



Volunteer Handbook Supplement for Kpando, Ghana

Culture Shock

Please understand that Ghana is a very slow-moving, seemingly disorganized place with a major lack of infrastructure, crazy traffic, animals walking the streets, open sewers, non-stop (awful) smells and loud music and sounds. All of this can drive foreigners crazy, especially when they first arrive.

The first 24-48 hours are critical in your adjustment, so please try not to make any negative judgments about Ghana during this period. You are likely to feel tired, hot and sweaty, and somewhat overwhelmed by the new sights, sounds, etiquette, etc. **Expect the unexpected at all times.** The best way to handle any culture shock is to have an open mind and relaxed attitude.

A common pattern for volunteers is as follows:

- First few days: They do not like Ghana at all and cannot wait to go home.
- By end of first week: They find the country tolerable, maybe even pleasant.
- Rest of stay: They fall in love with the country's culture and people.
- End of stay: They wish they could stay longer and often shed tears upon leaving.

Hopefully, you will eventually find, as myself and hundreds of other volunteers have, that Ghana is one of the friendliest, safest places to travel anywhere in the world, where you can make some lifelong friendships while helping out Ghanaians through your volunteer work.

Packing List Highlights

- Hand sanitizer (especially for medical volunteers but also for everyday use)
- Bug spray with DEET
- Compact mirror, as many bathrooms have no mirrors.
- Eye re-wetting drops (especially for contacts) because Ghana is very dusty.
- Sunscreen. You can get it in Ghana but the quality is usually not as good.
- Small quick-dry towel for bathing (do not need a large towel)
- Lightweight sleepwear that covers legs and arms (prevent mosquito bites).

Money Matters

Ghana is a cash-based society, so expect to pay cash for everything. Credit cards are seldom accepted, except at higher-end hotels and travel companies. Even where credit / debit cards are accepted, I still recommend cash because of the security risk. There are ATM's available even in small towns in Ghana, although not all of them work with foreign cards. The ones that always seem to work are Standard Chartered Bank and Barclays Bank. I recommending bringing at least \$100 USD (or equivalent) in cash in your pocket onto the plane, then exchanging all of it at the airport in Accra for Ghana Cedis.

Health

The biggest health tips I can give you:

- Do not drink tap water (only bottled water and other bottles drinks)
- Avoid mosquito bites (due to malaria)
- Wash your hands as much as possible (soap/water and/or sanitizer)

If you feel ill during your trip, please seek immediate treatment at the nearest medical clinic. When you are able, please immediately inform your coordinator, who will in turn call me. Symptoms which you should NOT ignore include fever, stuffy nose, cough, chills, persistent headache, muscle aches, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea (especially if symptoms last more than two days).

If you visit a hospital or clinic: **Insist on having blood tests done** to determine what illness(es) you might have. It is common medical practice in Ghana for doctors to simply give patients medicine(s) without doing any blood work or any other tests. You will probably meet resistance from staff, because doctors in Ghana are often placed on a pedestal and rarely questioned by patients. **Patients in Ghana are required to pay for their treatment up-front AND in cash**, then you would collect the paperwork and get reimbursed by your insurance company back home.

The most common illness reported by travelers to Ghana is travelers diarrhea, caused by bacteria-laden fecal matter that makes its way into food and water (Typhoid and cholera are also dangers).

Do Not Swim in Ghana

Drowning and road accidents are the leading causes of injury and death for travelers abroad, although the western media tends to focus on terrorism, political strife, and infectious diseases as the most likely dangers for travelers abroad. As tempting as it might be, the ocean currents in Ghana are too strong, unpredictable and dangerous. In addition, the lakes (like Volta Lake) often are filled with bacteria, snakes as well as garbage. In 2010 we had a medical volunteer almost lose her left eye due to a bacterial infection acquired from swimming in a lagoon in Ghana.

Malaria / Mosquitoes

Malaria is a common and very serious illness in Ghana. Malaria is transmitted to humans by the bite of an infected female *Anopheles* mosquito. The first symptoms of malaria are normally fever, chills, sweats, headaches, muscle pains, nausea and vomiting. **The peak biting period for malaria is dusk and dawn.**

- Mosquitoes bite mostly from sunset until dawn.
- Protect yourself when the sun is down by:
 - 1) covering up with long sleeves and pants/pajamas.
 - 2) using bug spray with DEET.
 - 3) sleeping inside a mosquito net (\$5-\$10 in Ghana)
 - 4) spray Listerine in the air and furniture around you
 - 5) burn local charcoal coils whose smoke repels bugs
 - 6) buy “Medisoft” body lotion in Ghana (smells nice, repels mosquitoes)
- Consider malaria pills such as Malarone (note: malaria pills do NOT prevent you 100% from getting malaria.)
- DEET has been a controversial chemical over the years, however I feel that it is better to have DEET on your skin during your short trip to Ghana than to get malaria.
- Bug spray: For a less messy experience, try first spraying bug spray and lotions onto your hands, then applying it manually to the rest of your body.
- Itchy bite tips: apply these directly onto the bites: clear fingernail polish, Vicks Vaporub, Bengay, toothpaste, banana peel, oatmeal...etc

