

## Useful cultural advice for visitors to Volta Home

**Ghana** is one of the few politically stable African countries. It has a fast growing economy and a strong tourist industry so travel for visitors is increasingly simple and comfortable, which is why Ghana is sometimes called *Africa for Beginners*. There are many different linguistic and cultural groups within Ghana, but in most areas visitors are warmly welcomed and some English is spoken. *Greetings are very important and it is usual to shake hands with absolutely everyone you meet.* The handshake is traditionally fairly limp and followed by a snap of index finger against index finger. Note that the elderly and the handicapped are always given very special respect and acknowledgement. Ghanaians are generally shy, modest and friendly. Swearing and blaspheming is culturally not appreciated in Ghana - nor at Volta Home.

**Religion:** Religion is extremely important. About 70% of Ghanaians identify themselves as Christian of some denomination, but most Ghanaians are syncretic and continue to retain many of their traditional beliefs. Traditional spirits and personalities play an important role in the social organisation and daily events of the population. Funerals are the one big occasion that brings together family and neighbours for much socialising and drinking. Friday is traditionally the funeral day when you will see many wearing the red and black mourning colours. Sunday is a special Church day when everyone will be out and about in their best clothes. On Sunday everyone dresses modestly and in their conservative best. ALL men wear long trousers and shirts. Pastor Annabi's Sunday services and Wednesday prayers at the school are important to everyone, so we suggest you join in, despite your religious persuasion. There will be great singing and drumming. At Volta Home, as in most rural Christian parts of Ghana, the children and teachers will be confused and insulted by any signs of atheism; religious intolerance or lack of respect for these services.

**Food and water:** At the Volta Home Mrs Annabi will go to great trouble to make you welcome and offer food specially prepared for you. It will be vastly superior to the food eaten by the children and will be a mixture of traditional foods and foods you are more likely to have at home. Mrs Annabi bakes wonderful bread and sugared rolls in the Volta Home oven. You will have pancakes and eggs for breakfast and fried chicken, fish or goat with rice, yams, plantain or pasta etc for your lunch and dinner. A small supply of filtered water will be available for adults at the home and you can buy extra supplies of filtered water and personal supplies in Hohoe nearby.

**Hygiene:** Water is collected from the stream each morning and washing of all kinds is done using buckets of cold water. 65% of the Ghanaian population live in this way despite clear evidence that this water is unhealthy and causes infections and serious diseases. Despite warnings and money being donated for tanks and pipes, the management at Volta Home have not yet accepted the serious dangers to the children of this continued use of the nearby stream. As visitors we can offer help to raise understanding regarding the importance of disinfecting and cleaning hands and open wounds; teeth cleaning; and drinking only filtered water.

**Animals:** All animals are treated very poorly in Ghana and you can expect to see cruelty and lack of regard for animals everywhere, even at Volta Home. It is important to understand that lack of refrigeration makes it necessary for animals to be killed and eaten instantly. Chickens, goats, pigs and even dogs are slaughtered near to the kitchen; where the children play; the washing is done, and meals are eaten.

**Daily Routine:** The Ewe people of this area generally value education and in recent years the government has injected huge funds towards a program of education for everyone to primary level. Even before this program began, Pastor Annabi was offering education to children who could not possibly have been educated by their own families or communities.

The day begins early at Volta Home with everyone working quickly through their chores before breakfast. School begins for most at 8.30 and finishes at 3.30 but daily routines are very inconsistent. The young teachers are men who have completed their senior exams but are not university educated and for this reason it is relevant for volunteers with any tertiary education to offer lessons to these young men as well as to the children.

The older children are busy again after school doing chores about the home and the farm. There are just 2 women to do all the washing; dressing the little ones; shopping, preparing food and cooking for 40 children. There is also no farm-hand to help Pastor Annabi tend the crops and the animals. For this reason the older children have very little play time during the day because they are relied upon to do most of these jobs.

*The following paragraphs have been carefully included because some volunteers have suffered owing to the fact that they were not prepared for these things*

**Corporal punishment and verbal abusing** of children is still traditionally accepted in many homes and educational institutions in Ghana. Recently the carers at Volta Home have been working with new methods of discipline but it is possible you will see caning and ill-treatment of varying kinds; and that you will sense that many of the older children fear and distrust their carers. Secrets and lies grow like mushrooms in this atmosphere and are therefore quite common at Volta Home. The consensus of past volunteers is that, if we work with an understanding of the cultural issues and the stress placed on the adults who have taken on this huge and poorly paid job, we will continue to see slow but positive changes towards a more internationally accepted standard of childcare.

