

Ghana

By Tom Kirvan

PANAFEST

THEATRE FESTIVAL SERVES AS CULTURAL HIGHLIGHT IN GHANA FOR ALL OF AFRICA

Ghana during PANAFEST – which runs from Thursday, July 23 through Sunday, Aug. 2 – feels less like a destination than a doorway.

Arriving in Accra, the capital and largest city in Ghana with nearly 2 million residents, visitors will feel that the air is warm, humid, and full of motion with cars weaving past market stalls, music spilling from shops, and the colors of kente cloth bright against the Atlantic light. Yet the real emotional center of the journey lies farther west, along the coast, where Cape Coast and Elmina face the ocean with beauty, sorrow, and memory.

PANAFEST, short for the Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival, is one of Ghana's most meaningful cultural events. Held every two years, it brings together Africans on the continent and people of African descent from the Caribbean, the Americas, Europe, and elsewhere in the diaspora. The festival began in the early 1990s and grew from the vision of Ghanaian writer and cultural leader Efuia Sutherland, who imagined the arts as a way to reconnect a scattered African family. Unlike ordinary festivals built only around music or food, PANAFEST is both a celebration and a pilgrimage. It asks visitors not merely to watch, but to remember.

The history behind the festival is inseparable from Ghana's coastline. Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle, now UNESCO World Heritage sites, once stood at the center of the transatlantic slave trade. Their whitewashed walls rise above the sea, beautiful from a distance but haunting within. Walking through the dungeons, visitors encounter a silence heavier than stone. Guides describe the cramped rooms where captive Africans were held before being forced through the "Door of No Return." During PANAFEST, that same door becomes a site of ceremony, mourning, and symbolic return. For many Africans, the journey is deeply personal: a coming home to a place they may never have known but have always carried.

A GHANAIAN CONNECTION FOR PRIMERUS MEMBERS

Primerus has a member law firm in Ghana, **Legalstone Solicitors**, located in Accra, specializing in corporate and commercial, corporate immigration practice, metals and mining, debt recovery and restructuring, real estate, family law, international commercial arbitration, and more.

Image credit: PANAFEST Foundation (2025). Women dancing at PANAFEST 2025 [Photograph]. 2025 PANAFEST Foundation. Retrieved July 20 from <https://panafest.org.gh/panafest-highlights>

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The festival's attractions unfold across several locations, including Accra, Cape Coast, Elmina, Assin Manso, and other historic sites. Events often include traditional durbars of chiefs, drumming, dance, theatre, poetry, concerts, lectures, exhibitions, youth forums, and ceremonies of remembrance. A durbar is especially striking: chiefs and queen mothers appear in rich regalia, shaded by ornate umbrellas, while drummers and horn blowers announce their presence. The scene feels ancient and alive at once, a reminder that African culture did not end with enslavement. Instead, it endured, adapted, and continues to command dignity.

At Assin Manso, another powerful stop on the PANAFEST route, visitors gather at the site known for the "Last Bath," where enslaved Africans were washed before being marched to the coast. Today, the place has been transformed into a memorial landscape. Prayers, libations, wreath-laying ceremonies, and processions turn the site into a space of collective healing. The mood is solemn, but not hopeless. PANAFEST is not only about grief; it is about restoration.

Attendance at PANAFEST is not measured like a single stadium event. Because the celebration stretches across days and locations, crowds gather in different places for different ceremonies. Major openings and durbars may draw hundreds or thousands of participants, while the broader festival attracts official delegations, artists, scholars, tourists, community groups, and members of the diaspora from many countries. The impact is felt not in one crowd alone, but in the steady movement of people through hotels, heritage sites, restaurants, markets, craft stalls, transportation services, and performance venues.

Economically, PANAFEST supports Ghana's growing heritage tourism sector. Visitors spend on lodging, food, guides, clothing, art, local transportation, and tours to historic sites. The festival also benefits performers, event planners, vendors, historians, cultural institutions, and small businesses in Cape Coast and surrounding communities. Ghana has increasingly positioned itself as a gateway for the African diaspora, especially through heritage initiatives that encourage return, investment, and cultural exchange. PANAFEST strengthens that identity by turning memory into movement and tourism into a form of reconnection.

What lingers most after PANAFEST is not only the sound of drums or the sight of the ocean against the castle walls. It is the feeling of standing where history wounded the world and seeing people gather there to reclaim it. Ghana does not hide the pain of the past. During PANAFEST, it frames that pain with ceremony, scholarship, art, and pride.

PANAFEST is not merely an event in Ghana. It is a homecoming, a remembrance, and a declaration that the African story did not end at the "Door of No Return."



Image credit: PANAFEST Foundation (2025). Drummers drumming at PANAFEST 2025 [Photograph]. 2025 PANAFEST Foundation. Retrieved July 20 from <https://panafest.org.gh/about-panafest>