

EXORCISING THE DEMONS OF LAKE CHALA

Lake Chala is a glistening gem, its greenish-blue waters highlighted by the emerald foliage surrounding it. But **Jill Craig** and the Nairobi Dive Club quickly appreciate the lake's spooky reputation – complete with eerie underwater scenery and stories of ferocious crocodile attacks



At roughly 900 metres above sea level, covering an area of approximately 3km² and thought to be between 60 and 90 metres deep, Lake Chala is a gorgeous freshwater crater lake overlapping the Kenyan and Tanzanian borders. Against the backdrop of Mount Kilimanjaro, fishermen float their dugout canoes on Chala's shimmering waters, and Nairobi Dive Club members explore its depths during the coast's off-season.

Exploring the lake since the 1980s for dive weekends, the Club uses Lake Chala as a way to ensure that their fins still work when the ocean is too rough. In my case, I decided to tag along since I'm usually the "problem diver." I'm the one who will invariably not bring the correct amount of additional weight, or I gulp down air

like it's a two-for-one drink special at the end of happy hour. In essence, it never hurts to get some more practice.

This year, about 13 divers and eight non-divers decided to make the trip to Chala. Some wanted to find out what lake diving is all about, others came to hike the crater rim, and we all wanted a relaxing weekend to sit by the campfire. But everyone had in the backs of their minds the story of the girl who was killed in 2002, by what most people believe was an enormous crocodile.

Driving to the Crater

I own a Toyota Vitz – aka, the most despised vehicle in Nairobi after matatus, buses, and lorries. Sure, I can zip in and out of traffic like an out-of-work Formula One driver, but that's only when I'm not paddling through potholes during rainy season or easing my souped-up little golf cart over unmarked speed bumps roughly the

size of hills in the Aberdares. Needless to say, I am unable to drive very far outside of Nairobi without worries that my little toto will be injured in any number of less-than-ideal circumstances on the open highway. My Danish friend Henrik, also captain of the Dive Club, is always quick to point out that the word "vitz" means "joke" in Danish.

My friends Laurien and Spencer therefore allowed me to hop into their Prado that Friday morning, where I wedged myself between duffle bags, gallons of water, dive tanks, dive gear, gourmet "camp" food that Laurien has a gift for whipping up at a moment's notice and various other items that one might need on a camping/diving trip. In other words, this Prado resembled a pioneer's oxcart.

About two hours from Chala, we heard something like an explosion coming from the back left side of the car and realised that the tyre had shredded. Spencer, being a mechanic in his younger years, quickly set to work with our friend Tom, who was driving behind us, to

replace it with the spare. Laurien, Erica, Jo (two other members) and myself stood around and half-heartedly offered to help with no real expectation of anyone taking us up on the offer.

Once the tyre was fixed, we continued on our way, until the back right tyre got its own puncture. Once that was fixed, we set off again in the approaching darkness and an hour later arrived at the campsite on the crater rim.

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(Real) Ghost Stories

Henrik and his wife Ivy, a professional caterer and chairwoman of the Mountain Club of Kenya, were there to greet us. Having already set up their tents, they were making a fire and preparing their own supply of gourmet camp food. So the rest of us scrambled around to find the best spots to set up our tents. It took me a full 45 minutes to complete this simple task, but finally done, we all settled down for the most important of camping activities – eating and drinking.

Laurien made her famous smoked halloumi, while Spencer grilled the steaks. We cracked open a few semi-cold Tuskers and Cokes and gathered around the campfire to tell stories. The conversation soon turned to the subject of the girl who had been killed in the lake. Henrik had previously sent us information about this incident so that we were all forewarned – and so the Dive Club wasn't liable for any accidents. In the darkness of the African night, when reverie and mystique take over, we began mulling over whether or not crocodiles could still be a threat.

In March of 2002, an 18-year-old gap year student named Amy Nicholls was volunteering on a conservation project in Tsavo National Park. She and her friends decided to spend the weekend at Lake Chala, no doubt excited to experience

Photographs: Jill Craig



its charms without the tourist throngs that overwhelm so many other Kenyan attractions. In the dusk hours, they ventured to the water for a quick dip after having been assured by locals that the lake was safe. In fact, even their *Rough Guide to Kenya* guidebook had described the lake as a "pleasant place to swim."

A few minutes later, and only about 5 to 10 metres from the shore, one of Amy's friends claimed that he heard her scream, "It's got my legs! Get out!" She then disappeared underneath the water. The friend claimed he saw a yellow eye close to the shore afterward. Amy's body was found 48 hours later, suffering horrific wounds and missing an arm. Pathology reports listed the cause of death as drowning associated with a crocodile attack.

Henrik chimed in that rumour has it that an eccentric British colonist introduced crocodiles to Lake Chala in the early 1900s. He said that local fishermen were becoming increasingly angry over their torn nets, so they began shooting and poisoning the crocs.

No crocodiles had been spotted in recent times though, and Henrik and Ivy said that they'd never seen one in the previous two years they'd been diving Lake Chala. Trying to end with a happy thought, Henrik adds, "Hey, in Botswana they've even started doing crocodile diving safaris because crocs aren't concerned with divers. Once you're under their attack and kill zone, you're fine."

On that note, I said my good nights. Like a child clutching her security blanket, I grabbed a few more Tuskers and crawled into my tent, my little army-green nylon haven where I'd likely spend my final hours before meeting my demise at the mouth of a crocodile. What was the point of this again?

