

▶▶ Thankfully, it's not on the scale of the floods that hit Mozambique in 2000 and we're soon on our way. We stop off at Helene, a tiny village of straw huts roasting under the afternoon sun, to visit Venancio Mbande, a maestro of the chopi timbila. The dignified sexagenarian has been playing and making the xylophone-like instrument from mwenje (sneeze-wood) trees for more than half a century, and played the Royal Albert Hall in 1992. On its own, the timbila sounds like a malfunctioning Teas-made, but several played together have an eerie beauty, as Mbande demonstrates with his two sons and grandson. Driscoll spoils the vibe slightly by offering to buy one. Later, in the Indian Ocean fishing village of Vilankolo, the New Yorker hefts his guitar and does his best impression of a human iPod, showing *Rainman*-like recall of the melodies and lyrics to everything from the Eagles' *Take it Easy* to Gnarl's Barkley's *Crazy*.

**DAY 7: VILANKOLO**

Disaster! After a run-in with a rogue beer can on the beach, Driscoll is nursing a cut on one of his chord-playing fingers. With the festival three days

away, it's touch-and-go whether he will be fit to play. His usual ebullience is lacking, even after a visit to a local church, where he sings with a choir of harmonising kiddies. It's left to Pete to wow the crowd of locals and tourists who have assembled at our campsite. The way that they holler, it is as if they've never heard a lad from Nottingham create drums, synths — even *Pink Panther* trumpets — with his mouth, then use a recording pedal to layer them over each other. It's extraordinary, like a one-man ghetto orchestra. This kid's got charisma, too.

**DAY 8: VILANKOLO**

Garland and Gerrard, our high-energy South African guides, order us from our tents with sergeant-major barks and we set off through an apocalyptic landscape of red earth, termite hills, twisted trees and forest fires. Mutanda attempts to elevate flagging spirits: "Joe Driscoll's cut his finger and may not be able to play guitar. But Hollywood Moore's in the house, so everything should turn out fine." The saxophonist, who is swiftly acquiring cult status, smiles from under his greying moustache.



*Above: The Perebox in full flow. Right: Kimba addresses the crowd. Far right: dancers at Charlie's Bar.*

**DAY 9: CHAMOI**

Heat blasts through the open windows and kids chorus "Hello!" as we crawl north. "I must have waved to two hundred people today," grins Reames. In preparation for Malawi, Mutanda teaches us phrases in Chewa, its most widely spoken language. "How are you?" is "Muli bwanji?" and "thank you" is "zicomu." Driscoll asks

what the Chewa is for: "I'm hung like a squirrel but I'm really passionate." The finger is healing, evidently.

**DAY 10: CHINTHECHE**

We turn a corner and get our first glimpse of Lake Malawi, a 680km-long (422-mile) inland sea that was dubbed "the lake of stars" by David Livingstone. The festival site is

breathtaking, with the two stages only yards away from a palm-fringed white beach and the turquoise lake stretching as far as the eye can see. Playing over the coming weekend are the cream of Malawian artists and British dance acts, including Annie Mac and Ben Westbeech. "Muli bwanji!" booms Driscoll as he takes the stage several hours later,

handily ingratiating himself with the smattering of Malawians in the crowd. The finger holds up admirably during the gig, and on into the early hours as he jams by a beach bonfire with Elias Kadwala, a 19-year-old local guitar prodigy. "This is where the real magic happens," Driscoll grins, as the lights of fishing boats glint under the orange moon.

**DAY 11: LAKE OF STARS FESTIVAL**

As the Makambale Brothers band sit under a palm tree beating out harmonies on instruments made out of oil cans and leather suitcases, locals flock on to the site to join the Western backpackers and NGO workers. Pearson Malisau, 22, raised the £20 entrance fee by selling home-made bracelets and postcards: "They charge a lot, but I love the mixture of people, black and white," he says. That was key, insists Will Jameson, who set up the festival after falling in love with Malawi during his gap year. "We didn't just want to rock up with loads of Western DJs and have a big rave. We wanted it to be a collaboration with local people." One of these is Lucius Banda, an ursine crooner who takes to the stage with a troupe of dancers clad in satin military uniforms. It's like Barry White fronting the Village People — in a good way. One of Malawi's biggest stars, Banda is going to be a tough act to follow but Petebox not only keeps the Africans interested but brings the house down, concluding his set with a rapturously received cover of Basement Jaxx's *Where's Your Head At?* "That guy has talent!" beams Malisau.

**DAY 12**

A refreshed-looking Malawian gentleman balancing a pint of beer on his head passes by offering sips from his carton of Chibuku Shake Shake — the local firewater, after which Jameson named his Liverpool club night. It tastes like sour milk and sawdust. Pete, now something of a celebrity, tutors a posse of young acolytes at an impromptu beatboxing workshop. The Beatlife Drummers march down the beach to entertain the locals who can't afford tickets. And after sunset, the very British drum'n'bass of Rodney P and Skitz has a posse of twinkle-toed local lads kicking up clouds of dust. Jameson is chuffed. With 1,200 paying customers, £100,000 contributed to the local economy and more than £4,000 raised for Unicef, the festival is bigger than it's ever been, and even more ambitious plans are already afoot for 2008. "Zicomu!" yells the DJ as the last record grinds to a halt. "Africa's time is coming!" ■  
*This year's festival is on October 10-12 (www.lakeofstars.co.uk). There is a fundraising event at Fabric, Charterhouse Street, London (www.fabriclondon.com), on Feb 7*

PETA WILSON



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