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# Promiscuous

Cameroon, Gabon

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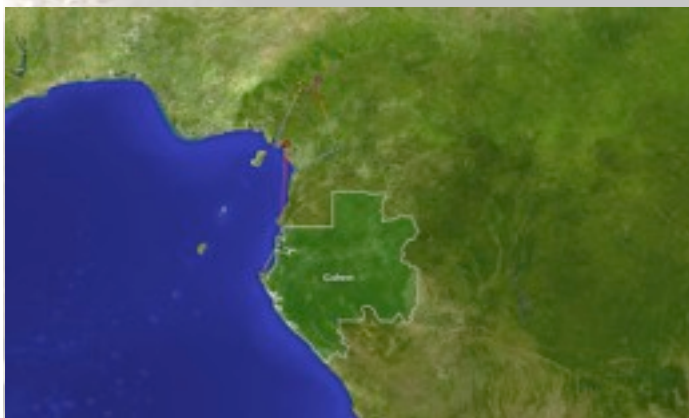


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## Foreword

A trip to Cameroon had been cooking on a slow burner for a number of years. At least since 2004, when I met a young traveller touring West Africa like me, who was getting himself organised for a trip to Yaounde; getting his visa sorted, gathering information from locals and other travellers. He was telling me about the mountains, the rugged landscape across the entire country, the lowland gorillas, the rainforest, brown beaches and the friendliness of the local tribes. I was hooked.

Then, the National Geographic channel, the Eden channel and the Travel Channel showed a number of programmes featuring Cameroon, including the Globetrekker. The question was not if but when to go.

Gabon was a slightly different deal. It had never carried enough appeal to lure me for some reason. That changed somewhat when I saw a cover of a travel guidebook featuring mandrills. And after seeing mountain gorillas in Zaire (DRC) back in 2005, I thought it was perhaps a good idea to see the lowland gorillas, too.

## Itinerary

Between 2006 and 2011, I went through a number of itineraries for a holiday in this part of the world. Some of them included Sao Tome & Principe and Equatorial Guinea. Logistics, however, never really allowed to squeeze all that I wanted to see into a three weeks holiday.

In addition, I learned online and from travel literature that Equatorial Guinea was not a very pleasant place to travel, where travellers were not welcome. So, I dropped the idea. It was Cameroon and Gabon only then.

Cameroon was relatively easy to plan. There was a lot of information online, most of which was relatively up-to-date. A number of hotels were showing up on search engines and on online travel and booking agents.

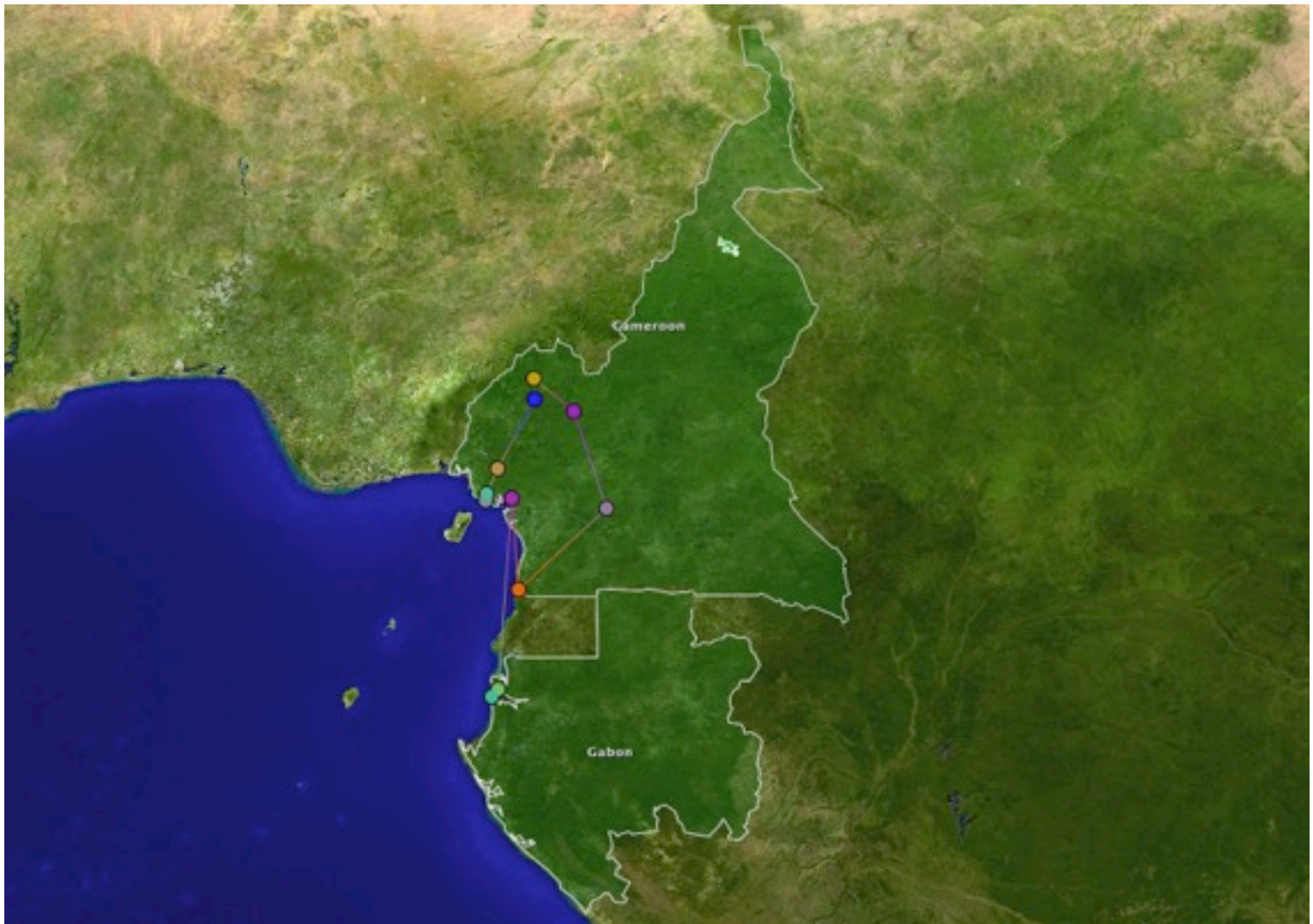
It took me about a week to decide where to go and what to see. This included the northern and southern coastal regions, the capital and the famous Ring Road in the mountains, part of the anglophone region of the country.

Gabon was different again. It was secretive. The net had very little data on what the current situation was, what national park was open, what transport worked, what the accommodation options were available, where was safe.

There were few travel agencies in the country and in France, which had websites with rather limited offer, all quoting stupid prices for very little. I managed to connect with a couple of guys on Facebook, who kindly forwarded a couple of websites containing hotel information for the whole country. They also gave me a few pointers and suggestions, particularly what to do for New Year's Eve.

But the logistics did not work well in Gabon. The train line for the Lope National Park was not working, the lodges and hotels in the park were closed and it was impossible to find out whether the park allowed any visitors at all.

Perhaps it worked out well after all. I could give Cameroon the role to take me places, so I could explore a little. And Gabon could just be the place to relax and party. So, my itinerary contained just the capital city of Libreville, Pointe Denis and Port Gentil.



# Cameroon 'Promiscuous'

Arriving in Cameroon and going through immigration and customs was swift and painless. There were no superfluous questions asked. However, the Douala airport, after 19:00 hours was almost completely shut down. There was nowhere to change money or use an ATM unit. That was the most discomforting aspect of the arrival, as the central African frank was not a currency that could be easily acquired in Europe. Although, it might have been in France, I do not know.

The airport taxi drivers were very keen to take a white tourist for the ride, though. The normal price for a trip to the centre of the city (which was not far, actually) was CFA2,500 but they kept asking CFA4,000 and more. One just had to be firm and ensure there were no other passengers taken in the car one was taking; for safety reasons.

By the way, the reasons why this part of the story is titled 'Promiscuous' are provided a few pages later.

## the Bodyguard

I did not have to worry about that, though. I had arranged for a bodyguard! His name was Oscar. He was a gentle and kind giant - the current national champion in bodybuilding. He looked rather intimidating, and that was the whole point. But he was a good lad, religious and caring for his daughter.

This was the second time that year that I opted for a local guide like that. The first time was in the Brazilian city of Salvador a few months before the trip to Cameroon, where I was also landing during the hours of darkness. It worked very well. I got picked up, driven to a safe hotel and taken to a party full of locals and travellers straight away.

Before this particular scheme, I usually let myself find the way to a hotel on my own, facing the airport taxi drivers or plunging to the adventure of a local transport, and met locals afterwards. Sometimes, it took a

couple of days. Sometimes just a few hours or immediately I left the hotel. Eventually, I saw no difference meeting locals straight away. If it was not going to work out, due to personality clash, for any other reason, it was still easy to simply walk away.

Oscar, and his mate, came to pick me up from the airport. We took one of the taxis. Fare negotiations were short.

