

Lake Malawi - History

For centuries European explorers had speculated about the existence of a great lake in Central Africa. Returning travellers in the 17th and 18th centuries offered descriptions of the lake they had heard about with some even claiming to have seen it. Cartographers such as de L'Isle and d'Anville began to produce maps with the shape and position fairly accurately portrayed.

On a visit to Mozambique in 1856 David Livingstone visited Tete where he met Candido Cardoso. Cardoso claimed to have visited the lake ten years earlier and promptly drew a sketch map of it, which Livingstone annotated.

After his original plan to explore a way up the Zambezi River was thwarted by the Kebrabassa Rapids, Livingstone began a journey of exploration up the Shire River to Lake Nyasa. Although he was certainly not the first European to gaze upon the Lake, it was he who exposed its presence to the rest of the world and claimed the honour of its "discovery". He described it as a "lake of stars" in reference to its glittering surface. In true Livingstone style his diaries detail his observations of the Lake and its people. His notes embraced the length and breadth of the Lake the coastline, boats and fishing, trade, slavery and climate.

He saw evidence that thousands of slaves were being transported over the Lake each year to be sold in the slave markets of East Africa. He reasoned that a gunboat on lake Nyasa and an alternative trade to that in human beings, together with Christianity, would put an end to the slave trade. His plea for missionaries to bring Christianity to Central Africa was answered and the history of Malawi took a change in direction.

Lake Malawi has always attracted more than its share of reminiscent travellers. From the time of the Victorian missionaries and traders, whose little steamers ploughed its waters in the cause of Christianity and hard cash, the accounts of visitors to the Lake are distinguished by an attempt to pin down an essential mysteriousness, part of its unchanging quality, which has always managed to elude final definition.

Nature has endowed Lake Malawi with the richest variety of tropical fish of any freshwater lake in the world. Up to 550 species of cichlids are unique to these waters. Fresh lake Chambo is a famous and delicious Malawi dish. In 1980 an area of the southern part of this huge inland sea, which is Africa's third largest lake, was proclaimed a world Heritage Site.

The area encompasses the Nankumba Peninsula and also several of the offshore islands. This is the magnificent Cape Maclear where a succession of sandy bays are interspersed with hills and rocky outcrops, which rise steeply from crystal, clear waters.

From Makanjira on the east coast a lonely Arab dhow sets out on its periodic trip towards Salima, the last of a whole race of dhows which in the 19th century, linked the pre colonial interior with the ivory and slave markets of the Indian Ocean.

The cries of fish eagles, fishermen in dugouts silhouetted against the evening skies, and the warm, sleepy atmosphere, make it impossible not to relax.

Watching the graceful dip and swoop of a passing dugout canoe, or perhaps walking along a beach to find thousands of fish drying on wooden trestles, it is tempting to make romantic assumptions that here is a way of life as timeless as the beauty of the Lake. In fact, the dugout canoes have seen a transformation in the fishing industry which has made them part of an active contemporary economy. The arrival of the bicycle started the fish on their way to the markets of Blantyre and Zomba.

Today tons of dried utaka and matemba provide a staple diet for villages far into the interior. Traditional village fishing techniques include seine netting, ring netting, gill netting and traps. Many canoes are still used but plank boats are favoured when affordable, because they carry bigger loads. Sun drying preserves some of the huge harvest but mostly it is smoked in the lakeside villages. Much employment is generated, not only for those who fish, but also for those who build and repair boats, make nests and travel long distances to sell the shining harvest of the Lake.

The lakeshore craftsmen are very inventive. Stands of hats, row after row of them in a vast variety of shapes and styles, compete with rows of toys also made from basket work but with ingenious detail-car bonnets that open, helicopters with rotors that turn and Land Rovers with spare wheels. Baskets of great variety provide an overwhelming choice while skilled wood carvers produce prized artefacts that will always conjure up happy memories of time spent at the Lake.