

Stranded in Malawi

On an African tour, vehicles tend to behave like the Proteas during a World Cup tournament: just when you think things are humming along, you're disappointed. Misfortune befalls **Villiers Steyn** and **Jl de Wet** in Malawi – after more than 1 1000 km on the road.

PHOTOGRAPHS VILLIERS STEYN

People, people and more people...

After a quick, 45-minute, border crossing we're in Malawi. You're immediately aware of the cultural differences from Tanzania. The people here are a little quieter, but more confident, and everybody speaks good English. And there are lots of people.

In their thousands they form a wall on either side of the road as they walk between Songwe and Karonga, all of them smiling and colourfully dressed. There are also plenty of cyclists and farm animals.

Malawi is one of Africa's most densely populated countries. It has about 14 million citizens in a country more than ten times smaller than South Africa – that's 118 people per square kilometre.

We stop off in the luxurious campsite of the Chitimba Camp on the shore of Lake Malawi. On the beach, a few travellers are playing volleyball and our neighbours in the campsite are a Dutch couple in a canary-yellow Land Cruiser station wagon. The perfect place to take a breather for a day or two.

Day 52 Rather lie low

In the morning we visit the St Ann's Clinic north of Chitimba. Jl explains his symptoms to a sister and we spend an hour waiting for a doctor, just to be told the doctor doesn't have the equipment to do >

Breaking camp is never fun, but doing it when your T-shirt is glued to your body is torture. We don't have a thermometer, but it must be at least 40°C here on the banks of the Ruaha River in the Ruaha National Park in Tanzania. On top of that, the humidity is close to 100%.

On the drive back to The Old Farm House, where we spent the night four days ago, we could at least crank up the air conditioning.

Upon arrival we decide to first service the Hyena before washing the sweat from our bodies. After all, our trusty steed has covered 10 999 km since we left Pretoria fifty days ago.

Under a tree in the campsite I document the service, while Jl replaces the air filter, petrol filter and oil. We also ensure that every bolt we can find is tight and use cable ties to tie down anything else that looks a little loose.

When we inspect the tyres, we see the pressure of the right front tyre is a little low. This is our first puncture.

We quickly find the leak and repair it with our tyre repair kit.

Now she's ready for the last 5 000 km, not so? Well, we would soon find out...

Park off for a whole week. It's not for nothing that Nkhata Bay is one of the big tourism drawcards in Malawi. Here the beaches are as attractive as that of any tropical island.

Old Farm House, Iringa, Tanzania to Mama Rula's, Chipata, Zambia (7 days, 1615 km)

Day 51 Could you pull over, please?

I'm usually the one who has to get up at night for a bathroom break. Jl sleeps right through. But last night I heard the tent's zip open and close a few times. En route to Mbeya I had to pull over four times. The symptoms are clear – Jl has a bladder infection.

It takes us more than an hour to find a tub of baking soda in Mbeya. According to Jl's mother, Almarie, it's the best medicine for a bladder problem. Fortunately, we have more than enough Game concentrate with which Jl can try to mask the taste of the baking soda.

We stop at a Toyota dealership and ask about the ABS light that started lighting up on the dashboard a few days ago. The mechanic assures us that the brakes would work just like normal brakes should the ABS pack up. They say they can't do anything for us right now, since all ABS parts have to be imported.

The road to the Kasumulu/Songwe border post, where we cross from Tanzania into Malawi, is one of the most beautiful we've driven on yet. It winds among hundreds of koppies as we gradually descend. We see bananas everywhere along the road – on trees, bicycles, shop shelves and people's heads and stacked on the pavements.



Easy living on the lakeside. At Njaya Lodge on Nkhata Bay steep steps take you past some overnight huts to a private beach.

SERENGETI TRIP: PART 7



Lessons from leg #7

Rather be 100% sure. If you suspect there's something wrong with your vehicle, even if it's just a gut feeling, there is usually something wrong. Pull over and inspect the engine and chassis thoroughly, or drive slowly to the nearest workshop.

Play it safe. When stopping for a break or to have a look at your vehicle, be sure to pull as far off the road as possible.

Show some leg. With a little patience you should easily get a lift in most East African countries.



a urine test. Frustrated, we return to camp where we lie low for the rest of the day.

