

TO THE ISLAND IN THE SKY

Michael
Smith

OVERSEAS MEET, JUNE 2013, TO THE MULANJE MOUNTAINS OF MALAWI AND A SUBSEQUENT VISIT TO THE DZALANYAMA FOREST ON THE MOZAMBIQUE BORDER.

The most common response to the suggestion of a trip to Malawi was “Why?” The next likely question was “Isn’t that the place with all the killings?”

In quick succession a couple of years ago, two mountaineers mentioned Malawi to me, one at the 2011 joint meet as we walked towards Ingleborough and the other on a Kinder mass trespass commemoration walk. They spoke of its unspoiled charms, rugged mountains, African culture and reasonable weather, so making it sound just the place for the YRC – hence its place on the 2013 meets list.

A little investigation revealed that a foreseeable problem would be the limited size of the huts there if we arrived with a dozen Ramblers as we had on the 2012 trip to Nepal. So in discussions we stressed that this was not a suitable place for large groups and that we would be buying food and cooking for ourselves as the trekking support infrastructure was underdeveloped. This was going to be more of an exploratory trip than recent Club ventures, for example the most recent guidebook to the mountains was published in the ‘70s and long out of print. Together these cautions appeared to put almost everyone off and we ended up with a party of five: three members for three weeks and another couple with us for the first week.

The killings? Well, they were confusing placid Malawi with seriously conflicted Mali. Malawi, called the *Warm Heart of Africa*, is the old colonial Nyasaland squeezed in between Zambia, Tanzania, and Mozambique with long thin Lake Malawi filling the Malawian part of the Great Rift Valley forming most of its eastern boundary.

As one of the World’s least-developed and most-densely populated countries, Malawi has about four-fifths of its 17 million people living rural lives with low life expectancy and high infant mortality. Its main export is tobacco followed by tea, sugar then other food products with Uranium, Thorium, etc. making up just 1% of exports. The official languages are Chichewan and English which was encouraging for negotiations and we had no problems on the language front. Another encouraging aspect of Malawi was the road infrastructure and public transport arrangements which are good compared to most other countries in the region.

Historically, in 1859 David Livingstone declared the southern highlands to be suitable for European settlement and missionaries and colonisation followed with the British Central African Protectorate being proclaimed as the Club was formed, including the Shire Highlands and its Mulanje area. The white administration ran the territory and its million people on a budget of £10,000 and a staff of under a hundred: light-touch government indeed. Tolkien penned *The Hobbit* shortly after climbing onto the Mulanje plateau. Independence came for Malawi in the 1960s with Banda’s one-party state lasting until the 1990s and President Joyce Banda elected last year. Freedom Day used to be celebrated but we noticed no observance of it at all despite it being marked as a holiday on calendars.

Flying in from London via Addis Ababa or Nairobi to Lilongwe’s Kamuzu International Airport we took a bus for the supposed five-hour journey south to Blantyre. The two buses we used took longer on account of one shredding a tyre and the other unexpectedly running out of fuel as the dashboard had no power. Much of the tarmaced route had pedestrians and cyclists making their way along, close to the speeding bus.

Blantyre, named for the birthplace of Livingstone, is the main commercial centre and we bought maps there for the trip. As Mulanje mountain huts do not provide food we used the services of Mulanje Outdoor Adventures to provide supplies, porters, cooks and guides. They had an arrangement with the Mountaineering Club of Malawi giving access to the huts and especially to the sleeping mats and basic kitchen equipment stored locked away at each hut. Cooking in the huts was on an open fire with the hut-keeper providing buckets of water from the nearby stream. Sleeping was on the floor either in the main room or a side room.

Many isolated outcrops of rock were seen rising out of old sedimentary farmed lands as we travelled south. These elevated islands result in natural diversity of unusual habitats. The largest is Mulanje mountain, actually an isolated granite massif or monadnock, extensive enough to create its own climate, covering over a thousand square kilometres and rising from the 650m Phalombe Plateau via a plateau around 2,000m to Sapitwa, 3002m, the highest summit in south-central Africa.

