

Visiting the Volta Home?

Here is some useful cultural advice



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 very friendly. **Swearing and blaspheming is culturally not appreciated in Ghana, or 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. 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. At Volta Home, as in most parts of Ghana, the children and teachers will be confused and insulted by any sign of atheism; religious intolerance or lack of respect for these services.

At Volta Home ...

Food and Water: At the Volta Home Mrs Annabi will go to great trouble to make you welcome and offer food specially prepared for just you. It will be vastly superior to the food eaten by the children. Mrs Annabi bakes wonderful bread and sugared rolls in the Volta Home oven. You will have fried chicken, fish or goat with rice, yams, plantain or pasta etc for your lunch and dinner and you can buy biscuits, filtered water and fruit in Hohoe nearby.

Money: you will need very little cash while living at the home and we believe that your belongings such as a small amount of cash and your camera etc will be safe in your room. However it is important to note that the Volta Home grounds are open to the public at all times, so you must take responsibility for your belongings. Banks with eftpos are half an hour away. **\$10 is a reasonable weekly wage in this area, so \$1 (1 cedi) given in kindness during your travels will be much appreciated.**

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 warnings and donated tanks etc, the management at Volta Home have not yet accepted the 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 hand washing; covering and cleaning wounds; teeth cleaning; and drinking only filtered water.

Animals are generally 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. Chicken, goats, pigs and even dogs are slaughtered near to the kitchen; where the children play and where meals are eaten.

Daily Routine: The Ewe people of this area generally value education and Pastor Annabi is very keen to give these children every opportunity to learn. Recently the government has injected huge funds towards a program of education for everyone in primary level. Even before this program began, Pastor Annabi was offering education to children who could not have been educated by their own families.

The day begins early at Volta Home with everyone working quickly through his or her chores before breakfast. School begins for most at 8.30 and finishes at 3pm - but routines are inconsistent. There are no tertiary educated teachers at this school and rarely enough teachers to cover all ages. The young ones are often not in class. The older children are busy again after class doing chores about the home and the farm. There are too few adults at Volta Home and the children do much of the work necessary to prepare the meals and maintain the food supply. For this reason the older children have very little "down" time 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 towards new methods of discipline but it's possible you will see caning and ill treatment of varying kinds, and that you will sense that many of the older children distrust their carers. Secrets grow like mushrooms in this atmosphere and are therefore common at Volta Home. The consensus of past volunteers is that, if we work patiently and with an understanding of the cultural issues and the stress placed on the adults who have taken on this huge, poorly rewarded task, we will continue to see slow but positive changes towards a more effective standard of childcare.

Licensing and Government regulations at Volta Home: The Volta Home does not hold an orphanage licence and nor do 95% of 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 they 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 affect this statistic. For this reason parents have traditionally needed to force children to learn safety rules and to 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 and death. It is important for us as visitors to learn the rules and help to support and enforce them. As volunteers we are treated with the respect given to visiting dignitaries and professionals, so it is important to understand how this new culture expects you to behave within this role. One little piece of advice: Traditionally teenage boys and girls are encouraged to be reserved and introverted around their elders; teachers; 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 to their "Gran'pa".

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. Pastor Annabi ("Gran'pa") is the boss, and he is highly respected in the local community and far beyond. His wife Comfort and their children have run the home for over 20 years. Isaac, the 3rd son, is teaching at the school and is being helped through a correspondence teachers college course by Australian donations. Pastor Annabi's daughter Mabena lives with her children in a cottage on the farm and helps with the orphanage children. His other daughters, Mercy and Marie will sometimes visit to help during busy times. Isaac, the third son, is a teacher at the school and is studying a teaching degree with help from Australian sponsors. At least 8 grandchildren also live at the home along with the homeless children, but are not given special treatment by their grandparents - in fact you will probably not be told which are the grandchildren because the authorities frown on orphanages being built around family members.

Local children who attend the school will sometimes join the Volta Home community. Some of these children are offered medical or financial aid along with the Home children, so the numbers at Volta Home will vary accordingly from 35 to 45 children. Some of the older children have been given donated scholarships to boarding schools or to specialist schools. These older students return to Volta Home during the holidays. Meanwhile many of the orphaned 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.



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 a student or I 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 childcare, 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 logbook 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, but since money is so scarce they are always short of even the most basic items. School equipment is urgently needed but it is wise to distribute these things yourself to all 40 or so children and supervise the older children to write names on each item. Basic exercise books can be bought locally and 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. Many gifts tend to be left safely in Mr Annabi's house and never see the light of day because books etc are considered to be very expensive and 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 I would suggest that each book be marked as being a gift to the children of the Volta Home to assure it remains there! Remember too that the young teachers are paid just \$8 a week to teach. Giving a gift of a book to each of the six teachers will benefit everyone and make the book more accessible. Inexpensive craft things such as bags of beads, feathers with coloured paper and glue etc are wonderful because everyone can enjoy them without the stress of waste or problems of equal sharing etc. 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 and Amanyo 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

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The website offers a **blog for volunteers** which will give opportunities for up-to-date information and details for visitors.

www.voltahome.org