

Go West

With its thriving contemporary art and nightlife scenes, Ghana's capital, Accra, is Africa's new cosmopolitan hot spot.

BY ALEXANDER LOBRANO PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL BOSHOFF



A NEW CHAPTER Clockwise from top right: the restaurant Coco Lounge; the National Theatre, whose architecture has been compared to a seagull spreading its wings; fishing boats in Jamestown, one of Accra's oldest neighborhoods; Black Star Square, also known as Independence Square, an outdoor event space in the city center.

ON A SULTRY NIGHT in Accra, the air smells of wood smoke, brine from the wet but welcome breezes off the Gulf of Guinea and the plumeria trees that line the streets. This, and the soundtrack of chirping insects, barking dogs and gunning motor scooters, feel quintessentially West African.

But drive into the Stanbic Heights district, home to many of this tropical metropolis's newest boutiques, galleries and brasseries, and you'll feel as if you've somehow detoured into South Beach — albeit a version with far less attitude and much more charm. "Something is happening here," says the Lebanon-born Nada Moukarzel, who has lived in Ghana's capital for 20 years. "A lot of Ghanaian professionals are coming home from places like New York and London, because they're attracted by the city's friendliness and relaxed way of life. There's also the burgeoning of a really talented creative class in Accra." As if echoing her sentiment, the most recent Armory Show in New York City just unveiled its first-ever exhibition devoted to the art of Africa, which included works by local artists El Anatsui and Nengi Omuku.

Moukarzel is at the heart of this transformative art-and-style scene, running not only the beautiful, mixed-discipline gallery La

Maison — a version of 10 Corso Como in Milan — but Santoku, a stunning Japanese restaurant with a bamboo ceiling that was designed by the French interior decorator Hubert de Givenchy (a nephew of the couturier); Ghana Edition, an arts and lifestyle magazine; and the upcoming nightclub Carbon, which will open this year in partnership with Nick House, the London nightlife kingpin.

But although the art scene is what's getting Accra most of its attention these days, this city of two million also has white-sand beaches, an electric dance-club culture and a collection of underappreciated midcentury architecture, like its Soviet-influenced Independence Square and Independence Arch. It's an essential stop for anyone interested in the region's history, and a lively symbol of Ghana's future.



STAY

Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City This luxurious new hot spot located in the middle of the city's downtown ministries district caters to Ghana's growing tourist trade with an outdoor pool and a Resense spa. The spacious rooms have teak parquets, beds with modern Kente cloth throws and wooden floors lined with colorful Ghanaian fabrics. kempinski.com

La Villa Boutique Hotel The building's quirky charm comes from its history as a functionalist-style former Russian embassy; its 40 rooms are decorated with locally made furniture and fabrics, and the outdoor pool is surrounded by lush gardens. lavillahana.com

EAT

The Chop Bar You'll find Ghanaian comfort food, including cassava flour dumplings, banku (balls of fermented corn), jollof rice with a choice of chicken, beef or fish at this posh friendly place in the downtown Achimota retail center. With globe lamps, bare wood tables and molded red plastic chairs, it has sort of an L.A.-in-the-1960s vibe. facebook.com/thechop

Coco Lounge A favorite of the city's art crowd, this airy restaurant has black-and-white tiled floors in crisp geometric patterns, ball-shaped, feather-covered lanterns hanging from its high ceilings. The food, while casual — burgers, fish and chips, huevos cheros and pizzas made in a wood-fired oven built from an oil truck — is reliably excellent. yoloexperiences.com

Maquis Tante Marie Located at Pram Pram beach, this easygoing open-air restaurant has bamboo furniture, bright yellow tablecloths and a big wooden bar where you can find popular dishes from across Ghana and the Ivory Coast, including nyama chiki (grilled spiced mutton) and fish yassa (grilled in a sauce of served lemons and onions). The infectious partylike atmosphere is due to the young, spirited crowd. 233-240-145-211

SEE

Artists Alliance Gallery Run by Ablade Glover, the 82-year-old painter who is recognized as the grandfather of Ghanaian art, this best-known for applying oil to canvas with a palette knife, three-floor gallery is an essential stop for anyone interested in Ghana. Glover plays a mix of works by established local artists, along with painters Owusu Ankomah and George Hughes, among other talents like fellow painter Ebenezer Borlabe. facebook.com/Artists-Alliance-Gallery-312131868849673

Kane Kwei Carpentry Workshop Accra has an unusual folk-art tradition: hand-carved wooden "fantasy" coffins that express something about the life, personality or aspirations of the deceased. Kane Kwei's workshop in the shape of an airplane for someone who had always wanted to travel, for instance, or a cocoa-bean-pod-shaped coffin for a farmer. It's worth stopping by this workshop in the suburb of Teshie if only to marvel at the craftsmanship and ingenuity of these creations. ghanacoffin.com

Wild Gecko Handicrafts This shop sells (and makes) ceramic handmade textiles and jewelry hewn from silver and bullhorn. Owned and run by a Dutch-Ghanaian, it's the best place in Accra to shop for local arts and crafts, including those ornate Adinkra symbols, visual symbols, originally created by the Akans, that represent concepts or aphorisms. There's Besse Saka, a sack of nuts that represents abundance and affluence, for example one called Odo Nnyew Fie Kwan, which means "Love never lets its way home." wild-gecko.com

Woodin As a producer of clothing for men (jackets, shirts, shirts and trousers) and women (blouses, skirts, dresses and trousers) made from colorful African-designed and printed fabrics, Woodin is a Ghanaian success story, with seven shops in Ghana and 10 in neighboring countries. The Greater Accra Mall location has the best selection, including clothes in bright floral and patchwork prints that will work equally well back home. woodinfashion.com



LOCAL FLAVOR Clockwise from top: a jewelry stall at one of the area's many street markets; the Pallet Kitchen bar, where cocktails are named after black icons such as Fela Kuti and Malcolm X; a crab cake, served in shell, at Urban Grill; the exterior of Wild Gecko Handicrafts, a trove of Ghanaian collectibles; the pool at the Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City; a tropical swimming alternative at La Villa Boutique Hotel.

