



Ghana adventure a family affair

When **Stacey Knott's** dad comes to visit her in Ghana, it's more than just a trip to the country the Kiwi journalist now calls home – it's a chance for him to meet his son-in-law.

I'm sitting in the small lounge of my Accra apartment with my dad. He's recovering from another eventful day, leaning back on one of the bamboo chairs, a gentle breeze ruffling the vibrant pink and green African print curtains behind him. I'm sprawled out on the floor surrounded by the New Zealand treats my mum has sent over with him.

It's his second to last day in Ghana, so I ask him, "what do you think of Ghana? What's been your favourite part so far?"

He mulls over the question, thinking over the whirlwind tour of the nation. Ghana is a little smaller than New Zealand in geographic size, but incredibly diverse in what to see and do. Over a few days my dad has seen elephants and castles, relaxed at beachside resorts and wandered bustling streets, absorbing the country's history.

But for my dad, Allen, there's the added bonus of meeting my new family here – hence his answer: "Meeting John."

I met John five years ago. I was pouring pints at a bar in Edinburgh, he was coming in to unwind after a cheffing shift. Coincidentally, I had just booked a ticket to his homeland Ghana to escape the Scottish winter and embark on some journalistic adventures. We bonded, started dating, then after a few years of long distance while I went back to New Zealand, we both moved to his home country in 2015.

Before meeting my dad, John was nervous. After a pretty spur-of-the-moment wedding in April, Allen has become John's father-in-law.

Lucky for John, Allen has all the best traits of a typical Kiwi father – he's the definition of affable.

His first words to John at the airport are "come here, mate – my new son-in-law!" as he pulls him in for a hug.

Aside from these two getting to know each other, I want to show my dad as much as possible. Tourists generally spend at least a few weeks here, but dad is here for five days, so our itinerary is action-packed.

We kick off this grand tour in Accra, my home for the past two years. It's a sprawling city on the Atlantic coast, and development hasn't kept up with

population growth. Current estimates put the Greater Accra area at four million people. Traffic jams can mean a 15-kilometre journey will take close to 90 minutes, with fumes from old, rusty repurposed vans creating toxic clouds that hang around the roads.

Some of the streets have potholes "big enough to fit a small town in," my dad jokes. John loves these dad jokes – and there are many.

As we crawl through the city, dad notices some exterior work being done on a building. Two men are three floors up, no safety gear, perched on a ledge as they hammer away.

"Jesus, can you imagine that happening in New Zealand? WorkSafe would have a hernia!"

There's a lot of luxury around, and for tourists or foreigners with a strong currency backing them, Ghana is cheap. John and I don't seek out the expensive joints, instead opting for low-key spots. We take dad to one of our favourites, a mix of Ghanaian and Ivorian cuisine, for his first taste of local food. Three large meals, water

and a few big, local beers is equal to about NZ\$30.

Fuelled and ready to explore, we head to one of the most interesting parts of Accra, the historic Jamestown area. Densely populated, and fairly impoverished, this part of Accra raised five world boxing champions, is home to the best street art festival I've seen, and has a large fishing community. We are on a walking tour with a local company, traipsing through the historic streets and beachfront, which is dotted with dugout fishing vessels that search for fish for days on end. We pass men fixing their nets and children playing in the waves. Our guide, Saamuah, explains the perils of fishing here – fishermen have to go further and further out to get anything as stocks deplete and plastics in the polluted ocean increase.

You can't come to Ghana without acknowledging its colonial past. Jamestown has a number of crumbling colonial buildings, and while some are used as homes, businesses or government services, they also remind us of the slave trade and the stolen independence of this nation.

About a three-hour drive further along the coast are some of the country's most powerful relics of Ghana's history – the Cape Coast and Elmina Castles. Both served the same purpose – housing the colonial rulers upstairs in airy, big rooms with the sea breeze wafting through, and trapping enslaved Africans in dungeons below.

We dedicate one day of dad's trip to visit this area. We go to Elmina Castle, which – like Cape Coast Castle, was the definition of human cruelty. While



those white rulers were free to pillage the country, beneath them enslaved Africans were crammed into dungeons in appalling conditions. Sickness and deadly diseases ran rampant, people were forced to urinate and defecate where they slept. The women were raped, and anyone who tried to escape or fight back was sent to a condemned cell with no light, and left to die. The men and women who survived these hellholes were then shipped off to the Americas, for a life of slavery.

