

Ghana – West Africa, 2002



November 7, Accra

Mmmm, warm iodine water and heavy dough pastry. I realize now that when we asked the woman on the street last night if the pastry was “sweet”, we had unintentionally asked if it was good, not sugary.

It's 8:30 in the morning and I seem to be a little too far from the ceiling fan.

Anyway, the first cylindrical pastry I bit into seemed to be oniony with minuscule meat. It had been hanging over night on little clothesline we constructed in the room. Unfortunately, this has not stopped the tiny ants from finding it and surprising me with the first bite. They are not the only ones who realize the inside it tastier than the heavy outer crust.

We think we've been here three days, although it's hard to tell. With the time changes and the day from outer space in London, we finally decided that we had been essentially sleepless on planes for two nights, not one. Ordinarily we try to ignore these details, but after one arrives and recovers, it's just too tempting to figure out what happened.

The adventure really started in London when we saw the line to the check-in counter folded like a snake broken in 10 places. The luggage was so huge and numerous, it looked like a convention of importers instead of vacationers.

My knowledge of and identification of jets is confined to their seating arrangements. This was a two five two. It was full, as far as I could see. We were the only Caucasians! Perhaps Ghana isn't that popular a destination!

We caught a taxi upon arrival in Accra and Glenn sat in front with the driver where he received a good douse of water every time we turned a corner. It was raining lightly outside, but it was torrential for Glenn inside.

We did arrive and did find a hotel and slept, dizzy with fatigue. Nothing is harder than trying to get up in the extreme heat of 2:00 PM when you are still exhausted. I neglected to mention that the several guys checking us in to the hotel were wearing boxer shorts only. However, outside all men wear long pants and African shirt or white shirt and tie! Women are even dressier.

Beer (huge bottle) is \$1.00 Canadian and chicken and chips dinner \$2.00. Our hotel rooms (boxer shorts and all) are \$7.00 Canadian, bathroom down the hall. Everything is very old. The linoleum that doesn't reach the walls, cracks fixed with concrete, closets (or room entrances?) painted and nailed closed, and electric wires looping their way across the ceiling toward the fan. All that said, it is amazingly clean. Sink in the hall, window glass hastily painted blue, see through wooden stairs and a



shower revealing head and feet to anyone passing by. This is the hotel we've come back to. The other was worse, even though it was across from the "Go With God Hair Styling Salon". Our room adjoined the courtyard where the pounding of cassava root was like a commercial for a headache product.

November 8, Volta Region

I must get one of the posters picturing the different limitless designs of corn-row hair braiding possibilities. that are outside the styling salons. Nothing beats the women in African print swaying down the street, all their curves aligned in beautiful posture as if carrying 7 suitcases on their head, (which I did see). The seven pieces of luggage were huge, new, empty, and not strapped together. The seven suitcases had turned and looked both ways before softly jogging across the traffic. This was impressive looking but probably not nearly as heavy as the baskets filled with small chilled bags of water carried by some.

We are in Akatsi now, and have twice been into the bird sanctuary. The Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) (Dior from Tulsa, Oklahoma) has been here one year and has one more to go. She is helping a small village develop and sell river tours in hand hewn canoes for the purpose of bird watching. She has an adopted dog named Solace. Village access is difficult - the red pot holed road is so bad the taxis don't like to go there. The first one refused to wait for us (after agreeing to) and we ended up spending over an hour in the pitch dark beside the road (feasting mosquitoes and all), waiting. It would have been much worse if the bird guide guy had not pulled strings to get us pressed into a taxi.

Our trip to the sanctuary the next morning began with the taxi driver not showing up. We did make it, though and went on the river with the PCV and a visiting PCV. We especially enjoyed the pied and malachite kingfishers we saw. I had been waiting with bated breath to see a poisonous green mamba hanging from the trees - no luck. These two young women had been assigned to two separate rivers in Ghana to help advance local eco-tourism.

