

Malawi – Heart of Africa

Holiday information and itinerary

Ride Profile

Usual daily distances: 40km to 80km with options up to 105km on some days

Days of cycling: 10

Terrain: Quiet backroads and dirt tracks

Support vehicle: 100%

Tour staff: 1 CycleActive guide, 1 local driver/guide, additional safari guides in Liwonde National Park

Flexible ride choices: Yes

The main route through Malawi includes rides that can be enjoyed by the whole group, with vehicle support in case anyone wants a break. By using some places as a base for 2 nights we can offer a range of cycle rides, other activities or rest days in between the journeying days. Our UK guide will discuss these rides with the group and either lead the rides or give you advice and options if you want to explore at your own pace on these days.

Holiday Details

Duration (inc flights): 15 days

Saturday to Saturday

Group size: 7-14

What's included:

- All accommodation (guesthouses, hotels, basic but comfortable forest lodges, luxury tented camps)
- All meals except for 2 nights and 1 lunch
- Safaris in Liwonde National Park
- All transfers
- Vehicle support for rides
- Services of expert cycle and local staff

Cycle rentals:

Good quality bikes available from the UK, delivered either to you or to the airport prior to your flight out.

Summary Itinerary (from the UK)

Days 1 & 2. Fly to Lilongwe, capital of Malawi. City tour followed by night out at local cafe-bar.

3. Rift Valley Escarpment to plains ride to Mua Mission.

4. Cycle the southern lakeshore trails to Cape MacLear Marine National Park.

5. Free day to swim, snorkel and explore the beach.

6. Cycle south to Malombe then transfer to the Ku Chawe Inn on Zomba Mountain.

7. Explore Zomba by bike or on foot, or relax at the luxurious Ku Chawe Inn.

8. Ride across the plains to the giant granite cliffs of Mulanje Mountain.

9. Morning walk to ZwiLankalamba falls then afternoon tea estates ride to Satemwa.

10. Free day to explore the tea trails of Satemwa and Thyolo.

11. Cycle across the plains and into Liwonde National Park. Afternoon on safari.

12. Full day of walking, land rover and boat safari activities from our luxury safari camp.

13. Early morning safaris then transfer to Lilongwe.

14. & 15. Fly back to the UK, arriving on the morning of day 15.

Itinerary Notes

- We can arrange flights to fit the tour arrival and departure dates, but if you wish to allow a day or two for acclimatisation and to explore Lilongwe then there are alternative options. Extra hotel nights can also be reserved quite easily.
- Conditions on the ground change frequently in Malawi, so we operate this tour with both local and CycleActive guides who know the country very well and have a great deal of experience in running cycle trips in Africa. Whilst the itinerary may change slightly from that shown below, our expert team will always ensure that you are well cared for and have a great experience of Malawi.

Contact us to find out more or make your booking.

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Detailed itinerary and further information

Days 1&2 – Arrival

Your flight leaves the UK in the evening of day 1 and arrives in Malawi's capital, Lilongwe, on day 2. We transfer to our guesthouse close to the centre of the old town, where we sort out the bikes before heading out to explore the bustling markets.

This evening our guide will brief you on the tour and what our plans are for the next day. We then head out for a great meal at a restaurant in the heart of the Old Town area of the city. Once you've had your fill it's time to rest up before our first day on the bikes, although those with energy to spare might enjoy a cold drink at one of the lively bars before heading to bed.

Day 3 – Rift Valley Descent to Mua Mission (65km)

We start the tour with a short drive south out of Lilongwe to the small village of Lizulu, perched right on the edge of the Rift Valley escarpment. Our first ride starts here and is the perfect warm up – taking us on a small but paved road that winds down through amazing scenery with views ahead across the wide expanse of the Great Rift Valley.

As we travel you'll see village life, farm life, an amazing array of birds and plants as well as meeting many locals. As the descent evens out we'll start pedalling more as the ride rolls on, up and down, towards the mission at Mua, which has comfortable cottage accommodation for us tonight.

