

Information for Link Travellers

This advice is based on the experiences of Link travellers to Sekondi-Takoradi (ST). The guide is written by Dudley Tolkien, updated from his last visit in April 2008, supplemented by contributions from other travellers as shown. Observations made are from the author's personal experiences, and other travellers may have a different take on some items.

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1. Your Pre-Travel Information.

Travellers are advised to complete a Pre-Travel Data Sheet (see Appendix A), and send a copy to one or both of Brian Dixon (tel. in Ghana 0243 420506, email brian.dixon@cnrinternational.com) and Bob Baldry (tel. in Ghana 0244 322144, email bob_rob2020@yahoo.co.uk) in Takoradi, and to copy it to Jill Bailey (email jill.bailey@plymouth.gov.uk) of the Plymouth Link Committee. This is to make things run more smoothly if something unforeseen happens to you on your trip, in particular if you have any health problems. Brian runs the local operation for CNR International, which has a whole network of contacts to cover such eventualities, and they have all been tested before. Bob is the UK High Commission's local representative in Takoradi. An example of how this can help you is that if you get sick, and go your own way and it isn't the best way, you can have a real problem extricating yourself - Brian or Bob will get you in the right place to start with.

It is also recommended that travellers register their details using the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's Locate service :-

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/Locate/>

2. Flights.

British Airways (BA) is the only airline which flies to and from Ghana directly on a daily basis. KLM, Lufthansa and Alitalia also fly most days with one short flight change. Visitors from Ghana have used the Libyan airline Afriqiyah, changing in Tripoli - this flies about 3 times a week.

Scheduled flights.

Several of us have experience of BA (www.ba.com), which has been trouble-free. We have also used KLM (www.klm.com), which changes in Amsterdam, and problems have been experienced in some cases, but not others. The European scheduled airlines use Heathrow. Afriqiyah (www.afriqiyah.aero) uses Gatwick - delays can be expected sometimes.

BA leave Heathrow around 1400, arriving in Accra in mid-evening. The return journey leaves late in the day, arriving at Heathrow around 0630. Flight time is about 6½ hours. KLM leave Heathrow earlier in the morning. Check the websites for up to date information.

Prices vary widely according to time of year, most notably in the late summer / early autumn, but can even vary wildly from day to day, so check frequently. A return trip can cost anything between £400 and £900. Increasingly airlines are offering the facility of booking on-line and getting an e-ticket, so having printed it off at home there is nothing further to do, and you cannot lose it if you print duplicates, and email it to yourself as further cover.

BA take bookings using credit cards, but KLM only accept bank transfer because of problems with card fraud associated with the route. BA now allow *two* 23kg items of luggage in the hold.

Getting to and from the airport.

All National Express (www.nationalexpress.co.uk) buses to/from London stop at Heathrow. There is also a connection to Gatwick via both Heathrow and Victoria. Time-tables and booking facilities are on-line, including the e-ticket facility. Where it is necessary to travel to London the previous day because of an early departure, there are bus/hotel packages available. For Heathrow the cheapest hotel offered is the Comfort Inn in Hayes (functional but perfectly adequate) where the combined bus fare and hotel will be £80 or less. There are shuttle buses to and from the airport that cost £3 each way.

3. Visas.

All UK citizens require a visa. It lasts for 3 months, is single entry only, and costs £50. There is a multi-entry 2 year option for £70, which can be difficult to obtain but has been achieved twice by one Link member. There is also a 1 year multi-entry option for £60. The visa can be obtained directly from the Ghanaian High Commission and you can download an application form from the Ghana High Commission website, <http://www.ghana-com.co.uk/VisaForm.pdf>.

In applying for a visa, you should obviously choose a time when you don't need your passport. Send it in your application accompanied by your passport and the fee. You can pay *only* with a banker's draft (more complicated) or a postal order, *not with a cheque*. It is wise to send it in by RMSD, with a self-addressed RMSD envelope for its return.

You can also use a visa service which costs extra, but they are on hand in London and know the idiosyncrasies and how to manage them, and will be able to trace progress if necessary. If your passport goes astray at the High Commission (which has happened) you are in a much more advantageous position with an agency. One of the agencies we have used is Travcour. Contact - tel. 0207 223 5295, email (Amanda) amanda@travcour.com. For Link members, their normal fee of £35 is discounted to £30, or £20 each for 5 or more people together.

4. Medical.

The article below was written after the October 2004 visit by Dr Mike Inman, a retired anaesthetist.

Health Advice for visitors to Ghana.

