

## Traveling to Africa – It's Complicated!

In August I made my first trip to Africa. I was in Limbe, Cameroon for 12 days doing management capability building for a not-for-profit organization. While I have traveled to 20+ other countries, I had never been to Africa before. I have done business in China and India - so doing business in other cultures wasn't new to me. But, as I quickly discovered, this trip was in a different category. The country is one of duality. It has two official languages - French and English. It is very welcoming and hospitable - and, sees western visitors as dollar signs. It also has two influential cultures - French from being a former French colony and African.



I knew that this would be a different experience from landing in Douala, Cameroon. Two things occurred to me simultaneously. One, I was traveling alone - which makes a trip into a new country a completely different experience. And two, while Cameroon says it is a 'completely bi-lingual 'country', that is not true. They speak French. My high school French teacher would have been proud to know how much of her teaching came back to me in the airport. However, my French only came back when I was listening - unfortunately, every time I spoke - Spanish came out!

The crush of people was incredible at the airport and finding your luggage on the carousel is a real challenge. After I retrieved my luggage, a Customs official walked up to me, marked my bag with chalk, and pointed to the line out of the baggage claim area. I thanked him and began to walk to the exit line. He then stuck out his hand and rubbed his thumb back and forth across his fingers - the universal sign for 'pay me'. In the US, I would see this as bribing a public official - but this was Africa. So, I paid the official \$10 USD, and avoided standing behind 200+ people at the X-ray line. It turned out to be one of the best 'investments' I made while in the country.

The majority of the Cameroonian people I met were warm and welcoming with excellent hospitality. They wanted to make sure that my visit was safe and enjoyable. I tasted many different types of local food (my favorite was the smoked rabbit), saw the local sites, and enjoyed hearing stories of where they grew up from each person I met.

I quickly became acquainted with the concept of 'tips' in Cameroon. If you have anything done for you at all, a tip is expected. And sometimes when you don't want things done for you, a tip is expected. The man who holds the sign with your name on it and then introduces you to your driver expects a tip just as large as the man who actually drives you to the hotel. The tips are expected, as one individual told me, because 'you have more money than me, so you should give me some of it.'



My drive to Limbe included another interaction with a public official. A police officer waved over my car and driver. He then examined my passport saying that the VISA was invalid. After I corrected him and showed him the valid dates on the VISA, he waited for several minutes. Then, he told my driver that we could go. My driver told me that the officer had been waiting for me to get nervous and then to offer him a bribe.

It was a pleasure to work with the client organization. They are doing very good work to improve the health care systems in several West African countries. What surprised me was the narrow set of experiences that individuals brought to their work. All of the people working at this organization are highly educated in their special area of study. For example, one individual had a PhD in a hard science area but didn't know how to link Excel spreadsheets together to create a scorecard.

In the U.S. we have Affirmative Action and frequently it is attacked for being unnecessary. My experience in Africa reinforced, for me, why it is needed. While both my client and I have advanced college degrees - comparing our pre-college backgrounds showed enormous differences. My background was rural, but a fairly mainstream high school. My client's background was a small village and an open, grass-hut school. My client is very smart and learned quickly throughout our work, but was starting with a much narrower set of experiences to bring to the organization. Many of us in the US have been exposed to additional experiences that impact our ability to get results even today. In the US, Affirmative Action helps to equalize these differences in background as well as education.

The 12 days 'in-country' ended with lots of practical tools and new skills for the client organization. They learned quickly, applied what they learned even more quickly, and the engagement ended on a very high note. I am glad that I went to Cameroon and I am glad that it was very different from any place I had visited before. It is good for me to be out of my comfort zone and experience a very different culture than the one I grew up in. It is also good to be in a country with little infrastructure.

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I may dislike paying my taxes, but it is good to be reminded of what those taxes provide. Being in a developing country makes you appreciate having potable water every time the tap is turned on, driving on roads that can support more than 50 mph, and having electricity stay on even when you get 4" of rain in 24 hours.

All in all, this was a good, successful trip - but complicated. This wasn't an easy country or continent to visit and definitely isn't a trip I'd recommend for a rookie international traveler. But, for someone who isn't afraid of being way out of their comfort zone, Cameroon and Africa can be a rich and rewarding adventure.