

Hippos at Dawn, a Lake of Stars by Night — A 7-Day Malawi Itinerary

Lilongwe to Liwonde National Park to Lake Malawi's Cape Maclear and the Zomba Plateau

DURATION

7 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

May – October

Malawi's dry season brings clear skies, cooler nights, and the easiest wildlife viewing in Liwonde, as animals cluster near the Shire River; the wet season (Nov-Apr) is hot, humid, and makes some dirt roads impassable.

FROM

\$1,780 USD / person

for 2 people, incl. 6 nights' lodging (2 nights all-inclusive safari), 3 internal transfers, and park/activity fees

Seven days through the warm heart of Africa, built around three very different landscapes: Lilongwe's wildlife sanctuary as a gentle start, Liwonde National Park's elephant- and hippo-packed Shire River, the glass-clear, cichlid-filled water of Lake Malawi at Cape Maclear, and a final hairpin climb up the cool, pine-forested Zomba Plateau before flying out of Blantyre — with real lodges, real transfer logistics, and 2026 prices for every stop.

Day 1

Arrival in Lilongwe & the Wildlife Centre

Touch down at Kamuzu International Airport and settle into Malawi's capital with an afternoon at its wildlife rehabilitation sanctuary.

Airport Transfer — Kamuzu International Airport to Lilongwe

~35 minutes · private transfer, ~\$25 USD total

A short drive south from the airport into Lilongwe's leafy Old Town and Sanctuary area, arranged in advance through your lodge — metered taxis are scarce, so a pre-booked transfer is the standard way in.

Lilongwe Wildlife Centre

~2 hours, guided · ~\$12 USD / person

A working rescue-and-release sanctuary inside a patch of protected forest in the city itself, home to rehabilitated hyenas, monkeys, and Malawi's only captive lions — all rescued from the illegal wildlife trade and never bred or sold on; a guided walk explains each resident's story.

Lilongwe Wildlife Centre · lilongwewildlife.org

Dinner — Latitude 13 Degrees, on your own

~1.5 hours · ~\$18-25 USD / person

An open-air restaurant set around a reflecting pool a short walk from the Sanctuary, mixing Malawian lake fish with a continental menu — an easy, unhurried first dinner after a long flight.

Overnight — Latitude 13 Degrees Hotel

From \$170-210 USD / night, for 2 people

A boutique hotel built around a garden and pool in Lilongwe's Sanctuary area, a few minutes from the Wildlife Centre, with a style more Cape Town design hotel than capital-city business stop.

Latitude 13 Degrees Hotel · Sanctuary Area, Lilongwe

Day 2

Transfer to Liwonde & a Sunset Boat Safari

Head south to Malawi's premier wildlife park, where the Shire River does most of the work for you.

Road Transfer — Lilongwe to Liwonde National Park

~4 hours · private 4x4 transfer, ~\$160 USD total

A paved run south on the M1 past Dedza's roadside craft stalls, then a final stretch of dirt track into the park — arranged through your camp, since self-drive rentals in Malawi are limited and the last few kilometers need a 4x4.

Sunset Boat Safari on the Shire River

~2 hours, guided · included with Mvuu Camp stay

An open boat drifting past pods of wallowing hippos and basking crocodiles as elephants come down to drink at the water's edge — Liwonde holds one of Africa's densest hippo populations, and the golden-hour light over the Shire is the whole reason to time it this way.

Overnight & Dinner — Mvuu Camp

From \$560-640 USD / night, for 2 people, all-inclusive (meals & 2 daily activities)

A classic tented safari camp on the Shire's bank, run under African Parks' Liwonde concession, with open-sided dining and the sound of hippos grunting just past the deck rail after dark.

Mvuu Camp, Liwonde National Park

Day 3

Elephants on the Shire: a Full Day in Liwonde

A morning game drive and an afternoon walking safari, built around the park's healthy elephant and antelope herds.

Morning Game Drive

~3 hours, guided · included with Mvuu Camp stay

Liwonde's reintroduced black rhino, growing elephant herds, and sable and kudu antelope all roam a park that's rebounded sharply since African Parks took over management in 2015 — mornings are when the bush is coolest and the animals most active.

Afternoon Walking Safari

~2 hours, guided · included with Mvuu Camp stay

An armed-guide walk through mopane woodland for the small details a vehicle drives past — termite mounds, bird calls, and fresh tracks — with the Shire's hippo pods visible again by the time you loop back.