I could not better the advice given by the Masta Health Brief (www.masta.org). It is up to date and authoritative. Clearly the way to stay fit in Ghana is to take all sensible precautions. Well before leaving, see your doctor and get all the jabs. Yellow fever is available in the Lisson Grove surgery in Mutley: expect to pay around £40. Other injections should be available free through your GP. Find out about which anti-malarial is recommended, and if it's Lariam, start taking it well before you are due to leave. It does not suit everybody and you may need time to change. The sun is fierce, so cover up, take a hat, plenty of sunblock, and drink plenty of water, bottled water advised. Take insect repellent, long sleeves and trousers for the evenings, and you may wish to take a mosquito net, and other anti-mosquito devices, depending on where you will be staying. HIV/Aids is endemic.

People in Takoradi just about all have suffered from malaria, regarding it as about as inevitable as we regard the common cold, but it's much more serious and can kill. Even if you are not consciously aware of the mosquitoes, as one Ghanaian friend told me 'they're waiting for you!'

During the October 2004 visit, we only had one sore throat between the 15 of us, but if you do get sick I suggest the Port Clinic which is run by two GPs, and is held in the Ghana Ports and Harbours Authority Hospital just near the entrance to the port in Takoradi. The charges are modest, £5 for registration, £3 per consultation, and £10 per night for a bed plus medical costs. If necessary specialists are brought in if you need specialist care, and arrangements can be made to fly you to Accra or home. For this you would need to be insured.

The simplest most important medical advice we would give anybody new to a hot African country is to always have bottled water available, and to drink lots of it. Dehydration is the biggest risk until you are acclimatised, and if you wait until you are thirsty you have probably left it too late.

5. Arrival in Accra and transport to Sekondi-Takoradi (ST).

If you arrive in the evening you will need to stay overnight in Accra. There is an advantage to making arrangements before you leave: the taxi drivers at the airport are very insistent and compared with Accra prices are generally very expensive - in April 2008 a fare of 3 GH¢ was normal.

There are obviously many hotels in Accra, and we mention below ones that members of the Link have used. Except for the Penta, most recent experience of the other hotels dates back to 2004. The cost of accommodation in Ghana has rocketed up in the last year. A number of cheap hotels can have mosquito problems, so take care.

- Penta Hotel in Osu: tel. 021-760812. Cost now c.\$100 per night. This is right in the heart of lively Accra at night, so there is a vast choice of good restaurants (the Dynasty Chinese is expensive, but magnificent). Also very handy for getting a sim card for your mobile phone, as MTN's HQ is just 200 metres along the road.
- Paloma Hotel in central Accra, which includes in the cost airport pick-up / drop-off.: tel. 021- 228700 / 228723. They also will change money at a good rate, and accept payment in sterling. Breakfasts are good, and there is a constant toing-and-froing of volunteers and young travellers. (You can also change money at a Forex about 400m to the west – across the road.)
- Linnhurst Lodge in Link Road (!) is close to the airport in very quiet residential area. However, getting a meal there requires a rather rigid, advance booking regime, which can be tiresome.
- The Pink Hostel, where we have negotiated NGO rates because of the Link (Link-headed notepaper helps). They have been known to make a room for the night available at 8.00 am.

Getting to Sekondi-Takoradi. There are two options – to use public transport or arrange for some form of private hire/taxi. One of the cheapest is to use an STC bus, the Ghanaian equivalent of National Express. They travel several times a day and are reasonably comfortable, effectively the equivalent of NE without the on-board toilet. Nowadays most coaches are air-conditioned, and the cost is under £4. You have to pay extra for your luggage, which has to be weighed. Don't lose your bus ticket or luggage ticket: you need the luggage one to reclaim your case on arrival.

Using a taxi for this trip will not only cost about 10 times as much, but unless you know who you're dealing with, it's rather unwise from a personal safety standpoint. STC is safe, cheap, reliable and comfortable, and the road is now tarmac the whole way, so a 4 hour trip is now the norm, but traffic is heavier on a Saturday because lots of people are doing trips to funerals.

Getting back to Accra. The key message is, if you're travelling back on the same day as your night flight home, leave ST in good time, ideally before midday.

6. Money.

The unit of currency is the **cedi**. However, in July 2007 the currency went through a re-denomination process, so now people speak in both old and new money (until the old money passes from memory) ! Transitionally, the old money is called the cedi (written as ¢) and the new money is called Ghanaian cedi (written as **GH¢**). The conversion is

1 GH¢ = 10,000¢ and very close in value to 1 US dollar.

1 GH¢ is made up of 100 pesewas.

1 pesewa = 100¢

Ghanaian cedis are all notes (1,5,10,20,50) and pesewas are all coins.

