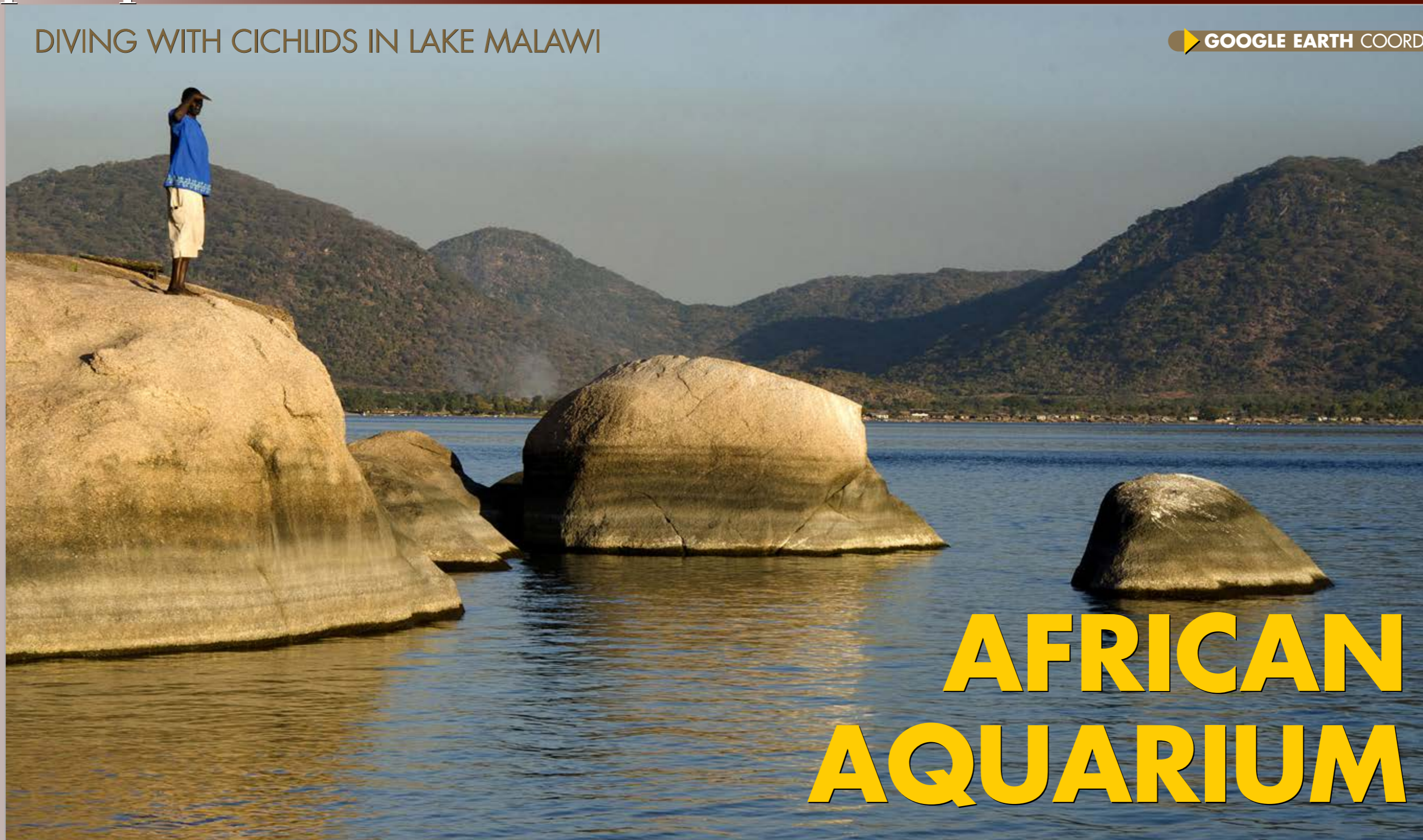


# Trip Report

DIVING WITH CICHLIDS IN LAKE MALAWI

▶ [GOOGLE EARTH COORDINATES](#) [HERE](#)



## AFRICAN AQUARIUM

Exploring the barren, rocky bottoms of a veritable freshwater inland sea - in search of fascinating, colorful fish among hippos and Nile crocodiles



*Maylandia sp.*  
This cichlid is flashing its bright blue sidebars, possibly as a sign of aggression or territorial display.



