

Changing Money in Ghana

Ghanaian currency is called the Ghanaian new cedi (GHC) and right now the conversion rate for the US dollar is 1 dollar US to 3.35 GHC. You can't get GHC in the United States, so when you travel to Ghana, you need to do your money exchanges there at ATMS, large banks (often a Barclay's Bank), or forex bureaus (foreign exchange). We had been advised that not all places would convert money and that your best bet was to bring your US dollars in crisp, new \$100 dollar bills. The GHC is commonly referred to in Ghana just as the "cedi."

We had used an ATM at the airport when we arrived in the capital Accra on Saturday night to get enough cash to last through the weekend, as their money exchange was closed by the time we arrived. We then went to Barclay's Bank in Accra early Monday morning to change still more money.

A week later in Tamale, Ghana, I needed more cedis, as I had been doing some power shopping! I was spending the day with Nico (Nicholas Gampie of the partnership committee at OLA) and Nii (Ntreh Nii-Sarpei, the owner and manager of a pharmacy) and asked their recommendation on whether I should go to Barclay's or the forex. Nicholas promptly said "Neither. Nii will change the money for you." Nii nodded his head in agreement and drove us to his pharmacy office. He asked me what the exchange rate was but I could only tell him what it had been when I left the US ten days ago. So he looked it up on the Internet and then opened his safe. I gave him 2 new \$100 bills and he counted out my Ghanaian money: 640 GHC in very used 5's and 10's, and some 20's.

Well, you can imagine the stack of money that was at an exchange rate of over 3 to 1! I could only fit half of it into my waistband money belt, the other half going into my fanny pack. So I looked about five months pregnant with my bulging money belt under my clothes. For security's sake, I didn't like to keep much money in my fanny pack, usually carrying only what I thought I'd need for the day. But now I had no choice.

The 5's and 10's cedi's were easily spent, as many places did not have change if you gave them anything over a 10 cedi note. Sellers would frequently have to go to other sellers asking for change from them, if you'd given them a 20 cedi note.

So, when I rejoined the rest of my travel group after my stay in Tamale, they were teasing me about having gained so much weight from the good food in Tamale. When I told them the new "weight" was lots of 5 and 10 cedi notes, they asked me if I would change some of their 20 cedi notes. We were driving down to Cape Coast at that time and we all took off our money belts in the van. By the time we were finished, I had mostly 20 cedi notes and the other 8 travelers were excited to have smaller denominations. And I was excited to have a slimmer profile and be able to put most of my money in my moneybelt, hidden away under my clothes. Our driver was quite amused by our "money trading" in his van - it was a first for him!

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