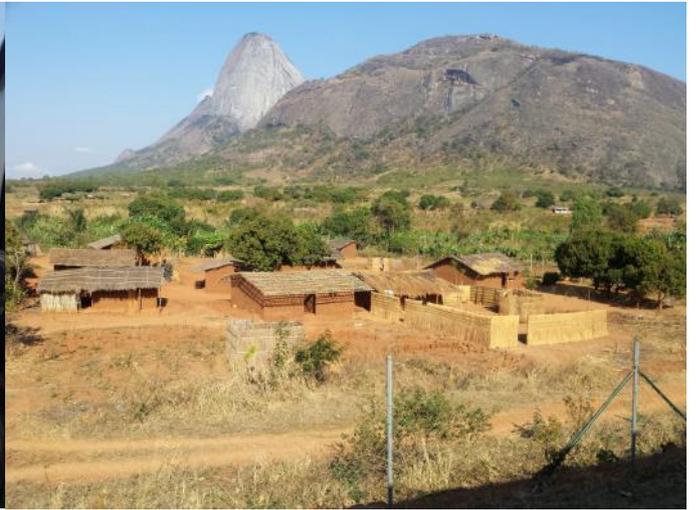
Speaking of eating, the Big Mama the train conductor forced in the empty seat next to me, was spilling over into my space for about an hour, until we reached Nampula. Dressed in her *capulana* outfit, she seemed oblivious or indifferent to the fact she needed so much space. [*Capulana*: patterned colorful fabric, similar to chitenge fabric in Zambia and Malawi, that Mozambican women and men use to dress themselves.] Up until the Big Mama's appearance, I had my own bags on the empty seat, and at some point, had tried to approach a young girl, sitting with her mother in the opposite aisle, with my stickers, a blank sheet of paper and my colored pencils. The child didn't seem very impressed and kept on weeping until she fell asleep on her mother's chest. When the mother returned the colored pencils and the paper to me, I saw she had written the girl's name on the it: Eliandra.

When the train finally arrived in town, I followed the Barcelonian *pareja* (couple) to Ruby's Guesthouse. Still in abdominal pain, nausea and a headache, I entered the dorm room where two women were caressing each other while lying on the same bed. I didn't say much to them until a few hours later, when I spoke – as much as we could understand each other – to one of the two (Victoria, a Brazilian working as a missionary for the Catholic church) about my malaise. With her help, I did the malaria at-home test I had purchased in Livingstone (Zambia) and it gave a negative response. Later on, I spoke – with more fluency – in Spanish about my symptoms to the other woman, of mixed Brazilian-Uruguayan roots.

The two women proposed I could ride with them the next morning, first to a money-exchange place they knew of, and then to a health clinic, if I wanted to get a more accurate test for malaria. The absence of fever was a good indicator that the negative result of the home test was correct but, I was still concerned if I was having an acute case of schistosomiasis, even though the description of its main symptoms also included fever, which I didn't have.

I took a sorry excuse of a shower in the guesthouse's narrow shower/toilet space combination, with the warm water coming and going, and then did my laundry. Feeling hungry, I walked out of the hostel in the direction of the central church and Vip supermarket, hoping to find something to eat. Although it was already night time, it was relieving to feel, as a foreign woman, quite safe (or, non-threatened) while walking in the quiet streets of Nampula's center, under the light of a full moon. I made a couple of stops to check out the street food joints for maybe a sandwich, but the items on sale were either too greasy or the vendors couldn't understand what I meant by "sandwich". I ended up buying three *Pastéis* at Vip café and nearly had a sugar overdose attack after devouring all of them by the time I got back to Ruby's. [*Pastéis de Belem*: Also called Pastel de Nata, a famous Portuguese custard tart.] The sugar overdose was followed by very intense abdominal cramps, which I was quite sure I had never experienced with diarrheas in previous travels.

Before arriving back at Ruby's, I passed in front of the Ethnography Museum and stopped at the gate to check its opening times. I couldn't understand what was meant by "2a Feria", nor was I inspired by the lack of modern features in the building's appearance. On top of that, the reviews on Google Maps were not encouraging about the richness of the exhibition, so that immediately solved for me the dilemma of staying in Nampula for a second night so that I could visit it. In fact, when I later checked my calendar and realized that my departure day from Mozambique was a Monday, not a Tuesday, as I had originally thought, it became certain that unless my health deteriorated a lot until the morning, I was only staying in Nampula just for that night.



Monday, August 27

Up at 6am and without a headache, I felt more relaxed about my health. I would have stayed in bed a bit longer, but a dog was barking outside the window and the two Brazilian women/lesbian couple (?) had said we were going to the Forex place at around 7:30am. I had my *pequeño almuerzo* (breakfast) with the Spanish couple, who informed me that there were chapa departures to Ilha de Moçambique until noon. We didn't exchange any goodbyes, as we were all certain we would see each other again on the streets of the petite island.

The "Forex" place ended up being a hardware store where poor me exchanged 150\$ for 61 MT each and the Brazilian missionary workers exchanged 2100\$. I couldn't help but wonder for whom they were changing such an amount. We then went to the health clinic, where eventually I decided to skip spending money I didn't have on malaria tests I didn't need. So, they drove me back to the hostel and I departed with my bags in search of a "Tanzaniano chapa" to Ilha.

Surely, I asked directly and stressed that I needed a minibus going to Ilha, *beyond* the bridge. Surely, they lied. The chapa stopped at Monapo. On the way to there, I couldn't help but indulge in some grilled corn and a handful of bananas, for 30 and 10 MT respectively. *Dead cheap!*

My intestines cringed a bit but gave me no urges to rush to the toilet. Sitting next to the driver's seat in the minibus during the stop at Monapo, it was interesting to observe the people sitting on the Vodacom-sponsored concrete benches and what was happening at the square's market stalls. In fact, it seemed *everything* was sponsored by Vodacom! Suddenly, I was asked to get out and move to the cabin of an open-back truck and wait there while the truck's open area was filled-up with locals.

While enjoying the front-window views of the remaining route to Ilha, I was able to capture some videos of the ride. I also bought myself a bowl of freshly roasted cashew nuts, to have as a snack for later.

At 2:40pm, the bridge joining the mainland with Ilha appeared in the horizon. But ... surprise, surprise! The truck stopped right before it. Fuming for being lied to after I came out, I refused to spend more money for a motorbike taxi. So, I walked the 3km length of the bridge, breathing in the strong ocean wind and checking out how clean from garbage the water was. *Not much*. Within fifty minutes I had arrived to the island and sat at a bench to have a break and release my back from the heavy weight of my bags.

Right after I ate my bananas, I noticed the big, spectacular branches and trunks of some trees behind me and to my right. "*What kind of tree is this?!"*, I thought.

A few minutes later, I started walking towards Ruby's Ilha Hostel, taking notice of the

look and condition of various buildings and of the unknown, spectacular trees. On the announcement board of a municipal building, I noticed a poster for a German-Mozambican theatrical performance, “Medea 2”, that was scheduled to be performed during my stay on the island. *Super!* I had really missed some experience of culture during the trip.

