

Exploring Cameroon countryside's with regards to African cultural heritage

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The trip to Cameroon this summer has been an experience filled with stories and immersion into the West African culture. It gave an opportunity to observe and study local arts and customs in anglophone and francophone regions of the country. What is more, it presented a rare chance to take a look at the changing people's attitudes and ways of life that are unique to Cameroon's past and geographical position.

Upon landing in the second-largest city Douala, one of the first things that caught my attention was the crisp quality of the air. One could breathe the fresh breeze and feel the pleasant temperatures that vastly differed from those in southern Europe. The rainy season had just ended and left Cameroon with a spectacular variety of seemingly never-ending tones of green.



A local businessman and couchsurfing host Dagobert picked me up from the airport and took me to his office in Douala center, where a monthly gathering for Cameroon leaders was taking place. It has been a privilege to sit around the table and listen to some of the brightest Cameroonians from the fields business, academia and public discuss their visions for the country. The passion with which they talked about the future and opportunities was contagious and made it an inspiring place to start the journey.





After the meeting we went to Dagobert's basic and cozy family home, where I stayed for the next couple of days, talking to the people, accompanying the family with their daily chores, such as washing, food preparation and trips to the market. On Sunday the three children in their Sunday best invited me to join them in a local church, where 18-20 year old church leaders put immense enthusiasm in creating interactive environment for the youngsters: singing and dancing throughout the mass and organizing the games after the religious celebrations.



Religion plays a significant role in the life of most children here – with most of their days occupied with going to school and making a large contribution to their family well-being, it is exhilarating for them to be in a worry-free environment, filled with enthusiastic youth who are concentrating on making it the best possible experience for the children.

My next stop took me to the capital city Yaounde, where a local high school graduate Ngassam met me at the bus station. When we went to his family home, the household, consisting of a grandmother, sister, her children, their uncle and Ngassam's brother, all accepted me into their midst with utmost kindness.



As there is no public transport in Yaounde, one has to use shared taxis to get around. Drivers here take a rather creative approach to driving and do not mind going at the side of the road, overtake cars with the closest of distances at same time managing to keep up a conversation with two passengers squeezed in the front seat.





The city itself has beautiful examples of post-colonial modernist architecture, especially when it comes to different governmental buildings. The cultural life is abundant in comparison to Douala. I went to quite numerous public libraries who had choir and dance rehearsals, as well as arts workshops, all quite welcoming to locals and foreigners alike. Walking during the day, I was impressed with how well the life is organized and how each street vendor seems to have his usual customers or how suited government workers blend in with the crowds.



The next day, Ngassam and I took a trip to the south of Cameroon towards the border with Gabon. By a mix of buses and hitchhiking, we spend two days on the road, and met various people, the most memorable of which was a military colonel, who told us extensively how Cameroon is preparing for Boko Haram situation in Nigeria. In fact, during our 800km trip, we were stopped 12 times by the military who wanted to check our IDs and passports because of civil unrest in the north of the country.



Later I continued my journey towards to the east and visited Abong-Mbang, a small town with plenty of local NGOs, where a Peace Corps volunteer Matt who had worked here for two years had invited me to stay and explore local arts and crafts.



It was quite different being in a small village as opposed to a bigger city, such luxuries as always working electricity or running had to be forgotten. However because of a local contact, I ended up seeing the inside of the local organizations, visited community craft centers in the nearby villages and spent long evenings talking about the issues in Cameroonian society with Matt.



We visited a local hospital, which I thought to be a gated oasis in the midst of chaos, with sparsely spaced buildings and a funeral home where four days per week, up to 10 burials per day took place. It was one of the first realizations of high mortality rate, especially in the rural areas due to malnutrition, untreated malaria and violence. The funerals were beautiful – an event where all family even from the most distant regions would come together and talk about their loved one and let them go in a customary way.





During my stay in Abong-Mbang, I met and became friends with another Peace Corps volunteer Laura who had worked as a social worker here and discussed at length the communal approach to money in most households, prevalent domestic violence in families and acceptance of 'living today' because the future is often too uncertain.



I went back to Yaounde with a regional judge from the east of the country, who has been studying international law alongside his duties in the court. We have talked about how the legal framework is interpreted and how much it depends on country's colonial history.



Cameroon has taught me more than I could have imagined before going. Its young, ambitious and communal society is often organized around family units and religion, with both Christianity and Islam practiced throughout the country. The good relations between the religious communities are especially relevant today as Boko Haram's Islamist group carried out numerous attacks on civilians near Nigeria and it is no longer allowed to travel in the northern parts of the country, which had an impact on the planned itinerary. Overall, Cameroon has been a rewarding and welcoming country to independently travel in and offered valuable experiences and overview of life in West Africa.