The ride was short. This was perhaps owing to a lack of traffic at that time of night. The hotel, Prince de Galle, was not bad at all. The large suite on the fourth floor cost me CFA90,000, which was a bit extravagant, I have to admit. I stayed in much better places around the world for a bit less... But as it turned out Oscar and his mate were actually from Yaounde and not from Douala. It was better that they stayed the night. It worked out cheaper to take a suite with two bedrooms and a living room.

The suite was clean and spacious. The two bathrooms were modern and included a bidet, which was a standard in most better hotels in Cameroon. The bar downstairs was cool, but not very lively, and it seemed that it was frequented by 'working girls'. A couple of hours in the bar and ... the guys decided to join me for a part of my trip. They were both very funny, spoke the local languages





and were perfect as a very effective deflector shield against any trouble, hustling and unwanted company.

## Douala to Limbe

Although I was prepared to brave public transport from Douala to Limbe in the morning, it took me too long to get organised with the money business, e.g. finding a working cash dispenser in the centre of Douala. So, I eventually picked up a private taxi from one of the junctions, right at the centre. The lads were not from Douala, so they could not provide any directions themselves. We had to ask a few people, but there were, strangely, few people around at that time.

The trip took me via dense forest of palm trees, woods of very graceful looking trees, and never ending banana plantations. It was a very pleasant ride. The green scenery resembled forested areas of Europe, actually; a single lane road amongst green fields and the forests in near distance. The journey took just over an hour and cost me CFA15,000. Not a bad value for money after all. I had two bodyguards with me, so public transport would not cost me that much less and would have taken considerably longer.

I counted about seven checkpoints, where the Police tried to extract money from the motorists and travellers. Fortunately, I was not stopped once. Otherwise, the trip would have taken much, much longer. And might have cost a lot more, who knows.

## Idenau

I was a bit unimpressed that the hotel I booked was actually not in Limbe, but in Idenau, some 10 miles farther west, towards the mountains. Despite its name and description on its website. I actually wanted to stay in Limbe, so I could be closer to the local community, sights and hopefully some action.

There was no action around the hotel after sunset. Fortunately, it was Sunday, so the Seme Beach, which the hotel owned, was packed with people. They lounged in the shaded areas, sipping beers and soft drinks. Lads and a couple of gals kicked football, loads of people did some body surfing, and some of the locals dived into the nearby river, which in part run in parallel to the shoreline.

All this combined with a seafront full of benches and shaded sitting areas around

stone tables. And there was a paved beachfront with planted palmtrees. It had two bars and a grill, where one could order freshly cooked food. Very civilised indeed.

It was great to observe how the Cameroonians had fun. The beach had a colour of milk chocolate! The sand was fine and it looked incredible. One could walk along the beach for miles. But the tides were crucial. At low tide, the beach was wide and definitely doubled for a full size football pitch. But at the low tide, almost all of it was swallowed by the ocean.

The sunset dimmed by the dust brought by the Harmattan wind all the way from the Sahara, looked like nothing else. It actually started to get seriously dark way before the disc touched the horizon. The chocolate colour sand of the beach reflected the sun and the sky nicely, particularly in the part washed with the waves of the Atlantic.

The hotel charged CFA35,000 for a two-room suite with two bathrooms. It was nothing special though, and it was clear that the hotel had seen much, much better days.

It also had a good number of bungalows on the way to beach. By the way, the venue charged the non-residents CFA1,500 to use the beach, including infants and toddlers!

## Limbe

I took a short trip from the Seme Beach Hotel in Idenau to Limbe. I wanted to withdraw some more money for the car hire for the next three days. And I also wanted to check what I was missing by staying so far from the town.

As I walked to Limbe, I passed by the last lava flow following the eruption of Mount Cameroon. The lava had destroyed the road I was using, and they had to build a bypass. The site was open for visiting. It cost CFA1,500 to enter and CFA500 on top to take pictures. I did not enter, thinking that I could probably cover the site on the way back.

Soon after the lava flow, I spotted a black mamba by the road. The snake was moving very fast, as I might have spooked it. Black mambas are generally aggressive and can attack when they feel threatened. Other snakes just run away. This one, but the road did want to attack me actually, as it started to move quickly from the roadside bushes onto the road. I managed to jump away to the middle of the road and the reptile gave

up. Perhaps realising that it achieved its objective.

Limbe enjoyed a reputation of one of Cameroon's tourist centres. The other was Kribi in the south of the country. It had attractive beach and seafront but the tourism infrastructure was not very obvious, or was almost totally invisible at all. I would expect hotels right by the beach, I could not spot anything. Strange.

Well, perhaps the beach was not the reason why tourists came to Limbe. Perhaps it was the active volcano, reportedly one of the easiest peaks of its size to reach in Africa. Mount Cameroon, the highest peak in West Africa was visible (allegedly) from Limbe as its proximity to the ocean was astonishing. Yet, when I visited, weather prohibited any sighting of this spectacular view. Which was a real shame, as literature and the net is full of praise of this sight.

Limbe centre and waterfront had a few examples of colonial architecture. Nothing particularly spectacular, yet curious fusion of tropical frame built around French, British and German structural and facade concepts. But one has to be careful when photographing them, as they housed

governmental institutions. When I visited, Cameroon was still rather paranoid and authorities prohibited photographing official governmental buildings, local authorities seats, military and police force camps and approaches, presidential and ministerial residences, airports, harbours, bridges, telecom and industrial installations, anything too pretty and anything too ugly. Go figure, where you can pull out your camera!

I normally do not attend zoological gardens. But this one in Limbe came highly recommended as it was more of a primates preservation centre rather than a zoo. The apes had more space to move, jump, lounge or snooze than a typical African zoo. It was also an education centre telling the locals and visitors not to buy bush meat and to protect the gorillas, drills, mandrills, chimps and other monkeys. The ticket revenue came to the rescue operations and to feed the saved apes.

The centre had a lovely cafe serving cold beers, fantastic baguette-based sandwiches, and decent pizzas. The cafe was endorsing a local artist, whose paintings were very intriguing and clever. Had this been the end of my holiday, rather than the beginning, I would have acquired a couple of paintings or





drawings! If you are in town and like original art, do not miss this place.

Many hotels near Limbe were out of town in the westerly direction. Most of which were inaccessible by public transport. And one would have to hire a moto taxi (the backseat of a motorbike or a scooter) or a private taxi. The coastal road did not run close to the coast all the way. And therefore there was still quite a hike to the beach from it. Not ideal, if you have not made a reservation and would want to check a few venues before deciding where to sleep.

The only bank in Limbe whose ATM was giving money was the Societe Generale. And its ATM booths were fully air conditioned. Which was cool.

The beach in Limbe also had a nicely developed seafront with benches, which were in fact popular. Locals sat down, rested, couples held hands, traders took breaks. The beach had three sections. One for swimming or relaxing. The other was for fishing, fish trading and repairing nets and boats. And the last one was used as an extension of a fishing community. This is where boys played football. Just on the edge of the fishing beach, there were a couple of beach restaurants.

Just on the edge of the fishing beach, there were a couple of beach restaurants. I checked the Chez Charlotte. They had good,

ice-cold draft lager, and a few items on the food menu. The spot seemed very popular with Cameroonians. They tucked in the local dishes, and seriously enjoyed them. It was not a dirt-cheap place, with almost European prices, and considering that an average salary in Cameroon was CFA80,000 (£100 or €120) per month, they would have to be relatively well off to be able to afford to splurge on CFA1,000 bottles of beer.

The venue had a terrace with a few sturdy tables and a handful of plastic tables and chairs directly in the black volcanic sand of the beach. It was a superb spot for the sunset and to watch the fishermen return from the sea or getting ready, or pushing their vessels into the water. And every now and again a boy with a horse would appear selling rides or sit on the horse and snap, both for CFA500.

I chatted to one of the local girls sitting at the table next to mine. She was from Douala. But she had moved to Limbe to pursue a singing career with a few of the venues catering for travellers, hotels, restaurants, bars and night clubs. She was rather nice, although I would have to say that I did not fully agree with her philosophy for life. We chatted long after sunset.

Limbe, apparently, boasted a good number of night spots. I passed by a few, but I did not check any of the clubs. Instead, I partied on the beaches at the beachside bars.

In addition to those at and near the beach, there were countless booths selling drinks and snacks where locals converged for a chat after sunset. As the sun disappeared behind the horizon and it got dark very quickly (there was no twilight in Cameroon - too close to the equator), the town's life appeared to begin. Not just the nightlife. The life itself. Perhaps the locals considered daylight and sunlight too much 'in your face' or too hot to leave the house. In the dark, perhaps it was easier to hide any bodily imperfections and feel more adequate and free. Trading, gossiping, drinking, street music playing, traffic - all picked up at night.

So, I eventually did not get to see the old lava flow on the way back.

## Limbe to Bamenda

The next day, I had to go to Kumba to pick up the hire car. It was about 90 minutes from Limbe to Kumba on a very nice road. I used public transport from Limbe's bus station. The minibus left relatively quickly. Perhaps within half an hour. The whole ticket business was a bit confusing at the beginning, as one had to find the right ticket booth for buses leaving in the direction one wanted to travel. But then, the driver's assistant checked the tickets, so one was certain one was on the right bus. A bit unusual for Africa, but it worked well...