Thanks to a Wi-Fi signal in the bar we get a rare opportunity to ease our Facebook withdrawal symptoms and to send an email or two. We also place a few orders with the eccentric curio carvers outside the camp entrance and both take a long afternoon nap.

Since the bilharzia risk is high, we decide not to swim in the lake and rather shorten our visit to Malawi to make up for the extra days we spent in Tanzania. The plan is to drive into Zambia tomorrow.

Day 53

A campsite with a difference

We hit the road at 8:30 and are again astonished by Malawi's natural beauty. At Chiweta the tar road turns away from the lake and we look out over communities living in tiny settlements on the lake shore. The vegetation is emerald-green and every stream we cross runs strongly.

In a forestry area 70 km south of Mzuzu, the biggest town in the north of the country, the Hilux starts running oddly. Somewhere metal is grinding on metal.

I immediately pull over but don't see anything wrong under the vehicle. Five kilometres on I feel it again, but this time it's noticeable – there is friction somewhere under the bakkie. Does it have something to do with the ABS light?

We pull over a second time and inspect the chassis carefully, until we notice oil on the inside of the left back wheel. My heart sinks – this looks like serious damage. Without wasting further time, we ask for help at the sawmill next to which we happened to stop.

Initially things look quiet, because today is Sunday, but then we meet Charles Zimba, a quiet car mechanic who is willing to take a quick look at the Hyena.

"The bearings will have to be replaced," Charles says, "and also the oil seal." The diagnosis doesn't sound good. Slowly but surely he takes the brake unit apart. "The skid control rotor is also damaged. I would suggest we remove the whole hub so the guys at Mzuzu Toyota can have a look at everything tomorrow." JI and I nod and pretend to know what he's talking about. Thank goodness for Charles.

He helps us to remove the contraption and promises to replace it tomorrow as soon as it's fixed.

Sunday afternoon soccer

We are stranded. Since we can only get help in Mzuzu tomorrow, we make the

most of a long day at the side of Malawi's main highway. We open up the bakkie's awning for a little shade and pull out the chairs. Three boys on a pile of tree trunks watch us with big eyes. And then we have an idea.

Up until now we've given away plenty of soccer balls, but haven't really played. Now is our chance... With two gas bottles, a washing-up basin and the orange toolbox we make goalposts on an open piece of land between the broken bakkie and the sawmill.

Within minutes there are ten barefoot kids in each team. JI and I take turns to make sure the ball doesn't roll into the road. As is the case with most seven-year-olds, these boys are ball chasers, but one is clearly in a league of his own. "That lighty in the blue shirt is a little Lionel Messi," says JI.

While we play, a crowd of older boys form next to the field, but they wait until the little ones have tired before taking over the game. I haven't seen such respect in a long time. And then we see where they have learned it, because next thing we know the adult men come closer. They too wait their turn.

