

Africa Fleet Mercy 2018 Cameroon



2 Mar 2018 Postcard 5 Africa Mercy for Burners

Today (Friday 2 March) is my last day on the job, and I'd like to put my visit to the Mercy Ship Africa and Douala Cameroon in the context of Burning Man. Huh? There are a lot of similarities. Work with me on this. Yes, there is a Starbucks, but the coffee and supplies are donated. So, we have a center camp and we have coffee that costs money.

Why Go?



The staff of both BRC and Mercy Ship are populated by an odd group of people with many special skills. They go because it's fun and they want to change the world. Some aspects of life in default world leave them wanting

but they work the problem but look forward to going "back home". It costs a surprising amount of money to live someplace where you are a volunteer. For the community of Mercy Ships, "Welcome Home" means coming back to a hospital where it is really is all about the patients, and the entire system is there to serve them.

Special Use Permit

Mercy Ships goes where it is wanted in Africa. Not goes where it wants. Before pulling in to port, there is an advance team that negotiates a contract with the government for cost sharing, use of government assets, environmental protections, leave no trace, non-discrimination, scope of practice, dates of arrival and departure- just your basic BLM Use Permit.

Ticket

There are two ways to get on the Mercy Ship. Think of it as getting a ticket through the general sale, or getting a staff credential. Patients come on board for care after getting a ticket. Staff come on board after getting a lanyard.

To get a ticket, you need to be a patient that has a problem the ship is equipped to work on. Our team takes out cataracts and removes pterygea Not a need for glasses. Not glaucoma. Cataract, that is expected to respond to surgery.



To get a staff credential, you need to have a skill that is needed, and you need to be available during very specific time windows. Think early arrival. Think ARTery has a lot of on-line forms? Try credentialing health care workers that from 40+ countries for stays as short as two weeks. Try and figure out what people really know how to do.

Getting There

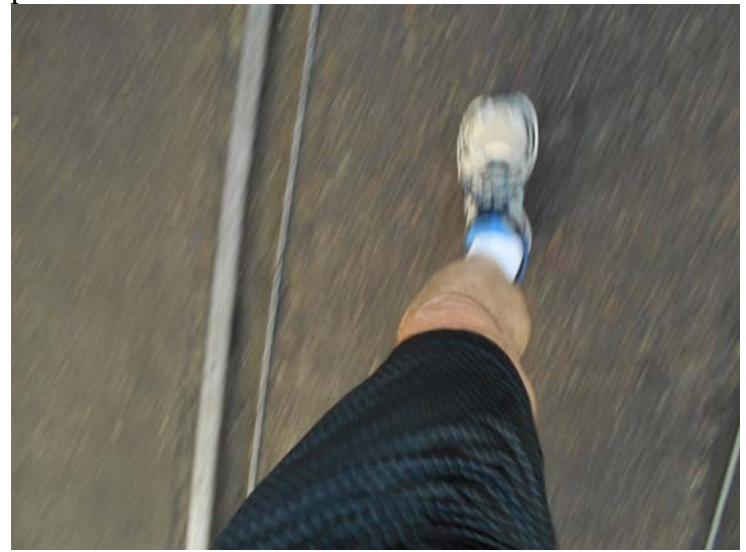


Never seen a rig like this. You saw it first here but I expect it will be all over the playa in a year or two.

Perimeter

There is a hard perimeter of 400 meters. We were encouraged to exercise within it. Running the trash fence it ain't. I was ignoring advice and running in the

port in about a minute.



Hard to get in trouble for taking a picture of your own foot. There are a lot of poorly understood rules regarding what you can take pictures of and what you can do with the images. Familiar?



Inside a wall made up of big steel boxes, there are some air conditioned, very fancy tents.



These really are very fancy inflatable tents, I am surprised that I have never seen any in BRC. Notice the shade tarp over the tent? Blows up like a Zodiac boat, not like a jumping castle.
www.outdoorventure.com

Gate



The Security

Team that mans the gate are Gurhka from Nepal. They are unarmed and fiercely polite. Somewhere between Gate and Greeters. Like Burning Man, there are no guns among the residents.

Our Center Camp is the Midships Lounge, a two story affair with TV's, sitting areas, and computer workstations.



Interestingly, in that which is called the Internet Café, no food or drinks are allowed.

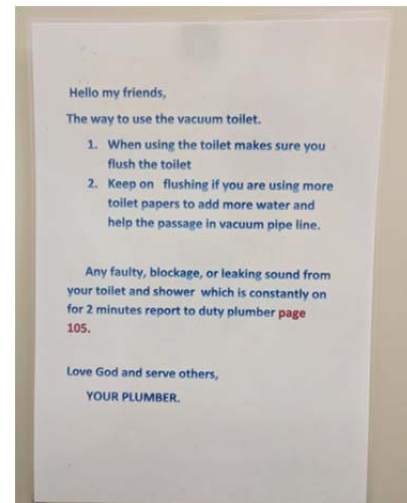


Like Burning Man, the people with the guns are camped just outside the perimeter. Harbor Patrol is adjacent to the Mercy Ship Africa berthing.



Rows of Toilets can be found both places, and lots of instructions that hopefully get read.

