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The Two Faces of Ghana

By LABAN CARRICK HILL

AT midday, the heat was so palpable that it had its own color, a pulsing, iridescent yellow. I paused at a tiny market stall and bought a peeled and sliced half pineapple — sweet and juicy, not like the tart pineapples in the markets at home in [Vermont](#). Then I stopped a young woman carrying a tray of hard-boiled eggs on her head. She took the tray down, knelt and, with a plastic bag over her hand, peeled and salted the egg for me. To complete my meal, I bought a tiny sachet of filtered water from a small boy carrying a bucket of them on his head.

I was in the Kotokuruba Market in Cape Coast, a city of about 82,000 people in the West African nation of Ghana, on a Wednesday morning last summer. The market rocked with [music](#), from hip-hop, pulsing from loudspeakers, to tribal drumming. Honking taxis fought pedestrians for space. The stalls seemed to sell just about anything — machetes and huge cast-iron cooking pots, pirated DVDs and homemade slingshots. A blacksmith worked a piece of iron over an open-air hearth; I picked up one of his earlier creations: a gangkogui, which is an elongated cowbell, the kind used as percussive accompaniment in drumming ceremonies. Its forged and hammered metal had been wrought into elegant, almost arabesque, curves.

At every turn I was met with a friendly “Akwaaba!” which means “welcome.” Small children shouted, “How are you, Obruni?” In Fante, the local language, obruni is the word for “white person.” In one of the market aisles, a woman dressed in a colorful batik dress with an infant tied to her back offered mortars and pestles for making fufu, an African staple of pounded cassava and unripe plantain. The mortar was a deep wooden bowl about two feet in diameter, the pestle a tree trunk five feet tall, requiring two hands to maneuver. When I stopped and inquired about the price, the woman laughed and teased, “Obruni, you make fufu?”

Ghana, whose population was estimated to be about 18.5 million in 2000, was propelled into the limelight last month when [President Obama](#) chose to visit at the end of a weeklong trip that also took him to [Russia](#) and [Italy](#). Ghana has been known to many people in the West primarily for its tragic role as a major shipping point for Africans who were taken away to the Americas as slaves, a history that Mr. Obama emphasized to his daughters, [Malia](#) and [Sasha](#), as they accompanied him and [Michelle Obama](#) on that trip.

But as one of the few African nations with a history of smooth transitions of power in free elections, Ghana was also a logical platform for a presidential speech urging all Africans to embrace democracy. And as an English-speaking country with abundant natural gifts and an appealing culture, Ghana today draws international tourists who not only want to explore the slave trade’s dark past, but also desire a joyous African experience.

The Ghanaian city best known to foreigners is Accra, the capital, a sometimes interesting but densely populated and often cacophonous city of some 1.6 million on the Gulf of Guinea. But a

compelling and memorable trip can be found in Cape Coast to the southwest and in the region nearby — an area of stunning sunsets and sunrises, 400-year-old [fishing](#) traditions and the best preserved of the historic forts that spawned so many tears. And everywhere, the friendliness that Ghanaians take pride in.

I was in Ghana for five months last year, organizing a creative writing program at the University of Cape Coast and starting the Ghana Poetry Project, a nonprofit organization that encourages and supports contemporary African literature through activities that include readings and workshops. The more I explored, the more I was seduced by Ghana's bright colors, spicy foods and intense rhythms. This is a country in love with music and dance — a preoccupation that shows not only on special occasions like the Oguaa Fetu Afehye, a festival that draws foreign visitors in September, but every day.

Though I could spend hours shopping, my goal as I walked through the market in Cape Coast that morning last August lay beyond the shops and stalls. I was on my way to the Cape Coast Castle, the last stop in [Africa](#) for countless, perhaps millions of slaves, a number we can never really know.

As I left the market behind, the traffic and crowds died off, and the closer I came to the castle, the more somber the mood felt. Ahead of me, visitors clustered close together and slowed their steps almost to a shuffle. Even the young men who had gathered at the castle gate to solicit donations for fictitious youth soccer teams spoke in hushed tones. I realized that I had just walked the same path through town that the captives took, force-marched and traded to the British for guns, liquor and other goods, and then funneled into ships.

