The North West Province Geographically is the north of Western Cameroon. It has about 2.7 million inhabitants. The provincial capital is Bamenda.

The people are very hard working, with a rich and vibrant culture. It is one of the two English speaking provinces in Cameroon, the coastal South West that also borders with Nigeria being its only Anglophone sister.

North West Province is in the grasslands of Cameroon, and has two main seasons - the dry season starts around the end of October and continues until rains start in the middle or end of March. November through February is the best time to visit. The landscape is hilly, with deep valleys, and occasional plains, the scenery is breath-taking, throughout the year.
THE HISTORY OF NORTH WEST PROVINCE is marked by famous tribal wars, which gave way to colonial wars with the Germans. After Cameroon’s independence the province became a major player in the political history of the country, producing some of the most towering statesmen that Cameroon has ever had. They include, amongst others, the late Honourable Augustin Ngom Jua, John Ngu Foncha and Soloman Tandeng Muna.

The province is known for her rich, unique and diverse cultural heritage - a heritage which, over the years, has been jealously protected. It is one feature that distinguishes the NW from the other provinces of Cameroon, and notable that in other regions most traditional culture was either rooted out or watered down by colonial influence and religions, be they Christian or Muslim.

THE WONDERFUL CULTURE of NW is characterised by its -
• tribes and languages,
• art and crafts,
• song and dance,
• loyalty to Fondoms,
• loyalty and reverence to His Royal Highness the Fon,
• strong belief in witchcraft,
• many ceremonies and feasts.
THE FONDOMS
The province has more than fifty tribal Fondoms. Bafut, Bali, Kom, Mankon and Nso have large populations under the rule of a single Fon, consequently these are called first class or paramount Fons - because they rule supreme in their tribes.

Generally, the Fondoms of the North West are peculiar in that the Fon has the largest family in the land - some have 50-60 wives, and children in the hundreds. Strong and sacred societies exist and help the Fon to run the affairs of his tribal state: these societies are known variously as the KWIFO or NGUMBA. Nobles are powerful and constitute one of the strongest forces in each tribe.

Polygamy and wife inheritance are common practice. As a result of polygamy, families are usually large. Children are raised under the full grip of their father, while each wife feeds and caters for her own children. Some noblemen have such a large number of women that their homesteads could be mistaken for a palace.

A Fon is the supreme leader of a tribal state (in much the same light as Kings and Queens used to lead society in Europe or Asia). The Fon is the leader, the Supreme judge and the spiritual head of his people.

When a Fon dies (or ‘gets missing’ as people refer to the death of a Fon), he has to be replaced almost immediately. The process of replacing him is simple, the next ruler must be either the son of a late Fon or the brother of a late Fon. In Kom the succession is matrilineal and as a result, nephews, on the mother’s side, qualify. The large number of royal wives and royal children means that these selection criteria are rarely broken. It is also said that the ruler must have royal blood in his veins. The choice of a Fon in some tribes rests in the hands of noblemen and elders. In other tribes the ruler selects his heir. In other tribes the choice is entirely in the hands of the Kwifo or Ngumba.

A Palace in the traditions of the people of this region, is the spiritual centre of cultural activity in any tribe. It is the seat of power and the base of royal ruler-ship. The palace is the pinnacle of all mystical and ancestral worship. Headed by a Fon, it is the leading household in the land, to which the members of the tribal state pay homage.
Palaces of the Paramount Fons can be visited in day trips from Bamenda. If possible plan ahead, make contact with a palace representative, ideally five to ten days before you want to visit. If they go to the palace beforehand then the necessary preliminary arrangements can be made and your trip will run more smoothly and successfully. They may also know if there are events like dances, weddings or death celebrations coming up that you could attend. If you have time, you will find it rewarding to make a circuit, visiting tribes and palaces which have different traditions. This will give a true flavour not just of the vibrancy, but of the enormous richness and diversity of culture, tradition, architecture and so on, in the region. The journeys from Bamenda to most of these palaces are scenic if not spectacular, and worth making for the sake of the journey alone. The external architectures and palace surroundings are all interesting, Bafut and Bali have museums which are open to the public, and Bafut has trained guides to receive visitors.

