
Ghana: 10 Days in Ghana

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A cultural safari in southern Ghana provides a different perspective on the Africa many people are familiar with through television. There are no vast plains with herds of animals, no spectacular mountains and no raging rivers, but Ghana serves up a palette of rich ecosystems and colourful cultures found only in West Africa. Ten days takes you through five of the country's ten regions and delivers five unique eco-zones. Ghana's most important feature is her mosaic of vibrant people. Everywhere you go they are friendly and helpful - from the merchants and craftsmen of bustling Accra to farmers and fishermen in the rural areas.

Day 1: After a flight to the capital, Accra, it's the ideal time to pay a relaxing visit to Labadi Beach, especially on a Sunday when hoards of Accra residents from all walks of life join tourists in the mutual pursuit of sun and sea. A nominal fee goes towards keeping the beach litter-free. Snack bars and watering holes abound, as do roving troupes of drummers and acrobats amid legion hawkers (who are very polite compared to some places on the continent). For dinner, try the Argentine restaurant El Gaucho (near the airport) for the best steak in West Africa. If you prefer sampling local food, try La Paloma on the Ring Road.

Day 2: Leaving Accra early, head west to Cape Coast and on to Takoradi and Dixcove which lie in the Western Region. En route, you can get refreshment at the White Sands Beach Club near Gomoa Fetteh, a stronghold during the British colonial era. A beautiful place for lunch is the Biriwa Beach Resort just outside the former capital of Cape Coast. Owned by a German couple, the restaurant sits high on a hill with an ocean view and features seafood, German dishes and local cuisine. If you would rather push on to Dixcove, you can enjoy a great lunch at the Busua Beach Resort where you will spend the night.

Busua is undisputedly one of the finest beaches in Africa, with miles of sand and no development. This is your first exposure to a real fishing community, mirroring hundreds of such villages all along Ghana's coast. Relax on the beach or stroll to the village, where the fishermen are happy to explain their techniques and show off their canoes. The Alaska Beach Bar lies between the village and the resort and serves cold drinks to everyone, including frequent invasions of overland trekkers who have traversed the Sahara. Local Rasta Kwesi Acquaye will be happy to give you a drumming lesson if you purchase one of his tie-dye T-shirts. Enjoy dinner on the patio at the Busua Resort (mosquito repellent compulsory). The chef is very proud of his lobster creations and the catch is always fresh.

Day 3: Make an early start for Beyin, a seaside town near the border of Cote d'Ivoire. Along the way, see rubber and palm plantations. Be sure to wander in a few hundred metres to experience an extraordinary solitude: the neat rows of trees weave geometric designs that glimmer and dissolve as you walk. Arriving at Beyin, you can explore Fort Appollinia, a British garrison dating from 1753.

After a picnic lunch at the castle, it's time to enter your second eco-habitat: the wetland lagoons that lead to Nzulezo, a stilt village built on the waters of Lake Tandane. The trip there takes about 90 minutes, the first part on foot through the tall grasses and the second by dugout canoe. Nzulezo is home to about 600 people who found a haven in this isolated retreat after escaping persecution in the Ashanti Wars of the 18th century.

After an hour's tour of the village, travel back in the magical late afternoon, when egrets, herons and hornbills flock to the lagoon for their evening feed. If you're lucky you might even see a band of Spot-nosed monkeys in the trees. By sundown you are on the main road back to Busua where you spend a second night.

Day 4: With a mid-morning start, you journey back to Cape Coast and settle in at the Elmina Beach Resort. After lunch, take a stroll through the harbour of Elmina, a fishing community that marks the spot where the Portuguese made landfall in the 15th century. Several hundred yards away lies Elmina Castle, built in 1482 and notorious as the principal garrison where countless slaves were held before shipment to the Americas. The castle has been restored and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. The tour with a Monuments Board guide takes about two hours and reveals one of Africa's darkest chapters. You may also want to visit Fort St. Jago which lies across the harbour on a hilltop - a beautiful spot from which to watch the sunset.

