

November, 2012

Cameroon – Douala and the Beach at Kribi

After two full weeks of working, training embassy staff, we were looking forward to a week of R&R. Little did we realize that our week would be filled with knowledge gathering about the good, the bad and the ugly parts of living in Cameroon combined with a plentiful dollop of serendipity.

We departed the house of friends Fara and Chanh for a drive to Douala with friends Lucia and David Ware. They have graciously invited us to stay at their home. David manages the affairs of Maersk Shipping, a Danish firm which is a leader in the field of containerized shipping around the world. David had the same position in Dakar, where we met. He then moved to Mauritania, just north of Senegal, where he soon established Maersk as a powerful presence in that country. He was then transferred to Douala, with a similar objective in mind. Unfortunately things weren't working out as well as he anticipated. More on this later.

Douala is located on the Bay of Guinea, which empties into the Atlantic Ocean. The population ranges 2-3 million, depending on whom you talk to. At any rate it exceeds the 1.8 million population of the capital city, Youande. It's the commercial capital of Cameroon and may well be the largest seaport in all of West Africa. Douala is normally a four-hour drive from Youande. Two things conspired against us. First, we left late; David wanted to leave by 2PM to avoid driving after dark. Second, it was the rainy season, and we ran into one of those Cameroonian storms where it rains cats and dogs and pigs and elephants: almost constant thunder and lightning; at times we couldn't see 25 feet in front of us. We finally get through that when we arrive in the outskirts of Douala, known as Le Petit Village, where it is raining people! It's pitch dark, and pitch black people are everywhere: walking, running, racing on all manner of conveyance. They act as if they're immortal, running or crossing in front of our car as if we didn't exist. We experienced several near misses, which we avoided, thanks to David's defensive driving.

We arrive in Douala at the house of a friend to pick up L. and D.'s son, Nathan. Finally, we're home just in time for a well-deserved stiff drink. David talks about The American School where Nathan goes. David is on the school board. He thinks has discovered that he's the only full-blooded American parent who's involved with the school. Most of the parents are Cameroonians who traveled to the U.S. with the sole purpose of having their baby on American soil. We have been told there are 10,000 Americans in Cameroun, a figure we could never believe. This explained it!

The next morning we find the living room floor covered with woven goods: hats, baskets, purses in multiple gay colors. Lucia imports these items from her native Madagascar. She invites women, primarily ex-pats, to her home to view and purchase these items. We recall that Fara, also from Madagascar, used to do the same thing in Senegal. Now Fara works at the U.S. Embassy.

After close of business – late morning, Lucia took us on a tour of downtown Douala. We visited several craft shops. One was a furniture store. Cameroon is covered with forests; the types of wood are amazing – multi-striped, multi-colored, multi-functional. Chuck tried to memorize the names without success; there are more than a dozen. We ran into these woods later in our travels. More on this later. In any case, they're magnificent.

We visited an outdoor craft market, where we bought several bottle openers of an ingenious design. They consist of a carved wooden handle at the end of which are partially inserted two screws. The screw tops fit underneath a bottle cap, and slight leverage removes the cap with ease. These can be elegant or simple, but the same concept applies. Everyone uses them, as we saw when we visited Anzie's former colleagues in Yaounde.

We toured the shoreline and port area. We stopped at a restaurant on the water's edge to verify that it was open. A young man from an adjacent restaurant attracted our attention. He was holding the largest shrimp that Anzie and Chuck had ever seen. We thought it was a langouste, a lobster without claws. But no, it was a gamba, the largest species of shrimp. One of these would make a substantial meal. It made us recall where Cameroon got its name. Portuguese fisherman discovered that the surrounding waters were filled with shrimp, or *cameroe*, the Portugese term.

We picked up David for lunch back at the restaurant – not the one with the huge gamba. We ate delicious, grilled, good-sized gambas and sea bass.



Before dinner that night Chuck played with Nathan. Nathan is a handsome, precocious, loquacious six-year old. He'll be a heartbreaker when he grows up. He bemoaned the fact that his two girlfriends have left school to return to their respective homes in Brazil and France. When he grows up he plans to travel to both countries to meet and marry both girls.

David looked tired. He explained that work has become a grind. His business is slow because he refuses to pay bribes. Unfortunately, Cameroon government and business appear to be based upon corruption from the top down. Everyone is looking for “the envelope”. David has been trying to dismiss an employee who refused a change of position. The employee, an official in the union, did nothing except try to build a case against David. David was called into an interview with a government official who accused him of racism. It even hit the papers. David was convinced that an “envelope” would make the whole problem go away, but he just could not. In Senegal and in Mauritania he made a success. Cameroon is a real frustration for him. He’s scheduled to move to a new location in late December, but has yet to hear where it’s to be. Despite the negative impact of the Cameroonian government, David is still a star in the eyes of Maersk corporate. He won the Efficiency Award in 2009 and 2011. He was also singled out as Top Performer in 2011.