The dry season, November through March is the best time to plan a cultural experience of North West Province. The days are hot, and dusty, but it is the favoured season for festivals, for weddings, and for the often grand “cry dies” in which the life of a loved one is remembered, and celebrated through dance, music and feasting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FONDOM/TRIBE</th>
<th>DISTANCE FROM BAMENDA</th>
<th>TYPE OF ROAD</th>
<th>FONDOM/TRIBE</th>
<th>DISTANCE FROM BAMENDA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bafut</td>
<td>20 km</td>
<td>Paved</td>
<td>Mankon</td>
<td>10 km</td>
<td>Part paved, part (+/-4.5 km) dirt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>24 km</td>
<td>Paved</td>
<td>Nso</td>
<td>110 km</td>
<td>Part paved, part (+/-30 km) dirt</td>
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<td>Kom</td>
<td>80 km</td>
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Vehicles can be hired locally - subject to abrupt changes that depend on the season and other factors.

As a guide, a taxi car & driver will cost 20,000 - 40,000 frs. per day depending on the road conditions you will pass over, and an air-conditioned 4 x 4 in good condition 150- 200,000 FRS. per day on all roads

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1 Detailed directions on page 14

A UNAFAS:CVP publication
Promoting Cameroon’s cultural heritage
Bafut Palace is beautiful, its magnificent structures, in red burnt brick done in the days of the German administration in Cameroon are the enduring sign of excellent cooperation that existed and still exists between the Germans and the Bafut people as a whole.

Constructed neatly in Nsani Bafut, the Royal Bafut Palace is a masterpiece of both ancient and modern architecture.

A visitor will be attracted to the outlay of beautiful small red brick buildings with clay tiled roofs that belong to the Fon’s numerous wives.

Compact and neat, this is a grand example of a modern palace and a well-structured fondom.

The imposing ancestral and spiritual house (Atsum) of the palace, built with wooden poles, sticks, raffia ‘bamboo’ and roofed with grass will hold the breath of a visitor. It is tall and big, beautiful and yet awesome in many ways.

Famous for tall tantalizing juju dances, the people of Bafut today are ruled by His Royal Highness Abumbi II, Fon of Bafut.

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2 Raffia palm ‘bamboo’

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Promoting Cameroon’s cultural heritage
**Bali Nyonga** is a major tourist attraction of North West Province. The Bali Palace holds a lot for its visitors. Built on the slopes of the beautiful hill in Nta’mfuang, the imposing, palace structures are impressive.

The old palace is so ancient, constructed as it is with burnt brick.

The main building of stone, contains the reception and residential areas, it is elegant and beautiful.

Visitors will enjoy the outlay of smaller buildings that stretch beyond the main structure. They are neatly outlined and they speak of the great cooperation that existed between the German administration and the Bali people.

This palace holds the ancient relics of the Bali culture, a few of which are sometimes on display.

The Bali palace is famous for its unique annual festival, the Lela, which takes place around mid-December every year. It is a grand display of the rich and beautiful Bali cultural heritage.

Rich in traditional costumes, the Bali annual festival does not have its match anywhere in the NW Province. It is the pinnacle of the people’s display of their culture, expressed in great song and dance. It is a colourful event that will fill the hearts and minds of any visitor.

The Bali today are ruled by His Royal Highness, Ganyonga III, Fon of Bali.
THE FONDON OF KOM has its seat in the town of Laikom, located high on a wooded, sheltered hilltop which claims the highest rainfall in the province and some of the best views - in earlier times the rocky crest overlooking Laikom was reserved for the Fon’s relaxation. Visitors are allowed to enter the medicine forest, where there is a tree, which is believed to have been felled, cried out against its destruction, and then stood back up again. The ruins of a defence wall against intruders still exists. The forest surrounding Laikom is home to the rare and endemic species of bird, The Bannermans Torako.