However, people's conversation doesn't quite fit the conversion time-table of the banks ! People still say 1 million for 100 Ghanaian (or new) cedis, and may say (as they always have done) 400 for 400,000. Apart from the last example, the number of 0s should make this rather obvious, and this doesn't seem to be intended as a way to deceive, but be careful all the same. In fact, the change has gone rather smoothly, and as a traveller it is such a relief no longer to be burdened with the similarity of carrying money to carrying a loo roll around ! Furthermore, currency exchange is now a quick operation, as a large number of small denomination notes no longer have to be counted. Thankfully, the old notes are totally out of circulation.

Take your money to Ghana in British pounds in CASH, which can be exchanged anywhere. If you have some travellers' cheques then by all means bring them as back-up, but they are a hassle to change and the exchange rate will be noticeably worse.

There are several Forex booths around which are the best places to exchange money. Around Takoradi Market Circle one can be descended upon by guys offering money exchange - sometimes one can get a very marginal improvement on the Forex rate, but unless you know the individual concerned, ignore these guys - they are not a threat, but do tend to mess one about and are just a general pest, and you don't really want to be doing this in the public gaze anyway. Furthermore, they often offer a rate BELOW Forex - you have to go into the Forex bureau to get the rate as it isn't displayed outside.

Credit cards can be used in a number of more up-market outlets, but you will generally pay an exchange rate over the odds, as they will argue their need to recover bank handling costs. The transaction will usually be charged in US dollars, but if you have a choice whether to use credit card, ask them first about the exchange rate they apply, and whether they also apply a handling charge, then work out whether the overall cost is acceptable - it really does vary. Ghana's economic activity at the personal level is overwhelmingly conducted in cash.

7. Telephones.

Phoning Ghana from UK

Using a provider such as BT for this will cost you 10 or more times what it need cost ! In fact, phoning Ghana is usually cheaper than phoning a British mobile number ! There are two sensible options.

The cheapest option is by using one of the many international calling cards. This can be done by buying a physical card, or by buying the credit on-line. Either way, you will be provided with a choice of access numbers (an 0845 one which will probably attract the cheapest charge, an 0800 number which may carry an 0800 premium, and an 020 number for people with mobile contract credit), and a PIN number unique to your card purchase. The process is to phone the access number, then you are asked to enter your PIN number when they will tell you your credit balance, then you enter the phone number you wish to dial. Recent experience has shown the best card for Ghana to be 'Mad for Minutes', accessible on-line thus

<http://www.1st-phonecards.co.uk/cardpages/mad.htm>

What you must do with any of these cards is find out the rate you are actually being charged, as it is nearly always more than what is advertised, and often double (still a tiny fraction of BT's rates). 'Mad for Minutes' advertises 3p per minute to a Ghanaian mobile and 1.5p to a landline (using 0845 access). The real cost seems to be a little more, but not by much. Note that using a payphone attracts typically a 20p per minute surcharge, and the access number charges apply whilst you're connecting also. Cards with an additional connection fee are bad news, as connection blips are quite frequent. Customer Services for these cards tend to be overseas call centres, who will sort out a locked PIN number for you, but experience has shown that contacting them for anything else to be a wasted effort.

A second option is VOIP via the internet. This is more expensive than using a card, but the line quality tends to be better. Using Skype, it costs 10.9p per minute to a Ghanaian mobile, and 10p to a landline. Furthermore, with Skype you are always charged exactly according to the tariff. These are their international rates to everywhere

<http://www.skype.com/prices/callrates/?currency=GBP>

Dialling codes. The international code for Ghana is 00233. The STD code for Accra is 021, for Sekondi-Takoradi is 031. Cell phones all start with 02 - MTN is 024 and OneTouch is 020. In all instances strip off the leading 0 when calling internationally.

Using your mobile in Ghana to phone locally

If you use your British number to make phone calls, they will be routed through UK and be very expensive, although text messages remain cheap. An alternative is to buy a SIM card for use in Ghana, and not doing so is likely to burden your stay with unnecessary inconvenience. There are numerous cell-phone operators, but the dominant one is MTN (formerly Areeba and before that Spacefon), as that is the network always found when one switches one's phone on. The MTN office in Takoradi is on Dixcove Hill, next door to Captain Hook's restaurant, and in Accra there is a main office in the main street of Osu. In one of these offices you can buy an MTN SIM card for 1 GH¢ to put in your phone plus some credit, but note that your mobile must be **unlocked**.

