

Dust in My Pack

Ignite Your Adventurous Soul with Travelling Tales from Around Our World

By Nancy O'Hare

Excerpt from **Chapter One: Boat Trips**

Malawi—The MV Ilala

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Thank you all for your unending support; I will always be grateful.

Preface

Travelling feels like part of my DNA. My father describes this call as our gypsy gene. For me, it was first ignited at the age of twelve, when I was fortunate enough to take part in a two-week field trip to Europe. Upon my return, I promptly forewarned my parents that, at some point, I would move overseas. Years later, my choice to become a chartered accountant was partially influenced by the knowledge that all companies, in all countries, need accountants. My plan slowly took shape. Since 1998, when I nabbed a transfer to Australia, my path has led me to some remarkable destinations, even though its course has not always seemed clear.

This book is a compilation of enduring memories from living on five continents and travelling across sixty-three countries. Tales range from adrenalin-inducing exploits to awe-inspiring sites. These favourite adventures are broadly grouped into chapters by type of travel experience. I have not ranked them, as to do so would diminish the very diversity and unique qualities that each imparted.

Throughout my travels, one consistent message has shone clearly. People across the globe are connected by a common quality, no matter their country of origin, economic status or religious leaning. Folks everywhere seem to have an instinct to help their families and those near to them. Compassion unites us.

This compelling pattern became visible to me as I travelled for work and on the occasional five- to twelve-month sabbatical, when I ventured through remote regions of the world. My husband and I came across so many helpful and welcoming individuals, often when least expected. For instance, a staff member at a family guesthouse in an isolated Malaysian village balanced my husband and me on the back of his motorbike for an hour-long ride to the nearest hospital to take a malaria test. Thankfully, the test came back negative. The same theme was reflected by my Omani colleagues, a mix of Sunni and Shiite Muslims, as we developed a camaraderie like that of a second family. Perhaps the clincher was in 2014, at the height of the Ebola outbreak, when our Nigerian steward used his vacation to educate every family in his home village. He walked door to door to advise people on how to protect themselves against the virus.

I have witnessed countless comparable situations. If there is one takeaway from this book, it is a call to respect people of all cultures and races. Differences are not something to be afraid of. Embrace them.

Introduction

Is your travel bug feeling dejected and faded? Have you chosen a holiday destination, but fear you might be missing out on something special? Well, in either case, this book is intended for you. I have distilled years of travelling across our globe into these accounts of my most memorable encounters. This is not a traditional travel guidebook; instead, these tales aim to relay a sense of the experience. After all, it is the memories of the people we met and our unexpected insights that stay with us long after a journey ends.

These exploits are grouped into chapters according to broad travel categories, such as boat rides or multi-day treks, and then by country. You might choose to reinspire your lust to explore by reading the book cover to cover, or you might prefer to focus on those topics or locations that appeal to your current travel quest. I have included practical guidance about each destination in every section.

I hope that this book inspires the traveller inside you.

Chapter One: Boat Trips

Malawi—The MV *Ilala*

The Basics

Synopsis: Leave any preconceptions at the beach, and you will be in for a truly unique journey.

Most useful items to pack: Patience and humour

For further travel information: Go to malawitourism.com and then navigate to the *Ilala* and Malawi Shipping Company web page for current information about the official schedule and fares. Fares are paid on board. For the latest real-time information or advance cabin bookings, it is generally recommended to ask at your local hotel a day or two prior to your expected voyage date.

The Experience

Malawi's white sun blazed in the centre of the crimson, charcoal-black and forest-green stripes that adorned the pristine flag of Malawi swaying atop the MV *Ilala*. This proud statement hinted at the essence of the ship, more so than the peeling paint encircling its railings. The patchwork of paint was the result of a long-time partnership between the sun's perpetual rays and the hands of countless passengers gripping the metallic bar's reassuring firmness. How many guests over the years had unobtrusively observed random yet captivating daily occurrences while creating their own mark?

The original SS *Ilala* first plied the waters of Africa's third-largest lake back in the late 1800s. The second generation came to be in 1949 with the MV *Ilala*. This younger breed holds up to 450 passengers across its three decks. Over sixty years have passed, and after many a day in the maintenance yard, the *Ilala* continues to chug from village to village around a 365-kilometre loop of Lake Niassa. In 2013, a few years after the trip described here, the *Ilala* was given an overhaul, its new engines reportedly able to reach a speed of up to ten knots, increasing the pace of the voyage. A smaller, newer vessel, the MV *Chilembwe* typically acts as a replacement when the *Ilala* is incapacitated by repair work so life can continue unfettered. Yet the *Ilala* remains the option preferred by both locals and travellers keen to experience their own journey on its seemingly mythical decks.

