

Travelogue – minor field studies in Ghana April 3 – May 29, 2010

For my bachelor thesis in journalism I spent eight weeks in Ghana in West Africa, doing interviews with female, Ghanaian reporters about their working conditions. I did nine interviews with reporters working both in broadcasting and newspapers. I also did research visiting Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ), Ghana Journalist Association (GJA), National Media Commission (NMC) and the non-governmental organization Women, Media, Change (WOMECE).

Why Ghana?

When I decided to go back to school after my internship at Sveriges Radio I knew I wanted to write my bachelor thesis abroad. For a few years I have had this urge to go to Africa, this vast and versatile continent often overlooked when we plan our trips around the world. But Africa is just a simplified umbrella term for 54 different countries that together inhabit almost a billion people. So how do I choose which country to go to? A few practical criteria narrowed my options: I did not want to go to a country currently struggling with civil war or domestic disturbance, I would prefer going to a country where the inhabitants speak English so I wouldn't have to use an interpreter for my interviews and finally, there needed to be freedom of the press to enable my field study. What ultimately made me choose Ghana was a combination logic elimination, chance and luck with finding contacts in the field.

Preparing for Africa

The weeks before leaving I kept myself busy (which kept me from being nervous) by taking care of all the practical details such as getting all necessary injections, applying for a visa, spending a lot of time and money in the drugstore, finding a place to stay in Accra, buying books, doing research and so on.

But the night before my departure I was terrified. I kept thinking that eight weeks would feel like forever, that I would feel terribly lonely, get homesick and get malaria. Ten weeks later I try not to forget what it felt like that night, so that I can remind myself of how good it felt that I managed to overcome my fears.

Changing continents

After 12 hours of traveling I arrived in Accra, Ghana. Leaving the airplane I literally walked into a wall of heat. If you have never been to a tropical country before it's hard to imagine the almost insufferable humidity – you better get use to sweating 24/7.

My first two days on the African continent were made a lot easier thanks to a fabulously helpful and generous Swedish woman named Kajsa Hallberg Adu. I got in touch with Kajsa basically through Facebook. I simply wrote in my status update that I needed to get in touch with people in Ghana, which resulted in a friend of a friend suggesting I'd contact Kajsa. Having a Swede pick me up at the airport and introducing me to the Ghanaian society the first few days was invaluable for a rookie like myself, and I am tremendously grateful for that.

Moving in

After spending two days outside of Accra in Kajsa's protective care I was dropped off at the house where I was going to stay for the next eight weeks. Once again it was a friend of a friend who had come to my rescue and recommended I called a man named Maxwell Amponsah who rents out rooms in a house in Osu, central Accra.

My first impression of Accra was that it's busy, intense, filthy, crowded and chaotic. After a few weeks I found myself appreciating the chaos, enjoying the street-food and loving the fact that wherever you are you can buy pure water, mobile credits and cheap snacks from a bowl that someone is carrying on their head.

The night upon arrival I was greeted by the news that I would have to share a room my first week since there had been a double booking. I ended up sharing a room with a Chinese girl my age, and it actually turned out to be a relief not having to spend so much time alone my first week in Ghana.

There were seven rooms in the house and the tenants were with two exceptions young students from different parts of the world such as Germany, Uganda and China. Staying in a house where I was not the only westerner was very

comfortable and at the beginning very practical, I could ask them all kinds of (stupid) questions knowing they probably had felt the same way their first week.

Obruni, how are you?

Except for the heat, there were a number of things I had to get used to. One: in the tropic zone the sun sets around 6 pm, which means that after 6 pm it's pitch-black since many streets in Accra lack functioning streetlights. Two: I soon got used to people calling me obruni (white) and constantly asking me "how are you?" sometimes by just saying "how?" as I passed by. Asking "how are you?" is basically equal to just saying hello, and when asked you are expected to answer "I'm fine, how are you?" If you sometimes failed to answer you would most probably here someone call "It's nice to be nice!" after you. Three: Ghanaians have a completely different attitude towards time. If you make an appointment with someone, he or she will most probably be late. Another example is the lack of timetables, even when you are taking a 3-hour bus trip to another city; the bus leaves when it's full and it might take ten minutes, it might take two hours.

