

# Cameroon

Cameroon's tourist industry is a victim of geography. It sits in a tough neighbourhood, bordered by some problematic countries. But this shouldn't put you off, as Cameroon really has just about everything a traveller could want. One of the most culturally diverse countries on the continent, its people include ancient tribal kingdoms, Muslim pastoralists and forest-dwelling pygmies.

The landscape is no less dizzying in its diversity. Mt Cameroon (4095m) is the highest peak in West Africa and attracts plenty of trekking interest. A still-active volcano, it rises almost straight from the sea in a spectacular manner. Further north are the rolling grassfields of the Ring Road area, while the Mandara Mountains are a complete contrast again – dry and rocky, with isolated villages eking out a living. Fringing all of this are some of Africa's oldest rainforests, and the excellent Parc National de Waza, with abundant mammal and birdlife, and large herds of elephants gathering at water holes in the dry season.

If all this exhausts you, you can retire to some fine palm-fringed beaches and fantastic seafood, which should help to recharge your batteries. Throw in a cold beer or two, some lively home-grown *makossa* music and the Indomitable Lions of the national football team, and you'll be revelling in your discovery.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 469,440 sq km (a little smaller than Spain, a little bigger than California)
- **ATMs** At banks in large cities, linked to Visa
- **Borders** Nigeria, Chad, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Central Africa Republic (CAR) all open; borders with Democratic Republic of Congo sometime closed, check in advance
- **Budget** US\$40 per day
- **Capital** Yaoundé
- **Languages** French, English and many local languages
- **Money** Central African CFA; US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 16.4 million
- **Seasons** Hot year-round; north: wet (April to September); south: heavy rain (June to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 237, international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visas** Required by all, available in neighbouring countries for US\$60



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Mount Cameroon** (p288) Don your hiking boots to climb the mist-shrouded slopes of West Africa's highest peak.
- **Kribi** (p293) Chill on the white beaches and practise your French with the locals over grilled fish.
- **Ring Road** (p291) Explore the cool green scenery and rolling countryside near Bamenda.
- **Mandara Mountains** (p298) Head into the remote landscape and trek from village to village.
- **Parc National de Waza** (p298) Watch elephants at the water holes of one of the region's best national parks.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The north has rains from April/May to September/October. The hottest months are March to May, when temperatures can soar to 40°C, although it's a dry heat. The south has a humid, equatorial climate, with rain scattered throughout the year. The main wet season there is June to October, with light rain from March to June. Throughout Cameroon, November to February are the driest months.

The best months to visit are November to February, although you'll have harmattan haze during much of this time. The worst months are July to October, when it's raining almost everywhere, and many roads impassable.

## ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Starting from either Douala (p284) or Yaoundé (p280), go to Limbe (p288) for a night or two to get your bearings before climbing Mt Cameroon (p288). Alternatively leave the cities for Foumban (p292) or Bamenda (p289) and then head to the open country of the Ring Road area (p291). Finish back in Douala or Yaoundé.
- **Two to Three Weeks** Spend the first week exploring the Ring Road area (p291) and visiting Foumban (p292). Then head to Yaoundé (p280), fly north to Maroua (p296) and venture into the Mandara Mountains (p298) for a few days trekking. With more time, you could go from Yaoundé to N'Gaoundéré (p294) by train, and from there make your way north by road to Maroua.
- **One Month** Start with a night or two in Limbe (p288), followed by a climb of Mt

## HOW MUCH?

- **Ingredients for juju fetish** US\$1
- **100km bus ride** US\$1.60
- **Moto-taxi ride across town** US\$0.20
- **Bottle of palm wine** US\$2
- **Carved mask** US\$30

## LP INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.60
- **1.5L of bottled water** US\$0.90
- **Bottle of '33' beer** US\$1.20
- **Souvenir football shirt** US\$6.80
- **Stick of brochettes** US\$0.20

Cameroon (p288) before making your way up to Bamenda (p289) and the Ring Road area (p291). Cross to Foumban (p292), and from here make your way to Yaoundé (p280) before taking the train to N'Gaoundéré (p294). Spend the remainder of your time exploring northern Cameroon (p294).