**Domwe Island**  
The rocky shoreline of Domwe Island.

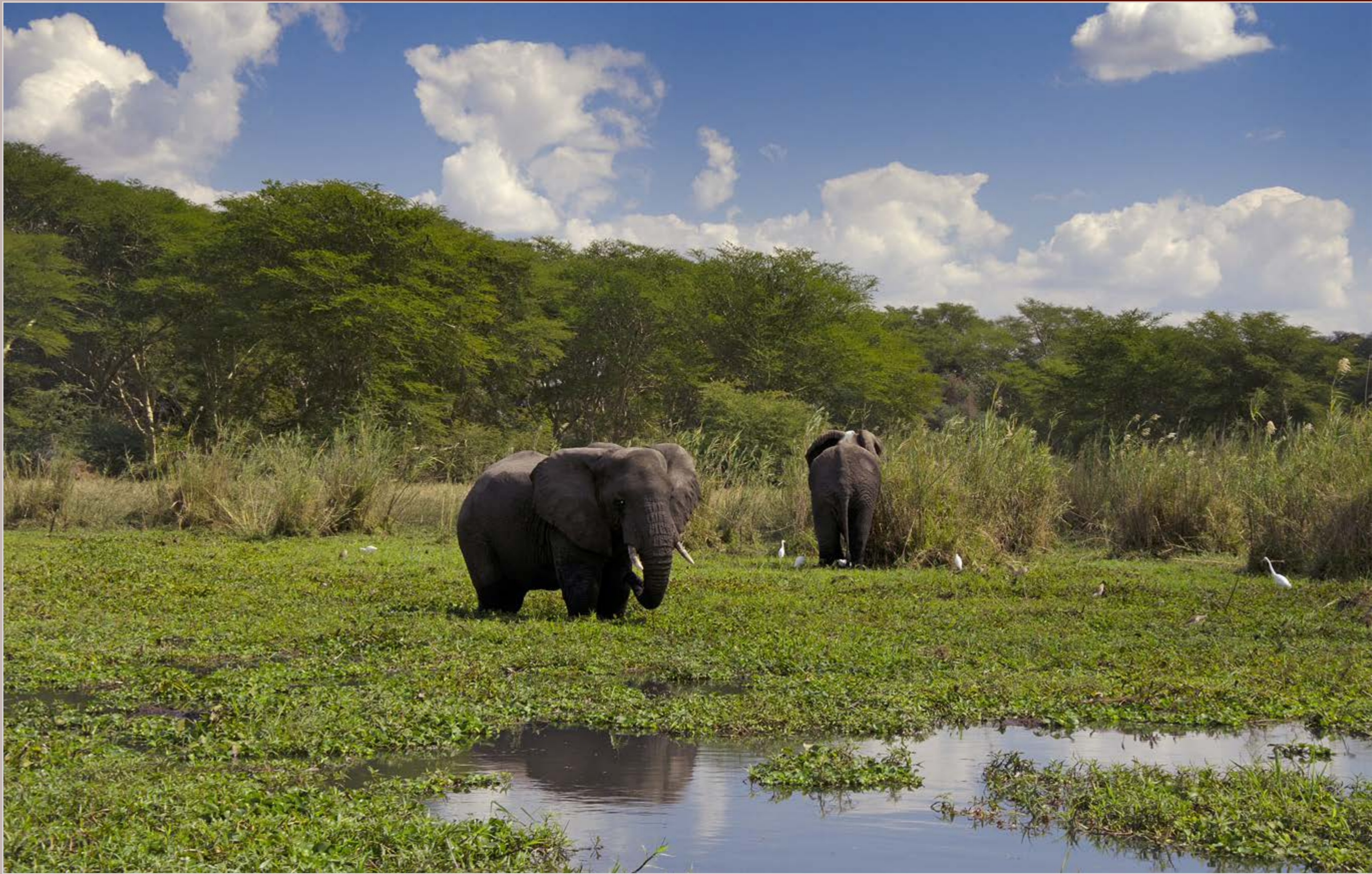
TEXT AND PHOTOS  
BY SCOTT BENNETT

For some reason, many people attach an unwarranted stigma to Africa. Whenever there is trouble somewhere, many assume the entire continent is hazardous simply by geographic association. As African nations go, however, Malawi remains refreshingly innocuous; it doesn't make the news for all the wrong reasons. Make no mistake; the country's small size belies its multitude of attractions. Known as the warm heart of Africa for its friendly people, I quickly realized it could also be called the land of surprises.

