

the magazine for the responsible tourist

r:travel

EXCLUSIVE
Your guide to the
Virgin Holidays
Responsible
Tourism Awards



20
of the best
responsible trips

Green wash or
green warrior?

Can you get it right
in the credit crunch?

**and the
winners
are...**

www.responsibletravel.com
Holidays that respect destinations and local people

WINNER

Nkwichi Lodge/Manda Wilderness Project, Mozambique

One of Africa's finest

'Luxury without the guilt' is the phrase coined to describe the idyllic offering of this eco-lodge nestled in the unspoiled shoreline of Lake Niassa, Mozambique. It's a description the lodge owners are proud of – for it shows them that they've got the balance just right

LIKE ALL the best ideas, Nkwichi was born in the pub.

In the mid-1990s Patrick Simkin and his brother Paul were mulling over their futures in a London pub. They kicked a few ideas around, but by the end of the evening had settled on an eco-tourism project in Africa.

That was the easy bit. Two years were then spent training up in the skills needed to implement such a plan, looking for investors and for a site.

One of the first investors, Lola Castro, had worked with the UN High Commission for Refugees in the repatriation of Mozambican refugees at the end of the war in the early 1990s. She had travelled extensively around Northern Mozambique and fallen in love with the untouched beauty of Lake Niassa (the Mozambique side of Lake Malawi).

'I had been travelling around various African countries looking for the ideal place to carry out our dream, but without much luck,' recalls Patrick. 'I followed Lola's advice, hired a boat for two weeks and travelled up the length of Lake Niassa, exploring the shore, looking for the ideal place to set this project up.'

'The whole area was perfect: untouched, wild, beautiful and with a population that was willing to participate in the protection of their natural resources.'

But it was not until a year later that the unique 'Mchenga Nkwichi' beach was discovered. 'Mchenga Nkwichi' literally means sand that squeaks or goes 'Nkwichi' when you drag your feet through the soft white sand.

'Much of the time on this second trip,' says Patrick, 'was spent sitting under a mango tree, discussing with chiefs and village elders

about our goals and the impact this would have on the local populations. Ancestors were consulted and offerings made in respect to the local traditions. The result was a formal letter drawn up by the villagers stating their full support to the whole project. Armed with this document, the project was born. The year was 1999.

In 2002, Nkwichi opened: the main lodge building has a dining room raised high on a platform providing views out over the lake. The fig-tree platform built among the enormous granite boulders on the lakeshore provides another popular spot for guests to dine or relax. Seven stunning chalets – accommodating just 14 guests – made from local thatch, wood and stone are hidden beneath the treeline and invisible from the lake. All power is solar and the kitchen cooks with 'eco-stoves' which use 70 per cent less firewood. These stoves are made locally and are also becoming popular with villagers.

'To begin with, it was a bit trial and error,' admits Patrick, now the resident director. 'While I had experience of managing lodges in southern Africa, I had not actually built one from scratch. Our first chalet actually collapsed during construction, but we all learnt quickly and now have one of the most imaginative designs of any African lodge.'

Guests can enjoy a wide variety of nature-based activities, including exploring the Niassa bush and snorkelling in the incredibly clear waters of the lake, which contains a greater variety of indigenous fish species – more than 1,000 – than any other lake in the world.

Funding from the lodge has contributed to the Manda Wilderness Project (MWP), a charity which – with the support and

help of the local community – has turned 120,000 hectares of lakeside land into a community-owned conservation area. Through the MWP, community development programmes have so far built six primary schools, a maize mill, a maternity clinic and given loans and training in sustainable practices for more than 700 farmers.

The support of the local population has been pivotal. Nkwichi has been the main driving force behind the establishment of the Umoji Association, a legal body empowering 20,000 local people through their chiefs and elected representatives. Through the association, six communities have received their land rights certificates from the government – the first and only communities in the country to have done this. The conservation area is included in these land titles.

Nkwichi only employs local people, including 30 per cent women, two of whom are managers. And by ensuring communities benefit from lodge business, tourism continues to be seen as positive. Local choirs come to the lodge to sing for guests – and guests visit local villages for traditional dance ceremonies. Occasionally, a church service will be interrupted for guests to introduce themselves and talk about the churches where they come from.

'Luxury without the guilt is a great phrase – and true,' says Patrick.

And Mozambique's tourism minister has said on Moz TV: 'This is how lodges should be built in Mozambique – no, this is how they should be built in Africa!'

www.mandawilderness.org

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

'NKWICHI demonstrates what a small, privately-owned, luxury eco-tourist lodge can contribute through a \$5 bed night levy; and has been a driving force in the creation of the Umoji Association representing 20,000 local people through their chiefs and elected representatives. One of the first, large community associations in Mozambique, it has enabled six communities to secure land rights certificates from the government.'

BEST SMALL HOTEL/ACCOMMODATION