Charges are fairly reasonable, and even to phone UK it will only cost around 25p per minute, a good deal cheaper than some mobile to mobile calls in UK ! You will, of course, get a Ghanaian telephone number, which expires three months after use unless you have it renewed within another 6 months after that at an MTN office - useful if you plan to return, as then you can give your UK contacts your Ghanaian phone number before you go.

You will find that Ghanaian contacts will often 'flash' you - this means phoning you for one ring only, so you can phone back and they leave you to pay for the call - just get used to it !

8. Food and Accommodation.

Hotels.

A key issue in making your choice is whether or not you want air-conditioning (AC). The climate is hot and humid and gives some people a problem sleeping properly. Others dislike AC but without it even with a fan going at maximum speed all night you will not get the temperature in your room below 30°C.

The humidity is high enough for someone with glasses going from an AC environment to non-AC to find their specs steam up instantly. If you use AC a lot it can delay the time it takes to become accustomed to the heat and humidity, and can give rise to a dryness in the throat, but it is very much a personal choice. We recommend that you wear cotton rather than denim: Ghana is much hotter than Plymouth *all* the time, and takes some getting used to (see the medical section below).

Most, if not all, of the comfortable hotels are in Takoradi, and A/C will always be available. Check prices when booking, as prices have risen steeply recently.

At **Planters Lodge** (tel. 031 22233) one gets a suite which is half a chalet, the ambience of the place is extremely pleasant, and it is quiet. The restaurant is in a delightful setting, overlooking the swimming pool.

Africa Beach (tel 031 25148) is cheaper and much busier with lots of locals who are keen to chat. The rooms again are chalets, and this is the only hotel in Takoradi by the beach. It also has a swimming-pool.

It's a personal choice if one wants it to be quiet or lively, and of course these are just two hotels of many.

The highest rated is the **Hillcrest**, but this would appear to be targeted more at business customers and looks like a bland block of flats. The **Takoradi Beach** is similar.

Guesthouse Maggi (tel 031 22575) is down a quiet road opposite Planters, has comfortable rooms with huge double beds, and there is a small restaurant and bar in the compound. It is cheaper than the other hotels listed here. The Link negotiated a 10% discount on their rates a few years ago – you will need to remind them of this before you book.

There are plenty of other hotels, but if you're looking for something cheap, beware that some cheap hotels will pose a mosquito, and therefore malaria, risk. The better hotels have mosquito protection built into their rooms. Mosquitos are always around, and the locals accept getting malaria just like we accept getting the common cold, but it's much more serious.

Eating well in Sekondi-Takoradi

Colette Gregory spent two days in Achantaman School, and the kitchen staff there made sure she tried the best local food. The following is her account of food and drink, with comments on some local eating places:

There is a whole multitude of different foods that I would class as “must-try” when you travel to Ghana. Care should be exercised at all times when it comes to what you eat but as long as you follow the adage, “Cook it, peel it or leave it!” then you should be fine.

The first speciality I tried was red red and beans with plantain. Red red and beans is a spicy stew with – unsurprisingly – kidney beans in it. Stews seem to be a normal meal when accompanied by some kind of staple crop. In this case it was the plantain, which are like large savoury bananas which are cut in half widthways and fried (palm oil is often used for this). My favourite way to eat plantain though was a plantain chips. For this they are sliced thinly lengthways and then fried till they resemble crisps (but they're sweeter). Keep an eye out for them when you're travelling in a taxi or STC bus because they are one the most common things people bring to you on their heads to sell.

Another common staple crop accompaniment I enjoyed is called kenkae. This is maize that is fermented in water for three days, then mashed and blended with more unfermented maize to form into a ball that you rip pieces off with your fingers. The technique was to soften these pieces by kneading them with your index and middle fingers and your thumb and then dip it in your stew. I warn you: it's harder to master than it looks!

One day for breakfast I was served gari. This you have *got* to try – it was my favourite! It's cassava that's been roasted and grated. You add warm water or milk (depending on what you can afford), sugar and Ideal (condensed) milk. It tastes just like rice pudding but with finer lumps. Sometimes it's made as a savoury accompaniment, minus the sugar and milk of course. Ghanaian people refer to gari as their saviour because it's cheap, widely available and eaten all the time.