Oh, the electric fan has come back on. It's raining in spurts, Glenn is on the balcony photographing a peacock and there is drumming in the distance competing with a sporting event on TV in the open air bar.

The people are outrageously nice. We've learned to say a prolonged "YOOooo...h" when they welcome us. Red mud huts, thatched roofs, daily swept yard of red earth, chickens and goats - all so tidy and sparse. How do white shirts, dress pants and gold chains come out of these huts? The women's African prints look like they've just been washed in new blue Cheer from a laundromat. The river water is mud. All earth and dust is red as evidenced on the inside of my collar.

We do need to carry some food with us. Yesterday I was stuck eating cooked plantains for lunch and dinner. As we were leaving the bird reserve today we asked if there was any place to eat in the village. The PCV said there are beans and sugar cane only. We did find a place back in town.

As an eight year old whacks the hotel lawn with a machete, we are faced with only a gelatinous blob of white tasteless pudding wrapped in a banana leaf. This is called fufu (or banku?)

November 11, Volta Region

We are in the town of Ho. I am praying for cloud cover. It's so tempting to stay here in front of the fan and eat chocolate and drink iodine water for breakfast instead of going out. Glenn has been lugging around the wrong voltage converter all this time. Now that it is time to use it to charge the video camera, we are stuck. We used my underwear to plug holes in the (window) screen last night.

We are covered in mosquito bites, both have a cold and the skin on my face has the amazing ability to exude glue.

So far so good. We are heading for Tafi Atome (monkeys and kente cloth), where there are no fans.

November 14, Volta Region

Leaving Ho we passed a plumbing store named the Anointed Plumber. Our guide in Tafi Atome is Innocent, the brother of Patience.

Today we have walked four hours round trip, in the heat, to the neighbouring village that weaves like there is no tomorrow. It was very picturesque. I feel like we really got to know the village by staying a little longer than the norm. There were lots of monkeys, but no other wildlife. The only reason there are monkeys is because they are sacred. The village is loaded with tiny goats, chickens, guinea fowl and kittens. There are three large goats that wander around and do anything they want because they are sacred. We did get to meet the fetish priest that lives together with the Christian church in an interesting amalgamation; (he looked a little like Ghandi - robed with gold wire rimmed glasses). We had to bring local distilled alcohol in order to meet him. I didn't realize we were going to have to take the first drinks, including pouring some on the ground for the ancestors.

Anyway, everything is eaten, even the kittens are special food for Christmas. They have no dogs because "they defecate and make the village unclean". Every morning before or at dawn the ground is swept everywhere in the village. It is incredibly tidy looking with the mud huts and thatched roofs. We were unfortunate enough to get an iron roofed room with one blue ceiling bulb and no fan. I'm not going to stretch my creativity to find words to describe how hot it was in there, although "shoot me" comes to mind.

Back to animals, we did see a dead "grass cutter". It was on its way to being dinner - looked sort of like a small beaver or very large rat or a guinea pig with hormone problems.

Glenn addressed the elementary school at the close of their day. It was a surprise request and he did well, telling them how important education is and a lot of smiling and yooohing.

A man (46) died the first day we were in the village. The carpenter put aside his two inch thick mahogany bookshelves and was building the coffin when we visited - he gave us two oranges. The funeral was all night and till a few hours after dawn the next morning - drumming, dancing and singing all night. They think some juju was involved because all of a sudden the man couldn't use his legs and then died a few months later. "Possibly he was after another man's wife."

Glenn had a batik shirt custom made for him in this village, for \$8.

November 15, Odumase Krobo

We visited a very interesting bead "factory". The ovens were made of clay and fired by cassava wood. You could stand under the thatch cover and watch the little molds go through the door on a long spatula like a pizza being cooked.

The market in this particular town finally had just the right size of fabric section. The Accra market had sooo much material I knew I would never be able to handle it. I now have four pieces of fabric, a new dress, and big time beads. And the luggage gets heavier and heavier.