Proclaimed a National Park in 1973, Liwonde features a diverse range of habitats and abundant wildlife despite its relatively compact size of 580 sq km. Mopane woodland dominates approximately three-quarters of the park along with candelabra trees and numerous baobabs. Reed swamps and marshland fringe the Shire River while the south features floodplain grassland, mixed woodland on the hills and semi-deciduous riverine forest. After paying the park fees, we set out for Mvuu, the sole lodge located within the park boundaries. En route, game was abundant with impala, bushbuck, waterbuck, warthogs and kudu. A herd of elephants was an unexpected surprise with quite a few juveniles present.

Discreetly nestled on a small lagoon off the Shire River, the camp was simply stunning. Resting on a raised platform high beneath an imposing thatched roof, the main lodge featured an open-air reception / dining area offering views of both the lagoon and Shire River beyond. Lodge facilities included a dining room, pub, lounge area, library and swimming pool. Accommodation consists of eight luxurious tents for a maximum of 16 guests, each with ensuite bathroom facilities and a private viewing platform overlooking the water. It didn't take long to spot some wildlife. Egrets waded through the lagoon's shallows while some imposing crocodiles basked on the muddy riverbank. Mvuu means "hippo" in the local Tonga language and the name couldn't be more fitting. Approximately 2000 reside in the Shire River and seeing them is a 100% certainty. To me, their snorting and bellowing is a sound synonymous with the African bush. A short drive brought me to a lookout over the Shire River, where I enjoyed a glass of wine as the setting sun transformed the still waters to liquid gold. Afterwards, a night drive yielded kudu, white-tailed mongoose, genets, scrub hares and even a bushbaby hopping along the ground. Over dinner, I was asked what I wanted to do the next morning. Activities included guided bush walks, game and boat drives. I opted for

*continued on page 82* >



**African Elephant** *Loxodonta africana*  
Peacefully grazing in knee-deep water by the lake's edge.



**Masimbwe Island**  
The rocky, barren bottom of Masimbwe Island is home to countless, colorful cichlids.



*Maylandia aurora*  
 Most Malawi cichlids display a brightly iridescent and very colorful livery.

the latter, which provided tremendous photo ops, especially for birds. Over 300 of the country's 650 species reside within the Park, which includes a copious number of waterbirds.

Getting up for sunrise, we crossed the river just in time for the clouds to roll in. Bird species included open-billed and yellow billed storks, African spoonbills, fish eagles, African pied kingfishers, little bee eaters, reed cormorants and African jacanas to name but a few. Golden and brown-throated weavers congregated amongst the reeds fringing the waterways, while wire tailed swifts were constant companions, perching on the boat's bow or under the canopy barely an arm's length away. Hippos were everywhere. Fortunately, my guide knew exactly which ones to approach or which ones to avoid. Elephants grazed in the marshy areas surrounded by cattle egrets, eager to snap up insects disturbed by their enormous companions. Within Liwonde is a 4000 ha fenced area called "The Sanctuary," where a number of rare species have been introduced including buffalo, Lichtenstein's hartebeest, zebra, roan, eland and black rhino. The Liwonde Black Rhino Project, initiated in part by Wilderness Safaris, has established a small breeding population to provide a source of animals to establish in other Parks. Although we didn't see any, they were definitely around, with middens

(rhino latrines) indicating their presence. Elephants were much easier to find. One massive bull standing astride the track necessitated a monumental detour! Lots of birds were on view, including yellow-billed and crowned hornbill, Livingstone's flycatcher and Lillian's lovebird. Liwonde is the only place in Malawi where the latter has been observed. We were also lucky to spot sable antelope, several hundred of which reside in the sanctuary's mopane woodland. Another first was a bush pig, a close relative of the red river hog found in the central African rainforests. Distinguished by less colourful markings, coarser hair and a larger size than their jungle cousins, bushpigs are usually nocturnal. However, during the dry season, they emerge prior to dusk when temperatures are cooler.

The following morning, a second boat cruise revealed more, filling my flash card to the bursting point. Waterbirds were especially tolerant, allowing a close approach for frame-filling images. The crocs were far more skittish, sliding into the water the moment the boat got anywhere close. One massive male in the river raised his head above the waterline and emitted a deep booming call to attract females. Although brief, my stay at Mvuu was spectacular. Although Malawi isn't regarded as a safari destination, Liwonde's wildlife was most impressive.

*continued on page 84* ➤



### **Mumbo Island**

Water and savannah meet along the rocky, wooded shores of Mumbo Island.



*Maylandia callainos*

Most cichlids of Lake Malawi have no common name outside the aquarium trade.

