Dear prospective Ghana study abroad student,

Whether your are considering going to study in Ghana or have already committed to the journey, you doubtlessly have numerous questions about what to possibly expect, how to get yourself there and how to prepare. My name is Ellie, and as a student recently returned from the UC Berkeley EAP program at the University of Ghana at Legon, I’d like to provide you with information and share some of my experiences that may help answer some of those questions.

To really prepare for an adventure in another country, it is vital to remember that our experiences are shared with the people we come in contact with—that we profoundly affect one another’s perceptions, learning and enjoyment. Therefore, I asked Ghanaian friends what their experience of American students has been and included excerpts here. My hope for this letter is to encourage you to study abroad, give you an idea of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ to prepare for it, provide a little insight into being a good cultural ambassador, and help you get the most out of your adventure!
Studying abroad is an invaluable experience that will broaden your understanding of the world, introduce you to some amazing new friends and teach you a lot about yourself. However invaluable it maybe, it still comes with a pretty hefty price tag. If funding is not an issue for you, great, you can skip this paragraph and move on to the more interesting bits. If you are like me and funding is an issue, please don’t let this stop you. There is the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship. The Gilman is the undergraduate affiliate of the Fulbright program awarded by the US Department of State. It is designed to help US citizen undergraduate students of limited financial means who desire to study abroad in less traveled to countries (outside Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand). The purpose of the Gilman is to expand the number and diversity of students participating in international exchange programs, with the long-term goal of preparing American students for assuming significant roles in our increasingly interdependent world. Applying for this grant is not difficult; it involves writing two essays and performing a follow on project—this letter is my follow on project. In addition to this scholarship there are many others, so get out there and do a little research. Your dream of studying abroad may not be as far away as you think!

**But how am I going to pay for it?**

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To get the most of your experience in Ghana (or anywhere for that matter), you’ll benefit from really exploring and embracing the new and different aspects of the host country—even the ones that are challenging. Everyone is different and will therefore have their own unique reactions and adjustment periods. Don’t expect it to be easy or exceptionally difficult. Just stay as open minded and enthusiastic as you can while learning how to operate within these new systems. Housing amenities, transportation, commerce, food, weather, education, communication, and cultural customs are just a few of the ways you will have to adjust. Here are some major bullet points to keep in mind:

- Ghana is an economically developing nation; therefore infrastructure may not be as reliable or available as you are used to. For example, the water usually is running if you live in the International Students’ Hostel. If you live in Volta or Legon Hall it may only run a few hours a week when the polytanks are being filled (you will learn to take bucket showers, do bucket laundry, flush toilets with buckets, etc.—once you get used to it, it’s not bad). Similar issues may be experienced with wireless internet being spotty. Electricity and cell phone service are more consistent. All of these things are improving all the time.

- The primary and most cost-effective mode of transportation are the trotros. These are privately owned vans that operate within a large network like public transportation does in the states. Because they are privately owned, there seems to be very little regulation of their condition nor a written schedule. Still, you will get more and more comfortable traveling this way and navigating this somewhat confusing system. Best thing to do is ask a local for directions!

- Shopping at the open air markets is rather daunting at first as you are expected to bargain down the price of just about everything (excluding imported goods). Often the price you’ll be quoted will be double (or more) the cost. How much you pay in the end will be a product of your bargaining skills, your willingness to pay more because as a Westerner you probably can afford to, and the Ghanaian sales person’s willingness to be bargained down. It can be helpful to have a Ghanaian friend come with you to the market at first. It is also helpful to learn enough Twi language to conduct your purchases.

- The food is heavily starch based. Be prepared to work harder to eat enough vegetables. It’s definitely possible just less convenient. Fruit is readily available—especially pineapple, bananas, oranges, mango and coconut. Also on the plus side, meals are very inexpensive compared to American prices. In Ghana you can eat for as little as 50 pesewa (roughly 25 cents), but usually more like $2.

- It will always be humid. Just get used to being sticky. Many Ghanaians bath twice a day for this reason. Scrub with a lufa or exfoliating cloth and avoid lotion. A perk of the humidity is that you probably won’t need it. Wear sunscreen. When it’s not cloudy (seasonal) the sun is pretty brutal. You’ll acclimate and learn to walk in the shade.

- Communication in Ghana is more abundant and more structured depending on whom you are talking to (elder or peer). Always introduce yourself ask how people are doing. Don’t be offended if people ask very personal questions about your relationship status very quickly. People will want your phone number and will call you often, even daily. You must consider your own comfort level with this and decide whom to give your number to.

