

REMEMBRANCE

As her seven-week voyage through West Africa draws to a close, Eliza Reid visits an Icelandic-sponsored orphanage in Togo and sees the moving memorials to those who were victims of the slave trade in Ghana.



Fairy-tale: *The fairy-tale like structure of the main building of Spes in Lomé. Just like this exterior, everything inside was freshly painted in bright colours.*

A baby born in West Africa has a one in five chance of dying before its fifth birthday. Malaria, diarrhoea, AIDS and other illnesses which are either preventable or treatable in developed countries remain killers in developing nations. As I travelled around the region, it was impossible to ignore the distended bellies of malnourished village children or the diaper-less city toddlers crawling in cardboard boxes that doubled as playpens.

Despite the poverty, most of the children I saw were as cheerful and friendly as any others, calling out greetings (and requests for *bonbons*) as I walked past. But collectively, some of the happiest children I met were at SPES (www.spes.is).

"Spes" is the Latin word for hope. In this case, SPES stands for *Soutien pour l'enfance en souffrance* (Support for suffering children); it is an orphanage in Lomé, the capital of Togo, which was started on the initiative of Njörður P. Njarðvík after he visited friends in Togo several years ago.

"We started from zero with Njörður," Immaculée Amenganvi, Director of the orphanage, told me over a refreshing glass of purple *bissap* juice when I toured the fairytale castle-like structure near the national football stadium. After his first visit, Njörður returned to Iceland and raised the required amount for the charity (the Icelandic Board of SPES is now headed by Össur Skarphéðinsson; the other Board members are Bera Þórisdóttir, Eva María Gunnarsdóttir, Jón Sigurðsson, and Lena Magnúsdóttir). Along with additional funds raised by a French organization, they collected enough to sponsor five orphans.

SPES is now the happy home to 61 children from ages toddlers to the age of ten. Either one or both parents of each child has died. Each child accepted to live at the facility has had enough funding secured for him or her to attend school until the age of 16 and to eat healthy cooked meals each day.

Compared to the facilities I saw at People du Monde in Benin, where the project is still getting off the ground, Spes was luxury. The facility has electricity and running water, as well as a

staff which includes 15 "ta-ta's", women who look after all the children. There are screens on all the windows to prevent mosquitoes flying in and a new cafeteria and dormitory are being constructed. Being in a capital city no doubt helps, but generous donations (it costs EUR 77 per month to sponsor one child) have clearly been put to good use.



Lunch time! Children at the Spes orphanage in Lomé enjoy a hot-cooked lunch. The girl on the right is eating with her right hand. That's perfectly acceptable here (but never by using the left hand, which is traditionally saved for other "duties".)

A simple plaque above a painting of a fruit basket thanks the Icelandic government and sponsors for funding for the orphanage. In the yard, a joyful child ran around in a small T-shirt emblazoned with the Sparisjóðurinn logo.

AU REVOIR FRANÇAIS, HELLO ENGLISH

"So, how did you like Togo?"

I was being quizzed by the Togolese border guard at the Togo-Ghana border post at Aflao.

"Well, it seemed nice, but I didn't have time to see much of the country," I answered of my five-day stay, which had included two days of bed rest after catching a bug.

"Ah!" cried the young man in the falsetto exclamation of mock horror that was so common in this part of Africa. "Well, that's alright," he continued. "Next time you visit, you can find me and I'll keep you company the whole time." He winked.

Avoiding the cacophony of requests to change money, buy pirated music, eat grilled meat or smoke a joint, I walked the 100 metres or so into Ghana, my last overland crossing of the journey. The story was similar.

"Can I have some money?" a weary official inquired hopefully, after asking to see my yellow fever vaccination.

I shook my head.

"Well, maybe you could marry me instead?" he ventured optimistically.

And so I arrived in Ghana, land of English speakers and religiously-themed hair salons: southern Ghana's fervent Christianity is famously expressed in the many religiously themed names owners give their various enterprises.

In the first few minutes of my 4-hour bus ride to Accra, Ghana's capital, I witnessed establishments like the Goodness and Mercy Veterinary Clinic, Glory Mart, the Holy Trinity Spa & Health Farm and Sweet Jesus Fashions. A van was painted with the slogan "The Lord will protect me from all danger." It was parked next to a construction site where tree trunks propped up the different floors and people worked several storeys up without any hard hats.

