

My EIL scholarship trip to Ghana

by *Niamh Costigan*

Greeted with a blast of heat and humidity as I stepped off the plane at Kotoka International Airport in Accra, I embarked on a great adventure that was both enjoyable and enlightening.



At the airport, after meeting up with IYEP Ghana's Heidi Boakye, a lady who impressed me instantly with her sense of humour, warmth and intelligence, I was introduced to the other members of the international group with whom I was to spend much of my stay in Ghana : three Japanese girls and a young Swissman. The five of us spent our first week staying at the University of Ghana in Accra. Accompanied by either Heidi or her IYEP colleague, the energetic Mabel Fudzie, we began undergoing an orientation programme which included basic lessons in the local dialect of Twi and enjoyable workshops on traditional music and dance.

As someone interested in languages, I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to learn Twi - which is one of the 42 ethnic languages native to Ghana - although it was not strictly necessary because everyone in Accra spoke pidgin English at the very least, and those fortunate enough to be well-educated spoke it with fluency. (As a former British colony which gained independence in 1957, Ghana's official language is English, and education is conducted through that medium). As well as learning about the music, dance and language, we were well informed about Ghanaian politics, culture and history by Kwame Agyepong, Director of IYEP, the Ghanaian organisation affiliated to EIL.

Suitably prepared, we then dispersed to various locations around Accra to spend ten days living with Ghanaian families. The homestay aspect of the programme was a highlight for all of us and offered an opportunity to sample the unique hospitality and friendliness of the Ghanaian people.

My own host family, the Ofosu-Appiahs, treated me beautifully - in fact I could only complain of being treated too well, as they did everything they possibly could for me. My host sister Vera, a tremendous cook, prepared traditional Ghanaian dishes for me, of which my favourite (after getting used to it!) was fufu - a dish consisting of a ball of bland pounded cassava, served in a spicy hot soup with deliciously tasty fish.



My host mother, my host sister, and their good friend Georgina, a dressmaker, saw to it that I was kitted out in traditional Ghanaian outfits, beautifully made to measure from vividly dyed Ghanaian cloth. It amused them no end to see me, a white girl, wearing the traditional "kaba and slit" of local women. They roared laughing, absolutely delighted with my transformation into a true Ghanaian woman, as I completed the effect by tying a length of cloth around my head in the traditional Ghanaian style.

I had been warned beforehand about the highly infectious nature of the Ghanaian laugh; so big, joyful and gaily uninhibited that you couldn't but join in. My 18-year-old host brother, Kofi, was a born comedian; often the two of us would be rendered helpless with laughter as he rapped and danced to entertain me.

I commissioned Kofi and my 21-year-old host brother Harry to supplement the Twi I had already learned with some more phrases, and they duly obliged until I could handle a simple dialogue. Throughout my stay, Ghanaians enjoyed nothing more than to hear the white foreigner speaking Twi with apparent fluency and would roar laughing when I answered their simple questions with Twi phrases. "Akvesi broni [white Ghanaian]!" they named me. I had many names in Ghana: walking down the street, children would shout "O broni ahema [white princess]", but my favourite name was "Akua", which was given to me by my host brother Harry. Many Ghanaians have two or three first names, one of which is a name corresponding to the day on which they were born - so Harry named me "Akua" meaning "Wednesday girl."

I hugely enjoyed the Ghanaian pop music, an intriguing blend of traditional 'highlife' styles and new American rap and r'n'b influences, backed with a bouncy beat similar to West Indian reggae. The chief protagonist of the new trend they call 'hiplife' is Kumasi native Lord Kenya. I loved Lord Kenya's tunes so much that by the time I left for home with my treasured copy of his seminal album, I had been named "Akua Kenya - Lord Kenya's wife!"

The second major stage of our trip was a nine-day stay at an orphanage in Bawjiase, a village in the Central Region of Ghana. This entailed a second acclimatisation: the humidity of Accra was nothing compared to the heavy, exhausting, moisture-laden air of the rainforest belt. However my time in Bawjiase was the most enjoyable and rewarding aspect of my trip.

Founded by a remarkable woman named Madame Emma, the orphanage was home and school to about 70 girls and boys. For several days I taught senior level English, junior level Biology and primary level Art, and learned much from the experience. The children were affectionate and gentle, bright and articulate and full of potential, and they danced and sang with truly astonishing talent and enthusiasm. I was very sad to leave them.

During our programme we also had the opportunity to visit the famous Kakum National Park in the Ghanaian rainforest, where a series of canopy walkways are strung from treetop to treetop and offer a spectacular bird's-eye view of the forest. Although the rope bridges are perfectly safe to cross, I must admit I felt less than comfortable as they swayed from side to side in a most precarious way! Unfortunately we were unlucky with the weather that day and didn't get to see any wildlife at all, but nevertheless it was a unique experience. That same day at nearby Cape Coast we visited a slave castle and heard harrowing stories of the Ghanaian past.

My trip to Ghana was educational, inspirational, and unforgettable. I will remember with affection the kindness and generosity of the Ofosu-Appiahs of Accra, the staff of IYEP, and the endearing children and carers of the Bawjiase Welfare Home. I hope to see all of them again some day.