My trip to Ghana, A Once in a lifetime experience

Preparing for a trip to Ghana was the most difficult part of my experience. Returning to the country that both my mother and father were born and raised, and taking on the responsibilities of representing Eastern Connecticut State University was almost overwhelming. I imagined getting to the airport and thinking of the life that I have been so accustomed to, and also living up to the expectations of my Ghanaian heritage. This experience gave me the opportunity to step out of my own skin and look at myself in a different light. I found that as I anticipated the changes that I expected to endure, they happened without me noticing.

Life sometimes throws a twist your way now and then, but during this experience I think life just threw a twister. From the moment I woke out of the car to find the Delta international gate in JFK life began to get a little crazy. After being misdirected five times by ten different people I began to think that it all meant something, but what? I kept going over these ridiculous ideas as to why I had arrived 3 hours early only to be lost for 2 hours, but then it dawned on me that things just happen. After finding the gate, and finally linking up with the class my attitude soon changed. The girl who once begged her security team (Mom and sister) to accompany her to the airport was now the girl who wanted her security team to take a hike. I didn’t understand why I was on such a rollercoaster of emotions and contradicting feelings. But as directed my mom and sister left the airport, they were not only ashamed and surprised by my change of heart, but they were upset that this is how I chose to say goodbye to them. When you make the
choice to embark on an experience like this you never know if you made the right decision until the day comes and you take that first step of the long journey, and to me that choice was validated as I took the first step on the airplane. Sitting on the plane my anxiety built, I knew that I was in for a ten hour flight, a time change, and a drastic change of weather, but I didn’t know anything else beyond that, and the thrill of that alone was overwhelming. As the last few minuets of the flight came to an end and looking out of the window to the country that I would call home for the next two weeks was exhilarating. As we approached the ground beautiful buildings and structures took our breath away, we were finally here. Getting off the plane and heading into the airport was an experience of it’s own, from baggage claims, customs, and random people carrying your luggage for “free”, we had enough to talk about for the bus to our first destination. As I broke away from the group for a minuet and looked at what was around me I noticed that although I was in at totally different country, everything looked so familiar. There were billboards that advertised toothpaste, people driving Mercedes and BMW’s, and school children playing. As we loaded the bus that we would come recognize as our secondary living quarters, the trip really began. The streets of Accra, were full of people, people selling items in large bowls on top of there heads, people walking around road side shops buying and selling items, people talking amongst themselves while enjoying a refreshing beverage, no matter where you looked there was people. The fast, congestive but exciting street life was amazing to see, there was a great sense of community life that I had never seen before. At our first destination we discovered the culture of being a tourist in Ghana. The minuet we stepped off
the bus a group of 5 young men took to us like a moth to a flame. They had necklaces, bracelets that you could customize with names, and so much more, it didn’t seem to matter to them that we were there to see the W.B Dubois memorial museum, or that we didn’t have any money exchanged to busy anything, they just wanted to sell and talk. After walking through the museum and getting a better perspective of how Dubois had such a influence on Ghana’s history and how he brought a new sense of hope to the people of Ghana. When the tour came to an end the ground took less than 5 steps before the young ancipinuers were on swarming us with merchandise to sell and questions about American music. As we walked a few steps and made our way to the W.B Dubois restaurant we were overwhelmed at the persistence of the vendors, it got to the point that not only did the restaurant staff told them to leave us alone, but so did the team of professors that accompanied us, but they both were failed attempts. As the food took hours, and the vendors began to multiply we had a clear indication of what things would be like in the next 14 days. The anticipation about finding out where I was going to be living grew more and more as we embarked on a five hour bus ride to Cape Coast from Accra, and as the time went by so did the dynamics of the lifestyles. I found that as we left Accra and head towards cape coast there was less and less modernized infrastructure, and but as we made our way to Cape Coast the infrastructure appeared again. The towns between Accra and Cape Cost gave me the open eyed perspective about the distribution of wealth and commodities in the country, although this was a small example of the disparity that many small towns that I saw in Ghana, it was a eye opener to the situation. Our much anticipated
arrival to Cape Coast was tiering, after taking a small tour of the university, and attending dinner in a lunch hall that we would come to become very familiar with, we were finally paired up and sent off to our new homes for the next two weeks. I found out that I was placed at the home of Professor Agyeman, a well known and respected Sociology Professor at the University Of Cape Coast. The drive to Professor Agyeman’s house was an adventure, it was not only one of the furthest houses from the campus, but it also sat on top of a hill of a bumpy eroding hill.