NEVER AGAIN



Bustling: The view of the town of Cape Coast from the castle. During the day, the beach is always bustling with activity. Fishermen's boats are lined up on the side, and some have already headed into the sea.

The strong smell of salt water permeates the humid air as you stroll along the sandy beach of Cape Coast, a three-hour bus ride west of Accra. Local fishermen do their work in long narrow boats with long narrow poles atop which hang colourful flags – except on Tuesdays, when they stop for a day to let their prey "rest".

The idyllic setting – a town the perfect size for walking, bustling with activity and colour, stately palm trees shading the ground, the Atlantic's majestic waves crashing against the rocks,

traditional music blasting from speakers at a shady café - is not the primary reason Cape Coast is one of Ghana's most visited places.

The Ghanaian coastline, on which Cape Coast is almost in the middle, is home to the densest concentration of European-built forts and castles in Africa; about 80 fortifications of different types were constructed over a 300-year period. Of the 29 which are still standing (there were 37 forts) in some form or another, one of the best preserved is at Cape Coast. The forts were constructed between the late 15th and 18th centuries and were occupied variously by the British, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Prussians, Swedes and Danes.

In addition to their strategic importance for influence and security in the region, the castles and forts held commodities which had been acquired in the interior and were exported to Europe and the New World. **Initially, storerooms were full of gold and ivory, but it was the human "commodities" that have made these structures famous today.**

Estimates vary, but around 7 million slaves were taken from modern-day Ghana to the New World between 1650 and 1850. Cape Coast Castle, along with the fort at the town of Elmina ten kilometres away, is now a UNESCO-listed heritage site and has been turned into a museum commemorating the memories of the slaves.

I joined a rather sombre tour of Cape Coast Castle. Gmangul Nkrumah, the guide, took our group of eight to the dungeon, a dank, dark room once described as about half the size of a tennis court, with three tiny square windows along one wall, in which 250 to 300 men were kept chained together while they were imprisoned waiting for the next boats to arrive. The relieved themselves, ate, and slept together there, waiting only to be led to a life of slavery – if they survived this initial captivity and the dangerous sea crossing.

Gmangul invited us briefly into the cell for the condemned, where those who had attempted to escape or otherwise misbehaved were sent. Fifty men were chained together and locked in the tiny room with no light, fresh air, food or water. They were abandoned there until the last one perished, their bodies then thrown into the sea.

The women had their own dungeon. They were often raped by one or more of the European officials. The mixed-race children of the slave women and their male captors were sent to schools established by the European colonials. These were the first formal schools in Ghana. Today, their descendents still often bear surnames from their European ancestors, like Johnson or Van Dijk.

Each fort's "door of no return" marked the place at which the slaves, chained one to another, had to leave their prison for the ships which would take them from their homeland forever. The dark door is half the height of an average human; officials made the slaves crawl out the door to prevent them from trying to escape.

The slave trade was abolished in the British Empire in 1833 and in Portuguese territories in 1869. Brazil was the last country of the Americas to abolish slavery, in 1888.

At Cape Coast Castle there is a plaque in memory of those who lost their lives. It says:

May those who died rest in peace.
May those who return find their roots.
May humanity never again perpetrate such injustice against humanity.
We, the living, vow to uphold this.

MY PICTURE



"Bravery": Walking 30-metres up on the seven suspension rope walkways that make up the "Canopy Walk" at Kakum National Park, just north of Cape Coast, was the bravest thing I did on my trip! Apparently the view over the tops of the rainforest trees is spectacular – but I was too focused on overcoming my mild acrophobia to look!

Six days before the end of my trip, I woke up grumpy. I had a minor cold; my head was throbbing from clogged sinuses. I had missed my bus because the hotel owner had given me the answer I thought I wanted to hear about departure times, rather than the actual schedule (he knew I didn't want to wake up too early, so he told me the buses left at 10am, when in fact they left at 7am). When I finally arrived at the station for a later trip, the bus was (of course) delayed. The little inconveniences of travel had built up and now every small incident was making me increasingly frustrated.