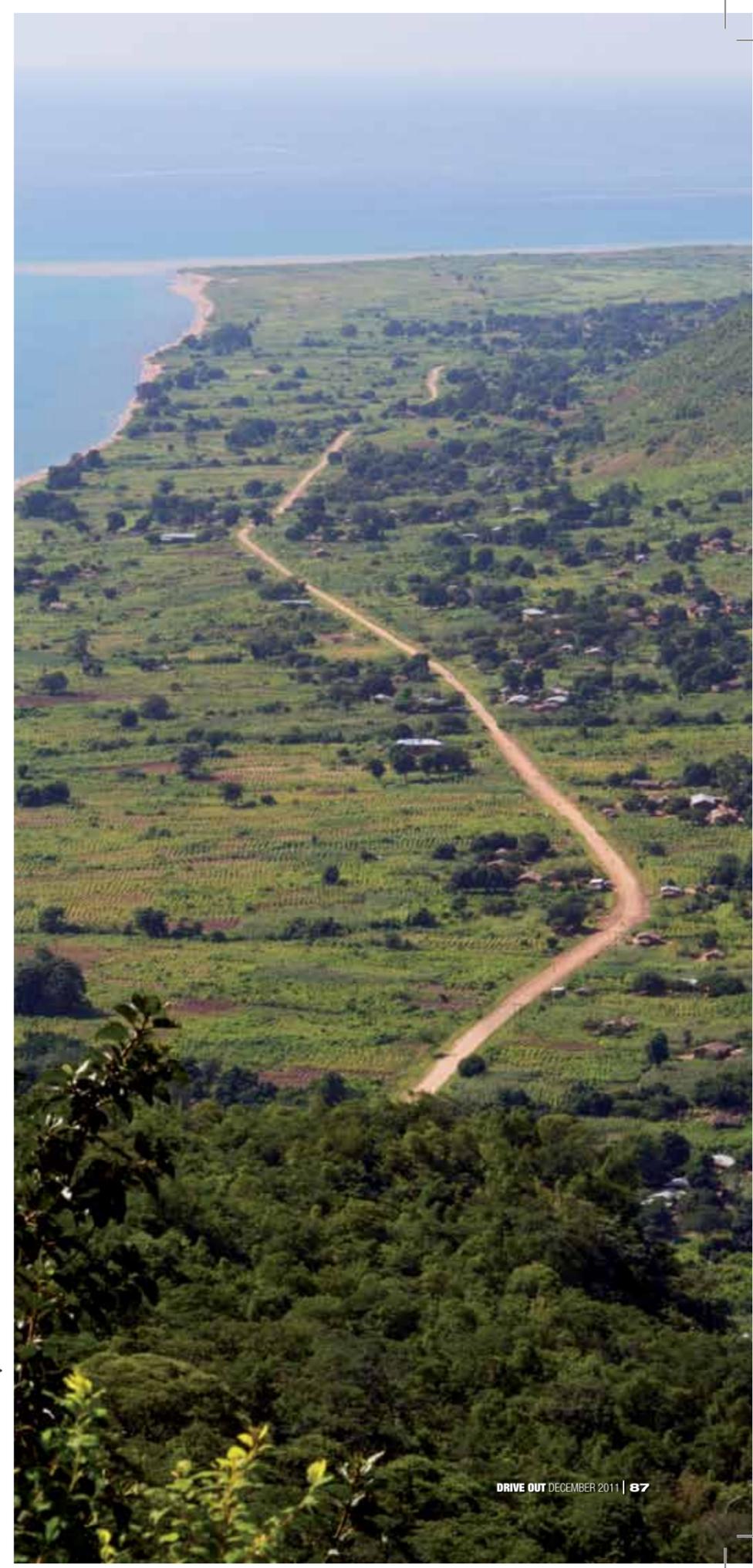
By sunset we pitch our tent next to a pool of rain water that we name "Lake Malawi". It is by far the strangest place at which I've ever camped. I join a chatty man for a walk down to the local well where I fill our basin with water, so we can at least wash our faces. Shortly after lighting the campfire, about 15 of the boys who played soccer with us join us by the fireside.

They're still too young to speak or understand English, but they're far from quiet. In the weak light of the flames you just see fingers wherever you look as they point out objects in and around our camp.

Then JI decides to play a game with the kids. In the back of our Bradt tour book is a list of words in Chichewa, Malawi's national tongue. When he mentions the name of an animal, they imitate it loudly: "Ngombe" – "Mooooooo!"; "Mbusi" – "Baaahhhhh!"; "Udzuzu" – "Bzzzzzzzz!" They imitate a cow, boer goat and mozzie. They even know the sound of a real hyena.

An hour later the boys are still there by the fire. Not a single parent has come to look for them. In an attempt to send them

Tempting, but rather not. If you want to drive all along Lake Malawi, you could turn off onto a gravel road at Chiweta, but Villiers and JI decided to stick to the tar.





Private splash pool. The Hilux broke down 70 km south of Mzuzu, and Villiers and JI were forced to camp next to their own 'Lake Malawi'.

home, JI says, "Khalani Bwino!" – "Good-bye!" In a choir they answer: "Khalani Bwino!" and you just see hands waving, but they don't move. To them it's all still part of the game.

Finally, one of the older boys understand what we are trying to tell them, and he says something in Chichewa. At once all of them jump up and promptly disappear into the night.

A day which many might have considered a disaster, turned out to be an unforgettable experience. I will forever cherish the Malawians' friendliness, respect and willingness to help.

**Day 54
Operation Mzuzu**

This morning we're up before dawn. We only have one day to get the rear wheel of the Hilux fixed if I am to wake up in a beautiful spot on the lake shore tomorrow, on my 29th birthday.