The first palace courtyard contains a memorial stone with a fascinating, rarely told story, the second an ancient court, where in the past the Fon tried the most difficult cases in the land.

The Fon and royal council preside over state matters in a courtyard surfaced with bricks, made as far back as 1917.

The 150 year old Afo-a-Kom no! art piece can be viewed subject to 14 days notice prior to your arrival. It disappeared from the palace in 1966 to be found in Washington, USA. Unlike much African art that leaves the continent, it returned to its home in 1974, has made a second visit to Washington, and to other parts of the world.

You are most welcome to visit Laikom, care goes to ‘wula tum nu ma’ (my stranger) more even than to the house holder.
THE FONDOM OF MANKON includes much of Bamenda town - though the palace has a rural setting.

The Ndoreu-Takumbeng, traditional house of the Takumbeng society can be seen near the palace entrance - sacrifices made near this house sustain the peace, health and well-being of the Mankon people.

The museum is a most imposing structure seen as one ascends towards Mankon palace. Behind which one enters a business like entrance courtyard. One particularly beautiful carved stone decorates an inner courtyard. Leopard, elephant and buffalo feature in palace art, portraying the sagacity, wisdom, judicial and political power and authority of the Fon.

At the heart of the palace is the sacred and beautiful royal Atsum house, the oldest house in the kingdom, built when the previous was destroyed in 1891 during fighting with the German explorer Zintgraff. Few people are permitted to enter, and only the initiated even enter the courtyard.

The sacred forest is dense, tall and thick, such forest is a rare phenomenon in the province these days. From the hilltop above the palace the extent of Mankon Fondon can be enjoyed - the Mezam river valley, towards Bamenda town, and hills extending to borders with Mbengwi, Bali, and more distant neighbours.

The Mankon people are led today by His Majesty the King of Mankon, Fon Angwafo III.
NSO (NTO’H NSO), the Nso palace is the heart of Kumbo, which is also the capital of Bui Administrative Division. Built on ten hills as Kumbo is, the palace is constructed on a sloping hillside below the ancient market known as wai-kimbo – Kimbo is the native Nso name for the town that was changed to Kumbo by the administrators (colonial and national).

Built with mud-brick, stone and cement blocks, the main attraction on entry are the two Mfu’h (warrior) houses. One is to the north and the other to the south.

The old one storey structure built with stone holds the royal courts, offices, and reception areas of the royal palace.

Also prominent are the NGIRI and NWERONG sacred Ngumba houses. Under construction in the forecourt is a large sitting area being built to keep visitors and onlookers comfortable during ceremonies.

Famous for its juju masquerades, the Nso palace is a major attraction and the centre of a strong cultural expression of its people. During traditional rites and ceremonies, this palace can be a cultural heaven for its people.

Today the Nso people are ruled from this palace by His Royal Highness, Sehm Mbinglo I, Fon of Nso.
VISITING A PALACE - PALACE PROTOCOL
Generally, there is a strict protocol involved in visiting a Fon’s palace. The stronger the traditions of a tribe, the stricter the protocol becomes.

Arriving at a palace, visitors are met by the Fon’s guards (Chindas). They are always there. They immediately seek to know the identity and mission of the visitors. At this stage clear instructions will be given – wearing of caps, or removal of caps, depending on the palace. Some are so strict that you have to buy caps instantly, before being attended to. Others may be told that their dress does not warrant them to appear before his majesty the Fon.

