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Visiting Ghana

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Introduction

Welcome to "Visiting Ghana: A Guide for Tourists," a comprehensive resource crafted for anyone eager to explore the enchanting landscapes, historical richness, and vibrant cultures of this West African jewel. Ghana, often hailed as the "Gateway to Africa," offers an unmatched blend of natural beauty, complex history, and contemporary appeal, promising tourists an adventure that is both enlightening and refreshing.

This book is designed to provide prospective travelers with in-depth insights into what makes Ghana such a compelling destination. Unlike generalized travel guides, our focus here is squarely on the distinctive experiences that await in this extraordinary country. From the bustling markets of Accra to the serene beaches of the Atlantic coast, and the dense rainforests teeming with wildlife, every corner of Ghana pulsates with unique vitality.

Prospective travelers will find practical advice on every aspect of journeying through Ghana—from navigating its transportation system and understanding its currency to mastering cultural customs and etiquette. Whether you're traversing through the historical halls of Elmina Castle or immersing yourself in the local cuisine, this guide aims to ensure you are well-prepared for every leg of your journey.

At the heart of Ghana's allure is its people. Known for their exceptional hospitality and vibrant cultural expressions, Ghanaians offer travelers an opportunity to engage authentically with Africa's heritage. Whether through participating in traditional ceremonies, exploring local artisan crafts, or joining in spontaneous musical gatherings, visitors will find meaningful connections in every interaction.

In addition to the cultural and historical attractions, Ghana is a country of splendid natural beauty. Travelers will find themselves drawn to the lush landscapes of national parks, the cascading waterfalls, and the majestic mountains, each offering the perfect backdrop for adventure and exploration. Our guide provides advice on how to safely and sustainably engage with these natural treasures, ensuring your visit leaves as gentle a footprint as possible.

Ultimately, this book is more than just a travel guide; it's an invitation to discover what makes Ghana exceptional. By immersing yourself in its rich history, engaging with its welcoming people, and witnessing its natural wonder, you'll gain an experience that goes beyond mere tourism. Prepare yourself for a journey that captivates the soul and broadens your horizons, leaving you with memories that linger long after the return flight home. Welcome to Ghana; your adventure awaits.

CHAPTER ONE: Getting Started: Essential Information

So, you've decided on Ghana! An excellent choice, if we may say so ourselves. Whether drawn by tales of its vibrant culture, poignant history, lush landscapes, or the legendary warmth of its people, you're embarking on a journey to a truly unique corner of West Africa. But before you start packing your bags and dreaming of Jollof rice, let's cover some foundational basics. Think of this chapter as the essential toolkit you need before you even look at flight schedules or visa forms. Getting these fundamentals right will pave the way for a smoother, richer, and altogether more enjoyable Ghanaian adventure.

First things first, let's pinpoint Ghana on the map. Nestled comfortably on the coast of West Africa, Ghana shares its borders with Togo to the east, Burkina Faso up north, and Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) to the west. Its entire southern edge is embraced by the warm waters of the Gulf of Guinea, part of the vast Atlantic Ocean. This strategic location has historically made Ghana a significant hub for trade and cultural exchange, a role it continues to play today. Knowing its neighbours helps understand regional dynamics, though for your trip, the focus remains squarely within Ghana's welcoming borders.

Ghana isn't geographically monolithic; it presents a fascinating variety of landscapes packed into a country roughly the size of the UK or the US state of Oregon. Along the coast, you'll find sandy beaches fringed with palm trees, bustling fishing villages, and mangrove-lined lagoons. Move inland, and the terrain transitions into a belt of tropical rainforest, particularly concentrated in the Ashanti and Western regions. This is where you'll find towering trees, high humidity, and national parks protecting rich biodiversity. Further north, the landscape gradually opens up into drier Guinea savanna and then Sudan savanna near the border with Burkina Faso, characterized by grasslands, scattered trees like baobabs, and a distinct climate pattern. This geographical diversity means you can experience quite different environments within a single trip.

Understanding this geographical spread is key to planning your itinerary. The coastal areas, including the capital Accra and historical sites like Cape Coast and Elmina, tend to be hot and humid year-round, though sea breezes offer some relief. The forest belt is typically wetter and equally humid, essential for its lush vegetation. The northern savanna regions experience more distinct wet and dry seasons, and during the Harmattan period (roughly December to February), dry, dusty winds blow down from the Sahara, affecting visibility and air quality across the country, but most intensely in

the north. Pack accordingly, considering which regions you plan to visit and when.