David just that day discovered another swindle. His driver was cheating on him. Using the company credit card creates a monthly record of all charges by time and place. When David looked at the monthly bill he realized that his driver had been charging gas every day at the TOTAL station. In cahoots with a station attendant, the stolen gas had probably been put into containers and sold.

After two days in Douala, we took a taxi to a resort, La Ilomba, located on the Bay of Guinea near the town of Kribi, on the south coast of Cameroon. What a symphony of colors, sounds and aromas! Countless flowers: orchids and jasmine. Peacocks roam the property along with birds of many types. We fell asleep to the sound of surf. The twelve rooms are named after twelve types of wood that are found in the country. Lumber trucks are a common sight, and nuisance, on the highways.

The resort is owned and operated by Elizabeth. Her father is Swiss; her mother is Cameroonian. She went to hotel school in Switzerland. The tastefully decorated rooms located in cabins arranged around the central garden and dining room.

I asked a waitress where the pool was located. She pointed at the ocean. It looked brown to me. I waded in, gingerly, and swam a bit. About a half mile down the beach a freshwater river empties into the ocean along with tannin from upriver trees. Thus the brown tint to the ocean. Also, as we were in the rainy season, the amount of fresh water that gushed over the broad waterfall and into the ocean was so immense that at high tide the top layer of water was sweet. What a treat it was to bodysurf in fresh water.

On our first day I introduced myself to the bartender. I always think it’s good practice to befriend the bartender. When she heard my name was Kennedy, she smiled and said I had a relative working in the dining room. That evening I met

“Kennedy”. He’s a tall, dark and handsome Cameroonian. I suggested that we might be related. Many instances exist in the Cameroonian tribal system where a man fathers many children by different wives. I joked that perhaps we were brothers with the same father and different mothers. He laughed heartily, and we greeted each other as “mon frère” for the rest of the week.



Elizabeth, the hotel owner, also has a story about corruption. A few years back, after her family had purchased the property, government officials arrived to demand back beach taxes allegedly owed since before they acquired the property. With penalties and interest the amount ran into a couple of million francs. She knew it was a shakedown. That the amount was negotiable, depending upon the size of the “envelope”, but she refused to pay anything. As a result the government shut down the resort. She was forced to lay off her staff. Three months later, the government finally gave in and she was able to reopen, even though she hadn’t paid the bribe. If she wasn’t such a fountain of boundless optimism, the place would have closed long ago.

Elizabeth tried to organize the hotel and innkeepers in the area with an aim towards developing more clout in dealings with suppliers and the government. She discovered that she was paying much more for utilities – gas, electric, trash pickup – than anyone else. Why? Because they all paid bribes. What would you do?

And now, an amazing case of serendipity. On the morning of our scheduled departure, we were confronted by a lady. “I know you!,” says she. Turns out she’s Beth, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal when we were there. We also ran into her in D.C. at the Peace Corps 50th anniversary two years ago. Beth was staying at La Ilomba with her daughter and friends on their way back from a gorilla safari in the Central African Republic.

Back to Yaounde for two nights before our return trip home. We stayed with Femi. He’s a delightful, and extremely hospitable, Nigerian-American. He left Nigeria to visit his sister in New Jersey, and stayed, went to school and joined the Foreign Service. Femi has worked at a few posts. His family lived with him during his postings in Canada and South Africa. His wife and kids are living in the states though, as she is studying for an advance degree. Femi gets home as often as he can, and speaks daily with them through Skype.

No one will allow us to pay for a meal. We dined at a posh French restaurant, Oxypool, with Chanh, Fara and the boys. The next day we went out to breakfast with Femi. One hour later met Chanh for lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant. We ate excellent soup and nems. We met Fi, a friend of Chanh's who arrived in Cameroon back in 1979. "Back then nothing was developed, but everything worked. It took a while, but everything worked eventually. Now so much has been developed, but nothing works." The world according to Fi.

The next day we bid a fond adieu to Cameroon. Our flight home was a bear: 27 hours through Paris and Amsterdam and the concomitant security checks at every stop. At least we had each other to share the pain.

Cameroon's future? If the government could change their mentality from fast buck governance to farsighted development, the economy would expand through foreign investments and tourism. The natural resources are there: beaches, lush jungle, savannah with an abundant supply of wild animals, desert, even pigmies. But, until the leaders can see beyond their own noses, and wallets, and self-interests, it won't happen.

Still, for the adventurous traveler, it's worth the effort. And the price is right!

A la prochaine,

Anzie and Chuck

P.S. – Good news! David and Lucia Ware are being transferred to Colombia in early January, 2013.