Ghana 2011

The first three hours of my time in Ghana were spent in a stationary mini-van in the car park at Accra airport watching extended family after extended family cram themselves and bulky possessions into Nissan Micras. Looking back on it, this was a mere suggestion of the laid back lifestyle Ghanaians lead. I remember a time later in the trip when our taxi driver turned up 3 or 4 hours late and was absolutely astounded by the looks of anger on our faces. He could not comprehend in any way what we could be distressed about. By the end of my stay however, I was fully accustomed to the slow pace of life and an eight hour wait in the airport going home flew by in a haze of diarrhoea and people-watching.

Ghana is well known as the “gateway to Africa” and a safe bet for first time visitors to the continent. I definitely felt safe pretty much 24/7. The guidebook mentioned that it’s not uncommon for taxi drivers to have a beer or two in the glove box and I would agree with that statement, but for some reason never felt endangered. Most of my time was spent in a fairly rural village in the eastern region of Ghana, and perhaps the lack of traffic had to do with my safe feeling. A particularly memorable day was fitting eleven people into a very small 4-seater and merrily bumping along the road to the next village at quite a speed and feeling completely at ease. Although this could have been to do with the quantities of Herb Afrik consumed. Alcohol in Ghana is pretty well accepted and the group of us at the volunteer house had lapped up vast amounts of STAR (Sit Together And Relax) beer, strawberry gin and the occasional Alomo Bitters (however this was only to be taken when you had got past the stage when taste matters to any extent!). Although alcohol is widely available and seemingly accepted that doesn’t mean to say the people are all drinkers. In fact in most of the bars I visited the clientele was mostly white, with a few Ghanaian men at times.

Ghana is a sexually liberated country, represented by the sweetie jars containing condoms (with the AIDS symbol on) placed on the counters in many bars. Indeed flirting between sexes is very apparent and sexual discussion is not at all taboo. Homosexuality on the other hand is viewed with extreme distaste. The supervisor of our volunteer house, Ken, was well known for saying that he would have to be paid a million pounds to buy from the gay rice seller in the neighbouring village.

Religion plays an important role in Ghana and most of the schools have a link with one of the churches. At mixed schools the pupils wear different uniforms according to their religion or church.

At the house there was a woman named Rose who would cook for those that wanted her too (admittedly her delicious tasting Red Red did cause an embarrassing situation for me involving a dodgy tummy and crouching at the side of the road…). Anyhow one Sunday Rose invited us to her church, and even though this involved a 5:30AM start, I was keen to go. When we arrived, the building (one of the most well built and maintained I had seen in the area) was overflowing with families. Outside on a row of benches a man was leading Sunday school. While we waited for a seat inside we were enthusiastically ushered over to join in with Sunday school. Several of us sat at the front looking apologetic, as the teacher waited for us to join in with reciting books and verses of the Bible by heart. Eventually, to our great relief, some more plastic chairs materialised inside the church and we were paraded down the aisle quite proudly by Rose. It was definitely a different experience from a reserved and quiet service in England. The Pastor makes lengthy, loud and excitable speeches
and the crowd would roar out agreement or run up and down the length of the aisles waving white handkerchiefs. At length, the pastor came over to the group us and asked our ages and names. As we said them he would “repeat” them into the microphone. I think everyone ended up with a slightly altered name! Towards the end of the service it was time for people to take it in turns to receive advice from the pastor, who seemed to think he had the gift of both mind reading and looking into the future. When I stepped up, he informed me (after asking me for a dance) that I had been suffering with pain in my right eye and it would cause me trouble later in life unless I washed it with a cup of salty water and then all my problems would be gone. Despite the fact I had never had trouble with my right eye I allowed Rose to pour salty water in it later that night. Interestingly a few days later, my right eye began to hurt...

Talking of religious occasions, funerals are massive. And, it seems, quite an enjoyable experience for those attending. They also seemed to take place outside over several days, and due to the large numbers of mourners, would involve a lot of speeches over a megaphone. We were regularly awoken by the sounds of an excitable funeral party. Whilst they all dress in black, as at a traditional British funeral, the women in particular had some beautifully intricate outfits, and the men (usually seen in trousers and a t-shirt) would wear something similar to a Sari draped over one shoulder and the rest of the body.