As soon as the guards (Chindas) are satisfied, they will call one or two nobles, who are also ever-present. These men sometimes question the visitors further before leading them on. Ushered in to the waiting room or waiting area, visitors will wait before the throne while nobles consult His Royal Highness the Fon. The Fon may or may not appear. Visitors should not be surprised if they are led near the throne and told to greet the Fon (in these parts the Fon is the throne and not the man sitting on it)! If the Fon appears, everyone will stand until he himself sits. Then all are expected to greet him in a loud hand clapping ritual. You clap two or three times with back bent slightly forwards. Meanwhile the gifts brought for the Fon (which will have been received by the Chindas and Noblemen before this point), are presented to the Fon.

HOLDING A CONVERSATION WITH THE FON
In some palaces nobody talks to the Fon directly, except his nobles and wives. In such situations the visitors will talk through a Noble or Chinda, and although the Fon may sit in front of the visitors, anything he says will also be transmitted via the Chinda or nobleman qualified for this task.

Visitors should note that the Chindas and Noblemen who receive them and take them to the Fon, will expect to be “rewarded” with a little gift for their “kindness” in allowing access to “The great Tiger” as Fons are known in their lands. This gift may be five thousand francs or more depending on the kindness of the visitor.
SOME IMPORTANT THINGS TO NOTE
Fons are busy and important people, and not every visitor will be lucky enough to receive a personal audience. However, as well as being a guide for the privileged ones, the following details give a taste of palace protocol.

In the culture of the NW, visitors do not go to the palace empty-handed. They are expected to always take some gift to the Fon. Traditionally the gifts will be a goat, chickens, palm oil, salt, palm wine and sometimes royal cloth! This does not mean that every visitor has to shop for goats and chicken before making a palace visit! On visits made at short notice, or by people from far-off lands it can be difficult to buy these gifts. In such cases, a “dry gift” can be offered to the Fon, an envelope with a money gift, as the visitor feels appropriate.

In most palaces which still have a strong culture, visitors should hand their gift to the Fon via the Chindas, rather than directly.

WHAT TO EXPECT
Visitors to a Fon’s Palace should expect reluctance and at times resistance to their wish to see the Fon. They just need to be kindly and patiently persistent! Visitors may be presented to the Fon’s wives and or children, in some palaces, visitors may have a dance performed in their honour. It is normal and acceptable to tip dancers, guides, or others who assist or impress you. It is a good idea to carry loose change for such occasions, 500, 1000 or 5000 frs.

Photographs are allowed in all palaces, but visitors should always remember to take permission from the Chindas and Nobles. In some palaces there are sacred stones, shrines, sacred trees, art and other objects which visitors may not be allowed to photograph. If you take nice photographs do try and send copies back.

During visits, traditional wear is preferable, but not compulsory. Most dresses are acceptable, except trousers on women. Sometimes women are told to cover their hair with a scarf.

There may be souvenirs on sale in some palaces, but do not expect to always find them available. There are sometimes souvenir shops outside the royal palaces.
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS.

How do you greet a Fon? By clapping your hands, two or three times in quick succession, while leaning forwards.

Can you photograph a Fon? Yes, of course, with permission from his guards or chindas.

How many wives and children does he have? It depends on the Fon. Amongst the five paramount Fons there are none with less than 25 wives today, but the Fons of Kom and Nso were on record in the 1940’s as having more than 100 wives each.

How does he manage to take care of all these people - wives and children? It is generally very difficult for him, in today’s world. Long ago, the whole tribe used to contribute to the upkeep of the royal household. Men hunted and sent in the meat each week, while women and nobles from every village sent grain and other foodstuff every season. But today all that has changed. There is a small contribution from government. The Nobles and other tribesmen contribute sometimes by taking in and raising some of the children. Other tribesmen contribute by making sure that visitors never come to the palace “empty handed.” Visitors assist in the same way. We hope that you will enjoy making your own contribution.

Some Fons levy a small building fee on everyone who builds on his land. Some are civil servants, while others run businesses to increase their income.