The massif gives spectacular views across tea plantations towards Mozambique, with sheer drops down forested gullies laced with waterfalls and fragrant cedar trees. An absence of annoying insects and the scarcity of threatening animals are further attractions. Given the tight schedule of most of the party and our large kitbags, we were collected by pick-up trucks from our lodging in Blantyre rather than using the crowded slow minibus to get to the Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve. By the Likhubula Forestry Station we met our *tenga-tenga*, (porters, literally those who carry) and were soon underway for the five-hour walk up a forested gully onto the plateau. On the way a plunge pool offered a bracing chance to swim.

On the path we meet many women taking down two-metre long bundles of firewood and men with long beams of Mulanje Cedar (*Widdringtonia whytei*). Both carried loads on their heads which were probably illegally felled though with a daily licence for collecting fallen wood for firewood is permitted.

Arriving at the Chambe hut we inspected our accommodation. This and the massif's other huts are single story wooden buildings each with a brick hearth and chimney and a deep veranda. Sitting on stilts or piles many have lasted a century and have settled a little leaving undulating floors and roofs. Beside the huts are simple long-drop toilets and similar cabins in which we were provided with a large bowl of hot water for a wash in the late afternoon. Many of these huts were built about a century ago either for administration of the forestry business or as 'hill station' bungalows for colonists to escape the heat of the lower plains. Nowadays they are maintained jointly by the Department of Forestry, the Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT) and the Mountain Club of Malawi (MCM) or the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian (CCAP).

We slept well after a filling meal. As the equatorial days were about 12 hours, we were stirring soon after dawn ready for breakfast and a 2½ hour ascent of Chambe Peak (2,538m). Off by 7:30 we passed through pine forest and up a steep slope on grassy tufts to reach a col where poachers loitered with dogs. From there we made for the East Ridge which consists of gentle sparsely vegetated rises interspersed with steeper rock faces which thankfully have gullies or shallow grooves as lines of weakness we could use. Small moves to the right, were made to link these and red marks on the rocks help our guides keep to the best route. A 100m section (rated low-grade rock climbing in the guidebook) was particularly steep but the crystalline granite rock was sound and gave excellent grip despite being tough on the fingers. Additional holds of uncertain security were provided by the stumps of *vellozia* plants. As with other summits here, the last few hundred metres were boulder strewn requiring careful moves over or round obstacles and strides over gaps.

The survey point at the top catered for the obligatory group photo and nearby picnic before we carefully

descended this fairly exposed ridge – any slip would have resulted in extensive laceration. On the steepest section a hand line was placed for security and Tim demonstrated a classic abseil here.

In front of us as we descended looking west we could see our entire route for the next week. To cover the whole range though we needed to get down smartly to the hut, eat and set off that afternoon for the three hour crossing of passes to the next hut at 2,219m, the Chisepo hut. We arrived there as the sun set. There were others there already and we ate a strong soup then a chicken stew together that evening. All the meals included fresh fruit and vegetables. We had the option of adding Nali sauce. 'Africa's hottest peri-peri sauce' is made from local birds-eye chillies scoring 175,000 scoville heat units. This sauce has achieved cult status in the West but quickly gained a different reputation in our home when brought back and used in chilli con carne.

Our cook had the fire going before dawn the next morning and we five were walking southeast directly behind the hut by 7:00. There were two others on Sapitwa, 3002m, the only time we didn't have a peak to ourselves. Soon onto rough rocky ground and we had to watch every step over the rough ground whilst we made height quickly up the long steepening northwest ridge. This led to a flatter section where we scrambled past a couple of monoliths four times Tim's height, the Rabbit's Ears, then tortuously between, over and under huge boulders for almost a mile. The latter part of this three-hour ascent is termed 'virtually indescribable' in the guidebook so the red paint waymarking was welcome. Sapitwa is the highest peak in the region and the name translates as "Don't go there!"

After lunch we again traversed east across ridges to the next hut, Thuchila at 2,303m, across several distinctly decaying wooden bridges. The last of these was twisted at crazy angles requiring parts of it to be climbed like a ladder. That evening a short walk in front of the hut gave a magical view of the sunset over the plain.