Since I had never been to an African country before, it was a new experience for me being set apart as white. At first I felt uncomfortable being so different and not being able to walk down the street without attracting immediate attention. But after a while I hardly noticed when people were looking at me and I am very happy that I got to experience what it's like to be a part of the minority.

Getting started and getting things done

As part of my preparations I tried to get in touch with people who might be able to help me with my field study. It turned out to be seemingly impossible. I researched and I emailed, and then I emailed some more, but I never got a single answer. So when I felt I had acclimatized enough to get started with my field study, I basically had no idea where to begin. I ended up getting my first interview through a Swedish woman working in Accra, who I met through yet another friend of a friend. The next three interviews I got help from a Ghanaian journalist student who (of course) was a friend of a friend of a friend. The next (and last) five interviewees I simply found reading the newspaper looking for female bylines.

Getting people to agree to be interviewed was a lot easier than I thought it would be, concentrating on transcribing the interviews though turned out to be a lot harder. I found myself having a really hard time spending too much time working on the computer in a non-air-conditioned house and with the possibility of so much adventure and exciting experiences lurking just outside the door. With this said I am very happy that I decided before I left that I would not present my thesis until the next semester.

Letting the field study rest

Since I was not the least stressed out about my field study I had time to leave Accra for a while and travel around Ghana with my dad who came to visit. We ended up visiting Kumasi, Tamale and Mole (one of the national parks). I am really glad I got the chance to see more than just Accra, the north of Ghana was different in many ways; it's mainly Muslim, it's poorer, drier and overcrowded with bicycles and motor-bikes.

On the weekends I often ended up on one of the many fabulous beaches that occupy most of the West African (former called) gold coast. What I liked about the beaches in Ghana was the fact that countless hotels do not yet exploit them. Even though the sand is fantastic, the water is warm and the sun constantly shining, the tourists have not yet found their way to Ghana, which was good for me but maybe a bit unfortunate for Ghana.

Coming home

Before I left I was told that the hardest part would be to go back to Sweden. Once you have experienced a much more primitive lifestyle you get frustrated just thinking about our wealth, our extravagance and the things we take for granted. For me the first thing I noticed when I got back was how well organized and tidy everything is in Sweden and above all, how obsessed we are with time and efficiency. Cause even though Ghana still has a long way to go when it comes to education, healthcare and economic development, I think Sweden has a lot to learn from Ghanaians, their attitude towards time just being one of them.

Good to know if you plan on going to Ghana for minor field studies:

- It is forbidden to import or export Ghanaian currency (GHC – Ghana Cedi), but in the bigger cities there are plenty of reliable ATM: s. If you want to bring some cash, bring dollars or euro
- If you are taking a drop taxi, try and ask someone else than the driver what the price should be to your destination and make sure you bargain about the price with the driver before you get in the car
- Don't forget to bring sun cream and lots of anti-mosquito-spray
- If you are doing interviews, bring gifts from Sweden to give to your interviewees. It's much more fun to be able to give them something from Sweden than to buy something Ghanaian
- Avoid staying in a hotel, renting a room is a much easier (and cheaper) way to get to know people and get to know the culture
- Upon arrival, buy a Ghanaian sim-card, they are cheap (10 SEK) and accessible everywhere, you can also buy credits wherever you go and it's quite affordable to call Sweden
- Remember not to use your left hand when giving and receiving things, it is considered to be rude
- Bring a guidebook if you plan on traveling around the country, but don't expect anyone to be able to give you directions by showing them a map. Ghanaians can hardly read maps, but they are very helpful
- If you have never been to Africa before, you might want to try and make some contacts before you go so that you have people you can call and hang out with your first week. Not being completely alone my first week was invaluable

Anyone who has questions about Ghana or MFS is welcome to contact me:

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