I arrived to Ruby’s right at the moment two separate young men appeared with trays of fresh fish stabilized on their heads. *Seafood, BABY!* I booked myself for three nights in a very pretty, 5-bed dorm room. Overall, the hostel, a building of the Portuguese colonial era, was very nice and I had the entire room and plenty of shelf space to myself.

After doing the necessary laundry, I left at 7pm to have a walk around and look for a place to eat. Two things in particular caught my attention: a store selling small wooden boats (a.k.a. contenders for my boat collection back home) and a group of barefoot children that were still out and about on the streets at 9pm. *Shouldn’t they have been at home at that time?! Grr...*

I couldn’t understand what the waiter at the entrance of Café Central was telling me about the waiting time to be seated, so I ended-up for *matapa de siri siri* and grilled fish with vegetables (*peixe do dia*, the fish of the day) at Reliquias restaurant. [*Matapa de siri siri*: a local specialty soup, made of a sea plant that grows around the island.] My 780 MT dinner was very tasty but my intestines didn’t get equally excited.

No, scrap that. My intestines got so “excited”, that after I returned to the hostel, they led me to the toilet for three different phases of elimination in watery form!





Tuesday, August 28

The evening's diarrhea and abdominal cramps got me out of bed with worry. The room was still looking pretty, though! I eavesdropped on the birds singing in the inner courtyard, had breakfast (bread and butter, black tea, fresh guava fruit) and stepped out of the hostel at 9:30am.

First, I walked towards the island's (history) Museum. A group of unwashed children approached me, clearly with an intention to beg me for money, calling me "Amiga". I told them "We are not friends" and "Since when are we friends?" in Spanish, feeling quite upset about the situation of them begging and their potential exposure to abuse by adults. In fact, I was so upset that I raised my voice to make them stop pestering me and they made fun of me in return. I continued towards the Castle, where another group of kids approached me, again making me put up my defenses.

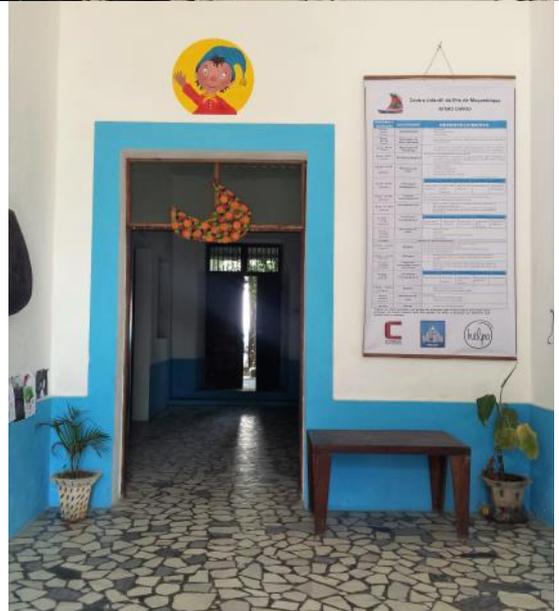
I passed by an abandoned, colonial-era house on the coastline. The Portuguese-style, colored tiles that were still on some of its destroyed walls, made me wonder about the beauty the building must have had in the past, before its collapse. Drawn by European-architecture and the flowers typically complimenting the picture (e.g. fuchsia-colored bougainvillea), I kept my eyes open for windows, staircases and facades that met my personal criteria of "beautiful".

Even some pages with a student's hand-written sentences, cut-off from a school notebook and lying on the ground, drew my attention. The filth and decadence of other spots also drew my attention ... as well as my distaste. I stopped and had a look at the Muhipiri exhibition in the Municipality building, demonstrating ideas on how to improve the infrastructure and buildings on the island that needed renovation, especially those in Makuti town. Indeed, as I saw while walking through Makuti town (the island's southern half) and Stone town (the island's northern half), Makuti lacked sanitation and the colonial buildings were left to fall apart.

I made a longer stop in the Garden of Memory and since I had paid an entrance fee, I sat down in the calm setting to write my notes. I couldn't help but comment out-loud to the garden's keeper that the slave trade practices (to which the garden, a former warehouse where slaves had been confined before being shipped off, was dedicated) were not truly abolished, as people in modern-day Africa were being packed like sardines in minibuses by their own compatriots, women had been carrying loads on their heads and doing many other chores at the same time, etc.

A few minutes before I left the garden, a large group of small, unsupervised children came into the space and started running around. *Wait, shouldn't they have been in school?!*

I walked towards the "Hospital"; at least that's what the blue sign outside said regard-



Wednesday, August 29

Tired from all the visits to the bathroom and the mosquito bites (*ΔΩΣΑΜΕ!! ΦΤΑΝΕΙ!!*), at 6:20am I walked up the steps to the hostel's white-washed terrace, as the first sight of it the previous night left me curious about it. In fact, more and more, I had been observing new details of the island and of particular places which I had not noticed before.

A few minutes before 8am, after a breakfast of only bread and bananas, I exited the hostel for further exploration of the streets and with the intention to visit the hospital. I decided to walk down the east side of the island, which included taking my shoes off and walking in the low tide, happily discovering some non-edible sea treasures. One of those discoveries was what seemed like a bone whose one end had prongs like a comb, the kind I had seen Africans use to comb their short hair.

At some point, my hands were so full with my new treasures that I had to sit down near the abandoned San Antonio church to sort them out. That's where I last remember seeing the bone piece, as I later discovered that it was no longer in my bag. *Too bad I didn't take a photo of it!*

I ended-up at the south tip of the island and the Christian Cemetery, whose decadence and abandonment were somehow balanced by the presence and fragrance of beautiful plumeria trees that were just starting to bloom. I searched for some of the oldest graves, as well as for any recent ones created after 1975, when the country became independent from Portugal. The grave that impressed me the most (to the point where I thought "I want one of *these!*") was the boat-shaped grave of a young boy named George Michael, who had been buried at the age of 3 in 1958. Unfortunately, George's grave, whose entrance was open, seemed to have suffered a looting attack, as the marble coffin's cover was partially shifted.

I walked a bit more in exploration/curiosity mode, before ending up at the hospital. To my surprise, the expansive complex of colonial-era buildings was still receiving patients. Some of the buildings seemed to have been completely out of use. The receptionist led me to a room where I could talk to the nurses. Several people were waiting in the open space between this room and the pharmacy; I wondered if they were just waiting to receive their medication, because I had seen some of them place a piece of paper inside a carton box in front of the pharmacist's window.

For a fee of 10 MTS, I spoke to a female nurse and gave a history of my symptoms, which resulted in a prescription for two types of antibiotic against parasites such as tapeworms. One of the pills I had to take the following morning "before eating anything 6 hours", said the google translation for the instructions the nurse typed on my phone. My meal for the day had to be plain pasta, to avoid further irritation of my stomach. I had already stopped at

a small grocery shop the day before and had bought a pack of spaghetti and two different yogurt flavors. My rationale was that the yogurt could help restore my intestinal health but, by the end of the day, it simply came out with everything else.

