

Easter Weekend In Ghana

Keith Thomson

Introduction

You are going how far? No, I'm going to Accra – not everyone's first choice of venue for a father and son bonding session. Four days in West Africa just after returning from a ski trip to Saas Fee, exchanging the sunshine and wonderful snow conditions in Switzerland for the humidity, heat and anopheles mosquitoes of Sub Saharan Africa. My son Duncan and I flew to Accra on BA 81 from Heathrow on Maundy Thursday, stayed there four days and flew back overnight on Easter Monday arriving back in London at 06.30. The answer to the question "*What did we do in such a short time?*" was "*quite a lot*". Even my first year university student son said he was exhausted and he did not have a private ENT list to do the afternoon we returned! An ethical dilemma but no colleague was available to substitute for me.

Arrival at Kotoka Airport

This is modern even by European standards. We collected our bags, strolled through customs and were met by my friend Augustine Conteh. Eleven years before I had paid for his wife Catherine to have a Caesarean section at a maternity hospital in Freetown, Sierra Leone [1]. The result was Regina now aged eleven (Fig 1).



Fig 1 The Conteh family with Jenny and Duncan

His taxi driver friend Abecu then took us in his ancient Golf GTI, equipped with impressive sounding exhaust and dangling 'furry dice', to the Madina District where we were going to stay at a house owned by Stella, a Ghanaian friend, who lives in Windsor.

Day 1 – Hunting Ed!

After a breakfast-time visit by my niece Jenny, who is studying politics at Lagon University in Accra, we set out to find a place called Kwamoso where Duncan's friend Ed was doing three months of his 'GAP year' with an organisation called 'Teaching projects abroad.'

He had already spent six weeks teaching English and Geography to forty 11-14-year-olds before moving to Kwamoso. The directions were that this village was situated beyond a town called Mamfe in the Akuapem Hills. We had to find a man called the Rev. Fianko and ask him where the white men were! Abecu drove us there with unerring accuracy in about one and a half hours. We were met by the Rev. Fianko, whose business



Fig 2 Ed the builder

card referred to him as 'The Prophet'. Ed, friend Billy and others were building simple accommodation blocks (Fig 2) out of handmade mud bricks for homeless people. They returned with us to Accra in the GTI. With six on board the exhaust certainly took a hammering on the local roads. After a swim at the nearby Errata Hotel we had dinner at the Redd Lobster (sic!)

where I tried an interesting local dish called 'Banku' consisting of porridge-like maize which was dipped by hand into a fish stew.

Day 2 – 'The Big Expedition'

Abecu and his friend Emmanuel arrived in two cars at 6.00 am to take us to Cape Coast where we planned to visit the Kakum Rainforest and Elmina Slave Castle. The estimated two hours turned into nearly four, but relax, this is West Africa where the charming people are more 'event' rather than 'time' orientated. The road was remarkably good but the traffic was heavy with many over-laden, beaten up, old minivan taxis called tro-tros, driving too fast right up each other's exhaust. The landscape was flat and remarkably green with pineapple plantations and coconut palms.

Kakum is a rainforest whose main tourist attraction is a 40m high 450m long walkway with seven wobbly strands interspersed with platforms each surrounding a huge tree. When the guide said it had been designed by Canadians in 1996 I was slightly less apprehensive. My dislike of heights made this walkway (Fig 3) quite a challenge but all nine of us, including Regina and the two taxi drivers, completed this feat of endurance. The rainforest canopy was very impressive as was the informative museum. I didn't realise how many currently used medications were derived from this source



Fig 3 Taxi driver Abecu on the Kakum walkway

including Quinine, Ouabain, Vincristine and Vinblastine. We saw no wild animals but did hear some monkeys chattering.

Next we drove to visit the Slave Castle at Elmina which stands as a foreboding reminder of man's previous inhumanity to

his fellow man. Built by the Portuguese in 1482, it was captured by the Dutch who ruled until 1872 when it was sold to the British who ruled until Ghana received its independence in 1957. For over three centuries it was the scene of unspeakable evil. Slaves captured by other indigenous tribes were sold to white slave traders in exchange for various goods; they were kept in separate male and female dungeons into which they were packed with minimum food, water or sanitary facilities. Our guide said that up to 50% died before the next America-bound slave ship arrived.