Sekondi-Takoradi is a port so fish is a local favourite. One evening a group of us went to Captain Hook's, a restaurant that specialises in seafood. We had a generous meal – for example I had lobster spaghetti – for ₵100,000 each, including a tip, i.e about £6.20. Bear in mind that this is probably the most expensive place in town. Other places for eating out that I would recommend are the Africa Beach Hotel (great atmosphere, sometimes live music, always has stalls by the gate selling souvenirs) and Joy's Chinese Restaurant, if karaoke is your thing.

When drinking in Ghana you should avoid alcoholic drinks because (a) it's frowned on and (b) it could dangerously dehydrate you in such a hot climate. What seems to be popular as an alternative to beer is Guinness Malt, which tastes like liquorice. My favourite drink was Fanta: it tastes much nicer than Fanta you buy in the UK somehow. Note that when you buy Fanta, Coke or an equivalent in a glass bottle, the seller will expect the bottle back once you've finished so don't try and walk away with it as we did the first time. Water should be drunk by the gallon but always check that the bottle caps are sealed before drinking to avoid a health problem.

Ghana is a centre for Fair Trade chocolate. The best brand, I was advised, is called “Kingsbite”. It's very good in Ghana but be warned that when you bring it back to the UK for a gift for somebody it turns rock hard in our climate.

Updating the position for 2008, Captain Hook is still clearly best in town. Africa Beach is good, and this is a nice outdoor experience, as is Planter's Lodge. Valley Beach Hotel is also good. A wonderful ambience by the sea, seeing the surf highlighted by lighting, is the Joy Chinese, but sadly the cuisine nowadays is a major disappointment.

Although the climate should lend itself to the growing of copious quantities of green vegetables and fresh fruit, they are not easily found, and seem not to appeal much to the average Ghanaian. The local dishes are certainly tasty, but very heavy with a high starch content. On the main road you may see people holding up a large dead rodent trying to catch the custom of passing traffic - this is a type of bush meat called a grass-cutter.

9. Miscellaneous Advice.

www.ghanaweb.com offers a good range of information on Ghanaian life.

Don't take pictures in the Harbour Road approaching the port, if you want to avoid getting in hot water with the police.

People don't have specific addresses, and only the important roads seem to be named. Addresses involve PO Box numbers. Takoradi's centre is symmetrically organized around the Market Circle, which is fairly easy to follow.

Tipping - the Ghanaian expression is to 'dash'. Most people are very short of money, so being dashed is always welcome. If you want to show a Ghanaian your appreciation, always do it in cash - much more appreciated than a box of chocolates or whatever.

Ghana is a very safe place, and generally much safer than Britain regards street crime, but it is still wise to be vigilant, as applies to anywhere in the world. You are likely to be many times richer than most people you encounter, but they just regard you as a good person to do business with, but in a friendly way and nothing nasty. Probably the worst thing you will encounter during your stay is exasperation at the almost universally appalling standards of punctuality - very irritating when you're on a tight schedule, but you won't change it !

Taxis

They are cheap and plentiful, about a quarter of the equivalent cost in Plymouth. However, fuel costs have risen three-fold in the last 2 years or so, so they are not as cheap as they were not so long ago. It's always best to agree the price before you get in, and haggle by all means, or ask the next driver who comes along to compare prices. After a short time you'll get an idea of the going rates - there are always some taxi drivers ready to rip off an 'obruni' (white man) for a couple of cedis, but they'll do it with a smile. Getting to and fro to town can be done cheaper still by using a shared-taxi - there's a fixed fare applying once the taxi is full.

Internet

Internet is available in Takoradi very cheaply - 50p will get you a fair chunk of time. Response times aren't great, but OK generally. There are quite a few cafés around.

Guide books Probably the best is the Bradt guide to Ghana. The 4th is the latest edition (2007), ISBN 978-1841622057. The photograph of the guide in Kakum in the earlier edition is Still Alive (that's his name) who showed us around in 2004. There are no other guide books that are exclusively on Ghana. The closest Lonely Planet come is West Africa, covering a multitude of countries. The Link has copies of older versions of both books for travellers to browse or borrow.

Maps The only exclusively Ghana map is ITMB. The latest version (2007) is of larger scale than before, 1:500K, ISBN 978-1553412267. Cost is £7.50 from Amazon. Jane Murray has very useful 1:50,000 Japanese maps of Sekondi-Takoradi, two sheets covering the whole city and surrounding area. For Sekondi-Takoradi there are no street maps available locally. The Bradt guide has maps of the main areas of Takoradi, and scanning these on to single sheets for walking around when there is very handy.

Sporting options

To play tennis, give Margaret a ring on 0244 659644. She is a handy player. Ask if she can fix you up with a racquet.

