



Mud, mud, glorious mud

When four former Maties reached Cameroon on a nine-month African odyssey, they decided to stuff the easier tolled detours and to take on the notorious mud craters that could swallow a logging truck. That's where the fun began for **Stephen Cunliffe** and co.

The Land Cruiser lurched over the edge and dropped into the muddy soup below. The left rear panel smashed against a solid wall of earth with a crunching shudder, followed by the tinkling of breaking glass.

"Don't stop!" yelled Tim. "It's only our rear lights. We need forward momentum!"

With the Detroit Locker diff locks engaged, all four wheels churned powerfully through the deep, viscous mud. The vehicle ploughed on through driving rain.

Despite the BF Goodrich mud-terrain tyres, the Cruiser slid around like a drunken ice-skater as it fought for traction in the slippery sludge.

Although securely strapped in, everyone in the vehicle sat quietly on the edge of their seats, transfixed by what might be lying in wait around the next corner.

We were anxious and tense: nobody wanted to spend another 14 hours bogged down in mud.

I was trying to discern the best route through a never-ending quagmire that faded into the inky

blackness beyond the reach of our headlights.

Everyone was thinking the same thing: "How could anybody consider calling this Cameroonian mud bath a road?" But in the end, we made it through.

Cameroon has everything from dense rainforest to scorching arid plains.

It boasts Mount Cameroon, an active volcano that has West Africa's highest peak, along with beautiful crater lakes, stunning national parks and palm-fringed beaches.

However, among all the fluffy words and alluring marketing statements, proponents of Cameroon have neglected one vital word that would encapsulate our Cameroonian experience: mud.

I had never seen, heard of, or even imagined that much mud.

With the rains at their peak, early September was arguably not the ideal time to be exploring Cameroon. However, our young, enthusiastic and, in some aspects, naive crew of four old university friends relished the idea of tackling the challenge. >



PHOTOGRAPH TIM KORVING

Spectator sport. In the rainy season, this is what the main “highway” between Cameroon and neighbouring Nigeria looks like. Prepare yourself for long delays – and a lot of winching – as vehicles get stuck.

My wife, Katherine, a chemical engineer who works for an NGO, and I were accompanied by Tim Korving, a civil engineer, and his wife, Ciara, a journalist.

We were travelling in a diesel 1989 HJ 60-series Land Cruiser that we had bought second-hand in the UK for £5 000. We spent another £2 000 kitting it out and fixing it up for the challenges of Africa.

We were five months into our nine-month African odyssey from England to Cape Town, following a seldom-driven route along Africa’s less-visited west coast.

After a month-long exploration of Western Europe we started crossing Africa in Morocco. Then came Western Sahara and Mauritania, after which we crossed through Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana. After Togo and Benin, we slowly conquered the road blocks of Nigeria. Then we hit Cameroon...

Quick facts



Best time: November-February

Stay at least: Two weeks

Experience: Trekking up Mount Cameroon, an active volcano and the highest mountain in West Africa, great wildlife in Waza National Park, palm-fringed beaches and warm water along the coast, challenging driving conditions and plenty of mud for 4x4 aficionados during the wet season.

Know-all: More than 200 ethnic and cultural groups live in Cameroon, which is often referred to as “Africa in miniature”.



Accessible



Only in dry months

Our guidebook didn’t mince words about what lay in store when it described the route we had chosen into Cameroon: “treacherous in the rainy season”. Touché.

When we eventually exited the mud fest a week later, I would reflect on that statement and realise that never before had I read and ignored five more aptly written words of warning.

A 4x4 ride from hell

Our ordeal began three days earlier, soon after we departed the colonial city of Calabar in the southeastern part of Nigeria.

The road deteriorated rapidly and by the time we entered Cameroon via the Ekeang-Otu border post, it was a shockingly bad track devoid of all traffic.

We spent two hours on painstakingly slow bureaucratic border procedures, and then embarked on the 4x4 ride of our lives.

Torrential rain and logging trucks had transformed the “road” from Otu to Mamfé into a never-ending series of deep, wet craters. It looked more like the ideal habitat for wallowing elephants than an arterial road linking neighbouring countries. It was hands down the worst we had encountered anywhere in Africa.

Enterprising locals had constructed boom-controlled detours around many of the worst mud hazards, and for CFA 5 000 (R70) they would permit vehicles to use their alternative routes.

