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SLOW-CRUIISING DOWN LAKE MALAWI

For a quick moment Captain Schlömer's eyes scanned the green foreshore only two or three hundred yards to the right, then with a sharp bark to the silent man at the wheel, he turned back to me and continued his reminiscing, the retelling of his days under sail off Cape Horn. The era of the great sailing ships heavy with Australian wool and grain or nitrate from Chile, beating through the stormiest seas in the world, is now dead and gone, but the Captain didn't conceal his pride in having been a part of that way of life while it still lingered on. He didn't come out and say it but I sensed he had lost none of his love for the honest power of sail. The engine far below, whose vibration we could feel from the bridge, could never be loved, only tolerated.

The Captain is German--a slight accent remains--and it was as a prisoner of war that he first came to Africa. He's stayed on and for the past eight years has been master of the Ilala II on Lake Malawi in south central Africa.

Moving forward to the wheelhouse window I looked down onto the lower deck, a crammed and crowded mass of black heads. Sleeping men were sprawled on the hatch cover unconcerned by the hot African sun. Women with children tightly wrapped to their backs by brightly-patterned native fabrics held baskets of bananas and paw-paw and dried fish.

Soon we would pass Cape Maclear and come in sight of Monkey Bay at the south end of the lake. Here I'd leave the Ilala after nearly three days of pleasant lethargy, of sitting in a sagging deck chair and lazily watching the distant landscape slide by.

Leaving the bridge to Captain Schlömer and his silent helmsman I crossed the deserted upper deck--there were now only six cabin class passengers--and went one level down to my cabin. Closing only the louvred outer door and setting the wall fan on high, I stretched out on the clean white sheets and let my mind wander.

Six months before I had left a misty gray London and driven in a Land-Rover south across Europe to Tunisia. On for 12,000 miles across Algeria and the Sahara, into Niger and Nigeria, through the dark heart of Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Zaire. Into tiny Rwanda and out again onto the sweep-

ing plains of Tanzania and Kenya. North into the highlands of Ethiopia then south again eventually through a corner of Zambia and now to Malawi, a pleasant scenic country that not long ago was the British colony of Nyasaland.

This was my first clean and decent accomodation since London: no dust or mud, flies or mosquitos. No rising at 5 a.m., packing up camp and setting out on a long day of slow going over rutted or mired roads. Mostly during these months my thoughts were of cold beer and of good food that could be energetically chewed. Water which we had to lace with chlorine and tinned mackerel or corned beef were normally the reality. Thus I had no qualms over indulging myself: It wasn't yet noon and I had already downed two icy cold Carlsberg beers--locally brewed--at the tiny bar on the upperdeck. And this morning's breakfast: oatmeal, eggs, bacon, sausage, toast and coffee.

It was now Thursday. The seven of us had boarded the Ilala late Monday evening at Chilumba near the north end of the lake. Up to then we had only the vaguest idea of the ship's schedule, the ports, the fare. Reliable information and Africa have the same affinity for one another as oil and water. The Malawian consuls in Nairobi and Addis were very kind but unable to help us. The East African gameparks and flights to Europe were all the Nairobi travel agents knew or seemed to care about.

There appeared no alternative but to go and hope for the best. As it happened we were in luck for as we arrived at Karonga we could see the ship at anchor just off the shore. It was about to depart, however, so we were told to drive the 48 miles south to Chilumba, the next port. Once there, we found the Ilala again sitting offshore. The small dock was dark and deserted. Headlight-flashing and horn-blowing roused no one on board. So nothing to do but into the cool water and swim for it and bring back a boat to pick up the others. (Several stayed behind and would drive the Land-Rovers south to meet us at Monkey Bay.)

Coming aboard we were met by the stone cold unsmiling steward and viewed disapprovingly: Our unorthodox boarding surely wasn't in our favor and the fact that we looked decidedly unprosperous didn't help either.

Two of us arranged for cabins while the others sought and found a few square feet of deck space to stretch out on at one sixth the cost. Just as the eastern sky over the Tanzanian shore was lightening, the engine began to throb, the anchor chain grated noisily, and we slipped out into the lake.