I cooked and ate the pasta in 2 doses, only four hours apart, because I had felt hungry again very soon. The second dose I enjoyed on one of the colored-pillow covered, built-in sofas of the hostel's terrace, with a view of the sunset.

On the terrace I met Elsa, a French traveler that was on a 4-month trip across southern Africa. Elsa had already been to Ilha for a few days in the past and mentioned she had friends on the island and in Nampula. In fact, her friend in Nampula was going to be visiting her on Saturday for her birthday. Little did I know, as I discovered a couple of hours later, that her "friend in Nampula" was Mwaura, the man I had sent a Couchsurfing request to and who had replied that he could host me during my last weekend before flying from Nampula to Johannesburg. This meant that Mwaura's visit to Ilha on Saturday would give me free transportation to Nampula for his return in the evening, and the opportunity to meet him before staying for two nights at his place.

Mwaura had already joked with me in our Whatsapp message exchange that my name seemed to him like "Chris Columbus (of Cyprus)", which I gladly accepted as a nickname. He described me and Columbus as "both accomplished travelers". *So very true.* 😊

By 6:15, I was showered and ready for the theatre performance, wondering if I would see the Spanish couple again because, contrary to what we had expected when we last met at Ruby's hostel in Nampula, I had not seen them at all on the island.

Nope. They weren't there, either. While waiting for the doors of the colonial building to open for the performance, I had a chat with one of the persons working for the German Theater Company. She hoped I would have been able to understand the content of the play, even though I couldn't speak neither German nor Portuguese. I hoped so, too!

Apparently, the Germans had also been also disturbed by the presence of so many unsupervised children on the streets. The group of children which had upset me the day before outside the museum, had stood the previous night outside the window and had watched the play. As the woman informed me, a very big crowd had gathered to watch the play for the first night, much more than what the organizers had expected.

A few minutes later, the performance began, myself seated at the front row. I figured that if I wasn't going to understand what was being said, at least I should have had a good view of the stage. Indeed, I comprehended very little of what the actors were saying, which had me checking on Wikipedia a few times to read Medea's background story.

I liked that the three Mozambican actors were paired with the 3 German actors, each representing Medea, Jason and Glauce, Jason's new wife. The play lasted for about 90 minutes

and led to a standing ovation by the majority of the audience. I couldn't partake in the enthusiasm. The organizers gave a short "Thank you" speech, with the German noting that the children, which went up on stage *without* being called on stage, should have been going to school.

I think his pledge fell on deaf ears. Unsupervised, uneducated, flamboyant, entitled and without boundaries: a recipe for disaster for the future of those kids.

I looked around for Elsa but it was her local escort (a man that worked at the museum) that spotted me. The three of us walked to the Os Escondidos hotel, to see the painting exhibition of a local artist. The man had drawn ink-based images regarding the slave trade, and the culture of the Macua people, among other themes. I chatted a bit with him using a combination of my B-level Spanish with the few words of Portuguese I knew.

He said he had been to North Korea, where the infrastructure "was great" and the people seemed "very happy", contrary to Western propaganda. He was also aware of the existence of Cyprus because of Makarios, who he believed had been a great man, at least from what he knew. I explained that Makarios was to be blamed for several problems in Cyprus' recent history, something which, reasonably, the artist was not aware of. In exchange, I learned about the *mussiro*, the white, tree-based paste the Macua traditionally spread on their face to protect them from the sun.

I browsed through the artist's book. He asked if I wanted to buy it but, feeling embarrassed, I said I could stop-by the next day, even though I already knew the price was beyond my budget, not to mention I did not want to add more weight to my bags. Soon after, we left and while Elsa was flirting with her escort and considering going somewhere else for a drink, I knew I had to return to the hostel, for I had an early pill-taking wake up.





Take a journey with me ...

Thursday, August 30

My morning was quite slow, as I had to wait until around 11am to eat my late breakfast of bread rolls and bananas. I used the waiting time to have a longer chat with Elsa about her travel history, which included her past trip to Australia, where she had worked and explored. In return, I gave her information and trip suggestions for Malawi.

I felt a mix of admiration and envy for her adventurous, laid-back attitude and her good luck in being offered a good, albeit short-term, work contract. At the same time, I thought she was contradicting herself, as on the one hand she wasn't making any specific plans for her birthday on September 1st and on the other hand she didn't want Mwaura to return to Nampula during that evening so that they could go out drinking. In my head, I wished Mwaura would reject the idea and would drive back to Nampula with me, as I couldn't afford another night on Ilha beyond Friday.

Beyond my chat with Elsa, I browsed the internet, mended the hole in my backpack and sent ideas I was still having about Malawi to Newton Kambala. Moments after I had sent those ideas, I realized that UTM's presidential candidate dressed himself in clothes that displayed his face multiple times, during his campaign rallies. *Hm, a "worship me, I'm the Messiah" kind of approach never sat well with me!*

When I was eventually ready to exit the hostel, I headed in a north-bound direction, towards the museum. I became so frustrated with the children beggars for being disrespectful and pushy and mocking me when I tried to set some boundaries, that I went straight to the police station to complain about the whole situation. After 20 minutes of waiting, I was sitting in the office of the Police Commandante, trying to communicate with him in my comedic, weird mix of Spanish/Portuguese regarding the causes of that intense problem.

He said that the number of children had increased significantly overall and that parents were making money by having their children beg. A law existed regarding mandatory schooling, but he said it could not be enforced (*or, he didn't want to bother?*). He said the tourists were giving money to the kids, so I responded with a suggestion to put up a sign at the entrance of the island or in prominent locations, to prevent them from doing so. He suggested I could also complain to the Municipality.

I thanked the Commandante for his time and headed to the Municipality building, but couldn't find anyone there, as everyone seemed to have been on a lunch break. So, I went to talk with someone at the public school opposite the hospital. The man I spoke to said he was the school's Assistant Director. I asked how many students they had; he wrote the number 1186 (!), on a piece of paper, as I wasn't sure I had correctly heard him spell it out. Those 1186 students were divided in three blocks of time: 6am – 10:30am, 10:30am-3pm, 3pm-6pm, and in classes of 50-75 pupils (!!!).

Meals had been offered at the school in the past but when the offer was interrupted, many parents stopped sending their children. On the one hand, I was still upset with those parents and on the other hand I was wondering about what kind of quality of education the children were receiving under those very restricted conditions. It seemed like a loss-loss situation to me ...

I moved on, bought some bananas, checked what Sara's, Zavalli and Karibu restaurants offered for lunch and explored more streets and spots I had not noticed in the previous days. For example, the open park on the "Hospital Road", where some of the games in the playground seemed quite unsafe. As much as I am fascinated by playgrounds, I wouldn't want to slide down *that slide* and land on bare concrete! A large banner was hanging from the park's gazebo, announcing the traditional games that were planned there for September 2nd – 6th, in commemoration of the island's 200th year anniversary. Unfortunately, I wasn't going to be there to witness the fiesta.

