



tourist trail for decades. The explorer David Livingstone came here in 1859 and gave it its Scottish sounding name (he also named the country's southern city Blantyre after his birth place in Scotland), and was the first Westerner to circumnavigate the lake, which is more than 560 kilometres long and contains over 1,000 species of fish.

We turn off the tarmac and take the dirt track that leads to the lake's shore. Small stretches have been surfaced; the rest is covered in deep potholes, and the vehicle swerves from one side of the road to the other to avoid them. The joke is that you can tell when a Malawian driver is drunk because he drives in a straight line.

The lurching is worth it when I arrive in Chembe village and get my first glimpse of the stretch of soft white sand caressed by the clear waters of the sea-like lake. All along the shore are small lodges offering basic accommodation; the hippies



A man came to the village once on a motorbike, and it became immortalised in a dance

FATHER CLAUDE BOUCHER

The heart-shaped Mumbo Island (top) is an exclusive eco-resort and a part of Lake Malawi National Park; kayaking (left, top) is one way to see the natural beauty of Mumbo; a bridge (left, bottom) leads to a white sandy bay and safari-style tents under thatched roofs. Photos: Louis Chanu, Dana Allen, Karen Smith

came here in the 1960s to smoke the famous "Malawi Gold" marijuana and some of them never left.

Bars belt out African reggae and the smell of barbecued fish permeates the air. The crowd is partly made up of charity and NGO workers taking a break from important work in local schools and hospitals – an international mix of worthy individuals who have come to the lake to relax and let their hair down.

I spend a couple of days here watching the fishermen in their dugout canoes, chatting to the village boys on the beach and playing the local board game, *bao*, in the shade of a tree. But after a few days the local touts trying to sell me bracelets and carvings are beginning to disturb my peace, and I decide to head out to the exclusive eco-resort of Mumbo Island, an hour's boat ride away.

The boat leaves from the Kayak Africa office on the beach, the company that was first given the

concession to create a camp on the one square kilometre island in 1996. In those days, the only way to get there was to sea kayak the 10 kilometres from Cape Maclear. Now, there is a small diesel-powered boat, although the option to kayak is still available. The island emerges as a small, densely forested granite outcrop with a white sandy bay. As we get closer I can see fixed safari-style tents under thatched roofs perched on boulders, with terraces overlooking the water. With just seven tents in total, this is the closest I've come to living on a deserted island.

Inside my tent is a double bed and locally carved furniture. I am thrilled to find a hammock strung up on the terrace outside and uninterrupted views of the island and lake. There is a wind-up hurricane lamp, because the island is without electricity, the bathroom contains a compost toilet and bucket shower, which can be filled

with solar-heated water on request. The island is part of Lake Malawi National Park and the camp is designed to be minimum impact. This may be one of the country's most luxurious hang-outs, but many of the profits are ploughed back into the community. Malawians hold positions of management here, and 98 per cent of the staff comes from Cape Maclear. The locals I speak to say they see tourism as a positive thing – it gives them career options other than fishing and brings in a market for their craftwork.

Life here is simple and slow. Days are spent on the little beach – lounging in the hammocks, or taking out the snorkels and kayaks – or walking through the forest of ancient figs and baobabs and spotting rare species of bird. At night the solar-powered lights come on along the walkways and banquets of food are served in the thatched restaurant. It is a little piece of paradise. lifestyle@scmp.com