A drive of several hours brought me to Cape Maclear in the Lake Malawi National Park. A World Heritage Site, it encompasses the Cape Maclear peninsula as well as the lake itself and islands up to 100 metres offshore. Upwards of 23 dive sites are located within the Park's boundaries. Situated within the Park limits, Cape Maclear is a resort area with a really interesting vibe. Abounding with overseas backpackers and souvenir vendors, I felt like I was in Southeast Asia rather than Central Africa! Bordering Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania, Lake Malawi is no ordinary body of water. One of Africa's Rift Valley lakes, its vast basin was created by titanic geological forces that continue tearing the continent apart. Plummeting to a depth of 800m, the world's fifth-largest lake features the largest number of fish species of any lake in the world. Along with its namesake country, the lake borders western Mozambique and southern Tanzania. At the southern end, the Shire River flows outwards towards the Zambezi River in Mozambique. The lake is about 350 kilometres southeast of Lake Tanganyika, another Rift Valley giant that is Africa's largest.

Incredibly, all but a few of Lake Malawi's fish species are endemic. The vast majority are cichlids, the most colourful of which are locally known as "*mbuna*". Like an

undersea Galapagos, an initial colonizer has evolved into upwards of a thousand known species, with more undoubtedly awaiting discovery. In comparison, Lake Tanganyika possesses a fraction of the species count despite being substantially larger. The remarkable endemism is due to a number of factors, with isolation from other major bodies of water having a significant impact. In addition, cichlids are highly territorial, generally residing in one compact area for their entire lives.

My first night would be spent in Cape Maclear at Mgoza Lodge. Situated right on the beach, the lodge was basic but comfortable. The morning after I met Patrick, who would be my divemaster for the next two days. With luggage and dive gear aboard, our destination was Tumbwe Island a 30-min boat ride away. Gearing up proved especially interesting. In the ocean, I normally require 7-8kg of weight with my 3mm suit but here, with a steel tank combined with less buoyant fresh water, I only needed 3kg. With a water temperature of 23 degrees, I was hoping my 3mm would be warm enough. (Patrick had on 5mm). Plunging in, I noticed an initial chill, but that quickly subsided. The morning's first dive site was The Wreck. A 15m steel-hulled vessel sunk specifically for diving, it rests upright at a depth of 30m. Heading down the slopes to the wreck, visibility was limited to less than 10m, so I





**African Elephant** *Loxodonta africana*  
Elephants are commonly encountered along the lake's shores.

ensured that Patrick always remained in close proximity. Cichlids were everywhere in a staggering array of shapes and colours. It was hard to believe they had descended from a solitary species. The dominating feature of the terrain was granite boulders, some which were the size of houses. A large blue crab peered out from under a rock, scuttling to the safety of a deep recess as I approached. Despite the lake's immense size, the crabs are the premier scavengers. Vegetation was surprisingly absent however, but every surface was shrouded with algae, the primary food for many cichlid species. A few however, eat, other cichlids. Arriving at the wreck, it proved to be a magnet for cichlids. Descending to the stern, we encountered a pair of *kampango* catfish. Dwarfing the cichlids, they are the biggest fish in the lake, with some attaining lengths of 2 m. Unfazed by our presence, they allowed a close approach for wide-angle photography. Our bottom time maxed out, we then ascended the gradual slope, marveling at the huge boulders and abundant cichlids. After, the challenging conditions I had just encountered in South Africa, diving Lake Malawi seemed like being in a pool! Completing our surface interval, we motored around to the other side of the island to our next site called The Aquarium. I quickly realized the name couldn't be more apt, being instantly enveloped by cichlids of even greater numbers and varieties.

The next morning, Patrick arrived right at 9:00 and we set out for Mumbo Island. While much smaller and flatter than Domwe, it proved no less dramatic. The island's rugged circumference was a jumble of massive boulders spilling down to the water's edge, with baobab and candelabra trees jostling each other for space. Underwater, the scenery was equally dramatic. Tooth Rock featured a series of pinnacles descending down to 50m. Descending to 18m, visibility was only 5m at the start. While photography was limited by the conditions, there were plenty of overhangs and swim throughs to explore. Ascending for our safety stop, the water became crystal clear, with immense boulders dwarfing the never-ending cichlids. Mpipi Bay proved similar, with rocky slopes descending gradually to 100m. Here, we encountered some fish species I hadn't encountered further south. Silvery *chambo* are a favoured food species in the lake as are the non-cichlid *usipa*, the latter swarming in great numbers near the surface. Having finished diving by mid afternoon, we headed back to the resort on Mumbo.