An abandoned house in colonial architecture, right across from the park, caught my eye. I went inside to check out its inner details and realized that although it was severely ruined, a family was inhabiting what seemed like a sort of room that was still standing at the far end of the inner courtyard. Yet another surreal moment of my South-East Africa trip.

It was 2:45pm when I arrived to Karibu restaurant for a bowl of rice and matapinha de siri siri. I could have had the same meal at Sara's, but Karibu was much prettier in décor. Either way, my hope was that my intestines were going to handle the meal well. While I was eating, LAM Airlines informed me that my flight out of Nampula to Johannesburg had been rescheduled, which meant I was going to land in JNB *just 40 minutes* before the departure of my Emirates flight to Dubai.

I finished my lunch, spoke with Mwaura about the news (that's when he informed me LAM is sarcastically called *Late And Maybe* because of its frequent flight changes) and returned to the hostel, where a Spanish couple gave me their phone to call LAM and get the issue sorted out. By 4:15pm, my September 3rd afternoon flight from Nampula to Jo'burg became Nampula to Maputo the night before, with the addition of Maputo – Jo'burg early in the morning of September 3rd. Those arrangements meant I was going to have quite a few hours to kill in Jo'burg until the evening departure with Emirates.

While I was sitting at the hostel's bar area and chatting with Elsa, the conversation turned to boiling lobsters, an admittedly spooky act, considering the lobster would be alive and suffering in the boiling water. Right then, a young man appeared outside the hostel's main entrance. I turned around and saw he was holding up, at the door's window, a lively "dancing" lobster for sale.

If Elsa had been open to this idea (of buying and cooking a lobster), I would have proposed to cook it for celebrating her birthday. But of course, that would have been *my* way of

thinking; cooking in a hostel's kitchen for a small group of fellow travelers for my birthday, **like I had done in Iceland**, for Arthur from Russia and Akiko from Japan, on December 31st, 2017.

The dilemma "Aronia Spa or Apartheid Museum?" wasn't really a dilemma. After almost five weeks of "swimming" in dust and carrying a total of 20kg in my backpacks, I really needed a good scrub and a good massage. The history of racism in S. Africa would have had to wait for another time, although I did ask Elsa about the details of her experience of the exhibition in the museum. Therefore, I arranged with Aronia a full day with them for September 3rd.

Around 6pm I stepped out for an evening walk, which resulted in the discovery of even more streets and buildings I had not seen before (*how BIG is this island of 3km X 500m???!!!*). I ended up on the steps of a gazebo, between the ocean and the museum, for some note-taking. But the question "To Tea or Not to Tea?!" kept lingering in my head. Soon after, I was sitting on a sofa inside Ancora d'Ouro Café, with a pot of lightly-scented ... Tealia (or Tilia, to be exact) on the coffee table in front of me.

Not long after I had sat down, I was joined my Michael, the Portuguese owner of Mozadventures Company, who organized excursions in the area, including whale watching boat trips. We talked for a couple of hours (a.k.a. my already very-delayed-note-taking became even more delayed) about (a) the incredible sonar skills of the whales (that can, apparently, maneuver their huge bodies in micro-movements, to avoid tipping over a kayak or a boat with tourists floating above them) and the magical/majestic experience of coming close to them, (b) my concerns about the education system and the problems I identified on the island (Michael agreed that the education system was not good and said he knew of men that had 28-32 children in their life time), (c) the renovation of European-era buildings on the island (there were several renovation projects taking place, even though it was very costly to transport the appropriate, architecture-matching materials, truck after truck, on the restricted-load bridge connecting Ilha with the mainland), (d) life on the island and working with the locals (as he said "If I reach the point where I'm yelling at my employees for their tardiness and difficulty working correctly, then it's time for a short escape"), which he preferred, despite any problems, compared to the hectic daily life in Europe.

It seemed to me that with the right attitude, a "thicker skin" against the obvious problems, and financial security, a European, especially when he/she knew the language, could achieve much more than just survive life in Mozambique. Michael and his wife had a house on the island and a house in coastal city Nacala, so they were most likely not "struggling" to make ends meet.

He said rough seas were expected in the next three days, which meant that any chance of him saying "Do you want to join us for whale-watching tomorrow?" (*wishful thinking!*) dissipated right away, together with my dilemma "to swim or not to swim in my remaining two days?".



Take a journey with me ...

Friday, August 31

Well, my plans and hopes of swimming shouldn't have dissipated. Because in the morning, when I saw how calm the water was on the northwest side of the island, next to the castle, I became upset with myself for not carrying my bathing suit and towel with me. By 7:45am I had left the hostel to explore the streets I had seen the night before. The ocean on the east side of the island was roughening up, putting the natural rock barriers to the test.

Taking some photos of those rock barriers was the 2nd-best segment of the first 25 minutes of my exploration. The best was the discovery of the abandoned cinema. I couldn't believe I had missed it after all that walking up and down of the previous days. *Seriously, HOW BIG is this 3kmx500m island?!?! I had even asked the locals about the cinema, to no avail. How could they (and I) have missed noticing CINE TEATRO NINA, it wasn't a small building! I thought it was such a shame that it had been abandoned, as I would have loved to watch a movie screening during my visit.*

The only thing that made the natural rock barrier on the coastline prettier to look at than the long line of blooming plumeria trees standing parallel to the inland wall of the castle, was the presence of annoying smoke coming up from the burning of dried grass nearby, which a group of municipal workers were overseeing, obviously in preparation for the President's upcoming visit for the 200-year celebrations. *Oh, how beautiful the scene and how orgasmic the scent will be when those trees are fully blossomed!*

At 8:25am I turned the corner towards the west coast, saw how smooth the water was, with a dhow boat gliding in the distance, and said to myself "*Damn, I should have been ready for this!*" The inability to immediately see, from the hostel, the smoothness status of that water in the morning felt like the same kind of "punishment" I get for living in the center of Cyprus and having to drive for one hour in the hope the water at one of my favorite bays will be just what I need for my swim.

Anyway, I forgave myself for not knowing and kept walking, passing through the Campo de Sao Gabriel park, where, as the sign at the entrance said, used to be a "cemetery for poor Portuguese who perished on the journey to India" in the 16th century. *Which journey to India?!* [The establishment of the Portuguese Estado da Índia between 1500 and 1515 marked the beginning of European slave trading in the Indian Ocean. Portuguese ships carried slaves from Mozambique to their settlements in India and ultimately as far as China and Japan. By most accounts, an average of some 200 slaves each year left Mozambique for Portuguese possessions in India and East Asia, from the early sixteenth century to the mid-1830s.]

The teenage students of the local high school that I run into in the park could not tell me the name of the iconic trees that I saw dotting their island. Eventually, my online search was successful: Banyan trees, a type of fig tree that grows on another plant. I made a mental

note that I could return to the park for note-taking (by that point, note-taking was turning into a joke as I couldn't find the time to do it) and moved on in my discoveries of new corners.

