

MV Ilala cruises

The MV Ilala, a 620-ton vessel operated by the Malawi Lake Services, provides an essential lifeline service to local communities along the Lake. It is NOT a luxury service but the cabin class is usually clean and the food is edible. It is famous for not running on time but is one of those classic African journeys that offer an unforgettable experience to the more adventurous traveller.

Every week, the MV Ilala travels the entire length of Lake Malawi and back with up to 400 people on the lower deck and 100 ton of cargo up forward, the vessel offers 5 double cabins. The owner's cabin has a bathroom en suite, whilst the others have shared bathroom facilities.

It is possible to just do one leg of the trip the most common being from Likoma Island to Monkey Bay. The top deck above the cabins is reserved for cabin class passengers and is equipped with a covered bar. There's nothing much else to do expect to sit in the sun or shelter in the shade of the bar. Either way, there is much to be said for just lazily watching the magnificent scenery at the edge of the lake go by at a gentle 10 knots!

Oliver Ransfors, in his outstanding historical account of Malawi, Livingstone's Lake, describes the atmosphere on board so well "Each day on board, amid the excited bell ringing, siren shrieks and hooting that seem inseparable from all maritime arrivals and departures, laughing crowds of Malawians line up on the Ilala's deck to disembark, cluttered up with baggage that includes bicycles, cages filled with squawking fowl, sewing machines and even tethered goats. They are ferried ashore in lighters to return an hour or so later crammed with another batch of passengers who quickly settle down in the cramped quarters to cards and singing and sleeping and the preparation of meals in little cooking pots. It all looks and sounds like a cross between Hampstead Heath on a Bank holiday and an Eastern market, but when the ship weighs anchor again the noise dies down and the first class passengers resume in their novels, their deck chairs and their worship of the sun."

What to wear and take with you.

Apart from casual clothing and a jumper for the evenings, all that is required is an adequate supply of insect repellent for the evenings spent in ports, suntan lotion if you are susceptible to sunburn and a couple of good books.

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