

# TheBigTrip

## Band wagon

Revellers heading to this year's Lake of Stars festival in Malawi will be able to party all the way there on an epic bus ride. Paul MacInnes joined the musicians on the debut trip

Every year the festival season becomes longer and more exotic. That summer spell when young people gather in fields to listen to music and fall over, the result of either inebriation or inappropriate footwear, used to simply involve packing a tent and heading for a farmer's field. Today, you can build your summer around a trip to Benicassim in Spain, Burning Man in Nevada or Exit in Serbia. But of all the festivals around the world, one of the most far-flung must be the Lake of Stars.

Staged in Malawi, on the banks of its majestic, eponymous body of water, not only is Lake of Stars on the other side of the earth, it's miles away from anywhere. A long flight from the northern hemisphere is, at the least, followed by several hours bouncing through the bush on dusty potholed roads, and even the most cosseted guests need to go on the back of a truck.

It is possible to take an even longer route, however – a route that takes 18 days, crosses five countries and involves more time on a reinforced Toyota Dyna truck than most people would conceive possible. As a means of travel it's neither easy, nor comfortable, but I went on an abbreviated trial run last year and, truly, it changed my life.

The journey began outside a Johannesburg hotel at 5.45am one Sunday morning. Along with 15 others – a collection of musicians, performers due to play at the festival, their kin and various others – I was a pioneer in what organisers hoped would soon become a tradition, the Lake of Stars road trip. We were to drive north through South Africa, Mozambique and eventually Malawi, spreading word of the festival along the way.

Within 20 minutes of boarding the bus, we had crossed the Nelson Mandela bridge, rushed on to the N16 highway out of Johannesburg, and left almost every semblance of urban development behind. Heading north east, first through the state of Gauteng, then into Mpumalanga, the scenery was rural; lengthy plains and variegated hills, interrupted only by bursts of citrus plantations. We munched on our packed sandwiches, drank cartons of juice and wondered how much sparser, how much less familiar things were to become.

As it was, by dusk we were back in a big city. Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, sits on a bay leaning out into the Indian Ocean, 150km from the South African border. Despite its



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setting, the city is not an exotic jewel, every building within it is black with soot and chipped at the corners like rotten teeth, a visible legacy of the 17-year civil war that was among the most vicious in post-colonial Africa.

The shell of Maputo may be damaged but it is also a buzzing city, one renowned for its music and nightlife. Our first stab at uncovering it was to head to the Avenida Marginal, a neighbourhood occupying a prime spot on the bay and one filled with bars serving cocktails and Premiership football. This was not quite what we

had expected. The performers among us were scheduled for a showcase at Banana Grove, a gaudy and expensive place almost entirely frequented by expats who sat in luxurious armchairs and looked on unmoved.

Despite staying out till the small hours, the evening had not proved satisfactory and the next day we asked our host in the city, a German called Roland who manages many of Mozambique's biggest musicians (and fills the Simon Cowell role on the country's equivalent of The X Factor), to provide an alternative. We began with lunch in a restaurant serving cheesy, crusty pizzas, before moving on to a fleamarket, a fish market, a small club, and a recording studio (where I chronicled a verse from The Power of Love into a microphone while no one was looking). We ended the day with a picnic dinner on a traffic island and a singalong with some of Roland's artists.

It had taken two nights, but we had slipped unconsciously into the routine that would continue for the entire trip; carousing late into the night, then awaking before dawn and heading on



to the bus. It was a charmed existence and one that was brought home to us the next morning when we clambered on board in the middle of a rain storm which had flooded the streets. As we focused on containing our hangovers, all around us locals tried to go about their daily business ankle deep in water, often wearing no shoes and with miles to go to their destination. It was the first of many moments when we were made aware of our good fortune.

Our next stop was on the ocean; Vilanculos, a small fishing town that neighbours the idyllic Bazaruto archipelago. While affected in its own way by the war – it was a fashionable holiday destination before conflict ground business to a halt – the landscape of Vilanculos was, unlike that of Maputo, unspoilt.