- Gender relations are shaped by a largely patriarchal society. If you are a woman, you will also have to figure out your own boundaries concerning male attention and then be respectful but firm in your interactions. Furthermore, I don’t suggest bringing short shorts/skirts/dresses. Not only will you get more attention from men than you probably want, but some disapproving looks from most folks. That’s not to say that no Ghanaian women wear these, but it’s pretty rare in public.
• I can’t really stress how big religion is in Ghana. In Accra, the majority (75%) of folks are Christian and rather devout in their faith. You will get accustomed to very loud proselytizing on campus, at the market, on the radio, and just about everywhere else. People will want to talk about it. People will try to convert you (if you are not already of strong Christian faith). All of this is done with good intentions, and remaining open to religious conversations is a good idea.

• The education system operates very differently. The material covered in class is not necessarily representative of what will be on the exam. You will probably be held accountable for way more information than the teacher has lectured on. If you are given hand outs, study everything on them. Read more outside of class. American students consistently underestimate the difficulty of the final exams, which constitute 70% of your grade. The grading system is adjusted down (80%=A) but the grading standards are rigorous, and perfect scores hard to come by. Most Ghanaian students take school very seriously and study hard.

• And finally, try, REALLY TRY NOT TO assume you are right, where you come from is right, what you’ve been taught to believe in is right. That implies that others are wrong. It will be difficult when you encounter things that go against the grain of your knowledge or beliefs. You don’t have to accept everything, but you did not go to Ghana to be right, you are going there to learn. Be judicious in where you place judgment.

• Actually, that wasn’t the last bullet point. Last (but certainly not least) is to make friends! Make as many connections with people as you can on and off campus. Be smart about whom you associate with of course, but getting involved in the community will be the best part of your experience. Do an internship, volunteer, join a club, play music, dance, laugh, make Ghanaian/International/Californian friends. My friendships and internship were far and away the most fulfilling and memorable aspects of my study abroad experience! Ghana is a very social culture; the more you embrace and embody it, the more fun you’ll have. If you are an introvert this may take some work, but will still be rewarding!
Interacting with new people with a different culture in a foreign environment is really exciting! It can also be a little overwhelming, especially if you don’t know what to expect, nor how others will perceive you. University of Ghana UCEAP office student assistant, Mirriam Baiden, recognizes that “it’s not so easy to adapt to another culture.” She advises students to “open up to everyone. No one’s to be trusted, but be open.” In my experience, Ghana is full of some of the warmest, kindest people I’ve ever met and the connections you have with people will help guide you through and outshine the difficulties.

Dorcas Oware, who also works in the UCEAP office at UG, said that her one piece of advice to incoming students would be to “read about Ghana—the people, the culture, the environment. People’s expectations are too high. It’s a developing country and it gets compared to developed countries.” People come to Africa with a lot of misconceptions and unfortunately, a lot of ignorance. Often this is due to skewed and inaccurate depictions we in the West receive through news and other media. Make a point to educate yourself before you come. Challenge your own assumptions. Amongst myriad other books on politics, culture, history, etc., the From California to Ghana book, published each semester by the Ghana EAP office, offers a collection of essays from other students in the same discovery process you will soon be going through. Your home EAP office should have a copy.

Upon arriving in Ghana, there will be an exhaustive (and pleasantly exhausting) 2 week orientation program that will help introduce you to the people, places, language, history, food, music, dance, attractions, nightlife and customs. This orientation will go a long way, yet it is only a preview, and there will still be much you don’t understand. Mayfred Owusu, my Ghanaian neighbor at Volta Hall, told me that her one piece of advice for foreign students would be to “try, when you are here, if you don’t understand something about behavior, food, everything you see around, ask questions.” This comes with a cautionary note to stay mindful that you are asking questions out of genuine interest and in a respectful way. Of her extensive and predominantly positive experiences with American students through the EAP office, Mirriam Baiden explained that one of the only negatives aspects of these interactions was that students should “think before you ask questions.” Truly listen to people’s answers and keep a dialogue open.

Ghanaian friends told me that some of the positive stereotypes about Americans are that we are open, friendly and respectful of each other’s views—help prove these to be true. Mirriam Baiden went on to say that her favorite thing about spending time with American students is that she got to learn from them and they from her. She told me that we have a reputation for being exploratory and always looking for new experiences. These are wonderful qualities that help foster strong cross-cultural relationships and produce incredible adventures that you’ll keep with you for the rest of your life. SO, get out there!

Cheers!

Ellie