In the morning Fiona and Booker descended north with porters, through sunflower farms, to be transported back to Blantyre. Then onward for a visit to Chembe village within the Cape Maclear National Park on Lake Malawi to snorkel, kayak and risk bilharzia to see the many brightly coloured Cichlid fish. Little to their knowledge the kayak's hatch seals (presumably having been lost in a previous incident) had been replaced by cloth coverings which upon capsizing were washed away. With two gaping holes they were left stranded on the far side of Domweisland. Heroically, Booker paddled, slithered and swam some miles, hitched a lift on a dugout canoe and secure assistance from a group of local fisherman to arrange a rescue for Fiona (and, more importantly, the kayak) who had meanwhile, 'enjoyed' a close encounter with a large monitor lizard.

A real adventure. They also walked the local hills, which were once used as a hideout from slave traders, in the company of baboons and a grass snake. They managed that without mishap.

Meanwhile, Richard, Tim and I scrambled up the West Ridge of 2,590m Nandalanda standing behind the Thuchila hut. Tim was full of a cold and I was sniffing. Nevertheless, we kept a good pace skirted left of the truncated spur of Castle Rock on short steep slabs then fluted slabs over false summits and a balanced rock. After we traversed east below the summit we turned back sharply and steeply up a narrow ridge to reach the survey point and hung on to it because of the strong blustery wind. Our guide ferreted around in the boulders 20m below the summit and returned triumphant with the water bottle he had dropped on his last visit. We descended a steep groove off the flank rather than risk the summit ridge in the wind then descended the ascent route visiting the rocky spur we bypassed earlier, disturbing a Red Mountain Hare and several lizards. The wind-blown cloud was quite wetting and we put on our waterproof jackets for one of the few times on this trip.

The huts had solar panels to charge batteries and provide some illumination. The same approach is used in village huts as few areas have mains electricity. Those with these systems offer a mobile phone charging service to others. In the huts though most of these badly installed systems have failed. Our guide, Comestar, had some success in charging his phone battery by holding bared wires direct from the panels onto its terminals. We provided rubber bands so he could leave it to charge.

That day's peak, Nandalanda, and the two peaks to its south are known as the Eildons for their similarity to the three shapely hills which make a half-day outing from Melrose. The Mulanje Eildons are a different matter. We tackled the remaining two the next day in improving weather, as the clouds gradually cleared. Initially we headed back west for 20 minutes from the hut, then left the track by a bridge to head for Khuto, 2,757m, across grassy slopes then boulders then more grassy slopes. After a traverse right under a rock wall we took the second gully left over boulders with some awkward scrambles. A final swing to the left took us towards the summit. Over a bite to eat we persuaded our guides to next head over unfamiliar ground south across a col to Dzole, 2,715m.

Once underway we saw occasional small cairns probably placed by members of the Mountain Club of Malawi. These marked the starts of steep shallow grooves or ramps avoiding crags to deposit us at the col. Beyond was slightly steeper ground which we thought would 'go' but our guides insisted on a descending traverse to the left dropping a long way, over a series of rocky terraces and occasionally through vegetation to meet up with a route they know from the Minunu hut. Muttering to one another at the inefficiency of the route, we eventually levelled out before passing old trigger snares. Then we reached a steepening rib of slabs and gullies and turned right to

take these, regaining the lost height as we headed almost directly to the summit. We crossed the usual boulder field, this one unusually flat and chaotic. The descent was east down steep slabs to the Minunu hut despite our destination, the Thuchila hut, being on the opposite side of the mountain. Minunu, like most huts, has nearby swimming pools and visitors were bathing noisily in the late afternoon sunshine. Short of time, we sped past and picked up a good track to circle anticlockwise for 2½ hours round below all three Eildons and over a pass to the Thuchila hut.

The hut now held three couples: one making a travel video, another involved in tourism and the last hailing from Leeds, taking a year out to travel through South America, Australia, New Zealand and now Africa. He had a distant connection with Arthur Salmon – more evidence that it's a small world as Karinthy pointed out in his six degrees of separation. We had a full table for the chicken meal that night.

