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# **Ghana**

## **One semester abroad**

Report

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# **Contents**

## **1 Introduction**

## **2 Studying in Ghana**

2.1 My Objectives & Expectations

2.2 My new Environment: Ghana

2.3 Studying at the University of Ghana

## **3 Reflection**

## **Literature**

## **Annex**

# **1 Introduction**

For students of geography, it is recommended to spend time apart from home in distant places by absolving e.g. internships or a semester abroad. Already when I applied for geography, I thought about spending my fifth semester at a university far away from Flensburg. And so I did!

Before I could start my adventure, I had to decide where to go. However, it was an easy decision after the Head of *Department for Geography and Resource Development* of the University of Ghana visited the University of Flensburg and piqued my curiosity for his home country.

## **2 Studying in Ghana**

### **2.1 My Objectives & Expectations**

“Why Ghana?” was always the question people asked me when I told them, I will spend one semester at the University of Ghana and the answer was always the same: “It is far away and totally different from home!”

To spend one semester abroad meant for me to escape from my German daily life, meet new people from all over the world and to delve into a culture, different from my own. Ghana seemed to be a perfect place to realize these ideas. I did not want to have too many expectations, but at the latest that I joined a preparatory course at the University of Flensburg about Ghana – usually arranged for those, who went to the country for an internship – I learned more about my new environment and started to create a specific image about my semester abroad.

One of the reasons for spending a semester at the University of Ghana was that I needed a break from my stressful German daily life referring to my studies and side job. I saw the chance to gain (spatial) distance to lose all the stress and pressure assembled during the last month and to think about different possibilities for my future. Beside my escape from Flensburg, I expected to broaden my horizon in different ways. In addition to the improvement of my English skills, experience a new culture that could not differ more from my own, received priority. Various aspects such as new manners, a different way of life, a cuisine unlike the German but also other methods of teaching and studying, I intended not only to see but also to experience. I expected from my studies in Ghana to participate in interesting lectures, even if I probably would have some comprehension problems because of a language barrier. Additionally I was curious about experiencing how a student’s daily life and studies in Ghana are. But next to my life as a student of the University of Ghana, it was also important for me to have time for travelling to see and find out as much as possible about my new temporary home.

Furthermore, my objective was to meet lots of new people, both, Ghanaians, who could introduce me to their culture and people from very different nations to explore and understand the new environment together.

I never doubted that a semester in Ghana implies a large-scale challenge. But I awaited this challenge relaxed and imagined that I could calmly confront difficulties and problems that would certainly appear, because those challenges were a major impulse for me to visit Ghana. However, my assumption was that my prospective living situation would be the most difficult challenge. I did not have an exact idea about the accommodation for the international students, but I knew that I would share a room for five months with a stranger – a tough condition for someone like me with my own apartment in Flensburg.

## **2.2 My new Environment: Ghana**

The in West Africa located former British colony – known as Gold Coast – gained its independence in 1957. Since that day the country is known as Ghana.

The Republic of Ghana shares its borders with the francophone nations Côte d'Ivoire in the west, Burkina Faso in the north and Togo in the east. In the south, Ghana borders on the Atlantic Ocean, more specific, the Gulf of Guinea. The country is divided into ten administrative regions: Volta and Greater Accra Region, including Accra, the capital city of Ghana, Central Region, including Cape Coast, the former capital, Eastern, Western, Ashanti, Brong-Ahafo, Northern, Upper-West and Upper-East Region. The national language is English. Besides, many different languages and dialects are common in Ghana (e.g. Twi).

As per the government of Ghana, the total population of the democratic country is about 24.000.000 (status: 2010). With about 3.000.000 inhabitants (status: 2000), the Greater Accra Region is the second most populated region in Ghana (most populated is the Ashanti Region). The University of Ghana is located just in this region. The campus lies about 13 km north-east of Accra, in Legon. The University of Ghana was founded as the University College in August 11, 1948 when Ghana was still known as Gold Coast, to provide higher education in the British colony (ACADEMIC AFFAIRS DIRECTORATE 2009: 9). The current student population is about 42.700, with a male-female-ratio about 3:2 and about 1.400 foreign students and 950 senior members for research and teaching. The University of Ghana is the oldest and largest of the five public universities in the country (ACADEMIC AFFAIRS DIRECTORATE 2009: 10). The beautiful, tropical campus is dominated by a unique Asian architecture and provides many halls of residence, departments, lecture halls and laboratories, libraries such as the Balme Library – a monumental building named after David Mowbray Balme, the first principal of the University College –, an open-air theatre, sport fields, a sport stadium and a swimming pool with a gym close-by, cafeterias, restaurants, shops and a night market, university basic schools, a national post office and a variety of banking houses (ACADEMIC AFFAIRS DIRECTORATE 2009: 11). The whole campus area is permanently under strict observation by several security guards and policemen.