This is our plan of action: JI takes the damaged hub to Mzuzu, while I look after the bakkie and our tent. Dominee De Wet decides to rather hitchhike after one of Charles's friends wanted R400 to drive to Mzuzu. He gets a lift with the second vehicle that stops. As it happens, it's a German theology professor, and the two talk the hind leg off a donkey.

While JI twiddles his thumbs at Mzuzu Toyota, I play soccer again with the young guys. When it gets too hot, I seek refuge under the roof and read.

More than eight hours – and R2945 – later, JI arrives back at "Lake Malawi", carrying a repaired hub.

He travelled back in a minibus taxi, and won't forget this ride either. A kilometre before stopping at the traffic police control point, the excess number of passengers jump out of the taxi and walk past the roadblock. A kilometre beyond the point, the taxi stops and waits for the passengers. "That's transport, Africa style!"

As promised, Charles helps us to get the bakkie roadworthy again, but it takes

us until after sunset to replace the hub. We decide to drive to the nearest coastal town, and, fortunately, this turns out to be Nkhata Bay – one of Northern Malawi's best-known tourist spots. Shortly after departing, the brakes say goodbye. To make things worse, we drive in the dark for 50 km, down a steep, twisty pass to reach Nkhata Bay. It's a terrifying drive to the bottom.

By the time we stop at Njaya Lodge, we're both exhausted after the excitement and worry of the past two days. We sleep like logs.



Make the best of a bad situation ... Villiers plays soccer next to the tar road with a group of lighties near the place in Malawi where the Hilux conked in.

**Day 55
Not really a party to remember**

Right from the start JI and I had decided not to keep to a fixed itinerary. If circumstances dictate, we sleep somewhere other than planned. We decide to spend two nights at Nkhata Bay and forgo our visit to South Luangwa in Zambia.

Today is my birthday, but instead of cake and pressies, we only have hamburgers and a pool table... and it suits us to a T. Besides a short walk on the Njaya Lodge's private beach, I spend most of the day flat on my back. With the sea-green water of the lake and dug-out canoes it's not hard to take a postcard picture. Just a pity about the bilharzia in the water.

We conclude the day in the bar where a few locals gather to watch Manchester United play Marseille.

**Day 56
Heading home**

Our brake problems cause us to pop in again at Mzuzu Toyota where, fortunately this time, they can work on the vehicle themselves. After quick and friendly service we're back on the road with working brakes and head for the Zambian border. Just before sunset, after a very easy border crossing, we stop at Mama Rula's camp near Chipata.

For the first time in more than a month home starts feeling nearby again. With only two weeks to go, I hope we're not in too much of a hurry to get home. You know what a horse is like when he smells the stable...

Next issue: The last leg ... Hippos and an elephant bull visit the two travellers' Mana Pools camp, JI makes interesting friends in Matobos, and Mashatu is crawling with predators.

This is where we stayed

Chitimba Camp, Chitimba, Malawi

Where? About 1 km north of the village Chitimba in northern Malawi, 122 km south of the Tanzanian border.

Cost? MK600 (R29) pppn camping

Facilities: This tidy, shaded campsite is situated on the lake shore and has a cosy pub overlooking a wide beach. Meals are supplied by day and Wi-Fi is available at MK15 (±73c) per minute. There are green lawns and communal bathrooms with cold showers.

Bookings: camp@chitimba.com; www.chitimba.com

Njaya Lodge, Nkhata Bau, Malawi

Where? In Nkhata Bay, Northern Malawi

Cost? MK500 (R24) pppn camping

Facilities: Njaya is on a steep slope above a picturesque private bay and has a very informal backpacker feel to it. It has a variety

of rooms and a small campsite, as well as a bar, restaurant, television and pool table. The communal bathrooms have flush toilets and hot water.

Bookings: info@njayalodge.com; www.njayalodge.com

Mama Rula's, Chipata, Zambia

Where? Outside Chipata in eastern Zambia

Cost? \$7 (R56) pppn camping

Facilities: Mama Rula's is one of the tidiest campsites we stayed at on the entire trip. It has green lawns, plenty of shade and excellent communal ablutions, as well as a restaurant and bar.

Bookings: mamarula@iwayafrica.com; www.mamarulas.com

Drive Out says: Spoil yourself with steak and pap (ZK70000/R113) or lasagne (ZK45000/R73) – you won't be sorry.



A house of straw. Njaya Lodge's huts have a beautiful view across the lake.