Soon after but still before 6 a.m., the steward woke me to collect the 20.50 Kwacha fare (\$27.70). By his early morning arrival I concluded that he felt I should be down in third class.

Once I had taken a long shower and dawdled over the marvelous English breakfast, my mood brightened and I sought out the still surly steward, paid him my fare, and then had a look around the ship that we had so ingloriously boarded the night before. The Ilala II--the first Ilala was named for the district where Livingstone died and in 1875 circumnavigated the lake-- is a 620-ton, 172-foot motor vessel of three decks. The upper two constitute the inviolable domain of the cabin class passengers, usually tourists or high government officials. Two young Indian girls and a matched pair of elderly genuinely eccentric English ladies were our fellow passengers. I noted my predecessors while glancing through the guest book that I found tucked under the bar: Mostly South Africans and Rhodesians (only Malawi of the black-ruled nations has relations with these two countries).

There are nine cabins, a large sundeck, a bar, lounge and dining room. It's all very quaint and colorful and one rather expects to come upon a tropically white-cladded character from a Somerset Maugham story leaning against the rail taking the evening air.

To pass down to the lower deck is to enter another world entirely: Men, women and children hunched together, some sleeping, others with bored blank expressions; a few laughing and playing at cards. All variety of sights, sounds and smells abound. Every bench is taken and a once a good spot is won, it's not readily or cheerfully relinquished. If it rains as it often does those not under cover have no choice but to get wet.

The routine for all is broken once or twice a day when the vibration of the engine eases and the Ilala slowly approaches a small lakeside village such as Ruarwe or Mlowe. The anchor is let down and a flotilla of dugout canoes soon surrounds the ship. A babble of bargaining begins for the ripe bananas and the fried fish lying in baskets in the bottoms of the canoes. The ship's lifeboat ferries passengers and cargo to and from the white beach a short distance away. Finally, the whistle shrieks, the anchor is drawn in, and the Ilala turns once again out into the lake.

At larger places such as Nkhata Bay, where there are docking facilities, the ship will land and everyone has a chance to go ashore and wander about, perhaps to have a beer or buy fresh fruit in the local outdoor market.

The Ilala is not a particularly handsome ship. Her stern is stubby and

the hull is ready for another coat of white paint. But for the people of Lake Malawi she is a beautiful thing indeed; they have no other dependable mode of communication and transportation. She was built in Scotland over twenty years ago and then disassembled, shipped in pieces to the Mozambique coast, brought up by rail and reassembled at Monkey Bay. Since that time she has weekly made a 659-mile circuit of the lake, calling at ten villages on the way up and the same ten coming back.

Lake Malawi is the tail end of that meandering chain of lakes that is such a prominent aspect of African geography: Lakes Tanganyika, Kivu, Edward and Albert, and slightly off to the right the continent's largest, Victoria. All have certain distinguishing qualities. Lake Malawi--on older maps it shows as Lake Nyasa--is unique in that it's nearly a country in its own right. One fifth of Malawi is the lake and so it's no exaggeration to say that the lake is Malawi.

It's a pretty lake: well framed by mountains and high plateaus along its 350 mile length. Here and there narrow stretches of sandy beach. Native fishermen bob about in their bwatos--dugout canoes--and occasionally you'll see a sailing dhow making its way across to the Tanzanian shore. Not so very long ago such a sight would've sent villagers scurrying into the jungle fearful of arab slavers.

The scourge of most African lakes and rivers, the disease bilharzia, is as rare as crocodiles and so swimming is perfectly safe. The water is clean and clear and many of the 240 species of brilliantly-colored fish are easily spotted. In fact one of the growing industries here is the export of a number of the lake's unique varieties to aquaria around the world.

The strangest sight one encounters on the lake is also unique: towering columns of flying insects. For a long time I watched these from the Ilala's sundeck thinking them only smoke from brush fires on the distant shore. In reality they are composed of billions of flea-like creatures that, having bred in the lake, rise as a well-orchestrated mass hundreds of feet into the air.