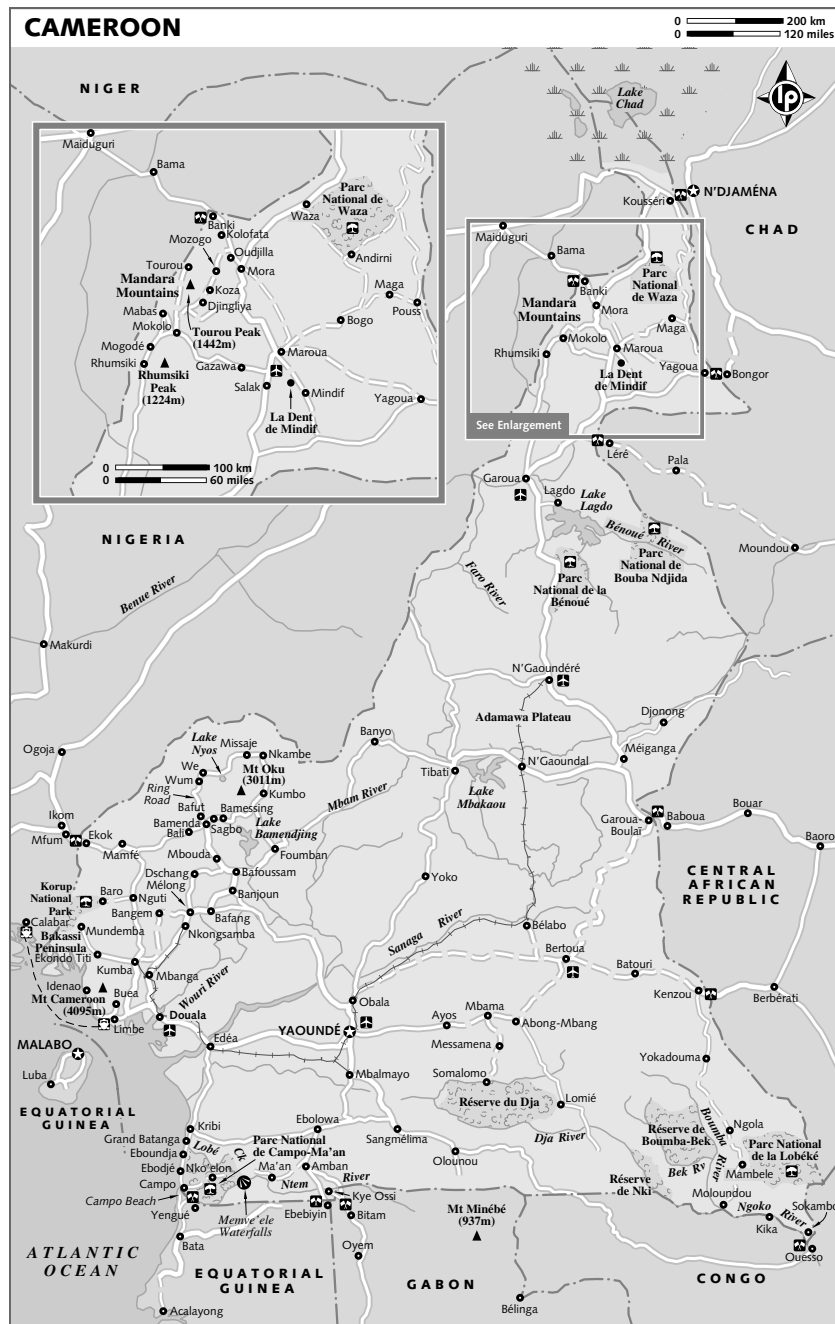
## HISTORY

Cameroon is another example of colonial powers creating a country without regard for tribal boundaries or geography. The parts of what is now Cameroon were divided and ceded between European countries throughout the colonial era until the modern boundaries were established in 1961, creating a part-Anglophone, part-Francophone nation.

