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## Ghana: Castles and Forts

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Cold stone ramparts. Surf crashing against rocks. Ancient cannon lying silent, rusted warriors that once witnessed the coming and going of humanity - and inhumanity. The hour is late. The entourage presses forward toward the Male Slave Dungeon where the guardian lifts a stout wooden bar from its ancient iron brackets. A priest enters the forbidding chasm, leading the way. The air is thick, heavy with humidity and pungent odours of fungus and mildew. Down into the dungeon they go, torches flickering on massive stone arches as the passage leads to yet more horrifying chambers. Subdued and silent, the throng moves on.

Each harbours private thoughts, trying to imagine the cruelty and horrors that occurred in these tombs fashioned for the living - and the barely alive. Tears fall to the slick, cold flagstones as they gaze upon the rings and cleats once used to shackle the innocents. The shadows of ghosts appear and disappear in the dim recesses of the chamber. Suffering voices cry in hushed whispers - or is it only the sea crashing against the rocks they hear through the small portal that back then provided a meagre glimpse of the waiting slave ship? This portal, once entered, became the Door of No Return. They gather near the exit which originally led to gangplanks, to listen to a solemn eulogy. Centuries have turned to dust, but memories remain.

### Efforts to Preserve History

In 1997, Ghana inaugurated the "Emancipation Day Celebration", an event that first honoured the 150th anniversary of the end of slavery in Ghana. It has now become an annual celebration in remembrance of the five or six million slaves that said farewell to their home from Ghana's shores. For many, the castles and forts of Ghana have become focal points that epitomise Africa's own "Holocaust".

In 1979 the United Nations placed 35 of Ghana's castles, forts and ruins on the World Heritage List. From 1992 to 1997, the UNDP and USAID carried out major conservation work on Cape Coast Castle, Fort Sao Jorge (Elmina Castle) and Fort St. Jago. These three places have become an integral part of Ghana's tourism attractions. In Ghana the terms fort and castle are virtually interchangeable since most forts also served as residences for colonial governors.

The Slave Route is marked by forts and garrisons along the entire coast of West Africa. Nowhere else in Africa are there so many of these structures as in Ghana - where, in whole or in part, at least 70 remain. Some of the oldest are in remarkably good condition, others have been restored, many are half in ruins and the rest are mere piles of bricks and rubble.

### A Legacy in Stone

The construction in 1482 of a fort at Elmina was Europe's first toehold in Africa. It was soon to be followed by a wave of colonisation that would engulf Africa over the next two centuries. Hot on the heels of the Portuguese, the Dutch, French, British, Spanish, Danes, Germans and Swedes fought to get their fair share of the gold trade. They built forts to protect their interests along the coasts of West Africa.

The Portuguese were also the first to exploit Africans as slaves, the first of these being sent to the nearby island of Sao Tome, as cheap labour for sugar plantations. Over time, and as more gold came from the New World, the demand for this metal was rivalled only by the need for labour. The Amerindian populations had been largely decimated by the Spanish and with the ever-increasing demand for sugar, labour was needed to work new plantations that sprang up in the Caribbean.

Thus began the wholesale deportation of Africans to the New World. By 1734 nearly all the forts had switched to the more lucrative trade in human cargo. Dungeons were built and the forts at Cape Coast and Elmina became collection and trans-shipment centres for slave exports to Dakar and the New World.

Initially they were outposts, then garrisons for gold, and finally prisons and depots for slavery. As the colonial powers grew in might and again subsided, these structures changed hands many times, reflecting the forces at work a continent away. Even today some of these places carry on their original functions - as seats of power and even prisons.

### The Forts of Accra

Perhaps the most famous fort in all of Ghana is Fort Christianborg in Accra. Begun by the Portuguese in 1550, it changed hands in 1652 to the Swedes before the Dutch acquired it in 1660, only to lose it to the Danes a year later. Denmark built most of the fortress but lost it to the Portuguese. Eventually it was recaptured by Africans and again changed hands with the Danes a few times before finally the British bought it in 1850. It remained the seat of British colonial rule in Ghana right up until 1957 when Ghana attained independence. Today it is the home of President J.J. Rawlings and is simply referred to by most locals as "the castle".

Nearby is Fort James, founded on a Portuguese lodge dating from 1576. Unfortunately neither of these forts can be visited, since Christianborg is the official residence of the head of state and Fort James is still in use as a prison. For those who might be interested, there are some ruins of Usher Fort in Accra and some remains of the Dutch Fort

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Agustaborg in nearby Teshie.

#### Along the Eastern Coast

Three forts were built east of Accra: Fort Vernon (British, 1740) at Prampram, Fort Kongenstein (Portuguese, 16th Century) at Ada, and Fort Prinsenstein (Danish, 1714) at Keta. Sadly, none of them are worth a visit. The best preserved is Prinsenstein, but shifting tidal forces on the Keta coastline have undermined much of its foundations and it is slowly tumbling into the sea.