The beautiful stone like house sat behind a large black gate with cute but fierce dogs guarding the life of Professor Agyeman and his wonderful family. None the less when the gates opened I sighed in happiness and relief, it was a beautiful house that was both welcoming, and a home. As professor Canterbury and Dr. Bryant enjoyed a conversation with my new house father my roommate Jensine and I took a tour of our bed room and bathroom. To our surprise a little lizard better know as the wall jackal was waiting for our arrival in the shower. After giggling like school girls and thinking of all the possible things to do, Jensine and I decided to capture our new friend In a box and show professor Agyeman what we had captured. Right as we showed him the lizard that we had captured, our new house father broke out in a loud laugh, I didn’t know if it was because Jensine and I looked ridiculous befriending a lizard, even making plans to keep it, or that he just thought it was a prank. But as he told us that this particular lizard is very overpopulated in Ghana, and they are often found walking the walls of houses, we quickly understood where both the lizards name came from (Wal Jackel) and professor Agyeman’s laughter was coming from. Lets just say from that night on
every time we walked into a room in the house we examined the room from bottom to top just to see if our little friend had come back to say hello. The first night of sleep was a struggle for me, adjusting to the four hour time change was hard, I lost 4 hours of my day, and I knew the next few days were going to be just as rough. Our next few days in Ghana consisted of waking up at 6am, having breakfast by 7am, getting picked up by the bus at 7:30am, lecture at Cape Coast University at 8:30am, eating lunch at the campus cafeteria at 12pm, and the good times rolled all though the day and evening, making it back to our houses before 10pm was a treat. Although our days had become somewhat routine we became use to late starts to our lectures and activities, and receiving our meals 2 hours behind schedule, this is when we realized that our innate American lifestyle began to rebel against the culture that we had traveled half way around the world to experience. At times I could totally relate to the frustrations of my fellow classmates, but there were other times that I felt embarrassed and disappointed in their actions and behaviors in response to these very issues. The biggest learning experience for me came when I had to learn how to push everything that I have been taught in the past aside in order to be able to learn in the present. As we packed and prepared to travel for more than 10 hours across Ghana I wondered if I would be able to feel the excitement that I first felt in the airport awaiting my departure for Ghana. Not being able to communicate with those that I loved back at home was also upsetting. I knew that yet again I would need to walk into this next step with a open mind and a positive mentality. Later on in the day as we packed our house father informed us that he would also be taking a trip, and he would be sending his best
assistnat Matthew to look after us. Jensine and I were not only excited to see who
Matthew was, but we also wanted to see what we could get away with. We were
dying to go out and explore the Ghana nightlife, and a night out before our 10 hour
trip to the North of Ghana was exactly what we had in mind. From the moment we
met Matthew we became instant friends. He had a smile that was big, and
welcoming. Standing at about 5’6 with such a skinny frame it was hard to imagine
him as anything less then sweet. He annihilated conversation by asking us about
ourselves, and our experience in Ghana so far, he listened as we babbled on and
without knowing it hours had went by. Eventually Jensine and I merged into a
conversation about the Ghana nightlife and how we desperately needed a night
out, and Matthew was in for our plan. After getting the green light Jensine and I
decided to call some out of fellow classmates to let them in on our plan, within
minuets we picked our destination point ( Cape Coast Beach Resort) and our
meeting time. Matthew scored us a ride with his roommate David, David and
Matthew then directed the rest our mission by getting taxi’s for the rest of the gang.
As we drove towards Cape Coast Beach Resort I couldn’t help but become
hypnotized by the beauty of the ocean and palm trees. It made me think about how
people in America pay thousands of dollars to get a glimpse of this for weeks at a
time, but some people of Ghana who live off less than two dollars a day have this
as their backyard, it just amazed me. When we finally reached the resort it was if
we were finally free to just relax, and we took full advantage of that. We walked on
the beach, we danced in the night club, and we even took time out to sit and talk
about our experience so far, it was if we were all on the same page. The time went
by before we knew it, we had a 6am pick up time, and it was now 2am, we knew our mission had to come to an end. The next morning our bus driver/ friend Gorge honked his horn as Jensine and I woke up. We had no time for breakfast, no time to grab minuet things, and no time to slug along. At one point I realized that going out and getting less than 4 hours of sleep was not such a good idea, but it was fun. The bus ride brought on a new meaning for sardine packing, There was 20 of us all together, over 20 pieces of luggage, and about 2 inches of space between all of us. We all learned early on that there was not much that we could do about the circumstances of the bus, but there were things that we could do to control the conditions of the bus.

