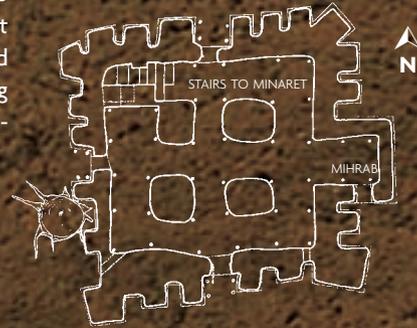


ounded in the mid-seventeenth century, Larabanga is the oldest and most revered of eight ancient mosques in Ghana, serving as an important place of pilgrimage for the region's Muslim community. Built in the Sudanese style on a quatrefoil plan, the diminutive earthen structure is ringed by conical buttresses bolstered by rows of horizontal timbers.

A minaret rises from the northwest corner; a *mihrab*, or niche pointing toward Mecca, graces the building's east facade.

Although Larabanga had retained much of its architectural integrity over the centuries, a coating of waterproof sand-cement applied to its exterior in the 1970s resulted in substantial damage to the building. In time, moisture trapped within the earthen walls began to weaken them, while termites, attracted by the sanctuary's high humidity, took up residence in wooden beams and support timbers. Collectively, the moisture and infestation caused portions of the building to collapse. Although the mosque's congregation worked to stem the damage, the shape of the towers and buttresses was significantly altered with each repair. In September 2002, the minaret and *mihrab* were felled by a violent rainstorm. Given the dire condition of the building, it was placed on WMF's 2002

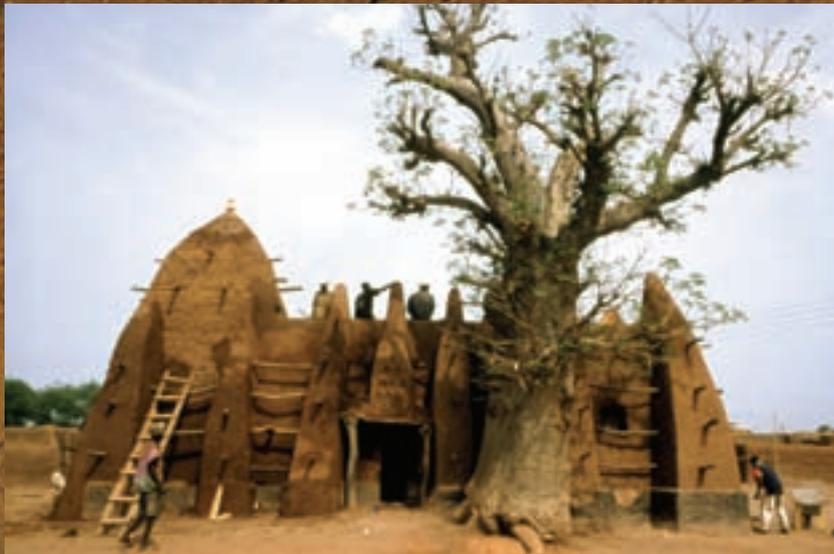


WMF (3)



LARABANGA MOSQUE

A GHANAIAN TREASURE REBORN



BUILT IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, THE LARABANGA MOSQUE HAD SUFFERED FROM INAPPROPRIATE RESTORATION. A LAYER OF SAND-CEMENT APPLIED IN THE 1970S, TOP, TRAPPED WATER IN EARTHEN WALLS, WEAKENING THEM. SINCE LARABANGA APPEARED ON WMF'S 2002 LIST OF THE 100 MOST ENDANGERED SITES, THE MOSQUE HAS BEEN RESTORED, CENTER, USING TRADITIONAL METHODS, PROMPTING A REVIVAL OF THE VANISHING ART OF MUD-BRICK CONSTRUCTION.
WMF.ORG

list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*.

Today, this jewel of Sudanese-style architecture stands reborn, thanks to the efforts of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board and CRA-Terre EAG, an international research center that specializes in earthen buildings at the School of Architecture in Grenoble, France. Funded by WMF through a generous grant from American Express, conservators, working in concert with the local community, carefully removed the cement plaster from the mosque, replaced damaged timbers, reconstructed the collapsed minaret and *mihrab*, restored the portal, and refaced the structure in traditional mud plaster.

The project has served as an important catalyst for the rebirth of mud-plaster construction, an art that has waned over the decades as more and more buildings in the area are built of iron and concrete. Compared to concrete, earthen architecture requires substantial maintenance, needing to be refreshed each year following the rainy season. However, it is far more sympathetic to the environment and better suited to the extreme heat of West Africa, providing cool interior spaces throughout the year.

Since its restoration, the mosque has resumed its vital role in the spiritual life of northern Ghana. On Fridays, canopies are erected around the structure to accommodate Larabanga's growing congregation. The local community is now working to build a nearby visitors' center to share with the world the ways of a vanishing art. ■