

TRIP REVIEW

CHAD & CAMEROON

By Michel Behar (January 2019)

Chad

Home to deserts and rainforests, exotic wildlife and ethnic diversity, ancient history and newfound independence, Chad is a destination sure to leave an imprint on your memory long after you've left. A landlocked nation in the heart of Central Africa, Chad has been inhabited since around 7,000 BCE, and has been occupied by both sedentary and nomadic populations for over 1,000 years.

Like many other African nations, Chad was colonized by France in the early 1900s. Though the country gained its independence in 1960, its stability was short-lived, and civil war plagued the region in the 1970s and 80s. Chad has been governed by President Idriss Deby since 1990, and has been politically stable for the last 10 years. An oil boom in 2000 helped pull the nation partway into the 21st century, and today its capital city of N'djamena offers a number of decent hotels, as well as a highway connecting it with Zakouma National Park. Chad is one of the world's least developed countries, but has one of the most effective armies in the area, and plays an important role in military and peace-keeping operations in the fragile Sahel region.

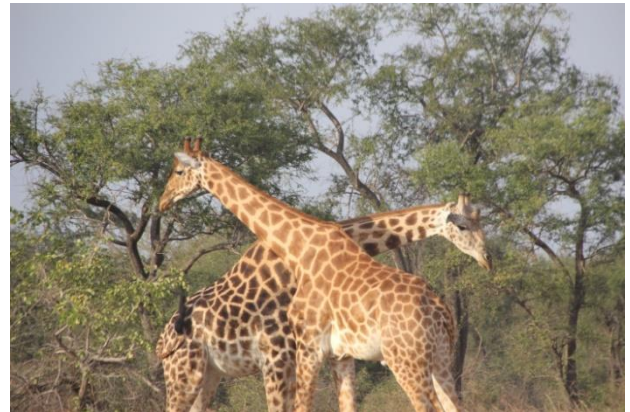
While French and Arabic are the official languages of Chad, many other dialects are spoken, and the country is home to over 200 different ethnic groups. Islam is the most popular religion in Chad, though about 40% of its citizens are Christian. The country's civil war saw a fracture between the two religions, with Libya supporting the Muslims in the north, and France taking the side of the Christian farmers of the south. Despite Chad's low literacy rate, its capital boasts two universities – one catering to the country's French speakers, and one to the Arabic-speaking community.

Our first day in Chad was a busy one. We flew into N'djamena (originally established by the French and known as Fort Lamy), and from there went directly to the National Museum. Feeling a mix of both excitement and celebrity, we were delighted to find that the museum had opened just for our group. The director gave us a tour, proudly showing off the museum's many ancient treasures along with its prized artifact: the Toumai Man, widely regarded as one of mankind's oldest ancestors and also we saw a 7 million year old crocodile. Later, we checked into the Chari Hotel – the oldest luxury hotel in Chad, dating back to the colonial era. The hotel has managed to hold on to its colonial charm while still offering the typical modern-day amenities. From the hotel's spacious garden teeming with colibris, we could see the Chari River separating Chad from neighboring Cameroon. After a welcome drink in the bar, we enjoyed a delicious dinner, then retired to our rooms, eagerly anticipating the next day's adventures.



The following morning, we headed to the airport for our private jet that would take us to Zakouma National Park for a 3-day stay. Roughly the size of Rhode Island, Zakouma is Chad's oldest national park. For many years, poachers would raid the park, killing animals for trophy or profit. Sometimes even rangers were killed as well. A number of species, including elephants, were in danger of extinction in this region. However, in 2010, African Parks took over management, and not only brought the park up to western standards, but helped to put an end to the poaching, and regrew the diminished animal populations. Today, the park is home to more than 500 elephants, believed to be the largest remaining herd in Africa. And in 2018, six black rhinoceroses were reintroduced to the park, after being extinct from the region for nearly 50 years. In addition to thousands of animals, there is a mixture of woodlands and grasslands, and Zakouma enjoys a growing reputation in powerful philanthropic circles as a protected haven for the rich biodiversity of West Africa.

Our tour of Zakouma National Park began with lectures from our study leader (Michel), and the park manager (Maxim). Then, after a quick lunch, we were on our way to our first exploratory ride. The rides lasted about 4 hours on average, and our driver stopped anytime we heard or saw something. Our group sat on the open-air off-road vehicles in wonder, as we spotted one majestic creature after another. The experience of seeing crocodiles, baboons, lions, elephants, hartebeests, storks, pelicans, cranes, and much more in their natural habitat is one I'll not soon forget.



On the third day, we said goodbye to Zakouma, and set out on the road back N'djamena by way of road, a journey that required 2 days with a night of camping (quite comfortable and reasonably acceptable). The drive is long but the joys of watching life go by along the road in the small villages and tiny towns we passed was very eye-opening to understand the country and its conditions.