Sunday morning was frosty. A little weary after some long days we walk just a couple of hours over a pass and down to the Chinzama hut to relax and air our sleeping bags. The Leeds couple arrived and joined us for a lunch of salami, salad and chips before they continued to the next hut. Richard went for a swim in the Ruo Basin pool.

That afternoon three MCM ladies appeared, discovered that we were in the hut, promptly changed their plans and disappeared at a brisk pace towards the Madzeka hut. Later two girls arrived, looked around and passed through to the Minunu hut.

Perhaps Tim and I needed to go for a swim in the pool.

We checked with our guide who assured us that we did not smell.

After a three-course breakfast from our cook, Baston, we were off the next day with clear skies and a slight frost. We headed further east towards the Sombani hut but turned south on a good flattish trail to ascend the less distinctive peak, Chinzama, 2,663m. We passed the start of the guidebook route and followed a notional route by a dry streambed and gained the marked route on the slabs of a higher shelf above a vegetated gully. The summit was again a jumble of boulders with the highest point being atop a large squareish granite boulder not unlike Ilkley's Calf rock. It gave a steep scramble before we had our usual summit picnic.

We descended and headed to the shabbier Sombani hut at 2,070m. After afternoon tea we three prospected the start of the stiffer scrambling route up shapely Matambale, 2,643m. It clearly got fewer ascents and our guides were unfamiliar with the peak. This would have made a grand day out for our last ascent but the weather was windy and changing.

After strong winds overnight we woke to thick cloud with wind-blown rain. All our plans were now on hold. We whiled away the day reading and drinking tea.

Lunch was ham, banana, cabbage and chips. In a late afternoon clearing we wandered east, past a Malawian Cedar nursery, part of the replanting scheme to restore the mountain's forests.

We also spotted cervel spoor and our guide was convinced he heard a cat pass in the night. There was more rain overnight.

Not only had we lost the day to poor weather but the rain had made the earthen descent paths from the plateau too treacherous for our ill-shod porters. Our intentions of heading back south west across the range and down to a convenient roadhead were now impractical. Instead we were forced to head further east off the plateau's drier flank and down to the Fort Lister Gap which marks the end of the Mulanje range.

Britisher Lister was associated with the establishment of the fort in colonial times to discourage slave trafficking by the Yao chiefs after Livingstone and others highlighted the suffering involved.

After porridge, fruit salad, beans and egg on toast we packed, tipped the porters, cooks and guides and walked off the edge of the plateau down through the forest for a few hours down to the Lister gap village where a pick-up truck waited to take us, our gear and, on the back, our support team.

We drove right around the northern side of the Mulanje massif on gradually improving roads to our starting point of Likhubula of nine days earlier. The additional transport organised at short notice was expensive at a cost of \$180.

A porter then dashed up to the Chambe hut in under half the time we had taken, collected our climbing gear and got it down again before nightfall as we had abandoned any hope of rock climbing the next day.

We spent the night in a CCAP bungalow with suspect electrics: the earth wire to the property hung freely in the air, unconnected. A gecko kept our bedroom almost insect-free. Neaby vervet monkeys, fork-tailed drongos and Livingstone's turacos fed in the trees. We walked that night a mile or so to Nancy's Dream Restaurant for a papaya starter, pizza and a coke. Breakfast in the CCAP mission buildings was accompanied by the singing of 'Abide with me' before an expensive transfer back to Blantyre. There we bought bus tickets and relaxed in the afternoon by visiting the park on Mandala Hill for a beer. We had an appetising pre-arranged three-course meal at the Ministry of Tourism catering college's Alendo Restaurant close to our Lodge on Chilembwe Road: £8 with beer and coffee.

An early start the next morning saw us on a trouble-free luxury bus back north to Lilongwe where we met up again with the two now back from Lake Malawi.

The youngsters returned to the UK the next day, whilst Tim and I were driven about 30 miles west to the Dzalanyama forest lodge. This is a spacious bungalow

by a waterfall in both a Miombo forest reserve and a working forestry area with both pine and gum plantations. Dzalanyamais important for many Malawians who believe it to be the site of creation with the footprints of the first man to be seen in the rocks where God set him down. We didn't see those but we saw prints of hyena, deer and boar.

