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‘Out of Africa’ Teacher Kevin Rossman, wife Starr fall in love with Cameroon

By Tara Kaprowy
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If asked, North Laurel High School teacher Kevin Rossman could write quite an essay on “How He Spent His Summer Vacation.”

Rest assured, there would be no references to seashell stores, time share disasters or Dollywood. Instead, his story would talk of tea leaf fields, motorcycle taxis, and how he and his wife, Starr, fell in love with Cameroon, Africa.

On Saturday, June 16, Kevin and Starr loaded up on a plane to start a five-week journey. Their destination? Cameroon, a country tucked between Nigeria and Chad to the north, Central African Republic to the east, the Atlantic Ocean to the west and Congo and Gabon to the south.

The Rossmans were two of 13 Kentucky educators who went on the trip. Their goal was to study the country to enrich their teaching upon their return.

Kevin first learned about the excursion through an e-mail sent by Union College, which footed the bill of the trip.

“They wanted teachers and they wanted people who could handle five weeks in Africa,” Kevin explained.

That certainly pertained to Kevin and Starr. The couple have traveled the world together, landing in France, Germany, Thailand, Turkey, Greece, Belgium and Mexico.

When Kevin saw the e-mail, he immediately signed them up and, a week later, learned they had been chosen.

So on June 16, they made their way through Lexington, Atlanta and Paris airports before, 20 hours later, landing in Douala, Cameroon.

“There were all kinds of people standing there,” Kevin recalled. “They were wanting to help you get cars or take your luggage.”

Successfully navigating through the airport, the Rossmans and the rest of the group made their way to their hotel.

“It wasn’t real fancy or anything. It had a bed and a bathroom,” Starr said. “The only really big difference was the bathrooms have a hole in the floor. And a hose comes out of the wall. When you have a shower, the whole bathroom gets wet.”

Over the next five weeks, the group stayed in accommodations that ranged from relatively modern rooms to square boxes with no electricity.

“Our definition of hotels and theirs are two different things,” Kevin laughed.

One of the group’s first visits was to have a look at the public school system. School for Cameroonians students starts in September and ends in June. It is also offered from age four all the way to college.

But while the system is similar, the amenities are not, with some classrooms occupied with up to 100 students.

“They don’t have the good things that we have,” Starr said. “They’re lacking in technology. They don’t have computers. We visited a few blind schools and one of them had a computer that translated books into Braille. But then another one didn’t have anything like that. It varied from place to place.”

A look at the political system was also eye-opening.
"They said it's one of the most corrupt countries in the world," Kevin said.

From 1884, the area was occupied by Germany. In World War 1, however, France invaded the country, with the last German fort surrendering in February 1916.

After the war, the colony was split between the United Kingdom and France under a League of Nations mandate, with France assuming the larger portion of land.

In 1960, the country achieved independence.

But the French and English influence is still present, with most residents speaking both languages as well as a pidgin language.

A look at a Cameroon newspaper — which often featured stories of the Rossmans and their group — shows it having a French headline but English text.

Traveling by Toyota diesel van, the group made its way across the country's various regions, which include beaches, deserts, rain forests and savannas. Along the way, they saw the country's major crops.

"They have bananas, palm oil, rubber trees and tea plantations," Kevin explained. "They also have some oil. But nobody knows how much except for the president of the country."

While driving, the group was constantly stopped at road blocks.

"It could be the army, the police, even a local chief," Kevin said. "They just wanted to know what we were doing."

Eating was another interesting part of the trip, with the group sampling a lot of rice, potatoes and peanuts.

"And eggs. We had eggs every morning," Kevin added.

Going to restaurants, which often meant a two-hour wait before food arrived, was another adventure.

"There was not one name-brand restaurant in the country, not even in the capital," Kevin said.

While Kevin and Starr always traveled with the Union College group, they had ample opportunity to interact with locals, who were fascinated by them.

"The people were very friendly, they were really nice," Kevin said. "One time a little kid pointed to us and said, 'White man, white man!' The mom said, 'Shh, shh, shh.'"

The Rossmans also quickly learned the Cameroonian response to nearly every question.

"No problem, no problem," Kevin laughed.

On July 22, Kevin and Starr made their way back to their home in Barbourville, ready to tackle another school year. They both feel the trip has changed their lives.

"It's made me appreciate what I have a lot more," Kevin said. "For the first time in my life, I realized I was rich. We really do not understand how blessed we are."

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Photos

Kevin Rossman stands with some new friends on his summer vacation.

Starr Rossman pretends to take a bite out of a scary-looking native white fish. She and her husband Kevin Rossman traveled to Cameroon, Africa this summer.