Day 4 – The Southern Lakeshore (60km to 90km)

Pedalling right out from Mua Mission we spin our way on to the backroad that skirts Kasankha Bay, at the southern reaches of Lake Malawi. The journey takes us through many tiny hamlets as we head towards the peninsula that brings us right into the lake at Cape Maclear.

This final section of the ride is through the Cape Maclear National Park, a rich landscape of woodlands and open bush that clears as we cross the hills and descend to the golden beaches and boulder-strewn headlands. Here we stay in en-suite chalets, each with its own patio facing right out across the beach and lake. The setting is just away from Cape Maclear village, so you can enjoy complete peace and relaxation.

We reserve flights on one carrier but can also arrange a variety of flights for you, to fit in with our individual travel plans. Our flights to Malawi are on Ethiopian Airlines, who allow us a 30kg baggage limit to ensure smooth carriage of any cycles. Ethiopian are one of the best African airlines, and alongside SAA are the only operator with licences to fly into both the UK and USA.

Missionaries in Africa where known as "White Fathers" and three of these men arrived in Mua on 13th September 1902. With the co-operation of the local tribes as mission was established and now this also houses a major cultural and arts centre, focussing on the art and anthropology of the local tribes.

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Day 5 – Cape Maclear Marine National Park (0km)

Today you have many choices, such as swimming, snorkeling relaxing on the beach or just taking a walk through the fishing villages.

Cape Maclear is a remarkable and interesting place – seeing the catch come in at dawn as the men return with their dugout canoes or watching them catch Kapenta with lanterns and nets after dark.

Day 6 – Southern Lakeshore to Mangochi (45km or 60km)

Today we ride out across the hills of Cape Maclear park, heading south to follow the final stretch of Lake Malawi's 600km of shoreline. As the lake narrows it also becomes even more populated by small fishing villages and you'll see huge racks of tiny, brightly coloured capenta being dried by the roadside.

Our ride spins along through the villages on a quiet road, heading towards the small provincial town of Mangochi. We aim to get here by early afternoon so that, while you relax and walk around, our guides can load up the bikes for the transfer on to Zomba Plateau. This not only sets us up for the next day of biking, but means we get two nights at the fabulous Ku Chawe Inn, perched high up above Zomba Town on the wooded slopes that overlook the valley.

Day 7 – Exploring the Zomba Plateau (0km, 25km or 40km)

This is a flexible day where you can choose to spend some time relaxing, enjoying the beautiful walks to nearby waterfalls and summits, or joining our cycle guide for a circuit of the plateau.

The cycle route takes in views at every point of the compass as we ride the ridge all the way around the plateau. You'll see Lake Malawi to the north, Mulanje Mountain to the south-east and the hills of Mozambique to the west. For those who want to extend the ride we can spin down the hairpins to Zomba Town and explore it's well known market – selling everything from vegetables to parts for old Morris Minors!

Whatever you choose to do our guides will be able to advise and assist you. But if relaxation is in order then the Ku Chawe terrace, with its view across hundreds of miles of the Rift Valley, is a great place to be.

If you would like to snorkel or go out into the lake by boat or kayak, speak to your guide and it may be possible to arrange a trip around the headlands.

The biking on Zomba is the most challenging on the tour, with some steep and loose sections of trail that need to be ridden with care. An excellent alternative to the riding is to trek up to the main summit, where a lookout tower provides the most superb views across the Phalombe Plains to Mulanje and beyond.

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Day 8 - Phalombe Plains to Mulanje (up to 80km or 105km)

The next leg of our journey takes us right up to the sheer-sided slopes of Malawi's most impressive mountain massif. The first section is an easy blast down the slopes of the Zomba Plateau, before we pedal out into the plains on a thin strip of tarmac. The road soon turns to hardpacked dirt, and the shacks and street stalls are replaced by thatched settlements, children tending cattle and open scrub land.