The forest trails through the thin forest were much tamer than the Mulanje routes. We saw a wide range of bird species but relatively few individual birds. Tim had a couple of days out here and I had five. Ascents were made of all the main rocky hills including Kawuziuzi (Breeze) Hill by the Mozambique border, Mtsotsolo Mountain by the forest entrance, a northern outlier of Kazuzu and 1,654m Kazuzu itself. The last of those gave sightings of deer, rock hyrax and bush squirrel. Early in the day as we ascended a sunlit broad ridge my guide Flackson, a pace ahead of me, almost stepped on a large puff adder which started to move away as he leapt aside. Unaware, I too almost stepped on it then notice the snake's movement in the leaf litter and I skipped away smartly. Puff adders are responsible for more fatalities than any other African snake and a bite would have been a serious matter here. We were an hour from the lodge and even if a forestry vehicle could be found it was another half-hour drive to a simple clinic with a nurse, then two hours on to the Lilongwe hospital. I'm glad it moved steadily away rather than living up to the species reputation for being bad tempered.

Perhaps the most interesting day we had took us along the Mozambique border. We saw a string of women heading over with food for a family celebration, smugglers taking motorbikes over the infrequently patrolled border, illegal tree felling and charcoal burning, besides legitimate felling and transporting of plantation timber.

The meet provided interesting mountaineering in a novel area amidst an unfamiliar culture. So we are grateful to the various people who recommended this area to us. We secured good logistical support and sufficient information on the routes to make good use of our time out there. While maps were difficult to obtain we now have copies and can envisage other opportunities for any future visits to the area. The people we met were warm-hearted and helpful, making the trip enjoyable and relaxing. So despite the highest peak's name meaning don't go there we would say do go and you are likely to have a good trip.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Most visitors spend at most two or three days in the Mulaje mountains making just an ascent of Sapitwa. A trek through the range from Lichenya to the east and back down south-west could take anything from a rushed three days to a relaxed week.

We have the unfinished business of the scramble up Matambale Peak from the Sombani hut and walking the southern approaches.

There were long apparently unclimbed ridges joining some of the peaks which appeared to be feasible.

As for climbing, east and west faces of Chambe peak are real challenges, offering rock climbs of up to 1,650m and said to be the longest rock climb in Africa. Protection appeared sparse. It was said that there was some (bolted) sport climbing being gradually developed.

PARTICIPANTS

Tim Josephy
Michael Smith
Richard Smith
Fiona Smith (guest)
Dave Booker (guest)
Guides: Comestar Supini and Edson Mvoso
Cooks: Burton Menard and Patrick Wowo
Porters: John Ben, Albert Muroma, Paul Mpaha, Vuto Kapito and six others for shorter supply portages.

ANIMALS IDENTIFIED

Deer
Puff Adder
Red Mountain Hare
Rock Hyrax
Smith's Bush Squirrel
Vervet Monkey

BIRDS IDENTIFIED

The locations where the listed birds were observed are coded and given in parentheses:

- l, Lilongwe city;
- b, Blantyre city;
- n, Nidirande peak close to Blantyre;
- c, Chambe bowl, Mulanje massif;
- s, Sapitwa/Chisepo shelf, Mulanje massif;
- t, Tuchila shelf, Mulanje massif;
- g, Lister Gap descent from the Mulanje massif;
- d, Dzalanyama Miombo forest reserve (or approaches) on the Mozambique border.