Day 5: Getting an early start, you are off to Kakum National Park, a pristine tropical rainforest famous for its Aerial Walkway, a 40m-high, 330m-long series of suspension bridges that weave through the tree canopy. After scaling the heights, take a guided walk through parts of the forest where rangers describe the various plants and how they are used by local people. Not far from the park is a quaint little spot called Botel, with a restaurant and lodge built on walkways over a lagoon that is home to birds and a few crocodiles. Hans, the owner, will introduce you to some of his resident

monkeys. (See also page 121.)

In the afternoon you have time to visit the region's other landmark fort, Cape Coast Castle, once the seat of British governors and a former slave prison. After a scenic drive through the city, your route takes you back to your hotel with a stop at the village of the Volta fishermen - migrants from the Volta region who now live on the coast. Since they are essentially squatters, all their homes are built in a traditional adobe and thatch style. It's a great opportunity to see traditional Volta architecture.

Day 6: Travel north to Kumasi, the capital of Ghana's legendary Ashanti Kingdom. The route takes you through stands of forest into Obouasi, famous for its gold mines and the source of Ashanti wealth. Stay at the Royal Basin Hotel, close to Bonwire, a village renowned for its production of the royal kente cloth. Wandering the streets of the town, fending off curious children, rewards you with many photo and shopping opportunities.

Day 7: In the morning, travel north of Kumasi to the nearby craft villages. Pankrono is known for its pottery, all of which is made by hand without the use of a wheel. At Ahwiaa, just up the road, Ashanti carvers fashion royal stools, fertility dolls, masks and canes. A little further is Ntonso where artisans make adinkra, a cloth worn for mourning and at funerals. An ideal place for lunch is the Kente Kitchen, located in the grounds of the Cultural Centre in Kumasi.

After lunch, you might even be able to attend a traditional funeral, held on Saturdays and readily identified by the large numbers of people wearing red or black adinkra cloth. West African funerals are somewhat festive occasions, marked by drumming, dancing and paying homage to ancestors. Visitors are welcome, though it is customary to leave a few dollars behind as a donation to the family of the deceased. Later in the afternoon, make a detour to Manhiya Palace and the Palace Museum. Occasionally it is possible to make a courtesy call on the Ashanti king, Otumfuo Osei Tutu, or meet members of his royal court.

Day 8: With an early start, you can make the five-hour drive back to Accra by early afternoon, with a stop for lunch at the Aburi Botanical Gardens. Aburi is also home to a colony of master drum-makers and woodcarvers. If it's Sunday, you may want to spend another afternoon at Labadi Beach, or perhaps go shopping at the National Arts Centre where you can find bargains galore. In the evening, take an excursion to Accra's upmarket Osu district where you can dine at one of several restaurants. Papaye is known for its chicken, Mr. Steer for burgers and Frankie's has the best ice cream in West Africa. After dinner you might want to visit Club Aquarius or the Macumba nightclub, near Danquah Circle.

Day 9: A city tour of Accra takes you past several monuments, including Independence Arch, the National Theatre, the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial and bustling Makola Market. You might want to visit the National Museum and have lunch next door at the Country Kitchen, which serves up quality Ghanaian cuisine. In the afternoon, visit the Arts Centre for some last-minute shopping, or just relax by the pool.

Day 10: A day trip to Ada where the Volta River meets the sea. The Volta Estuary is home to many species of bird and you can charter a boat at Manet's Paradise Village for deep sea fishing or sightseeing on the river. Also nearby is the Shai Hills Nature Reserve, a most unusual park with habitat more typical of grasslands found in the north of Ghana, and home to herds of Kob antelope and many baboons. Overlooked by most itineraries, Shai is one of Ghana's best-kept secrets.

Travelling to Ghana

As Ghana is not a mainstream destination for the UK market, it is wise to speak to a tour operator who specialises in the country when planning your itinerary.

Ghana's most important feature is her people. Everywhere you go, they are friendly and helpful. Photography is not a problem as long as you ask first, but don't be surprised if someone asks for a small tip. Shopping entails bargaining and is an adventure in itself. In Accra, taxis are cheap and plentiful. Ghana is one of the safest countries in Africa, but the mosquitoes do carry malaria and it is inadvisable to travel on roads after dark due to the risk of an accident.

Montreal-based Bob Burch is a frequent visitor to Ghana.

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