

Malawi may be one of the smallest countries in Africa, but to two British couples, it is a place of enormous beauty and promise

Why Clapham lost out to Chikale . . .

Illustration: EMMA SUTHERLAND

FOR MY husband Paul and me, 10 years of London life had become intolerable — the weather was grim, and the once up-and-coming Clapham street where we had bought our flat seemed to have become the frontline for crack dealing.

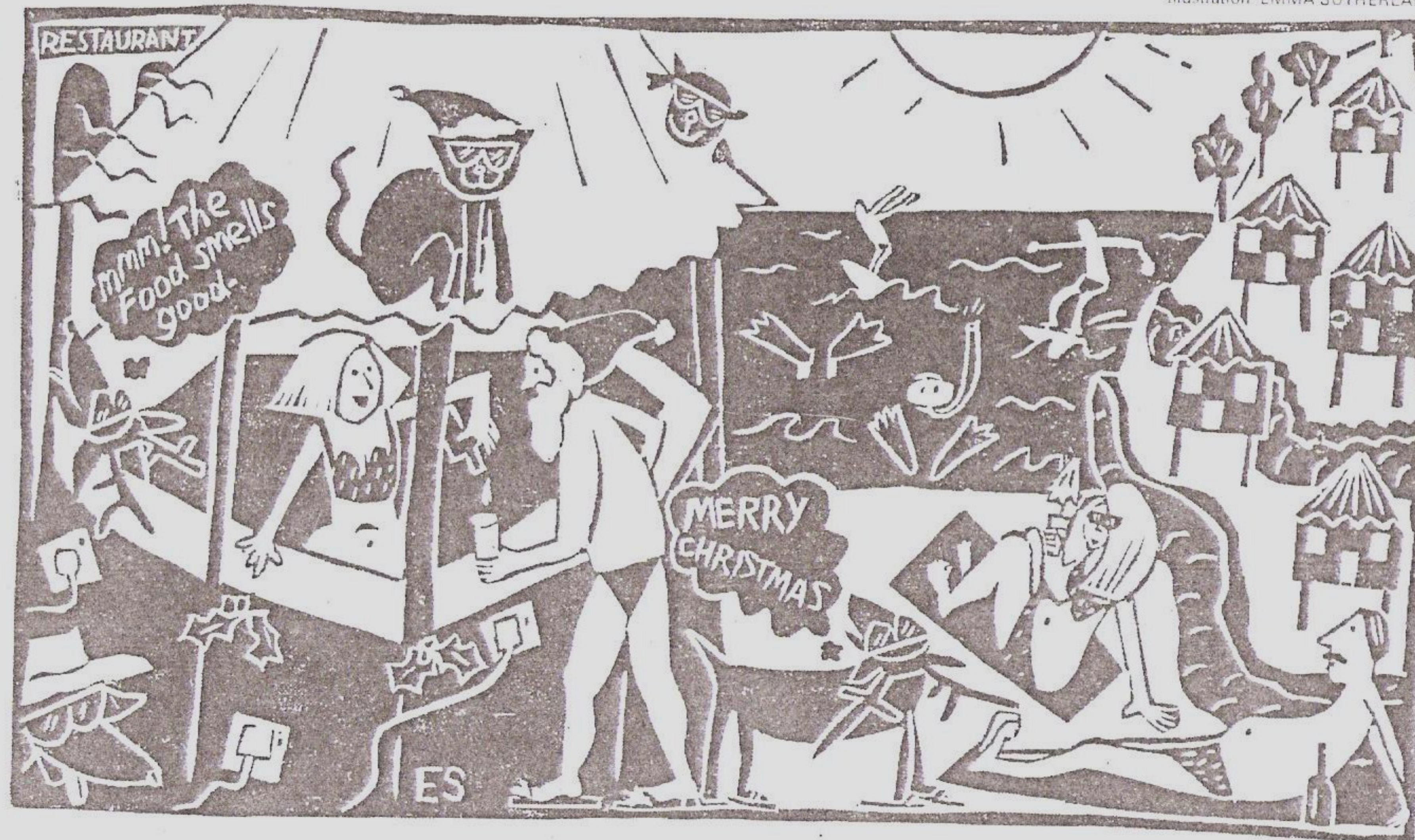
Above all, our lives weren't going in the right direction, despite us both having comfortable and occasionally stimulating jobs.

Paul had always been adamant that he wanted to live abroad, and it was a natural decision for us to spend the next few years travelling at every possible opportunity — to see if the grass really was greener on the other side.

It turned out that our travels took us to Thailand, where we were bowled over by the wonderful places to stay — beautiful but simple wooden chalets on stilts on every beach, with sumptuous bars and restaurants. This was the sort of business we instinctively felt we could run ourselves, but not in Thailand — we were 10 years too late.

We plunged straight into an atlas, researched possible countries in business libraries, and then wrote sheaves of letters to governments all over the world inquiring about setting up a business. Some didn't even reply, but others did and we started to get very positive responses from Africa.

So it was that three years ago we set off for the "dark continent" and travelled to Kenya, Zanzibar, Tanzania



and finally Malawi — the country which had shown the most promise.

Not until the last few days of our holiday did we stumble upon Chikale Beach, near the small town of Nkhata Bay on Lake Malawi. We found ourselves in a sandy cove with crystal clear warm water (and excellent snorkelling) shielded by tall hills carpeted with green forest. So beautiful, popular with camping

travellers, yet virtually untouched by the outside world.

We knew instantly that this was the place, and we set about trying to find some land that would be suitable to build a hotel on. After a meeting with the village headman he led us to a perfect plot on a hill overlooking the beach. We shook hands with him there and then. I don't think either of us had ever been so sure of anything in our lives.

Leaving somewhere you have lived all your life is hard — saying goodbye to family and friends was heart-wrenching — but we knew

that if we didn't take this opportunity now perhaps we never would. Surely the saddest thing must be to grow old with regrets. Anyway, if it all went horribly wrong we could always come back, we told ourselves. There was nothing to lose.

We rented a basic house near our plot of land, found a foreman, and started building immediately, based on rough plans that we'd had drawn up back in England.

On Christmas Eve 1995 the electricity was connected to the bar and we opened for business on Christmas Day with a huge party.

received are to be trusted — the view from our bar is one of the most beautiful in Africa.

What matters to us most of all, though, without sounding too "right-on", is that we can employ as many people as possible. We currently have more than 25 hotel staff, and when we put our prices up it is so that we can put their wages up. We wouldn't feel justified in running a business here if we couldn't put something back into the community. Even a little goes a long way in Africa.

Meanwhile, we have built ourselves a stone house overlooking the bay, as we feel it is essential to make a proper home for ourselves.

We've met some amazing people in the short years we have been here — a huge mixture of nationalities from all walks of life. We have learnt things that never would have been possible in London. And above all, we have been able to watch our dream become reality.

Of course there are disadvantages — we have both had malaria (although there are very few mosquitoes) and sometimes the slow pace of life can get frustrating. But the advantages far outweigh these problems — waking up with the sound of surf crashing on the beach, sunshine every day, having animals (three dogs and two cats) which can roam freely, wearing bikinis and flip-flops all the time, being surrounded by nature, meeting an exotic range of people... the list is endless.

What may come next is anyone's guess, but for now, at least, we have found our niche.

Claire Norish

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