Both castles are now tourist attractions. Guides tell the history of them and their importance as a



Allen Knott, Stacey Knott and John Ocran at Mole National Park in Ghana with a star attraction of the park.

PHOTOS:
STACEY KNOTT



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Dugout boats waiting to go out into the Atlantic.



Elephants bathe in a watering hole at Mole National Park.

reminder of slavery and human trafficking. In tourist attraction lists and guide books, these castles are always in the top five – as is Mole National Park, another crucial destination on this trip.

Mole is in the north of Ghana, about 12 hours if you drove, or one hour if you fly, like we did. We are in the north for 24 hours, with one target. To see elephants.

This is a budget-friendly attraction with a motel and restaurant in the park, and small villages to explore in the area.

To get here, it's a few hours' drive from the Tamale Airport through the arid land of this part of Ghana, which

is also the most impoverished region of the country. My dad watches in wonder at the landscape of mud huts, noticing the women collecting water from boreholes, with children playing nearby.

"So I take it a lot of their time will be spent, getting water, getting food, and caring for the kids," my dad notes.

With these rural areas of northern Ghana accounting for the highest poverty rates in the nation, and many people subsistence farming here, it's a fair assessment.

At the park, we go on a hike through the bush, following a park ranger as he tracks elephant footprints. Alas, they are young elephants on the move and

we can't catch up with them. After two hours of fruitless sweating under the blazing sun, we hire a jeep. We zoom to a watering hole and see a baby elephant and her mother pour water over their bodies. Further up the road, we come across a huge male elephant. We edge closer, he's standing still, not doing much of anything. Nearby we spot another one, younger, chowing down on some branches.

"Bloody incredible, aren't they?" my dad says, as we stare at them in wonder.

With the mission accomplished, and dad's time here quickly depleting, it's



time to head back to Accra.

Because John and I didn't want a wedding, we have a lunch in Accra on dad's last day to celebrate our recent marriage and introduce my dad to the

family here. I struck it lucky with this lot. My in-laws are family as well as friends.

Both dads do speeches at the lunch, with extended family and friends watching. John's dad, also called John, retells the story of our journey back to Ghana, and their surprise when John and I decided on a registrar marriage.

"We were told a few weeks ago, out of the blue these two were going to get married," he says.

"Tell me about it!" my dad says.

After John senior's well wishes, my dad stands up and recalls that earlier conversation we had, when I asked him what the best part of his trip was. His answer is met with wide smiles, and John tears up.

Dad has collected a bunch of sticks for his favourite metaphor. In front of the Ghanaian family, he tells John and I to break one stick. Easy to do, he says.

He then passes us a bunch, which you can't snap.

He tells us each stick represents a member of our combined family.

"We are stronger together," he says. Then, to John, "there are plenty more sticks back in New Zealand. We are waiting for you."

Fact file

More information:

Before you go to Ghana: You need to have a yellow fever shot. You will need to get anti-malaria medication too. Tourist visas can be arranged before arriving, for approximately \$150.

Staying there:

Accommodation: Airbnb is growing. There are also hostels, guest houses and a range of hotels through the country, from 1 star to 5. Check booking.com.

Visiting Mole:

From Accra, return flights are about \$200. You can also take a bus for about \$15 but it will take at least 12 hours. The park is a few hours from the airport. You can hire a taxi for \$100 each way, or take a bus.

For your meals, accommodation, park

and tour fees in Mole for two nights, budget for \$150.

Visiting Cape Coast/Elmina:

For a day trip, you can hire a private car and driver for around \$150, or take a bus from Kaneshie in Accra for \$10. Entry to the castles is around \$10.

There are beach resorts and hotels of varying cost along the coast.

Visiting Jamestown:

For a Jamestown walking tour, visit [facebook.com/JamesTownWalkingTours/](https://www.facebook.com/JamesTownWalkingTours/)



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Looking out to the bustling Jamestown area of Accra, home to fishermen, boxers, and an art festival.



Stronger together - Allen Knott meets his daughter's in-laws on his first trip to Ghana.



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Mole National Park in the north of Ghana is a major tourist attraction, where elephants are the stars.