



A Place to Call Home

Maria Dias



To really know a place, you must be open to different contexts and perspectives. So thought I and my husband when we decided to drive from Nampula to Niassa, in the North of Mozambique, with our two sons. And, what a trip it was!

For one week we drove 1095 km, mostly on dirt roads. We had wild monkeys as companions on a desert road; we had a community dinner in a Catholic Mission; and we stayed on a construction site. We sailed to a fancy ecolodge and stopped to pee in an unlikely house on the shores of Lake Niassa. Like many expats in

Mozambique, we have always lived in its capital, Maputo. A city with a vibrant multi-ethnic personality that welcomes and enchants people from all over the world. A place where it is easy to forget that the country, extending for around 2300 km, is home to nearly 30 million people and embraces quite different realities. So, we decided it

was time to show our sons this diversity.

We rented a 4x4 in Nampula, filled it with the essentials thinking of the many kilometres of bush ahead, and hit the road.

Many things could have gone wrong. Summer floods had destroyed some roads, we were driving long distances, frequently without internet, and, though we are not absolute beginners, we are also not the most experienced off-the-road drivers. So, despite planning carefully, the initial anxiety was inevitable. But, as we immersed in the wide and breathtaking landscape, with colourful people wandering all the time on the side of the ochre road, that feeling vanished. And, when we

realised, Africa magic had done its ways and a sense of peace and companionship had emerged instead.

Every now and then we had to drive over logs, stop to guess the best route and even help tow a truck to clear the way. But, showing its robustness and elasticity, our 4x4 did its job on the most demanding stretches and it only let us down when crossing a pluvial basin. Nothing serious, as we were parking before crossing to the lodge on the shores of Lake Niassa and the only drawback was walking a few metres with our bags in hand. Far from being luxurious, the places where we stayed were clean and comfortable, perfect for our short stays. And the recipes cooked by the locals,

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always available and willing to pamper us, allowed us to recover from the small stresses and prepare for more.

From Cuamba to Lichinga, we should have taken the new paved road, but the GPS still doesn't recognize it, so we took the old dirt road, now disused. It took us almost three hours to drive 86 km and, apart from monkeys, we didn't see a living soul for around 30 of them. But despite the butterflies in our stomachs caused by the loneliness of the unknown place, we couldn't help

but marvel at the wild landscape that surrounded us. We had the sense of doing something unique.

By the time we arrived at Messumba we were at the peak of our enthusiasm. So, it was just when we entered the ecolodge, a place to which stones and soft light give a sense of a hobbits cave, that we realised we had navigated three and a half hours, listening to stories of crocodiles that fortunately never showed up, told by the sailors of an artisanal boat, far from robust.

This trip was meant to be, so all went well.

Was it worth it, we were asking our sons on our way back.

Yes, they loved it. This part of the country is poorer and more underdeveloped than where we live. But our lunch under a 2000-year baobab tree confirmed it's also more exotic and African, they said. "Here, everyone has a place to call home," my youngest son summed up.

Ends

