



SMILE OUT IN STYLE  
The bar/restaurant area is low-key and relaxed

# MAGICAL MALAWI

Kaya Mawa is a pioneering island eco-lodge that is firmly putting Malawi on the beach safari map. **LOU HALL** discovers Africa's best-kept family secret



THE ISLAND WOMEN HAND-CRAFTED MUCH OF THE LODGE'S BEAUTIFUL INTERIOR DESIGN DETAILING

**B**obbing on the freshwater lake, a fish eagle swoops low and a distant ripple of laughter drifts across the water. It's 8am, but already the beach is a hive of activity: local children are diving from distant granite boulders; brightly dressed women are washing clothes at the shore, others collect water, carrying buckets on their heads up the beach, children skipping alongside; the sand is being raked, the kitesurf-school and Lasers set up and the kikoy-clothed lodge staff are laying the tablecloths on the wood-deck beach restaurant terrace. Forget the sunset – this is the magic hour, as the beach glows golden in the morning pink light and the day slowly wakes.

Dave, the boatswain, pushes down the throttle. We carve gentle turns on the flat water, the spray making rainbows against the cobalt skies. It's also a balmy wake-up call after the dark winter days we've left behind in London. Out around

the headland we go, past ancient swollen baobabs and Ndomo House (the owners' Moorish private four-bedroom villa, available for exclusive hire with pool, staff and beach). Then on, past rocky coves, to Mango Drift (mangodrift.com), the lodge's third private bay, dotted with thatched chalets and a bar under a mango tree that's home to the backpackers' lodge and PADI dive school. Local fishermen, dugouts by their side, are mending nets, preparing to head out for the day's catch.

We return to a breakfast of muesli, yoghurt, fresh fruit and poached eggs on homemade toast. And so begins a perfect week. There's lots to do – sailing, windsurfing, kitesurfing, dive courses (age 8+), but we stick to waterskiing, wakeboarding, bat and ball, kayaking and the odd snorkelling adventure. When not flopping on our terrace or deck daybed down by the water's edge, reading, having R&R (the spa's Rhythms of the Lake massage is something else),

watching the kids at play or heading off on cultural explorations, that is.

Malawi may not (yet) be top of your list for family beach safari destinations. It's a landlocked mud-hut country in one of the most remote and poorest parts of Africa – hardly the ideal destination for a family beach safari with kids and grandparents, is it, you ask? Well, think again. It's now firmly on the world map as a leading family beach safari destination, thanks to Kaya Mawa (kayamawa.com) on Likoma Island ('Isle of Baobabs'), where we're staying. The lodge's name means 'Maybe Tomorrow' (in the local African Chichewan dialect). It is a nod to the slower pace of island life.

This is a family-run 12-cottage eco-lodge, with sandy shores and direct lake access. It's also quite accessible from the UK. You need to change planes, but flights are cheap. You can now leave London at 6pm and be on the beach by 2pm, gin and

tonic in hand, while the kids discover the best island playground imaginable.

The freshwater Lake Malawi is one of the biggest draws about staying here, dreamily situated as the resort is on the shores of this vast, majestic body of water (coined Lake of Stars by Scottish explorer David Livingstone). Implausibly clear and salt-free, the lake makes holidaying brilliantly easy with young kids. (No tears over itchy skin, stinging eyes or combing salt-caked hair!) It's also like swimming in a giant aquarium.