Football is played at Gyandu Park in Sekondi, from Premier League through to school events. Hasaacas play in the Premier League, Eleven Wise and Sporting Metro play in Division 1, the level below. Often something is going on there, but you need to ask around. Hopefully there will soon be matches at the new Sekondi Stadium. Phone Malik on 0244 978453.

Georgina is ladies' golf captain at Beach Road Golf Club. Contact her on 0244 454359 if you'd like a game of golf.

Dressmaking

Georgina is also a dressmaker. If you want an African dress made you can buy material in the market and ask Georgina to make it up. Another excellent source of ready-made or personally tailored outfits is Stop Over African Wear House (*sic*) opposite the Police Reserve, not far from the Africana Roundabout.

10. Life for the ordinary Ghanaian.

Ghanaian people are enormously friendly and welcoming, and this will undoubtedly be stamped on your travel experience. However, this is despite life for most Ghanaians being enormously tough, primarily for economic reasons. Annual income for something like 80% of Ghanaians is under £500, and naturally this massively impacts on their life-style. What's more, if anything this is getting tougher, the recent tripling of fuel costs over the last couple of years being a prime example. Also, very recently Ghana has discovered oil, which will affect the Takoradi region in particular - one can only hope it doesn't prove the poison chalice which it has done in so many other countries for ordinary people.

The economy is very different to UK. Unlike UK, it is POSSIBLE to live on such a tiny income, but strangely that doesn't mean everything is cheaper. Until very recently, identical consumer goods were 2 to 4 times their price in UK, although that is now changing - the cheapest new DVD player 2 years ago would cost £90, but now they can be bought for £30. Also mobile phones have gone much the same way, although somehow nearly everybody you met still had one ! However, these are luxury items, and the price of essential goods is rising. The difference with UK is that there are a lot of very cheap goods around, but the quality of these is not good at all. The other major difference with UK is the cost of services. People's time is very cheap, so paying somebody to do something is more acceptable for a poor Ghanaian than it is for a (as seen by a Ghanaian) relatively rich westerner. For instance, there is no DIY presence in Ghana, as employing somebody to do something is so cheap, and hearing that I lived alone, somebody once asked me if I employed a cook (assuming that would be cheap !). Another example of people's time being cheap involves the long hours many women spend in a salon getting their hair fixed, all for £3 or so, which is a long labour-intensive process. In Ghana, people don't really see time as money, as it doesn't pay much - this may largely account for the generally awful standards of time-keeping. Ghanaians refer to subsistence expenses as 'chop money', a derivation from the cheap eateries called chop-bars.

Also, there is no state social safety net for Ghanaians, and with that goes a lack of direct taxation for most people. One has to pay for school fees, medical attention, and even a postal address. If we are unwell, we go to the doctor, and if it's sufficiently serious, he/she refers us to go to hospital. In Ghana, this works in reverse - there's no local surgery to attend, one just goes straight to hospital. There's no such thing as hospital food, your friends or family bring it in for you.

For people old enough to remember, in many ways life today in Takoradi reminds one of life in Plymouth 50 years ago - e.g. deference (e.g. people are reluctant to ask a doctor 'what's my problem?'), less traffic, safe for children to go out and play, the waterfront basically unused, policemen at liberty to give the old 'clip around the ear', and no 'nanny state'.

Ghana is a most overtly Christian country. Church-going on Sunday's is pretty universal, and in any built-up area you are unlikely to go more than 100 metres or so without seeing a sign with a religious meaning, be it the name of a business, a sticker on a car, or whatever. However, Sekondi-Takoradi also has something like 100,000 Muslims, but everyone gets along together very peacefully in harmony. A very big social occasion is a funeral - they last all week-end, with Saturday the big day. People's dress is basically white, and they have a big party, as long as the person who died had a decent innings. Even the anniversary of someone's death is celebrated.

Descriptions of relatives - for aunt, uncle, niece, nephew one is often told they are mother, father, daughter, son respectively. Family ties are very close in Ghana, and what we find confusing is very natural to them.

Women's hair is wholly different to what one would typically find in Plymouth. Nearly all the ladies' hair-dos are 'weave-ons', meaning artificial hair attached to a short base of their own hair. This allows a level of flexibility for appearance not generally available with one's own hair, but it can make it confusing recognising somebody you know ! This option is not available to girls in school (no doubt not to their liking !), where they have to keep to their natural hair, which is invariably very short. Unsurprisingly all this fun over hair doesn't extend to Ghanaian men !

