

Going to Ghana

By Lon Haldeman

“Push the left lever.. Push the left lever,” I instructed as the grade steepened. I was riding behind Toka who was using a bicycle with working derailleurs for the first time.

Toka (age 16) and her friend Vivian (age 18) live in the remote bush area of eastern Ghana, Africa. I had met them last year at a bike race for area cyclists. The prize for the top racers

was the opportunity to join our PAC Tour group during an eight day ride through Ghana. When I saw them racing I knew they had the strength and athleticism to be good cyclists. They both come from humble families living in mud brick houses with thatched roofs. Most of their lives have been spent doing hard labor hoeing fields and carrying water on their family farms. Their chance to earn money came from selling yams and bread along the roadside to passing buses. They would dodge traffic while balancing a 30-pound basket of food on their head. They both had tough childhoods but it gave them the strength and agility to be natural cyclists.

Our tour would travel about 60 to 100 kilometers per day. The road conditions ranged from nice pavement to powdery sand. About 75% of the roads had nice pavement but since we needed to be ready for the worst conditions we rode mountain bikes with two inch wide tires. Len from New Jersey rode his Lightning recumbent which was the fastest bike on pavement but not really made for sand riding. Everyday our bike handling skills were tested by dodging water-filled potholes and crossing muddy stream beds. To everyone’s credit we avoided mishaps during the tour.

We started our ride in the coast city of Accra. Accra is a sprawling city of four million people with over crowded neighborhoods and traffic jams. We stayed at a hotel near the beach which would be Toka and Vivian’s first view of the ocean. To start the cycling portion of our tour we shuttled all the bikes and riders 20 KM into the countryside to the quieter roads in the foothills outside the city.

The landscape in southern Ghana is covered with big rolling hills that provide about 3,000’ of

Garmin climbing every 100 KM. The hilly terrain provides the basin for the Volta Reservoir.

The dam was built 50 years ago to provide hydroelectric power to the region. The reservoir is the largest in the world covering over 3,000 square miles. Our tour would follow the jagged shoreline that included many peninsulas and bays.

On the third day of our tour we took a small fishing boat (large rowboat) across a ten mile





channel of one of the many finger-like bays of the lake. The boat trip would save us 100 KM of riding around the perimeter to our destination that night. The boat trip was the first time Toka and Vivian had ever traveled in a boat and they were hesitant about riding across the open water. The boat ride was relaxing and a nice afternoon break giving us a new view of the beautiful hills around the lake.

The official national language in Ghana is English because it was a British colony from the 1700's until their independence in 1957. There are 77 regional languages and 49 official languages taught in schools. Every 50 miles we encountered a different language in the new region.

The only way they can talk to each other is by defaulting to English which is taught in the schools. For our tour group speaking English worked well because we could talk to everyone we met on the road.

As we rode from village to village we felt like we in a parade. The school children along the road would greet us with shouts of "Obroni, Obroni" which means "White Person, White Person". At first we were offended by the racist observation. When I stopped to ask them why they identified me as a "white person" they said the term "Obroni" was a compliment and that the people from the United States were very powerful. They meant "Obroni" as praise, not as an insult. Our group never did get used to the reverse discrimination. Many of our conversations with roadside locals were about not identifying someone by their race even if it was meant as a prestigious label.

November in Ghana is the start of the dry season that lasts for the next five months. It rained the day before our tour started and then we had dry conditions for the next 12 days. The daily temperatures range from 75 degrees at night to 95 degrees in mid afternoon. The heat was the toughest part of the tour so it was nice to have a support van supplying ice cold drinks every 10 miles. All of our hotels had air conditioning and ceiling fans which provided relief from the jungle heat. Our group decided that with the dirt roads and the hot conditions we should get double mileage points toward PAC Tour Hall of Fame miles. Basically if we rode 50 miles it felt like 100, so each day was challenging enough that we felt like we had a good day's ride.



We had six Americans on our tour and we have all toured together in Peru in the past. We found that there were a lot of similarities between Ghana and the jungle region of Peru. Many times I had to remind myself not to say hello in Spanish if we met a local person on the road. The food in Ghana tends to be spicier than Peru and most of the dishes included rice, fish, chicken, soups and beans. Their national dish is called Fufu which is made with a white corn dough made into a baseball size lump. People would pinch off a golf ball size glob in their right hand and dip it in a spicy goat soup sauce and eat it with their fingers. The whole eating process was rather messy

and an acquired taste. Most of our group liked the spicy soup and we would eat it as a sauce over fried rice. We always found plenty of food to eat at the hotel restaurants each night.

On the fourth day we attended the bike races organized by our friend Vida in her village. She planned a series of races around the soccer field for girls and boys. Each group would race for six laps in the semifinals and the winners proceeded to the final event. The races were major entertainment for the village and several hundred racing fans cheered for the riders. Our tour group had brought over 200 race prizes from the United States. The prizes were dozens of jerseys, shorts, helmets and items donated by PAC Tour riders to the Africa Prize Program during the past year. Toka and Vivian raced in the girls race and Vivian easily won on a break away during the final 2 laps. It was a fun day for our group and a good way to meet the people of the local village.



Our route continued on a big loop along the border with the country of Togo. This was considered no man's land and neither country took responsibility for maintaining the road. The one lane road had become so overgrown that the vegetation on each side slapped us on our shoulders as we rode on the single track path. Our support van took an alternate route during this section.

