

Community Tourism Strengthening Communities Through Climbing

Climb Malawi is an innovative initiative that combines adventure tourism with community empowerment. By offering trekking experiences, Climb Malawi allows people to explore the natural beauty of the region while supporting local communities and promoting sustainable tourism practices. Ed Nhlane from Climb Malawi discusses the organization's approach and impact, highlighting its unique method of combining adventure with social responsibility.

Tell us a little about yourself.

I was born and raised here in Malawi. At Climb Malawi, I'm one of the volunteers. I joined in early 2018, just a few months after the initiative started. Back then, I connected with a Canadian expatriate named Tyler Algeo, who had moved to Malawi with his family. As an expat, he noticed a significant divide between locals and non-Malawians and wondered how people from different backgrounds could truly come together.

As a passionate climber, Tyler built a climbing wall in his backyard using equipment he had brought from North America. Initially, it was just for his personal use, but eventually, he started inviting others to join. This sparked a community that bridged various divides, and soon people from all walks of life—both Malawians and expats—were climbing together. It was incredible. Many thought we were crazy because this wasn't a typical activity associated with Black Malawians, but it was fun. His vision was, "*What if I could use climbing to break down these barriers and create a platform where people could connect?*" Over time, the people you'd meet while climbing were no longer categorized. Everyone was welcome.

How has climbing in Malawi evolved to become more inclusive for the local community?

If you look at the history of rock climbing in Malawi, it was always practiced by visitors from Europe, America, and Australia. They would come to Malawi, explore this wonderful landscape, go on impressive climbing tours, and then leave. There was a gap between the potential for climbing here and the actual effort to establish it locally.

The climbing groups that formed between the 1960s and 1980s were primarily composed of white people living in Malawi. But gradually, more Malawians took an interest in climbing, and the vision shifted. We started developing natural rock climbing, and the response was overwhelming. It was simply about being in a space where no one judged or measured you against any standard. People felt liberated, and that was the same feeling I had when I first joined.

Here, you'll find people who work as tailors, often earning very little, climbing alongside those with the best education from the most prestigious universities—some with doctorates. But no one knows anyone's background beyond the shared goal of being friends. This friendship and partnership we build here are all that matter.

We envisioned a space where we could all meet and foster relationships and a sense of community. For Malawians who cannot afford to travel abroad, this offers a unique opportunity to experience the world without leaving the country; they can encounter diverse cultures. For visitors, it's the perfect way to immerse themselves in Malawian people, culture, and language—engaging directly and experiencing local customs firsthand.

As Climb Malawi grew, more people wanted to join, but climbing isn't a cheap sport. The biggest challenge is often the gear: harnesses, climbing shoes, and so on. Life in Malawi is tough, and you can't simply tell someone they can participate without the right equipment. That's why Climb Malawi operates on a nonprofit and donation-based model. Suggested contributions are low, but everyone is welcome regardless of their ability to pay. Members can earn their membership through small tasks at the climbing center. Those who can afford more are encouraged to donate extra to cover costs and keep the community thriving. This approach has made climbing more accessible and created an inclusive community where people connect and grow through their shared passion.

That's a beautiful mission. Do you have a favorite moment related to climbing or the connections where background didn't matter?

About a year ago, we were thinking about the next step for our community. We had some young participants in training who had reached a certain level of experience. So, those of us in leadership roles stepped back to let things unfold and gave the younger members the chance to take on responsibilities themselves.

We were thrilled to see that they didn't feel inferior just because they might not have the same education or background as others. They confidently expressed their opinions: *"I think this and that is the best for us."* It showed us that we had made a significant impact on their lives. They realized that their contributions were just as valuable as anyone else's.

For the average Malawian, attending university is often unattainable. But in this space, people can interact with others who have different perspectives and mindsets. Through these connections, individuals help each other out of difficult situations, such as supporting one another with tuition fees. Nobody asked them to do this, and it wasn't mandatory—they simply wanted to contribute to the community. It's about more than meeting up, climbing, and going home at the end of the day.

That's a very sustainable approach to focusing on people in the community. At Climb Malawi, women are taking on roles traditionally reserved for male climbers. How has that relationship evolved, and what roles do they play?

Our goal is to use rock climbing as a tool for empowering women and fostering community development, helping young girls take control of their lives. It's been challenging, but we've persevered, and many are willing to invest their time and resources.

We've realized that rock climbing can attract tourists, so we're developing climbing routes and training local guides. Although we're not yet selling climbing tour packages, we aim to ensure that any financial benefits remain in Malawi. It's important for local communities to see tangible advantages from tourism, which is why we emphasize building strong relationships and promoting local economic participation as we develop climbing infrastructure and community connections.

When I talk about relationship-building to create a supportive environment, it's about fostering a space where making mistakes is okay. If someone laughs, it's in solidarity—because we're all having fun, and we know success often comes after trying new things and failing about 75% of the time. This environment helps those who may feel excluded to give their best. We see this daily when we climb together, sharing challenges and supporting each other.

Initially, we noticed significant differences in confidence levels, particularly between a girl from Europe and a Malawian girl who might need more encouragement. That's why we started offering women-only sessions to help those who still felt hesitant. In these sessions, women felt more relaxed and willing to try things without fear of judgment. Strong catalysts within these groups encouraged others to keep going. When even the strong fail sometimes, it shows that everyone faces challenges, just on different levels.

In our sessions, we climb collectively without formal trainers; everyone learns from each other. If I notice someone struggling, I might suggest a technique that helped me. This broadens our understanding and allows us to share knowledge. It's empowering to go from someone struggling to someone who helps others succeed.

That's truly inspiring. One last question: What does a truly fair future look like for you and your community?

Our vision has always been for Malawians to be the face of the community. What we often see in Africa is that climbing communities in other countries lack true representation of their local culture. People might live there, but they don't have a genuine connection to the place.

What does that say about what we're trying to achieve? Our vision has always been to welcome everyone into our community, but we never want a situation where Malawians—the very people this initiative is for—feel out of place.

That's why it's about creating an environment and a community where Malawians can take on leadership roles. At the end of the day, we need people who understand both the dynamics of the outside world and the local context and who are committed to their country.

In an ideal world, we'd have a community led by Malawians but open to everyone. Then all our differences wouldn't matter at all.

Interview conducted by Henriette Meyer