

THREE'S a treat waiting for me when I check into my room at the Labadi Beach Hotel in Accra. It's a basket of tropical fruit that includes mango, granadilla, pineapple and pawpaw. After a long day of travelling from South Africa, it's just what I need. And it's just the beginning of what will be a delicious weekend of Ghanaian cuisine.

There's even more of a feast when we make our way to the Akwaaba Restaurant (the Akan word for "Welcome"), which serves a full English breakfast as well as dinner and lunch buffets. Much like at the Terrace Bar, the casual al fresco venue that overlooks the pool and is perfect for sundowners to fight the sometimes unbearable heat, we're welcomed with fresh coconuts sprouting straws. With some old-school music playing in the background, it's the perfect way to start what happens to be a popular weekly barbecue.

"It's expensive to eat in Ghana," says Adrian Landry, general manager of the hotel, whose words echo those of an unmarried business executive who said his grocery bill amounted to almost \$300 a month.

"We import different foods from the best available markets, like sausages from Kenya or beef from South Africa," says Landry.

Part of the reason is because Ghana doesn't produce as much food as it could. And even though the amount of developed farming land is expected to increase to about 20 605 hectares this year, it would only be 6 percent of the 346 000ha of potential irrigable area.

To address this, the government is offering tax breaks and other benefits to agriculture-related enterprises and businesses that convert crops, fish or livestock into canned or other packaged products.

The solution for tourists and residents is to eat local. In the northern savannah region, which is the country's largest agricultural zone, you can try dishes like Ghanain Oto: mashed yam and palm oil with boiled eggs. Another popular option is Ampesie: boiled yam that can also be made with cassava, cocoyam, or plantain.

In the coastal savannah region, which includes Central and Greater Accra, popular foods include Fufu: a common Ghanaian dish (considered a delicacy across the African diaspora) made of pounded cassava and plantain. Another option here is Etor: boiled and mashed plantain, mixed with palm oil, and garnished with groundnuts (peanuts) and eggs.

The coast, especially along the banks of the River Volta, also offers opportunities to fish. "The men catch the fish and the women sell the fish," our tour guide explained when we asked about the source of the tuna, salmon, herring and (sometimes) mackerel. "But not on Tuesday. That's the day the sea goddess must rest."



The buffet prepared at Ghana's Labadi Beach Hotel and, below, two dishes prepared by the establishment's executive chef, Gary Lane: Norwegian salmon with plantain and, right, poached prawn with saffron sauce.



GOURMET GHANA

Food is expensive in the West African nation, and it's best to stick to traditional local delicacies. EUGENE YIGA was blown away by the exotic tastes on a recent visit

As expected, since we're staying at one of the city's top five-star hotels, there's quite a feast. Ghanaian chicken soup served with tea bread (like a baguette) and kpakpo shito (ground green pepper). Spicy pork belly with jollof rice (adapted from the Djolof traders of Senegal and made with rice, tomatoes, spices and meat boiled together), side salad and chilli relish. And let's not forget about the

Waakye (boiled rice and beans) with Kelewele (spiced ripe plantain, sometimes served with peanuts).

My favourite is "red red", a dish that gets its name from the palm oil that adds colour to the bean stew, as well as the bright orange colour of the fried ripe plantain. Indeed, it turns out that a lot of Ghanaian soups and stews use a spicy condiment made from chillies, onions and tomatoes. Quite a kick!

The best way to fight the spice (and get a break from the sweltering heat) is to sip on something cool. In the north of Ghana, popular beverages include lamujee (a spicy, sweetened drink) and pitoo (a local beer made of fermented millet). But in the south, there are interesting concoctions like asaana (made from fermented maize) and a palm wine that is used to create akpeteshie (a local gin).



Known for its good food, the Labadi Beach Hotel in Accra is situated in tropical landscaped gardens overlooking one of Ghana's most beautiful beaches. The on-site restaurant prepares both local and international dishes.

PICTURES SUPPLIED



In Accra, one of the top spots to get comfortable with the cuisine (besides La Tante DC10, a quirky restaurant built inside a grounded airplane) is The Republic. It's the perfect place to sip on some local beer – Star and Club are popular – and try its own special concoction: the kokroko, which is exactly like a coco loco... except it's completely different. Its ingredients include pulverised ice, hibiscus, lime, mint, brown sugar, and a "spirit component" that remained a mystery to us all. Never mind. When something tastes that good, you might as well sit back and savour it.

DINING DO'S & DON'TS

Table manners in Ghana can be quite formal. Here are some tips:

In Ghana, it's considered a sign of friendship (and an honour) to be invited to dinner at someone's home. So be sure to dress the part, even though you might need to remove your shoes at the door.

You're not expected to bring a gift, but if you do, make sure you present it with your right hand or both hands. Never offer it with your left hand.

Greet elders or heads of the family first. People over 30 can be called "pah-pah" (males) or "mah-mee" (females) while those over 50 can be called "nah-nah".

Wait until you're told where to sit. A basin will be brought out so that you can wash your hands. This is important because the food tends to be served from a communal bowl.

Wait until the eldest male begins eating before you start. Also, eat from the part of the bowl in front of you. Never reach over to grab something from the other side.

When scooping food, use the thumb and first two fingers of your right hand. Never use your left hand. If you're not comfortable using your hands, ask for utensils.

HOW TO GET THERE

The writer travelled on a direct flight from Johannesburg to Ghana as a guest of South African Airways (flysaa.com), which now offers direct flights from Accra to Washington DC. The flight time from South Africa is about six hours while that from the US is about nine hours.

WHAT YOU NEED

Visitors to Ghana must get a visa from a Ghanaian embassy or high commission. Because many in our group struggled with the lengthy and complex application process (done via www.ghanahighcommission.co.za), it takes up to seven working days, excluding Friday, when the service is closed), we applied for visas on arrival. You also need to produce a yellow fever vaccination certificate and take the necessary precautions for malaria.

WHERE TO STAY

To book a room or suite at the Labadi Beach Hotel, call +233 30 277 3029, e-mail labadi@legacyhotels.com, or see www.legacyhotels.co.za/en/hotels/labadi.