### **2.3 Studying at the University of Ghana**

To study at the University of Ghana connoted for most students to live on campus in one of the numerous residence halls. Almost every non-African international student (about 90% from the USA) is sheltered in one of the two International Students' Hostels (lovingly called "ISH" 1 & 2) mixed with local students and some African internationals such as Nigerians (the Nigerians represent the largest part of the international students). Both ISH's are located at the south of the campus and each hostel has four levels with 43 single and 85 double rooms. Furthermore, each ISH provides twelve common washrooms, six kitchens, three TV-Rooms, two reading rooms and one small restaurant. Besides, ISH 2 is equipped with a laundry.

The first semester of an academic year at the University of Ghana begins in mid of August and ends a few days before Christmas. All international students who arrive in a well defined time period can enjoy a pick-up service from the airport to ISH organised by the IPO (International Programmes Office). Arrived at ISH, every student first gets a room. Most non-African internationals are sharing their room with an African student. Anyhow, my roommate was a girl from Norway! The Ghanaian roommates often just arrive when the lectures have already started. The first days of an international student are filled with unpacking, orientation organised by the IPO, doing important errands (e.g. buying plates, saucepans, toilet paper, bucket, pillow etc.) as well as the payment of the school and accommodation fees, registration for courses and exams within a specific level (the bachelor-program is grouped into four levels, level 100 to level 400), receiving one's students' ID-card and – of course – adaptation to a new environment.

The lectures do not differ that much from those in Germany. There is only little interaction between students and lecturer. The lecturer asks questions just at times and in the end students get usually the chance to eliminate obscurities. Furthermore, most lecturers are using Power Point Presentations even if not one lecture room is equipped with a beamer; but every class has a class representative ("class rep") and this person must organise a beamer on time. The few lectures that are not hold by Power Point are arranged with dictates. The lecturer is dictating the entire presentation and the students are writing almost everything verbatim. Seminars like in Germany do not exist, but some departments offer tutorials referring to a particular lecture. Nevertheless, sometimes students have to get active by presenting a given issue by Power Point within the lecture or writing assignments about a specific question. Those duties are mostly handled by teamwork.

Apart from the regular lectures and the few assignments, the first weeks of the semester at the University of Ghana are quite relaxed. It seems like the local students do not even take a look into there lecture notes afterwards while the few internationals who come from non-English speaking countries at least go through their notes straight after a lecture to eliminate last comprehension problems. The proper "cramming" and intense dealing with the assembled materials start just a

short time before the exam period begins. The studying material is composed of lecture notes, copied readings the students can buy and – if available – former exam-papers. The exam period lasted from mid of November till mid of December. One week before the first exams begin, the students get a “Revision-Week” to have free time to prepare and study.

Every exam at the University of Ghana lasted two and a half hours. Each student receives a prepared booklet and about ten minutes before an exam starts officially, the students get the exam-paper to have a first look. In most departments, an exam includes two sections. Each section has three questions. All in all, three questions must be answered – in form of three essays – with at least one question of each section. The guidelines for the exams at the University of Ghana are much stricter as at the University of Flensburg. It is not allowed to take any piece of paper or a phone into the venue. Moreover, every student has a defined seat, identified by the respective index number, written on the desk. Furthermore each student has to sign on a paper (internationals must sign twice) and must be identified by one’s students’ ID-card. The lecturer is never present. Other staffs from the particular department are the minder.