11. Motoring in Ghana.

This is something few travellers are likely to experience, unless they hire a car. However, I can also relate my experience from the standpoint of car ownership. Most of you will only be making a short visit, so using taxis locally, and using the STC bus for longer trips will probably suffice. However, if your stay is longer, and you wish to explore further afield, other options may be worth considering.

To do some touring, one will probably want the use of a car for a few days. If one is going to do the driving, an option is a hire car. If not, you will need somebody reliable to take you around. Either way, this will prove expensive.

The hire car business is not well developed in Ghana through very low usage, so rates are higher than Europe. The small print is also worth close attention, particularly on insurance matters, as car insurance is also much less well developed than at home. Few people insure their cars with comprehensive insurance, as the annual premium tends to be around 7% of the value of the car. An International Driving Permit isn't obligatory, but very advisable, and have some photocopies. The reality is that if your skin is white, you will get stopped by policeman exponentially more than if you are black. My Ghanaian friend went months without being stopped, then I come along and it happens 3 times a day. Sometimes they just want a back-hander, sometimes they're just being officious, but that's the way it is.

Hiring someone to do your driving is also expensive, to a degree that is totally out of kilter for what one would pay a taxi driver for a long trip. In addition to paying for the fuel and chop money and accommodation (only £3 a night or so) for the driver, you will likely be asked to pay a daily rate for the use of the car which is at least double the entire cost of a return taxi day trip from Takoradi to Accra - nobody has ever convinced me of the logic of this, but that's the way it is ! Because of the vulnerable position one would be in under such an arrangement, it is vitally important that you find out beforehand that your driver is clearly known to be trustworthy.

Driving is getting easier on the main roads now the surfaces are being improved. However, on bad surfaces beware of potholes - they can really mess up your suspension, cause punctures and bend wheel frames. This is not helped when one wants to be careful, and big trucks and 4x4s with big wheels, that deal with potholes easily, hound you with aggressive driving, overtaking in such a way to restrict your slalom course! Night driving is rather stressful, because of poor street lighting. Driving in Accra is pretty horrid. People drive aggressively, and the road signs aren't very good, but worst of all are the tro-tro drivers. Tro-tros are the cheapest form of public transport, usually mini-buses. The key thing to remember is that they use the inside lane, and keep cutting out - don't use that inside lane. Driving in ST is fairly civilised, the only difficult place really being Takoradi Market Circle.

Buying a second-hand car is expensive, the market value of a decent car being up to 3 times the cost at home. Cars that have been used in Ghana have a reputation for being beaten up wrecks, so what is sought are cars that have been imported from Europe, paradoxically referred to as 'home use' ! One has to display an insurance disc as well as a tax disc. There is a rather gentle MOT equivalent required when renewing a tax disc, but seeing some of the foul exhaust emissions that one finds themselves following sometimes, there must be ways of getting anything through ! When your car needs repairing, the market in spare parts is almost entirely second-hand, whereas in UK this is basically limited to scrap merchants. Also, labour charges are very cheap. If one breaks down, helpful people just seem to appear, happy to help you for what we would regard as a pittance. However, there is one different way of operating in Ghana that one may encounter at a garage, which applies not just in the motor trade. If you've arranged some work with the boss man, make sure he's there when the work is done. The problem is that in Ghana there isn't such a position as foreman, so if the boss is away (they say 'he has travelled'), nobody else will take responsibility for the work, to one's great frustration.

12. Tourism options in the Sekondi-Takoradi area.

ST itself has a lot of tourism potential, but as yet it hasn't been developed (the Link is trying to help with this), but it is still interesting to look around. Takoradi is the modern, commercial city, where you are more likely to stay as it offers more creature comforts. Market Circle is the centre of town, from which the main roads fan out. The Beach Road area is the most affluent part and where the best hotels are, effectively a leafy suburb by the sea. One can take a nice walk along the beach from Africa Beach Hotel. Sekondi is much more traditional African in nature, with the extra character of an old town. It is also much more visibly Muslim, and there are several mosques there. It is an interesting place to walk around. Sekondi is the naval port, and Takoradi the commercial port. The two cities are about 5 miles apart, and the coastal drive between them is quite picturesque. The Sekondi football stadium, built by the Chinese for the 2008 African Cup of Nations, is outside Sekondi, just off the link road to the main road to Accra.

