

**MALAWI
SIPETWA
MARCH 2005
By Karen Hauptfleisch**

From two to four, five, seven, five, four and then eventually two – that was the amount of people planning to travel together to Malawi at various stages. But on the 17th of March after a crazy drive to the Johannesburg airport (Frans took us sightseeing trying to avoid the peak hour traffic and he did a splendid job) – we finally made it in the nick of time. (Marianne aka Biscuit had the savvy to call ahead and tell someone -I'm still not sure who – to hold the plane).

Three hours later we were in a taxi on our way to Blantyre. And then African time set in. We were told that a bus to Mulanje would arrive at 13h00 and since then the only answer we got irrespective of the question was “the bus is coming”. But we're fellow African's so I studied the bird book and Biscuit learned Chichewa. Unfortunately I'm also a Gemini and my bum was really getting sensitive so we phoned Moses from Mulanje (the local guys are either called Moses or Patrick) who came to our rescue and the next moment we were in a minibus to Limbe.



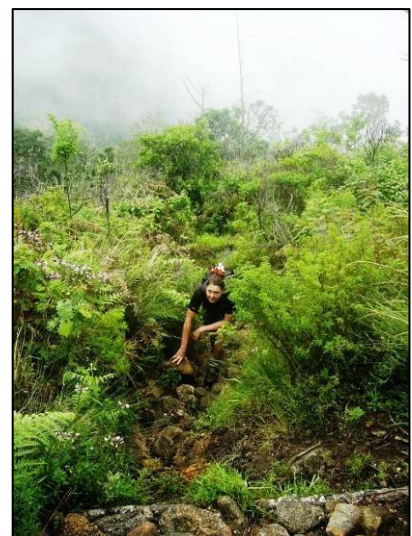
Lovely sunset

From Limbe we took another minibus to Chitakali where Patrick from Mulanje picked us up and took us to Likhubula Forest Lodge (I definitely recommend a 4X4 for this stretch) where we watched a spectacular sunset at the pools close by. Afterwards it was time to pitch the tent while Patrick arranged the porters and guide. Mmmmm – exactly one day to get to Mulanje - not bad for two girls traveling on their own I would say.

By 5h30 the next day we were ready for the rolling hills and soaring peaks and got to the C.C.A.P hut at 12h20. I went bird watching while Biscuit did her favorite thing – chatting to the people. At 15h00 we went to Linje pools where Biscuit danced naked on Lichenya plateau and declared that she'll make sure that I get sponsors for my African peaks – if not from First Ascent, then from Playboy. What a great traveling partner.

The one moment we were still watching the sunset and the next Pierre our guide got us all running like headless chickens because of the threatening rain.

All the talking about the spirits leaving bananas on Sipetwa (Sipetwa means “don't go there”) had quite an effect on my dreams and when I woke up it was misty and Biscuit decided that she was better off in bed but by 6h30 we were on our way and what a spooky hike it turned out to be. The mist rolled in without warning and at one place we were surrounded by thousands of spider webs and all the trees were covered with old man's beard. It is definitely a place to shoot a horror movie.



Some bundu bashing

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks - Malawi

We arrived at the shelter around 12h30 and by 14h00 we were on our way to camp 10 minutes from Sipetwa. Akin (a guide) started laughing at me when I put my backpack on and said people don't go up to Sipetwa with a backpack (well, not a 80 liter one). But he was obviously not aware of the fact that my forefathers went barefoot over the Drakensberg so there we were. But I must admit I had some narrow escapes since it was extremely slippery and the weight of the backpack made rock jumping extremely difficult.

It was also very difficult to stop falling and Pierre had to help me up several times after a fall. But I did feel a lot better after being informed by Biscuit that I definitely won't bleed to death and that Pierre didn't actually save my life several times – I might have just broken a couple of bones. No big deal.

After two hours of climbing (falling) and a lot of huffing and puffing (did I mention that it was raining), two guys came sliding past us. They stopped just long enough to inform us that we had to turn back since it was raining cats and dogs on top so we were forced to turn back. It was only after several more falls that Pierre insisted on swopping backpacks with me and it made a huge difference. I was still slipping but this time I was not falling head over heels because of the heavy backpack. It was still raining when we got back to the shelter.