Curio stall 101

There is nothing as grim as buying a fruit bowl on the road just to see the same one two weeks later, just with nicer patterns and at half the price, at another stall. This is how you get value for money:

Where should I buy? Malawi is one of the cheapest countries, because they focus mainly on the backpacker market.

From whom should I buy? Don't buy from the pushy guys. Some of the best, cheapest items sometimes hide with the younger, quieter guys.

How should I haggle? Remind the salesman that you are also an African and that the South African rand isn't worth nearly as much as a

US dollar. So insist on an "African price".

What is a good price? We paid \$40 (US) for a metre-long bao board; \$20 (US) for a wooden plate with "Serengeti Trip 2011" and an African scene



carved on it; MK500 (R24) for a wooden key ring with a name carved on it; and MK250 (R12) for a wire bracelet.

Can I pay in kind? Yes. Soccer balls, magazines, sunglasses and clothing in good condition work as well as cash, if not better.

Drive Out says: Don't hesitate to ask the curio guys to carve you something special. You can ask for a specific item, form, name, animal or scene. Just make sure you give them enough time to complete it before you leave. Do yourself a favour and sit with them for a while.

Gear: Medication and extra parts



Medication

You will get ill in Africa, and it's the quickest way to spoil your Africa tour. The sooner you can stop it, the better. As medication is not freely available north of the South African border, buy it before you leave.

This is what we took along:

ACC 200 (phlegm)
 Allergex (hay fever)
 Andolex C spray (sore throat)
 Anthisan ointment (mosquito and other bites)
 Aurone Forte ear drops (earache)
 Betaperamide (diarrhoea)
 Burnshield Hydrogel (burns)
 Buscopan (stomach ache and cramps)
 Celestamine (allergic reactions)
 Clopamon (nausea)
 Corenza C (cold and flu)
 Coxflam (muscular pain, arthritis, sprains)
 Doxitab antibiotics (tick bite fever)
 Fourrts Quadragel or Dequadin (ulcers)
 Game concentrate (dehydration)
 Gen-Payne (pain and fever)
 Halls sweets (blocked nose)
 Lactovita (drink with antibiotic)
 Mefliam (prophylactic: malaria)
 Nasonex nasal spray (sinus)
 Oxylin eyedrops (dry, sore eyes)
 Panado (headache)
 Persivate and Canalba cream mixture (skin irritation/fungus)
 Prospan syrup (cough)

Ranclav broad-spectrum antibiotics (persistent infection)

Rehidrat (dehydration)

Rennies (heartburn)

Rinex (cold and blocked nose)

Serc 24 (prophylactic: motion sickness)

Sinutab (sinusitis)

Strepsils (sore throat)

Voltaren (muscular pain)

Wound aid cream (sores/infection)

Also remember other important items such as Vaseline, earplugs, sunblock (including lip balm with sunscreen), Aftersun, Zam-Buk, a needle and thread, an extra toothbrush and chronic medication such as asthma pumps. And a packet of baking soda for bladder infection.

Our first-aid kit contained the following: band-aids, gauze, latex gloves, scissors, tweezers, plasters and plaster rolls, safety pins, antiseptic and thermometer.

The medication cost about R3 000.

Drive Out tips:

- Store your first-aid and medicine kits where they're easy to reach, preferably behind or below the driver's or passenger seat.
- Keep a laminated copy of every person's complete medical aid details at hand, including ID numbers, addresses etc.
- Check your medical aid's cross-border emergency number – it could differ from the local number.



Take extra vehicle parts, and consider a DIY service

It's not practical to take extra shock absorbers, leaf springs and a gearbox with you. Africa has more than enough experts (in the cities *and* in the sticks) to help you when these big parts break. However, it is worth it to take some smaller parts along.

We took an additional air filter and petrol filter and replaced them after about 11 000 km, with the vehicle's oil. We also took two spare wheels and everything necessary to change and fix tyres, among others a tyre repair kit, high-lift jack, tyre pressure gauge and small compressor.

Other useful extra vehicle parts include a set of fuses and bulbs, and don't forget to take a roll of duct tape, a bunch of cable ties and a packet of steel putty.

All our additional parts set us back was about R500.

Drive Out says: To be safe, budget about R5 000 for possible vehicle damage. Few vehicles escape damage on African roads, especially when you're travelling this far. 

