

# Capt. Daley's Sea Stories

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### Elmina Slave Castle & Road to Accra 1



Elmina Castle was erected by Portugal in 1482 as São Jorge da Mina (St. George of the Mine) Castle, also known simply as Mina or Feitoria da Mina) in present-day Elmina, Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast). It was the first trading post built on the Gulf of Guinea, so is the oldest European building in existence below the Sahara. First established as a trade settlement, the castle later became one of the most important stops on the route of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The Dutch seized the fort from the Portuguese in 1637, and took over all the Portuguese Gold Coast in 1642. The slave trade continued under the Dutch until 1814; in 1871 the fort became a possession of the British Empire.

Britain granted the Gold Coast its independence in 1957, and control of the castle was transferred to the nation formed out of the colony, present-day Ghana. Today it is a popular historical site, and was a major filming location for Werner Herzog's *Cobra Verde*. The castle is recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage



The people of Ghana are very religious. This sign about faith in God is written in Fante. Fante is one of the three former languages literary dialects of the Akan language. It is spoken in the Central and Western Regions of Ghana. Fante is the common language for communicating between the several Kingdoms of the Fante people, though each has its own (sub)dialect: Agona, Anomabo, Abura, Gomua. Many Fante are monolingual.



If you like yellow, one of the local cell phone companies (MTN) will give you yellow paint to paint your house provided you put the MTN logo on your house. Cell phone companies are the major businesses of Africa.



If you must carry something on your head, it may as well be lobster. Lobster for lunch, anyone?



Famous Elmina Slave Castle looking very peaceful, but the history is anything but peaceful.

The people living along the West African coast at Elmina around the fifteenth century were presumably Fante. The Fante ethnicity bears an uncertain relationship to "Akan," itself a word connoting conquest and warfare. Among their ancestors were merchants and miners trading gold into the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds from medieval times. The ancestors of the Akan-speakers of the forests however undoubtedly came from north of the forest.

The people on the West African coast were organized into numerous populations that were drawn according to kinship lines. Family was extremely important in society, and family heads were united in communities under a recognized local authority. Along the Gold Coast alone, more than twenty independent kingdom-states existed. Elmina lay between two different Fante kingdoms, Fetu and Eguafu. While there was a relative degree of interstate rivalry, peoples generally intermingled freely. Trade between localities was important for the economy. The coastal people also had strong trade relations with the Sudanese empires to the north.

West Africans nurtured ancient connections to other parts of the world. Common metals trade, iconic artistic forms, and agricultural borrowing show that trans-Saharan and regional coastal connections thrived. The Portuguese in 1482 were the first Europeans to visit the Gold Coast as such, but not necessarily the first sailors to reach the port.



What an interesting title, kind of like Chief Executive Officer, but more descriptive what he does.



I've seen lots of West African fishing boats, but never so many in one place!



The front door of the castle is protected by a draw bridge and moat.

The Portuguese first reached what became known as the Gold Coast in 1482. Prince Henry the Navigator first sent ships to explore the African coast in 1418. The Portuguese had several motives for voyaging south. They were attracted by rumors of fertile African lands that were rich in gold and ivory. They also sought a southern route to India so as to circumvent Arab traders and establish direct trade with Asia. In line with the strong religious sentiments of the time, another focus of the Portuguese was Christian proselytism. They also sought to form an alliance with the legendary Prester John, who was believed to be the leader of a great Christian nation somewhere in Africa.

These motives prompted the Portuguese to develop the Guinea trade. They made gradual progress down the African coast, each voyage reaching a point further along than the last. After fifty years of coastal exploration, the Portuguese finally reached Elmina in 1482, during the reign of King Afonso V. However, because Portuguese royalty had lost interest in African exploration as a result of meager returns, the Guinea trade was put under the oversight of the Portuguese trader, Fernão Gomes. Upon reaching present day Elmina, Gomes discovered a thriving gold trade already established among the natives and visiting Arab and Berber traders. He established his own trading post, and it became known to the Portuguese as "A Mina" (the Mine) because of the gold that could be found there.



The Dutch built this fort, Coenraadsburg Fort, a stone's throw from the castle. The fort was purely military, protecting the castle. No commercial trading was done from the fort.



The main courtyard in Elmina Castle. Slave cells are on the first floor and living quarters and the governor's suite are on the upper floors.