Wooden stalls were being installed in the Sao Gabriel park, most likely for the upcoming celebrations. Not far from the park, a street with geometrical, pebble designs on the sidewalk facing the ochre-colored wall of a European-style house, an angry-faced, metal door knocker on another European-style house, the Tribunal House – with two tan-colored dogs sleeping on the ground in front of its staircase, a few meters apart (*perhaps the modern equivalent of two marble lion statues?!)* – and a bucket of yellow paint meant for refreshing the scaffolded wall of yet another European-style house, were some of the photographable frames that caught my attention.

By 9am, the menacing dark clouds gave their first strong shower, forcing me to take refuge in yet another abandoned building, and because of that, “forcing” me to see corners and capture images I would have otherwise missed. For example, the graffiti of a crab above a large, rectangular window in one of the rooms, or a paper boat sitting in the corner of an adjacent room, or the list of names in white color on the cement floor of the inner courtyard. They could very well have been the names of the boys playing football in the large open space next to the building.

The rain helped clear the atmosphere and settled the dust, which was an added bonus for me and the images I wanted to take. Not wanting to give any of the children coming towards me a sign that I wanted them to pose for me while they were running behind a loose bicycle tire, I turned the corner and waited there to capture them as they passed running in front of me. *Gotcha!*

The next sets of tires I saw, properly fitted on bicycles, were in front of the Hindu temple, the moment a group of Asian tourists were exiting it. My curiosity drove me inside the temple's garden, where I read an interesting description of the history and principles of Hinduism as a way of life. A monk there was already busy talking to two tourists, so I passed on the possibility to wait and ask questions.

I exited, walked past the Mercado Municipal and kept going, with my eyes checking the sky, as the clouds were getting ready for another downpour. I paused for a few moments in the yard of one of the mosques, peeked inside the yard of the school that hosted 1100+ students and felt curious about the inside of a barber's shop in one of Macuti town's streets.

Even though I had managed to pick up several seashells and halved coconut bowls, I was not lucky in relocating the fish bone I had lost a couple of days earlier. *Even Chris Columbus (of Cyprus) could not make such a lucky re-discovery!* I passed outside the Central Mosque, the empty fish market and, later, next to a man carrying an empty wooden box on the back of his bicycle. I assumed he had already sold the day's live chickens by that point (10am).

One of the most impressive finds of the day was a group of mussiro-painted women I

Take a journey with me ...

came upon. Unfortunately, I was too shy to approach them for a close-up photo because I didn't want to be intrusive and, without a proper zoom camera, the chance to capture them clearly was not available with my phone. The next impressive image was the walk-way on the side of Feitoria Hotel. Allured by the hotel's lunch-of-the-day offer, I went to check out what it was about. The bananas hanging in the walkway were *HUGE!* I sort of tried to reach out and grab one which seemed somewhat ripe but I didn't insist much because I was embarrassed at the possibility of being seen.

The idea of having an ocean-view, affordable lunch there was exciting, so I promised myself to return later. *Surely, I had the look of a gypsy with my dusty clothes and shoes but hey ...* While walking towards the library next to the Municipality building, I noticed that the hospital's external walls were being repainted white, for the President's eyes. The woman working at the library was sitting on a bamboo mat on the floor and didn't seem very happy to see me, nor very excited in general. Possibly because she saw me as a "threat" to her going on her lunch break.

In the 20 minutes the woman allowed me to stay there, I managed to snap photos of a National Geographic folded poster about the Incas and left with a promise to return. As it was too early for me to have lunch, I walked back to the hostel and washed my 25litre backpack. I couldn't put up anymore with how filthy it was, so it was about time for it to get a good scrub and to dry in the sun on the hostel's terrace. By 1:22pm and with the threat of more rain looming above me, I was back at Feitoria Hotel for my €6 lunch of fresh fish fillet with rice and vegetables and an in-my-face view of the ocean during low tide.

A woman on my right-hand side was bent over the exposed ocean bed, looking for "mariscos", as the waiter informed me. A daily, physically demanding business of digging the wet ground with bare hands, looking for seafood to feed the family and sell to others as well. Plus, it seemed to require some skill of knowing where to look for those hidden sea creatures.

About an hour later, following my tasty meal and a ball of ice-cream to top it off, I was back at the library to continue the photoshoot of the Incas poster and of another National Geographic poster I had found about expeditions to Mount Everest. Additionally, I managed to do a 15-minute skim read through a book in Portuguese about the history of Mozambique, before the flat-affect librarian kicked me out.

With about 2,5 hours left until sunset, I returned to Ruby's to relax on the terrace. I carried the necessary amount of pillows upstairs, while not restraining my curiosity to stare at the half-roofed/half-opened space of the humble house next door, where laundry was hanging to dry and a pot was sitting on open fire. The messiness of that space was in stark contrast with the neatness of Ruby's terrace and with the terrace of the Pensao (guesthouse) opposite Ruby in the same alley. Looking at the luxurious décor of that place, I wondered what the cost of accommodation would have been there.

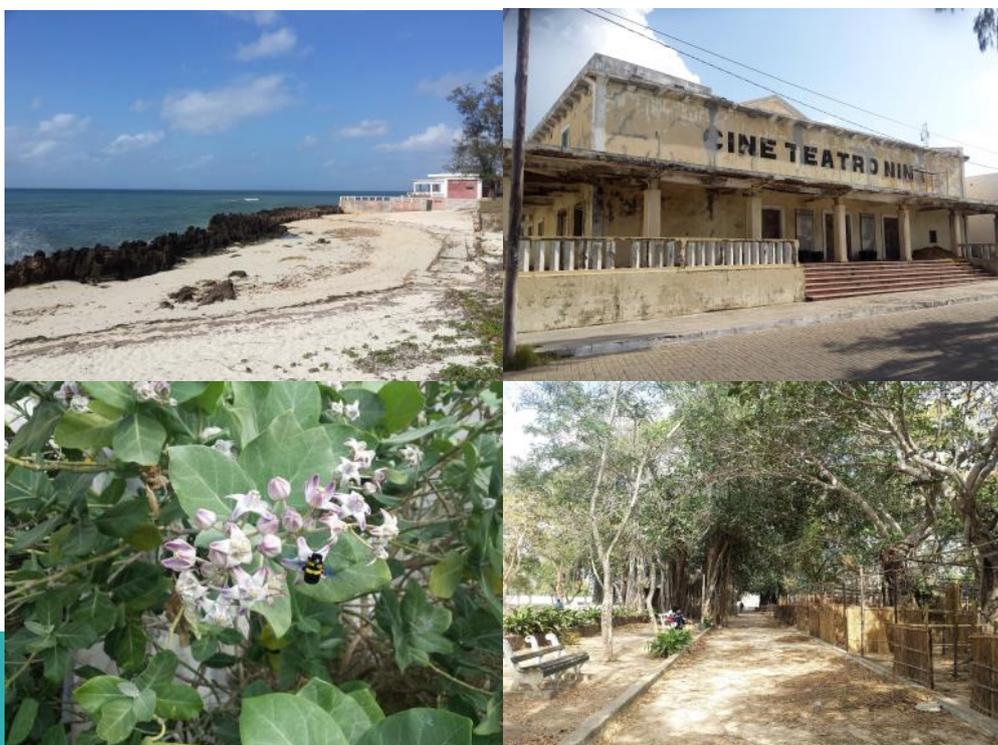
The house dog at Ruby's proved to be quite naughty, because the moment I laid down on the pillows, he came right up to me and took up most of the space! It wasn't comfortable for me to be "restricted" to half of the pillows, but I just laughed at the comical situation and allowed the dog to coexist with me. Elsa was not in the hostel, so, in the absence of company, my best option was to take care of the necessary tasks so that I would be ready and packed for the day after.