I asked a middle-aged woman sitting next to me if she could confirm I was waiting at the right stop for Cape Coast. She assured me I was, and then introduced me to her friend who was travelling on the same bus. The friend told me she would keep her eye on me and make sure I caught a safe taxi at a fair price when I arrived late that night at my destination. (In fact, when we finally arrived the woman insisted on escorting me to the hotel *and* paying for the taxi!).

I thanked the first woman for her kindness.

"Well, my children have travelled abroad and have always been treated well by local people," she said. "So when I meet people travelling here I always try to do the same."

And, just like that, she restored my faith in the whole experience.

There were days when I felt like tearing my hair out. There were times when I felt frustrated by the lack of infrastructure, by the lack of electricity, by the difficulty of getting a straight answer from anyone, by my guilt about witnessing the poverty and malnourished children.

Days passed when I was sweaty, grumpy, or ill, and all I wanted to do was shut off my environment, curl up in a soft bed in an air conditioned room and read my book. It was the hardest region in which I have travelled.

But every time I questioned why I was doing it in the first place, I met someone like the woman at the Accra bus terminal who reminded me. They were people like Arona and his extended family in Senegal, the unforgettable Mme Samb who escorted me to the Gambia, the shopkeepers on a Bamako street who invited me to have a supper of tea and watery rice with them, the hotel owners who called a doctor when I was ill in Mali, the passengers on buses and collective taxis who shared their food and their stories, and even dozen or so men whose quixotic marriage proposals I politely declined.

After I began to appreciate the generosity and humour of the people on a local basis, the other joys of the region revealed themselves: the addictive rhythms of the West African drums, the importance of families and children to society, the smells of grilled goat cooking on a street BBQ, the sea breezes, the desert sunsets, the *bonjours* and handshakes and every opportunity, and all the laughter.

It was invigorating and enlivening and the longer I have been away, the stronger these latter memories become and the more the frustrating ones fade. I try more than ever to smile and offer a greeting everywhere I go, and to be hospitable to strangers in the way that everyone I met in West Africa was to me.

What I have written here is just *my* snapshot of Africa. If you went on the same trip at the same time of year, your story would be different. I didn't see all the "must-see" sites of the region. I didn't try all the foods I should have or visit all the live music venues on offer. But I wouldn't change a thing.

And one day I'll go back – to take a different snapshot.

END.

This article concludes Eliza Reid's five-week series on her seven-week solo journey to West Africa.

WEST AFRICA

TOGO:

Population: 5.5 million

Capital: Lomé

Official Language: French, Ewe and Mina are common in the south and Kabye and Dagomba in the north.

Religion: Indigenous beliefs (51%); Christian (29%), Muslim (20%)

Life Expectancy at birth: 57.5 years

In the 19th century, narrow Togo (it is only 56 kilometres wide on the south coast) was initially a German protectorate under the name of Togoland. It was divided into British and French spheres of influence after the First World War; the British half was later absorbed into present-day Ghana. After 38 years in power, the country's President, Gnassingbe Eyadema, died in 2005, sparking a succession crisis which was ultimately won by his son, despite widespread accusations of electoral fraud. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for later this year.

Togo gained more positive international attention in 2006 when its football team competed in the World Cup in Germany.

GHANA:

Population: 22.4 million

Capital: Accra

Official Language: English, although many African languages, such as Akan, Moshi-Dagomba, Ewe and Ga are also spoken)

Religion: Christian (63%), Muslim (16%), indigenous beliefs (21%)

Life Expectancy at birth: 59 years

Formerly known as the Gold Coast, Ghana gained its independence from Britain in 1957, the first sub-Saharan Africa colony to do so. In addition to the gold which originally gave the area its name, Ghana's rich natural resources include cocoa, of which it is the world's second largest producer. These natural resources, combined with a relatively high literacy and education rate (the country has four universities), contribute to the country having roughly twice the per capita output of the poorer countries in West Africa. Like Senegal, it is viewed as a good example of a stable African democracy. For tourists, it is one of the region's most popular choices, thanks to a relatively well-developed transportation and accommodation infrastructure.