#### Landmarks on the Central Coast

A total of 14 forts, or their partial ruins, dot the coastline between Accra and Cape Coast. Many of them are in good to excellent condition and are equally accessible from either city.

Travelling west from Accra, Fort Good Hope (Dutch, 1705) was constructed at Senya Beraku as a post to facilitate trade for gold with the Akyem Kingdom. Like many of Ghana's forts, it is four-sided and lies on a promontory overlooking a cove with a good landing beach. The promised gold did not materialise, but by 1715 the fort was bursting with slaves which prompted a new construction stage, doubling the fort to its present size.

Nearby at Apam is Fort Patience, built by the Dutch in 1702 to consolidate sovereignty in the Acron state. It too succumbed to the lure of slavery. Shipping records reveal that during one two-month period in 1705, the forts of Accra, Apam and Bereku exported 900 slaves.

Fort Patience remains in excellent condition. It has been at times a police station and a post office, and is currently a rest house where visitors can stay.

Three other forts are located at Tantum (Winnebah), at Saltpond near Ankaful, and at Kormantse (Fort Amsterdam). The British garrison at Tantum is in disrepair, as is the French post at Saltpond. The Dutch Fort Amsterdam is the best maintained, but all three forts may be of interest to enthusiasts of military history.

The well-preserved Fort William at Anomabu is closed to visitors since it is still in use as a prison. It changed hands several times between the Dutch, Swedes and finally the British. During one of the British occupations, over 30 000 slaves were exported from here to Jamaica and Barbados between 1702 and 1706.

The crown jewels of the Central Region forts are definitely Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle. Both have received massive injections of capital to restore them meticulously. At the beginning of the 18th Century, 70,000 slaves were exported annually from Cape Coast by the British "Royal African Company". Today the castle houses the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board and a small well-designed museum. Tours include visits to the dungeons and the governor's quarters, with lectures by historian guides.

Trade with Portugal flourished at nearby Elmina Castle throughout the late 15th and early 16th Centuries. In 1637 the Dutch finally dislodged the Portuguese and Elmina became the headquarters of Dutch possessions in Ghana until 1872, when it was ceded to the British.

One of the best views of Elmina Castle is from Fort St. Jago (also under restoration) which commands a hill on the opposite side of the harbour. No less impressive are the many vaults and chambers, passageways and parapets, ramparts and rooms that have seen five centuries of history played out inside the castle walls.

One of the best times to visit Elmina and Cape Coast is during the "Emancipation Days" celebrations. The programme features a full-blown Fante Durbar of regional chiefs, music and cultural performances, canoe races and re-enactments of the slave trade. The Year 2000 edition is scheduled for 26 July to 1 August.

#### From Cape Coast to Côte d'Ivoire

Some of the finest examples of preserved colonial structures lie along the coast from Takoradi to Beyin on the border of Côte d'Ivoire. Fort St. Sebastian at Shama is a prime example of both Portuguese and Dutch influences, with characteristics also found in many of the forts built in the Caribbean. The placement of bastions with towers and gunports reflect a heavily defended Dutch presence. While Sebastian saw little trade and housed few slaves, it was vital for supplying the other forts along the coast.

Fort Orange at Sekondi should have become an important location, but constant attacks from the local Ahanta and feuding between the English, French and Dutch prevented it from ever becoming a strategic port. Ironically, today the fort houses a lighthouse that helps ships enter the modern port city of Takoradi.

From Busua Beach near Dixcove one can reach the romantic ruins of Fort Batenstein by horseback. Perched on a cliff, it has been under Swedish, Dutch and British control at various times. Of little strategic importance, it was eventually abandoned from 1818 to 1829. Under Dutch occupation it had become vital as a sawmill with operations to repair ships, and agricultural activities to supply other forts.

Like Batenstein, Fort Metal Cross, near Dixcove, never flourished as a trading centre, but became a service fort with mining operations for limestone, brick-making and timber supply. It has survived intact due to its continuous use as a residence for colonial officials, and in later years as a police station and post office. The Monuments Board has

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refurbished it so that guests may stay overnight for a nominal fee.

Fort Gross-Friedrichsburg in Princesstown is one of Ghana's best-kept secrets. Part of its appeal is the survival of original imported bricks that form pavements and vaulted ceilings. Its landmark bell tower and imposing gate add to its charm, clearly revealing that it was one of the most luxurious forts on the entire coast. In recent years the fort has become extremely popular with budget-minded backpackers and trekkers who frequently stay there for a nominal fee. It was also the scene of an heroic event in local folklore. A chief of the Ahanta people named John Conny (aka Canoe) captured the fort in 1717. He successfully repelled a Dutch effort to retake the fort, resisted the cannon fire of ships and fought off a regiment of 120 soldiers. To this day, people of African descent in the Caribbean celebrate the "John Canoe" festival commemorating his defeat of the British.