Bidding Cape Maclear farewell, it was time to embark on the final leg of my Malawian adventure to Likoma Island. Ahead lay a four-hour road trip to Lilongwe airport where I would catch my Ulendo Airlink flight to Likoma Island. After an airport layover of several hours,



**Hippo** *Hippopotamus amphibius*

Hippos are among some of Africa's most dangerous animals, being prone to sudden, fast, unannounced charges and being responsible for a number of fatalities every year.

the hour-long flight delivered me the island and Kaya Mawa Resort by late afternoon. Situated on the northern portion of the lake, just off the Mozambique coast, Likoma is something of an anomaly. The island, along with neighbouring Chizumulu, is part of Malawi due to the British. In 1880, established their headquarters on the island and in the early 20th century, erected a large Anglican cathedral. As a result, the island was ceded to Malawi rather than Mozambique when national borders were established after World War II.

The first day, we did a pair of dives in the morning with a third in the afternoon after lunch. Situated off the northwest side of Likoma, Masimbwe Island quickly became a favourite. Featuring shallows on the east side with deep drop-offs on the west, the fish life was abundant and the scenery spectacular. Like colossal steps, huge boulders tumbled to a depth of 26m. I even observed a freshwater sponge, something I didn't even know existed. Visibility at the safety stop was outstanding and I was able to get numerous cichlid portraits. However, one subject remained maddeningly elusive.

Many Malawi cichlids are mouth brooders, with the juvenile fish protected within their mother's mouth. Keeping a mindful eye on her free-swimming offspring, she will gulp the babies back in at the first sign of danger. Having missed them at Cape Maclear, I really wanted to see this phenomenon in action. Happily, our second dive at Christian's Point proved more

*Tropheops membe*

Many Lake Malawi cichlids feature a varying amount of barring on their sides.



successful. The key was to look for a school of juveniles, which indicated the mother must be close by. Before long, we witnessed the mouth brooding behaviour in action. Back at the dive shop, species classification proved equally demanding as many species not only looked similar but also had no common names. It didn't help that the id book had the girth of a dictionary!

mother's mouth. Regrettably, some cichlid mothers won't be winning any parenting awards. On several occasions we saw predatory cichlids decimating the juveniles with the mother nowhere in sight.

After getting a lot of macro shots the first day, I switched to wide angle for a return visit to Masimbwe Island. Visibility was at least 15m, the best I had seen on the trip. I managed to get another *kampango* image. Switching back to macro for my final dive, I finally managed to photograph juvenile cichlids inside their

Before I knew it, my adventure had come to a close. While lacking the megafauna and colourful reefs of a tropical ocean, Malawi's subtropical waters were truly unique, offering dramatic scenery and remarkable biodiversity unlike anywhere else on earth. However, one of the week's biggest surprises was the ease of the diving. With no currents, calm conditions and good visibility, Lake Malawi is an ideal destination for divers of all skill levels. I'm sure that when I return, the warm heart of Africa will continue to dazzle with more surprises.



*Tropheops "Red cheek"*

The cichlids of lake Malawi are much sought after for the aquarium trade.



*Pseudotropheus saulosi*

Several cichlid species from lake Malawi are a very bright yellow.



**Nile crocodile** *Crocodylus niloticus*

Nile crocodiles are large, fast, cunning and extremely dangerous predators - a constant threat to human or animal getting close to the water's edge.

**Kampango catfish**

A huge bottom-dwelling freshwater species which can get 2 meters long.



*Melanochromis parallelus*  
This is a somberly colored juvenile of the species.



**African Fish Eagle** *Haliaeetus vocifer*  
A large and beautiful bird of prey and a common sight along water bodies in Africa. Its shrill cry is unmistakable.



**Underwater photography**

The freshwater environment of Lake Malawi offers unique opportunities to the discerning, experienced underwater photographer.



**Mumbo Island**

Scores of *mbunas* - colorful cichlids - are to be found among the boulders of the dive site locally known as "Tooth Rock".