**Licensing and Government regulations at Volta Home:** The Volta Home does not hold an orphanage licence and nor do 90% of the orphanages in Ghana. There is simply not enough money to make the huge changes necessary to meet the government regulations, and there is nowhere for these children to experience conditions acceptable to those of us lucky enough to come from wealthy countries. For this reason it is important to look closely at the alternatives for these children and the conditions they would experience in their own villages, in order to appreciate the opportunities and protection that these children are experiencing at Volta Home.

**Important facts about adult/child relationships:**

Life expectancy in Ghana is 52 years but the many early deaths of children severely effects this statistic. For this reason parents have traditionally needed to force children to learn safety rules and obey their elders at a very early age. Methods of enforcing these lessons are harsh but adults are not always able to supervise children, and failure to follow instruction can easily lead to accidents or death. For this reason it is important to learn the rules and help to support and enforce them.

As volunteers we are treated with the respect given to visiting teachers or professionals, so it is important to understand how this new culture expects you to behave within that role. One little piece of advice: Traditionally teenage boys and girls are encouraged to be reserved and introverted around their elders; teachers ;

professionals and visitors in ways that appear exaggerated to us from other cultures. However it is the norm in most schools and institutions throughout Ghana. Recently Pastor Annabi has been disappointed to see a breakdown of this tradition at Volta Home, with the emergence of an attitude between teenage boys and female volunteers which is familiar and tactile in ways that are normal in many countries but foreign to his traditional ideal. Be warned that he will not be happy to see his bigger boys having their pictures taken with their arms around the shoulders of female volunteers. While the boys are enjoying this unusual liberty, please recognise that it is not pleasing their "father".

### **Who's Who at Volta Home:**

Pastor Annabi and his family own the 5 acres of land known as the Volta Home for Children but which gives the appearance of a small village. The orphanage is known to the local government, but does not qualify for a licence. Pastor Annabi ("Father") is the boss, and he is highly respected in the local community and far beyond. Pastor Annabi "Father", his wife Comfort have run the home for more than 20 years. Pastor and Mrs Annabi have always found it very difficult to reject any motherless child who is brought to their home by a desperate neighbour or family member. This is how the orphanage began, and this is why it is always stretched to the limit of its capacity.

Isaac, the 3rd son, is teaching at the school and is being helped through a correspondence teaching degree by Australian donations.

Pastor Annabi's daughter Mabeena lives with her children in a cottage on the farm and helps her mother with the orphanage children. Mr Annabi's other daughters, Mercy and Marie will sometimes visit to help during busy times. At least eight grandchildren live at the home along with the homeless children, but they are not given any special attention, in fact you will probably not be told who they are, since the authorities frown on orphanages that are built around family and family members.

Some local children who attend the school will sometimes join the Volta Home community. Because of their circumstances at home, these children are sometimes offered meals and medical help along with the Home children, and many will not pay school fees. For this reason the numbers being fed at Volta Home will vary daily. Some of the older children have recently been given donated scholarships to boarding schools or to specialist schools. These students usually return to Volta Home during the holidays. Meanwhile many of the children will be taken back to their villages to spend holidays with extended family. For this reason the school holidays will often see a reduced number of children at the orphanage.

This year (2010) the volunteers have compiled a book listing all the children together with a short history of each one. Hopefully it will be available at the Home for anyone wanting to acquaint themselves with the names and basic details of each child.

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## How to use your time effectively: Advice from past Volunteers

**Cortney's Advice:** I volunteered at the Volta Home through an NGO I discovered through a website called Idealist.org. The NGO didn't really prepare me at all for the orphanage. Now I know more about the culture of Ghana in general I realize that they truly just didn't think that information was relevant. In terms of what the daily routine would be, the information they provided was probably only 70% wrong. I suggest that it will help to be better prepared than I was, and to know what to expect.

My suggestion is that you must ask a ton of questions in order to get any specific information, especially about the classes you may be teaching (the times, subject, materials). I did a couple of hours each day, but the kids were in school from about 8:30 to 3:30 so there was a good amount of down time in between. The school timetable is very loosely followed with classes being cancelled for reasons like building a fence or picking up trash. No classroom is equipped with its own stash of chalk/eraser so I or a student constantly had to run to a neighbouring classroom to get some. Many days a child or 2 would come without a pen/pencil and children would come to school with open cuts or sores. They seem to be afraid to ask for help with these problems. Also I know a few previous volunteers who witnessed the children being disciplined in pretty harsh ways. I didn't witness anything more serious than a wack or 2 with a stick, but I wouldn't put it out of the realm of possibility and would prefer to have been prepared for this.

