

Episode 59: The Road to Livingstonia

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about the village of Livingstonia in Malawi. Livingstonia was built by Scottish missionaries over a hundred years ago and the road to get there has not improved much since!

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to from Livingstonia, which is in the highlands of Malawi, as we continue travelling through southern Africa. But before we begin, a reminder that you can get a special offer of ten US dollars in italki credits with your first purchase by going to <http://go.italki.com/englishin10minutes>. With italki, you can reach fluency in English quickly by having personalised lessons with native-speaking teachers at an affordable price.

Alright, so we're here in Livingstonia, and we've been in Malawi for a little over a week now, and I think Livingstonia's probably our favourite place so far.

Wendy: Yep, I think that's safe to say, so, uhh, I'm glad that we made it up here. It was not an easy journey, and it was a bit out of the way 'cause it's much further north than the rest of the places that we had visited in Malawi, but it was worth coming up here.

Nick: And we're also continuing south after we leave here, so, yes, we had to come up north and then we have to go back and retrace our steps¹ a little bit. But, as you said, uhh, it definitely was worth it. So, Livingstonia's a really interesting place. There's a village called Livingstonia and it was founded by Scottish missionaries in the 1890s. And so it's really unlike anywhere else that we've seen in Malawi or even in all of Africa.

Wendy: Yeah, it's definitely not your typical African village. The ... you still have these buildings that were originally built, you know, in the late 1800s or early 1900s by these Scottish missionaries. So, for example, they built a church and a hospital and primary and secondary schools and even a university, which is quite unusual to have a university in such a small village. But all of these are still functioning and it's great to see. I mean, there are wonderful services that they're providing for the local people, but, yeah, it's, uhh, it's a very quiet place. There's not a lot of life like there normally is. Normally, there's lots of people around and lots of noise and in

¹ retrace our steps: backtrack, do the same route in reverse

Livingstonia, it's very quiet, and you actually don't see many houses where people are living in Livingstonia itself. They're all kind of down ... further down the hills, and they kind of spread out² around the village but in Livingstonia, it's really just these public buildings.

Nick: Right, and the buildings all look quite similar. They're all built using the same style of architecture, there are these brick buildings. And so it's just this strange time warp³ to see this architecture typical of British or Scottish architecture of a hundred years ago here in Africa. And so the surroundings is (are) still Africa, but the buildings don't look like Africa and, like you said, it's not really the same bustle that you usually see in African villages. Yeah, it's more that people live a little bit outside and then they come in for school or for university or if, unfortunately if they have to hospital, or even for church services on Sundays as well. Uhh, so we went up in the village today and we walked around and, yeah, it was really interesting to see the history of it. There's a small museum where they talk about the history of the settlement, umm, yeah, and it was quite interesting.

Wendy: Yeah, I thought it was definitely worth a visit.

Nick: And we've also met some Scottish people here who are doing some work here and we've met quite a few Scottish people in, uhh, Malawi in general, because they have this connection, this historic connection with Malawi. And it's quite interesting that we're here in the Malawian highlands. We're nine hundred metres above the level of Lake Malawi or above the standard elevation in Malawi. Uhh, and so when you think of highlands, usually the first country that you think of in the world is Scotland, which has these highlands, and so, in Malawi we have highlands too, but it's not quite Scottish highlands.

Wendy: Not, not really, I mean, you know, we're still sleeping under mosquito nets and there's still lots of dirt and dust and, you know, it's a typical African landscape, really, it's just that we're up in the mountains or in the hills that are higher up than the rest of the lowlands down near Lake Malawi, down below. But, yeah, umm, I happened to⁴ overhear a Scottish woman talking on the phone, I believe to her mother, and judging from her end of the conversation, I can imagine that her mother was saying, 'Oh, be careful, cover up, don't get bitten by mosquitos,' because, of course, mosquitos in Africa carry malaria, which is a big health concern. And that's something that people are always trying to prevent when they're here. And so her response was, 'Well, I've never seen a mosquito, so I don't know what I'm supposed to look out for,' which I thought was really funny. And I guess it's true, that in Scotland, you don't have mosquitos, because it's quite cold and that's not the kind of climate where mosquitos live. But it does show just how, you know, different Africa is from Scotland.

² spread out (phrasal verb, past participle in this case): dispersed, not close together. See also: Episode 50.

³ time warp: distortion of time, something that seems like it's from another time

⁴ happened to: by accident, without planning or intent. See also: Episode 22b and Episode 55.

Nick: For sure. And in Livingstonia, you still do have some mosquitos, not the same volume of mosquitos that you have down, uhh, near the lake. And, in fact, the original Scottish missionaries tried to found⁵ this settlement elsewhere in Malawi, and it failed. Over several decades, they tried different sites, and apparently the reason was because of the malaria. And so eventually they came all the way up here, umm, which was a bit out of the way, but it was a place where they could build the settlement and have it be something closer to Scotland than, uhh, than the rest of the Malawi, I suppose.

Wendy: Right, because a lot of the Scottish missionaries did die from malaria and perhaps from other diseases too when they attempted to establish missions down below. So here, once they came up to the mountains, maybe it did feel a little more familiar to them and a little more comfortable, like home.

Nick: Right, I mean, for us we still think it's pretty hot, and it's pretty similar to normal conditions in Africa, but we've been talking to some local people here and they think there's a huge difference between up here and going down to the level of the lake - that it's much hotter down there. But for us, we haven't really noticed that so much yet.

Wendy: Not so much. Yeah, I think at night it does get a bit cool but, yeah, in the height of the day, it's still really hot.

Nick: Yep. And so I imagine it must have been really difficult for the Scottish missionaries to get up to Livingstonia back in the 1890s, because it's still really difficult for us to get up here today.