Such drive also is great for encountering nomadic caravans of some of the Arab tribes who when they move from area to another in search of water and grazing lands, they transport with them all their worldly belongings and you may see the matriarch of the clan sitting in her suite on the back of the camel while peaking between the shades made of seashells dangling



Cameroon

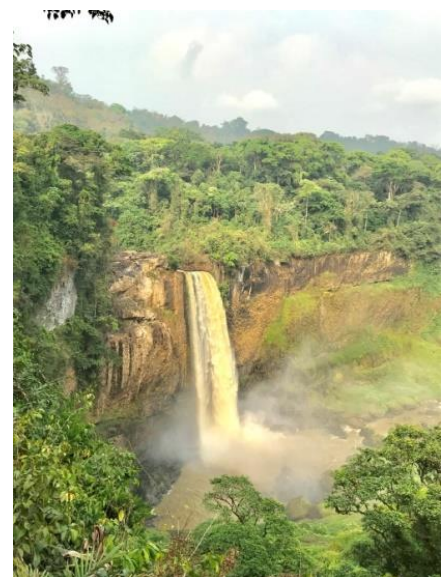
A land of royal dynasties, diverse climates, and many cultures, Cameroon is home to more than 22 million people. Often referred to as “Africa in Miniature” due to its 275 ethnic groups who speak more than 150 dialects, it’s considered the most heterogenous nation on the continent. Originally (and still) inhabited by Pygmies as far back as 2,000 years ago, Cameroon spent nearly 500 years (1394-1884) as the Kingdom of Bamoun. Descendants of the Bamoun dynasty can still be found in Cameroon to this day. The Bamoun, along with the Bamiléké, and Tikar, are known as Western Highlanders, and make up 31% of the country’s population.

In the late 1800s, Cameroon suffered the fate of many African nations, and found itself under colonial rule, first by Germany, then later by France and Great Britain. In 1960, the country won its independence from France, and a year later, a referendum united the rest of the nation. Today, though there are many dialects spoken, Cameroon is officially a bilingual country where French influence still runs deep, with 80% of its inhabitants speaking French, and 20% speaking English or pidgin English. Cameroon’s colonial past is evidenced in the religious make-up of the country as well, with more than half of its population identifying as Christian, while about 30% identify as Muslim, and around 6% as Animist. Despite being an autonomous nation for only 60 years, Cameroon is fairly wealthy by African standards, mostly due to its natural resources like petroleum, timber, cocoa, coffee, bananas, cotton, palm oil, tobacco, rubber, and unexploited deposits of iron ore, bauxite, copper, chromium, uranium, and other metals.

We began our incredible journey in Douala, one of Cameroon’s two major cities. Upon arrival, we were greeted by Daniel Mbevo, our knowledgeable and fascinating tour guide. On the way to our accommodations, we made a stop at the breathtaking Ekom waterfalls. The falls, coupled with the beautiful lush green surroundings, were the perfect way to start our tour. Later, we headed to the restored farm of Kléber Lodge, which dates back to the French colonial era, where we stayed overnight.

The next morning, we began our day with a driving tour though Bamiléké territory, famous for its coffee and cocoa production. After, we visited the museum/palace in Bandjoun, where we learned about the Bamiléké chieftom. Here, we admired the royal thrones, intricate masks, beaded objects, wooden carved panels, statues, musical instruments, and meticulously carved totem-like columns showcased at the museum. The compound also includes various huts for the chief and his wives.

Our next stop (after a delicious lunch in a local hotel in Koutaba) was Foumban, the capital of the sultanate. Foumban is one of the oldest cities in Cameroon, dating back to the 15th century. We explored the Palais Royal, which was built in 1917 and resembles a medieval chateau, complete with grand entrance reception halls, a room of thrones, and the quarters of the Sultan, Queen, and Queen’s mother. Inside the palace is the Sultan’s Museum, where we discovered many treasures, like beautiful gowns, centuries-old weapons, native instruments, dazzling jewelry, masks, and statues.



Just a few hundred meters south of the palace via the Rue des Artisans, is the Museum of Bamoun Arts and Traditions, which houses many artifacts, like cooking implements, statues, masks, and gongs. After the museums, we went shopping on the Rue des Artisans, where basket weavers, embroiderers, sculptors, wood carvers, and more, sell their wares. It was an exhilarating experience to become immersed in the energy of the market, to barter for antiques in this land of kingdoms, and to feel a part of a culture so foreign to me. Upon leaving the market, we set out for a resort in Petpénoun, where we feasted on an excellent buffet-style dinner, then retired for the night.

The following day, after a hearty breakfast, we made our way to a Bamendjou festival. This particular celebration was a festival held every two years for the octogenarian Bamiléké king. The king was seated at his throne, surrounded by servants and wives, dressed in a skirt, beaded necklaces, and sneakers. Our guide informed us that the king has been married 150 times and has 400 children. Being able to witness this tradition firsthand was one of the highlights of the tour.



After a light snack of bananas on the bus, we continued on to the Dschang Museum of Civilizations, where we learned more about the culture and history of Cameroon. Later, we stopped by the Bamiléké food and craft market on our way back to the hotel, and prepared to return to Douala the next day.

Cameroon's largest and most dynamic city, Douala is home to 2 million people, and is only 15 miles from the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. Its port serves a number of African countries. Our first stop in Douala was for a delightful lunch at a Greek restaurant, then we were off to explore the city by bus. We visited the exquisite neo-Romanesque Cathedral of Peter and Paul. Later, we drove by the previous residence of King Rudolph Manga Bell, and the palace of King Akwa. We ended our day in Douala with a quick visit to a local craft center, and then a delicious dinner at an Indian/Chinese restaurant.



The next morning, we set out on our last adventure: visiting the Baka pygmies. Before leaving, we purchased rice, matches, and flour to bring to our hosts. Then, we boarded three pirogues, and began our much-anticipated journey to witness this ancient and mysterious culture. Once we reached our destination, we were invited by the Pygmies to tour their houses, watch their ceremonial dances, and see how the inhabitants of this remote and small community live. After an unforgettable visit, we headed off to the coast, where we dined on fresh fish and shrimp. After a few hours of leisure time, we had a farewell dinner at the hotel, and then prepared for our flight home the next morning, closing the book on the final chapter of our incredible expedition.