Fort St. Anthony, built in 1515, is a perfect example of a triangular fort design. As the second Portuguese fort on the Gold Coast, it withstood Dutch attacks for several years after the fall of Elmina. Snuggled against the fishing village of Axim, it provides wonderful views of the community from its towers and parapets. Following extensive restoration in the 1950s, it has been used for various government and regional offices.

Built by the British in 1768, Fort Appolonia at Beyin has been under the care of Mr. Mensah since renovations by the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board 30 years ago. He has tirelessly dedicated half his life to the care and preservation of one of Ghana's historic gems. He cheerfully greets all visitors and is a popular local hero for children on school field trips.

Part of Appolonia's charm is its compact size and intimacy. Mr Mensah proudly flies Ghana's flag from the ramparts and will put up the flag of another country - a tradition found at no other fort in Ghana. Visitors may stay overnight and Mr. Mensah will also arrange a visit across the lagoon by dugout canoe to a remote village on Lake Tandane. The hospitality at Nzulezo is only surpassed by the beauty of the environment.

#### The Gates of Return

The vision to preserve these architectural relics has had a positive economic impact on Ghana - especially in rural areas like Beyin where Fort Appolonia is one of the very few attractions that continues to draw visitors, thus injecting vital tourist dollars into a depressed region. What were once The Gates of No Return have finally become The Gates of Return.

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#### UNESCO

##### Slave Route Project

The connection between Ghana's slave castles and salsa, rap or jazz may not seem immediately obvious, but the link is genuine and UNESCO's Slave Route Project aims to unravel exactly how it came about. The project was launched to document and preserve the evidence of a chapter in history which many people prefer to ignore.

The slave trade orchestrated a meeting of millions of Africans, Amerindians, and Europeans, which, paradoxically, gave rise to new forms of culture. As well as preserving Ghana's castles, much of the project's academic research focuses on these unintended by-products of slavery.

"The slaver was unable to reach the Africans' inner life force .... which has made the Americas and the Caribbean an exceptional theatre of multiculturalisation," says UNESCO's Doudou Diene. He believes that perhaps this cultural interaction somehow contains the potential for intercultural dialogue, and perhaps even the solution to modern racial antagonism.

In addition, this cultural interplay has contributed enormously to global heritage. Think of reggae or Rio's carnival. Collectively termed as "maroon" culture, after the name given to runaway slaves, these hybrids are adaptable, creative, open and defiant, says Diene. "This culture, under permanent tension and nourished by values born of violence, has proved its vitality in forms of artistic expressions known worldwide."

Unsurprisingly, most of slavery's remaining side-effects are less positive. "The legacy of slavery is real in every African country where it was practised," says Ghanaian historian Akosua Perbi. A few years ago, her uncle lost a land claim because his great-great-grandmother had been bought in a slave market in the 1800s. The Slave Route Project sets out to deconstruct all such prejudices, both in Africa and the West.

One of the project's highest priorities is to preserve millions of documents that record the slave trade (invoices, African and European traders' diaries, ships' logs, bankers' reports). These are currently scattered in institutions and private hands throughout Africa, Europe and the Americas, where they are often stored inadequately, at the mercy of insects and fluctuations in heat and moisture. UNESCO aims to catalogue all these documents and make them accessible to scholars and the public.

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"Levels of development in Africa today cannot be explained without reference to the persistent human, intellectual and cultural haemorrhaging which Africa suffered over centuries of the slave trade," says Frederico Mayor, UNESCO's Director General. Yet the horrors of slavery and its legacy are largely missing from western history books.

It was this silence surrounding the slave trade that led UNESCO to launch its Slave Route Project at the request of member states. The project's overall goal is to study the causes, characteristics and consequences of the triangular slave trade that dominated international commerce between the 16th and 19th Centuries. French historian Jean-Michel Deveau estimates that between 11 and 15 million Africans were transported between 1600 and 1800 alone.

UNESCO aims to preserve as much evidence of the trade as possible so that people worldwide will remember it and prevent anything similar recurring. "Any tragedy which is covered up may recur. Ignorance of slavery perhaps explains the fact that violence, oppression and lack of respect for human dignity are still evils besetting us," says Diene.

As oral tradition is an important source of knowledge in many parts of Africa, an urgent part of UNESCO's research consists of recording the oral history of the slave trade. This will reveal information not found in European or American written archives. UNESCO also promotes cultural tourism, collects information on existing exhibitions and museums, devises schools' education programmes and grants research scholarships.

August 23 1997 saw the first annual "International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition", timed to commemorate Santo Domingo's ground-breaking slave uprising in August 1791. UNESCO wants people to remember why the slave trade was what Deveau recently described as the "greatest single tragedy, in terms of scale and duration, in human history."

Compiled by Stephanie Debere.