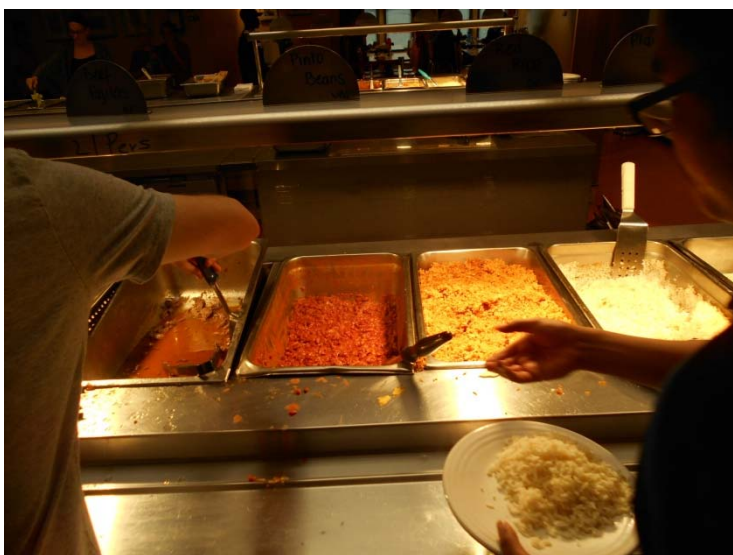
Center Camp



Food is a big deal. It is reliable and the people who prepare and serve it work like dogs. Imagine – a Salad Bar! There are just as many vegans and GF's in BRC as on board the ship.



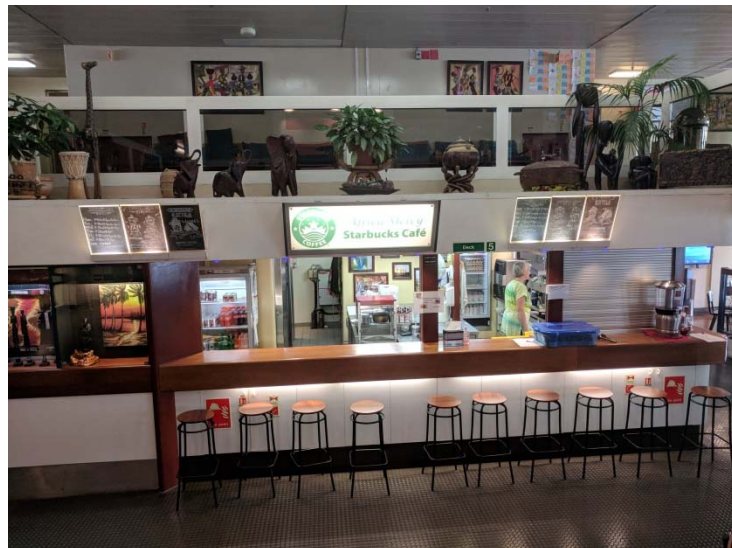
Taco night is popular.



But if you miss the service hours, you are on your own so you better be radically self-reliant, or at least modestly so.



Coffee is the lifeblood of a hospital, and for many, of BRC.



Finding your way to your camp can be confusing. Except for yours, of course, every camp sort of looks the same.



There is WiFi but limited bandwidth, so people find have their favorite connections.





Some people just have a natural sense of style, while the best some others can do is to go for a cool t-shirt.



You need shade structures and they have to hold up to the wind.



Both places are filled with objects of great mystery. This, I decided, is the world's largest Waffle Iron.



It's a gifting economy, art abounds, and you meet all kinds of people who are willing to talk to you. Of course, sometimes it takes two interpreters to communicate.



If you can weld and you have the tools you will be VERY popular.



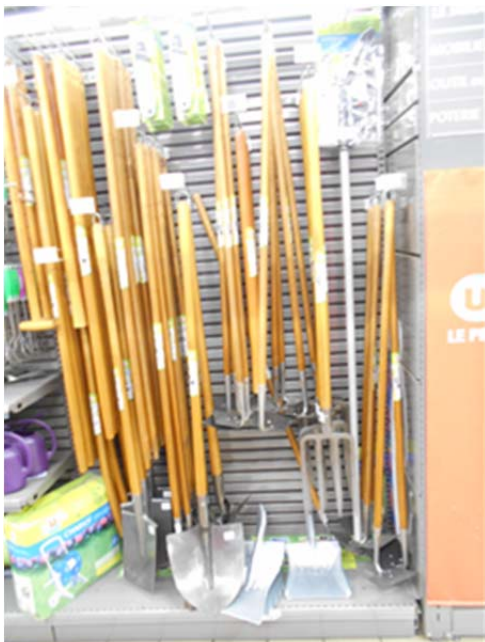
Just outside gate, there is a hardware store inside a grocery store.



A lifeline isn't any good if you can't throw it. Knowing how to help is not the same as doing it. Both communities are full of people who do it.

But no Amazon prime. And, as I have never visited Gerlach, I can't say if there is this selection of ice cream nearby.

Differences



This was my first time aboard the Africa Mercy. I am sure that I got much of it wrong. I do know that the experience for people like me who come for a couple of weeks is very different than that of individuals who live aboard the ship and raise their family in this place. Their kids go to school where the largest class is 4 kids. But it is life in a fishbowl. And just like your campmates can get on your nerves, imagine sharing a cabin with up to 9 other people for extended periods of time.

BRC is very diverse, or so we like to tell ourselves. There is really a pretty narrow range of skin tones and zip codes. Mercy Ship has Offices (like BMHQ) in 19 countries. It really is without borders.



Most of the participants in Mercy Ship are Christians, and they revel in being able to express their faith. But they are not selling anything, at least as far as I can see. It is all a gift. And, just like BRC, it is amazing that somehow it all comes together, enough donations are achieved that it all works, and with some ingenuity and flexibility, and being willing to learn from each other, it gets done. It was fun to be part of it for a bit. Thank you!

Joe Miller
jmillermdmph@gmail.com
2 March 2018