We ride all the way to the Mulanje Massif, and although the distance may seem high for less experienced bikers the combination of flat roads and having rested yesterday make it a great day to cycle that bit further than normal. For most of the group we load up at the village of Phalombe, at the foot of the Mulanje Massif. Those keen to ride all the way to the forest lodge and continue for 25km further as we circuit the mountains towards the village of Likhabula.

Day 9 – Mountains, Waterfalls and Plantations (45km)

This morning you are free to choose relaxation, exploration, or a bit of both. You could relax next to the Likabula river, read a book, have a swim in the pools, and take it easy. A firm favorite, though, is hike up to the magnificent Zwilankalamba waterfall. The falls go straight into a large pool which is an ideal location for a mid-morning picnic and cooling swim.

When you return to the forest lodge your guides will have loaded the vehicles, checked over the bikes and ensured that you are all ready for the afternoon cycle ride. The rolling road through to the slopes of Thyolo Mountain takes us deep into tea growing territory as we leave Mulanje Mountain behind. Tea is still picked here in the traditional way, and depending on the time of year we'll see the workers with baskets on their backs, picking at speed as they walk through the plantations. Our destination is the Satemwa Tea Estate, with its collection of extended farm house buildings and cottages dotted around the centre of its vast land holdings.

Day 10 – Thyolo Mountain and Tea Estates (0km or various)

The south of Malawi is home to some of Africa's finest and most beautiful tea estates. All around are rolling hills thick with green plantations – far from the open plains that we cycle through just two days ago.

We spend two nights here at the old tea planter's lodge, to give us time to explore this unique corner of the country. There are trails through the fields to walk or cycle, you can hike up Thyolo Mountain or down to the dam. There may also be the chance to taste a range of fine teas from the estate.

This remarkable ride shows just how rapidly the landscapes can change within Malawi. We start in rolling hills, cross the dusty plains then ride right up to the giant granite walls of Mulanje, whose rain shadow creates the most lush tea and pineapple plantations you could imagine.

The plantations of southern Malawi are not simply work places but entire communities. Traditionally the estate owners provide homes, schooling, health care and wages to the workers. In Malawi many farms are now part of the Fair Trade system as well.

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Day 11 – The Road to Liwonde National Park (50km or 85km)

An early start today gives us the chance to ride out of the tea estates and head north towards Limbe then on towards the Shire River crossing at Liwonde. This is our final day on the bikes and it links together much of what we have seen – from tea estates at dawn to the final glimpses of high Rift Valley summits before journeying on towards the open bush and wildlife filled plains.

This road ride brings us all the way to the gates of Liwonde National Park, Malawi's premier wildlife reserve. Here we load up the bikes and prepare to go on Safari.

The journey through the park from the gates takes us through wildlife-rich plains, riverside feeding grounds and open woodland. Expect to see elephants, hippos, antelope and more as we make our way to the luxury camp, with its thatched roof and open-sided bar/restaurant. This will be our base for two nights, as you sleep in comfortable beds in large chalet-style tents with hippos grazing on the riverbank just beyond.

Day 12 – Safari at Liwonde National Park

.This morning you can enjoy a dawn safari, perhaps by boat or vehicle, or even more exciting – on foot with a qualified guide and armed scout. Walking through the African bush gives you close encounters with the smaller but just as interesting animals and insects, and you can learn about the trees, the ancient traditions and old superstitions too. Later in the afternoon you can choose to go on a game driver or a unique boat safari, taking in the wildlife from the river. This is one way to get exceptionally close to the animals, as well as the abundant birdlife which Malawi is famous for.

Today is a time to enjoy the beautiful surroundings and the abundant wildlife, whether just relaxing in the riverside bar or heading out to explore with an expert guide.

Day 13 – Exploring Lilongwe

This morning you can enjoy a final pre-breakfast safari, heading out into the park in open-topped land rovers to see the big game and stunning bird life. We then we load up and drive back to Lilongwe.

