Douala may not be the ideal African city for religious redemption or happy-clappy born-again-Christian speaking in tongues, but if your idea of salvation after the hardships of daily life is a refreshing beer, then this is the place to be. Les Brasseries du Cameroun is the country’s largest industry and dedicated to guaranteeing a steady flow of liquid amber to the vast proliferation of bars, restaurants, nightclubs and other unidentified nightspots – some still in Maquis-style hiding – that have mushroomed all over the city.

But how do you make your night? What is it that attracts you to one place and not another? Our survey has no claims to reflecting anything but personal preferences – but that still won’t deter us from analysing our criteria of choice, from interior design and architecture to how the venues are anchored in the life of the city in today’s urban space. Admittedly, we aren’t drawn to expensive furniture and upmarket decoration in that hallmark ambience irresistible to wannabe snobs. In our quest for real style, we have to leave our options open.

Even after a great time at one venue on one evening we still have to confront that fundamental question the morning after:

But what is the ideal place?
The city’s longstanding bar-strip is a 200-metre stretch of beer-fuelled raucousness in the Bali quarter; if you want simultaneous music from several competing sound systems above the yelling of the crowd but still enjoy your drink and retain control of your basic motor functions, “Nuit Blanche” is the place of our choice and the perfect spot to observe the action.

Its white walls and furniture reflect the current penchant for snowy hues. The divinely unpretentious Monoblock A chairs are the most comfortable bar seating in all Douala and the atmosphere swings between garishly lit and sultry and well, garishly sultry and lit.

The beer on offer is brewed in accordance with the German purity law of 1516. It’s a nice venue, immaculately clean and very spruce – a place where even the German purity law could feel at home.

Here, we meet local artists Hervé Yamguen and Hervé Youmbi and over a beer or two we get all the latest gossip about the Douala art scene.
“C’est bon mais c’est trop fort.” (“It’s good but it’s too hot”) says Dou Kaya, putting even more pepper sauce on his grilled fish. Dou – multi-talented Egyptologist and musician – lives in an impressive mansion, a signature building of German colonial architecture right across the street from “L’Escale de Bonantone”. This restaurant/bar heads our list for its excellent seafood and the sophisticated atmosphere of the mixed but distinguished Deido quarter crowd. The high-concept design of intersecting patios and terraces with soothing purple and green spots blurs the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, design and function, seeing and being seen. We can comfortably watch the constant flow of passersby or a selection of international video productions on multiple screens that include stunning surprises, even for the new media connoisseur.

The interior has plenty of wow: a shell of a building with exposed raw concrete beams and walls in a teasingly unfinished state skilfully set off against a corrugated steel ceiling.

The toilets are also deliberately designed to perplex alcohol-addled minds: the doors are hinged in the opposite direction to the way they look and there’s no light switch... the door snaps shut behind you and ta-da! Total darkness and no sense of orientation. What a lark.
The pleasure-themed “Alt Délices du Wouri” guarantees the ultimate in relaxation. The well equipped shelves behind the bars provide the input for heavenly dreams and the sheer enjoyment of the good vibes of the company around.

In the early evening, this is the preferred meeting point for amorous couples and later – after they have left for the more serious part of the date – the artists and intellectuals take over.

We were honoured to share the night with painter Koko Komegne, the good spirit and heart of the Douala art scene. He always finds the right words to express the most profound thoughts with lightness and humour. But why do we discover the highest level of aesthetic consciousness here?

It must be the bar’s understated, minimalist design and soft flow of fluorescent light that gives this venue its unique atmosphere – which is just pinch-me-I’m-dreaming magical.