



ghana

Story by Eileen C. Herbert '04
Photos courtesy of Bruce J. Dierenfield, PhD

CANISIUS STUDENTS EXPERIENCE WEST AFRICA AS THEY TRAVEL A 100-MILE SLAVE PATH

When Ashley E. Scott '09 stood in the small, dark, underground dungeon of Africa's Cape Coast Castle, she could almost sense the fear of the people who had been imprisoned there nearly two centuries earlier. Tens of thousands of enslaved Igbo, Ewe and other African people passed through the 'doors of no return' during the dungeon's years of operation. Forced to stand in the cramped quarters with little food or air, the prisoners' scratches are still visible on the walls where they tried to claw their ways to freedom. Many perished. Those who survived were loaded onto ships and taken to the New World to serve as slaves.

Scott, who is an adolescence education, social studies and history major, studied Africa's slave history in fall 2007 in the course *Bullwhip Days: Slavery in America*, instructed by Bruce J. Dierenfield, PhD, professor of history and director of the All-College Honors Program. However, she said nothing could have prepared her for what she experienced in the slave dungeons of West Africa.

"I knew a trip to Ghana would be the chance of a lifetime but I had no idea that it would be life changing," said Scott. "The experience at the slave castles gave me a greater understanding of my heritage. I couldn't wait to get home and share everything I learned and everything I saw with my family and friends."

Scott was one of nine students who traveled to Ghana in March 2008 with Dierenfield and Sababu C. Norris, director of multicultural programs. The trip was part of Dierenfield's program, *The African American Experience* (*Canisius College Magazine*, winter 2004). Funded by a Peter Canisius Distinguished Teaching Professorship, the program

includes innovative coursework, lectures and trips to historically-significant locations such as Harlem, NY, the Deep South, and for the first time this year, Ghana, West Africa.

"Today, Ghana is the most modern, prosperous and one of the safest places in West Africa," said Dierenfield of the country that gained its independence just 51 years ago. "It is a great place for students to absorb Africa's culture."

The group's 10-day trip began in the capital city of Accra. With a population of 1.1 million people, Accra is among the wealthiest areas in Ghana. "It was beautiful," recalled Katherine D. List '08, an accounting, accounting information systems and finance graduate, who noted that the city was dotted with Christian churches, Mormon temples, four-star hotels and many historic places. "Ghana is filled with beautiful memorials to the country's recent independence and to their first president, Kwame Nkrumah, whose tomb is designed as upside down machetes to represent peace," said List.

American-born civil rights leader and NAACP founder W.E.B. DuBois, PhD, spent his last years in Accra. The students also visited the W.E.B. DuBois Memorial Center for Pan-African Culture, which stands as a testament to his life's work and serves as his final resting place.

As the group traveled north along a 100 mile slave path to the city of Kumasi, the students began to see a stark contrast to life in the city.

"There were dirt roads and the villagers lived in huts," said Scott. "The people no longer traveled in cars but walked, many times carrying large items on their heads. That includes the village children, who carry their stools for several miles to and from school each day."



PHOTOS

(left) Ghana produces approximately 70 percent of the total fish production in the country. Pictured is one of many fishing villages along Ghana's coastline.

(above, left) Ashley Scott '09 (center) and Tyshae N. Newton '09, a marketing major, pose with a cloth weaver in a Kente weaving village.

(above, right) Cape Coast Castle serves as a reminder of Ghana's notorious past involving the slave trade.

(right) History Professor Bruce J. Dierenfield, PhD, checks out the wares in one of the Asante craft villages.



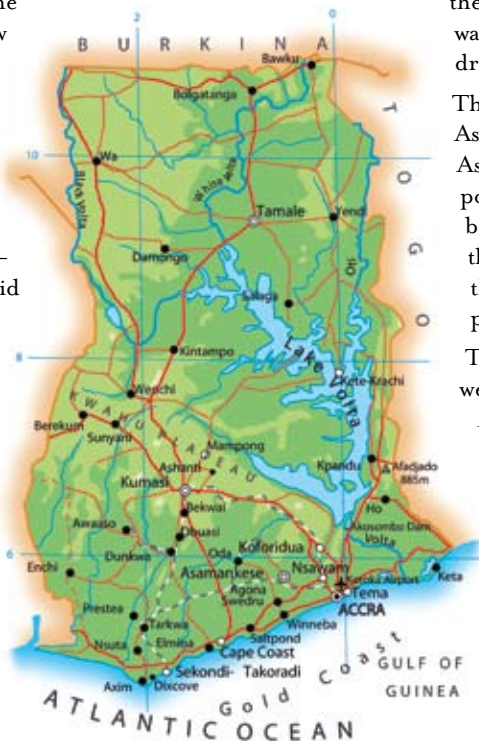
As the wealth of the areas they visited decreased, so too did their accommodations. One of the hotels provided running water for only a few hours each day. The students also encountered some surprise hotel room guests - lizards!

But, all agreed that the safari through Mole National Park, where elephants, antelope and baboons roam free, and the trek through the rainforest at Kakum National Park, were extraordinary moments. "We walked out on suspension bridges in the rainforest's canopy," said **Nick A. Coleman '09**, a history major. "It was one of the best experiences of my life. You could see for miles."

The students also noted that Dierenfield, who has been to Africa on more than one occasion, is an adventurous traveler who seized every moment as a learning experience.

For instance, the group attended Easter Sunday services at St. Theresa's Catholic Church in Elmina. "The Mass was said in the African language of Akan and lasted nearly four hours," said Coleman. "The church was packed and there was a great deal of singing."

The students met the tribal chief of the village of Larabanga, the largest Muslim village in Ghana, and took a boat ride with two village fishermen. "When we



were out on the water, we could see the villagers along the shore and see how much they depend on the water for their daily lives," said List. "They fish, drink and wash in the water."

The students honed their bartering skills in the Asante craft villages in Kumasi, home of the Asante Empire. "Kumasi was a central trading point on the slave routes and the Asante people became very powerful as the central contacts for the Europeans," said Dierenfield, who noted that the Asantes traded gold, ivory and eventually people for livestock, textiles and guns."

The students shopped and watched the cloth weavers of Kente and the woodcarvers of Ahwiaa. "One of the young children taught me how to weave Kente cloth," said Scott.

In addition to souvenirs, the students also brought home memories of Africa that will last forever. Dierenfield said nothing could make him happier.

"I wanted our students to see things that they wouldn't ordinarily see," he said. "They experienced Ghana's history, culture, food and religion, and even the challenging parts of the trip made their experiences richer and added to their memories. It is all part of the adventure." ■