Cell phones

- **We strongly recommend that you have a cell phone!**
- We recommend that you buy a phone in Ghana (guaranteed to work).
- In Kpando the retail prices start at approximately \$30 USD.
- The carriers include Vodafone, Kasapa and MTN.
- Keep an eye on your phone 24 hours, as phone theft is rampant in Ghana (it's one of the very few pervasive street crimes).
- Coverage Problems:
 - Phone calls and text messages often fail to get sent/received.
 - Calls often are dropped mid-call.
 - Sound quality of calls (international/local) is often dreadful.
 - Mobile phones often do not work inside most houses/buildings.
 - Step outside for best reception/coverage.
 - Do NOT rely on receiving calls or sending/receiving text messages for any important communications!
 - To make sure you get through: make the call yourself.

Internet

- Most volunteers give up on Internet access early during their trip, because the Internet connections in the country are **very** slow (often not even regular dial-up speed-level).
- There are Internet cafes in Kpando. The cost is about \$.50/hour.
- Wireless Internet: you can bring a laptop and buy a wireless card from provider MTN in Kpando for approx \$80+ USD, for dial-up-speed access.

Laptops

It's a good idea to bring a laptop to use it as a storage and backup device for your photos, or to keep a trip journal. However, if you are looking to connect to the Internet with your laptop, it's probably not a good idea. Please see the article on our website about this:

http://www.cosmicvolunteers.org/articles_ghana_laptop.html

Adapters

For plug adapters for your cell phones / laptops / cameras etc: We strongly recommend that you wait until you get to Ghana to buy them. They cost around \$1 USD and you're assured that it will work with US / European / Australian plugs.

Dress Code for Non-Medical Volunteers

- For bottoms: I recommend khaki pants or capris.
- For tops: short-sleeve t-shirts are fine (scrubs for medical volunteers).
- For footwear: flip flops or closed-toe shoes are best (sneakers, clogs etc).
- Please: no cleavage, short-shorts, or form-fitting clothes (disrespectful to locals).
- You will see tourists, locals and perhaps even fellow volunteers breaking these rules, but you are a volunteer / "insider" so the rules are different for you (if you want to be respectful, which of course you!).
- It's highly unlikely anyone would say something to you about inappropriate dress.
- Note that in some communities, especially in the north of the country, there are Muslim populations so you will see some females covered up considerably.

Medical Volunteers Only

- Wear long pants (scrubs/khakis), scrub tops, and closed-toes shoes (sneakers, Danskos etc)
- Bring your own scrubs, stethoscope, and mask(s)
- We buy gloves for the clinics, but feel free to bring a small box if you want

Photos, Video, and Electronics

- Always ask before taking a photo or video of someone.
- Be very careful when wielding your cameras in public because of theft. The worst place for a camera abroad is usually around your neck, as it's visible and easy to snatch from you.
- When flying or on a bus: always pack electronic equipment in your carry-on bag (laptop, cameras, mp3 player etc) so they are always in-sight. We just had a volunteer finish her wonderful trip to Ghana in March, only to find that during her trip home, her camera was stolen from her checked luggage.
- Always-Always back-up your photos and videos regularly – even on a daily basis if possible! Transfer them to a laptop, smart phone, pen drive – anything so that you have backups in case your camera is lost/stolen/damaged.

Passport

- When flying, always carry your passport on your person and not your bags. I've found that cargo pants with deep/secure pockets are a good place to hold the passport. I also put my own passport in a Ziploc baggie at all times, to protect it from sweat / dirt / humidity / spilled drinks – both when flying and when in the host country.
- You do not need to carry your passport to your volunteer job each day.
- However, when you travel around the country, please carry your passport with you (again - on you person). There are police security checkpoints on the roads between cities in Ghana. Do not be surprised or offended if the police ask only you for your passport (as a foreigner). These checkpoints are basically just bribery points for the police to supplement their income (usually only the bus drivers have to pay; only occasionally foreigners).
- Almost all hotels in Ghana require you to surrender your passport to them at check-in; you get it back when you check-out.
- Lock your passport, cash, camera and other valuables inside your luggage when you are out during the day from your host family or hotel. It is usually best to bring small locks from home.

Toilets at Host Families

- Toilets are western design
- The flush handle does not work usually.
- To flush, fill a bucket from the bathroom and dump it into the toilet.
- Use toilet tissue sparingly, as it clogs the pipes.
- When you travel around Ghana, carry a small roll of toilet tissue with you, as many places don't have it.