Trade between Elmina and Portugal grew throughout the decade following the establishment of the trading post. In 1481, the recently-crowned João II decided to build a fort on the coast in order to ensure the protection of this trade, which was once again held as a royal monopoly. King João sent all of the materials needed to build the fort on ten caravels and two transport ships. The supplies, which included everything from heavy foundation stones to roof tiles, were sent, in pre-fitted form, along with provisions for six hundred men.

Under the command of Diogo de Azambuja, the fleet set sail on 11 December 1481 and arrived at Elmina a little over a month later, on 19 January 1482. Some historians note that Christopher Columbus was among those to make the voyage to the Gold Coast with this fleet.

Upon arrival, Azambuja contracted a Portuguese trader, who had lived at Elmina for some time, to arrange and interpret an official meeting with the local chief, Kwamin Ansa (interpreted from the Portuguese, "Caramansa"). Concealing his self-interest with elegant manners and friendliness, Azambuja told the chief of the great advantages in building a fort, including protection from the very powerful king of Portugal.

Chief Kwamin Ansa, while accepting Azambuja, as he had any other Portuguese trader who arrived on his coast, was wary of a permanent settlement. However, with firm plans already in place, the Portuguese would not be deterred. After offering gifts, making promises, and hinting at the consequences of noncompliance, the Portuguese finally received Kwamin Ansa's reluctant agreement.

When construction began the next morning, the chief's reluctance was proved to be well-founded. In order to build the fort in the most defensible position on the peninsula, the Portuguese had to demolish the homes of some of the villagers, who consented only after they had been compensated. The Portuguese also tried to quarry a nearby rock that the people of Elmina, who were animists, believed to be the home of the god of the nearby River Benya. In response to this, the local people forged an attack that resulted in several Portuguese deaths.

Finally, an understanding was reached, but continued opposition led the Portuguese to burn the local village in retaliation. Even in this tense atmosphere, the first story of the tower was completed after only twenty days; this was the result of having brought so much prepared-in-advance building material. The remainder of the fort and an accompanying church were completed soon afterward, despite resistance.



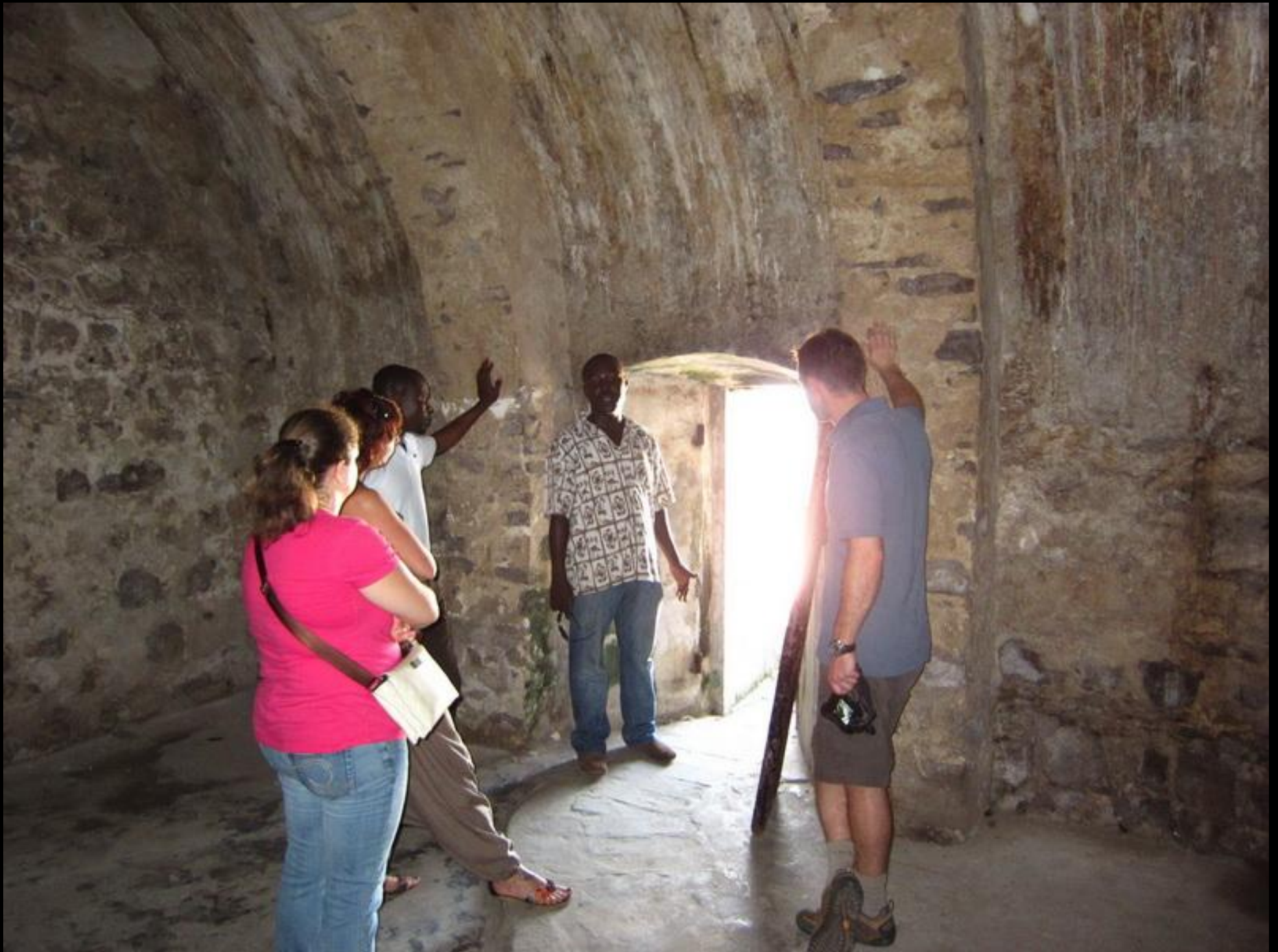
One of the female slave storage areas. There was a staircase to the Governor's quarters for selected female slaves to entertain the governor. Slaves were abused in every conceivable fashion.