Of course, studying in Ghana includes also leisure. While Ghanaians prefer to spend that time with watching TV in their rooms, playing e.g. football on campus and going to church every Sunday, the international students prefer rather to visit places off campus to experience the new environment. To capture the markets in Accra downtown, strolling through the Cultural Art Centre, laying in the sun, shopping in one of the „western-style“ malls or participate in the Reggae Night every Wednesday at two different beaches are just a few examples for a students’ recreation in Ghana. Alternatively it is also possible to spend one’s leisure on campus. Students can join one of the numerous sport teams (e.g. football, basketball, volleyball, swimming etc.), go to the gym as well as swimming lanes in the campus pool or participate in movie nights or music performances. The weekends of an international student, that mostly start already on Friday, are basically reserved for travelling and clubbing. Leisure can also include the Ghanaian cuisine. Bread and egg in the morning and for lunch and dinner rice and plantains in a numerous of variations, chicken, fish, yams and of course the national dish Fufu, just to name a few, are almost everywhere to get.

### **3 Reflection**

As an international student at the University of Ghana I felt never left alone due to the IPO. The IPO not just made recommendable offers such as the well organised airport pick-up service or an orientation program; if any problems, difficulties or obscurities appeared, we students could always contact the IPO. Additionally, it was quite disburdened that the University provides a safe accommodation for every international student. To live in ISH with other internationals and locals is exciting and great even though it is not always easy.

The rooms in ISH are adequate and I always felt comfortable in my new home. The kitchens need getting used to. But actually it is good to have the possibility of using hotplates and a refrigerator so that ants and rats (no permanent condition) can be ignored. The common washrooms were for some a difficulty, because men and women are not always separated. Personally, I never had a problem with sharing a washroom, even with men. But unfortunately, ISH 2 had serious problems referring to running water during my first four month and it seemed like nobody felt responsible. Not until end of November, construction works started to change the water system. Since then, water was almost always running, but before it happened that we had no water again and again so that ISH 2 started to smell disgusting and excrement were summing in the toilets. To get water from somewhere else for washing the dishes or to take a bucket shower was no problem. In addition it was possible to take a shower in ISH 1. But the situation with the toilets was really a challenge nobody wanted to adapt to. Referring to that, it should be noticed that the cleaning staff made day-to-day all efforts to keep ISH clean, even without running water. Also the staff from the laundry made a good job with washing and drying the students' laundry. Nevertheless, most students washed the bigger part of their laundry by hand – a quite exhausting challenge. It is impressive to think about Ghanaian women who wash the laundry of their e.g. five-headed family regularly.

Beside the ambient conditions, I made both positive and negative experiences with living next door to Ghanaian and other African students. A difficulty was to get used to those Africans who got up very early and went to sleep very late. Unfortunately I learned that the locals – but also Nigerians – are quite inconsiderate. However, this behaviour seemed not to be intended rather like a common manner. Apparently they are just not used to think about if their behaviour bothers others. E.g. those Africans I met were banging doors, singing (not always good but loud), listening to music so that the entire hostel could almost feel the bass and were chatting with such a high volume like they were standing meters apart from each other, and all this in the very early morning or during the night. This behaviour is interesting but a mystery to those who were raised to be always considerate. Even if it was never a problem to ask for more silence and I got slightly used to the noise 24/7, to deal with it was just exhausting at times. In addition, it was complicated to cope with some students' understanding of basic sanitation, e.g. to flush the toilet, wash hands regular or even the use of toilet paper were uncommon. In general I do not care about other people's hygienic behaviour as long as it does not affect me, but always to deal with the excrement of other students was disgusting. There were two possibilities: I could tell the person in question to flush or I could just try to ignore it and do not care about. I chose the second way, because I would feel bad, like teaching them sanitation and I think that is not my duty at all.

Besides I made also very positive experiences by sharing a hostel with the local students. Ghanaians are the most sociable people I have ever met. It was never a problem to have a conversation with the

local students, because they were always interested where the internationals come from, what courses they do etc. In addition, especially the female students like to cook and invite other people. Sharing seems to be an important virtue in Ghana. They do not just like to share food, but also knowledge. Ghanaian friends gladly help foreigners to understand their culture or to teach them some words in Twi, a widely-used Ghanaian language. Every question can be asked, even if the first reaction is mostly a loud laugh; but I learned that Ghanaians never laugh about people, they smile at them and they do this constantly. To share a hostel with Ghanaians connoted one was never alone, because we internationals were always welcome to join or visit the locals.

All in all, it is sometimes a challenge to live in ISH, together with students who behave so much different as oneself. But even if I was glad to return to my own apartment after five month, the experiences I made in ISH were awesome and I wouldn't want to miss them. For instance, I learned to fade out annoying noise and my worst concern, to share a small room for one semester, turned out to be one of my greatest experiences.

