

CULTURED EXPRESSIONS

Visit Ghana in 2010! / An Interview with Lisa Shepard Stewart

How long have you been traveling to Africa? My first trip to the Continent took me to Senegal & the Gambia in 1986, and my first visit to Ghana in particular was in 2001. The upcoming tour, from September 16 through 28, 2010, will be my 7th time there.

What first took you to the country? I was invited to be a guest journalist by an e-commerce company called Novica.com. They promote local artists all around the world, letting them set their own prices, post their bios, etc to gain exposure and build a worldwide clientele. My role on the trip was to interview their Ghana-based artists and place stories about them and the Novica mission in US media upon my return.

What is your most vivid Ghana memory? There are LOTS, but one of the most vivid was meeting King Otumfuo Osei Tutu II and his entourage, as part of the Novica trip. Being a fabricaholic, I was especially thrilled to meet his Chief Dresser, a man of 80 years or better, who spoke no English, but we communicated thru an interpreter. His job is to dress the King for special events, selecting the kente cloths to suit a particular occasion, etc. I tried to apply for a job with him, but he just chuckled – apparently, he wasn't hiring at the moment. Finally, on the third day of hanging out in the courtyard with local children, artists, the entourage and some gorgeous peacocks, we were given access to the inner court, finally meeting the King. Along with our offerings of Schnapps, I presented him with a copy of African Accents. I believe he was impressed, as it describes various textile crafts of his country, and gives readers an appreciation for them.

What can those traveling with you expect to discover? The trip is designed to uncover the traditional crafts of Ghana, interpreted through today's artists. Aside from the technical experience of how kente is woven or how glass beads are made, they'll also get a feel for how people live in Ghana, and how much ancient tradition still impacts daily life, which is one of the things I love most about Ghana.

How did you get to know so many of the artisans, craftsmen and craftswomen? My Novica trip introduced me to artists that became friends, and we stayed in touch. I realized that there was a lot in Ghana that I could offer to my customers, and on my second trip the following year, I set out to find even more textile artists, especially those that could ship goods abroad. I visited markets, mills, street stalls, and found new resources everywhere I went. It was amazing!



How did you come up with the idea to do this sort of trip, taking crafting abroad? Actually the idea for this trip developed through another Cultured Expressions event, our Quilter's Retreat to Jamaica. I've done five in the past 6 years. After visiting a holistic spa called Jackie's on the Reef in Negril on a personal vacation, I decided it would be the perfect setting for a small group of people to get together to create, in between the holistic spa treatments and the gourmet food! I shared my idea with Jackie Lewis, the owner, and she agreed to try the group event. We average seven or eight participants, and the spa's capacity is kept at 12 for a quiet, intimate setting, so with 8 participants, we have the place to ourselves!

Why did you make quilting a part of the group trip to Jamaica trip? Quilters are known to be passionate about their craft, and they'll take it anywhere - cruises, cabin resorts, spas - so I felt it was a natural combination. When I went to Jackie's for the first time, it was just a much-needed getaway, and once I arrived and began to relax with the music and waves crashing on the reef right in front of me I wished I'd had some of my fabric stash and my sewing machine to play around with.

What do you think are the benefits of this sort of travel? I think that any journey is beneficial, if only for the change of scenery. But beyond that, combining travel with a personal passion or hobby gives you a chance to recharge your creativity, too. Approaching your work in a new setting can help you to uncover new ideas that you might never tap into when you're sitting in your familiar sewing room. With the Ghana trip, you are in completely new surroundings, and you soak in the energy of the culture, sometimes realizing it as it happens, and sometimes not. You come back with fresh perspectives for your craft and often for your life in general.



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Would you consider this educational travel? Absolutely. I believe that all travel (especially international travel -- is educational. The hands-on workshops and the presentations we have planned will teach participants about the crafts themselves and their role in the society. In fact, we do encourage educators and professional artisans to check with their institutions about the possibility of earning credits on the trip, depending on their programs. There will also undoubtedly be spontaneous "teaching moments" that might take place in a crowded market, in a taxicab, etc. Different participants will have different experiences, and these will be shared during the trip, another kind of sharing & education that takes place organically. The more open you are to the experience, the more you will learn.

Did you have a model for the trip? Do you know any other companies doing this sort of tour? I really structured the tour from my own experiences, and my knowledge of my customer base. Many have expressed an interest in this kind of tour, and when I give lectures & trunk shows, I pay close attention to the comments and questions that follow when I show video images of my previous trips.



What is your goal for this trip? Just like the Jamaica retreats, I want to share with others that "feeling" I get when I'm there. I'd like for the participants to share my passion for Ghana, to gain a first-hand appreciation for their unique culture, and to come home even a little bit "changed" because of the experience. Another goal is to launch the Cultured Expressions "CE Cares" Program. We're inviting the group members to create a small item (a mini-quilt, cloth doll, or other simple gift item for kids) that we will present to a local children's orphanage or hospital on the last day of the trip. The crafting activity will give us a chance to work with some of our newly acquired materials and actually "set needle to fabric" while we are in Ghana, creating something useful & meaningful that we can leave behind. I hope that for at least some of the travelers, it will symbolize the start of lasting relationships between us and new Ghanaian friends.

Would you consider this to be a group trip for crafty types? Most definitely...in comparison to the 2003 trip, where only part of the itinerary involved the crafting workshops, the 2010 tour is more fully craft & textile oriented. Branded as a Cultured Expressions event, it's definitely designed for "fabricholics and beadophiles" like quilters, sewing enthusiasts, dollmakers, fabric crafters, fiber artists, etc. Put simply, if you find the CulturedExpressions.com website interesting, you should seriously consider joining us in 2010!

Would non-crafters feel out of place? We realize that some participants would like to bring a spouse, friend, sibling, etc. And we do have optional activities lined up for them, such as "Traditional Village Life" program, a full-day spa excursion, visits to the wood carving region, and shopping. They would also be a part of the group dinners, and the trips to Kumasi, Cape Coast (both overnight trips) and to Koforidua. For the "non-crafter" companion, it's equally important that they are open to the adventure and make the most of the opportunity. Hands-on workshops are included in the tour cost, so we do encourage the companions to participate fully, to learn and enjoy something different, which I believe is the goal of any kind of travel.



Will participants on this trip also have a chance to visit general "tourist" points of interest? Yes, in Kumasi, we tour the Manhyia Palace (where I met King Otumfuo in 2001) and the Kumasi market, the largest in West Africa; in Cape Coast we take a guided tour of visit the slave castles and pay our respects; and Koforidua includes the bead market and bead-related cultural programming that will be of interest to all. It's really a full and well-rounded itinerary. We realize that this would be a first trip to Ghana for many, so it's important that we balance the textiles & crafts with an overview of Ghana culture and tourists highlights.

For more information on the Textile & Craft Tour of Ghana, visit www.CulturedExpressions.com, call Lisa at 1-866-MUDCLOTH (866-683-2568), or email info@CulturedExpressions.com