

## Alysa Meisterling

From September 2012 to January 2013, Belmont University graduate Alysa Meisterling lived, volunteered and traveled in the West Africa country of Ghana. Below is her account of this experience.

As I write this report, I am back in the states. I'm back home. And yet, strangely enough, it doesn't feel like home. It seems surreal almost. I can't stop questioning whether or not the past five months of my life actually happened...or was it just a



dream? Living in Ghana changed everything for me. The day I stepped of that plane, I knew I was in for the ride of a lifetime. Not even a half hour into being there, I found out my luggage was missing. All of my clothes, my belongings, everything...gone. My 'panic mode' button was instantly turned on. When you arrive in a third-world country for the first time, the very last thing you want to hear is that your bag cannot be found.

Regardless of the fear and anxiousness that was building up inside me, the other volunteers and

myself were rushed to a bus and taken to our program director's house, where we would be staying for our week-long orientation.

The first week felt like a blur. My bag was found a couple days later, and I was taken back to the airport to retrieve it. But even with it back in my possession, I felt out of place. The other volunteers were nice and the Ghanaian organization members seemed friendly enough, but I couldn't get that feeling out of me that screamed 'What the hell am I doing here, get me out!' I missed home. Internet and communication was terrible. I had no desire to eat. I simply wasn't feeling like myself. Orientation consisted of daily group meetings, where the nineteen volunteers and myself sat with our program director, Henry, and the other program members, to discuss everything we needed to be aware of before we dove head-first into this country we were about to call home. The meetings covered everything from food, transportation, money, theft, language, health, cultural diseases, our placements,



classes, teaching, etc. We also got the opportunity, that first week, to get a glimpse of what Ghana was like. We were taken to some shops and a market, and had some free time to ourselves to get better acquainted with each other and Ghanaian culture.

At the end of the week, we all piled up into a big bus and were dropped off at our schools. All the volunteers worked and lived in pairs, and my volunteer partner was named Chrissy, from Scotland. We were the two oldest volunteers in our group, since the rest

of them were closer to 18 years. Chrissy and I taught at a Ghanaian secondary high school called Golden Gate SHS. The students were approximately between the ages of 16 and 20. The school was located off of a main road in Shama Junction, Western Region, Ghana. We were about an hour's journey from the town Takoradi.

The first week at our placement, we were instructed to visit all of the different classrooms to get a feel for what age group and what subject we would like to teach during our stay. There were four forms (grades). Chrissy chose to teach Form 1 Science,

and I taught Form 1 English. In the beginning of my time there, the days dragged on slowly. Chrissy and I never felt like we were being proactive enough for the longest time. Since the kids were older than the age group we were both expecting to teach, we found it very difficult at first to find a way to interact with them. Most of the other volunteers in Western Region lived much closer to town, and since it took so long to get there, we stayed around the school a lot after classes had finished. At the school, there were daytime students, who left after classes got out, and boarders, who lived on the





school compounds 24/7. In the evenings, from 6:30-9:00, the boarders had what they called 'prep time,' or also known as 'serious private study.' After they dined, they would grab their books and head to the classroom, where they would spend the two and a half hours working on assignments, taking/reviewing notes, and reading their books.

Our room had a bunk bed, some shelves, a little tv, a shower, sink, and a toilet. A generator would come on from 5-10 every evening, so we could

use the lights, watch movies, use the fan, and charge our phones and cameras. In the beginning, I was very thankful that we had a working shower, but after experiencing bathing from a bucket over the holidays, I was bummed we didn't get the opportunity to do that more! Many of the volunteers had to bathe with a bucket everyday, and I have to admit, I was a little jealous of them! I was always grateful for the flush toilet though... A pit toilet was never something I cared to deal with.



It took maybe a month or so of being there until I felt like I was finally starting to adjust. I was learning new things about the school, the people, the food, the language. Everything was fascinating to me, and before I knew it, I found myself falling in love.

The students absolutely loved us. Ghanaians in general absolutely loved us. Being 'obronis' (white people), they looked up to us instantly. Being white women, the men wanted to marry us, and the women wanted to be us. And regardless of who we were or where we came from, they all wanted to befriend us. We had to speak slowly and clearly, enunciating and repeating things countless times. Although English is their common



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and clearly, enunciating and repeating things countless times. Although English is their common language, they were much more familiar with their tribal languages, which we learned there are around 49 different tribal languages in Ghana. Teaching the children was extremely enjoyable but often difficult. It was easy to notice how slow the kids in Ghana grow up. I was teaching 16-20 year olds, and I often felt like I was teaching 5 year olds, having to constantly tell them to sit down, be quiet and behave. I was always trying to think of new ways to engage and interact with them to make it more fun for them to learn. At a



Ghanaian high school, I was having to teach them about verbs, nouns, adjectives and basic English grammar. These were things I personally learned at an extremely young age, and they were just beginning to understand it. There was a lot of repetition, and I found the best way for them to practice was to give them writing assignments.

Some were better students and harder workers than others, but we always managed to have fun, in and outside of the classroom!

Over the weekends and the three-week-long Christmas vacation, I spent most of my time traveling with volunteer and Ghanaian friends. Ghana has ten different regions, and I got the chance to visit five of them, including Western Region, Accra, Eastern Region, Ashanti Region and Central Region. I got to the opportunity see beaches, markets, jungles and villages all throughout Ghana.





One weekend, a few of my friends and I went to Accra to see the 2012 African Music Video Awards. In Ghana, the beaches were always beautiful and there were always fishing boats and fishermen along the shore. The markets were filled with women and men selling anything



from clothes to food to household needs. They were always trying to pull you over to their shop, and it became a fun game to bargain with them over something you might be interested in buying.