However, we had come to Cameroon in search of an off-the-beaten-track adventure, and the overland challenge of a lifetime beckoned, so there was no way we were going to wimp out and take the “easy way” around. So we confronted the challenges head on, taking the direct route through mud wallows large enough to swallow a logging truck.



PHOTOGRAPH KATHERINE CUNLIFFE

Wrestling, anyone? Tim takes a slippery testing stroll through one of many “elephant mud wallows” that dominated the journey to Mamfé.

Tim drove like a champion and I worked the trusty winch in overdrive. Both activities turned out to be a handful. We made slow progress.

Arriving in Mamfé at 9 pm, the affable local police chief

took one brief look at us, and pointed us in the direction of Ultimate Motel.

Dorothy, the friendly motel owner, took pity on the motley crew of mud-caked adventurers that pitched up late and unannounced on



PHOTOGRAPH TIM KORVING

DESTINATION | CAMEROON

Good start. From Mamfé, which has a decent road and this impressive bridge, the road degenerates spectacularly to Kumba.



Jungle gridlock. With a truck buried deep in the mud and blocking the road, traffic backed up for hours.

her doorstep. She showed us some basic but affordable rooms and even lent us some West African Francs to buy dinner and beers, since we had been unable to change any money yet.

Our first day in the mud was coincidentally also Ciara’s birthday. Thus far it had been memorable for all the wrong reasons, so we set off in search of a feast to set things right.

It soon became apparent that Mamfé lacked banquet options, especially at 10 pm, and we were forced to settle for some less-than-appetising spaghetti omelettes with bread and a tired salad. We promised Ciara we’d make it up to her in the days ahead. At least the Mützig beers were ice cold.

Surely, it can’t get worse ...

It was hard to imagine a worse road than the previous day. But there it was, right in front of us. The road from

Mamfé deteriorated still further en route to Nguti and Kumba. Yet again our winch was hauling us forward, inch by inch. A drive that should have taken no more than three hours in the dry season would take us 17 exhausting hours.

It seemed quite inconceivable, but our route was actually the main “highway” joining Cameroon to neighbouring Nigeria. Even the hardened local Cameroonian drivers admitted it was difficult to consider this mud fest a real road.

Throughout the day, we made excruciatingly slow progress. Little did we know our biggest driving challenges still lay in wait.

At around 3 pm, on a severely churned up stretch of road south of Nguti, we came to an abrupt halt. We were 21 000 km and 156 days into the African overland adventure of a lifetime and for the first time it seemed that we wouldn’t be going any further. >



A 16-wheeler truck was stuck in the long narrow trench masquerading as a road. It completely blocked the road. Buried down to its axles in the middle of this enormous hole, it was going nowhere quickly.

Traffic backed up on either side of the truck. The rain and our muddy surroundings kept us confined to the car for 11 tedious hours. When the rain occasionally abated, the humidity hit us. Everything in the vehicle was damp and sticky. The windows were open in a vain attempt to catch a breeze and dispel the odours of four dirty bodies trapped in the confined space.

