

Competing for Ghana

Bhavya Jha (Ghana, '18)



The noises of drivers signaling passengers for tro-tros (private minivans used by most Ghanaian commuters), the sight of rich red dirt sprawling under masses of greenery, the humid air—my journey in Ghana began with a full sensory overload. I was surrounded by the local Twi language, different foods, and a foreign culture. As much as I was enjoying my time in Ghana, by the end of my first month I could feel myself getting frustrated for not being as engaged with the country and its people as I wanted to be.

So I decided to join the University of Ghana swim team, the Legon Marines. Swimming was a big part of my life before going to UCSB, but it was something I had lost touch with since starting college. When I found myself in the pool again for the first time in four years, I rediscovered a forgotten part of my past. As one of only two Americans on the team, I was very nervous that I would not fit in. What I experienced was exactly the opposite. The Legon Marines welcomed me into their family with open arms. I found myself being eager to go to practice every night to spend time with my newfound friends. We bonded as we trained and complained together over drills and sets.

As a member of the swim team, I had the opportunity to participate in the West Africa University Games (WAUG), an international athletic competition that takes place once every four years. WAUG was a surreal experience. The Games were held in Nigeria, a 36-hour drive away from Accra. As we left the University of Ghana campus at 4:30 am, I was excited for our road trip through the West African countries of Togo and Benin. Despite a bus breakdown, several delays due to traffic and passing military convoys, we finally made it to the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. Our two weeks there flew by. After the exciting opening ceremony, we banged our djembe drums and loudly cheered for our teammates in the swimming, tennis, handball, track, badminton, and table tennis events.

Being part of the swim team in Ghana allowed me to meld the familiar with the foreign. I suddenly felt like I was part of the collectivist Ghanaian culture. With my teammates, I learned how to eat a bowl of fufu with my right hand; I danced to Ghanaian music; and I engaged in complex conversations regarding political and cultural differences. My experiences with the Legon Marines and participating in the Games engaged me with Ghana's people and culture in the in-depth way I had hoped for when I arrived in Accra.

Standing at Kotoka International Airport waiting to board my flight back to California, I couldn't help but reflect on how quickly this place and its people had grown on me, and how fortunate I was to have been able to experience my four months in Ghana. I had arrived in Ghana a stranger, but I left as a member of team Ghana.