Rules of the Bus:

1.)There was to be no open containers placed on the bus floor because of the guaranteed mess that it would make on the bus, not to mention sticky floors.

2.)There was a consensus in the back of the bus, that people would switch seats, in order to have the seating arrangements fair for everyone.

3.) There would be no complaining about the following: seating arrangements, the temperature, and uncontrollable circumstances

The list grew as we spent more times on the bus, but these were the basic rules that we not only followed, but lived by.
Our trip to the North put a different perspective in my mind. I couldn’t wrap my mind around how dramatic the change was from cape coast on. We began to see the modern way of living being replaced with more traditional homogenous communal living. Instead of cement houses we were noticing mud houses that didn’t seem to have the same stability and longevity as the ones in cape coast. I kept thinking to myself about everything that these people lacked, but I never thought once about everything that they had. Even as I glimpsed for 30 seconds while driving by I noticed that the people in these traditional communities sat in circles sharing, and enjoying a meal with one another. The children all took on a role, weather it be the girls we saw picking up shea nuts, or the young boys who walked the streets with two full jugs of water, and the young girls who stood on the road side with huge bowls on top of their little heads selling water. These small communities were making a huge impact on the way that I saw the way of life, and the Ghanaian culture. Arriving in Novrongo was a breath of fresh air. Although we were staying at a hotel that seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, it was the hotel itself that caused all of our excitement. From outside it was everything that we hoped it would be, and the AC systems was just a small part of it. As we walked in we met college students from Texas that had nothing but great things to say about the hotel we were staying in, and they also informed us that Ghana’s permire soccer team The Black Stars were also a guest at the hotel. Not only were we staying at this beautiful hotel, we were lucky enough to have our own rooms, it was as if we were rewarded for all of the time we spent on the bus. The first few days at the hotel
were amazing, the breakfast was up to par, and dinner was just as good. In the mornings we took off to see what the North of Ghana had to offer us, and I have to say it was the best time that was spent in Ghana. One day we visited a crocodile farm, where we learned first hand how to trust, and let go of fears. Everyone had the opportunity to sit on a crocodile and get over the fear of being eaten, it brought the group a lot closer. On another day we had the opportunity to host a book donation, in which we presented books to the University of Development Studies, on behalf of Eastern Connecticut State University and our international studies tour. This event gave us an opportunity to give something back to the university that worked so hard to have us go to Ghana and experience what we did, and it was really nice to have the press there and give recognition to such a wonderful thing. One of the best experiences that we had in the North was in Tamele. There we had the opportunity to experience the art of the North first hand. Attending a lecture at the multicultural center in Tamale turned into a dance lesson followed by a full out dance party. As two men beat the traditional drums for dancing, and one of the best dance instructors lead the way, each and every student had the chance to dance and experience the art of dance. It became such a thrill when locals filled the windows and they watched and cheered us on. I couldn’t believe that everyone let loose and lived in the moment, it was another time that we really bonded as a group, it was a story that we all shared. Aside from the dancing, we also had the opportunity to shop for the beautiful artwork that the talented people of the community had produced. From drums, to portraits, to jewelry, there was something for everyone and every price range. The ability to bargain for prices was
something that acceptable in the culture, and encouraged, the vendors would go
down in price by 50 percent at times, not only to satisfy the coustmer, but to
maintain a way of living. After leaving Novrongo we packed our bags and headed
out more then 8 more hours on the road on the bus that seemed to get stickyer,
and smellier everyday. Reaching out destination of Mole park was a sigh of relief
after traveling on the deadliest road known to man. But before we pulled into the
park we took a stop to see the oldest mosk in Ghana. It was located in a village
right outside of Mole park, and what we weren’t expecting was the attention that we
would be causing in the town. As we pulled up to the monument we were
welcomed by fifty children that wanted nothing more then to ask us questions
