

Visiting Mole National Park

Mole (pronounced moLAY) is a wildlife preserve in the northern part of Ghana, much like our U.S. National Parks. Just recently, a good road was constructed from Tamale, Ghana, to Mole, halving the driving time from over four hours to two. So a visit to Mole was on the agenda the Partnership Committee at our sister parish, Lady of the Annunciation (OLA), showed me on my first afternoon there. I was excited to be able to visit Mole, as the distance had been prohibitive before.

A young man, Ntreh Nii-Sarpei (he is simply called Nii--pronounced "knee"), was to be our driver. Nii is probably in his early thirties and is a successful businessman, owning and running a pharmacy. The day before we were to visit Mole, Nii dropped me off at the OLA Guesthouse and said he'd pick me up at 3:30 a.m. and that we'd have a picnic breakfast at Mole when we arrived at 6 a.m. Okaaaay. . . as it was already 9:30 p.m., it was going to be a very short night! And I better tell the night watchman at the guesthouse that I'd be up and about at that early hour as well as Patience, who ran the guesthouse, that I'd not be there for breakfast.

The reason for the early departure was that the best time to see the animals was either 6 a.m. or 3 p.m. So 6 it was, as there were already plans for the afternoon. At 3:30 a.m. sharp, Nii drove his Nissan four wheel drive vehicle to my door. In the car already were Nicodemus Gampi (of the Partnership Committee and known as Nico) and his four year old son Onysimus (pronounced Oh NIS e moose and usually called Ony). Another passenger was a man whom I had not met who was to be dropped off at the bus station on our way. It turns out that he was a relative of Nico who was traveling north and had stopped in Tamale to spend the night with Nico and his family. In addition, we stopped to pick up Valeria (pronounced vah LAIR ea), also a member of the Partnership Committee. Trouble was, Nico and Nii couldn't remember exactly where Valeria lived. We got to the right street and knocked on the wrong door (but didn't wake anyone, fortunately). Then, a block away, we saw a figure standing out in the road--it was Valeria with her picnic hamper balanced on her head.

After dropping the bus traveler off at the bus station, which was bustling at now 3:45 a.m., we started out of town, dodging goats which were sleeping all over the nicely paved two lane road. Nii needed to stop for gas, only all the gas stations we passed were closed. At the fourth station, Nii honked his horn to waken the attendant, who slept in the gas station. The attendant, a young woman, came out and was able to gas up Nii's car, but could not generate a receipt at that hour. So our plan was to stop by there on our way back to Tamale.

So by 4 a.m. we were on our way to Mole, all of us passengers nodding off to sleep while Nii drove steadily on, enjoying the great surface of the road and dodging sleeping goats. The sun has just come up when we pulled into Mole and, as we drove into the place where we'd pick up our guide, we saw baboons and lots of monkeys. When I asked about the kinds of monkeys, I was told "red monkeys and green monkeys." I have to admit, they looked the same to me.

While waiting for our guide, we enjoyed the picnic breakfast Valeria had brought: hot water in a thermos for tea or coffee and lots of yummy white bread and hard boiled eggs. I contributed protein bars, which everyone tried somewhat gingerly, as they had not experienced them before. They didn't ask for seconds on the protein bars! Valeria is a teacher and it turned out that one of her former students was working in the park restaurant where we sat down outside for our meal. Valeria asked her if we could have some jam from the restaurant for our bread and we were treated to a wonderful orange marmalade. Yum!

Our guide got in the front of the car with Nii and the rest of us squeezed into the back. The guide told Nii where to drive to the best places to see the animals. We wanted to have the windows of the car open so we could lean out of the car, taking photos. But Mole is tse-tse fly territory and they were really swarming that morning, so we ended up with the windows closed. Nii had to creep the car along, as the dusty track we followed was hugely potholed and had many big rocks sticking up. It was an amazing trip into the park: we saw elephants VERY close up and bush pigs (they look like a wild boar) and waterboks and bushboks (these are two different kinds of antelopes, the waterbok having a hide with strange white lines on it and the bushbok having a plainer coat and cute little round ears facing forward at an odd angle).

We had engaged the guide for 2 hours, so at the end of his time, we went to the small museum. Poaching of elephants is a real, continuing, problem in Mole, with the poachers leaving the carcasses after they remove the tusks. In the museum there were preserved parts of elephants from those carcasses as well as educational material about the animals and poaching.

On the way back to Tamale, we stopped at a town that had a hospital. Nii wanted to make a personal call on the hospital, as they were in arrears with their bill to Nii's pharmacy (about \$45,000 Ghana cedi or \$15,000 US). He thought a visit might bring good resolution. Not so--they hadn't any money, Nii said. He shrugged his shoulders and said it was a hard problem, as the hospital really needed medicines and, he was convinced had no ability to pay him for them. My guess is that Nii is continuing to supply medicines to the hospital.

Nii is a very generous person, to be sure. Little Onysimus had been coughing, so on the way into Tamale, Nii drove by his pharmacy and picked up some cough medicine for him.

He dropped me off at the convent at OLA compound, as I had a 1 pm lunch with the Sisters of Mary Immaculate who live there. As I bowed my head for the blessing, I was grateful for more than just the food: it had been a fun morning with friends and I had been blessed to see another part of God's amazing creation.

Barb Luxenberg

		
<p>A waterbok crosses the road at Mole</p>	<p>At Mole--Valeria (front); (left to right) a guide, Nico and Ony, Barb, a guide</p>	<p>This was NOT taken with a telephoto lens!</p>