In Kumba, as soon as I picked my rental car, the road turned to dirt and it was extremely bumpy. Really, it was no way for a small passenger car like mine. Or one with no air conditioning as the dust got everywhere, absolutely everywhere. And it was much too hot to have windows up! I definitely wanted a large off-road vehicle, yet those were not available that day.

On the border between the Anglophone and Francophone parts, there was a small bridge over a large river. People worked on the banks, loading timber and sands, some took a dip, other perhaps did some fishing. I stopped and snapped a few shots. That was the real Africa, full of lush vegetation, wide rivers, wooden boats, kids swimming.

Then, after about 2 hours, the dirt road ended and relatively good asphalt surface led all the way to Bamenda. It was broken by many checkpoints and toll booths. I was stopped three times. The results were not good. First corrupt police guy claimed that the insurance was not valid, but it was very valid. The second corrupt police thief decided to take his time to check all papers thoroughly. The third one spotted that the car had no registration numbers! And I had not spotted that either, when I took the car. I was very angry with my driver. But I was angry with myself even more.

I reached Bamenda after sunset. I quickly found the hotel, the Ayaba. It was supposed to be the most luxurious hotel in town, but I would argue! They charged CFA42,000 for a tiny triple room with a balcony. It was so 1970s and smelled like it has never been properly cleaned since the day it was built. I was glad that I was there only for few hours.

Their so-so priced restaurant had few dishes on the menu, and the food was mediocre at best. And one had to ask to put the food back on the fire, so it was properly cooked and come to the table hot.

There was nothing much to see in Bamenda itself. Despite all the raving words in the travel literature, how it was the cultural, political and commercial centre of the region. The only place worth a few words was the Up Station. It offered good views of the city and a couple of Germanic buildings. It was also a military base, so one had to be careful when venturing there. I did that in the morning and snapped a few view shots.

## Bufut

From Bamenda I was embarking on the adventure of the Ring Road. The first stop was Bufut, although it was in the opposite

direction, as I was not planning to do the entire loop.

Bufut is a seat of the eleventh king of Bufut. It was like visiting a kingdom in its own right. It was appropriately remote to feel like this And yet, the site was well catered for visitors. I left over CFA30,000 there!

The king's sons worked at this incredible site as guides and musicians. The museum, resurrected by the Germans, who had fought wars with the Bufut, had a number of small rooms packed with giant sculptures representing gods, goddesses, spirits and images of the fon in disguise.

The entire compound was extensive and included a massive wooden temple, where the people called upon their ancestors. The entire 'kingdom' was freely accessible and it was very pleasant and interesting to wander around.

The visit would not be complete without attending at least the traditional dance by the guys. They dressed in feather suits and donned giant masks and whirled around; one on stilts! Some other men and kids played music on traditional instruments. The dance lasted about half an hour, was a bit dusty at times, and it was definitely the highlight of my day that day.



The ladies also had a traditional dance, but it was much less spectacular.

The dance show was CFA15,000 extra, so it effectively contributed to half of the cost of my visit. I also got three postcards for CFA1,500 and the taking pictures was a CFA1,500 surge charge.

## the Ring Road

Then, after Bufut, time came to brave the Ring Road. Now, the travel books do not quite tell you how bad the Ring Road actually is. It is much worse than impossible, erm... impassable. The small vehicle of mine could hardly make it through.

From Bamenda to Kumbo, it took good four hours on the partly tarred, partly dirt road. But the dirt road was an extreme way of travelling. The smaller vehicles kept disappearing from sight in the waves of sands and rocks. When rain falls, those parts are completely impassable, even for robust SUVs. And only large trucks had wheels big enough and sufficient clearance to make it. I never enjoyed such as a slow progress. Particularly when there is really nothing that interesting to see around during the trip.

The views from the road, which the literature reported to be super spectacular, were, to be honest, just below average. There are thousands of much more accessible spots around the world that are seriously better. And many, very many of them can be found in West Africa, including Mali and Burkina Faso. Anyway, it was almost fun to make this trip.

## Kumbo

I arrived at the Fomo'92 Hotel minutes before sunset. The lodge was located on one of the many hills of Kumbo and about 20 ensuite rooms, all except two were called 'single' and had comfortable double-size beds. These went for CFA7,500, which was a jolly good value for money. They were small and rather basic. Yet, everything seemed to work; hot water, flat screen TV, door locks. The sheets were clean. White towels, toilet rolls and a minute bar of soap were all provided. The other two rooms were called suits and went for either CFA10,000 or CFA8,500. I did not check them, but apparently they were not much different than all the single rooms. The hotel had its own power generator. And when I visited, they indeed had to use it.

Their restaurant was good. Estelle, the cook, could slap a few basic but yummy dishes within 20 minutes. Be it roast chicken with rice and sauce, or with rustic chips or fried plantains, or grilled fish with the same. These went for CFA3000 or so a piece.

I thought I'd want to check Salsa, the nightclub, but I was so covered in red dust all over, that after shower, I just could not be bothered any more! But two of my local 'bodyguards' did go.

Before we left Kumbo, which was the largest town in the highlands, I needed to exchange some money. The tank was just under half full, and I really did not want to run out of petrol in the middle of nowhere. And I had no CFA cash on me. The guidebook suggested that the town was well equipped with banks, yet whomever I asked, they did not know where to change euro to CFA. Some of them, who thought they knew were wrong.

I eventually found a bank in the centre of the town, and they changed €200 at the official pegged rate with no questions asked. I was rather impressed with this. I used cash dispensers before. This was my first experience with an official bureau de change. Actually, it made all sense. The





central African frank has been pegged to euro (previously to the French frank), so exchanging euros to CFA should carry one rate only. Yet, I was expecting some commission charge. There was none, though. Jolly good, I thought.

It was very hard to get to Kumbo, but the city was rather interesting. It was dramatically located amongst the mountains. It was not easy to spot 'the centre' as each hill, with its church, mosque or temple, had its own little square or traffic roundabout. Some streets were paved, yet some (or most actually) were just dirt roads. Weather was cool, and people seemed very welcoming and friendly. Yet, there were not that many sights to admire. Kumbo had a fon and his palace allowed visitors. Yet, not on the day I was around. In fact, when I was leaving the town, I felt it was a bit pointless going all the way there, after all this trouble, stupidly impassable road, dust, stress of getting stuck and bone rattling. It might have been more fun in a proper vehicle, at least an off-road 4x4 SUV.

## Kumbo to Foumban

Although my driver insisted that we would need to go all the way back to Bamenda on

this terrible road in order to take a turn to Foumban, I kept strongly disagreeing. There was another way, which I remembered from the google maps. I could not prove it, as there was no Internet in Kumbo. But I asked at the hotel and they confirmed my route. So, we only had to travel about half way back on the Ring Road.

The road to Foumban was a little better. It took about two hours to reach the junction from Kumbo and then another one and a half hours to Foumban. The driver was very impressed with my local knowledge and that I insisted to take this route. From the junction, it was mostly downhill. There were no paved sections at all, but there were less sand dunes, boulders and sharp rocks to navigate through. It was not gravel, but the surface was more or less even.

A few miles before Foumban we stopped for a drink in a small and very welcoming village. It had a central market, a square and a couple of very rustic bars full of local, simply dressed, middle aged and older men sipping beer, sodas and playing games. The owner of the bar was chuffed to have a white tourist on the premises. I drew considerable attention and more people came inside. This meant more customers. Quite decent music blasted from the speakers and it was soothing to cool down

with ice-cold lager in a shade, letting the bones rest a little. From that spot, there was only about 15 minutes to Foumban.

## Foumban

I proceeded directly to the hotel. The hotel, which I chose, the Baba Palace Hotel, on the outskirts of the town, charged from CFA10,000 to CFA40,000.

The rooms up to CFA40,000 were no different from one another. The most expensive ones were god size round houses with a large lounge, really large bedroom and sizeable bathroom. But there was no running water, so after all that dirt road running, all I had was a bucket shower. A few actually! After rinsing the red soil off my entire body (I had to do that several times during my African visits, so I was not surprised), I went to town to see the sultan's palace.

Foumban was smaller than I expected. The town itself seemed rather nice and organised. All main roads were paved and the layout of the place seemed logical. My bodyguards liked it very much. They had never been to Foumban before and said that it resembled the capital city of Yaounde a

lot. Well, the architecture in general was not terribly striking, and apart from a couple of mosques, there was little to please the eye in this respect. Travellers ventured to Fouban to see one building only, however – the sultan's palace.

About a half of the palace was dedicated to a museum. The museum inside was decently maintained, but the mandatory guide was really slow, which made the visit feel like a bore, almost. Fortunately his French was clear and he spoke slowly, so I managed to understand most of what he said. The cabinets of the museum concentrated on the local area. They displayed a combination of anthropological and cultural items, a few photographs of the sultan's family, everyday use tools, traditional outfits, art. It was not possible to take pictures inside. I only managed to snap part of the flamboyant wooden stairway, in the main entry hall of the palace. It was a very dark hallway. I was not sure if it was the intention of the architect, the current occupants or the museum authorities. But it looked very austere, intimidating if a little spooky.