Additionally to my life in ISH, I perceived the studies at the *Department of Geography and Resource Development* as very positive and promotional. The Head of Department was always concerned with the well-being of the internationals and was available for questions and to solve problems. Furthermore, all my lecturers were interesting characters so that I really enjoyed being taught by them. Even though I had little comprehension problems in the first few weeks, after a short time I could catch the African English quite well. I also learned fast that time is not the Ghanaian's business. In my first week I heard from a local person the great sentence: "You have the watch, but we have the time!" and the Ghanaians are taken that literally. All the more, I was surprised to see that most of the local students were exceedingly on time, while the lecturers tended to be late. Teamwork with the local students to prepare assignments went very well and it was interesting and great to see how enthusiastic they can discuss about a given topic.

My only but tremendous point of critique about studies at the University of Ghana in general is that references are rarely or even not indicated at all and if references are available, they are mostly incomplete and incorrect (e.g. "source: www"). Not even readings are sourced. I read one time three copied chapters of a book I did not even know the title or author. In addition, Ghanaians like to use Wikipedia as a reasonable source. I was quite shocked about this "misdeed".

Apart from life and studies on campus, the daily life includes some challenges. Ghanaians are very religious and insist on their faith obstinately. Those Ghanaians I met would never start to deal with their belief critically, because everything is written in the bible, hence it is a fact. And especially the women tended to start religious discussions that never find an end, because they showed no understanding at all in reference to unbelieving or different believing people. For them, there is no doubt that the bible publishes the truth. In respect to this, my only positive experience was to learn



something about the Ghanaian faith and contents of the bible. Personally, I accept every kind of faith and those discussions could have been very interesting if both parties would have shown mutual understanding, but to talk with a non-tolerant person – with regards to religion – was just exhausting.

Beside those religious debates, I was confronted with begging people. Those are mostly children between the age of five and ten belonging to the Romanies. To realize how their parents exploit them to collect money and other goods while they are sleeping in the shadow, broke my heart.

To experience the vivid market life in Ghana as well as the seller all over with their goods carried on their heads was very remarkable. It is totally fun to delve into the markets but inevitably I started to think about what kind of life it is to labour every day – Monday to Sunday – from the early morning till night in the dust and hot exhausting sun. Especially to see little children working, even if Ghana has school attendance, was a sad experience. I had a great childhood within an easy going life and they seemed to have nothing but their work. But despite the hard labour they afford, I saw everywhere energetic people singing, dancing and laughing. Obviously Ghanaians enjoy themselves. They appreciate already little things in their life and this virtue is commendable.

I mentioned already the sociable manner of the Ghanaian students. But also off campus, the local people were always very interested to meet an “Obroni” (white person) or to touch one. For me as German, who is used to German reservation, it was sometimes overwhelming that everybody wanted to be my friend or grabbed me. Especially for women it is very exhausting to interact with Ghanaian men after a while. Every man wanted to talk to me, to be my friend, to get my phone number without even knowing my name, just because he thought I’m so beautiful. Of course it’s great to make friends but not with about ten new men per day and if those “friendships” are based on superficiality. But this outgoing behaviour can also be advantageous. I guess because I met many locals I felt more integrated into the new environment and I really met nice, helpful and great people.

I could continue with more aspects, could immerge more into details. There is so much I experienced during five exciting months. Ghana taught me, showed me and gave me much and I only hope I gave as much as I received. Of course there are things I will not miss such as negotiating about totally inappropriate prices, the enormous air pollution or exhausting noise 24/7. But anyhow I will miss a lot. The climate, when the sun burns and the wind blows over my skin, local music with dancing and singing people all over, the Ghanaian vitality, never to feel stress due to pressure of time, because I learned time is so much a relative term, Trotro rides, the likely most interesting and wonderful way to participate in Accra’s horrible traffic, an impressive, beautiful varied landscape, crickets that chirred me to sleep every night and toads that kept me from sleeping

because of their croaking concerts, delicious and spicy Ghanaian food, reggae nights at awesome locations as well as lovely people I met – internationals and locals; in short: just Ghana!

