

## Travel report for Pembroke



This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to work for a newspaper in Lomé, Togo, over the month of August, thanks in part to the generous Robert Baldick Memorial Scholarship. I worked for the bimonthly newspaper *La Symphonie*, which covers breaking news within Togo and on a more regional and global level, along with other topics such as Economics, Literature and Sport.

I found this internship through the Togolese charity AVED-TOGO, a charity whose main aim is helping deprived communities and children. They also help organise internships and volunteering opportunities, and they organised my internship with the newspaper, along with my accommodation in the local area. One of the employees at the charity also spent the month living with me in the accommodation they found, to ensure my safety and enjoyment of the internship. My accommodation and internship ended up being in Sanguera, a village-like suburb fairly far out from the city centre, and a good 40-minute walk from a supermarket or a paved road! Although this was a culture shock, I am retrospectively very happy to have lived in that part, as I got to see the real Togo.

The first couple days were spent getting used to live in Togo, that is to say remembering to take my anti-malarial medication and my mosquito spray, learning to enjoy cold showers (as the weather was very humid and hot water was nowhere to be seen) and getting accustomed to power outages; I was fortunate to have two plugs in my room and running water. The local children were thrilled to see someone like me living there, as Westerners don't usually venture as far out of Lomé as Sanguera; they learnt my routine fairly quickly and would always run out of their houses to wave at me in the mornings, often chanting the Ewe word *yovo*, meaning "foreigner" or "white man" paired with *bonjour* or *bonsoir*, depending on the time of day.



My boss at the internship was a very interesting man keen to hear exactly why I came to Togo and what it was that I was interested in. When I told him I was particularly keen to read some Togolese literature, he decided to put me in charge of the *Literary ballads* section of the newspaper. I would choose Togolese books to read, write summaries and critical analyses (all in French, of course), and publish them in his newspaper. This was an incredible opportunity, as I had so much independence to write about what I enjoyed. The first book I read was one very recently published by quite a famous Togolese author, Moïse Inandjo. My summary and analysis of this book were published in the released edition of the newspaper – being able to see my name and my writing in one of the most popular newspapers in Togo was an incredible feeling,

one which has really made me think more deeply about the possibility of a career in journalism.

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Another task I was set during my time at the newspaper was critiquing a book not yet published. I was told by my boss that *La Symphonie* was interested in the possibility of working alongside a Togolese publishing house, and that they were offering prospective authors critiques on their work. I was told to “not hold back”, despite the fact that I recognised the name of the author from another (published) book I had read. I did as requested and concluded that the book was not good enough to be published, despite many promising elements, as it was simply too similar to another book already written.

My boss also took me to a journalist convention and seminar on the reporting of terrorism in Togo. Not only did I get to meet representatives of many of the government ministries in Togo, but I was able to learn about the ethics of journalism, and the potential for conflict between the people’s right to be informed and the state’s right to national security. Some parts of the seminar were very heated, as journalists and the official communique for the Togolese army had a dispute on the role of journalists in this conflict.



On the weekends, I would travel around the country, visiting waterfalls, UNESCO world heritage sites, and voodoo fetish markets, among other things. The scariest part about travel in Togo is the road and driving quality – not many roads were paved, and the ones that were would be the width of 1.5 lanes and yet have three lanes of traffic, mostly huge lorries whose drivers haven’t taken breaks within the last 24 hours. On my drive back in the group taxi from *Kpalimé* (a western city in Togo famous for its waterfalls), the car broke down and

we ended up driving back at night – something which I did everything I could to avoid. These roads do not have any lights above them, and many of the cars don’t have or turn on their own lights, so it felt like driving blind. Huge lorries would appear out of the black fog as if by magic, and motorcycles (and even pedestrians) would weave in and out of traffic on the road that was the Togolese equivalent of the M1.

Another (more positive) adventure was the food. Having lived in Ghana as a young child, I vaguely knew and remembered the basic elements of West African food, and Togolese food did not disappoint. Fufu, a dough-like food made by pounding cassava and plantain, is delicious, and luckily I enjoy fish and chillies, as they seemed to be in almost every meal in some capacity!

I am really lucky to have been able to travel to this part of the world – it has been invaluable to my written and spoken French, but it has also given me a much broader perspective on the Francophone world and the ways in which *la Francophonie* is and isn’t relevant in the lives of French-speaking Africans.

