

**Ghana's Golden Coast: this West African state was a focus of the slave trade for centuries, and the first African colony to win independence, exactly fifty years ago. Graham Gendall Norton finds lots of history to explore**

Graham Gendall Norton

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THE FIRST OF THE AFRICAN MEMBERS of the Commonwealth to become independent--on March 6th, 1957--the former Gold Coast colony took a new name, Ghana, from one of the ancient empires of West Africa.

To Prime Minister (later President) Kwame Nkrumah, the name was a symbol for a new, proud, pan-African movement which he saw as throwing off the colonial chains throughout the continent, resulting in an Africa peaceful, prosperous and united in its main purpose. This was not to be. Increasingly dictatorial, he was himself deposed by a coup in 1966. Ghana then zigzagged between elected civilian governments and military leaders, though, unlike elsewhere in Africa, little blood was shed. Central to its problems were the economy, especially when the world price of cocoa dropped (Ghana had been the world's largest supplier), policy failure and some corruption. But the past fifteen years have seen free and fair elections, and power passing constitutionally from one party to another. Things are better economically: more gold is exported than from any other African country except South Africa, and, with diamonds, provides most foreign revenue. After that, cocoa and, surprisingly perhaps, tourism. Significantly, the ministry of Tourism is also that of Diasporan Relations. More than anywhere else in Africa, Ghana's tourism is history- and culture-based.

The world's most dramatic monuments to the slave trade are probably the castles and forts every few miles along Ghana's coast. But alongside these are the vibrant, colourful, tradition-centred festivals, the Durbars, the installations of local rulers, or other events which visitors can see. And the visitor might also glimpse groups of hundreds in traditional dress, surging to funerals. Usually held after forty days of mourning for the death of an important figure, these are a lively commemoration of the departed.

For the first-time historical traveller, it is on the coast that the main attractions lie. Much of Ghana's appeal today is a balm to the Afro-Americans seeking some palpable memory of the slave diaspora. Voluntary Ghanaian expatriates and their children, who left more recently to better themselves in Britain, Europe or North America, also come back to connect.

But those who venture inland will also want to visit Ashanti, the formidable and culture-rich kingdom which Britain fought throughout the nineteenth century, the capital Kumasi was burned to the ground by Sir Garnet Wolseley in 1873, but a late nineteenth-century fort inside which a foolish British governor got himself besieged in 1900, has a good military museum, The palace of the Asantehene (the king), who is a powerful figure in Ghana, can also be visited, and on festival days he appears in full state, wearing his multi-coloured silken Kente cloth, and a profusion of golden ornaments.

Sir Garnet began his expedition from the then British seat of government, Cape Coast castle. It is a huge white-washed pile, the centre for British trading activities on the Gold Coast from 1664, and the seat of the government of the colony which it formally became in 1843 (until 1877, when this shifted to Accra). But the beginnings of the European involvement with the Gold Coast can be found at another castle ten miles further east, Elmina, 'The Mine'. Originally named the Castle of St George, it was founded by the Portuguese as they ventured down the coast of Africa looking for the route to the east. They had first landed in 1471, and in 1482 built the castle by agreement with the local ruler--the Europeans paid an annual rent for all these forts. The oldest European structure surviving in sub-Saharan Africa, it was visited by Columbus.



Oguaa Fetu Afahye festival, in Cape Coast. With chiefs carried in palanquins and participants in traditional costume, and carnival atmosphere, it remembers pre-Christian customs. It is held every September.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The Portuguese were primarily looking for gold, of which the region had a ready supply, obtaining it from the interior in exchange for salt. The sea from which that came still dominates Elmina, with its fine narrow harbour, today crowded with gigantic colourful fishing canoes, that leads to a lagoon. Between these expanses of water is the mostly nineteenth-century town, with a well-restored Dutch cemetery and several colourful Posuban shrines (found at towns all along the coast, these belong to the Asafo companies, once a sort of traditional local militia, now traditional bodies with a ceremonial role in local life).