November 16, Akosombo

Our record for the common means of transport is 21 adults. They are called "tro-tros" (mini-vans) and they account for maybe half the traffic on the roads. I would estimate another 30% of the traffic is taxis and the remaining 20% is trucks and private vehicles.

We were sweating seated and ready to tro-tro our way to Accra when I felt something somehow unusual touch my leg. I had chosen the seat over the goat! I figured the floor would soon be awash with urine and ball bearings. I never dreamed a goat could "hold it" for 1 ½ hours. When the poor

thing was lifted out the back door he started peeing in mid air and the raisins started falling - lucky for the bags of rice on the tro-tro floor.

Water is purchased in little half litre plastic bag pillows. You bite a hole in one corner and suck. We had gotten a bit dehydrated and purchase four bags. We drank two and were lingering on the third. On the next tro-tro in the linkage to Accra it started raining. Unfortunately there was only one sliding glass window on my side where there should have been two. Immediately there was a hubbub. Glenn gave me the water bag, my hat flew off, luggage was being shuffled, people gesticulating. But nothing compared to the reaction caused by me inadvertently squeezing the water bag, spraying all those in front of me. I'm still hoping they thought it some how came from the window.

Power of God Metal Works
Shower of Blessings Beauty Salon
Lord is My Shepherd Saw Sharpening
The Anointed Plumber

Allah the Most Gracious Engineering Works
Thy Will be Done Licensed Chemical Seller
God First Machinery Service
Steadfast Love Communication Center

November 17, Senya Baiku

We are in the southwest garret of a slave trading fort on the Gulf of Guinea. I had looked forward to trying to conjure a ghost feeling or two but the music was too loud last night. The ocean breeze through the openings in the four foot thick wall is very pleasant. Early morning launching of the fishing boats is picturesque accompanied by fishermen chanting with the primitive effort of dragging large boat over sand with only wooden poles as tools. This town is very poor.

November 19, Accra

No traveling would be complete without at least an attempted rip off. We were having dinner down the street when a very big man came and said "California"? I said "We're from Canada."

"So am I!"

"Where are you from?"

"Vancouver."

"What do you do there?"

"I'm in shipping. We go all around the Great Lakes. I'm on vacation and my company sends me where ever I want to go. My girl friend is from Montreal. I have a car and we are going to Elmina on Thursday, if you care to come."

"We have plans, thanks."

"What hotel are you staying in?"

"Hotel California."

"There's a place up the street that gives 9.2 exchange rate - best rate in town!"

"(no reaction)"

"(ditto)"

"(no reaction)"

"Bye, see you around."

Screaming traffic with so much horn beeping you would think the noise was essential to locomotion. Bleating goats and crowing rooster seems an odd mix. How do the goats and little children know not to run into the street?

November 21, Accra

We have done our duty at the National Museum and have found a spot in the shade with a breeze to temporarily begin the drying process. While waiting of a bite of lunch I inadvertently lifted my arm

to discover the place mat, a laminated menu and several pieces of cutlery stuck fast to my skin. One has to just remain calm.

November 22, Accra

Glenn has delivered two lectures to computer science students at Ghana University and Kelly has arrived!

We launched into a bus ride to Kumasi.

Braved the morning market.

Launched into a long bus ride to Tamale.

Braved the morning market.

Launched into a long bus ride to Mole.

Voila!

After these arduous three days we have landed in paradise! We arrived late at night and I was awakened by Kelly at 2:00 AM saying "There are 5 deer outside our window!" I reply "Wow, great!" snore. At 3:00 AM she woke me up saying there is an elephant outside our window - Wow! We all leapt up out of bed and ran on tip toes to see a huge African elephant with big waving ears eating on a tree outside the window. The moonlight lit his tusks as he began to walk toward us. At this point I ran away from the window - why, I don't know. Anyway, he came right up and began to vacuum the flower bed, as we freaked out. As he disappeared down the small flower garden he farted a good bye. It took us quite a while to settle down enough to sleep the rest of the night.