The beating heart of Ghana, and likely your point of entry, is Accra. Situated on the coast, it's a sprawling, energetic metropolis that serves as the nation's political, economic, and administrative capital. It's a city of contrasts, where modern skyscrapers jostle for space with bustling traditional markets, colonial-era architecture stands alongside contemporary art galleries, and the constant thrum of urban life meets the relative calm of its beaches. While we'll delve into Accra's specific attractions later, understand that it's the central node from which most journeys into other parts of Ghana begin. It's where you'll find the main international airport, numerous embassies, major banks, and a wide range of accommodation and dining options.

Navigating Ghana is made significantly easier by the fact that English is the official language. A legacy of its colonial past, English is used in government, education, media, and business. This means that travelers who speak English will generally find it straightforward to communicate for official purposes, read signs, understand menus in larger establishments, and interact with Ghanaians working in the tourism sector. Road signs, official documents, and newspapers are predominantly in English, which removes a significant barrier faced by tourists in many other non-Anglophone countries.

However, step outside the formal sphere, and you'll quickly discover that Ghana is a linguistically rich and diverse nation, home to over fifty indigenous languages and many more dialects. While English provides a common tongue, the everyday linguistic landscape is a vibrant tapestry woven from Akan, Ewe, Ga, Dagbani, Hausa, and numerous others. The most widely spoken indigenous language group is Akan, which includes dialects like Twi (spoken by the Ashanti people) and Fante (spoken along the coast). Learning even a few basic greetings or phrases in the local language of the region you're visiting (especially Twi) will be immensely appreciated and can open doors to warmer interactions. Don't be shy; Ghanaians are generally very encouraging of visitors attempting to speak local languages.

While English proficiency is widespread, particularly in urban areas and among younger generations, don't assume everyone you meet will speak it fluently, especially in more remote rural areas or among older people. Communication might sometimes involve gestures, patience, and a good dose of goodwill. Furthermore, Ghanaian English often has its own unique cadence, expressions, and vocabulary, which can occasionally lead to minor misunderstandings. Embrace these moments as part of the cultural exchange. Remember that communication is more than just words; tone, context, and non-verbal cues are equally important in Ghanaian culture, something we'll explore further when discussing etiquette.

Let's talk money. The official currency of Ghana is the Ghanaian Cedi, denoted by the

symbol GH¢ or sometimes GHS. The Cedi is subdivided into 100 Pesewas (Gp), although Pesewa coins (1, 5, 10, 20, 50 Pesewas, and the 1 Cedi coin) are less frequently used for small transactions than they once were, often rounded up or down, especially in informal settings. The Cedi banknotes come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, and 200 Cedis. It's worth familiarizing yourself with the look and feel of these notes to avoid confusion. The larger denominations (100 and 200 Cedis) were introduced relatively recently and might sometimes be harder to break for small purchases, especially in markets or with taxi drivers.

Cash remains king in Ghana. While major hotels, upscale restaurants, supermarkets, and airlines in Accra and other large cities like Kumasi and Takoradi increasingly accept international credit cards (Visa and MasterCard being the most common), you absolutely cannot rely on plastic for the majority of your transactions. Smaller guesthouses, local eateries (known as 'chop bars'), market stalls, taxis, tro-tros (minibuses), and entrance fees to many attractions will require payment in cash Cedis. Therefore, always ensure you have a sufficient amount of cash on hand, particularly when travelling outside the main urban centres.

Changing foreign currency (like US Dollars, Euros, or British Pounds) into Ghanaian Cedis is best done at authorized Forex Bureaus (Foreign Exchange Bureaus) or banks. Forex Bureaus, easily found in cities and larger towns, often offer slightly better exchange rates and faster service than banks. Avoid changing money on the street with unlicensed dealers; while their rates might seem tempting, it's illegal and carries a high risk of scams or receiving counterfeit currency. US dollars are widely accepted for exchange, but ensure your bills are in good condition (no tears, excessive creases, or markings) and preferably newer series, as older or damaged bills might be rejected or exchanged at a lower rate.

ATMs are readily available in Accra and other major cities and towns, typically located at bank branches, shopping malls, and the airport. They usually accept international cards (Visa and MasterCard primarily) and dispense Cedis. However, ATMs can sometimes be unreliable – they might be out of service, out of cash, or potentially reject foreign cards unexpectedly. It's wise not to wait until your last Cedi to find an ATM. Also, be aware of potential withdrawal limits imposed by both the local bank and your home bank, and associated transaction fees. Inform your bank about your travel plans beforehand to avoid your card being blocked for suspicious activity.

A crucial tip for managing cash in Ghana is to always try and keep a good supply of smaller denomination notes (like 5, 10, and 20 Cedis). Many everyday transactions involve relatively small amounts – a taxi ride, a bottle of water, street food, market purchases. Trying to pay for a 10 Cedi item with a 100 or 200 Cedi note early in the morning can often lead to delays while the vendor scrambles to find change, or sometimes an inability to complete the transaction altogether. Break larger notes whenever you make a purchase at a larger establishment, like a supermarket or

restaurant, that is likely to have ample change. Guard your cash discreetly; avoid flashing large amounts of money in public.

