

How coffee is protecting

**Malawi's**

**last**

**rainforest**



Speciality coffee production in the Ntchisi Forest is helping protect Malawi's last remaining rainforest as well as supporting local communities in continuing to live in harmony with nature.

**It used to be that the Ntchisi Forest was a place of protection for its people. Its 75 sq km of dense double canopy rainforest surrounded by rolling hills proved an ideal refuge for the local Chewa tribe from attacks by the martial Ngoni settlers in the 19th century. Now it is the forest that needs protecting.**

As some of the last tranches of indigenous rainforest in the country, Ntchisi was first designated a reserve in 1924 by British colonialists who moved villages out of the area. After independence the Malawian government brought the villages back by introducing a co-management agreement that placed the surrounding communities as the main stakeholders in preserving the forest. With the forest providing locals with their water source and just about every household dependent on seasonal,

rainfed agriculture, preserving the environment is a lifeline.

Poverty is an underlying problem. Farmers produce barely enough to feed their families. Climate change, unsustainable farming practices and rapid growth of population are putting a lot of pressure on the communities and the land they depend on. All the while a lucrative revenue source towers temptingly above them in the forest. More than three quarters of urban households use charcoal as fuel for cooking and heating energy. Nearly all the charcoal available to buy in large cities is illegally produced from trees in Malawi's natural forests.

However, an alternative revenue stream has been introduced in Ntchisi that brings villagers a reliable income to build a life beyond survival while protecting – and even increasing – the forest's tree cover. What is it? Coffee.



The Commonage organises trips into the local community for guests

The Commonage is a community project based on the southern edge of Ntchisi Forest Reserve that uses artisanal coffee production to lead its holistic vision for protecting the rainforest. It may seem a surprising solution. The mass production of coffee – the world’s most consumed drink (after water) – is considered one of the prime culprits of global deforestation. However, Tim Bellack, The Commonage’s managing director and co-founder, says coffee sustainably grown on its smallholder farms on the edges of Ntchisi prioritises tree cover and works with nature to support the year-round fertility of the land.

“Coffee is ready to be harvested after the seasonal staple and cash crops here,” he says. “In the period from June to September farmers can generate a new income through a sustainably grown high value cash crop with a guaranteed market from our side. The perennial crop grows best in shade and is therefore giving farmers a strong economical encouragement to incorporate trees in their farm systems.

### Supporting livelihoods

“The approach to turn land that has been used for decades to grow monocultural crops into a diverse agroforestry system with coffee at its core is creating economic development in the area, while regenerating the soil and growing the tree cover around the reserve.”

At around 1,500 metres in

elevation, the montane forest around here meets the exacting growing conditions of the prized Arabica coffee bean. The climate is warm and stable with temperatures staying between 22°C and 29°C all year round. Harvesting takes place during the dry season so coffee beans can be dried in the sun – a process that helps to preserve the beans’ natural oils responsible for the coffee’s aroma and flavour – while the microclimate of the rainforest ensures sufficient moisture for the plants to thrive.

### Coffee Flavour

The coffee farms surrounding The Commonage grow rare Arabica varieties including Geisha, Catimor and the local Agaro. Tim says: “Every variety and every farm has a unique flavour profile that is slightly changing every year according to the weather. It’s very much like wine, just a bit more complex as after the fermentation process roasting and brewing play an important role in the development of the taste. The typical flavours you can expect from The Commonage coffee are a thick caramel sweetness with loads of body and a smooth chocolatey mouth feel.”

The seedlings for these speciality coffee plants were provided to the farms by Rösterei Vier, the German coffee roastery that partners with The Commonage. The Düsseldorf-based operation roasts and sells speciality coffee grown in sustainable biodiversity at farms in South and Central America, South Asia and Africa. The Commonage is its first hub in a coffee producing country and has its own roastery to provide for a growing domestic market, especially in the capital. Tim says: “Most of the coffee we are currently producing is being roasted and sold within Malawi. We try to keep as much value adding activities as possible in the country. People can find our coffee in Lilongwe at Kaza Kitchen in Area 12 in Lilongwe and Uka Café in Area 3. Rösterei Vier also gets a few special micro lots every year to showcase some of the




best coffees of the harvest.”

The speciality coffee commands a higher price tag from a discerning market with the farmers benefiting from that extra income. The Commonage guarantees a good price for the beans so the farmers can cover the cost of the seedlings, support their families and have enough left over to help build better lives. “Coffee can generate an income up to 20 higher than any other conventional cash crop of the area,” says Tim. “We buy the coffee directly from the farmers to cut out the middleman and build long lasting and transparent relationships with the farmers. We pay a minimum price that is higher than the fairtrade price as well as premiums to farmers that incorporate good farming practices and agroforestry systems on their farm.

“We know every farmer personally. Some use the extra income from coffee for paying school fees

The roasting machine at The Commonage





'The typical flavours you can expect from The Commonage coffee are a thick caramel sweetness with loads of body and a smooth chocolatey mouth feel'



for their children, to buy tin sheet roofs for their homes or to get a motorbike."

The farmers also provide paid-for coffee tours, in which they guide tourists around their fields. Visits are especially popular during the harvest season from June to September and are rounded off back at The Commonage with the chance to roast and taste your own coffee. A true farm to cup experience.

### Ntchisi Forest Lodge

Tourism is another important contributor to The Commonage's forest-preserving mission. The onsite Ntchisi Forest Lodge has accommodation ranging from modern brick and glass cabins through ensuite rooms in one of the oldest buildings in Malawi to luxury tents pitched in the beginnings of the jungle. The lodge also has a restaurant serving lunch and dinner

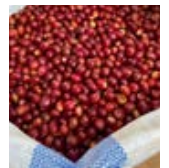
– along with freshly roasted forest coffee, of course – while its close relationships with the surrounding communities offers plenty of opportunities for village visits and locals-led tours to reveal colourful orchids – prolific from November to April – among the forest's lush vegetation.

At a two-hour drive from Lilongwe, Ntchisi Forest Lodge is a highly accessible nature-infused escape from the capital. Once you're here it's possible to cycle all the way to Lake Malawi or follow walking trails into the thick forest and look out for samango and vervet monkeys, red and blue duiker and – so lodge legend has it – a leopard.

Funded by tourism and coffee, The Commonage has put in place a comprehensive plan to protect the last indigenous rainforest of Malawi. It includes community forest patrol teams, the planting of indigenous trees, workshops to motivate and

involve local youths, fire-fighting units activated during the dry season, and an irrigation and clean drinking water system sourced from the rainforest.

The latest figures from the National Forest Inventory (NFI), a Modern Cooking for Healthy Forests (MCHF) project supported by the Government of Malawi that measures and monitors forest biomass, suggest the work is paying off. The report found from 2016 to 2022 there was an estimated 35 per cent increase in forest biomass – any plant matter or tree material produced by forest growth that can be converted to an energy source – in 25 sample plots studied in Ntchisi Forest Reserve.



Freshly picked coffee berries

To find out more about how to support the Commonage's work as a volunteer, email [info@thecommonage.mw](mailto:info@thecommonage.mw). To book a stay at the Ntchisi Forest Lodge, visit [www.thecommonage.mw](http://www.thecommonage.mw)