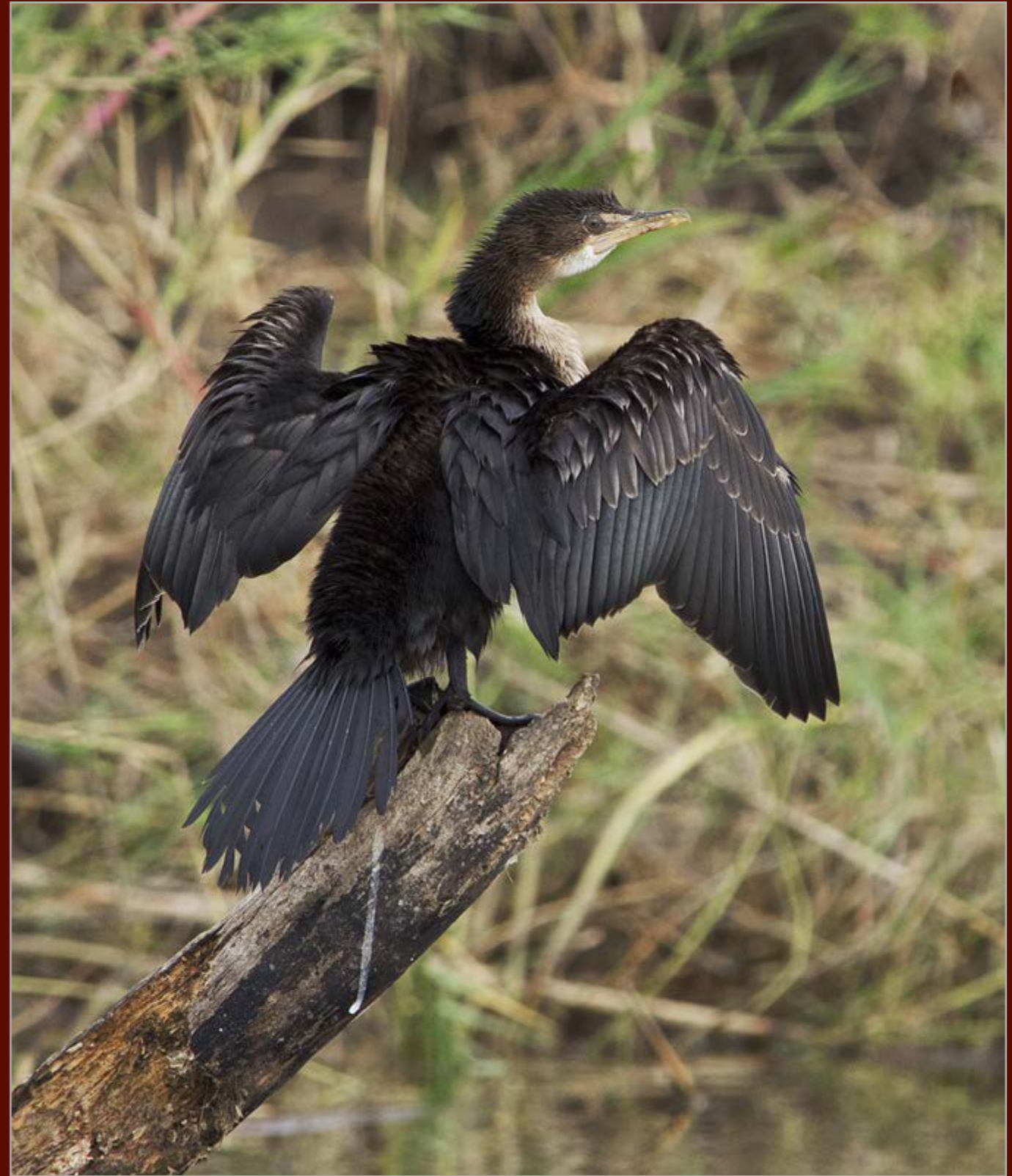


### **Mumbo Island**

The local resort features thatched bungalows perched on the massive boulders overlooking the lake's edge.



**Western Banded Snake Eagle** *Circaetus cinerascens*  
A large-headed, short-tailed day raptor, often observed along rivers from Senegal to Zimbabwe.



**Reed Cormorant** *Microcarbo africanus*  
Also known as the long-tailed cormorant, a common water bird with a wide distribution range in Africa and Madagascar.



*Protomela taeniolatus*  
Not all cichlids from lakes Malawi and Tanganyika are brightly colored.



*Maylandia zebra*  
One of the most colorful and brightly patterned species from lake Malawi.



*Dimidiochromis kiwinge*  
This specimens shows the oral care of its progeny typical of many cichlids.



*Melanochromis parallelus*  
Another brightly patterned cichlid species from lake Malawi.



**Shire River**  
Sunrise along the palm-lined shores of the slow-moving Shire River of Malawi.