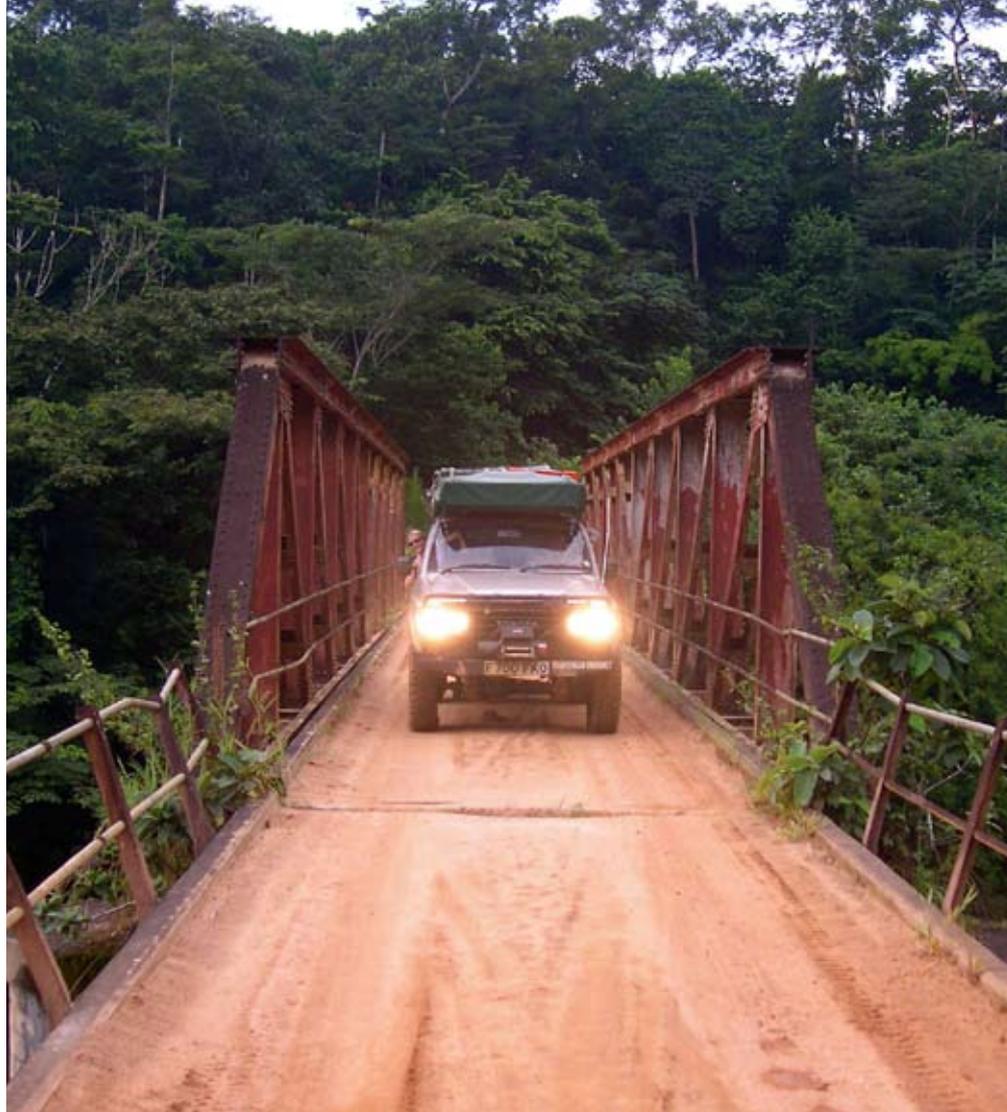
At sunset, squadrons of mosquitoes descended on the vehicles and started biting us left, right and centre. We hurriedly draped a mosquito net inside the car and, despite the muggy heat, tried to catch some sleep.

At around 2 am, the traffic suddenly started moving again. A 4x4 truck had extracted the 16-wheeler with 90 metres of chains.

After two vehicles had made it through, the third bogged down, so Tim and I manoeuvred our Land Cruiser to the front of the queue and winched the car out. In the next hour we had to winch eleven more vehicles through before the traffic jam was cleared.

After hauling one last, particularly ancient-looking, 4x4 through the churned-up mud, we dived back into the Cruiser and took off. No doubt somebody else would soon get stuck and block the road again. We didn't want anybody queue-barging ahead of us. Just behind us, a two-wheel drive Toyota Corolla was raring to have a go...

Amazingly, ever since we entered Cameroon, we had watched these robust little sedans being pushed,



New life. Old railway bridges, such as this one between Otu and Mamfe, are often recommissioned for traffic.

pulled and coaxed through the muddy tracks of western Cameroon.

With our patience exhausted and wives no doubt contemplating divorce, we needed to get cracking. That's when we lurched over the edge and dropped into the muddy soup below. And eventually we managed to plough through that hole as well.

In the next two hours, until we pulled into the elusive town of Kumba at daybreak with everyone passed out in their seats, we endured some more close calls, including almost rolling the vehicle twice.

After booking into the grand-sounding Pelcan Hotel (a guesthouse), we washed off the worst of the mud before collapsing into a deep, dreamless sleep.

A mountain cure for cabin fever

Six months cooped up in the same vehicle is a tough test for any relationship, even with two of your best friends.

The four of us were still speaking to each other, but we were all suffering from serious cabin fever. Every conceivable topic of conversation had long since been flogged to death and we had listened to every CD in our combined music collection at least 50 times.

So we decided to stretch our legs on West Africa's highest mountain. Through the Mount Cameroon Intercommunal Ecotourism Board, we tracked down a guide, the amiable Charles, to lead us on our trek.