Apart from my small backpack, I also washed the seashells I had found the day before, so that they wouldn't smell bad inside the big backpack. To wash myself, however, I had to wait through the 5 hours of island-wide electricity shut-down, as my headlamps weren't so strong and I wasn't willing to expose my body to those damn mosquitoes with them having the unfair advantage of being able to "see" me in the dark. In fact, I was feeling so annoyed with their presence that I did an online search for mosquito-exterminating tools I can carry with me in my next travels. My mosquito-repellent spray was clearly not performing well enough.

I tried to make the most of those 5 hours of waiting in the dark, relying on tall white candles given to me by the hostel staff. The only place with lights on in the immediate vicinity was the upscale guesthouse across the alley. As the Ruby staff member told me, they charged 5000 MT ($\approx 82\$$) per night for accommodation. I figured that explained how they could have afforded a generator.

I realized that guesthouse had its lights on when I went up to the terrace to collect my dried-up backpack. The other thing I realized was that the dog had practically chewed apart the pillows I had left there in the afternoon and had defecated in two different spots of the terrace. *Just lovely!*

As soon as electricity returned, I took my shower and went straight to bed, because I had an ambitious mission to accomplish in the following morning.





Take a journey with me ...

Saturday, September 1

The mission: “Get up at 5:45am and go check out the western coastline. If the water is smooth, go for a swim.”

The attempt: I got up at 5:45am and immediately walked towards the police station square, past the stationery shop, past the pier where a construction was being renovated to become probably a guesthouse or bar, and past a house where a *f...ing dog* behind the gate started barking. As is usually the case with dogs, it didn't take long for 3 other dogs that were unchained outside one of the other houses to start barking at me and to start running towards me. I got scared, took a few steps back and as my legs hit a concrete slab and I fell backwards, I screamed in fear. I don't know if that's what made the dogs stop and turn back, as the man that was standing outside that house did not call them back to return. He did ask me if I was ok, but by then it was too late for me. I had only sustained a scratch on my right hand but the shock I had experienced was so great that I just returned to the hostel and aborted the mission. From what I had managed to see, the water was indeed smooth.

At 7:30am I sat down for breakfast with Elsa and we agreed to have a walk together as Mwaura still needed a few hours to arrive. Our walk lasted for about 75 minutes; the sea was rough in the distance on the eastern coast and dark grey clouds gathered above us, letting their content loose at about 10:15am. Elsa decided to return to the hostel because she didn't have rain coverage with her. On the contrary, I had the necessary equipment, so I walked myself to Ancora d' Ouro for another round of Tilia tea and note-taking.

Note-taking: The action I frequently intended to do but somehow always found a way to postpone!

During that 75-minute walk, we walked in front of the hospital, whose façade was still being painted white and headed towards the lower part of Makuti town, looking for produce stalls, which we found minutes before the first heavy raindrops fell. It was my chance to see what a lemon that did not look like a lemon, looked like! A yellow-green ball, the size of a tennis ball, with a rough, creviced skin and without a particular scent. *Definitely not the kind of lemons I knew of!* Elsa said she had already bought one in the past, so I took her word for it.

In the 2,5 hours I sat at Ancora d' Ouro, I tried moving photos from my phone to my USB but something went wrong and some of them disappeared. 😞 I wished I could somehow recover them, but as that had not been the first time I had lost photos while traveling, I understood the chances of recovery were going to be slim. The micro-usb attachment I had found in Cairo at the beginning of my trip was very small and sensitive to movement. *Damn!*

Mwaura arrived at 12:45am to the café and showed me the two icing-covered cupcakes he had brought with him to surprise Elsa. The cupcakes didn't look their best; even though they had been contained in a cardboard box, they had crushed into each other while the box

was sitting on the back seat of his car. The gangs of begging children operating in the area flocked around Mwaura's car when he arrived and the sight of the cupcakes stirred their attention even more.

We devised a plot to surprise Elsa at the hostel and walked together there, cupcakes and candle in hand. I entered Ruby's front door first; Elsa had been sitting at the bar. I started talking to her about a random topic but stirred the conversation in such a way as to give Mwaura an excuse to come in the door with the candle on the cupcake. She was, as we expected, pleasantly surprised. My gift for her was a pack of crunchy peanut biscuits from the female vendor in a nearby street corner; I had heard Elsa mention she really liked those.

The three of us walked for lunch to Sara's restaurant. As much as Elsa was surprised earlier, I was equally surprised that Sara's had a back garden with tables! While Elsa and Mwaura had a bowl of matapinha de siri siri, I had a plate of rice with fish and a sauce; it was quite good. My "ransom" from the place – for my fridge door back home - was the beer cap of a locally made beer (Manica) with the image of a boat on it.

I suggested we go to the deck of Feitoria Hotel for coffee or tea and ice-cream. Before doing that, however, we had a lunch-digesting walk towards Il Ponte, a small bar on the pier. The water was so incredibly smooth, I felt really disappointed I had not managed to go in for a swim during the morning. If there was anything that could relieve me a bit from that disappointment, it was the fact there was some garbage floating in it.

There were several flocks of small fish swimming on both sides of the pier. Our best chance of nearing the water was to go down the concrete steps at the end of the pier, after the group of Europeans sitting there had eventually departed. From that spot, and without having to enter from the beach, it could have been a smooth 750m swim towards the castle. However, I was still going to be aware that this was an ocean, possibly with strong undercurrents, a kind of "uncharted waters" for me. I would have also needed to solve the question, "Where do I place my things safely while I'm swimming?"

After we spent about 45 minutes on the pier, we went to Feitoria. I couldn't resist their pricey but delicious vanilla ice-cream, while enjoying the sunset in the distance. It was a lovely end to a bumpy stay on Mozambique Island! 😊

Not long after, I left with Mwaura, with final destination his house in Nampula. We chatted for several topics during our 3-hour ride. About selfish politicians with "egos the size of mountains". About the tribal conflicts in Kenya, generated by the British and the missionaries that, in order to gain control over people in the past, had turned tribes against each other by showing preference to one tribe for intelligence and strength. About the pre-independence infrastructure left behind by the British, French, Portuguese and Belgian colonizers, in this order in regards to quality. About the Chinese penetration into Africa, for political influence, cheaper labor, access to resources and making money. About the tens of big cashew trees

Take a journey with me ...

lining the road, whose nuts are an expensive commodity, which explained the price I had paid for that small bowl of cashews on the way from Nampula to Ilha. According to Mwaura, Mozambique could have benefited from a stronger presence in the global cashews business, like Cote d' Ivoire. About personal goals for the future and how things can come together when we least expect them.