Overnight & Dinner — Mvuu Camp

From \$560-640 USD / night, for 2 people, all-inclusive (meals & 2 daily activities)

A second night in the same riverside tent.

Mvuu Camp, Liwonde National Park

Day 4

Transfer to Lake Malawi & Sunset at Cape Maclear

Trade safari dust for the shore of the third-largest lake in Africa, locally nicknamed the "Lake of Stars."

Road Transfer — Liwonde to Cape Maclear

~4 hours · private transfer, ~\$150 USD total

South through Mangochi and around the lake's southern tip to Cape Maclear, a fishing village tucked inside a bay of granite hills that was Malawi's first gazetted national park, on water instead of land.

Sunset on the Beach

~1 hour, self-guided · free

Lake Malawi takes on the look that earned its nickname after dark, when the lanterns of nighttime fishing boats scatter across the water like a second sky — best watched from the lodge's own stretch of sand with a Kuche Kuche lager in hand.

Overnight — Mgoza Lodge

From \$100-130 USD / night, for 2 people, incl. breakfast

A relaxed, eco-built lakefront lodge right on Cape Maclear's beach, run with a strong local-hire policy and simple thatched chalets just steps from the water.

Mgoza Lodge, Cape Maclear

Day 5

Snorkeling the Lake Malawi National Park Reef

A full day on and in the water, in a national park that protects fish instead of mammals.

Snorkeling Trip — Domwe Island, with Kayak Africa

~4 hours, guided · ~\$45-55 USD / person incl. equipment & lunch

A boat out to the clear water around Domwe and Thumbi West islands, inside the UNESCO-listed Lake Malawi National Park, where upward of 350 brilliantly colored cichlid species — found nowhere else on Earth — make the shallows look like a tropical reef without any salt water.

Kayak Africa · Cape Maclear

Sunset Dhow Cruise

~1.5 hours, guided · ~\$20-30 USD / person

A slow sail along the bay in a traditional wooden dhow as the granite hills behind the village turn pink, with the local fishing fleet heading out for the night just as you head in.

Overnight — Mgoza Lodge

From \$100-130 USD / night, for 2 people, incl. breakfast

A second night on the same stretch of beach.

Mgoza Lodge, Cape Maclear

Day 6

The Hairpin Climb to the Zomba Plateau

Leave the lake for the cool pine forests and hairpin roads of Malawi's old colonial hill station.

Road Transfer — Cape Maclear to Zomba Plateau

~3.5 hours · private transfer, ~\$130 USD total

A drive back around the lake and south to Zomba, climbing the plateau's switchback road through pine plantations that were planted under British colonial rule a century ago and now shelter forest streams and waterfalls.

Chingwe's Hole & Plateau Viewpoints

~2.5 hours, guided · ~\$15 USD / person (guide fee)

A short walk to a bottomless-looking chasm wrapped in local legend — said to have been used to dispose of the bodies of criminals and witches in pre-colonial times — followed by viewpoints over the Shire Valley stretching to the horizon.

Overnight & Dinner — Zomba Forest Lodge

From \$120-150 USD / night, for 2 people, incl. dinner & breakfast

A small eco-lodge built into the plateau's forest, with no electricity after dark beyond candles and paraffin lamps, and a fireplace that earns its keep at Zomba's 1,800-meter elevation.

Zomba Forest Lodge, Zomba Plateau

Day 7

A Last Plateau Walk & Departure via Blantyre

One more cool-air walk before the short run down to Malawi's second city for the flight home.

Morning Walk — Mandala Falls

~1.5 hours, guided · included with lodge stay

A short forest trail to a waterfall tumbling over granite boulders a few minutes from the lodge, usually with no one else on the path — a quiet last morning before the drive down.

Transfer — Zomba Plateau to Blantyre (Chileka Airport)

~1 hour · private transfer, ~\$55 USD total

A short, scenic descent off the plateau to Chileka International Airport in Blantyre, Malawi's commercial hub — flying out of Blantyre rather than backtracking to Lilongwe saves most of a day's driving on this route.

Departure — Blantyre Chileka International Airport

Variable · allow 2-3 hours before an international flight

Regional connections run from Blantyre via Johannesburg, Nairobi, or Addis Ababa to onward international flights home.