In the Fondoms with strong traditions and a large population the Fons duty is to rule his people. He can not take a job because his function of ruler and caretaker of his people excludes it. He has an ancestral duty as spiritual leader, which overrides all else. Consequently “the Fon rules for a living.” Some tribes consider it shameful for a Fon ‘to take a job.’ This is because every workplace has a boss, and a Fon should never have a boss, since he is the supreme boss of his land and tribe.

DIRECTIONS FROM BAMENDA

BALI NYONGA – from Commercial Avenue find the general hospital round-a-bout, take the upper exit, for Bali. Then, just follow this road all the way to Bali, where upon arriving, turn left at the first junction/round-a-bout, and continue up the hill some few
hundred metres to the palace (pass the memorial statues underneath the palace to reach the palace gates and parking area).

It is a pleasant, easy drive from Bamenda to Bali, the road is good, it takes no more than 20 minutes, through gently rolling, pretty grassland hills covered in eucalyptus, raffia palm, mango trees, small farms and views of the mountains beyond.

**BAFUT** - Take the right turn at general hospital round-a-bout, drive past Ntarikom market, continue along main highroad through the outskirts of Bamenda (which Mankon people insist is ‘Mankon town’ since it is built on Mankon land) into rolling countryside, continue straight past Mile 8 junction, pass signposts for the savannah botanic garden, through villages, and past schools, until the road branches - take the left, following a narrow paved road which terminates at the palace.

**KUMBO** - From Bamenda to Kumbo is a long drive for one day, but without question an interesting and worthwhile journey. There is good hotel accommodation in Kumbo if you want to stay. In Bamenda the easiest starting point is the round-a-bout at the bottom of the steep hill descending from ‘up station’ and Baoussam. Take the road to the east (right, if descending the hill: the road for Bambui, Ndop and Jakiri if you need to ask someone), and follow this road to the outskirts of town, pass Nkwen palace, and then branch right at the clearly marked Bambui town round-a-bout. Drive up, up and up into the mountains, to descend beneath the high open grassland, towering cliffs, domes of rock, and long views, past Sabga, and down to Nsei, crossing the Ndop plains now, continue straight, passing through Ndop town onto the dirt road, pass Ndwara tea estate junction, cross the rice farms in Babungo and then climb up from the plains in Babassi (on a clear day the Bamendjing Lake is visible) on twisting roads to Jakiri. The road to Kumbo passes straight through Jakiri, through pretty, hilly countryside.

Arriving Kumbo, at the first branch go right, and then take the middle route at the next junction. Rising up the hill, some 200m before the cathedral there is a sharp 40° turn back to the right, down a stony track. This takes you to the palace courtyard.

**LAIKOM** - Leave Bamenda following the route described above for Kumbo, as far as Bambui town junction - take the left branch, to drive through stunning scenery as the road climbs up into open topped mountains, past Mbingo hospital, after
which the road winds up and down, steeply, hills are high, cliffs, terrace farming, straight through Belo. Through Njinikom (which is a Catholic religious centre) follow the hard road down to the right. Hair pin bends descend to the Koini river, before rising up to Fundong, a market town high on the grassland plateau. Enter straight into the town, as far as a pseudo round-a-bout of tyres in the centre of the road, turn right here, up a dirt road. Branch right at Fujua, and right again across the stream at the next junction which has a signpost to the Sacred Heart Mission (the mission is straight, Kom palace to the right!). Now the stony track winds up through picturesque villages and farms overlooking a steep sided valley, with glimpses of high hilltops above.

The journey itself justifies a visit to Kom Palace, it is like passing through another world: and indeed you arrive at one.

**MANKON** – Leave Bamenda in the same direction as Bafut, as far as mile 8 junction, where Mankon palace and the airport are both signposted off to the left. Follow the signposted route, branching left when the paved road divides, bringing you onto a dirt road, quite soon, just after the church, bear left, continue following the widest dirt road (4.5 km) to the palace at the end.