

Idle and wild

PUMULANI LUXURY BEACH LODGE, MALAWI

Inside Lake Malawi National Park, hidden on the shores of sparkling Lake Malawi, is Robin Pope Safaris' exclusive beach lodge, Pumulani. Here you can combine a classic beach honeymoon with adventurous activities, in a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

WORDS BY GILLIAN MCLAREN



Part of the Great Rift Valley which runs from north to south in the country, Lake Malawi is a vast body of fresh water 600 km long and 80 km at its widest. Pumulani is positioned on a secluded sandy beach studded with rounded granite boulders, where pied kingfishers patiently stare into the quiet water. Only when a breeze stirs are there gentle waves lapping on the golden sands. In the bright sunshine you can relax on a sun lounger under a beach umbrella, or in the shade of the huge winter thorn tree, as you sip a Malawian gin and tonic.

Swimming in the warm water of the lake is intensely pleasurable. You can float easily, to see flocks of egrets etching their speckled shapes into the sky. From the water you can barely see the 10 individually designed villas, as their eco-friendly design ensures that they blend into the indigenous vegetation on the hillside. Grass grows on the roof of each villa, so as you walk up the wooden stairway from the private beach you see yellow baboons happily sitting on the roof picnicking on seeds that have fallen from surrounding trees.

Through the boughs of a giant baobab there is a panoramic view of the lake from each room of one of the villas. A spacious entrance area with a stocked bar fridge and tea station is open to a large lounge space with doors opening onto a wooden deck. The enormous bathroom has twin rain-showers and a slipper bath, where windows can be opened wide for an outdoors feel and to maximise the splendid view.

Simply but comfortably furnished, the bedroom also has windows that concertina open onto another wooden deck, perfect for a sunset glass of wine. In the late afternoon slanting rays of sunlight bathe the king-sized bed.

A highlight of a stay at Pumulani is a sunset cruise on the traditional wooden dhow with its unfurling white sails which reflect the pink-tinged light. Nibbling on fresh samoosas and quaffing an iced Kuche Kuche (the only truly Malawian beer) you sail the cobalt waters. As the sun sinks towards the horizon there is a delicate tracery of indigo in the clouds, and the water seems to fracture into thousands of tiny shards. The stillness and tranquillity are soothing to the soul.

Dhow crew are gentle people with a heart to please, as are all of the staff at this retreat from the madding crowd.

Meals are served alfresco, on a deck situated high on the hillside above an infinity swimming pool, with a panoramic view of the lake and hills beyond. You have a semi-private niche, as a line of tall sticks subtly separates each table. Food is simple and tasty, with freshly baked bread, pastries and irresistible desserts. Of course, the local fish with crisp potato chips is a must to choose from the two or three main course options on the daily menu.

For a honeymoon couple an intimate dinner table near the rocks is lovingly prepared, with white tablecloths, dim lanterns and discreet service. Celebratory champagne corks are popped.

On cloudless nights there is a special treat at Pumulani. They have a powerful telescope that can zoom in on stars and planets. Saturn's rings are clearly visible. Rob Walsh, the gracious manager, shows you the constellations that are visible and operates the telescope for you.



HONEYMOON | MALAWI

From the lodge there are walks of varying degrees of difficulty, on marked paths through the indigenous forest. With crispy leaf litter underfoot, dappled light filtering through star chestnut trees and an array of birds calling and flitting past, the walks are delightful. Early one morning a klipspringer and I stare at one another until he suddenly bolts. The experience has such a surreal quality that I wonder if I have imagined the encounter.

When you are ready for activities, you can visit the local village for a cultural tour where you are welcomed by scores of enthusiastic children with broad smiles and shouts of joy. This is an authentic experience that gives you a glimpse into the traditions and rituals of local Malawian people, and you support community projects initiated by Pumulani.

Equipment for kayaking, sailing and waterskiing is available. To scuba dive and for the best snorkelling to see the famed cichlids of Lake Malawi, a motorboat ride to nearby Cape Maclear takes you past gigantic boulders and fishing villages. If you want to learn to scuba dive, these calm, clear waters are perfect. Patrick of Dive Centre, Cape Maclear, is a PADI-certified instructor with a reputation for excellence. Using new equipment you will see literally hundreds of species of cichlids and freshwater blue crabs, and dive on sites close to Thumbi, Domwe or Mumbo Islands. Snorkelling is also richly rewarding, with a mesmerising amount of fish species in the region.

In the local Chichewa language, Pumulani means 'rest well'. You can certainly do so here, in the secluded and beautiful environs of this lodge, the only one situated in Lake Malawi National Park. ♦

Robin Pope Safaris, a member of Classic Camps of Africa, has excellent lodges in Malawi. As well as Pumulani there is Mkulumadzi, set in Majete Wildlife Reserve.

Tel. +265 (0)179 5483/4491
info@robinpopesafaris.net
www.robinpopesafaris.net

Latitude 13 is ideal for an overnight stay in Lilongwe, before you fly back to Johannesburg. It has contemporary décor in dramatic black and white, with touches of grey. The restaurant serves gourmet fare with an African twist.

Tel. +265 996 40 31 59
reservations@thelatitudehotels.com
www.thelatitudehotels.com/latitude13-boutique-hotel-malawi/home.php

Wilderness Safaris has Mvuu Lodge in Malawi, an eco-lodge in Liwonde National Park.
www.wilderness-safaris.com/camps/mvuu-lodge

Malawian Airlines offers daily flights from O.R. Tambo International Airport to Lilongwe and Blantyre. In two hours you will experience the warm heart of Africa. No visas required for South Africans.
011 722 0230; Resjnb3w@aviareps.com