The main courtyard of the palace and its front façade attempted to mimic grand properties found in Europe. Although, the façade looked tired, weathered and almost

ascetic. As if it was to indicate that a noble family had built the edifice, yet the nobility did not necessarily mean great wealth or an ambition to cover the building with decorating plaster or paint.

I reached the spot shortly before sunset, which made the place look special. I found the spot strangely animated. There were several dozen of locals dressed up playing traditional music on aged instruments. There was a little bit of dancing, too. A few vendors with produce carried in baskets on their heads navigated between the people hoping for some surge in revenue at the final hours of the day. I stood there for a while, in front of the palace and the central monument depicting a rider on a horse, trying to register the commotion on a few photographs. And then, the royal family arrived. They did not stop to greet the crowd, but proceeded directly to their quarters.

Naturally, the place where the palace stood was the most attractive spot of the town. The main gate was directly opposite to a busy market, which in turn was located right by the striking central mosque. The market was much less animated or colourful than most that I had seen across Africa before. People were calm and there was no

excessive shouting or arguing. I guess that was due to the lateness of the day. Just before sunset, so the traders must have just been counting their takes and wrapping up, before setting home. Everyone was smiling and the fact that I carrying a sizeable camera did not bother anyone, even the ladies, who are normally very shy in Africa and photographing them may mean running into a serious trouble with their husbands or brothers. I only wandered around the market for a short while. Soon, it was time to grab a bit to eat.

There were not that many obvious options for sit-down restaurant with a waiting service. Some, but not as much as I would have expected, street food vendors popped around, and I wanted to relax properly. Preferably somewhere with an air-conditioning, clean table cloths and a friendly waiting service. This was to compensate for two days of travelling on dusty roads in a super-hot tiny vehicle. I found a modern-looking hotel with an adjacent restaurant on the main highway leading from the sultan's palace to Yaounde. They had almost everything that I was looking for, except crisp table cloths. Roasted chicken, rice and a couple of cold lagers was easy to get without putting excessive strain the chef's abilities.





After dinner, I went out. The club was called Le Pritemps. It was not weekend, so the spot was not exactly jumping. They had not want to spend a penny to paint the walls so the venue looked extremely rustic. The resident DJ played good mix of music and it was safe. The club had a bar and a main entry hall, where most people boogied, and a couple of rooms at the back with no windows for private parties. Partying there was surreal.

A couple of local girls joined my table, and they were the most miserable and unhappy women I have ever seen clubbing in the entire world. They looked like they actually did not want to be there at all. Why they bothered coming through the club's door was beyond my comprehension.

I think I was back at the hotel quite early. It might have been 1 o'clock in the morning. There was still no running water, and to make the matters worse, there was no power either. It annoyed me slightly, since the price that I was paying was rather high. Too high, considering the quality and availability of the facilities. I later read online that no running water and no power was normality at this venue, actually.

## Foumban to Yaounde

Petrol, dinner, partying, and a relatively expensive hotel meant that I had no money left. I needed to change euro again. Yet, there was no official place to change money anywhere in Foumban. Fortunately, taxi drivers knew about a guy running a cloth shop near the central mosque, who changed euro for slightly lower CFA650 rate. The transaction was quick, painless and conducted with a smile. It was time to hit the road again. The next stop was the capital city of Yaounde.

The large bus, the last one that day, that was leaving at about 11am. Public transport going great distances across the country was usually leaving at sunrise. Leaving it until 10am meant leaving a bit too much to fate and luck. Rather risky approach in a large, third world country, where one can really get stuck in a place with uncomfortable facilities. On the other hand, money in those places could buy almost anything. If there were no buses, there were taxis. And their drivers did not mind going great distances, if it was profitable for them. So, realistically, one

should never get stuck anywhere in Africa in town, where taxis operated. And since the Africans love using taxis even for small distances, a taxi driver was a popular job even in small towns.

It took over 7h to reach the capital. I thought that it should have taken about 4h to travel those 310 kilometres. The road was in a good condition but the driver did not have a heavy foot. And I did not provide for frequent checkpoints and a 30 minute pause en route. It was relatively uneventful, the views were not very spectacular, and there was little action on the bus. One of the more vocal passengers, who sat at the very front of the bus refused to stop at police checkpoints, he kept on leaning out of the window shouting at the police officers "No! No! We will not stop. You will not enter. We won't pay!" Extremely loud and angry. It worked every time. Good on him!

## Yaounde

I arrived in Yaounde right after sunset. I was passing near the presidential palace on the hill, which was lit up during the hours of

darkness. My fellow traveller told me to take a chance and snap it from this obscure junction with a zoom. As I would not be able to take a picture of it from a different place. It was forbidden to photograph anything to do with the president and government, including bridges, tams, antennae, etc. Similar paranoia engulfed many western and central African states.

I checked at the Hilton Yaounde with no problem, the receptionist knew what he was doing, and he was impressed with my Hilton Diamond status. I did not think he saw Diamond guest that often before. He looked slightly intimidated. I liked it! It was about 7pm. It took an hour to go over an insignificant distance within the capital due to impossible traffic caused by aggressive and mindless driving. After shower and complimentary drink and food at the executive lounge, I went up to check the Panoramic Bar on the top floor with great 360 degree view of the city. The presidential palace was also visible in the distance. After the two nights at scruffy hotel in Limbe, a night at the smelly hotel in Bamenda, a night at the basic one in Kumbo, waterless and powerless resort in Foumban, and three days of excruciating slow and dusty journey, it was time to splurge a little. Or a lot, in fact. The hotel had all the amenities of a 5 star venue. The bed was very comfortable, the sheets were heavenly, the toiletries were lush and everything else just worked. The service at the executive lounge was a bliss,

too. Their pineapple juice was incredible! And the free booze and complimentary wifi came very handy as well.

It was time to go out properly in Cameroon. Near the Hilton was a street with a few clubs and bars. It looked very busy. Finally, it seemed that I was in the right place at the right time. I first tried Le Pritemps. It was packed on both of its levels, but had virtually no spot to shake your body. I was not sure this was the place for me. So after a couple of drinks, I changed the venue. Not far from there. On the way, a few quiet touts or doormen kept lurking, trying to assess whether I was going to give it a try at their place or not. But Oscar had already a place in mind, and we did not stop at any of those.

The Olympic Club and the Djeuga Palace Hotel was a fine place, although lacking adequate air conditioning and charging CFA5,000 for a bottle of beer or coke. I thought it was supposed to be frequented by expats, but there were not that many of them there. Still, the women who managed to get through the door were as predatory with any lighter skin guys as ever. The place was jumping. It had a great ambiance. The music was just fine and it looked like everyone had a jolly good time. The price of the drinks was definitely a crime! I think some of the lads kept nipping out for a cheaper drink nearby and coming back to the dancefloor every now and then. The lack

of proper ventilation and air-con created sauna conditions at some point. I needed to step out for a while and cool off. The streets outside were positively animated. There were quite a lot of people, who wanted to get in but kept being bounced.

I think I got back to the hotel at about 3am. I slept in. Massive bed, great view from the balcony, free buffet breakfast with plenty of fruit, crisp towels. It was hard to beat that. I booked another night! This meant that I was going to have only two nights in Kribi, my final stop in Cameroon. And from the hindsight, I should have allowed those three nights!

My new friend Oscar arrived at the hotel at about 12:30pm. He went a bit crazy the night before and did not get any sleep. So he wanted to take a shower and chill for a while before taking me to his family; mother, wife and daughter. We took a taxi to the suburbs of Yaounde, although the district seemed central, as it did not take that long to get there. The surrounding however, were dramatically different. There were no hotels, banks, large government buildings, churches or mansions. Just simple households and small shops built on dirt. No pavements or logic how to navigate through this part of the city. It felt and looked medieval. The space between any cluster of houses was wide enough to allow for a single woman pass with her shopping. No vehicle would pass through. And only a very clever biker





would be able to navigate in those very narrow and dark alleys. It was tighter than medinas of North Africa and the Middle East. The medina alleys were wide enough for a donkey with back baskets to pass easily. The alleys of the Poor Yaounde were too narrow for that. So, the taxi could only go so far. It stopped by a small football pitch. We have to walk for the rest of the way.

My presence at the poor quarters of Yaounde caused a bit of a shock at the local community. A bit of a sensation, I guess. It was not the first time that I was stared at in Africa, so it did not bother me. What concerned me was that a working train line passed right through the borough but it didn't stop people using the track as a pavement. Disaster was waiting to happen. The entire township was buzzing like a beehive. People conducted businesses, kids played, everyone was on the move, constantly.

Oscar's mother lived very modestly. It was a very simple household. But it was tidy. The floor was simply hardened soil. The lady had an old sofa, a couple of plastic chairs, a small coffee table and a rug on the floor of

the living room. There was no door between the living room and, what I thought was, a bedroom. Just a curtain. It looked like all the cooking was done either behind the house or in the front courtyard of the house. The household was within a small compound that was built on a slight slope. Oscar told me that during heavy rains, the living room flooded frequently. We did not stay long. Oscar wanted me to show other parts of the city, including the gym where he was training, and he wanted me to meet his mates.