During my brief time on the lake the weather was fine; mostly blue sky dotted with an occasional cloud, perhaps a short rainstorm in the late afternoon. (It was March.) All was calm and quiet.

But Captain Schlömer set me straight: "July is often the worst month but it can happen anytime. The surface will be like a mirror, then the wind--the chiperoni from Mozambique--will start to rise, and in an hour you're knocked about by fifteen-foot waves that roll the length of the lake."

This was no story-telling for in 1946, 150 lives were lost when an unexpected gale sunk the new m.v. Vipya.

The lake and indeed the country itself have a special association with Dr. Livingstone, the missionary-explorer. It was he who discovered, or more accurately rediscovered, Lake Nyasa in September of 1859 (the Portuguese Gaspar Boccardo had skirted its shores in 1616). Between his largely unproductive missionary activities and his accurate recording of the horrors of the then flourishing slave trade, Livingstone managed to survey most of the southern portions of the lake. Soon after his death a hundred years ago, the Livingstone Mission was founded and still stands today not far from the lake. In Blantyre, named after the explorer's Scottish birthplace and the country's largest city, is the Museum of Malawi which has an interesting collection of Livingstone memorabilia.

Without doubt the most bizarre incident in the lake's history--and surely one of the least known events of modern history--was the bloodless battle between the British gunboat the H.M.S. Gwendolen and its German foe, the Hermann von Wissman, in 1914. The British were victorious in what proved to be the first naval engagement of World War I.

It was just past noon when we came alongside the quay at Monkey Bay, the shore stretching around in a semicircle to form a well-protected harbor. We bundled our belongings together and joined the happy throng making their way down the dock towards the haphazard array of sheds and warehouses at the end. It didn't seem like much of a town. We walked to the right across a small beach and through clumps of tall marsh grass--the nighttime playground, we later learned, of a friendly hippo--to come out at the Monkey Bay Hotel. We waited here for several days; our Land-Rovers it turned out had become bogged down in the rain-soaked roads of the interior. The hotel was a happy and informal place with a lovely shaded patio overlooking the bay.

Later Captain Schlömer and his wife came by for a sundowner; we sat there at that peaceful time of day just before the shimmering evening grays become black and talked about Malawi and the lake. Just across the way the Ilala was being unloaded and first thing tomorrow morning the Captain would be off again for another week.

IF YOU GO: For information and bookings on the Ilala II write Ilala Booking Office, Malawi Railways Ltd., P.O. Box 5500, Limbe, Malawi. The cabin class fare for the seven-day round trip is about \$55 (exclusive of

meals), one of the great travel bargains. The Monkey Bay Hotel is an ideal base for before and after your cruise. The rate for a single room is about \$6 (P.O. Box 30, Monkey Bay). Monkey Bay is accessible by local bus from Blantyre, 165 miles to the south, although you may wish to rent a car or take the Air Malawi flight. Blantyre itself is served by East African Airways, South African Airways, BOAC, Zambia Airways, and Air Rhodesia. There's also train service from Beira on the Mozambique coast. Driving from Rhodesia, Mozambique and South Africa is difficult and not advisable. The road from the north through Tanzania is far better although once into Malawi, dirt roads which are often impassable during the rainy season are the rule.

In Blantyre the best hotel is without question the Mt. Soche (single rate about \$14. P.O. Box 284, Blantyre). Far cheaper but nonetheless clean and convenient is the new government-owned Travellers Rest House which charges only .35¢ a night for dormitory accomodation.

Pleasant background reading on Malawi in the colonial days of the 1940s is Laurens van der Post's Venture to the Interior, available in paperback. The best and only guidebook is Peter Randall's Guide to Malawi, published by the Winchester Press of Johannesburg. A copy may be obtained by mail from C. Struik Booksellers (probably the world's largest specializing in Africana), P.O. Box 1144, Cape Town, South Africa.

For government tourist information write directly to the Department of Tourism, P.O. Box 402, Blantyre, Malawi.

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Approximate word count: 2,500 words

