

November, 2012

Cameroon

Due to a somewhat amazing piece of luck, alignment of the stars or whatever, we have landed in Cameroon. A few months ago Anzie broadcasted our newly revised website – 167water.com – to friends and family around the world. One of the many persons who responded was our friend and my former boss at the American Embassy in Dakar, Senegal, Chanh Nguyen. He asked Anzie if she still did training.

As head of training for the Peace Corps in Senegal and six other West African countries, Anzie also conducted training in Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" for Embassy personnel. Among the participants were Chanh's wife, Fara, and Babs Jackson. At the time, Babs and I were members of an acting troupe that put on plays for the ex-pat community. Babs' husband, Robert Jackson, was Deputy Chief of Mission, or Vice-Ambassador. Rob was born in Amesbury, the next town over from Newburyport. They visited us in Newburyport two years ago. This all happened during the years 2003-06. Last year Rob Jackson was appointed Ambassador to Cameroon. Talk about the Small World Syndrome!

Anzie replied to Chanh's question in the affirmative. She then received a request from Embassy Human Resource Office to conduct not only Seven Habits training but Customer Service training for Embassy staff. After much communication and considerable work on Anzie's part, the contract was ironed out and approved. Besides the challenge of putting a successful program together, we had two big incentives. The first was to see Chanh and Fara again after six years. The last time we saw them Fara was extremely pregnant with twins. Fara is blessed with a slender build. She looked like a straw with an olive stuck in it. The second was for Anzie to return to Cameroon where she had been a PCV from 1974 – 1975.

Our problems began after we received the approval. We had to get all of our immunizations up-to-date: yellow fever, typhoid, hepatitis. We started taking malaria pills. Cameroon is really Third World! Then Anzie broke her finger when she tripped on a rug in our house. She was fitted with a cast. Within 24 hours she knew the cast wasn't the answer. What with the 95 degree weather and 90% humidity in Cameroon, she would have all sorts of nasty things happening inside the cast. Plus she couldn't use a pen or a marker. How could she teach without a marker and a flipchart?

The alternative was surgery. Dr. Chang would insert pins to secure the bones. The advantage was that Anzie would end up with a small splint on her little finger. She could write!

Then along came Sandy. We were scheduled to depart Tuesday, October 30. Sandy was scheduled to arrive Monday the 29th. No one could predict how long it would last or how strong she would be. Anzie chose to leave on the 28th to be

sure she arrived on time. Chanh and Fara graciously invited her to stay at their place, since the govt. would only cover her expenses beginning Wednesday, November 1. She met the six-year-old twins, Jonathan and Christian. Jonathan looks like Fara; Christian looks like Chanh.

Chuck elected to stay with the original plan of leaving Tuesday. It was a good thing he did stay, because Sandy drove some serious wind and rain at the house. Just the week before Roy, our favorite contractor, had put his team to work sealing the rear exterior wall of our house. For years we had experienced severe leakage every time we had a Nor'easter. As always, the project took much longer than anticipated. They discovered structural defects and areas of rot. Remember, the house was built 1845. That equals over 150 years during which housing "remuddlers" could screw things up! At any rate, our team had the rear wall rebuilt and sealed by the time Sandy arrived. The only step missing was new siding. Sandy proved a good test. She pointed out a few defects that could easily be remedied before re-siding.

Chuck went to bed Monday night with Sandy still blowing strongly. He awoke Tuesday morning to an almost dead calm. He felt pretty good about himself and his decision to maintain the course ... until he opened up his e-mail. There was a message from Delta that his Boston-Paris flight was canceled; a message from Anzie confirming same; a phone call from Axel saying the same thing. Chuck realized that, even though the weather didn't look too bad, around 17,000 flights had been cancelled. Who knows how long it would take to straighten out that mess?

Delta's message said that Chuck should call to arrange an alternate flight. He was pessimistic; Delta/Air France had only three flights each week between Paris and Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon. When he finally reached a customer service rep, she seemed confused. Chuck was put on hold for five minutes. When she returned, she gave him the news: the original info was bogus. The flight would leave Boston on schedule. You've never heard such whoopin' and hollerin'. He was right all along. What a smart guy!

Welcome to Cameroon

Chuck knew nothing about Cameroon except that Anzie spent one year there in 1975-76. Where is Cameroon? If you can picture Africa as a torso, Cameroon is located right in the armpit. It's surrounded by two bodies of water and six countries. The waters: the Bay of Guinea to the south, which empties into the Atlantic, and Lake Chad to the north. The countries: Nigeria, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Like most African countries, Cameroon has seen European rulers: first Germany, then France and England. The two major languages are still French and English. However, 240 other tribal languages still exist, as well as the same number of tribes.