One aspect of Ghanaian financial life that's rapidly evolving is Mobile Money. Services like MTN Mobile Money (MoMo), Vodafone Cash, and AirtelTigo Money are incredibly popular and widely used by locals for everything from paying bills and transferring funds to purchasing goods and services. While primarily designed for residents with local SIM cards and bank accounts, its pervasiveness is worth noting. Some smaller vendors or service providers, even those without card machines, might accept Mobile Money payments. As a tourist, you likely won't use it extensively unless you get a local SIM and set it up (which we'll touch upon later), but being aware of its existence helps understand the local economic landscape.

Now, let's synchronise our watches. Ghana operates on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), also known as Coordinated Universal Time (UTC+0). The good news for timekeeping simplicity is that Ghana does not observe Daylight Saving Time. This means its time relative to other parts of the world remains consistent throughout the year. For visitors from the UK, this means Ghana is on the same time during the winter months, and one hour behind during British Summer Time. For those from the US East Coast (EST/EDT), Ghana is typically 4 or 5 hours ahead, depending on Daylight Saving Time in the US. Check the exact time difference before you travel to coordinate arrival times and calls back home.

The concept of time in Ghana, however, can sometimes feel a bit more fluid than the strict adherence to the clock often found in Western cultures. While official appointments and transportation schedules (like flights or STC buses) generally aim for punctuality, the informal sense of time, often humorously referred to as "Ghana Time" or "Africa Time," can sometimes mean things run a little later than scheduled. Patience and flexibility are valuable assets. Don't get overly stressed if a meeting starts a few minutes late or if things take a bit longer than anticipated. Build some buffer time into your plans, relax, and go with the flow - it's often part of the experience.

Powering your devices is another practical consideration. Ghana's electricity supply runs at 230 Volts and 50 Hertz. This is the same voltage as the UK and much of Europe, Africa, and Asia, but significantly higher than the 110-120 Volts used in North America. Most modern electronic devices like laptops, phone chargers, and camera chargers are dual voltage (check the label - it should say something like "INPUT: 100-240V, 50/60Hz"). If your device is dual voltage, you won't need a voltage converter. However, if you have older or simpler devices (like some hair dryers or electric shavers) designed only for 110-120V, plugging them directly into a Ghanaian socket will likely damage or destroy them. In such cases, you would need a step-down voltage converter, which can be bulky and expensive; it's often easier to leave such appliances at home or buy a local equivalent if needed.

The more immediate challenge for most visitors is the shape of the electrical outlets. Ghana predominantly uses two types of plugs: Type D (the old British standard with three round pins in a triangular pattern) and Type G (the modern British standard with three rectangular pins in a triangular pattern). Type G is increasingly common, especially in newer buildings and hotels catering to international visitors. However, you will still encounter Type D sockets, particularly in older establishments or certain regions. North American (Type A and B) and European (Type C and F) plugs will not fit directly into either Type D or Type G sockets.

Therefore, packing a universal travel adapter is highly recommended. A good quality universal adapter will allow you to plug your devices into various socket types found worldwide, including both Type D and Type G. Ensure the adapter you choose can handle the grounding pin present in both Ghanaian socket types. It's a small investment that saves a lot of hassle. You might be able to buy adapters in Ghana, especially in Accra, but it's more convenient to arrive prepared. Consider bringing more than one if you have multiple devices to charge simultaneously.

It's also worth being prepared for potential power outages, known locally as 'dumsor' (a Twi term meaning 'off-and-on'). While the electricity supply situation has generally improved in recent years, occasional planned or unplanned power cuts can still occur, particularly outside of major city centres or during periods of high demand or grid maintenance. Most larger hotels and guesthouses have backup generators that kick in automatically, but smaller establishments or budget accommodations might not. Carrying a small flashlight or headlamp is always a good idea for navigating in the dark. A portable power bank for charging your phone and other small electronics can also be a lifesaver during an outage, ensuring you stay connected and can access important information. Surge protectors can also offer some defense for sensitive electronics against power fluctuations when the electricity returns.

Understanding these essential details – Ghana's location and diverse geography, the role of Accra, the linguistic landscape, how to handle money, the time zone nuances, and the practicalities of the electrical system – forms the bedrock of your trip planning. They might seem like mundane details, but getting them right from the start allows you to focus on the more exciting aspects of your journey: exploring historical sites, marvelling at wildlife, soaking up the culture, and enjoying the legendary Ghanaian hospitality that awaits you. Keep these basics in mind as we move on to discuss the best times to visit and the necessary entry requirements.

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