Everywhere you looked, you would see people selling things with baskets on their heads. It amazed me how heavy some of these baskets were and they could balance and walk with them on their heads for hours! Women also constantly walked



around with their babies wrapped to their backs with African material. No matter how hot it was outside, these babies would sleep and travel attached to their mother's backs without a care in the world! Traveling in Ghana was always fun and always an adventure. Cars broke down. We were always getting proposed to. Someone would get sick.

There was never a dull moment!  
Many of the volunteers, including



myself, got Malaria. Or at least I was told I got Malaria. I was never actually tested for it. I was simply taken to a Ghanaian doctor's home, asked to describe my symptoms and written up



for medication. It only lasted a few days, thankfully. It honestly just felt like the flu. I felt extremely hot, extremely tired and had a cold and a loss of appetite. Some of the other volunteers had it worse than I did, but thankfully, everyone recovered and we were back to teaching or traveling before we knew it! We were always covering ourselves with sunscreen and buying



handkerchiefs on the street to wipe the sweat from our faces. And let me just clarify something... I never sweat. Ever. But I did there. We also wore a lot of mosquito repellent and put on long sleeves in the evenings. We had to be smart and stay clean and healthy. It was very easy to get dirty and sick there. But as long as you took care of yourself and weren't careless, you were fine.

Everyday I was learning something new from them, and this is just a portion of the endless list I could make:

- Tro-tro cars are big vans that transport people daily. Tro-tro literally means 'penny penny.' Rather than pay for a taxi, most people took tro-tros. It cost me 1 Ghana cedi (equivalent to 50cents to travel an hour into town).
- Their currency is Ghana cedis and pesewas and it is worth almost double the amount of an American dollar.
- People would often say 'You are mad' rather than calling someone crazy
- 'Please' and 'Thank you' is rarely used
- Giving valuables to dear ones is extremely common
- Rather than saying 'I'll be right back' they would say 'Please, I am coming.'
- Holding hands is very common, even between women and between men.
- Many men grew their nails long, to use for itching and as a sign of beauty.
- Many men and women had tribal marks/scars on their faces depending on which village and tribe they were born into.
- Birthday celebrations are not big in Ghana, but nicknames are often determined by the day of the week you were born on.
- Common Ghanaian food/treats: Bo fruit (fried doughnut), FanMilk, Red Red (fried plantains and beans), Kenkey, Fu fu, fried rice, chicken, Indomie (instant noodles)
- Ghanaians are very forward and assertive about meeting people. Many people would approach me and say 'I want to take you as a friend,' which would imply they want your phone number so they can call you countless times a day.
- 'Chaley' is a common term used between mates.
- 'Papa' means very much.
- There is no wifi in Ghana. Unless you have an internet plan on your phone, you must go to an internet cafe to get online.
- Many people have more than one cell phone, with sim cards from different networks.
- 'Madase' means 'Thank you.'
- African wear is everywhere, naturally. In the markets, you can buy 2 yards or



- 20 yards, depending on what you need it for. I had several dresses made just for me by my very own seamstress!
- African waist beads are worn by almost every female, even baby girls. They are believed to give a girl's waist and hips a nice shape as she grows up, and it is also considered intimate/sexual. This is also the way they are able to determine if they have lost or gained weight.
  - Most Ghanaians are afraid of the sea (ocean) and don't know how to swim.
  - Ghanaians tend to perfect one skill and that becomes their job (ex: if you learn to drive, you become a taxi or tro-tro driver)
  - Politics are very important in Ghana. While I was living there, elections were held. The two most popular parties were NDC (National Democratic Congress) and NPP (New Political Party). NDC that won the elections, but most Ghanaians believe that NDC cheated and paid someone off for John Mahama, the NDC candidate, to win.
  - Greetings are extremely important in Ghana.
  - African braids/weaves are everywhere. The female students at my school found it fascinating that the hair on my head was in fact real! I did, however, get my hair braided while I was there! It took around four hours and six Ghanaian women to put almost 200 braids in my head. They stayed in for about a week until I just couldn't deal with the itching and the pain of sleeping with them. And then it took another four hours to take them out.
  - Caning children as punishment is extremely common in Ghana.
  - Christianity and Muslim are the two most common religions in Ghana.
  - Music in Ghana (Ghanaian hiplife) is huge!
  - Football (known to us as 'soccer') is huge!
  - 'Yo' means 'yes.'
  - When Ghanaians first learn English, it is often referred to as 'broken English.' An example of this would be: 'I dey go bed,' meaning 'I am going to bed.'
  - If someone is a close friend, they are considered to be a brother or sister.
  - Unless you live among the wealthy, most Ghanaians bathe from buckets and wash and dry their own clothes.

As I said, the list could go on forever.

Ghanaians are fascinating people. They are always looking out for each other. They definitely won't hesitate to steal or lie to help themselves, but their hearts are in the right place. If someone has done good to them, they will never forget that good deed, and they will eventually return the favor. Ghana is an extremely peaceful, happy country. There is an extremely low crime rate. They don't like fighting. They live at a very slow pace. I noticed very quickly, at the school, how they tend to start and end classes whenever they please. There is never any rush. The teachers at the school aren't paid very much, and they would come and leave the school whenever they felt like it. Things like this would often frustrate me because of how impatient I tend to be. But Ghana



taught me to value time and people and life. They taught me how to embrace every moment. They taught me how to forgive and accept. They taught me how to talk to God. They taught me to not be afraid of the new.

Ghana taught me how to love, and for that I will be forever grateful. It is for all these reasons and everything I've mentioned in this report that I am back in America today and can say that I found a new home in a third-world country. Ghana stole my heart. I have since made a promise to their country and to myself that I will be back there, in the very near future.