After 10 hours of hiking – the last 4 serious (it's no joke on top when it rains), sunrise on Sipetwa the next morning seemed impossible. Mulanje has claimed several lives in the past and after Linda, a girl from Holland, disappeared mysteriously two years ago the guides were instructed not to go to the top in the dark or when it rains. After supper everyone sat around the fire trying to dry their clothes. I don't think anyone slept well that night because of the cold.

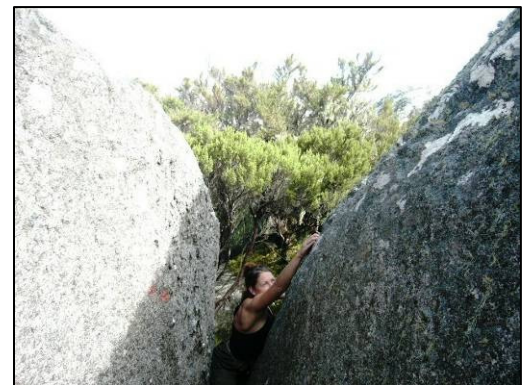


It was quite an adventurous hike to the top.

At 7 the next morning Pierre and I were on our way to the top – this time with only our raingear and water in a daypack. The climb up to the top involved some tree climbing, caving (that's what it felt like), tree hugging, mud dodging, rock climbing and a lot of huffing and puffing. I actually can't believe I tried it with a 80liter backpack the previous day. Once on top I took some pictures and then it was time for some nice bum slides down. And it was only now that I realized why the German and guide didn't stop the previous day to help us.



Some serious leg stretching.



Now how do I get on top of this rock.

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks - Malawi



On top! What a spectacular view!

Back at the shelter we had something to eat and were informed that Biscuit and the two porters only left at 10h30 and by now I was absolutely positive that Pierre didn't see me take some anti-inflammatory since he just about ran to the other hut. On the way there we had some lovely river crossings and passed beautiful pools but I was glad to see the hut and take off my wet boots. We sat around chatting while Pierre had a nap and then we walked down to Elephant head for a nice sunset. It was not long before we ran back, the rain pouring down.

The next morning we got going around 6h30 and it was a lot of downhill but we had an orchestra of birds encouraging us and were picked up by Patrick from Mulanje at 10. After a shower he drove us to town where we first caught a minibus to Limbe and then one to Blantyre. My bum was still sensitive after the previous ride in the minibus and being squashed in the back with 5 other people didn't improve the situation but we survived. Getting into the second minibus I learned a valuable lesson. I thought for 5 seconds that I had the whole front seat to myself but the next moment I was squashed between the driver, my 80 liter backpack and a guy whose breakfast I could smell the whole way.

But things can get worse – the poor guy next to me had his nose stuck in my armpit the whole way – and something very similar to luckyboy was the only soap we could get in Malawi. But then we all know Africa's a tough continent.....

The Mulanje Massif, to me, is a harsh, mysterious mountain, especially if the mist comes rolling in. She has claimed several lives and nowadays it is compulsory to take a guide. I would definitely recommend using porters. The Malawians are extremely poor and the strong guys can consider using a porter as charity. We got excellent service from Patrick and Moses from Mulanje (Tiyende Pamodzi Adventures) who organized the porters and who arranged for us to become "honorary members" of the mountain club. The mountain is extremely clean thanks to a conservation trust.

MALAWI OUR TRIP FROM BLANTYRE TO CAPE MCLEAR MARCH 2005

It was 10h30, Central Africa time and we were sitting in a minibus trying to get from Blantyre to Cape Mclear in Malawi, squashed in with 18 fellow Africans. The wind was blowing through my hair, UB 40 was singing Songs of Jamaica and I was thinking that I really love Africa.

I also thought we got the general idea at last – rather get squashed in from the start – no need to delude yourself by thinking you might get a double seat – no sir. I have also discovered that 65% of the men in Malawi are either called Patrick or Moses. Well, Moses from Blantyre (don't get confused with the Moses from Mulanje or the Moses from Limbe etc etc) got us onto a minibus and after being dropped off at some village, we asked a shopkeeper where we could get a



Our taxi to Blantyre

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks - Malawi

minibus to Cape Mclear and after a short walk through town with our escort (Patrick from Limbe of course) (I presume it depends on how you look at it and on how heavy your bag is) we were on our way to Monkey Bay.