Between Oscar's mother house and his house, we stopped at the gym. It turned out that he wanted me to take some photos there with his mates. They were very excited actually. I guess they trained hard, but could never had a proper photo session. The trick was that Oscar could copy the photos onto his netbook and distribute to the lads via email or on USB drives. Four of his mates came. They spent about an hour to get pumped and the photo shoot started. It was actually a great fun. The lads had absolutely no experience as models, although they did develop a few good techniques of bodybuilding posing. Apparently, all of them

competed in the national bodybuilding tournaments. At sunset, it was too dark to take any more pictures so we moved on.

At his house, I met Oscar's cute 3 year old girl, who was a little shy, his sister and his wife wearing a polo shirt I gave him the day before. It was a brief encounter. I took a few shots for him with his daughter and his golden trophies, and he escorted me to my hotel. There was no going out on Christmas Eve. I invited him for a snack in the executive lounge but he declined. I got treated nicely to a variety of fish dishes, cheeses and port wine. I went upstairs to the rooftop bar, but it was boring, so I did not last very long. I lingered a little on the rooftop terrace contemplating the views of the city. And that was the end of the day.

## Yaounde to Kribi

I checked out of my Yaounde hotel at 9am, which admittedly was very late indeed. And it was Christmas!. I transferred to the gare routiere in the Kribi/Douala direction and sat down at the back of a small minibus bound



for Kribi having paid CFA5,500 (£6.93 or \$10.62) for the ticket. It was very cramped there and they were about to load so many people on it and so much cargo that the manufacturer of the vehicle would be genuinely astonished. I was concerned having seen a couple of accidents on the road during my travels in Cameroon. So, I changed my mind and hired a taxi for CFA50,000 (£63 or \$96.53). Not a cheap ride, but negotiated down from CFA80,000, and eventually costing CFA285 (£0.36 or \$0.55) per mile. And so, not too bad after all.

The road was in great condition, and the driver put his foot down very nicely. For most part of the journey, the speedometer's gauge did not fall below 130km/h. Seatbelts in Cameroon were obligatory, in case you were wondering.

## Kribi

About three hours later, I was in the rather pretty Kribi. I tried the Hotel du Phare, which I knew had been fully booked, but I took my chance. The unhelpful receptionist refused to help me. But it took me about a minute to

find the Hotel Palm Beach Plus some 200 yards south along the coast, which had many double en-suite rooms available for CFA32,000 per night. It also had greatly located beachfront bar, which must have been the poorest stocked bar in the country. Yet, I stayed there for a few hours watching local play in the water, play water polo, kick some ball, body surf, all with the background of the setting sun. A perfect holiday picture, really.

Kribi is stretched along the coast. It is a good hike from one end of it to the other. The northern parts opened to the ocean with a fabulous beach and a palm tree public park. Further down, there was the administrative quarter full of fine examples of colonial architecture. Then, the harbour, the lighthouse, the churches and a few hotels.

As I took a stroll north along the coast from my southern hotel through the marina, the pretty administrative quarter boasting grand mansions, the presidential house at a very nice little beach all the way to the public beach park, this particular northern part of town appealed to me the most. The beach and the park were great and animated places. It was Boxing Day, so everyone was

off playing and relaxing on the beach. People on the beach were friendly and approachable.

There two main parts of the beach. Both running for a mile or so. The demarkation between them were a group of large boulders, which nevertheless did not disturb the continuity of the beach entirely. Yet created a couple of crescents. So the beach had a shape of two croissants joined together.

Across the road from the beach park were a couple of restaurants-cafes, which happily brought tables right by the beach and served whatever your CFA wanted to buy. Be it cold drinks, freshly grilled fish, fried chickens or fruit salads.

I spent an entire day there walking on the beach, snapping people at their request, helping them with their snapping of their friends, watching fishermen, chatting to locals about life, the Universe and everything.

One of the young fishermen (a pygmy, I think) whom I snapped before, Eddie, came back to the beach to show how he looked fully dressed in normal clothes. It was really

funny. I did offer him a cold drink for letting me take a picture of him. So, he rushed home, changed and decided to formally introduce himself. He was 20 years old, had 18 year-old girlfriend, who ten months before gave birth to his daughter.

He was a bit shy, but very kind and friendly guy, who was not quite sure what he wanted to do with his life. A daughter, which was not planned, did complicate things for him, but he was determined to make it work and give his little girl the best he could to secure a good future.

His introduction worked well for him, as I talked with him in Frenglish (half French half English) for a couple of hours sipping juices at the beach. He then took upon himself to show me Kribi and told me stories about the town, the buildings, the harbour, the population, etc.

Kribi was not big, so there were not many classic sights to see. Yet, the administrative quarter did boast a good number of pretty houses, mansions, palaces and large complexes, which bore the combination of

Tropical French and Tropical German architecture. This part of town was clean, very tidy, had a wide alley and presented itself really nicely.

There were also two interesting churches in town, one a minute walk from the other, both bearing construction designs favourite by the German architects. While one of them was well maintained and used by crowds (it was Christmas), and the other (the Presbyterian) seemed abandoned and disused.

The lighthouse was also an attractive and interesting building, but it was off limits for visitors.

In the southernmost limits of Kribi (7km from the churches), near Grand Batanga village, there was a small waterfall Chutes de la Lobe, one of very few where a river waterfall plunges directly into the ocean. Access was limited due to a damaged bridge.

The best hangouts in Kribi were the beaches. Only the public beach park had

some facilities with nearby bars and cafes (not much choice, anyway). The other stretches of the coast had nothing but the waves, cream-coloured sands, and palm trees. And occasional boulders washed by the ocean. All to be enjoyed.

Now, one of the prettiest bits was the small bay right by the Presidential Residence. It was often empty, as the locals would not pick these parts as a first choice. And those, who happen to be lingering in the shade of the palm trees would feel obliged to let you know that you should not take photos of this beach. I still managed to take a few shots 'from the hip'. But what I wanted to say that it was very likely that you might have this bay just for yourself (or yourselves), relax, swim and take the sun rays in. Undisturbed.

I invited Eddie to join me for dinner at the Le Siloé Restaurant, who charged CFA2,500 for a large portion of spaghetti bolognese, CFA4,000 for a brochettes of barracuda, CFA6,000 for prawns, and CFA500 for drinks. It was a very pleasant spot to have dinner or lunch. It was located right by the bridge near the marina. The personnel was friendly





and attentive, and the service was swift and faultless.

One could peek into the kitchen or at the grill near the river, to see how their choice of food was being prepared. I had one brochette of fish and one of prawns, both of which were super and were served with plenty of rice. The pasta, which Eddie chose looked great, too. Although he was not too ecstatic about it, explaining to me that he really preferred African traditional and staple dishes.

Another very civilised option to sit down and eat was a large pizzeria near the Big Ben night club, with an adjacent bar. It was very popular with expats, although less atmospheric than the Le Siloé.

As this was my last night in Cameroon, I wanted to go out. Yet, the only club in town, the Big Ben, was shut. Eddie mentioned that there was a rustic club in the eastern parts of the town, but this did not sound like a place with a lot of ventilation...

This however did not stop me party at one of the roadside bars. Right between the Presbyterian Church and the Palm Beach

Plus Hotel, there were a couple of basic bars, which served cold drinks and played music. Packed with locals summarising their Christmas over the drink or two. I could not make a choice at first, as I wanted to make sure it was going to be a lively place with locals to chat to (in FrenGLISH, of course) and not in a corner of a hot room. Finally, there was a table in the street. A table in the wind, predatory women gently scratching my back, messing with my hair, talking dirty to me, a string of strangers sitting down for a while hoping for a free drink. It was a good night!

Kribi was an excellent place to meet the locals, relax on the beach and enjoy the relaxed and unspoiled ambiance of the place. If I were to compare Kribi to any other spot in West Africa, it would have been Lumley Beach of Aberdeen in Sierra Leone. And I guess this is to do with the fact that those places have not yet been seeing hordes of tourists, who mess with the locals' minds turning these spots in travellers traps full of annoying traders, hookers, bumpsters, hustlers, etc. Instead, the people are more curious to chat to the visitors to find out more about them and at the sight of a large camera they smile and invite their pictures to be taken.

This is why I wish I had not stayed that extra night in Yaounde, and spent more time in Kribi, socialising with the fishermen amongst pretty beaches, at the open-air cafes.

Kribi was well served by numerous buses and minibuses, which served both Douala and Yaounde (the former had more frequent links). I again hired a car. It set me back by CFA35,000, which worked out about CFA315 (£0.40 or \$0.61) per mile. The ride was comfortable and quick again, as the road was in excellent condition in most parts. I was in Douala within less than two hours. Again passing by the endless palm tree forests.

## Kribi to Douala

Slow start. Again. I needed to rearrange my bags so the packing was appropriate for a flight to Gabon. But first, a hop to Douala, a rather unattractive commercial capital of the country.

It was hard to leave Kribi's pretty beaches and friendly population. If I were to compare





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## Douala

In Douala I had a few hours to kill. It was a terribly dusty, sweaty, and super hot city full of fumes. I needed to figure out what to do to stay indoors. And how to do it remain indoors until it was time to go the airport.