After his visit to Cape Coast Castle last month, President Obama said that he was reminded of the Buchenwald concentration camp. It's an analogy many have made; I have been to Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and I, too, felt the similarity. As I walked through the arched gate into the long corridor leading to the castle courtyard, I was confronting the physical evidence of tangible evil.

The castle, an imposing stone fortress of ramps, stairs, parapets and holding pens, is a [Unesco World Heritage](#) Site and draws not only a steady stream of tour groups but also many visitors, including large numbers of African-Americans, traveling on their own. The castle boggles the mind with the businesslike efficiency of its neatly laid out spaces: the dark caverns of the men's and women's dungeons located deep within; the bright, airy residence halls on the upper floors for the administrators and paid workers; the high ramparts lined with enough cannons to repel an armada. Kidnapped Africans were held for months at a time in the most hellish conditions. Many died in dungeons so crowded that they could not lie down.

Those who survived left through the Door of No Return — a small wooden door built into a stone archway that led to waiting ships. I paused there, overcome by emotion. It was difficult, almost terrifying, to step through this door despite the fact that no slave has been forced through it for two centuries.

In the women's dungeon, a windowless hole, a small bouquet of flowers lay on the floor below the single bare bulb now lighting the space. The utter emptiness and silence seemed to intensify

the overwhelming feeling of loss. Visitors filed in but did not linger. Afterward, out in the courtyard, conversation ceased as all seemed lost in their private grief.

If you can return to the world of commerce after the castle experience, a small market tucked just inside the castle entrance provides a transition before going back out into the larger world — low-key shopping as decompression. A dozen vendors offer Ghanaian crafts and bargains. I was glad to return to my car for a quiet ride along the coast, retreating to the Coconut Grove [Beach](#) Resort just outside the town of Elmina, about six miles west of Cape Coast.

The Coconut Grove is one of Ghana's premier resorts, and the prices seemed unbeatable: \$150 (major hotels prefer payment in American dollars) a night for the executive suite with a bedroom, living room, kitchenette and a spectacular view of the gulf; much less for singles and doubles. At the beachside restaurant I ordered grilled local tilapia with a fresh pepper, tomato and ginger relish and banku (boiled corn dough). The restaurant at the hotel is one of the best in the country and features seafood caught daily. I watched the sunset on the gulf, surrounded by Western and African diners relaxing after a busy day on the [golf](#) course or around town. Out on the water, brightly painted dugout [canoes](#) cut through the waves on their way out to fish as they have done for centuries. I could just make out the hand-carved message on one of the hulls, "Nyame Yie," or "God Is Good," cresting over a wave.

As I walked along the beach the next morning, another guest galloped along nearby on one of the hotel's horses. Its hooves kicked up sand at the [surf](#)'s edge, scattering white egrets to the wind. Even though I was only two weeks into my time in Ghana, I knew I had found a kind of paradise that I did not want to leave.

Ghana doesn't flinch from its past, and is creating a new future with forays into [eco-tourism](#) — tours to remote villages and dense [rain forests](#), as well as the more prominent of its national parks. [Maya Angelou](#), who lived several years in Ghana, has described it as a place "improving the quality of man's humanity to man."

Elmina is a small town with a long history: founded in 1471 as a Portuguese gold trading port, it was taken over by the Dutch in the 1630s. It, too, has a horrifyingly efficient slave castle — St. [George's](#) Castle, which is twice the size of the one in Cape Coast and stands like a giant immobile obstruction on the shore — the oldest colonial building still standing in sub-Saharan Africa. The imposing moat around the land side looked like something out of a movie, and the Dutch Reformed chapel directly over the women's dungeons suggested a kind of brutal indifference to the captives that was still manifest as I stood in the church. Included with the price of admission were an excellent guided tour and a very good museum focusing on the history of the Akan and Fante people who originally settled this region.

