

Hearts and crafts

Friendly Malawi is rich in culture and natural wonders, writes Antonia Windsor

An enormous creature some three metres tall with a blue-and-red shaggy coat lurches towards me. There are hysterical giggles and shrieks as the local women run to the other side of the room to get away from it. The looming creature turns and pursues them. A white man seated next to me dressed in African garb leans over and whispers: "That is the HIV mask."

I am at the Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art in Malawi, and I'm being treated to a display of the Gule Wamkulu, a masked dance that is integral to Chewa culture. It is performed by members of the Nyau secret society, and each masked character, or *gule*, is believed to be in touch with a spirit that helps the wearer perform. The characters are chosen to convey vital messages to the community. All of life is represented: there is a character to

warn against smoking, a character to warn against greed, and even a character to warn against the "white man" – although they don't have the white man sitting next to me in mind.

He is Father Claude Boucher, a Catholic priest, who has been initiated into the Nyau so that he can hold these performances at the cultural centre. Boucher, realising the importance of preserving Malawi's traditions, established the centre in 1976, and it has become the country's leading cultural museum.

Around the walls of the thatched hut where the dancing is taking place are displays detailing the history and traditions of the Chewa, Ngoni and Yao people – the three main tribes in this landlocked central African country, which shares its borders with Tanzania to the north, Zambia to the west and Mozambique to the south and east.

The masked dance has finished, and the men and women are performing a group dance that looks incredibly sexual – the men seem to be miming stepping over a woman and then thrusting.

"It's the motorcycle dance," says Boucher. "A man came to the village once on a motorbike, and it became immortalised in a dance." I laugh at my mistake, and the dancers beam at me.

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, yet it is an incredibly friendly and happy place, earning it the nickname "the warm heart of Africa". Without the mineral deposits that boost the economies of its neighbours, tourism is one of Malawi's big hopes for economic expansion, and the government is encouraging community-based tourism and supporting local entrepreneurship, as well as training tour guides to ensure that, as tourism grows, the benefits are felt by the communities.

After the dance, Boucher takes me to the workshop reserved for wood carving, a local skill he is keen to keep alive. About 100 wood carvers train here at any one time, and much of their work is laid out on the terrace or strung from the trees. Small wooden chairs with high backs are intricately carved.

"Those are chief chairs," Boucher explains. "They are generally made out of mahogany or ebony, and each carver will create his or her own decoration – often it includes scenes of village life, animals or spirits, sometimes all three." Also on display are hundreds of carved masks depicting characters performing different duties and tasks – resembling three-dimensional Brueghel paintings.

The centre is on a mountainside, a 2½ hour drive from the capital, Lilongwe, where I had flown in that morning. It is part of Mua Mission, which was founded in 1902 and can also accommodate travellers in traditional thatched rondavels. The rooms are clean and tastefully furnished with locally carved furniture and ornaments. I eat an excellent lamb curry on the outdoor covered terrace as the frog chorus starts up in the river below.

In the morning, the slabs surrounding the river are occupied by dozens of women from the

nearby village who are washing their clothes and singing. From just my short stay here, I'm beginning to understand the Malawi people and their culture, but the sun is already high in the sky, and I'm eager to get on my way to Lake Malawi.

The smooth tarmac road has a steady flow of pedestrian and bicycle traffic, but cars are few and far between. Intermittently, women sit on the red dust at the roadside with baskets of fresh mangoes or tomatoes, or grilled maize cobs, hoping to entice a hungry traveller. We pass villages of round mud huts and small towns of single-storey painted buildings; bottle stores advertising Carlsberg lager (which is sold in brown bottles and called "green" to distinguish it from "brown" stout) and tuck shops selling 50ml bottles of cooking oil and fat doughnuts.

I'm heading to Cape Maclear in Monkey Bay, one of the few spots in the country that has been on the



RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

How to get there
Cathay Pacific flies daily from Hong Kong to Johannesburg, from where South Africa Airlines has daily flights to Lilongwe
Where to stay

- Bed-and-breakfast accommodation in a thatched rondavel at the Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art is US\$42 for two people. Dinner is US\$7 per person. www.kungoni.org
- Danforth Lodge in Cape Maclear is the smartest of the set and offers full board from US\$145 per person. Activities include snorkelling, scuba diving, sailing and mountain biking. www.danforthyachting.com
- A stay at Mumbo Island Camp, inclusive of all meals, snorkelling and kayaking, is US\$290 per person. www.kayakafrika.net

Where to visit

- Liwonde National Park
At the country's best spot for viewing game, take a boat safari on the Shire river to view hippos.
- Mounj Mulanje
The highest mountain in central Africa can be climbed with a guide, stopping in basic huts along the way. www.mountmulanje.org.mw
- Lake of Stars Music Festival
An annual celebration of music on the lake shore each September. www.lakeofstars.org



Mua Mission wood carvings