From Buea, a steep two-day climb saw us ascending 3060 m in less than 48 hours to the top of Fiko, Mount

Cameroon's highest peak. We set off from 980 m above sea level and the jungle of the lush lower reaches soon gave way to drier, sparsely vegetated grassy slopes as we ascended the volcano.

At 4040 m we actually climbed through the clouds and enjoyed our first sunshine in weeks.

Tim seemed to be struggling with the altitude. He hung back and, fighting for breath, stubbornly plodded on towards the summit. (Back in South Africa, X-rays revealed he was having problems breathing deeply because of a lesion affecting one of his lungs.)

After conquering the peak we enjoyed a couple of relaxing hours on top of the world before we began descending along a circuitous route via Mann Spring back to Buea.

The path took us through the site of a recent volcanic eruption. We gingerly threaded our way through nine ominously steaming craters in a black moonscape.

But we were enjoying some respite from the muddy world below. We appreciated the pristine dry landscapes of Mount Cameroon, much like a wine connoisseur would appreciate a well-aged cabernet.

The views we had from the mountain were spectacular and the exercise did wonders for everyone's spirits.

A beach braai farewell

The roads further east were in considerably better shape than in the west. We detoured through Limbe, Douala, Edea and Yaounde to Kribi Beach on the west coast for some rest and relaxation at the country's premier beach resort.

It was midweek during the off-season and we had the palm-fringed beaches all to ourselves.

We spent lazy days admiring the spectacular waterfalls of the Lobe River. It's an impressive set of wide cascades that empty directly into the ocean, a mere ten-minute

stroll down the beach from where we were staying at Hôtel la Croisière Bleue. Returning from the beach one afternoon, Tim discovered an abandoned faulty gas Weber braai in the garden. Before you could say, "How do you like your steak cooked?" Tim had fixed it.

We boys found a local market and asked a butcher to cut 1.5 kg of his finest beef into thick slabs. On our way out we picked up salad ingredients, potatoes, onions, beers and even tracked down four boxes of Spanish red wine.

We returned to the hotel like conquering heroes with our bounty, ready to serve Ciara her long-overdue birthday feast. We were greeted with raucous applause.

This impromptu braai proved to be one of the most memorable evenings of our entire African adventure.

The steaks were served medium rare with all the trimmings. We had some wine and speeches were made. Late into the night, we drank more than one toast to a country that had challenged and enchanted us in equal measure.



PHOTOGRAPH CIARA KORVING

Good ol' braai. The party finally got to celebrate Ciara's birthday with a braai. From left are Katherine and Stephen Cunliffe and Tim Korving.



On top of the world. A two-day trek to the summit of Mount Cameroon was just what the doctor ordered against cabin fever.

Know before you go:

Best time to go? The cooler, dry months of November to February. The rainy season runs from May to October. It is extremely hot from March to May.

Where can I stay? Wild camping is the order of the day, but you can find basic hotels, or camp in the grounds of churches and missions when passing through towns and cities.

Highlights? Its isolation off the beaten track is its greatest asset. Aside from enjoying some challenging off-road driving, a detour

to climb Mount Cameroon and down-time to enjoy fresh seafood on palm-fringed beaches were our highlights. Friends who visited Waza National Park in the north raved about the prolific animal- and birdlife.

Low points? Mosquitoes, torrential rain and too much mud in September

4x2 or 4x4? Seriously?

What did you drive? A 1989 Toyota Land Cruiser HJ 60-series kitted out with BF Goodrich Mud-Terrain tyres and Detroit Locker diff.

General road conditions? Atrocious

and muddy if you visit the west of the country during the wet season.

Essential gear? A spade, machete, high-lift jack, shackles, tow/snatch straps, winch, jerry cans (or a long-range fuel tank), a GPS, a comprehensive tool kit and compressor.

Best map? We used the *Michelin National Map 741: Africa – North and West*: it was severely outdated and horribly inaccurate.

Which currency? The Euro has replaced the US dollar as the currency of choice in West Africa, but both are accepted in Cameroon.

Visa? South Africans need a visa issued in advance. Phone the High Commission of Cameroon in Pretoria on 012 460 0341 or visit www.camhicom.co.za for visa rules, which can change suddenly.

Dangers? Cameroon is considerably safer than many of its neighbours, so mud and malaria are probably the biggest worries.

Extra reading? We got by with Lonely Planet's *West Africa*, but the Bradt Travel Guide *Cameroon* by Ben West is also highly recommended.