Later in the evening, over a sit-down for Chinese food in Nampula, Mwaura told me about interesting documentaries he had recently seen. One was about the population of China, especially regarding the vast difference in numbers of single males versus single females (a consequence of the past government-mandated preference for boys).

Chez Mwauras's afterwards, in the comfort of my own bedroom, I binge-watched videos of American stand-up comedians, took my shower and called it a night ...



Take a journey with me ...



Sunday, September 2

... I didn't really sleep much, though. The electricity was out when I got up at 6:30am but luckily for me, Mwaura's guard had turned on the power generator. I ate the (too sugary, as it turned out) peanut snack I had bought for myself on Ilha and took down some bullet points for my notes. *If it weren't for those, I don't know how I would remember all my travel experiences! Simply put, I wouldn't!*

Mwaura suggested we go for breakfast to Edificio Nampula, a café on the main avenue, which I had seen when I was walking around the first time I was in town, and which had not impressed me much. Mwaura's company and another round of interesting conversation made up for what the place lacked in charm. While I was having a simple cheese toast and tea, we chatted about (a) racism between blacks in South Africa (Mwaura described an incident of being a victim of it because of not being Zulu or S. African), (b) the lack of technical skills in Africa due to poor education, (c) his interest in sustainable agriculture and the desire to enter more into this field in the future, (d) how Indians are involved in drug trafficking, which could excuse the big riches they had in Nampula, (e) the 4-month flood that had shut-down electricity – and pretty much everything else – in 2015, hence leading him to buy a power generator for his house, (f) the Catholic religion in Africa and the big money it earned, with poor people giving from their little money to the church on Sundays, while the missionaries owned large properties and even their own airplane landing strip, (g) how the Chinese were money-laundering through the hotels they owned. *Bottom line: What an angelic world we live in (NOT!).*

Around 10:45am, Mwaura returned to his house and I continued on foot towards the National Ethnographic Museum. Even though the basic exhibition hall was open and there was no one at the reception, I ended up paying the entrance fee, followed by a chat with the fee collector, who tried to sell me some of his own musical instrument artwork.

In the museum's back yard, I checked-out what was available and ended up getting three small, wooden comps from a wood-carver. I walked to the Feira, a huge, noisy and filthy open market site, where I realized that, the same wooden pieces I had bought at the museum were being sold for a lower price. As I had expected, the pieces of capulana fabric were more expensive than in Zambia or Malawi, so I felt good about the decision to buy fabric in Malawi.

Feeling frustrated by the chaos of the market, I reached breaking point when an imbecile grabbed my wrist out of the blue and wasn't letting it go. I yelled at him to release me, obviously drawing the attention of those around us to the scene, and soon after I left the place.

Back at Mwaura's house, I devoured the take-away sweet-corn & chicken soup I had bought at the Chinese restaurant and one pastéis from VIP café, and prepared my bags for my ride to the airport. Later on, I watched with Mwaura Barack Obama's speech during John McCain's funeral, while trying to download the Uber app or Taxify on my phone. Google would

not let me bypass it (I have the Play Store disabled on my phone), so I abandoned the effort.

Upon arrival to Maputo, I was transferred with LAM's shuttle bus to VIP hotel. Instead of taking my shower and going straight to sleep, I spent time watching shows on the Discovery Channel (on war vessels and archaeological findings in Egypt) and therefore only slept for about 3 hours. Navigating through the TV channels reminded me of how unintelligible and frustrating the Portuguese language was for me, similar to French from the group of Roman languages.



Monday, September 3 (Mozambique)

My stay at VIP Hotel was too short. I missed the chance for a proper breakfast, as at around 4:30am I was to depart with the shuttle bus for the airport. The shuttle took time to arrive (*I guess the Late And Maybe didn't apply only for the company's planes!*).

At the airport, with 85 MT left in my pocket, I bargained and got myself a Pastéis that was ridiculously priced at 100 MT. My other option was to spend 60 MT on a boat made with shells (as I had not managed to buy a boat for my collection, after all) but it was ridiculously flimsy and almost falling apart. So, between my two passions, Pastéis de Belém vs. Boat Collection: 1-0.



Monday, September 3 (South Africa)

The plane landed in Jo'burg at 8:15am. One and a half hours later, I was standing in front of the Emirates check-in counter with a plan to drop off my big backpack and then leave for the city. That wasn't possible, the staff said, so I made the long way back to the luggage storage facility (JNB's layout did not win my appreciation as a user-friendly airport) and by 10:30am I was finally ready to head to Aronia Spa with an Uber driver the spa had arranged for me.

During the ride, it became obvious that Johannesburg's affluent neighborhoods were filled with fences higher than the houses themselves and that it was unsafe to walk on the street, even in those nice neighborhoods.

If only I had known in advance ... (a) that only one staff member at the spa would perform all of my treatments, (b) that she was not going to be as good as I had expected in her performance, (c) that the massage I really needed was not going to be a proper Swedish massage but an aromatherapy massage instead, with unnecessary buckets of oil and a bit of elbow pressure on my body, (d) that the manicure and pedicure I received would have been of very

low quality to the point that I would have to argue with the girl that had taken over the manicure that she was hurting me with the unprofessional way she was trying to remove my cuticles, and (e) that the treatments would be so slow I wouldn't even have time to take a shower to remove the extra massage oil before leaving for the airport. The snacks, the lunch and the relaxing ambience at the spa were positive highlights, but rather small against the lower quality of their other services.

At 4:45pm I was ready for the taxi ride back to the airport but the taxi driver messaged me he had been stuck in traffic and was sending his brother in his place. The brother arrived at 5:25, spot-on for the afternoon rush hour in the city's roads. If I had been using the Uber app, like most Johannesburgians, I would have gotten a ride much sooner, without having to wait for the brother to arrive.

I re-entered the airport at 6:05pm, rushed to pick up my backpack from storage and went as fast as I could to the Emirates check-in area. The female, black Emirates employee stopped me before I could reach the counters, stared at me with contempt and did not respond to my repeated question *"What do you mean the flight is closed?!"*, nor seemed touched by the agony I was clearly going through.

When I eventually asked to speak to her supervisor, the latter said the check-in had closed at 6:10pm and pointed me towards the Emirates customer service counter, where I was informed that they couldn't even transfer me to the 10pm flight of that same evening, since I was not classified as an "Emirates passenger", therefore they needed Egypt Air's permission to do so. Egypt Air's offices were closed until the morning, so, after I cried my eyes out for the unexpected inconvenience, I accepted that I had no other option but to find a "comfortable" spot in the airport to spend the night. After a lot of walking up and down, I placed an uncomfortable plastic chair in an isolated corner of the airport, covered myself with my sleeping bag and tried to go to sleep.

What was supposed to be a great, relaxing day before my flight to Dubai, ended up being a physical and emotional struggle, the worst experience of my 5-week journey.