Every day offered interesting riding with enough adventure to keep us wondering what we would see next. It was common to see eight foot tall termite mounds made from the red dirt along side the road. Our route had covered an interesting section of Ghana traveling into the back country where most tourists don't go.

During our final two days we proceeded by van 200 KM to the slave forts along the southwestern coast. These forts were built in the 1500's as the holding ports for slaves being shipped to south America and the United States. The forts are a depressing reminder of world history where over 10,000 slaves a year were held before being sent away.

By the time we had finished our tour we had a new view of Ghana. We had met many of the local people and we had a better understanding about their culture and customs. The people of Ghana were cheerful and they welcomed us as friends. We went to Ghana for a bike tour but we returned with a respect and admiration for their way of life. We are not sure when we will lead another tour to Ghana but we now have a strong connection with that unique land.

Toka and Vivian's Future

We were joined on our bike tour by local riders Toka (age 16) and Vivian (age 18). We were so impressed with the girls dedication for riding and desire to improve their lives we started to ask them more about their plans for the future. By the end of the tour we all agreed to see if it was possible to help them.

When I stayed in Accra 3 more days after our tour, Ben (our Ghana guide) and I kept busy meetings with Toka and Vivian. We went to Vivian's house where she lives in a small mud brick house with a grass roof. We met her mother, grandmother, aunt and 5 younger siblings.



We talked about Vivian's future. She wants to be a hair dresser and have her own shop. In Ghana you need a license to own a shop and you need to be certified from another shop that that says you know how to make all the hairstyles. The certification process takes 3 years and you need to work at another shop until you learn all the techniques. Owning a hair salon is a steady business in Ghana that doesn't make a ton of money but the work is consistent enough to make a living and is easier than physical labor.



Ben's sister (who owns a shop) would be willing to teach Vivian for 3 years. Vivian could live in Accra. The next question is where would Vivian live? Ben had an idea that would help his sister and Vivian. There is a courtyard attached to his house where there is space to build 2 more rooms of 8' x 17' each. One room could be a bedroom with two single beds and the connecting room could be a kitchen with a propane stove and a dining table.



We met with the carpenter, brick mason and electrician about the costs. To build the rooms, doors, windows, walls, roof, cement floor and electric would cost about \$1,600 US dollars. The construction would take about a month. Any improvements to building the rooms would go toward the rent for the next five years so Vivian would have a place to stay until her business was established.

She will need some money for living expenses for food while she was apprenticing at the hair salon. Ben thought Vivian and his sister could live together for about \$1,200 per year. I said we could support Vivian for 3 years while she was learning the hair business. Ben's sister said it was possible she could learn the business in 18 to 24 months. I told Vivian if she learned the business faster than 3 years she could use the remaining money to help outfit her shop. A metal storage container costs about \$500 and the beauty supplies cost another \$500 to get started. Vivian understood she needed to make a profit to continue to support herself after 3 years.

Ben is starting to work on the house now so the rooms are ready by Christmas. When Vivian moves to Accra in January she will buy a bed and some other supplies to start working at Ben's sister's beauty shop.

Toka's Plans

Then we met with Toka and her older brother who is about 35 years old. We went out to dinner together in Accra Monday night when Toka came to town to see her brother. Toka said she wanted to go to school at the boarding school near Aunum which is halfway between Dodi Beach and the M-Lfe Hotel.

Toka had her report card from Junior High Graduation which said she was eligible to start at the Aunum High School Boarding School. Her grades were very good and she wants to specialize in Home Economics



and Nutrition. She speaks four languages and wants to be a teacher.

The high school gave her a long list of all the things she would need to bring to the boarding school, such as...a storage trunk, clothes, fabric to make uniforms, an electric iron, broom, machete, soap, shampoo, mattress, sheets, blanket, pillow and 50 other things. The list totaled about \$360. Some things like soap would need to be replaced each month. The school provides food and dorm space. There would be 3

terms of 4 months each during the year. Each term cost about \$250 or \$750 per year. When we totaled up all the costs for three years the total was about \$2,700. Her family makes less than that each year.

I explained to Toka she would need to maintain at least a 75% grade point average to stay eligible for our support and if she maintained 90% she would have a better chance to continue at the University. Ben explained again to her in their native language that this was a big opportunity for her future. I could tell she understood when she started to cry and turned to me and said "Thank you... thank you". It was an emotional moment at the dinner table for all of us.



Her next term starts in January. She already missed the first term from September to December but she said she can catch up to the rest of her classmates by April by the time they start the 3rd term.

Business Plans

I gave Ben enough money to start building the rooms and buy Toka her school supplies during December. Before January I will send Ben enough money for Vivian's living expenses and Toka's school term. Ben set up a bank account to keep track of the money. He will deal directly with Toka's school and Vivian's expense so he keeps the budget in order. I will divide the payments to Ben every 4 months or so. We will need to raise some more money for the Global Outreach Fund but I am confident in we can support all these projects for 3 years.

Vivian and Toka are extremely motivated and they understand they won the lottery with this opportunity offered to them. They have experienced their other life option of selling yams from a basket balanced on their heads along the side of the road and they don't want to go back to that lifestyle.

Who would have known a month ago that we would meet two inspiring girls from the bush who needed our help. I will keep you updated with more news.

If you would like to contribute these projects in Ghana, Africa you can send a Tax Deductible Check to:

FPC Global Outreach
C/O PAC Tour
P.O. Box 303
Sharon, WI 53585

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Thank You,

Lon



