

A new Kenya Airways destination –

# Accra

## *Metropolis on the move*

If the city of Accra had a motto, it would probably be 'Hospitality – Integrity – Security'. The capital of Ghana since 1877, Accra is the usual entry point for most visitors. The renowned hospitality of Ghanaians is evident at Kotoka airport where entry formalities are swift and courteous. Great strides have been made over the last eight years, as tourism officials led the way in streamlining entry procedures. The curbside 'baggage boys' still jostle for the privilege of carrying your luggage to a taxi, but the 'hassle factor' is a mere shadow of its past.

Expect to be charged double and then argue with the taxis; you will wind up paying about 50% more than you should, but with inexpensive fares to virtually anywhere in the city, it's still a bargain. Though still struggling with the burden of a large foreign debt, the new president of Ghana, John Kuffour, has tried to maintain a balance between the demands of creditors and the needs of the people. Petrol prices are being held in check for now. People speak fondly of the new government and express great hopes for their future. Evidence of change is in the air.



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Background picture: Salaga Beach, where the seat of power rests side by side with the common man. The building on the cliff is the residence of the President, best known as 'the castle'. At dawn fishermen prepare to go to sea.

1. The National Theatre.
2. The National Conference Centre.



The face of Accra has been slow to change, but major strides in sanitation and road construction are the legacy of outgoing president J J Rawlings. While traffic can still be hectic at peak hours, new boulevards and flyovers have eased much of the congestion, and most of the open sewers are now covered. Older areas of the city have been less receptive to change. Historic Jamestown along the Atlantic coastline has a charming if somewhat dilapidated façade – collections of old colonial buildings, crammed into narrow and confusing streets. Here one can taste the flavour of Accra as it was 50 years ago: market stalls, storefronts, carpentry workshops, lottery booths and streetside vendors. The Makola Market is an endless warren of alleys and byways, seeming to lead nowhere but suddenly bringing you back to where you started. Here you find the bargains for wax print textiles, spices and the everyday necessities that attract hordes of local shoppers.

In stark contrast to Accra's older areas are the new buildings springing up all over town. With a metro population of 2.5 million, Accra remains a magnet for new residents from all over the country – along with hundreds of neighbouring country refugees fleeing civil strife and still more from the north escaping drought. Ghana has always extended a hand to these less fortunate and most find ways to integrate themselves into the social fabric. Their hope for a better future is mirrored in the sleek lines of the National Theatre, an architectural masterpiece. New office buildings symbolise a desire to be different. No soaring highrises, but each new tower embodies details that set it apart from its neighbours. The International Conference Centre was a gamble that paid off. Furnished with the latest audio-visual equipment, the complex can host events of 1600 people and more. It has become the showcase for Accra's national symphony orchestra and the site of many symposiums and conventions for both Africans and foreigners alike.



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*From pottery, gold and woodcarvings – to drums, beads and textiles, merchants will happily bargain with you, for your (or his) 'best price'.*

The International Trade Fair in the east end of the city has slowly been gaining popularity. Often a ghost town when not hosting an agricultural or industrial trade show, it is now the home of many shops and small businesses, adding to its functionality. Most visitors are unaware of the boutiques and galleries that now grace its premises. One of the regular stops on any city tour is the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial, a beautiful park that houses the mausoleum of Ghana's first president. Graceful fountains add to the peace and tranquillity.

Next door to the park is the National Arts Centre, a popular spot for tourists, and a must-do for any souvenir hunter. Prices are slightly higher than in the rural areas, but here you can find all of Ghana's famous arts and crafts in one place. From pottery, gold and woodcarvings – to drums, beads and textiles, merchants will happily bargain with you, for your (or his) 'best price'. Plan on at least half a day if you want to see everything.

More great shopping can be found in the more affluent area of Osu. From near the coastal road all the way to Danquah Circle, Osu's 'Oxford Street' has become the 'in' place to be seen. There are a number of clothing boutiques with seamstresses for made-to-order clothes; jewellery and perfume stores, supermarkets and a few art galleries.

But the biggest attraction of the area has to be the many restaurants and nightclubs. Frankie's Restaurant serves western style breakfasts, a variety of pizza and the best homemade ice cream in West Africa. Across the street is the new Mr Steer, a South African-owned hamburger chain. Nearby is the popular Papaye, Accra's original fast-food Chicken 'n Burger joint. For more elegant fare, try the Dynasty for Chinese, Chez Lien for Vietnamese and the Taj for Indian cuisine. Further out near the airport area are several French and Italian restaurants and the new El Gaucho for Argentina steaks. For more local fare, visit the La Paloma arcade for Ghanaian style dishes.

5. The High Court, one of Accra's best known colonial landmarks.

6. Ryan's Pub in Osu where the Guinness is always on tap.

Background picture: The popular Labadi Beach.

When the sun goes down, there is plenty of time to eat. Ghana's nightlife doesn't get going until well after 11pm. If discos are your scene, be sure to visit the popular Macumba nightclub near Danquah Circle where the action goes on until dawn. Nearby is Club Aquarius, another popular night spot. For a more relaxed atmosphere and a pint of Guinness on tap, visit Ryan's Pub, perhaps the only real Irish pub in all of West Africa.

No visit to Accra is complete without a visit to Labadi Beach, especially on a Sunday when hordes of Accra residents join tourists from all walks of life in a mutual pursuit of sun worship. A nominal fee of a few pence goes towards keeping the beach free of litter. Snack bars and watering holes abound, as do roving troupes of drummers and acrobats amidst a legion of hawkers who are very polite compared to some places on the continent. The action goes on until well after sundown, but watch out for the mosquitoes after dark.