Tuesday, September 4

The challenge ended up being not only physical and emotional but also financial. Egypt Air's officer in Johannesburg said in my phone call to them that I had to pay an additional €500 for them to give me a seat on their evening flight out the following day, which meant I would have had to stay at the airport for another 30+ hours. When I had finally recovered from the new shock and the second round of tears, I began to research my other options for flying out that same day.

Having been, already, through much more challenging situations while traveling in the past, this incident was not as scary, but I felt I desperately needed to get out of there and return home as soon as possible. So, I had no other option but to place my hand deep in my pocket and purchase a €545 ticket on a flight with Qatar Airways in the evening.

Oh, the irony: one hour later, I received an email from Egypt Air in Cyprus, who I had informed about my predicament in the morning, that they could get me a free seat on the September 5th flight. *Too late!*

Even though it was hurtful, finding the solution helped me to relax for the remainder of my stay at JNB. I treated myself to a tasty breakfast at the busy Coffee & Cream café and an extended stay on their sofa in order to charge my phone, later moved to another café for a muffin and sandwich and eventually had an interesting face-face conversation with Unathi.

Unathi was the South African woman I had contacted through the Couchsurfing platform with a request to host me on the evening of September 4th, in case I was eventually going to fly out on September 5th. After I bought the ticket with Qatar Air, she offered to come to the airport and have a coffee with me when she got off work.

She shared with me her desire to travel more out of South Africa. She placed herself in the middle-class category, living in a fenced community with amenities and everything she thought she needed when she was growing up, in terms of material goods, but in the end, she was not feeling happy and content. I learned from Unathi about the concept of “the black tax”, the expectation that if a black person was earning money as a professional, he/she had to spread it out to his/her less fortunate relatives or community members.

Wednesday, September 5 (Cyprus)

Perhaps it would have been wiser to return with the free flight, because then maybe I wouldn't have had my laptop stolen from inside my car back in Cyprus, a few hours after I had picked it up from the service center where I had dropped it off in late July. If there was any “good luck” in all of this, it was that all my personal and professional files had been removed from the laptop before it was serviced, and, together with my external hard drive, were safe at my house.

I don't even want to imagine how I would have reacted if my files – in other words, my life's work – had been stolen together with the laptop. *Phew!!!*

Overview

During this exciting and memorable trip, I spent 9 nights in Zambia, 15 in Malawi, 10 in Mozambique and 1 night in Johannesburg's airport. I traveled as a solo female backpacker, on a limited budget (1000 US dollars in total to cover accommodation, meals, local transportation, special activities and incidentals). This meant I had to find budget accommodation and had to make attempts to be safely hosted via Couchsurfing.

I prepared my itinerary based on information I had received from other travelers, blogs and websites and a section of the Lonely Planet pdf guide I had purchased back in 2016. The expectations I had for this trip were met almost to full extent and I am happy with the travel plan I had prepared and the planned and spontaneous experiences I pursued.

Like I had anticipated, the best natural highlights were the Mosi Oa Tunya (a.k.a. Victoria) Falls in Zambia, Mount Mulanje in Malawi and the Indian Ocean in Mozambique. I enjoyed several tasty and budget-friendly local meals in all three countries. I met and conversed with many people from different professions and all walks of life, with some of whom I continued the communication beyond the trip.

For transportation, I used motorcycle taxis, minibuses, trains, trucks, shared cars, my own two feet (a lot!), private cars, bicycle taxis and buses.

The most memorable art and culture experiences were (a) the Tusole band, the artwork in Faulty Towers Hostel main building, the live music at the Zambezi Café and the artwork in 37D Art Gallery in Zambia, (b) people playing the Bawo/Mancala board game, the artwork and library in Mandala House and the history of tribes at the Lake Malawi Museum in Malawi, and (c) the Medea theatrical performance, the painting exhibition of the male artist, and the exhibition at the National Ethnographic Museum (Nampula) in Mozambique.

The most memorable "local" experiences were the "18+12"-hour train ride from Livingstone to Lusaka (Zambia), the train ride from Nampula to Cuamba in Mozambique and helping the children learn during an afternoon street-side class in Blantyre (Malawi).

The most surreal experiences, for me, were seeing people walking in pitch dark on the side of dirt roads with buses and minibuses speeding by them, the Ultra-Fast & Furious ride from Mandimba to Cuamba, the fully naked girl in Mangochi, the woman breastfeeding on the side of the road in Jenda, the BREAKING NEWS road sign towards Mzuzu, young Sandres in flip-flops at Manchewe falls, crossing the border from Zambia to Malawi in the packed Toyota car and the Jesus-themed and other kitschy video clips on buses.

The socio-economic development issues I observed or discussed with others were the lack of good quality public education, bad family planning, poverty, violation of children's rights for proper care and supervision, school abandonment (drop-out) by students, girl marriage, unemployment, government corruption, poor life skills, resistance to change for the

Take a journey with me ...

better, piles of second-hand clothing, lack of garbage management and high numbers of HIV cases.

The things I missed that I wish I could have done were to attend a tribal celebration and try the mbuyu fruit in Zambia, hike to the peak of Mount Mulanje and swim in its waterfall pools and travel with the Ilala Ferry in Malawi and to eat fresh lobster and swim in the Indian Ocean in Mozambique.

The biggest physical, practical and emotional challenges I had to cope with (while in Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique) were the long train ride from Livingstone to Lusaka, being stung by a bee in Lundazi, the crossing from Zambia to Malawi, the uncomfortable minibus ride from Mzuzu to Chitimba, the uncomfortable evening bus from Mzuzu to Blantyre, the Airtel sim card not working in Malawi, my budget restrictions at upscale Lukwe Ecofarm, the multiple “Give me...”.. demands by locals, Chris’ house in Blantyre, losing many or all of my photos from August 11th – 15th, the language barriers in Mozambique, the parasitic diarrhea, the groups of begging children on Ilha de Mozambique, having my money stolen in Cuamba and the myriads of mosquitoes in all three countries.

If there’s any learning that should come from this trip for me, as a traveler, is that I should remember to watch my money all the time and never show the content of my wallet to anyone. I should have figured that out since **my trip to Cambodia in 2013**, but in some regards, I’m a slow-learner!! I should also remember to check and triple-check if I left any of my belongings behind in a transportation medium before I exit it. This is another thing I should have learned from previous travels but have stubbornly kept on my brain’s “back burner”. I should find good-quality ear plugs for those uncomfortable times when they are needed. And I should never overestimate the time I need to return to the airport from a city center, if I have a flight to catch, especially if I am a “second-class passenger” (where an airline will not assume full responsibility for me).

As a person, keeping my cool and maintaining my temper in the face of challenge is a life-long goal. The biggest challenges I faced, in this regard, during the trip had to do with being considered “rich” by locals simply because I was white and because I could afford to fly from/to the continent, when in my mind, I was significantly poorer than other white travelers. In effect, my own stress for my budget made me more nervous than I would have preferred to be. Therefore, while this trip helped me grow and allowed me to be a positive presence for the majority of the people that I met, I am still, as we all are, a “work in progress”! 😊