In 1637, the Dutch seized Elmina. Sugar production in the Caribbean was just beginning, labour was needed, and the Dutch pioneered the shipping of robust Africans as slave labourers to the English and French plantations. Restored again very recently, the huge and impressive Elmina castle has unmistakably Dutch flourishes to its architecture but below are the ghastly great cellars into which thousands of slaves awaiting shipment were forced over the next two hundred years. There were around sixty European trading stations, lodges, forts and castles established or attempted along this coast in the heyday of the slave trade, and thirty or so survive. Most of the significant buildings are between Elmina and Accra, in

what is now called the Central Region. In 1872 the Dutch sold all their Gold Coast forts to Britain.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Travelling eastwards from Elmina towards the capital Accra, the first fort is Cape Coast. There is no natural harbour--slaves went out, goods and troops (especially, for the Ashanti Wars, many from the black British West India Regiments) came in by huge surf boats. The castle here has a great array of seaward-facing cannon. There are rooms for the officer class which catch the sea breeze, and below, the dungeons for up to a thousand slaves, who might be held for many weeks awaiting a ship. In the fine courtyard there are three interesting graves: to Philip Quarcoe, the first African Anglican clergyman to be ordained (in the 1760s); to George Maclean, a respected head of the British forts and castles between 1829-47 and his wife, 'L.E.L.', an admired poet; both died here, she probably a suicide after only a few months' stay.

Cape Coast was originally colonized by the Swedes in the 1650s, and after a brief period in the hands of Denmark, became a British possession in 1664. The town teems with university and school students and there are notable old buildings--one a fine example of whitewashed Strawberry Hill gothick. A sign of local humour: a tiny bridge is called London Bridge, and is freshly painted with Union Jacks for the local Fetu Afahye Festival each first Saturday in September. But Cape Coast is also, every two years, the main site for Panafest, a celebration of culture and solidarity for all those, worldwide, of African descent. This year, to commemorate both the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Ghana and the 200th anniversary of the British anti-slavery legislation, this event has been expanded nationwide into 'The Joseph Project', beginning in Accra in July.

There are other large coastal forts between here and Accra, including Anomabu. It was from here that the son of the local king was carried off and sold as a slave in Barbados in 1744. His father, through his connections with the slave merchants, got him back, though, because of the winds and the shipping movements of the triangular trade he returned via London, where he was presented at court.

Accra itself is a big city, with a population of two million, out of the countrywide total of almost 21 million. Modern Accra grew up over the last hundred years: it lies between Jamestown (named for James II) with its seventeenth-century Fort James (which is to be turned into a permanent museum of African achievement) and nineteenth-century lighthouse, its old streets, its fishing beach and low cliff, and Labadi to the east. On High Street are Fort Ussher (a Dutch foundation and the 1890s Anglican Holy Trinity Cathedral, uncompromisingly Victorian gothic. Also notable are the Nkrumah mausoleum and museum, Independence Square (also known as Black Star Square) with its huge arch and the African Flame of Liberation lit by Nkrumah in 1961.

Another district of Accra that is worth visiting is the old town of Osu. The original inhabitants, the Ga, were fishermen, goldsmiths, entrepreneurs, and the Danes made a treaty with them to build a great castle still known as Christiansborg. In 1850 the British bought this, and later moved their administration to it; it is still the seat of government. It is impressive, but, as it is the residence and headquarters of the president, it cannot be visited.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]



Elmina Castle, founded by the Portuguese in 1482 to trade for gold. Taken by the Dutch in 1637, tens of thousands of slaves passed through its dark prison vaults to embark for the Americas.

## USEFUL INFORMATION

[www.ghanatourism.gov.ph](http://www.ghanatourism.gov.ph) (Ghana Tours [www.ghanatours.co.uk](http://www.ghanatours.co.uk), [info@ghanatours.uk](mailto:info@ghanatours.uk))

Population 20,757,032

Language: English (official) Local languages include Akan, Ewe, Ga, Dagbani, Nzema and Hausa.

A display of tomatoes in Accra's main market.



Religion: Mostly Christian; Muslim and traditional religions also exist.

Capital: Accra

Norton, Graham Gendall

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