Our guide showing us the cistern where water was stored. As fate would have it, the other guests were a pilot and flight attendants from Brussels Airlines. My grandmother was born and raised in Brussels Belgium. Small World!



Slaves were shackled to cannonball shot to prevent their escape.



The infamous door of no return. Thousands of slaves boarded ships through this door.

By the seventeenth century, most trade in West Africa concentrated on the sale of slaves. São Jorge da Mina played a significant part in the Atlantic Slave Trade. The castle acted as a depot where slaves were bought in bartering fashion from local African chiefs and kings. The slaves, often captured in the African interior by the slave-catchers of coastal tribes, were sold to Portuguese traders in exchange for goods such as textiles and horses. The slaves were held captive in the castle before exiting through the castle's infamous "Door of No Return" to be transported and resold in newly colonized Brazil and other Portuguese colonies.



There was a prison cell in the castle for Europeans that committed crimes.



These were the steepest stairs I've ever climbed. No ADA here - no handrails!



Such a commanding view from the castle.



Toda, Elmina is one of the largest fishing ports I've seen in West Africa.



So peaceful today!



Another view of the main interior square.



Guns defending the castle for over 500 years.

The fort was the first pre-cast building to have been planned and executed in Sub-Saharan Africa. Upon its completion, Elmina was established as a proper city. Azambuja was named governor, and King João added the title "Lord of Guinea" to his noble titles. São Jorge da Mina took on the military and economic importance that had previously been held by the Portuguese factory at Arguim Island on the southern edge of the Moorish world. At the height of the gold trade in the early sixteenth century, 24,000 ounces of gold were exported annually from the Gold Coast, accounting for one-tenth of the world's supply. The new fort, signifying the permanent involvement of Europeans in West Africa, had a considerable effect on Africans living on the coast.

At the urging of the Portuguese, Elmina declared itself an independent state whose Governor then took control of the town's affairs. The people of Elmina were offered Portuguese protection against attacks from neighboring coastal tribes, with whom the Portuguese had much less genial relations (even though they were friendly with the powerful trading nations in the African interior.) If any tribe attempted to trade with a nation other than Portugal, the Portuguese reacted with aggressive force, often by forming alliances with the betraying nation's enemies. Hostility between tribes increased, and the traditional organization of tribal societies suffered, especially after the Portuguese introduced them to fire-arms, which made the dominance of the stronger tribes easier.

Trade with the Europeans helped make certain goods, such as cloth and beads, more available to the coastal people, but European involvement also disrupted traditional trade routes between coastal people and northern tribes by cutting out the African middlemen. The population of Elmina swelled with traders from other towns hoping to trade with the Portuguese, who gradually established a west-African monopoly.



If antiquities could talk, what tales would this cannon tell?