I realised every day, how easy and extravagant my German life actually is. I wish I will never forget to cherish already the little things in my life. Hopefully I will always keep some of the Ghanaian esprit and composure. My semester abroad gave me a new perspective towards life. I had time to relax, to enjoy my escape and to think about my future. Beside knowledge about Ghana's culture I learned a lot in my lectures during the semester. Furthermore, I realised that I'm proud to be German, even if almost everybody's first sentence was: "I heard all Germans are racists!" and so reminded me of the horrible German history; but nevertheless, I like my country, but I never thought about before. I'm sure there are more little positive changes I made even though I do not realise it right now, but I will in the future. I feel shaped due to my personal Ghana adventure in a very positive way. I was not sad when I left Germany but I will be when I leave Ghana.

Thanks Ghana!

## Literature

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## **Practical Information for prospective International Students of the University of Ghana**

It is a challenge to spend one semester in a developing country and if you plan to complete a semester abroad in Ghana, you should prepare for the stay. If possible you should participate in a preparatory course concerning with Ghana. If your University does not offer such a course, you should start independently to deal intensely with your future temporary home. Without any preparation, it is more difficult to adapt to the new environment and it is not advisable to visit Ghana. Especially cultural aspects are important to study. For instance, it is necessary to know that you always hand a Ghanaian a thing out with your right hand, because the left is classified to be unclean. If it happens that you hand something out with your left, just apologize. It is also fundamental to deal with Ghana's climate. If you know that you can not handle hot and humid weather everyday, you should probably reconsider your plans.

Before the adventure can start, all necessary inoculations should be done. An obligation is just the inoculation for yellow fever, but you must get informed about if other inoculations are advisable as well. Do not forget to talk to your insurance about meeting the costs and of course, seek for a proper insurance for abroad! In addition you need to think about taking a malaria prophylaxis. It is likely to get malaria. Even with prophylaxis you can get sick, but the medical treatment around the campus is totally adequate so that you do not have to be concerned. Best is to get use to the thought that you can get malaria just as problems with your digestive.

To get financial aid, it is important to apply for "AuslandsBAföG" or a stipend on time. The study and accommodation fees are high but even without financial aid you should spend your semester in Ghana. The amount of fees is just little compared with the experiences you will make. In addition, talk to responsible persons to find out if the credits you will achieve in Ghana can get transferred into your study-program at home. Even though the acceptance of achievements is for many students important, do not cancel your plans just because your credits can not get transferred and you will prolong your study. It is worth it!

Before you can concern about getting a visa, you need to book your flight with respect to the official term and the period within the IPO (International Programmes Office) of the University of Ghana offers its airport pick-up service. In addition do not forget to request a passport, if you do not have (a valid) one. After that it is about contacting the Ghanaian embassy and being patient (perfect exercise for one's stay in Ghana). Fundamental is that you need to apply for the right visa type. Besides, be aware of the fact that every visa is just valid for 60 days so that you have to extend your visa at the Immigration Service in Ghana on time.

The Ghanaian currency is Ghana Cedi. You will need a Visa card to receive money. Almost every ATM just accepts Visa exclusively. Try to find a bank at home that allocates you a Visa card for

free with that you can get money without paying additional fees. Furthermore, it is advisable to use online banking to manage your money abroad.

If everything else is completed, you should contact the IPO to register for the recommendable airport pick-up service. In addition you need to decide if you want to apply for a single room in ISH (International Students' Hostel), your Ghanaian accommodation. But single rooms are more expensive and hard to get. If all preparations are done, the journey can begin.

Arrived at Legon campus, you should find out if the room you will get is permanent or if you have to move again, to know if you can start to unpack. Within the following days you need to pay all your fees. Most local and international students make their payments in cash. The easiest way to avoid waiting for hours in front of the bank with lots of money in your pocket is to make an online bank transfer if possible. In addition, you will register for your courses and exams during the first days. It is important to be aware about the determinations of possible course combinations. You will get the general information at an orientation program organised by the IPO. But the information does not include specific determinations of the several departments so that you need to pay attention to the notice boards. Otherwise it is possible that you will have two exams at the same time.