**Rhonda's advice:** You may find that when you begin your volunteering that you are given little or no direction and this can be daunting. However help is always needed around the home so decide what it is you would like to do and how you can best contribute and then just jump in. You can help with the child care, improvements on the property, or teaching. If teaching is not your forte, like in my case, just giving the kids your time is one of the things they will enjoy most. As you can imagine, with 38 children and so few adults, little time is usually devoted to these kids. We did art projects, jewellery making, played cards, played ball, went for walks and flew paper airplanes. Many evening were spent under the porch just talking. These are all special and worthwhile things that you can offer these kids. It is also important to enjoy your time and get to know their individual personalities.. they will amaze you.

On my second trip, the following year, we stayed at a hotel nearby and hired a driver so that we could make day trips to the orphanage. This trip allowed us more freedom to do things such as purchase medications and help to administer them. The Volta Home has much to learn from us and if you approach them in a way that is not judgmental the Annabi's are very receptive to learning new ideas. We created a log book of the children so Mrs. Annabi could track the children's history, and shopped at the local markets for supplies such as new kitchen items, storage containers and school things for the kids.

**Camilla's advice...** *bringing gifts to Volta Home.* Most things you bring to Volta Home will be safely stored away by Pastor Annabi and not be accessible to the children. Some of these things could find their way to market when there is a shortage of funds to pay for something considered to be a priority. If you understand this, you can be better prepared. Most things needed at Volta Home can be bought locally. Basic exercise books are a great gift. The children often re-use old exercise books, so a new one is a real treat. Go armed with marker pens to write names on each gift. More expensive gifts tend to be left safely in Mr Annabi's house and never see the light of day because there is an overall fear that the children will abuse or lose them. There is a very basic library which could do with some support, but think carefully about the subject matter of the book and know that the children will only get to read it if Mr Annabi or a teacher is watching. Books about real heroes and life adventures are popular, but remember too that English is their 3<sup>rd</sup> language! Newspaper, magazines and colouring books are very much appreciated. Inexpensive craft things such as bags of beads, feathers with coloured paper and glue; balloons etc are great gifts because everyone can enjoy them without the stress of waste or problems of equal sharing. You will find that even the oldest boys will love to make beads or collage, and it will mean a fun time for everyone.

Tom's advice.... Be careful not to favour a few with gifts or attention. Always be aware that each child needs your attention and time, so give it equally. I suggest that you learn very quickly to recognise and respect the sensitive relationship that exists between the children and members of the Annabi family. For fun and to make the most of your experience at Volta Home I suggest you offer to join Pastor Annabi when he travels to markets selling his herbal medication; go for long walks and get to know the history of the local area; take a bus ride to visit Grace, Amanyo and Esanem at the blind school in Akropong; and spend time having fun and getting to know the older boys around the fire each night or while fishing with them in the evenings.

Andrea's advice.... Something to think about before you leave home. Bring ideas for the classroom, nothing too advanced, but expect to teach or to help the teachers. They really want to learn. The older boys like doing word searches (crosswords etc) at night time, so bring some with you. English is not their first language, but communication is not overly difficult if you have patience. When you are working with the little ones it is sometimes useful to invite an older child to help with conversation and translation. I learned that, when school finishes in the afternoon, it is customary for the older children to get to work on chores. I took this time to look after the younger ones and keep them out of the way. I really bonded with the little ones during these times. Then, late at night after prayers, the little ones go to bed, so this was my time with the older children. We did homework and played card games. They are all wonderful kids and they just want a little attention. If you give it to them you will win their hearts

Charlie's advice.... On a very practical note, I could see that someone with management skills could help by putting simple systems in place to ensure that each child always has the necessities: eg. Lists for regular weekly checks on toothbrushes; shoes; bedding and the basic school items, plus more systems aimed at regularly replacing these things. These systems would need to be designed to foster responsibility but also to protect the children from being abused for losing or damaging their belongings – as sadly happens regularly. Storage is also a real problem, so help to tackle this problem (especially in the bedrooms) is constantly needed. For someone who is staying at Volta Home for more than a couple of weeks, I think this would be a great challenge and a very worthwhile contribution.

The website has a **BLOG** which will give more recent news for future volunteers.  
[www.voltahome.org](http://www.voltahome.org)