Fort Coenraadsburg on St. Jago Hill, reachable on a steep path above the castle, was built in the 17th century by the Dutch, who had begun exporting slaves, to provide elevation for big guns. The aim was to protect Elmina from invaders — primarily from the English, who would establish themselves at Cape Coast Castle just a few miles away. In the early 1870s, the Dutch sold the fort at Elmina to the British. There's not much to see now inside the fort, but the [bird's](#)-eye view of the entire village, framed by the Gulf of Guinea, is worth the [hike](#).

The oldest building in the village itself, the Bridge House, was built in the 17th century for the Ghanaian mistress of the castle's Dutch commander and survives as an affordable guesthouse and restaurant offering fresh seafood prepared in a spicy Ghanaian style. I found an open table on the patio and ordered the hkatankwan, or peanut stew with redfish and fufu, and ate it the traditional way, tearing pieces of the dumpling-like fufu and using them to scoop up the stew. From where I was sitting, I could see fishermen repairing nets and preparing for the evening's work.

On another day, Elmina can offer more to see, with its colonial [architecture](#) and its elaborate concrete shrines called posubans. Many were originally used as storage houses by local militias called asafo companies — now civic organizations — and survive as shrines to the companies. The one dedicated to Asafo Company Five is two stories tall with several life-size carved statues on the first floor and a sculpture of a ship with three sailors on the second. Local fishermen consider the shrine sacred and perform ceremonies and leave offerings at its base. I followed the road to several more shrines, which were just as elaborate.

About an hour's drive north of the Coconut Grove, there's a sample of Ghanaian eco-tourism at Kakum National Park. A canopy walkway, 1,150 feet long and swaying 131 feet above the forest floor, is suspended among seven trees and broken up by a number of viewing platforms. It's a breathtaking experience, especially early in the morning, before the crowds arrive. More than 200 species of birds have been sighted in this forest; I glimpsed an amazing yellow-casqued hornbill. Numerous monkeys seemed to fly as well, swinging in the trees.

But for a more social kind of exhilaration, you can return to Elmina, where every day at around 5 p.m. the Butwaku dance and drum ensemble, a small local troupe, holds open rehearsals in the west wing of St. George's Castle. When I visited, three drummers were set up on one side of the room with two tall, slim kaganu drums, a squat, round kidi drum and a gangkogui, the cowbell-shaped instrument. Once the drummers began to beat out complex rhythms, which seemed more like a conversation than a musical performance, four dancers — two men and two women — moved into the center of the space in a liquid unison, swaying and stomping.

Their first dance was an asafo warrior dance that follows a pattern of call and response. The drummers beat out a rhythm, and the dancers respond with their own movements, swaying and stomping, a back and forth that can last until dawn at festivals. At this performance, it was followed by a social Adowa dance, traditionally performed by women. One of the dancers grabbed my arm and pulled me out to dance. I did my American best, which guaranteed a good laugh for everyone.

For tourists with the time and inclination, the Butwaku group offers dancing and drumming lessons; anyone can sign up for just one lesson or a series of them. No matter where you go in Ghana, you will find traditional dancing and drumming. It seems no occasion, public or private, occurs without these performances. Whether it's just one drummer with a small kaganu sitting on the side of the road beating out thunderous rhythms that take a lifetime to learn, or a dozen drummers with a full array of drums made with animal skins tightly stretched on a wooden base, music and drumming is at the core of Ghanaian society, and dance is its expression at its purest.

Back in Cape Coast, I saw a drumming and dancing show at the Oasis Beach Resort, a nightclub where the food is good but the sound system and bar are a more compelling draw. As the sun set, I sat at a table under a thatch canopy. The bar filled up with Westerners, Rastafarians and Ghanaians, and bottles of local beer and shots of Mandingo, a red, syrupy aperitif, flowed freely.

As darkness settled, the drumming and dancing performance, with athletic young men dressed in brightly patterned chief pants and young women wrapped in large bolts of traditional handmade batik fabrics, evolved quickly into audience participation. No invitation was necessary. Diners just pushed back their chairs and joined in.

