

# in Malawi of Africa

any differently (better OR worse) from white, or for that matter, black people. It was a refreshing change!

In recent years, I have met many Africans in the course of my work, and while it is dangerous to generalise, I have often found them more easygoing than Asians. This is particularly true of the non-Arab parts of Africa, where people are often very relaxed, having fewer inhibitions in general, and fewer social inhibitions in particular. The latter point in itself can sometimes cause friction with Asians, who tend to be more conservative, and also disapprove of more permissive societies. The Malawians were very interesting to me in this regard, because the people I encountered were not as uninhibited as other Africans I have met, and not at all aggressive in their approach to you (either as sellers or as would-be "friends"). What was striking in the midst of obvious poverty was the general friendliness of most people; they smiled, or called out "Hello". They waved as you drove past. I should add that even when people said "Hello", it was rarely followed up by intrusive questions, or an attempt to get something from you (as is often the case elsewhere). Apart from the occasional beggar only in one place, on the outskirts of Lilongwe, did children ask us for money. That reminded me of the ubiquitous "Bondhu, baksheesh", that is heard all too often at home. But even then (to my relief), they were happy enough to wave and say "Bye-bye" when we smilingly refused.

Getting a sense of the people there was perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the visit. The poverty in Malawi cannot be missed. You see many people wearing clothing which is old and tattered. One man wore a shirt that was literally falling to pieces on his back. There is no lack of 'pot-bellied' children, whose bodies show the clear signs of malnourishment. And the concerns that wealthier people have are clear in the multiplicity of electric fences and guard-dogs (Rotweilers and Alsatians, usually muzzled to indicate ferocity, are the canines of choice). Despite that, most ordinary people you meet are striking in their politeness, and often take pains to say "thank you", "welcome" and "sorry", when the situation allows for such an exchange. Malawi Airlines, the national carrier, advertises itself as "Africa's Friendly Airline". I noted this with some degree of cynicism on my way there, since airlines are notorious for making wild claims about being your home away from home, without usually having much basis for such claims. And while Malawi Airlines was friendly enough, I must say that the friendliness of the Malawian people I came across lent weight to the claim

that the country is "The Warm Heart of Africa".

My entry into Malawi (in the context of a lifetime of difficult immigration queues, by virtue of having my particular green passport) was one of the easiest I have ever experienced. Despite not having a visa (procedures in this regard were unclear when I was planning the travel), I was simply asked what I did, and requested to provide some United Nations ID as proof of employment there. Upon doing so, I was granted entry with no charge (despite making it very clear that I was not there on official business). This was in striking contrast to a subsequent trip to Cambodia, where I was on official travel, and had the necessary supporting documents to prove this. In that case, I was made to wait for around an hour, after being taken out of the immigration queue, and made to stand rather visibly on the side (apparently because they thought I might be Afghan which, apart from being a first for me, is not in itself a criminal offence, as far as I'm aware!)... In fact, the airport in Lilongwe reminded me of how the old Dhaka airport used to be. It was very small and open-sided, so that you could look out at the many beautiful flowering trees, with their scarlet, yellow and purple blooms. Indeed, we had not even reached the terminal building before we encountered our first Malawian fauna--a gigantic monitor lizard, over three feet long (rather like a miniature dinosaur) crossing the tarmac in front of our airport bus.

Malawi has one of the highest population densities in Africa, but coming from Bangladesh, I couldn't really take this seriously. The drive from the airport into Lilongwe was characterised by lush undergrowth and many trees on either side of the road. Every now and then, you passed small concentrations of ten or twenty people, but in between there were many periods where you didn't see anyone. In Lilongwe itself, the population is more evident, but even then, the town is scattered, without a clear centre. You drive from concentration to concentration (shopping malls, or office blocks), with long stretches of road in between. At some crossings you see people selling a variety of items, which range from children's wooden toys to avocados and other fruit, to live kittens staring at you bemusedly, while they are being held up by the seller. People mostly walk to places (there are no baby-taxis or rickshaws), though there are tempo-sized vans, which ferry around people for longer distances. Many can be seen munching on roasted corncobs or sticks of sugar cane, much like home.

*(To be continued)*