First, I went for late lunch at the local Marseille Restaurant. Over half of the items featuring on the short menu were not available. Eh! I had fillet of the captain fish with fries (green beans which I wanted instead of fries were not available) for CFA4,000. It was not too bad and the coke was ice-cold. I did not want to linger in a restaurant, though. On the way to the city, I spotted a much more appealing pub-looking facade.

So, I decided to find that place. It was actually called Le Pub. I had an idea how to get there, but I was not entirely sure. I had to ask a few people around. I could swear that the place was nearby, but no-one seemed to have heard about it. I just needed to follow my sense of direction.

The pub called Le Pub was indeed just a few hundred yards along the same avenue as the restaurant. It was beyond me why would no-one, standing literally just a few yards from the place, not know where it was.

It looked very promising from the outside. Inside, however, it was awful. How terribly

disappointing! It was clear that the owners really had no idea about interior decorations for a bar, never mind for a pub! Right opposite the bar with some wobbly stools with faux-leather cushion tops, there was a kebab station! And in the corner right by it, there was, what it seemed, an administrative station. An overdressed big mama sporting a head to toe eye-piercing floral gown sat at a square table full of papers and files. The section of the 'pub' at the other end of the bar had a few square tables arranged as if it was a cheap restaurant. Awfully tasteless! The air conditioning worked well, though.

I lasted there only one pint of shandy and thought it might have been a better idea to leave for the airport. At least three Star Alliance airlines were operating from Douala (South African Airways, Swiss Air International, and Ethiopian Airlines), so it was bound to have a business lounge with free coffee, snacks and booze, I thought. And you know what? it did have one!

Cameroon was hard to leave behind. It was easy to travel, landscape was great and the people I met were really friendly.



# Gabon

## 'Difficult'

No wonder why there is so little information about Gabon available to travellers. Not only is it so inconveniently difficult to arrange anything about visiting the country, the situation what is open and where it is allowed to travel changes so frequently, that it is completely impractical to plan anything in advance. Or recommend anything before it suddenly gets outdated.

Getting organised for this part of the trip remotely from London was a near-impossible task. Of course, if I wanted to spend a disproportionately obscene amount of money to the value what I could get for it, there were a couple of somewhat obscure travel agents based in France that could set me up for a trip or two. Yet, even they did

not have up-to-date information about the situation in the national parks, which I wanted to visit.

I reached out to a number of social media and travellers websites, including Facebook, CouchSurfing, TripAdvisor, GloboSapiens, etc for some data on Gabon. There was little. I eventually got a response from a couple of CouchSurfers, but they also had limited information, were not available or not very helpful. In the end, a very friendly guy named Davy, who responded to my message on Facebook, gave me some actually useful information. He also gave me a few suggestions regarding a New Year's party.

My flight was due to land in Libreville at 22:20 at night. With no information what's what in the city, I would rather had some sort of accommodation secured for that first night. I tried to contact a few hotels, but could not get any response. Also, I needed to make a hotel booking that was required for the Gabonese tourist visa application.

So, I had to make at least one booking for the first night. For two reasons: a/ to be on the safe side, and b/ to get a visa. I booked one night at Le Meridien in Libreville.

## Libreville

I had mixed feelings about Gabon's capital. It felt safe to walk about with a large camera dangling from my shoulder. But the over present security forces everywhere did not allow to take any photos almost anywhere. It was so paranoid, I thought. Still, I managed to snap a few pictures along the oceanfront avenue. The same where the rather unattractive presidential palace stood.

On the first day, I walked to the port, to check for my the next day's departure to Pointe-Denis. It was a good hike from the rather mediocre Le Meridien hotel, which charged CFA125,000 per night. On the way, I stopped at the cathedral. Or two cathedrals. One old and the other new. I was not sure which one was which. I guess the old one, next to the archdiocese office was the original one. Snap, snap, snap.

The port was an interesting place. It was packed with fish stores or fish warehouses. There was plenty of fish and plenty of fishy smells. To my amusement, I also found two nightlife spots: the l'Absolute Karaoke-

Discotheque and the l'Aristocrate Plus Night-Club. What a cliché, I thought. I stopped at the Bogato bar there. Its air-con turned the air of the bar into freezing cold as low as the temperature of Lapland in winter! Their drinks were equally chilled. Walls inside were decorated with portraits of the President of Gabon taken at different stages of his long, long term rule.

There was not much to see in Libreville, to be honest. It was just a relatively well developed city (in African terms), growing into a concrete jungle. Its oceanfront in the centre, partially fringed with palm trees would have been nice had it been rigged of toilet smells and the beach been refilled. I heard that the government started doing something about the wild constructions along the coast and the oceanfront avenues and began to bulldoze those. Still, the rubble remained!

I checked a restaurant/bar called Le Sud, near Le Meridien. It was a French-run place charging CFA2,500 for 0.6l bottle of Régab lager, and some CFA4,000 for a range of promising-looking pizzas. Their menu also included a good number of fish, meat and poultry dishes for about CFA6,000-CFA7,000. It was a nice venue frequented by expats

and well-off locals. I actually noticed that Libreville had a large white community. It was a dramatic change from Cameroon, where I was the only white person I could see, also in both large cities of Doula and Yaounde and smaller coastal resorts.

I later went to Le Tropicana hotel near the airport to book my last two nights of the holiday. Its beach looked very inviting. Plus there was a local bar nearby, which offered additional entertainment and encounters with the Gabonese. The bar extended all the way to the beach with tables almost directly in the sand.

## Pointe-Denis

This holiday was a mix of late and early mornings. My second day in Gabon was relatively an early start. Quick checkout from the expensive Le Meridien and a short taxi hop to the port for the boat transfer across the estuary to Pointe-Denis.

The harbour was very animated that morning as two boats to Port-Gentil were departing, one almost immediately after another. There was perhaps a 30 minutes

gap. It was fascinating to watch the luggage handlers, the porters, and the port authority officials checking the passengers tickets. There was a lot of movement. The queue for the boats were long and disorganised. Rather off-putting, I must admit.

My small catamaran boat arrived on time, but I had to wait for other passengers. Normally, the boats between Libreville and Pointe-Denis run on weekends; Saturdays at 09:30am and 3pm, and Sundays at 10am and 3pm. On other days, the boat runs only through a booking. If one makes a reservation at one of the several lodges on the beaches of Pointe-Denis, the boat will be booked automatically. And yet, when I was around, a boat, or as it was called - a shuttle (in French 'navette') ran on a daily basis, at least twice a day.

It was a short, 30 minute cruise across the river. Interestingly, the entire waterfront of Libreville, including the presidential palace were nicely visible and... photographable!

Heavy and dark grey equatorial clouds gathered above the city and the beaches. It was nevertheless a very pleasant day without the scorching sun and sweating temperatures. It was still humid, though.





Pointe-Denis had a great potential! The beaches were near perfect, the sand was fine and almost white in direct sunshine, and the shores were gentle.

A number of establishments had already popped up along the beaches. One was the Assala Lodge, where I was staying for CFA55,000 (plus CFA99,000 for the New Year's Eve dinner party). But there were others; the Maringa Hotel, the Baie des Tortues, and the Le Rogolié next to the Assala. Farther afield in the southerly direction, there was also an expensive ecolodge called Pongara. It charged over €250 a night. It had only four bungalows. It was not accessible with the same Pointe-Denis boat service like the others. Pongara organised their own transport.

If I am not wrong, I think I spotted some day trippers, too. And that would be logical to escape the bustle and impossible traffic of Libreville to relax on white soft sands and eat fresh seafood at one of the lodges' restaurants, which really cooked very well. The Assala Lodge charged CFA8,000 for fish dishes, CFA10,000 for gambas and CFA15,000 for a grilled lobster. They were all cooked to perfection by a bunch of local cooks, who knew exactly what they were doing. And fresh food deliveries were being received by the 'navette' from the mainland.

Now, I was preparing for four days of relaxation, 'dolce far niente', spotting giant marine turtles laying eggs, and the big beach party of welcoming the year of 2012. No early mornings for at least four days!

I took an afternoon stroll between the Assala and the Maringa Hotel (and slightly beyond giant logs beach at the actual 'pointe'). There and back. I passed by numerous private properties. It looked like they belonged to white people. Some of the houses were incredibly large and of flamboyant, grandiose architecture. The beach seemed endless. It ran for miles and miles in both directions. Sections of it had palm trees leaning towards the water's edge. Classic holiday picture, really.

The next day, I got transferred from suite no.7 to hut no.1. I think I was supposed to be in hut no.1 in the first place but madame chief might have made a mistake the day I arrived. And at the day of transfer, she realised that she might need that extra bed in suite no.7 for the extra guests she was getting in the next couple of nights. The hut was about half of the suite's size, had one large bed (with mosquito net) and a lockable bathroom with shower. It had high ceiling and a porch with a basket swing overlooking the water with the views all the way to Libreville. Classic holiday picture really.

The equatorial weather on the second day got a bit worse. There were many more heavy dark grey clouds and in the distance, they were producing downpours. The sun rays sheepishly tore through them. The air felt cool with the gentle breeze blowing from the water. And it was not until 2pm when the sun started coming out more often burning skins as it does mercilessly on the Equator. With each sunny spell, however short, the air seemed to boil instantly. With the humidity at almost 100%, the effect was easily achieved. Sticky. Very sticky!