Here is a selection of day trip options from ST :-

- Cape Coast and Elmina. These are on the way to/from Accra, just over 1 hour's travelling away. They both have castles which were used for the transportation of slaves, and tours around the castles are understandably moving experiences. Cape Coast is a substantial town and the transport hub for the area, Elmina a very small town.
- Kakum. This is one of only 8 rain-forest canopy walks in the world, a few miles north of Cape Coast. It may look scary, walking along suspended up in the tree-tops, but it is perfectly safe as the chest high sides are impossible to fall through.
- Shama. This is a small seaside town about a dozen miles east of ST. It is very African, and you will see fisherman making nets, and other fishing activities. There is also a fort.
- Dixcove. This is similar to Shama in nature, but also has an interesting fort, which also gives an elevated view of the village. It is less than 20 miles west of Takoradi.
- Busua. This is a nice beach resort within 20 miles west of Takoradi. One can walk for a mile or more along a wide expanse of sandy beach.
- Axim. Another beach resort west of Takoradi, but about twice the distance of Busua, and similar.
- Nzulezo. This is a jewel in the crown to rival Kakum. It is a fishing village on stilts, and in mid-afternoon you see the children returning from school in rowing boats. You go there by an hour long dug-out canoe ride from near the town of Beyin, about 70 miles west of Takoradi on the coast.

13. Learn the Local language

Barry Harding contributes this short guide to Fanté

I asked the hotel and restaurant staff for help in learning some basic Fanté vocabulary. I struggled with the spellings but had great fun with the staff as I tried my pronunciation based on very poor phonetic spelling. They were very patient with me!!

Try it for yourself, just say what you see, bearing in mind that I do have a Yorkshire accent!!!!

How are you?	Otiden	I am well	méwhoyie
Thank you	mudassi	Please	mépocho
Good morning	mumooachi		
Good afternoon	mumooaha		
Good evening	mumooaji		

Monday	joda
Tuesday	ebenada
Wednesday	icuda
Thursday	éyoda
Friday	eefeeda
Saturday	menenda
Sunday	kwésiada

1	écul	6	esia
2	ébien	7	esun
3	ébassa	8	awotre
4	annan	9	acrun
5	enum	10	idu

Whatever else you say, try "Otiden!" when you meet a Ghanaian – they'll be delighted that you made the effort!

There are several Ghanaian languages, the other most common one in ST being Twi. Speakers of Twi and Fanté seem to have no problem understanding each other. There are also people around from the Volta region - these are the Ewe, who have their own language, but they all speak Twi / Fanté OK.

You will find that most Ghanaians in towns and cities speak good English, good enough for you to enjoy a real conversation with them. It is often so good that one forgets that they aren't speaking to another Brit, and then speak too quickly. Remember that you are speaking in your first language to somebody who is speaking remarkably well in their *second* language, and what's more, your British accent seems very strange to them, as they usually hear English spoken in a West African accent (which will test you sometimes !).

PRE TRAVEL DATA SHEET

Name
Passport Number
Home Address
Date of Birth
Name of GP and contact details
Details of any Medical Conditions (see Note 1)
Contact persons in an Emergency (see Note 2), who will be available during your stay in Ghana - please give phone numbers for all times if possible. Please supply a Link contact and a personal contact if possible.
Travel Insurance Company and Policy Number
Contact Number(s) for Insurance Company 24/7 (see Note 3)

<p>Details of Air Ticket. Give details of travel agent with contact details 24/7, if booked that way. If booked by e-ticket, email details to Link contacts in Plymouth and Ghana.</p>
<p>Address(es) whilst in Ghana, with dates at each address if possible.</p>
<p>Contact telephone number(s) whilst in Ghana. If you buy a sim card in Ghana, text details once you have them.</p>
<p>Travelling Companions, with phone numbers if appropriate.</p>
<p>Brief Timetable in Ghana, including arrival / departure date, details of intended onward travel, and anything else foreseeable as relevant should you need help.</p>

Note 1: Traveller could be fit for travel, but may be, for example, asthmatic, diabetic or hypertensive, and details of medication being taken for the condition could be of assistance to those giving treatment in a medically related emergency.

Note 2: Folk traditionally use 'Next of Kin' without thought as to whether they will be readily available - not much help if they are abroad on holiday, or whatever ! It is important that the contact declared is someone who can be readily available whilst the traveller is in Ghana, and can contact the traveller's immediate family / friends in the event of an emergency or mishap.

Note 3: Insurers and Travel Agents are giving out 087 / 084 UK numbers for emergency contact, but these numbers cannot be called from Ghana. It is important to provide a UK landline number which can be called from Ghana - ask the company concerned to provide you with this, explaining the reason. Ways can usually be found to get around this, this is error-prone and essential time is likely to be lost. Many of these 087/084 numbers can be 'translated' by looking them up on www.saynoto0870.com/search.php .