## Prawns for Starters

Portuguese explorers first sailed up the Wouri River in 1472, and named it Rio dos Camarões (River of Prawns). Soon after the Portuguese arrived by sea, Fulani pastoral nomads from what is now Nigeria began to migrate overland from the north, forcing the indigenous forest peoples southwards. The Fulani migration took on added urgency in the early 17th century as they fled the increasingly predatory attentions of Dutch, Portuguese and British slave-traders.

British influence was curtailed in 1884 when Germany signed a treaty with the well-organised chiefdoms of Douala and central Bamiléké Plateau, although for the



local inhabitants the agreement meant little more than a shift from one form of colonial exploitation to another. After WWI the German protectorate of Kamerun was carved up between France and Great Britain.

Local revolts in French-controlled Cameroon in the 1950s were brutally suppressed, but the momentum throughout Africa for throwing off the shackles of colonial rule soon took hold. Self-government was granted in French Cameroon in 1958, quickly followed by independence on 1 January 1960.

### Wily Ahidjo

Ahmadou Ahidjo, leader of one of the independence parties, became president of the newly independent state, a position he was to hold until his resignation in 1982. Ahidjo, a man with a total lack of charisma, ensured his longevity through the cultivation of expedient alliances, brutal repression and wily if authoritarian regional favouritism.

In October 1961 a UN-sponsored referendum in British-mandated northwestern Cameroon ended up splitting it in two, with the area around Bamenda opting to join the federal state of Cameroon and the remainder joining Nigeria. In June 1972 the federal structure of two Cameroons was replaced by the centralised United Republic of Cameroon – a move that is bitterly resented to this day by Anglophone Cameroonians, who believe that instead of entering a true union they have become second-class citizens.

### The Biya Era

In 1982 Ahidjo's hand-picked successor, Paul Biya, distanced himself from his former mentor, but adopted many of Ahidjo's repressive measures, clamping down hard on calls for multiparty democracy. Diversions such as the national soccer team's stunning performance in the 1990 World Cup bought him time. But the demands for freedom would not go away and Biya was forced to legalise 25 opposition parties. When it became apparent that plurality placed limitations upon the president, these parties were quickly, though temporarily, suspended, along with the constitution.

The first multiparty elections in 25 years were grudgingly held in 1992 and saw the Cameroonian Democratic People's Movement – led by Biya – hanging on to power with the support of minority parties. International observers alleged widespread vote-rigging and

intimidation – allegations repeated in elections in 1999 and, most recently, in 2004.

### Cameroon Today

The international anticorruption organisation, Transparency International, consistently ranks Cameroon among the world's most corrupt countries. This phenomenon affects every aspect of daily life, from dealings with petty government officials to the rampant destruction of the country's rainforests by logging interests and kickbacks from the recently completed oil pipeline from Chad to Kribi. Until this malaise is seriously addressed and genuine political openness is permitted, Cameroon will continue to limp along for the foreseeable future.

### CULTURE

Traditional social structures dominate life. Local chiefs (known as *fon* in the west, or *lamido* in the north) still wield considerable influence, and when travelling in places that don't receive many tourists, it's polite to announce your presence. You'll also need to get the chief's permission to enter tribal lands, including various mountains and crater lakes. In many cases, a small gift is expected – a bottle of whisky is common currency.

There's a distinct cultural and political gap between the Francophone and Anglophone parts of Cameroon, albeit one felt predominantly by the Anglophone minority. The country is far from being truly bilingual, and Anglophones complain of discrimination in education (most universities lecture in French only) and in the workplace.

### PEOPLE

Cameroon is home to around 280 distinct ethnolinguistic groups. Most Cameroonians are involved in agriculture, and the country is a major regional exporter of food, as well as being the seaport for Chad and Central African Republic (CAR). While Cameroonians may have a reputation as hustlers, it's a skill they often need to navigate a faltering economy and corrupt bureaucracy.

### ARTS

Cameroon has produced a few of the region's most celebrated artists. In literature, Mongo Beti deals with the legacies of colonialism. Musically, Manu Dibango is the country's brightest star.