At lunchtime, I took a stroll to the 'village'. It consisted of maybe three houses, where locals lived; a string of huts donated by the local queen to poor foreigners from Togo, Ghana and other African states; and one nightclub complete with a hotel. Hmm... I just heard how this sounds - I meant a hotel, which had a nightclub.

Those poor foreigners, according to one other foreigner from Cameroon working at the Assala, were very lazy. They just went fishing, ate and slept. Their kids did not go to school. They did not trade. They did not make any money. They lived from one day to the next. Apparently, one woman I met in the village, at her forties, also never went to school. And yet, I was impressed that the local queen created this space for them.

The nightclub looked fine! It had plenty of seating, a central dance floor, two small private rooms, and a small bar with tall stools, serving CFA5,000 drinks! I was corrected when I voiced a theory that only white travellers and business people attended. Apparently, Pointe Denis had a sufficient population of very rich Gabonese, who could afford CFA5,000 drinks and who would comfortably fill the entire venue. Apart from the president, who of course had a residence on the beach, there were also a few ministers, who lived there, including the Minister of Internal Affairs. And they definitely could afford expensive beverages.

On the third day at Pointe-Denis, rather unexpectedly, the clouds all disappeared. The sun made it a perfect beach day. It was perhaps a bit too hot, but occasional blow of the breeze from the sea made it bearable. The Assala Lodge got filled with loads of people, who arrived for the New Year's Party. The venue charged CFA90,000 per head for this privilege. Not cheap, but it included oysters and foie gras for dinner.

The day was made easy. Just snoozing at the beach, talking walks, dipping feet in the warm waters of the Atlantic, playing with sand, slapping a bit more sunscreen, sipping

Castel lager, snapping locals, snapping rich colonialists on their jetskis, snapping palm trees, slapping some more sunscreen, wading in water a little, snapping more locals, etc.

When the sun set, I thought I might have a chance to take a photo of the Milky Way, but the Moon was too bright, and the occasional cloud spoiled the view. However, three planets came in line, the Venus, the Jupiter and the Uranus. For a while they were all in the same line with the Moon. What a view! (the Uranus not really visible to the naked eye, though).

The Assala Lodge really made an effort to make it a real last day of the year party. There was a DJ, unlimited amount of lethal punch, and a variety of nuts and prunes as an aperitif. But they had a slight problem with the genie. It kept failing every now and again. The owner, Xavier, tried a new valve or something, and it did not work well with Diesel. Still, with all the candles and the proximity of the ocean made the ambiance electrifying on its own!

Now, imagine a very fine line of flickering lights of a large Third World city, some six miles away across a giant river. All ten miles

of it, running from left to right. Here comes midnight. The very first seconds of the new year. Suddenly, the long, very fine line of flickering lights gets a boost. Thousands of minute boosts. There are countless blasts of tiny but mighty flashes that light up every few hundreds of yards of the line, every few fractions of a second. As if someone followed Diana, Princess of Wales, trying to take her a photo at midnight, all the way across the city, there and back, all in an instant. That was Libreville on 1 January 2012 seen from Pointe-Denis. This spectacle lasted for ten or twenty minutes. Very long! And in the middle of it, the presidential palace put on a show. Several minutes of Hollywood style fireworks that lit up the sky all across the six mile-wide estuary. All at once. So ghastly flamboyant and over the top.

The party at the Assala kicked off after the fireworks. It was curious. Almost no-one boogied before midnight despite many invitations from madame chief. And she was on fire! And she could move, too. She might have been perhaps sixty years of age, but she never broke a sweat! Then, at 00:20 hours, somewhat magically, the entire dinner party stood on their feet and started jumping, twisting, shaking.





I spent the New Year Day on strolling on the beach, mingling with the locals, who came for a day from Libreville (including some rather predatory females), snapping more photos of the island, eating fish, wading in the sea. And preparing for a viewing of the sea turtles.

After a few enquiries with the locals and the owner of the Assala, I was convinced that I could do the turtles sighting on my own. All I had to do was just walk along the shore northbound, pass the presidential home, pass the pier, pass the 'rasta bar', pass the Maringa Hotel, and the giant logs lying on the beach, just before the tip of the island. And then, turn left (westbound). And keep walking towards the Baie des Tortues Hotel. The giant turtles should be coming out along that stretch beyond that tip.

I already made this trip, so there was no challenge for me. It normally takes about 45 minutes to the tip of the island. At night, it could take longer. Particularly as the sea would be at high tide, and certain stretches of the shore would be impassable. One needed to have to navigate giant rocks positioned to prevent more erosion of the shore, and protect the properties. It was best to have sturdy boots on.

## the Leatherback

I set out at about 11pm. I put on my hiking boots, just in case I was going to step on something at night, which could make me have to call my travel insurance. And like everyone on holiday, I would rather not have to do that. And it was a good idea, as it turned out. I managed to stumble on a few branches sticking out on the beach!

When, I passed the giant logs at the tip of the island, the sea was too high to walk along the water's edge. I had to climb onto the beach. And then, I almost stepped on the giant sea turtle just finishing laying her eggs! She was massive! At least 1m70cm (5'4") from head to tail. I must have startled her, I'm sure. But I was also a little shaken that I almost tripped over her.

She was just finishing covering up her eggs with the sand. She looked exhausted. I could swear I could see tears in her eyes. I did not want to disturb her too long. I lingered maybe 5 minutes and then turned back to the Assala Lodge. I really felt guilty afterwards. I had a feeling that I was encroaching on the leatherback's privacy,

invading. She must have been really frightened. I think she was happy to see me go. The sea was just receding, so there was time for her to go too.

In the morning of the second day of the year, I decided to stay an extra night at the Assala Lodge. The turtle viewing the night before, really the main mission for Pointe-Denis was accomplished, and yet it felt rushed to leave just a few hours after the event. Plus, I really did not have a plan for Libreville and the area.

As I said, Gabon was exceptionally bad in the tourism department. They created so many national parks, which of course is commendable, but created no means to get to them to admire their beauty.

Whilst in Libreville, I thought I might make a hop to a small national park, just north of the capital, but I found nothing about its qualities, facilities, trails, etc. Nothing. So, I parked the idea. I had time to decide on that after my return to Libreville for a the last three days of the holiday. An extra day of lounging was not going to hurt. It rained that morning. All five minutes. Then, the sun came back with a vengeance. Typical equatorial string of weather events...



## Back in Libreville

After the entire day of lounging and walking on the beaches of Pointe-Denis, I boarded a small boat bound for the capital. I had a quick chat with madame chief, who said that I should definitely get in touch with her daughter in France. I am not sure exactly why she kept on insisting on that. Perhaps it was because I was the guest at the lodge that was the longest. Or that I was the coolest guest at the lodge!

The small boat took 25 minutes to reach the harbour. There were a few issues with disembarking, as the concrete embankment of the harbour was too high for a small boat like this. Eventually, the not very clever captain, docked to the side of another boat and we were helped out by some very burly cargo loaders, who were taking a break from loading huge boxes onto a large vessel bound to Angola.

I got very kindly invited home by the owner of the Assala Lodge. It was a bit out of the centre, passed the airport, a long walk back to the action, I thought. Yet, there were always cars offering a lift back to the centre (at 3,000 CFA), and it was a great offer indeed, saving me loads of cash.

It was a great house, nicely decorated, equipped with a nespreso machine and with wifi... I could also wash my clothes. Actually, the maid was doing that for me; washing them, drying, ironing...

Xavier also invited me to have dinner with him and his daughter. He was very keen on proper French cheeses, which he was buying in bulk. So, it was a great pad to spend a couple of nights.

A morning double nespreso, and I was out hiking back to centre. It was a long walk. And hot! Along the walk, apart from passing the airport, I met hundreds and hundreds of school pupils dressed in uniforms. Most of the kids looked like grown-ups, so I guessed some of the schools were secondary or senior high schools. Some of the kids said hello, as if they sensed that I was anglophone. How they did that, I'm not sure. But later a couple of them asked me if I was German. Perhaps I looked German and not French.

On the way, just passed the airport, I stopped for a cold soda. It was a nice little cafe on the beach serving cold drinks, sandwiches and crepes. It was a tiny place, almost of it was mobile. It had a small booth, where all the 'cooking' took place and a platform extending from the booth with a

few stools and tables. But it looked very civilised and it was busy.

The beach where it stood was very nice, too. From that moment, I stayed on the beach, walking towards the Port-Môle, or rather the Quartier Louis, where I wanted to see an African craft and decorations shop. I paused for a while near the large Leon M'ba Lycee (a high school), at the beach. The kids were taking a dip in the ocean on their break. They were very funny and played like kids. Four of the kids wanted their picture taken. I obliged and one of the young gents wanted to ... pay me! He handed CFA2,000 to me and when I refused to accept the money, they could not believe that the picture was free! That was something new in terms of my African experience. It was rather shocking and somewhat bizarre. Normally, if one takes a picture of the Africans in Africa, the photographer pays for the privilege to take a photo.