The beach had sand the colour of ivory and the sea was lighter than sapphire. It was the kind of setting that demanded you sit there and contemplate it for several hours straight. At least this seemed to me to be the logical conclusion when, at 7am, after another late night and while one of our party was still ordering drinks at

the bar, a snorkelling trip was proposed to inspect the islands.

The choice between interacting with beautiful surroundings and simply lolling around in them turned out to be a no-brainer, considering how knackered I felt. When I woke after a couple of hours' kip under the shade of a baobab tree to find my companions disembarking from their boat sunburnt and punctured by small shards of coral, I knew I had made the right choice.

That evening we visited the town, touring its sparsely stocked supermarket, crammed corner shops and a cavernous fish market. All the while, we were accompanied by gaggles of young boys either listening to our English, practising theirs, or asking for a broad menu of small items – from pens to magazines. While attention was constant, it was never overbearing, and polite without exception. We had brief chats with so many kids that a fellow traveller – Pete a charming man and prodigious beatboxer – wrote to me on our return to confess he was still waving at complete strangers he passed on the street. Which, apparently, occasions a

different reaction in Nottingham. The rest of our journey to Lake Malawi allowed for little in the way of dawdling. From Vilanculos, we travelled to Chimoio where we spent one night in a bizarre, empty campsite on the banks of Lake Chicamba. Two of our party, both women, were stalked in the night by a zebra. The rest of us merely had to cope with a battalion of ants and the disappointment of being promised a swim only to arrive at the poolside to find the water was black.

From Chimoio we went straight for the Malawian border, and from there to the city of Blantyre where we spent one night in a well-appointed, fenced-off hostel by the name of Dougalls. One of our crew, Trey – the American behind the 7am bar order who had refused to sleep for the first week – bunked out in the middle of the night and went drinking in a spot called the Moonlight Booze Den. He returned the next morning and assured us it

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK HENDERSON



### The lake show . . . the journey by truck from Johannesburg to the festival; (left) jamming on the beach

saddle, it seemed only natural. By way of consolation we had the opportunity to spend three days listening to music on the edge of a glorious lake with broad sandy beach and extensive grounds, our only dilemma whether to drink on the beach or the curiously well-kept lawns. The inn even had a pool, and the water in it was blue.

The festival came into being in 2004, the brainchild of promoter Will Jameson whose successful Liverpool club night, Chibuku Shake Shake, is named after a maize beer far more popular in Malawi than its flavour deserves. He sees the event as a coming together of musical cultures, African and western, and a chance to raise money for charity (though it has struggled to do so yet: £5,000 was raised for Unicef this year, but mainly through fundraising gigs in the UK).

For our band of performers, Friday night was showtime. Pete, his fellow beatboxer-cum-singer Joe, the Malawian rapper Kimba (whose phenomenal energy saw him MC the festival in its entirety), and James "Hollywood" Moore, Joe's saxophonist and veteran of the 70s deep funk scene. All, without exception, did the road trip proud. (Indeed, the story of our journey appeared to have spread so quickly that to tell another festivalgoer you were "part of the road trip" earned an instant kudos.)

Yet on Friday, there was definitely something missing. The festival was less a joyous coming together of different peoples and cultures, and more a load of white South

Africans getting drunk and dancing to drum'n'bass. That's not to say it didn't work for us, but when we woke on Saturday it was immediately apparent that the energy levels had risen, and for one reason; the locals had arrived.

They came with jeeps filled with picnicking facilities and stupid outfits that appeared to have come from the Munich Oktoberfest, with tall foam hats and football kits. Best of all, they raised the quality of the dancing by roughly 78%. There was limbo and breakdancing and lots of frottage, all of which was brought to a frenzy by the deputy minister for tourism and culture, Billy Kaunda. Deputed to open the festival with a speech, it turned out that Mr Kaunda had been a pop star in an earlier incarnation and, after making an elegant call for Lake of Stars to serve as an inspiration for Malawian tourism, he left the stage, reappeared with a group of backing singers and knocked out his most popular hit. It's fair to say the crowd was jamming.