about the U.S. and hold our hands. At times I would look over at my friend Turquois
and she would have 10 girls on one arm and 15 girls on the other arm. Just looking
at the way the stared at Turquois was amazing, they admired her beauty, and he
cloths, they just wanted to be as close to her as possible. The boys weren’t too far
behind me when I realized that they were being accompanied by all the young men
who wanted nothing more to do then show them their soccer ball, and talk about
sports. I couldn’t believe that we had come to see the oldest musk in Ghana, but
we seemed to be getting most of the attention. After a short tour, and many
pictures of us and the kids, we headed out for our destination five minuests away,
Mole park. As we made our way up to the park we were welcomed by a monky, we
couldn’t believe it. When we first goit into the park we were surprised to find out
that there were no walls of seperation between us and the animals. The staff told
us that if we didn’t leave food outside of our rooms, or try to approach the animals,
we would be out of harms way. Later that night as we hung out in Ricky’s room we were surprised to find ten deer like animals (we later identified as Antalop) waiting outside our doors. As we grabbed our camera and took picture after picture, the antelop just stood there, it became so boring at one point we all went into our rooms, and watched as the antelop remained planted in that one spot. The next morning we were all awoken by the deep and powerful voice of Dr Bryant yelling “Yall need to get up, it time to go.”, seeing that I was half awake because of the fear an elephant was going to eat me, I was up and ready to go on the walking safari. The walk was long and tiering but it was worth it, we saw monkeys, warthogs, elephants, antalops, and other crazy creatures. Even though the experience itself was amazing, the elephants stole the show. The large, and rugged creatures walked aimlessly but with such grace and confidence, you couldn’t tell where they were going, or what they were going to do, but they did it so beautifully. Leaving mole park was upsetting because our carfree live with the animals mentality was over, and we were dreading the drive down that deadly road. On the drive back I had a lot more built up anxiety then anyone eles on the bus, before we left the U.S my dad had arranged for us to stop in Kumasi on our way back from the North to not only give us a tour of our family palace and have lunch, but so I would have the opportunity to see family that I hadent seen for nearly 18 years. Unfortunately as always we went behind schedual and the trip that we planned to make in Kumasi at 4pm became a 10pm 20 minuete visit. When the advisors realized that it was way to late and dangorus to drive 5 more hours to Cape Coast the opted to book us all room at the Asafo hotel, which turned out to be the worst place we stayed in
Ghana. That night we all gathered in Courtney and Jessica’s room to discuss our dissatisfaction in the hotel choice, and to blow off steam that we had gathered in the 6 hour long bus ride, by 3am we ran out of complaints and energy. Making our way back to Cape Coast marked the end of our trip. In the next few days we went to donate books to a town where Professor Canterbury had been bestowed a chief, and it was amazing to see that hundreds of school children and community members hosted an event in our honor, we also went to the university of Cape Coast library to donate books where we were yet again honored for our donation. We went to CoCo beach resort where we were given a taste of relaxation and luxury at it’s finest, it was then that we realized the paradise Ghana was. In our last days we went on the much anticipated canopy walk, where I personally learned how to overcome my fears while becoming a leader. As I lead the group from canopy to canopy I felt a sense of peace, it was then that I got over my fear of heights and looked over the side to see that I was hundreds of feet above the ground becoming a new self assured, confident person. I thought about how I come on this trip as one person, and I was leaving the same person, but with so much more to say and share with those around me. From the beginning of the experience I had so much to be nervous about, and towards the end I didn’t have a care in the world. This experience taught me exactly who I was, and brought me back to the life that I never imagined living. The beauty of Ghana is so surreal and almost unfair, but now that I have experienced it I know it exist, and it won’t take me that long to find it again. Since the trip I have remained in contact with my new friends Matthew and David, and am working on creating a longtime friendship with
Professor Agyeman as well as with his wife and daughter. I will even be returning back to Ghana December 27th 2009 with my family, so I will be able to see all of the friends that I made in Ghana. If anyone ask me today about my trip I tell them “it’s a once in a lifetime experience that you can only understand by living yourself”.