The next morning we found twigs with leaves from the tree, on the ground. I expected to see totally crushed flower beds, but they were completely unharmed, other than one type of plant (lily) partially eaten. When he stepped over the two foot concrete wall he was so gentle and graceful. This elephant is known for once entering the soccer field while a game was on we found out. He walked to the middle of the field and put one foot on the ball and rolled it back and forth, then left. The guide said this elephant's name is "Brother of Man".

One of the male baboons went for someone's day pack at the pool yesterday. Everyone scattered except the owner of the pack who won the tug-of-war.

We have now been on two early morning walking safaris and really enjoyed them. Dung beetles were one of the highlights. We've had many baboon (complete with clinging babies) and warthogs drinking and wallowing in front of our room.

There is a pool. There is a fan. And there is a great view of the watering hole within reach of the guy who delivers drinks! I must admit that I was a bit puzzled to read that one of the rules posted on the door in our room insisting that one not wear underwear to dinner. Fine with me, come to think of it.

As the sun slowly sinks in the sub-Saharan haze, dinner's on the way, the beer is cold and cheap - one more day until we leap back into real life.

Every night all the kob (deer-like antelope), baboons and monkeys come to our area and the village area to sleep. They have figured out that they are safe from predators near people. We did see lion prints on our walking safari, but they hunt at night and are never seen.

Many men and women in Ghana have decorative scars on the face. Sometimes as simple as one dash on each cheek. In the Kumasi market, during our trek in search of car tire sandals for Elaine, we met a Moslem man with three scars at the corner of each eye and three scars at each corner of his mouth. Apparently his mother had had five sets of twins that all died, so when he was born they did the scarring for luck.

Mole National Park has been pretty much paradise. It was no picnic getting here, though. Just one example is a bus we took that left late - searing heat - then immediately stopped for gas, as we sweltered. The bus then drove to a dirt road at the edge of town and everyone got out to stand in the sun as they changed a tire. Kelly was laughing hysterically when I told her we were stopping to change the tire.

December 1, Cape Coast

A night time lobster dinner on the roof of a slave trading fort, then off to the mixed couple mecca of Kokrobite. Fresh squeezed pineapple and orange juice, great food, cheap beer, little thatched roof huts, cats, dogs, chickens and a parrot. Kelly and Glenn go off to see a drumming and dance show and Kathy stays put, making up meanings for the painted symbols near the ceiling of the room and spends one hour contemplating what to drink next from the thatched bar.

Kelly has tiny, under the skin, bumps on all her fingers. The dozens of bites on her legs have improved since she purchased the miracle ointment called "Mercy Rub". Glenn demonstrated (day before yesterday) how hot he was by grabbing a portion of his shirt and wringing sweat from it before jumping into the taxi.

Tro-tros and taxis, horns and exhaust,
The battle for clean clothes and grooming is lost.

This morning we got to hear some very enchanting chanting from the fishermen as they dug their heels into the sand and pulled with all their weight on the fishing net slowly coming to shore.

We have Kelly packed up to the gunwales and off to the airport looking forward to things like cream rinse, milk and clean clothes.

Had we left a day earlier, we would have been on the flight where two young boys hid in the landing gear of the Ghana Airways jet and of course died by the time the plane reached London.

I'm looking forward to being cold, and introverted for a while.

City horns, goats and chickens,
Arms and legs seagull like spread, touch me not;
Vapours penetrating the bed,
Moving curtains and blue shutters,
Bathroom down the hall;
Dreams of brass warthogs and the bend over dance,
Tro-tros in my future, tro-tros in my past;
A few hours of afternoon, how long will it last;
Startling drips! a bug or sweat?
A bucket shower, so somewhat wet;
A hotel without power, as luck would be,
A room with a fan, lucky me!