The dancing continued in a similar vein till half one in the morning. At that point the hardcore headed for the 24-hour services of Harry's Bar, run by one of the organisers, a semi-legendary local night impresario. The wise wandered to the beach, the knackered to their tents.

It struck me that I had probably squeezed more experience into the previous two weeks than I had the previous two years. It was also, I thought, always in the most unusual places that I had my most memorable experiences. Perhaps getting up at 5am and staring out on to a road for 12 hours was a route to self-improvement. Like, you know, Zen and the Art of Toyota Dyna Maintenance.

### Five more adventures for 2008

**First-foot remote Madagascar**  
Pioneer Expeditions will certainly be living up to its name this year, with a never-before-attempted stomp into the remote parts of Madagascar and first organised descent of the Matsiatra river plus a four-day trek inside the isolated Makay canyons. The 18-night trip finishes off at a luxurious resort on the Mozambique Channel.  
● 0845 0047 801, [pioneerexpeditions.com](http://pioneerexpeditions.com). Departs May, £2,450pp excluding flights.

**Pacify elephants in Namibia**  
Fancy yourself as a bit of a diplomat? Then help settle an almighty feud between the farmers of Damaraland and the pesky local elephants, which have returned to the region after 60 years of wandering. The group will help build protective walls around the communities, visit the Cape Cross seal colony, Etosha national park and the Waterberg plateau, and learn how to say "Leave it mate, it's not worth it" using only their nose.  
● 0844 499 0901, [explore.co.uk/specialinterest](http://explore.co.uk/specialinterest). Departs June 13 and September 5, £2,570pp.

**Peru beyond Picchu**  
An eight-day trip through the Vilacamba range to the roll-off-the-tongue Tertiary glacier and Yanacocha Lagoon between May and October, finishing off with a well-earned dip in the hot springs at Lares before returning to the Sacred Valley of Cuzco.  
● 020-7384 2332, [cazloyd.com](http://cazloyd.com). From £2,785pp including accommodation and flights.

**All of Ecuador**  
With tropical islands, snow-capped peaks, cloud forests, sandy beaches and dense jungle . . . Wild Frontiers has a 14-day trip with all of the above this February, including a ride along the Nariz del Diablo (Devil's Nose) trans-Andean railroad, a drive along "the avenue of the volcanoes" and an optional extension to the Galapagos Islands.  
● 020-7736 3968, [wildfrontiers.co.uk](http://wildfrontiers.co.uk). February 9-24, from £1,650pp full board including domestic but not international flights and transport.

**Chinese eclipse**  
See this year's total solar eclipse from the snow-capped mountain setting of Hani in western China – where the very best weather prospects for the eclipse are expected – with Exodus Travel. The 18-day trip also includes visits to the Forbidden City, Great Wall, Tibetan monasteries in the Xinjiang Uygur province, and the Yellow river.  
● 0870 240 5550, [exodus.co.uk](http://exodus.co.uk). Departs July 18, £2,149pp including flights, sleeper trains and most meals.  
**Benji Lanyado**

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The road trip  
The journey to this year's Lake of Stars festival with The Bundu Safari Company (0027 11 675 0767/8, [bundusafaris.com](http://bundusafaris.com)) begins on October 3 and lasts for 18 days, departing and finishing in Johannesburg, visiting Botswana, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. Highlights include South Luangwa NP, Victoria Falls and the Mozambique coast. The cost is ZAR11,800 (around £915), including transport, camping equipment, most meals and festival and park entrance fees. Many optional activities en route cost extra.  
Further information  
[lakeofstars.co.uk](http://lakeofstars.co.uk).

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