Cameroon is so African. Try to pronounce the names of cities. Yaounde is the capital; Douala is the main seaport and commercial center; Abong Mbang is the town where Anzie was stationed in the Peace Corps.

The climate ranges from hot and humid rain forest in the south to hot and dry savannah to the north. We understand that Lake Chad is drying up due to desertification. Actually Yaounde is comfortable because of the altitude – 2500 ft. The rainy season is about to end, and everything is a lush green. This is the view from our hotel balcony over the city.



The population is primarily Christian. Muslims constitute 40%. Alcohol is popular here. There are two major breweries: Guinness and Brasserie. Guinness makes a Sam Adams-type lager called Foreign Extra. I just heard an amazing statistic. More champagne is consumed per capita in Cameroon than in any other country in the world. Go figure!

The people of Cameroon are laid back and love to laugh. Americans complain that it's difficult to convey to Cameroonian co-workers a sense of urgency. Anzie was fortunate to hook up with two Cameroonian friends who were teachers with her while she was in Peace Corps 37 years ago. Nanko is head of consulting firm that focuses on agricultural development. Michael is retired Inspector General of Pedagogy. He oversaw the teaching of English in the Cameroon secondary school system. He also wrote many school books for teaching English. We had dinner at Nanko's home last Sunday with both men and their lovely wives, and also visited Michael's home. We've invited them to join us for dinner this Friday at a local restaurant along with Chanh and Farah. We feel very lucky to see these old friends and have the opportunity to break bread with them.

Our Mission

Anzie's contract was to provide training in Customer Service, Steven Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" and Ken Blanchard's "Situational Leadership". The primary emphasis was on Customer Service, which she taught in two three-hour classes each day for four days. She also taught two four-hour classes for two days on the Seven Habits and Situational Leadership. Chuck assisted as "beast of burden", carrying bags and equipment, flipchart preparer, room organizer and role play participant.



Attendees ranged from maintenance staff to drivers to Consular and Political officers. The role plays were especially revealing. Anzie instructed participants to create role plays that involved realistic customer service situations. For example, a Cameroonian seeks an American visa and boasts of his/her “friends in high places”. An Embassy official calls the motor pool and demands a vehicle and driver forthwith, causing a scheduling conflict. These role plays were well done and revealed some issues that will be addressed.

The evaluations were very positive. One comment that came up repeatedly: “I now understand that I can say ‘No’, as long as you add ‘but I will find you the answer or someone who can help you.’ said it in a nice, positive way.”

Anzie even taught a group of Peace Corps Staffers. They responded with applause and laughter when she explained her experience in the Peace Corps in Abong Mbang, which is really considered “the bush”.

Anzie trained a total of 133 people in classes ranging from 10 to 25. Everyone was pleased with the results, including Chanh and Amanda, head of Human Resources. Who knows? Perhaps other opportunities may arise in the future.

Politics Here and Abroad

I’m writing this the day after the Presidential Election in the U.S. Of course we’re delighted with the results; both Obama and Elizabeth Warren won. It is truly a great day for America! The Cameroonians took our election seriously. Many of them stayed up most of the night and/or woke up early to watch the results. Obama was heavily favored here. Our driver professed his amazement as to how rapidly the results were computed. “Here in Cameroon it often takes as long as three months to get election results.” You have to realize that the President, Paul Biya, has been in office for 30 years.

Chanh wrangled an invitation for us to the home of the Deputy Chief of Mission for a post-election diplomatic celebration of the democratic process. The affair was held beneath a tent. Unfortunately it rained cats and dogs, lions and hippos; so we were all squeezed elbow-to-elbow under the rather small canvas. The proximity led to some interesting conversations with many new friends.

The first week-end in country, Chanh invited us to attend an off-site retreat with his team. Friday afternoon our convoy of two vehicles drove more than three hours to a cozy, but very simple, little resort located outside the town of Ebolowa. On the way we noticed a strong military presence as we passed through villages. We were stopped at a roadblock and directed to a side road. We waited there for a half hour until the President's entourage passed. President Biya was celebrating his 30th anniversary by visiting his native village.

Mr. Biya is building a house close to the U.S. Embassy. He also has the Presidential Palace on a hill close by. He is also reputed to have homes elsewhere, like in Switzerland, where he is reputed to spend about six months each year. Apparently President Biya speaks only French. He refuses to speak English. He won't visit the Anglophone region, nor will he visit the commercial/industrial center – Douala. Caveat: The info re President Biya is based on hearsay. I cannot vouch for its accuracy.

The Chinese Influence

China maintains a strong presence in Cameroon. The attraction has to be the natural resources. Gold, diamonds and other precious minerals are mined here. Oil rigs dot the Gulf of Guinea just off the coast. In exchange for allowing their commercial ventures, China has invested considerably in Cameroon's infrastructure. They have built a dam for hydroelectric power; they have constructed government buildings.