Ghana is like that. Traditional boundaries of performer and audience are often ignored, even in the most formal of occasions. Eventually, the D.J. spun the rhythms of hiplife, an African fusion of highlife and hip-hop that is more [Gnarls Barkley](#) than [Snoop Dogg](#), with lyrics sung in Akan tribal languages. The crowd clapped and laughed and spun as though time had stopped and this moment would never end.

The heat, along with any worries, vanished into the clear, star-filled night.

IF YOU GO

HOW TO GET THERE

Many airlines, including British Airways, Delta, Emirates and KLM, provide flights to Accra. A recent online search for travel in late August found round-trip flights on Delta from [Kennedy Airport](#) in New York to Accra starting at about \$1,100.

Cape Coast is about a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Accra. A car and a driver costs about 140 cedis a day (about \$90 at 1.55 cedis to the dollar) plus the driver's lodging and meals, which should be arranged in advance. Because of heavy insurance charges, it may be more expensive to drive yourself.

Hertz and Europcar provide cars and drivers and have desks in Accra hotels, including the Novotel, the Golden Tulip and the Labadi Beach. The head office for Hertz in Accra is on Nima Maamobi Highway (233-21-230-773). There are also many independent car [rental](#) agencies. A good source for them, along with other information on traveling in Ghana, is the tourism office's Web site: www.touringghana.com.

WHERE TO STAY

The Coconut Grove Beach Resort near Elmina (www.coconutgrovehotels.com.gh) has doubles starting at \$105. Its sister hotel in the center of town, the Coconut Grove Bridge House, has doubles starting at \$60.

The Elmina Beach Resort (www.gbghana.net), just outside Elmina, has doubles from \$140.

WHERE TO EAT

The Coconut Grove Bridge House's restaurant offers simple fare, but meals are good and affordable at 7 or 8 cedis.

The restaurant at the Coconut Grove Beach Resort is open to nonguests and serves hkatenkwan, a peanut stew with red fish and fufu, for 12 cedis.

Mabels Table (off the Coastal Highway west of Elmina) is popular with Ghanaians and serves jollof rice, a tomato-based fried rice, with fresh fish or chicken for 5 cedis. It's owned by Kohain and Mabel HaLevi, transplants from Mount Vernon, N.Y.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

The Kotokuruba Market in Cape Coast, is at the intersection of Kotokuruba, Rowe and Johnstone Roads. It's open every day except Sunday.

The Oguaa Fetu Afehye, a festival in Cape Coast, combines updated versions of ancient religious traditions with modern merrymaking and [music](#). This year, the weeklong festival will end with a parade on Saturday, Sept. 5.

Cape Coast Castle (www.capecoastcastlemuseum.com) is on Victoria Road and is open daily. Admission is 9 cedis for non-Ghanaians and 2 cedis for students, and includes a highly recommended 45-minute tour. There is a photography fee of 1 cedi per camera.

In Elmina, St. George's Castle (233-42-32701) is open daily; admission is 9 cedis. Open rehearsals of the Butwaku traditional dance and drum ensemble are in the west wing every evening at 5. To arrange dance and drumming lessons, contact butwaku@hotmail.com.

The Asafo Company No. 5 Posuban Shrine is in Elmina on [Liverpool](#) Street, the road that runs along the harbor before it turns inland.

Kakum National Park (www.ghana-net.com/kakumnationalpark.aspx) is open Monday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to dusk; admission is 9 cedis. The park is clearly posted along Jukwa Road roughly 20 miles north of Cape Coast and Elmina. It is best to arrive at 8 a.m. to see as much wildlife as possible.

The Oasis Beach Resort in Cape Coast (along the Coastal Road, about a half-mile west of Cape Coast Castle) usually has live music on Friday and Saturday nights. Meals are 4 to 10 cedis; beer is 2 cedis.

Laban Carrick Hill's latest book is "America Dreaming: How Youth Changed America in the Sixties."