The driver stopped every now and again and more people got inside. And there we were – two South African girls stuck in the back of a minibus and wham, the boot got opened and a black plastic bag filled with fish was hauled on top of our backpacks – which also meant on top of Fluff, my mascot that was stuck to my backpack. The driver kept on stopping and more and more people got in the minibus, and at one stage there were no place in the minibus so people were hanging on the door of the minibus. Biscuit was really looking pale and when she announced that there's no ways Fluff could have survived the fish smell I laughed so much the tears rolled down my cheeks. But we stopped again and this time the plastic bag with fish was tied to the back of the minibus and Biscuit got some color back.



The fish they rescued.

At one stage there were 25 of us inside the minibus plus the luggage and two people were hanging on the door. UB 40 was still singing the same songs and just when we got to the "I can't count anymore" stage two more plastic bags with fish got hauled inside and Biscuit went pale again.

Suddenly the fish that was tied to the back of the minibus flew off and we had to turn around. I really felt sorry for the guy whose fish it was, but not for long because the driver reversed and the rescued fish was put next to us in the minibus.

The driving, UB40 singing, the driver stopping, reversing, continued while more and more people got into the minibus and by this time we had three plastic bags filled with fish with us in the minibus.

After 5 hours of traveling my bladder started to ache, but Africa is one tough continent and as soon as we stopped in Mangotsi we were forced onto a pickup truck with the promise of a direct lift to Cape Mclear. Biscuit's started to have serious doubts when she was told to sit on the side but we had already paid and she had to be happy with a guy sitting almost on top of her head. The driver only left when there were 17 people in the back of the bakkie (don't forget their luggage and the sugar cane). And yes – we were forced to stand when there were 24 people in the back - but at least we had some breathing space and no fish got on the pickup with us. And after what felt like ages we reached Monkey Bay – and the driver informed us that we had to catch yet another minibus. It was at this stage that Biscuit threw her toys out the cot (it helped because we got half our money back) and I went in search of something resembling a toilet.



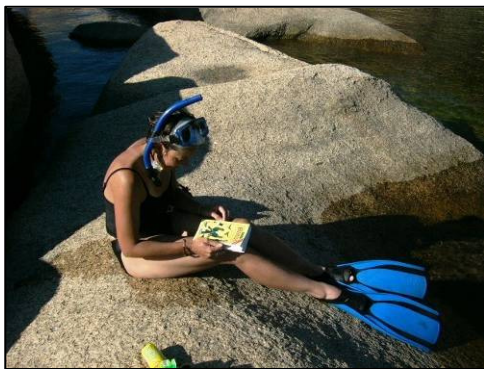
Biscuits' face says it all.

And thanks to Biscuit who asked a local to take pity on two helpless ladies from South Africa we arrived at Fat Monkeys two hours later – just in time to see yet another sunset in Africa.

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Our first day in Cape Mclear: I went hiking with Dan who insisted on getting us snorkeling gear for the afternoon. Unfortunately Biscuit discovered that he was asking more than double the normal rate and that was the end of any future business deals with him. He refused to give our money back and from then on we were known as the two bitches. But we did get our snorkeling stuff and went to Otter's point. (Did I mention that she's an attorney?)

I got a bit sunburned and after watching Biscuit eat some local fish (she claims she's never tasted better fish) and howl at the full moon, I went to bed. There was a huge party on at Fat Monkeys and after a while Biscuit and Amy decided they can't sleep with all the music and rowed over – whether to tell them to turn the volume down a bit or join the party I still don't know. And they weren't back for two minutes on the island before the music was turned up again.



Multi tasking. Who said you can't snorkel and do bird watching simultaneously?

several hours we decided to stay over for another night. After several Kuches we all went to Thomas's for something to eat. But Central Africa got to us and instead of walking we drove with Darren's nice 4X4.



Another breathtaking sunset in Africa

The 4th day: I think after four days in Cape Mclear I've got into the Africa rhythm. My plan was to swim to Fat Monkeys and back but after swimming for about 200m I turned back to get the boat and to do some bird watching. And after a bit of snorkelling and watching the sun rise Amy got us some fish to feed the fish eagles and it was really awesome to watch the magnificent birds.

After we got back to Fat Monkeys, we met Darren, a fellow South African working in Blantyre. Biscuit had her hair braided and after



What a fantastic place to relax!

The 5th day: Everyone was just hanging around – and when the roof of the kitchen started to burn everyone carried on as if nothing happened and 10 minutes later the cook was back in his kitchen.

On our way back, Darren was kind enough to take us for a hike in Zomba. He was also kind enough to let us stay at his place and took us to the airport the next day. What an adventurous trip!