Here's an interesting story that is part of the street gossip. The Chinese built the massive Palais de Congress, the parliament building, which is located not far from the U.S. Embassy. Rather than hiring indigenous people to do the work, China imports their own. Some say that they give prisoners the choice of spending years abroad performing manual labor in lieu of jail time. It took several years to complete the Palais de Congress. Why? Some say that the Chinese discovered gold on the site. For many years they mined the gold and sent it back to China. The Chinese allegedly suffered many fatalities during the construction. Instead of burying their dead here in Cameroon, they returned the bodies to China. Some say that an inordinate number of coffins were air-freighted to China during the construction. Some say that these coffins contained gold rather than corpses.

The Chinese presence here in Cameroon called to mind other countries that we've visited where we saw a Chinese influence. We spent three winters on Costa Rica 2007-09. During our first visit we complained about the poor condition of the roads – potholes large enough to house a Vietnamese family of five. The next winter we noticed a marked improvement. It turns out that the Costa Rican government had severed relations with Taiwan, and welcomed the Republic of China with open arms. Over the next two winters highways were improved; bridges were built. Over in West Africa – Senegal and Mauritania – way back in 2003-06 the Chinese were building stadiums and schools.

The Chinese foreign aid policy affords them a two-fold advantage. First, it grants China access to the local government. This gives them the opportunity to become involved in the commercial/industrial potential of the country, as well as the opportunity to exploit the natural resources. Secondly, it allows China to reduce the pressure of their over-population. They can export workers and, at the same time, increase employment.

Corruption

As I entered the Yaounde airport customs area I saw a banner displayed overhead: “Lutte Contre Corruption”, “Fight Against Corruption”. To me this looked like a noble goal. In my experience corruption has been one of the biggest obstacles to development throughout West Africa. Unfortunately, within days I learned that corruption is as alive and well here in Cameroon as elsewhere. Everyone has their hand out. Everyone looks for ways to exploit their position. Foreign enterprises have explored the possibility of doing business in Cameroon, only to leave in disappointment due to the number of palms they find must be greased. USAID folded its tent some time ago for the same reason. Friend David: “You ask what time it is, the Cameroonian will extend his hand palm up expecting some sort of payment.” More on corruption later.

Marine Ball

Before we left for Cameroon, Chanh wrote me: “Bring your tux.” My first thought was that Cameroonian attire must be quite formal. Must be the British influence. Chanh went on to explain that the Marine Ball was happening during our stay. We remember attending the Marine Balls in Dakar. They’re a fun way to celebrate the birthday of the Marines: formal dress, fine cuisine, cocktails and wines, military honor guard, music and dancing. This year is their 237th birthday.



We sat with Chanh, Fara and an interesting group. Jean Marie runs the Brasserie brewery, which produces Castel and “33” Export. He and his wife Josette are about to move to Equatorial Guinea, where he will manage another brewery. We think that we might have known them in Dakar; our stays there

overlapped.

Chuck sat next to an attractive Cameroonian, Elvire Happi. She was raised as the daughter of a tribal king. Her father had eighty-five (85) wives and 120 children. Elvire met a sibling that she'd never met before at the Ball that night. Eighty-five wives! How on earth could a husband keep eighty-five wives happy? No thanks!

Elvire is a busy lady. She owns a construction company in the south of France. She also operates a wine and liquor importing concern in Yaounde.

We certainly missed not seeing Ambassador Robert Jackson and wife, Babs. However, old friends from Dakar, David and Lucia Ware, showed up at the Ball. David works in the shipping business with Maersk. While in Dakar, he did a wonderful job as a guest lecturer for my Marketing class at Suffolk University. They're close to Chanh and Fara, because both Lucia and Fara come from Madagascar.

A good time was had by all!

Goodbye to Yaounde

David and Lucia invited us to stay with them in Douala. We planned to leave the day after the Ball. We were all invited over to Chanh and Fara's for a farewell brunch in honor of Josette and Jean Marie. Chanh and Fara started cooking at 5AM that morning. They produced a veritable groaning board of Vietnamese and Madagascan dishes. What a feast!

Jean Marie is a good friend to the American Embassy community. He had contributed vast quantities of his products to Embassy functions over the years. Chanh presented him with an impressive proclamation which expressed the U.S. Embassy's appreciation for his outstanding service. In turn, Jean Marie gave each attendee a very handsome bottle opener. (Are they really gold-plated?)

Anzie and I tried our hardest to express our appreciation to Fara and Chanh for the wonderful hospitality they had showed us for the past two weeks. Words were just inadequate.

We bid our fond farewells, and took off with Lucia and David for Douala and further adventures.

Hang in there for our next chapter!

A la Prochaine!

Chuck & Anzie