

Welcome to Malawi's "Other Lake" **A little haven of tranquillity where I learnt to Sail**

Just West of Lilongwe, Malawi's capital city, lies a little known secret. A vacation getaway surrounded by natural forest and seated on the shores of a 175 hectare lake, known as Kamuzu Dam II, that serves as Lilongwe's drinking water reservoir. It certainly wasn't on my tour guide book when preparing for my move to Malawi and I never imagined I'd be learning how to sail there.



Cassandra Jesse

I moved to Malawi in January and sadly left behind Amber, my 1962 Cheoy Lee Bermuda 30 ketch. I missed sailing her on the Chesapeake Bay in the Eastern US and yearned to feel again the wind in my hair and the cool water spray across my face. I was therefore very excited to learn I could sail near my new home with the Lilongwe Sailing Club. I caught a lift to the monthly 3rd Saturday sail, braai and race where I met a very welcoming and fun group of folks, I knew I had found the place for me. On a subsequent Saturday, the Commodore announced a sailing course would be run.

At 30 feet with a 2 ton lead keel, Amber was a forgiving vessel and, of course, I never received formal training so my sailing skills were, how do I say it, never fine-tuned. I didn't see this as a problem and jumped into a Gypsy, one of the Sailing Club's small dinghies, but had a surprise in stall. The variable winds over Kamuzu Dam II quickly taught me that the skills of sailing a larger vessel differ somewhat from those needed to handle a dingy. The tiller was so responsive and having to shift weight, jump side to side, just to keep above water was not in my standard sailing repertoire. The threat of capsizing seemed far too real (and daunting) so I then decided lessons were definitely in order.

On a beautiful sunny Saturday 12 of us convened at Kamuzu Dam II. On the veranda overlooking the dam, we sipped our coffee and listened to Shauna, our Irish instructor talk about wind direction, sailing courses (reach, run, close hauled), how to turn (tacking, jybing) and other basics. While on land, we each practised pushing the tiller, changing our body position in a very calm coordinated manner. We all looked like pros, until of course, we got in the water. With a strong breeze wiping over the Dam wall creating a misty spray, the 6 boats quickly scooted across the Dam to the marker buoy where we were told to turn. A push of the tiller and we were heading into the wind, fortunately the crew ducked to avoid a head crash with the boom. I was at the helm and somehow managed to get the boat to turn facing the other way (tack), but the main sheet seemed to be tangled around both my arms and I was left with feeling that I may not necessarily be heading the right way. We kept at it, tack after tack our confidence and skill increased and not before long we were rounding the

intended marker buoys, miraculously without getting wet. That of course, was soon to change..... capsizing drills were next on the program!



Students learning about the boats

Boats are meant to have their masts upright with sails billowing in the wind. But now, Shauna and Dan (the Commodore), were asking that we cast aside the boats' natural propensities and actually force it in the water with a resident hippo some where in the large dam. Of course as eager students, we did as the teacher asked, over and over and over again. It soon became fun to see who could capsize, right it and capsize again, the most in 5 minutes. Alas, our fears were conquered and we were ready to enjoy a few beers for the evening.

Most of us stayed in the 3 bedroom cottage that is part of the club. The cottage is idyllically set within a luscious garden and offers fantastic views of Kamuzu Dam and the surrounding native forest. In the airy living room, we set up a communal table and after the blazing sunset we played cards, Palermo and recounted our mishaps. We each brought food for ourselves, but as our group spirit was fostered over the day, everyone contributed to what became a pot-luck family meal. With new friends found it seemed the perfect way to end a fantastic day.

Sunday we resumed our training sessions, building on what we learned, the culmination of which was a race. I paired up with Anne on the Topper and expected to fair ok. We were well positioned at the starting line with 30 seconds to go, but the wind changed and were at risk of crossing before the start. We decided to back-wind the sail to avoid the need to sail around the start buoy again. However, the wind got even stronger and pushed us into what once looked like majestic reeds. This snare of roots and mud held us for nearly 30 minutes despite two canoes that came to help. We crossed the starting line, just as our first classmates finished. But, I suppose, it is all part of learning. And learn we did, for we redeemed ourselves by coming second in a race event last month. My sailing skills have certainly improved but I'm not sure what Amber will think next time I'm healing her over, water to the gunnels, on Chesapeake Bay!



A typical racing day on the dam

The Lilongwe Sailing Club is based at Kamuzu Dam II, some 35km South West of Lilongwe. Together with the Lilongwe Water Board it promotes sustainable activities for ecotourism with an emphasis on the conservation of the environment and of Malawi's natural ecosystems. The club house is set amongst lush native vegetation on the reservoir shore where members and visitors enjoy the many recreational activities in a natural and relaxing environment. There is something to do for everyone, sailing, canoeing, and windsurfing is just a start, fishing, birding and cycling are very popular whilst for small children there is a trampoline, wading pool, sand pit, and swings. Refreshments and snacks are available from the bar. Additionally the club can provide day-conferences facilities and accommodation at the cottage, the house has sleeping accommodations for six, cooking facilities, and a solar hot water shower.

To reach the Club, drive West of Lilongwe to Likuni and then go 15 km to the turn on the left hand side of the road that reads Lilongwe Water Board. Come on out and visit the Lilongwe Sailing Club next time you are in Lilongwe. Who knows maybe you'll end up becoming a life-time member! We hope to see you soon!

For further information try the Lilongwe Sailing Club web site: <http://www.lilongwesailing.com/> or contact the Commodore, Dan Lindfield (dan.lindfield@gmail.com) on 09295908, the Club Secretary Stacia Nordin (nordin@eomw.net) on 09333073, or phone the Club Manager Robert direct on 08621430.

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