Grey Heron (bd)
Cattle Egret (d)
Yellow-billed Kite (l)
Brown Snake-Eagle (c)
African Harrier (Gymnogene) Hawk (d)
Shikra (Little Banded) Goshawk (s)
Augur Buzzard (t)
Red-necked Falcon (d)
Lanner Falcon (t)
Rameron (African Olive-) Pigeon (c)
Cape Turtle- (Red-necked) Dove (d)
Tambourine Dove (d)
Blue-spotted Wood-dove (d)

Emerald-spotted Wood-dove (d)
Livingstone's Turaco (cg)
Schalow's Turaco (d)
Little Swift (lb)
Red-faced Mousebird (d)
Speckled Mousebird (d)
African Hoopoe (d)
Little Bee-eater (d)
Swallow-tailed Bee-eater (d)
Crowned Hornbill (s)
Pale-billed Hornbill (d)
Trumpeter Hornbill (d)
Flappet Lark (d)
Black Saw-wing (s)
Wire-tailed Swallow (d)
Pearl-breasted Swallow (l)
Mosque Swallow (d)
African Pied Wagtail (bgd)
Mountain (Long-tailed) Wagtail (c)
Woodland Pipit (d)
Fork-tailed Drongo (bgd)
Square-tailed Drongo (d)
Eastern Black-headed Oriole (d)
White-necked Raven (cstg)
Pied Crow (lbd)
Red-collared (*ardens*) Widowbird (n)
Rufous-bellied Tit (d)
Spotted Creeper (d)
Arrow-marked Babbler (d)
Dark-capped (Black-eyed) Bulbul (b)
Kurrichane Thrush (cd)
Cape Robin-Chat (c)
White-browed Robin-Chat (b)
Common Stonechat (cd)
Arnott's (White-headed black) Chat (d)
Evergreen Forest Warbler (c)
Olive-tree Warbler (c)
Lazy Cisticola (d)
Churring Cisticola (cg)
White-winged Apalis (c)
Yellow-Breasted Apalis (ctg)
Tawny-flanked Prinia (d)
Ashy (Blue-grey) Flycatcher (d)
African Dusky Flycatcher (d)
White-tailed Elminia (Crested Flycatcher) (d)
Malawi Batis (c)
Souza's Shrike (d)
Black-backed Puffback (sg)
Tropical Boubou (n)
Retz's (Red-bellied) Helmet-shrike (d)
White-crested Helmet-shrike (southern race) (d)
Greater Blue-eared Starling (b)
Violet-backed (plum-coloured, Amethyst) Starling (d)
Red-winged Starling (ncg)
Amethyst (Black) Sunbird (d)
Olive Sunbird (s)
Yellow-bellied Sunbird (ct)
Miombo Double-collared Sunbird (cstd)
African Yellow White-eye (t)
House Sparrow (lbd)
Blue Waxbill (l)
Common Waxbill (t)
Village Indigobird (Steel-blue Widow Finch) (d)
Pin-tailed Whydah ©

1 Sombani hut with the Hutkeeper's accommodation behind

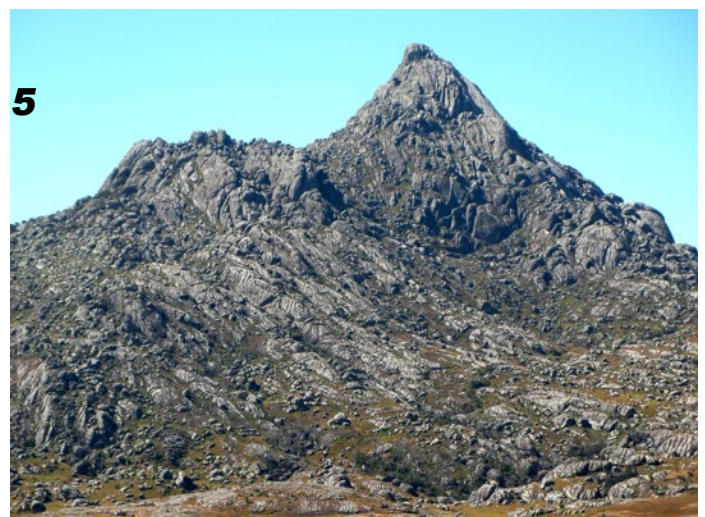


2 Tim Josephy by the Rabbit's Ears

3 Richard Smith in Khuto's West Gully

4 Damaged bridge near the Thuchila Hut, Fiona and Richard

5 Unfinished business: Matambale Peak





Descent of Chambe Peak,
Michael Booker, Fiona,
Edson and Comestar

The col by
Chambe's East Face



Richard, Comestar and Edson
working their way through a
boulder field

Kazuzu Hill and view over
the Dzalanyama Forest
towards Lilongwe





SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Accommodation in Lilongwe: Kiboko Town Hotel, www.kibokohotel.com