The daily life on campus is quite easy. If you do not want to go to Accra downtown, you can get all basic needs at the night market – close-by ISH – or within the surrounding area. You should know that life on campus is different to life off campus. While you can buy food on campus almost without concerns, you should take care off campus. The basic principle “cook it, boil it, peel it or forget it” is essential. In addition, too revealing clothes apart from the campus are not advisable. On campus or by clubbing in Osu, Accra's party quarter, you can dress how you like. Anyhow, even if the “Legon Girls”, the female students on campus, are dressing themselves like participating in a fashion show, you should try to be more sensitive with regard to clothes. It is always a difference if a local or an international wears a very short skirt or shorts.

If you are ready to enter the markets in Accra downtown, you must be aware that you have to negotiate. But first you have to decide how to get there. The cheapest way is a ride by “trotro”. After your preparation you will know all about trotros. There is just one thing to say: you need to be patient, persistent and pushy. Otherwise you will never reach your aim!

An easier way to move forward is driving by taxi. Taxis in Ghana are everywhere available, but it can become very exhausting to use one. You will not find a taximeter, so that you have to negotiate about the price before you get in. If you have no ideas about good prices, it is recommendable to ask a Ghanaian friend how much you should pay. Otherwise you are lost, because the taxi drivers are used to give you an “Obroni-price” ( a price for white, “rich” persons) that can be as double as the common price. You have to negotiate constantly. Be patient and wait for another taxi if you do

not get a reasonable price. Important is that you never hand out the money before you reached the destination.

Besides, be aware about the fact that you stand out because you are an obroni (white person). Even though the locals in Accra are used to white people, they will shout “obroni” and some will touch you. If just children grabbing your arm because they are curious, it is totally fine; but if it happens that men and women always grabbing you, sometimes in an inappropriate way, you do not need to put up with that. Unfortunately, many Ghanaians do not understand that they interfere into your privacy. If you do not want that strangers touching you just tell them precisely but kindly.

Ghanaians are sociable and curious to meet internationals. Try to be even sociable as they are. But if you really do not want to talk to someone – for whatever reason – you need to tell him/her precisely. To try to communicate by body language is not working. Ghanaians can not read it at all! For women it is important to know that about 90% of the male Ghanaians will ask for the phone number. Think that through. Worst case could be, you will receive so many messages and calls that you get very annoyed. Another question the locals ask likely is if you are engaged or married. For women it is recommendable to wear a “fake-ring” to not get bothered by too many men. Usually they recognize that and will behave more reserved.

For smokers, Ghana is the perfect place to quit. Smokers should avoid smoking in public, because not many Ghanaians are smoking cigarettes. Smokers are not welcomed everywhere and that should be considered.

Beside all the things you should be prepared for and aware about, it is not to forget that a semester at the University of Ghana is really fun and you should looking forward to that wonderful time you will have to make your own experiences and to explore the different world. All advises are just little aspects out of a whole and you will get used to it without always thinking about. Ghana is not exhausting in a bad way; it is much more an exciting and different challenge!

Last but not least, some ideas for your recreation:

During the week – after your lectures – you can delve into the market life off campus, scroll through the Cultural Art Centre (a paradise for those who enjoy negotiating and for smokers, because this terrain is dominated by Rastafarians so that smoking in public is not offending), go shopping in one of the “western-style” malls (if you ever need a little escape from Africa) or relax on beaches or at a pool. Even on campus there are many possibilities to spend your leisure. You can join one of the numerous sport teams (e.g. football, basketball, volleyball, swimming), use the equipment in the gym or participate in offered courses, swim some lanes in the campus pool, meet your new friends or if you prefer calmness you can just relax in your room in front of your laptop with browsing or a good movie. Also the nights can appear varied. Most students enjoy e.g. to go to restaurants, pubs or the cinema at the Accra Mall – close-by the campus – visit movie nights or

music performances on campus or go clubbing in Osu or to the Reggae Night every Wednesday at two different beaches in La, another quarter of Accra (great location!).

Most weekends are used for travelling. For many students, weekend already begins on Friday so that there is enough time to explore Ghana. It is advisable to plan and start the trips as soon as possible, even if it seems like you have lots of time for travelling. The end of the semester will arrive faster than you can imagine. But even though you can create your stay in Ghana in a variety of ways, you should never forget that you are not a tourist. You are a student!

All in all there is no perfect preparation. Challenges will appear constantly, but without them, your Ghanaian life would be too easy and boring. A stay in Ghana is eventful, exciting, interesting and I would always recommend it, but to really understand what I am talking about, you have to have been there!