While this is Africa, and there are no kids' clubs, Kaya Mawa is nothing if not family-friendly. The British owners James and Suzie Lightfoot (of Latitude Hotels), have young kids, and have thought of most everything (mosquito spray, torches, lifeguard on duty, you name it). Since taking over in 2008, they've given the place a stylish contemporary makeover that's had it winning shelf-loads of luxury travel awards. Kaya Mawa deserves it: it's

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SWIMMING IN LAKE MALAWI IS LIKE BEING IN A GIANT AQUARIUM

sun-drenched, relaxed and under-the-radar, with an air of having its top two buttons undone, in the way that all the world's best hideouts are. The lodge's success is also largely due to the vision and flair of its original founders, pioneering British duo Andrew Came and Will Sutton, who opened its doors in 2000. Since then, it's grown up. Today, it is a known world-leading luxury beach destination that's ideal for multi-generational families – both as a fly-and-flop or beach-safari tag-on (close as it is to a number of top wildlife parks). You choose. ➔







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HERE, KIDS CAN PLAY  
ROBINSON CRUSOE TO  
THEIR HEARTS' CONTENT



LAKE MALAWI'S CRYSTAL WATERS ARE IDEAL FOR SNORKELLING

As African beaches go, it's also about as safe as you'll find. There are no nasties here: no wild beasts, no big game and no crocs (despite stories of old!); no tide surge, no crime (Malawi is known as the warm heart of Africa), and the gently sloping main beach makes it ideal watersports learning territory. So you can relax your guard and let the kids romp, too. They'll while away hours scampering barefoot down the soft-underfoot paths from your cottage to the water's edge, nature-spotting like mini Gerald Durrells, chasing lizards, and they'll love climbing down the wooden ladder from your deck to the lake, hunting Nemo and friends (Lake Malawi contains 80% of the world's tropical freshwater fish), while you relax on your terrace and private deck – or join in.

Staying here has an added benefit of a digi-detox; there's no mobile signal or

## THE LOWDOWN

### HOW MUCH?

Scott Dunn offers 7 nights at Kaya Mawa staying in a Family House from £3,155pp (based on 2 adults and 2 children under 13 years old).

Price includes all meals, accommodation, transfers, snorkelling, walks, mountain biking, kayaking, sailing and flights with British Airways.

If children are older (13-17), prices are as follows: £3,355pp in a family house (based on 2 adults and 2 children aged 13-18yrs). All others inclusions above apply. [scottdunn.com](http://scottdunn.com)

### BEST TIME TO VISIT

Between April and December. Malaria is a low risk, but take precautions.

PlayStation. Instead, with acres of palm-fringed sandy beaches and rocky inlets to explore, the kids can play Robinson Crusoe to their hearts' content. The 'wifi issue' may prove contentious, but we love the remoteness; it forces you to 'switch off' and reconnect with nature. Even the kids (eventually) get it, opting instead to chase butterflies, spot otters and hunt for lizards. After a few days, we settle into the island pace of life, too; my other half, a digipreneur, even takes up reading good old-fashioned

books on the terrace and properly relaxes (finally!).

Once the initial lethargy has subsided, there's plenty to see and do. Guests can explore by bike, kayak or foot. Quad-biking to St Peter's Cathedral and seeing the bustling town and port are highlights for us. As is a tour of the local Nkwazi Village school, thanks to headmaster Isaiah, which inspires us to send book and clothes donations from my son's school on return home. A short 30-minute stroll over to Katundu textiles company ([katundu.net](http://katundu.net)), an impressive philanthropic artisan community workshop, set up by co-owner Suzie, making beautiful hand-crafted souvenirs, is a must, too. Even the walk there, through mud hut villages, seeing kids playing pick-up sticks as they swerve chickens and tethered goats, and playing football with balls modelled from recycled plastic bags and string, is an experience.

Which is entirely the point. Kaya Mawa couldn't be more authentic African island life – and that's rare. 'This isn't the Caribbean; this is Africa. We pride ourselves on that. Here, you can flop, or immerse yourself in local Malawian island culture,' explains owner James Lightfoot. 'There is no other beach lodge experience like this anywhere else in the world, that we know of.' Nor do we. It's a unique approach that clearly works wonders (judging by the number of repeat clients), and will doubtless leave your little ones eyes-wide, brains whirring with life-learning lessons, and you all yearning to return. Kaya Mawa? ■