Wendy: Yes, it was quite an ordeal⁶ taking public transport, which is the way that we travel. And so there were several different legs because we started in Lilongwe, in the capital, umm, and everything took much longer than we expected, which, you know, you should come to expect that in Africa. So we had to wait a long time for a bus and that took longer and it ended up being a two-day journey rather than a one-day journey which is what we had thought it would be. And then the last leg⁷, the last fifteen kilometres or so to come up the mountain, the road is really terrible.

Nick: Yeah, I would say it's one of the worst roads, if not the single worst road that we've ever been on, in over 100 countries of travel. Uhh, it's absolutely dreadful like you said.

⁵ (to) found: establish, create, begin. Note that the base form of this verb is the same in both spelling and pronunciation as the simple past of the verb 'to find', but they are separate verbs.

⁶ ordeal: difficult experience

⁷ leg: section or stage of a journey or a race

Wendy: Yeah, so we were in the back of a pick-up truck, which is the form of public transport that they use, uhh, to get up this road. And so we were packed in with a bunch of⁸ other people, local people, and lots of other things that, uhh, that they were carrying up the mountain. And it's a very, very bumpy ride. You were actually standing up because there was no more sitting room in the back of the pick-up. How did that go?

Nick: Yeah, it was difficult at the beginning because it's very bumpy. It's a dirt road, but there's also lots of rocks embedded in the road and just on top of the road. And then it's a switchback⁹ road, so you have a lot of turns. Uhh, and you can only do it in a four-wheel drive (4WD). So we were in this pick-up and the first few turns, I was just swaying¹⁰ around all over the place just trying to hold on to this bar, umm, and trying not to, basically, fall over. Uhh, and eventually I understood how to do it, that you bend your front knee and you kind of lean forward into the bar and then that gives you a lot more stability and, umm, and then, you know, you're just not moving around as much, uhh, as I was right at the beginning. And so then I, yeah, I got into it a little bit and I started half-enjoying it. Umm, because there's beautiful scenery. You're looking up - we even saw baboons on the side of the road and you can see the lake as you get higher and higher. But the road is just really terrible. To travel the fifteen kilometres to Livingstonia, it takes over an hour, sometimes up to an hour-and-a-half, so that shows you how bad the road really is.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm, yeah.

Nick: Although one of the interesting things about it is that because you can only go up in a four-wheel drive, up here in Livingstonia, there are basically no cars.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: Because there are these trucks that go as public transport every now and then, a few times a day, up and down the mountain, and then that's it.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And if you live near ... up near Livingstonia, there's no real reason to own a car unless it's a four-wheel drive, because you can't get down the mountain, and there's not really anything to drive to (at the top of the mountain), you can just walk around this area. Umm, and so that's another one of the reasons that we didn't have that typical bustle like you talked about in normal African towns, that it's a lot quieter here 'cause there's really no transport, there's no cars up here.

Wendy: Yeah, which also, you know, contributes to the time warp feeling, where it feels like you are back a hundred years ago when these buildings were first built,

⁸ a bunch of: quite a lot of

⁹ switchback: 180 degree turn on a road going up or down a hill or mountain

¹⁰ swaying: moving to and fro (or back and forth), often in a gentle manner but not this time!

and there were no cars then either. So, yeah, we're actually thinking about walking down to get down the mountain when we leave here, just because I think it'll be ... it'll take roughly the same time when you factor in the amount of time that you have to wait until another pick-up comes along. And then they're going really slowly and they usually stop and break down at some point along the way. Umm, so, yeah, cars are not terribly useful in Livingstonia.

Nick: Yep, so we'll try to walk down tomorrow. We'll see how that goes and then we'll head back south again to Lilongwe and then we'll continue into Zambia.

Comprehension Questions

1. What are the two main features of Livingstonia that make it stand out from other African villages, according to Nick and Wendy?
2. Why did the Scottish missionaries choose the site of Livingstonia for their settlement?
3. Why did Nick have trouble at the beginning of the last leg of the trip to Livingstonia?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. We had to take five planes to go from Australia to Malawi. The last _____ was the shortest one.
2. I was trying to hail a taxi from the side of the road when one of my friends _____ be driving past, so she gave me a lift.
3. The main tourist attractions in Barcelona are quite _____. You might have to take a taxi or public transport to reach some of them.
4. After my bag was stolen, I had to file a police report, cancel all my credit cards and get a new passport. The whole thing was quite an _____.
5. We're going to need to buy _____ avocados to make guacamole for the party this weekend. We have 25 guests coming!
6. The two cars crashed into each other on a _____ turn halfway up the hill because neither could see the other and they didn't beep their horns.
7. It was a cool autumn afternoon and the trees were _____ in the breeze. As they did so, their leaves began to fall to the ground.
8. I left my camera in the hotel just before taking a 12-hour bus. I hope they can send it to me in the post so that we don't have to _____ to get it back.
9. After she gains enough experience in the field, she would like to _____ her own charity to help feed needy people all over the world.
10. With its old American cars and lack of modern development, Cuba sometimes feels like a 1950s _____.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Do you think you would like to visit Livingstonia? Why or why not?
2. Do you know anyone who has ever contracted malaria? If so, how serious was it?
3. Where is the worst road you have ever been on? What was it like?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. That it has colonial-era public buildings built by Scottish missionaries, and that it is quieter than most African villages.
2. Because they had failed to establish a settlement at a lower altitude as a result of malaria.
3. Because he had to stand in the back of the pick-up truck and it was hard to keep his balance with all the bumps and turns.

Exercises

1. leg
2. happened to
3. spread out
4. ordeal
5. a bunch of
6. switchback
7. swaying
8. retrace our steps
9. found
10. time warp