Crammed between sweating, extravagantly clothed people, with my knees pressed painfully up against the seat in front of me (the seat being a thinly covered piece of sharp metal), chickens squawking from their basket under my seat, and an almost intolerable level of noise, it was hard to realize that I was learning. At least twice each day while in Ghana, I used public transportation, which consisted primarily of minibuses or large vans known as trotros. They were inevitably overloaded with people. Those who owned the trotros tried to make as much money as possible during each run of their route—for example, by directing three people to sit in a space that appears hardly big enough for one. Daily experiences like these teach one about a culture, over time, even if the lessons are hard to see while immersed in them. In a way, riding in trotros taught me more about Ghanaian culture than any other single activity.

One of the first lessons that I learned while riding on trotros was that my concept of personal space was vastly different than that of Ghanaians. In other words, being touched by others in Ghana was not a noteworthy event. Although being squeezed to the point of immobility in a seat is not enjoyable in any cultural context, the concept of touching that I first learned in the trotros carried over into most aspects of Ghanaian life. For example, showing casual displays of friendship through touching is common in Ghana; friends, whether girl and girl, or guy and guy, openly hold hands, walk with their arms around each other, or simply touch one another for emphasis while telling stories.

This openness and comfort with touching relates to another lesson I learned while riding in trotros: Ghanaians, on the whole, are very open to entertaining foreigners and to learning more about visitors to their country. In my experience living in the United States, foreigners are often marginalized or categorized as the “other”—in Ghana, being the “other” is reason for fascination. While riding on trotros, countless Ghanaians struck up conversations with me: “Hello, white woman. What is your name?” “How do you find your stay in Ghana?” “What do you think of our country?” and of course, the very common, “Take me with you when you go back.” These conversations would be initiated by a wide variety of Ghanaians riding the trotros—women preparing to go to the market, laps loaded with huge overflowing baskets of goods; men in business suits with small portfolios clasped in hand; women in traditional dress whose babies were strapped to their back with vibrantly colored Ghanaian cloth; and even younger children, who asked no questions verbally but whose wide, staring eyes told you everything about their intense curiosity.

Although the thought of these conversations may seem intriguing and pleasant, it is easy to forget the conditions under which the conversations took place—which brings me to another lesson I learned from the trotros: Ghanaians have a high tolerance for discomfort, and an ability to persist through adversity. First and foremost, all of my conversations on trotros took place
in the unrelenting heat: this is a heat that I have never before experienced and could never have imagined. The heat is such that one carries a small handkerchief to wipe the sweat from one’s brow; most people, including myself, would use this handkerchief once every few minutes. This heat is such that it presses on you from all sides; it drapes itself over your body; it clings to your hair; it weighs on your eyelids; it melts off sunscreen, makeup, lotion, powder; it burns the skin within a matter of minutes; it makes your clothes feel like imprisonment; and it fills up a small space such as a trotro with air so thick that you could push against it.

The heat was only one factor of many adverse events that could occur on a trotro ride. For example, there were often police “checkpoints,” which were glorified ways for the police to intimidate trotro drivers until the drivers offered a bribe. Police in Ghana do not have the money to patrol the streets searching for offenders; thus, they congregate at these “checkpoints” and decide which vehicles to harass and which to let through. If a policeman pulls over a trotro, the “mate” (the person on trotros who helps people load and unload and collects the money) and the driver get out, and have to show the permits for the vehicle, etc. This is usually just a formality; the police will eventually find some infraction for which to demand money. While such a transaction is going on, those in the trotro will sit patiently, waiting for the mate and driver to finish their business and get back on. Ghanaians’ patience in adverse times seemed to be common throughout my time in the country.

Possibly the most important lesson I learned from riding on the trotros in Ghana was simply this: life is hard. Walking to catch a trotro in the aggressive heat, being shoved into a small space almost like cattle, dealing with road bumps (literal and figurative) along the way, and facing the endless traffic—characteristic of a place with a lot of people but few roads—was simply hard to endure day after day. My stay amounted to nine months; those who are born and who die in Ghana face this hardship every day.

As bleak a picture as this paints, I found that Ghanaians seek their comfort in avenues other than material or physical comforts. Ghanaians’ sense of community and of loyalty to the community before the self is remarkable. Riding on a trotro can allow one to witness an impromptu microcosm of the larger Ghanaian community. To experience the hardship of life in Ghana alone would have been nearly impossible; but the people on the trotros and all of the other Ghanaians that became my “family” showed me a type of community support that I have never before experienced, and will certainly never forget.