We aim to arrive in the city in time for lunch, so you can explore the area, visit the old town markets and see the bustling streets of the capital. Lilongwe is an interesting and safe place to visit, and our guides can advise you on the best sights or best places to buy souvenirs (or just the best cafes or bars to visit if you prefer to watch the world go by).

Days 14 & 15 – The Journey Home

Depending on flight times we normally transfer to the airport in the afternoon for your overnight flight back to the UK (landing on the morning of day 15). If you would prefer to spend more time in Malawi please let us know as we can arrange this for you.

Elephant and Sable Antelope occur in large numbers in Liwonde, as do Hippo, Crocodile, Impala and Waterbuck. Leopard, Serval and the rare Oribi may occasionally be seen. Black Rhino have been reintroduced from South Africa's Kruger National Park, as have Zebra, Lichtenstein's Hartebeest, and Buffalo from elsewhere within Malawi.

Birds are prolific along the Shire River where you may see African Fish Eagle, Palmnut Vulture, African Skimmer, Pel's Fishing Owl, Bohm's Bee-eater, Lilian's Lovebird, Bat Hawk, Livingstone's Flycatcher, Whitebacked Night Heron and Brownbreasted Barbet.

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Additional travel facts

Tour Guidebook and Packing Advice

On booking you will be sent detailed information on a wide range of topics including health advice, recommended clothing, money, visas and so on, to help you prepare for your holiday. If you have questions on these topics either now or after you have read this information, please contact us.

Geography & Climate

Malawi is one of the smallest nations in Africa, a long and slender country whose landscape is dominated by the Great Rift Valley and Lake Malawi. The lake itself covers 20% of the country, and is surrounded by plains that then rise up to form the Rift Valley Escarpment. Across the plains various mountain ranges rise up, with the highest – the Mulanje Mountains – reaching heights of 3000 metres. The country has a reliable, warm & dry winter from May to October, making this the ideal time to visit. Later in the season, from September to October, the grass on the plains is shorter and the wildlife tends to congregate closer to the river, making these the ideal months for game viewing safaris.

Cycling Terrain

This tour explores Malawi on its backroads, which include quiet tarmac roads, rough tarmac roads and dirt tracks. The mixture of terrain means that a mountain bike is recommended, although a sturdy hybrid or touring bike would also work if you were comfortable using it on tracks and trails.

Cycle Rental

You may fly with your bike to Malawi and we will help to organize flights that make this easier. We will also send you guideline packing instructions. If you prefer to rent we have a variety of the latest models to choose from which will be delivered to you or to the airport, ready to travel with. Please call for details.

Cycling Support

While cycling in Malawi you will have vehicle support for the whole of the tour. Our leaders carry a good toolkit and will help to fix most bike problems, and always travel with a good first aid kit and contact details for outside assistance, if needed. Our vehicles will be permanently on standby as we ride and are ready to give support should it be required. Note that while we do have access to some spares as well as the possibility of getting spare bikes in the event of a major failure, this can be a time consuming/costly process. You must therefore ensure that your bike (if you bring your own) is in good working order before coming on the tour and ride within your abilities.

Accommodation & Food

We use a mixture of comfortable, sometimes luxury, accommodation on this tour but there are also two nights in more basic forest lodge accommodation. Our tour cook provides good food throughout the cycling parts of the trip, and the places we stay at serve fresh but simply prepared local produce. We can cater for vegetarians and for those with other specific dietary needs, if notified in advance.

Passports and Visas

A full passport with at least 6 months validity is required for UK passport holders.

Flights and Transfers

We can book your flight through an ATOL bonded agent and you will have a separate contract for your flight with them. Alternatively you can book your own flights through a range of airlines, although you should not reserve any flights until we have confirmed your space on the holiday. If you need extra hotel nights or airport transfers these can easily be arranged.

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