Some of Accra's less visited attractions include the National Museum on Barnes Road, housing collections of antique terracottas, Ghanaian cultural displays and some prehistoric artifacts.

The Accra Zoo is worth a visit just to see the rare forest antelopes native to Ghana.

The serpentarium houses several species of local venomous snakes. The zoo struggles to maintain a presence, but a famine a decade earlier resulted in the deaths of many animals when personnel were unable to get food supplies.

Background picture:  
The 'Accra Running Club' is a familiar sight on Labadi Beach. Members include athletes, bodybuilders, and fashion models – but anyone can join in.

Opposite page:  
7. The 5-star Royal La Palm Hotel has one of the largest swimming pools in West Africa.  
8. The 'African Pavilion' restaurant at the Royal La Palm serves traditional Ghanaian cuisine in an African ambience.

Background picture:  
Fishermen along Accra's coast are always in search of a 'good catch'.

Historians may also find two research libraries of interest, both of which are the final resting places of their founders. The George Padmore Library houses the collection of this noted Pan-Africanist. The W.E.B. Dubois Library is the legacy of another Pan-Africanist and one of the co-founders of the NAACP civil rights organisation in the USA (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People).

*Accra remains one of the safest cities in all of Africa.*

Cyber-Junkies will be pleased to know that Internet Cafés are all over town, with most of them concentrated in the Osu district. Fees are generally less than US\$1.00 per hour, but connections are slow and even checking email usually takes more than a few minutes. Phone cards are available everywhere

and offer a convenient way to communicate via Westel or Ghana Telecom public phones. Forex bureaus remain the best option for changing money with the current rate at about 7,200 cedis to US\$1.00 or 10,400 cedis to £1.00. ATMs are becoming more popular but they are few and far between. Credit cards are usually only accepted in the upscale restaurants and major hotels. And beware: the largest denomination in Ghana is a 5,000 cedi banknote.

Integrity is also a Ghana personality trait. While merchants and taxis will try to get the best price, they will also stick to any bargain made.

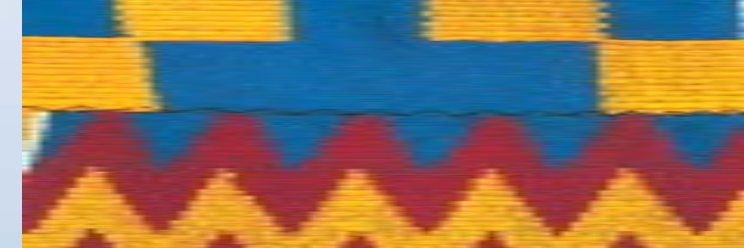
Since goods and services are so inexpensive, it's pointless to argue over a few cents unless you are on a strict budget. Most merchants will also take back any goods that you deem defective, or if you change your mind.

And finally: security. Accra remains one of the safest cities in all of Africa. Drivers are fairly aggressive but also courteous.

*Accra has ambitions to become the main Gateway to West Africa. While experiencing steady tourism growth from African Americans seeking heritage, it is often overlooked as a sunshine destination too.*

You can walk virtually anywhere in the city at any hour without worry. But remember that many streets are poorly lit and the biggest danger is becoming lost. You should also take care in markets and at the beach since pickpockets and petty thieves can be a nuisance.

Accra has a variety of accommodations to suit any budget. The newest and best hotel is the 5-star Royal La Palm facing Labadi Beach with rooms starting at about US\$220. The Golden Tulip and the Labadi Beach Hotel are 4-star properties with large swimming pools. Novotel, the Shangri-La and several smaller hotels are comfortable 3-star facilities. For nice 2-star lodging with air-conditioning and private bath, try any of the newer guest houses and Frankie's Hotel in Osu.



Two annual festivals mark Accra's traditional holidays. The Homowo Festival celebrates the harvest and takes place in early August with a full Durbar of regional chiefs. The yearly Carnival happens between Christmas and New Year and is marked by a parade with stiltwalkers and colourful costumes.

There is also a host of activities that you can do as simple day trips from Accra. Follow the cocoa trail to Tafo, visit the historic Aburi Gardens, take a game drive through the Shai Hills Reserve to see antelope and baboons, take a cruise on the Dodi Island Princess on Lake Volta, or spend a day at the Paradise Beach Resort in Ada where you can charter a boat for fishing.

Accra has ambitions to become the main Gateway to West Africa. While experiencing steady tourism growth from African Americans seeking heritage, it is often overlooked as a sunshine destination too. In addition to Labadi, there are miles of pristine beaches within an hour's drive from the city. Ghana hopes to attract even more visitors as tourism experts explore the potential of 'eco' and adventure tours. Accra is ready to host all who come... a Metropolis on the Move.

9. The annual Accra Winter Carnival takes place on New Year's Eve afternoon with a parade of colourful costumes, acrobats, marching bands, stiltwalkers and drummers.



## Fact File

Hotels and activities can be booked with Nomad Africa at [www.NomadAfrica.com](http://www.NomadAfrica.com). For information about the Royal La Palm Hotel, visit [www.goldenbeachhotels.net](http://www.goldenbeachhotels.net).

Kenya Airways fly to Accra from Nairobi twice a week on Mondays and Saturdays. Contact your local travel agent or tour operator for more information.

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