Later, I went to the main art market to have a look around. It was not very big (located near the Presidential Palace) and I managed to visit all stands twice in some 10 minutes. I was thinking perhaps of acquiring a mask or two, but really I was looking for a nice sculpture of a giraffe. I had something specific in mind, and therefore I did not like anything else on the market.



There were a couple of interesting masks, but the starting price was CFA50,000 (\$100 or €76), on which I took an offence. The shop owners quickly dropped the price to CFA10,000 (\$20 or €15), but the damage was done. I did not buy anything.

I stopped for a snack and a local Regab lager at one of 'fast food' restaurants near offices. It was obvious that the venue was catering for office workers, as some of them were still tucking into their burgers and chickens. It was interesting experience. I had to order in French and I caused a bit of a sensation with the waiting staff, who otherwise was very attentive and made sure that my lager always came ice-cold.

On the way back to the beach, I passed by the Port-Môle as the sun was setting behind a thick layer of dust a few degrees above the horizon. At the beach, a few miles from the harbour towards the airport, there was a nice club called Aqua Rhum and a simple beach bar, which I did not think had a name, but the locals called it Maringa. I had a sundowner there. It was a very popular place. It served a variety of dishes from a caravan-type vehicle fixed to the road permanently. The dishes included a range of burgers, salads and chicken dishes. And it was never short of cold drinks, although they did sometimes run out of certain brands of lager, including the one that I liked.

They had a canopy spread over a dozen of plastic tables with plastic chairs, most of which were busy most of the time.

The Assala boatman, Ben, joined me later for a snack and a couple of beers (he had to come all the way across the city) - it was him, who told me the name of the place. He was just 20 years old, and immigrant from Cote d'Ivoire. He was not a full time boatman at the Asala. He was one of the cargo loaders at the harbour. But he was rather petite. Perhaps 160 cm tall, weighing maybe 55 kgs. He was so skinny that you could see his heart beating through his skin! It was the first time I saw such a thing!

Anyway, that cargo loading job paid rather well, which was a blessing for him. One day, Xavier of the Asala spotted him in the harbour and asked him if he wanted to earn some extra money. This is how he got that job. It was not a daily job and he only did a couple of hours each day he worked. Ben was an interesting character, if a little shy. We spoke about his plans for life and the relationships between the black and white people in Gabon. We had a few drinks there chatting and watching people come and go at that place.

My birthday. It started slow. There were no specific plans until the evening. Rolling out of the bed late smoothed things with killing

time in the afternoon. A long hike from Carrefour GG all the way to Quartier Louis, about an hour or so, was good exercise. A few stops along the way on the beaches, chatting to students playing on the beach, were all good experiences. I stopped for a longer while at Maringa again. The guys already know me there, so as soon as I sat down, a beautifully chilled bottle of Régab lager was promptly delivered to my table without even having to say anything. That is what I call service! And it was my birthday, after all.

In the evening, I went to the Aqua Rhum. I had plans to go to a proper club, but conversations at the Aqua Rhum were too good and I was too plastered by 2 a.m. to go clubbing. I am not sure how many people I met in the club. But I know it was a great fun. I chatted to the personnel and loads and loads of guests. I bought drinks, I got drinks bought for me. I left tips. Everyone was happy.

The next day was the Birthday After Party Day & Night. Again a late start. A hike to the beaches, conversations (mostly in French unfortunately!) with the students on the beach again; about their weekend, my travels, their future plans, snapping some pictures with them... all until the sunset. A taxi home, shower, an aperitif, and a taxi back to the Quartier Louis.





Ben and his friend Davy joined me for the evening. They had plans to go night clubbing, and so they twisted my arm to have a birthday after party. It was Friday, and my last night in Gabon, so this actually did not sound like a bad idea at all.

A short visit to cash machine at Le Meridien, and we started at the Aqua Room for some pizza (c.CFA7,000) and Cuba Libres (CFA6,000 each). Then, a short hike to the New Cotton Club. When we arrived (CFA5,000 cover charge, first drink free, then drinks CFA5,000), the karaoke was just finishing.

The club had a collection of the tallest girls I have seen in West and Central Africa. Some of them were as big as Berlin's transvestites! And, sadly, some resembled them, too. And these were just the waitresses. Many of the paying customers were also tall girls. Plus a good number of them were also big (i.e. heavy). It was a bit of a shock to me as on the streets and beaches of Libreville, one could spot mainly smaller people. It was very strange, I thought.

The club got packed! They played really good music, some sort of Africanised 1970s and 1980s disco. Very special! By 4 a.m., I got a bit tired. And the groups of heavy drinking burly oil platform workers, who

invaded the club by that time, kind of ruined my experience. I gave Ben and Davy CFA20,000 to continue partying, as they were in no mood to stop yet, and took a taxi 'home'.

## Leaving

Rolled out of bed after noon and pre-packed. The maid handed me freshly pressed laundry I had given her the day before, and I took a taxi to the beaches again. But to my surprise, the coast was less animated than on a weekday. Perhaps the school kids and high school students made up the crowd during the week. In other African countries, beaches were busiest during weekends. This is when all the beach football was happening, the body surfing, girls watching lads, lads watching girls, etc.

Late lunch and a hike in the Quartier Louis in search of Gallery Olima. I saw very nice sculptures of giraffes at the Le Meridien's lobby, and thought I could get one for my flat. But when I eventually found this place, the prices really shocked me! For a small wooden giraffe (a wooden log with one end sculpted into giraffe's head) measuring about 15 inches they wanted over €100! I loved the concept but I really could not

justify the expense. If it was, say €20, I would have spent €100 to buy five of them (they really looked great in groups). Otherwise, I thought it was too expensive.

There were other animals sculpted really nicely, too. But the cost of them was stupidly excessive; an 6 inch leopard was €230, 5 inch round elephant was €155, 4 inch small sea turtle was €70. I have to admit that the ideas were lovely and the quality was superb. And yet, I thought there were limits of how much a bloke could spend on useless things and house decorations. I literally spent €0 in that gallery.

A short stop at Maringa for a bottle of Régab, and a conversation with handsome Mike, a 23 year-old waiter there and a father of a three year-old daughter. All in French (I think I was getting better in French every day!). He had waited three days to begin a conversation with me. I guess he was shy hearing me talking to others in English or FrenGLISH at best. He must have been the shyest person I have met. And not just on this trip, but in a few years. He was curious, though. More curious than he was shy, and this is why he eventually found enough strength to talk to me. A guy like Mike, with his face, would feature on magazines in Europe or America. He had interesting, regular and gentle features of a model.

An hour or so of chatting to handsome Mike and a taxi 'home' to finish packing. A quick chat with Xavier, a handshake with the guard, whom I had to wake up in the middle of the night or early in the morning to let me back in, and I was sitting in the lounge at the Leon M'ba International Airport of Libreville. Uh, and I spent the excess of my CFA on fragrances at the duty free shops...

## Epilogue

Now, what's in the title? So, there I am, believing everything that Oscar tells me. How much he believes in God, how much he loves the mother of his daughter, how the Lord is going to sort him out, provided that lives by the Christian rules. And then, at the earliest opportunity to shag a girl, he is the very first one in the line. And it does not matter how many times a night this opportunity materialises. And opportunities presented themselves every night, several times over. And every time, Oscar was ready to yank his cock out and get a jiggy with it.

I had to ask him how shagging girls whenever occasion arises could possible agree with his religious nature, fear of God, etc. And he did not even blink having an explanation to me ready. It was simple really.

Everyone had two lives. The first life was the God fearing life, decent, gospel-singing life, loving your partner, loving your daughter, full of faithfulness life. You could not hear enough about how God was great and important for the first life, how happy the first life to have God in the heart of the first life.

The second life, the inner life, was different. It was the life inside you that was making you (or making Oscar, in this example) give in to the lust and desire. Forgetting about the mother of his daughter. Forgetting about God, forgetting about decency, forgetting about sin. It was the life of satisfaction, pleasure, unlimited supply of condoms, life of partying, alcohol, gluttony, insatiable sex, lust and desire.

Now, the question was which life would take better of you. Was it the first life, or the second life?

I had never heard about such concept. I was not sure if it was just the Oscar's concept of life, or whether it was more common. But I have to admit that many lads, whom I met appeared to follow this life philosophy. I saw many guys chasing after women just for pleasure of it, and to get their pipes wet. But, the women were exactly the same. It did not matter that they were married or had boyfriends or kids to care about, they were

sill ready to browse through the meat market and get a body or a cock they liked.

The Cameroon-Gabon holiday was a jolly good holiday.

Cameroon was more about the discovery, going to the basics, roughing it a little, giving in to chance. It was about the chocolate colour beaches, mountains, volcanoes, meeting with the local, and loads and loads of partying.

Gabon was more about lounging, sleeping late, walking along the beaches, soaking the relaxing atmosphere. It was more about upscale hotels and lodges, tracing the giant sea turtles, and speaking French. It was about the New Year's Party, Birthday Party and Birthday After Party.

If I had to choose between the countries, I would have to say that Cameroon appealed to me more than Gabon. There was more poverty there, but people were also friendlier, and the landscape was more dramatic. There was more to explore, too.

## THE END

All names in this report are true and the story should be entirely accurate. All photographs were taken by the author during the trip. All rights reserved.