We saw the 'Gate of No Return' (Fig 4), the 'Condemned Cell' and 'the Washing Hole' for women destined for a trip to the Commandant's bedroom via a secret passageway – huge heavy cannon balls in the yard were a silent reminder of the punishment inflicted on those who had bravely refused his advances. These women were chained to eight of these and left out in the courtyard with no shade until they finally collapsed from dehydration and heat exhaustion. I had last visited Elmina in 1991 during my first trip to the Mercy Ship *Anastasis* in West Africa. The ship's chaplain held a very moving service in the chapel in the castle grounds where people representing their different European ancestry asked God for forgiveness for the acts of their forefathers, local Ghanaians also participated.



Fig 4 The 'gate of no return' at Elmina slave castle

We lunched some miles south in a restaurant situated in the shadow of Cape Coast Castle. The slow service was compensated by the spectacular view and who can complain about a total of \$40 for a meal with drinks for nine people including our drivers! Three hours later, we arrived back in Accra after a fascinating trip which had taken over 14 hours. I didn't feel the \$200 I paid for the taxis was a bad deal. The drivers seemed delighted.

Day 3 – Easter Sunday

We all went to morning service at Lagon International Church (LIC), with over 500 people in the congregation and a particularly impressive teenage choir. There was much swaying and dancing to the music in the vibrant manner which typifies West African church services – none of the sanctity of immobility which can sometimes occur in the UK! After church Duncan, Ed and Billy were taken by Abecu and his brother to the main football stadium in the centre of town to watch the Accra team 'Hearts of Oak' (nickname Phobia) play against a team from Angola. Apparently the atmosphere with 40,000 Ghanaians cheering home their team to a 4-1 victory was fantastic.

During the match I spent time with the Conteh family and had a fascinating discussion with Catherine about what it was like living in Freetown as a teenager from a very poor family – going to school with an almost empty lunchbox while others had much more, the lack of self confidence that such poverty creates. She is now a very self-assured young woman who is determined to graduate with high grades from Hotel Management School in Accra in July 2004. We discussed how to write her CV for job applications in the hotel industry, maybe not so easy as she is non-Ghanaian. The Conteh family and I then met the lads in the Osou District and went to celebrate Catherine's 30th birthday at Ed's favourite pizza restaurant. Finding Mama Mia turned out to be a challenge as navigation was not his forte!

Day 4 – The Market

Duncan, Ed, Augustine and I spent several hours in the local craft market negotiating and hassling with local traders. Billy was in bed with a fever subsequently shown to be caused by malaria. A friend of Duncan's had asked him to bring her 'a piece of sun' back from Africa so he persuaded a stall holder to carve him a wooden one with her name on it. Unfortunately the 'sun' looked more like a 'pineapple' but this allowed him to negotiate a 50% discount! At the drinks stall in the market, the bottled water for sale was the Coca Cola Company's Dasani (Fig 5) which was recently withdrawn from the market in the UK?



Fig 5 Dasani on sale in Accra market



Fig 6 Herbal remedies advert -- Accra market

There were some interesting adverts for herbal treatment claiming to cure many different medical conditions (Fig 6). We lunched in a pub in the Osou district called 'Sevens' run by our local butcher in Ascot's daughter and her Ghanaian partner. We arrived to find all the staff asleep! That evening after dining on Catherine's superb goat stew we returned to Kotoka airport for the flight to London. At passport control Duncan seemed to have been detained by two officers – it turned out they were discussing at great length the previous day's football match!

I wouldn't recommend everyone going to West Africa for a long weekend but the stress-free direct BA flight, the no hassle modern airport, the Conteh family to look after us and Abecu to drive us around made 4 days seem much longer – but keep taking the Malarone for another week and now off to Paris! It must be a hard life being a real jet setter!

Postscript

Three days later at the OAA in Versailles, I met Prof. Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, the President of the Ghana Medical Society and Frank Boni, a consultant anaesthetist from Korle Bu Hospital in Accra – they were impressed with my Ghanaian 'handshake' and knowledge of their local football team. I'm now hoping to arrange a Conference on 'the Medical aspects of childbirth' in Accra in September 2005. My previous experience of this type of venture in Moscow, Riga, and Vilnius has shown that personal contacts are essential for success of such an undertaking.

Ghana is also the current 'favourite' for the first outreach of the new Mercy Ship, the *Africa Mercy*, due to set sail from Newcastle early in 2005.

Reference

THOMSON KD. Sun, Sea but not much 'Sux' in Sierra Leone. *Today's Anaesthetist* 1993; **8**:160-161.