Braving the Water

With the previous night's discussion fresh in our minds, we awoke the next morning with some apprehension. We assembled as much of our gear as possible at the crater rim, before schlepping it down a steep, serpentine path to the water's edge. Ivy, Henrik and I found that the "easiest" way of getting the heavy tanks down the hill was to strap them into our BCDs (buoyancy control devices), and then just haul them down

on our backs. I find this process tedious enough on the dive boat, when I know that I'll be in the water within minutes. But this Do-It-Yourself Dive, where you have to carry all your gear, including wetsuit, fins, boots, mask, regulator, weights, BCD and tanks down a hill where one misstep could mean disaster – definitely made me more appreciative to get into the water. On a positive note, this laborious task also meant that crocodile fears paled in comparison to the more tangible threat of tripping and falling, laden with what seemed to be hundreds of kilos on my back. And even for someone named Jill, tumbling down this particular hill was a none-too-appealing thought.

The underwater world of Chala creates a setting where you definitely start getting the willies

Once we got our gear to the bottom and began the final assembly, I casually asked a lone fisherman if he'd seen any crocs lately and he started laughing. He told me he had never seen crocodiles in the lake. A giant wave of relief spread over me. I could now worry about my usual dive issues, which at that moment seemed like a godsend.

We slowly waded into the green water, and once dive buddies were confirmed and safety checks finalised, we began our descent into Kenya's spookiest lake.

Lake Chala is a wall dive so it drops off almost immediately. We found ourselves at 24 metres in no time. The water temperature was between 24 C and 26 C and the visibility was not great – a few metres at best. Long, gnarled tree branches seemed to reach up from the abyss and we had to be careful so as not to get tangled up in them. The stone-like formations comprising the wall had an almost-spongy consistency.

As Henrik later described, because the

lake is freshwater, you don't see it becoming blue like in the ocean. When you're staring into that abyss, it just turns black. The wall with those strange formations, the tree branches, and the lack of visible marine life, barring an occasional small fish or crab, make for a rather eerie dive. The underwater world of Chala creates a setting where you definitely start getting the willies.

We completed the first dive, spent the obligatory hour-long surface interval lugging empty tanks up the hill and fresh ones down again. Most of us got in at least two dives that day, and by the end of it, we knew we'd earned those Tuskers that were waiting for us at the top.

Recap of the Day's Adventures

That evening, as is wont to happen in these circumstances, no one would admit to having been afraid of crocodiles in the lake. Lots of laughter, joking, and ribbing had replaced the more sombre mood of the previous evening. Jo summed it up best, by pointing to a pair of colourful rubber shoes: "Those were the only crocs we saw this weekend. I consider that a success."

Henrik and fellow dive club member Adrian joked that the lake is now getting a reputation for devouring underwater cameras. Adrian lost his several years ago and on every dive trip since, participants have been (humorously) instructed to keep an eye out for it. This year, Henrik's Go-Pro flooded about 10 minutes into the first dive.

Ivy commented on one of the more pleasant aspects of diving Lake Chala – it doesn't involve the stress of an ocean dive where you have to get off the boat quickly. If you're a diver, you know exactly what she's talking about. That moment when you're battling seasickness and nerves, the dive master starts yelling at everyone over the whirl of the boat motor and crashing waves that you need to get out. This is the type of situation where you picture Navy Seals high on adrenaline back flipping off the side of the USS-Something. Except that in your case, you're still struggling with zipping up your wetsuit and panicking over where your missing fin could be as everyone else is bobbing up and down below, waiting for you. In Chala, you simply wade out into the water

without any yelling or dive master drama. So this was a big plus for many of us.

Once darkness had settled in, leaving us to the light of the bonfire, Ivy mentioned that she could see the small fires of the chang'aa runners around the lake. Apparently, she said, the chang'aa runners come across the lake every evening and morning from the Tanzanian side. They row their dugout canoes filled with jerry cans of the homemade spirits over to Kenya, unload their liquid gold, set up camp, and then return in the morning.

At this point, Rajesh began laughing and recapped a story from the 2009 trip, when Adrian had just finished his last dive and saw some guys struggling with jerry cans from their canoes. Being a Good Samaritan and thinking the jerry cans contained water or petrol, Adrian helped the guys carry them to the top of the hill. He later learned that he had inadvertently helped contribute to the chang'aa trade. Rajesh claims Adrian would have continued assisting if he didn't have a cold beer waiting for him back at camp.

Instead of diving, Erica, Jo, and Tom had spent the day hiking the perimeter of Chala. A few hours into the hike, they told us they heard some rustling as they approached a nearby clearing. Between 5 and 10 metres in front of them was a herd of more than 50 elephants. They were quite excited to have seen these animals rather than the infamous crocodiles.

Sinking Canoes

The next morning, some members decided to go out again, except on the other side of the lake. Liz laughed that this really was a Do-It-Yourself dive trip. Their plan was to get a boat, take it across the lake and dive from there. The first canoe pulled up and after the gear was loaded in, they noticed it was sinking. According to Liz, this wasn't really a boat in the traditional sense – more like some planks of wood stuck together. The boat captain was not pleased. In fact, he told them to stop complaining and start scooping water out. Liz says that it got to the point where the guy was taunting them, saying, "Oh, you guys are saying that you're professionals, yet you're scared of drowning."

After finishing the dive, they ended up swimming to the other side of the lake – it was faster than taking the sinking canoe.

And this, my friends, is how the Dive Club is able to do so many trips on the cheap. Sure, you can pay upwards of USD \$100 for two dives on a proper sailing vessel where someone helps assemble your gear and maybe even offers you a cup of tea. But you certainly won't have the lifelong memories of sinking canoes, crocodile threats, exploding tyres, and Tanzanian chang'aa traders. The experiences that make living in Kenya so very interesting. **D**

Useful Info

Nairobi Dive Club

Email: info@diveclubkenya.com

Website: www.diveclubkenya.com

The Dive Club attempts a Lake Chala trip every year, usually in May or June.