Food in Ghana was a matter of polar opposites. Some was great, some was appalling. For example I could probably list the meals that it was possible to create on two hands. Supermarkets are obviously non-existent and the streets are lined with stall after stall selling essentially the same things. Canned hot dogs and tinned tomatoes were the most frequent and popular items, with which the scope for creating a range of meals is clearly small. You could get a variety of fruit and vegetables in the markets- the pineapples tasted phenomenal, bananas were amazing and once you realised that in Ghana Oranges are generally green you could feast on them too. Fast food was also an option in the form of Chop (fried rice with a scattering of shrivelled vegetables and spices) and in the restaurants you could always rely on the standard three meals being available-Red Red, Banku and Fufu (balls of a starchy substance in a spicy sauce). After having been in Ghana a while, cravings for western food became apparent and we began to do outrageous things such as travelling half an hour to the nearest Shell garage, which was popular for having both Snickers bars and air conditioning. We found a local restaurant with a picture of a pizza outside and on further inspection a vast menu choice including some European dishes. Once we had all ordered and sat back in salivating anticipation, it gradually became clear that all was not as it seemed. We laughed with exasperated amusement when they scurried back apologetically to announce that all they could offer that day was Banku, Fufu and Red Red! I ended up on a staple diet of eggs and bread, day in day out. The chickens are so malnourished that the egg yolks are almost the same colour as the white and therefore not as tasty as your average free range English egg. Bread, however, in my humble opinion, was fantastic. On the streets you could buy cylindrical or rectangular loaves of ‘Laughing Cow’ bread from women who weaved their way through the traffic with packages piled high in baskets on their heads. This bread was like no bread I have ever tasted, almost brioche-like, but with the added bonus of being fortified with numerous vitamins and calcium - an effective government scheme. Also living next door to us was ‘fat bread lady’. She was one of the few fat people I saw in Ghana and had two massive clay ovens outside her house. Before we went to school each morning we would pay her 50 pesewa and she would open the oven door to reveal enough bread to feed the five thousand. It would always be still slightly steaming when we ate it, and we all
got into the terrible habit of eating a whole loaf before midday. The ultimate Ghanaian treat is a Fan Ice. Every day on the journey back from school, someone would be nominated as the Fan Ice co-ordinator and would collect pesewa ready to give the Fan Ice lady in exchange for a vanilla, strawberry or chocolate ice cream in a plastic sachet. Pretty much a frozen frube, but a million times better. You also drank water out of sachets, which was something I missed very much on returning home. Who needs bottles, when you can have both hands free and bite on to the top of a sachet?! 

Ghanaians, in general, love foreign visitors. Fat bread lady enjoyed our regular morning custom, of course for the money, but also just to look at us with intrigue. The shout of “Obruni Obruni!” was, for the first five minutes, unsettling. But it soon turns into the background noise of day to day life. It means foreigner or white person, but is essentially a statement, not an insult. And the thing they love the most is if you shout back at them the Ghanaian for black person or non-white! The shop keepers were always very keen to help and would rush around gathering up whatever you asked for and always handing over the goods in a black carrier bag, whether you wanted one or not. One of my favourite moments was buying some vegetables from a stall holder. She asked if we wanted some cabbage to go with our carrots, we declined (as we had no use for it) and so she persisted in lowering the price until eventually she put it in a carrier bag and gave it to us for free, saying that it was such good cabbage that we shouldn’t miss out! The Ghanaian people are also not in the habit of ripping you off either as in some less developed countries. You can easily jump in a taxi and pay the same price as your average citizen or buy fruit for the same amount of Pesewa. Ghana is renowned for being a friendly nation, and it’s very true. On the whole they are welcoming and interesting people. We got to know our supervisor Ken very well. He used to ask us why we read Lonely Planet guidebooks. If we want to really know Ghana why didn’t we read something written by a true Ghanaian? None of us had an answer for him, and on that note I will end my piece, because if you really want to know Ghana...go there!

Also just want to say thanks to Queen Mary for having given me the grant. It was much appreciated because it meant I could afford to see some of Ghana whilst I was out there (swimming in lake Volta etc) instead of just staying in the volunteer house and also, more importantly, to spend some money on exercise books, coloured pencils and display items for the schools. I obviously really enjoyed the trip and have hopefully made a difference, but I think I have also learnt a lot which will be relevant to my degree, I hope to use it as a case study in a forthcoming development module.