

Experiencing Life in Africa for the First Time

A visit to Africa for the very first time generated a special feeling that was complex and difficult for me to describe. All the stories and history that I had heard over the years from my parents became real. The trip was wonderful, exciting and in many ways different ways surprising as well.

On December 17, 2005 we began our trip from Reno, flew to Chicago, then to Belgium, and twenty-four hours of delay in Belgium we finally took off to Africa. The plane from Belgium had a malfunction, and this was the only plane that would be able to fly us to Cameroon. We had already boarded the plane and we were excited to take off when a flight attendant informed us that we had to stay the night in Belgium because the plane had a malfunction and had to be fixed before we could leave. We had no choice but to disembark the plane and spend another night in Belgium. The following morning we finally boarded flight for Douala, which I was told was the economic capital of Cameroon. We arrived at Douala airport at about six o'clock Cameroon time in the afternoon, and I immediately felt severe heat and smelled an unpleasant odor, never the less, I was excited that my feet had touched African soil for the first time in my life. There were so many people at the airport and with everyone cleaning their luggage and going through customs, we did not leave the airport until midnight and we still did not get our entire luggage. A few of them got lost during the transfer of planes between Belgium and Douala. After all the hassle, my aunt met up with us and drove us to her house where we stayed the night. Her house had all the necessities needed to make life pleasant and it didn't seem different from what I was used to.

I had hoped that this will be our last stop but my mom hired a bus the next day to take us to Kumba. She told me that we were going to meet my grandmother. During the journey from Douala to Kumba, I noticed many interesting things. I had begun to understand, or at least notice how different the transportation system was from what I was used to in America. The first thing I noticed was the roads weren't very good because they had potholes and were completely uneven. Travelling at night was difficult because there were no street lights along the road and no traffic signs. The journey was long and exhausting but we finally made it to Kumba sometime in the evening. I was so exhausted that I did not even bother to keep track of time.

I was very happy to spend a few days with my grandmother whom I had not seen in a number of years. After spending a few days in Kumba we had to travel to Mamfe where my other grandmother was living. I thought the roads from Douala to Kumba were bad, but the roads from Kumba to Mamfe were even worse. The roads were very dusty as well and because of the nature of the road it took longer to travel the short distance. It had taken us about eight hours to get to Mamfe; a journey which I was told should take no more than two hours if the road was good. I had also noticed that there were no posted speed limits along the road, which did not matter because with the condition of the road you could not drive fast even if you wanted to. I also noticed that the drivers were reckless in their driving. I was also surprised that we were stopped by police officers every few miles we drove. They always asked for our identification and checked our bags. I thought that was a waste of time because it happened so frequently.

When we finally arrived in Mamfe, we were looked upon by many in astonishment. "Why were we so different from everyone else there" I thought to myself

by seeing the expression on their faces. Was it because of our clothing that we had worn? Maybe they were not used to seeing kids dressed up like we did. Most of them didn't wear regular jeans and T-shirt. The traditional "Cabba" was what was worn on a daily basis by most women.

Communicating with my grandmother and even my older cousins was also different at times. Although they could not easily understand me, and I could hardly understand them at the beginning due to the differences in pronunciations, we still had a good time with one another. The house was full of people at every hour of the day. People looked through their windows to see what was going on. I just assumed that everyone there were friends and family.

Food was served only one time every day. I was forced to eat whatever was there and had no choice of meals. We were fortunate that my mom had prepared foods such as chicken, eggs and even fries that we brought along and we could enjoy those. Doors stayed open all day until in the evening and this enabled people to walk freely into the house without any phone calls to inform us prior to their visit. One evening a lot of our neighbors had gathered at my grandparent's home to celebrate our last day in Mamfe and also celebrating the life of my grandfather who had passed the prior year. The "Chief of Quarter" as I was told was his title, spoke in Pidgin English and I could understand a few words he was saying. He opened a bottle of Palm Wine and called unto my grandfather, Pa Tabe. After the speech there was dancing, music, and playing of the drums. the traditional dances and all the ritual were very exciting to me since I had never seen anything like this before. The power had gone out in the middle of all the festivities and that was to me because that was the third time the power had gone out that day but we did

not stop the celebration. After all the electrical issues, I understood why we had brought a flash light along with us. There is a lot to talk about Cameroon but I think that what stood out to me the most was the state of the transportation system, and the culture and traditions of the people. I do think that a lot of people are struggling to survive. I do believe that if the transportation system is improved and everyone helps out in the community the economy and the country will improve.

I am very glad to have such a wonderful experience in Cameroon Africa. I also thank my parent's everyday for that experience. Traveling to Africa for the first time had led me to understand the lives of many others, and that impacted on my life as well. It was an experience that will last a life time.

(High School)