Just as developed society relies on an established electricity infrastructure to provide a constant supply of power, life around Lake Niassa relies on the ever-present movements of the *Ilala* ferry. Despite its tendency to be late and the rather muddled boarding and disembarking procedure, people depend on the ferry as an ingrained part of their village livelihood. Viewing it in isolation, one would not likely comprehend the vitality that the *Ilala* brings to Lake Niassa. Beyond mere travel from point A to point B, the ferry proves to be essential in trade and local culture. Although the *Ilala* has its challenges, people and businesses have grown accustomed to its fickle ways and slow pace as it carries necessities and fosters communication between villages.

Our intended itinerary was to travel from Likoma Island to Chipoka, a village on Lake Niassa's southwestern shore. Likoma Island is part of Malawi but sits nearer to Mozambique's shoreline and falls along the northern section of *Ilala*'s circular route. The official schedule placed the journey from Likoma Island to Chipoka at twenty-four hours; however, the *Ilala* arrived at Likoma Island already fifteen hours late. Schedules are inevitably rough guides.

The ferry eventually arrived late in the evening. The sun had long set. Awaiting passengers crowded the beach as the boat glowed in the moonlight and dropped anchor. When we boarded, the entire lower economy deck was filled with sacks of corn, ground nuts and other essentials. I walked very tentatively across the tops of these sacks in the dark, carrying an eighteen-kilogram backpack plus a day pack hung on the front of my shoulders. My balance was further tested by the continual flow of people manoeuvring within the same corridor. They were headed in the opposite direction, eager to disembark from the very access point we had just entered. The secret was to give a brief smile to the passing voyagers, momentarily recognizing the challenge and humour in one another's journey, and to offer a hand or sway to the side to help each other pass. We were, quite literally, all in the same boat.

Despite sixty years of plying this route, organized chaos pervaded the boarding process. Climbing over and across bags was only part of it. First we had to climb up a rickety ladder balanced vertically between the *Ilala* and its overcrowded bobbing lifeboat. The lifeboat was well used, not for life-saving purposes, but as a loading shuttle because most destinations lacked a suitable dock. Passengers onshore shifted in a rhythm as they jostled to cram onto the lifeboat, often reaching for a child, bags, boxes or all such necessities. The owner of each sack and its specific destination was rather opaque. Yet in practice, bags were off-loaded, new ones filled their place and at times the entire bottom deck lay bare. It reminded me of a revolving door; each movement seemed small, but in their totality they were quite effective.

Our choice of a cabin was markedly advantageous, as the voyage ultimately took sixty hours—a mere thirty-six hours beyond its scheduled duration—and that excluded the fifteen-hour delay before the ferry even arrived at Likoma Island. Yet, with some planning, it is relatively easy to supplement the basic offerings of the ferry to incorporate a semblance of comfort into the wait. Bring a hammock to sway away the hours or reserve a cabin with two twin beds, a wash basin and a private toilet.

The first mishap became apparent when we headed to the upper deck for breakfast after a restful sleep during our first night aboard. Passengers who had expected to get off at the next stop remained on board lounging in small groups. One British university student readily explained, “Oh, have you not heard? We have turned around and are heading back to Likoma Island; they forgot the captain! It is absolute madness!” While the ship had been anchored at Likoma Island, the captain had gone ashore unbeknownst to his second-in-command. A few hours later, after the passengers had been shuttled on and off the ship and the dark beach was clear of those waiting, the acting captain pulled anchor and carried on with his route. Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, when he was due for a shift change, the deputy captain discovered the captain's absence. Consequently, the engines were slowed, the bow rotated and the *Ilala* slipped back towards Likoma Island.

The second and most noteworthy mishap, due to a lack of fuel, caused a twenty-four-hour unplanned layover at Nkhotakota. We had arranged for our tour guide to meet us at Chipoka to start the next phase of our travels overland across Malawi and Zambia. Travelling without a phone, we could only assume that our guide would be well apprised of the *Ilala's* delay, as it was a common topic of discussion at its many ports around the lake. Unexpectedly, we were the sole passengers headed for Chipoka. The *Ilala* only carried sufficient fuel to go directly to Monkey Bay, its final port of call, or to Chipoka, but not both. This conundrum was likely a direct result of the prior day's doubling back to Likoma Island. Hence, the boat paused longer than planned at Nkhotakota as the crew attempted to resolve this predicament. We only knew the name of our tour company, not the

specific guide assigned to our trip. After many conversations, a particularly resolute crew member tracked down the name of our guide, contacted him and rescheduled our pickup to Monkey Bay. The chances of a crew member knowing our guide seemed inexplicably slim, but the problem was solved nonetheless. The *Ilala* carried on towards Monkey Bay where, two days later than originally scheduled, we finally disembarked to appreciate having land beneath our feet once again. True to the revised plan, our guide was ready and waiting for our arrival.

About the Author

For twenty years, Nancy O'Hare coupled her love of diverse cultures with a career in finance; she has been based in Nigeria, Oman, Switzerland, Australia and Canada—plus completed a couple of short stints in Qatar and Ecuador. Between work assignments, O'Hare and her husband have taken multiple around-the-world trips for months at a time, covering all seven continents. They gravitate towards hidden gems tucked away from the crowds and aimed to see the essence of a place.

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