Accommodation in Blantyre: Chilembwe Lodge, www.chilembwelodge.net

Logistical support in Mulanje: Mulanje Outdoor Adventures, www.moadventures.mw, or the individual guide ComestarSupuni, mulanje.guide2@gmail.com

Logistical support for the Dzalanyama Forest Reserve: Land and Lake Safaris, www.landlake.net

Maps of the Mulanje area are available at 1:30k (overprinted with main trails) and 1:40k scales as colour photocopies ordered from the Government Surveyor's Map Sales offices in Lilongwe (south of the roundabout by the golf course, at the road's end) and Blantyre (at the foot of Victoria opposite the old law courts and tourist information office)

Route guidebook: Frank Eastwood's Guide to the Mulanje Massif, 1979, Johannesburg, SA: Lorton Publications with later supplements published informally locally and perhaps available via the Mountain Club of Malawi, www.mcm.org.mw.

Huts and portering: Mountain Club of Malawi, www.mcm.org.mw. Note that the MCM does not accept non-resident members except in exceptional circumstances.

YOU SHOULD DO AN IRONMAN !

Tim Bateman

This was how it all started around September last year. At 47 I've never been much of a runner but had recently managed to get myself up to running half marathon distances all be it very slowly. Then I came across some folks that were into this triathlon business and one in particular went and suggested 'You should do an Ironman'.

Not really fully understanding what I was letting myself in for I foolishly checked online and entered Ironman UK in August 2013 before it filled up. (These events are popular these days so you have to jump at the opportunity when you can).

An Ironman for those who may not be aware is basically a long distance triathlon. It starts with a 2.4 mile open water swim followed by a 112 mile bike ride and finally a full 26.2 mile marathon all of which must be completed within a strict 17 hour time limit. It was obviously going to need a fair amount of training on my part particularly on the bike as I've never owned a road bike, let alone one with proper clip in pedals. Swimming I could just about get by with and my running still needed to improve a lot.

I though a good starting point would be to join the local Rugby Triathlon club and go to some of their training sessions. And so began 11 months of training much of which was spent dealing with niggling little injuries. I learnt lots along the way and still have much more to discover.

The spring saw me do my first marathon in Barcelona of all places, it seemed like a good excuse to take the wife and kids away for the weekend. Not a fast time but I got round, then a month or so later I did the Greater Manchester marathon in a slightly faster time. Warmer weather arrived and I finally started to get out on my new bike. It's at this point that I started to realise

that 112 miles on a bike is actually quite a long way and once complete the prospect of doing any running afterwards is quite unthinkable.

I thought I needed to do at least one triathlon before the Ironman so June arrived and I found myself at the start of the Outlaw middle distance event in Nottingham. This was basically half an Ironman in distance and would get me used to all the procedures with the transitions and also allow me to practice my nutrition strategy in a proper race. I think the most important thing I've learnt is the importance of nutrition in these events, it's all very well doing the training but if you can't get the right number of carbohydrates into your system every 15/20 minutes then you will hit what marathon runners call the wall and your race is over.

The end result on a hot day and a flat bike course was just under 6 hours which I was more than pleased with at the time.

The full Ironman seemed like it was possible but I still needed to do much more cycling and the course at Bolton was somewhat hilly to say the least. Still I did as much as I could in the time remaining and all too quickly August arrived.

I turned up on the Friday for the first race briefing and the pasta party. The Saturday was spent sorting the various transition bags out and depositing them and my bike at the two separate transition areas some 10 miles apart. Then it was off to bed for an early night ready for the 6am swim start the next day.

Race Day:-

Swim (1:23:29) - This was quite an experience to start with. I was one of the first in the water and positioned myself off to the right hand side near the start buoy. I then turned and watched the amazing sight of all the other 1600 file slowly in which took the best part of ten minutes. The start was entertaining shall I say which