Personal Bathing

(at most host families and orphanage accommodations):

- there is usually no hot water
- there are usually no shower heads
- water typically comes into the bathroom either:
 - 1) from pipes then out of spigots near the floor, or
 - 2) manually carried from outside water tanks
- in either case above, the water is stored in large trashcans in the bathroom.
- you wash/rinse by scooping water from the trashcan with a small bowl
- if you truly cannot do without hot water, ask to heat water on the stove.
- bring a compact mirror from home, as many bathrooms have no mirrors.

You will never be anonymous in Ghana

Everywhere you go, people will notice you and often stare at you, even call out to you. Please keep in mind: 99% of people are merely being curious about you, they are not sizing you up for a scam or anything bad. The attention can get tiresome after a while, as many volunteers report. However, this might be your only chance in life to feel what it's like to be a celebrity and have your every move in public watched and analyzed. Your best strategy is to just smile and say hello / wave to people. You'll probably walk away from Ghana with a better idea of what Angelina feels like being tracked down by the paparazzi 24 hours! **There is very little sense of privacy or solitude in Ghana, both at your host family and in the country generally.**

Safety

The cities in Ghana (Kpando, Accra, Kumasi, Kpando etc) are like most others around the world, in that they are safe if you follow normal safety precautions:

- Do not walk alone at night.
- Watch for pickpockets and camera- and bag-snatchers on crowded streets, markets, bus stations, and tourist venues.
- **Never admit to strangers to being alone; tell them your friend / significant other / parents will join you in a few minutes.**

Greetings

Greetings in Ghana are formal and extremely important. The most common greeting is "You're Welcome" and handshake. Usually a "thank you" and handshake is the best reply. **There is a special way to shake hands in Ghana, involving snapping fingers together (ask your coordinator).**

"Abroni" and "Yevu"

- Many kids will call out to you with either of these words which both mean "white man". (Yevu is the Ewe tribe's word)
- They are simply being friendly and curious about you -- these are not derogatory terms in the least.
- It doesn't matter what your ethnicity is, they'll use these words because you are a "foreigner."
- It's best to smile and wave and say hello.
- This "Abroni" interaction is pretty amusing at first but can get very tiresome.

Miscellaneous

- Volunteers should do their own laundry. In Ghana laundry is usually done by hand, especially in Kpando. Your host family will show you how.
- Kpando does not have much "nightlife" to speak of, except perhaps sitting in a sweltering road-side "bar" on plastic chairs, sipping coke or beer (actually fun sometimes!).
- After sundown (about 6pm), most volunteers go to their host families for the night. They read books, watch movies, and spend quality time with the family.
- The weather is 80+ F and humid/cloudy in daytime; 65-70 F and breezy at night.
- On Friday nights / Sat mornings, you will usually hear the music and singing of funerals throughout the streets.
- Ghana is a very dusty environment with a lot of vehicle exhaust pollution. Especially for contact lens wearers, it is a very good idea to bring re-wetting drops from home to use here.
- Buy a small flashlight (aka "torch" locally) when you arrive in Kpando, for walking at night. It should cost no more than \$1-2 USD.
- There is a post office in town where you can buy/send postcards home.
- **Do not smell your food** -- it's considered impolite here, as they will think you are checking to see if the food is spoiled.
- There are goats, sheep, chickens, cattle roaming throughout every neighborhood.
- The sheep often make loud screeching noises which sound disturbingly like a child's screams. Roosters will likely wake you up, very early each morning.
- During the day, you can walk most everywhere around town. The longest walk is about 30 minutes -- from the farthest host family to, say, the orphanages and hospital.
- If alone after dark, please take taxis back to your host family for safety reasons.
- If you want to change your accommodations after arriving in Kpando AND you're under 18, we will not move you until we get your parents' approval (phone/email).
- Drinking age is 18 in Ghana.
- The majority tribe in Kpando and throughout the Volta Region are the Ewe.

Sports

- Soccer/Football: Local clubs train/play daily, feel to watch or even play (but only if you're a very good player; soccer's very serious here).
- Jogging: it's safe; best to follow the main road in Kpando out of town. Also try to go before 7am – to avoid heat and curious locals staring at you!
- Biking: think about buying a cheap bike (\$30+) to get around, and even ride into Kpando proper.
- Basketball: Not much going on in Kpando, but in Accra we work with a local org that holds camps/tourneys, if you want to visit them on a weekend.
- Golf: The closest is a Pebble-Beach like course in Takoradi (1 hour away)

Sightseeing excursions / day-trips near Kpando

- Lake Volta (10 min by taxi): No swimming! Just for viewing. (Must See!)
- Pottery workshop / retail in town of Fesi (10 min by taxi)
- Outdoor Catholic Grotto (15 min by taxi)
- Wii Waterfalls (1 hr by mini-bus) (Must See!)
- Tafi Monkey Sanctuary (90 min by mini-bus)
- Kente cloth weaving workshop / retail (in Kpando and nearby towns)