

Haiti: Land of Promise Betrayed

By Dan Kuhn

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From Miami it takes about one hour to fly to Port-au-Prince the capital of Haiti. They do not speak English but French and Creole, a French derivative dating back to French occupation during the 17th and 18th centuries.

The island of Hispaniola, the place where Columbus first landed, was divided later between the Spaniards and the French. The local Indians - the Arawaks - did not survive the blessings of civilization very long and were pretty much extinct within 50 years due to slave labor, diseases, and other woes. The Spaniards and French compensated the loss of local slaves by importing shiploads of African slaves. In 1697 Hispaniola was divided between the Spanish and French into what is today the Dominican Republic (Spanish speaking) and Haiti (French speaking). The French called the island the “Pearl of the Antilles” as it was the most lucrative colony of the French empire supplying, in the year 1776, 72 million lbs. of raw sugar, 51 million lbs. of refined sugar and 1 million lbs of indigo and 2 million lbs of coffee. Over half of all sugar imported into Europe, along with 60% of all coffee and most indigo came from Haiti. Forestry products were also exported. To keep this economic miracle going they needed up to 700,000 slaves. Their treatment must not have been too benevolent as they needed 40,000 slaves as replacements per year.

The French revolution in 1789 must have had some impact. In 1791, the slaves, wanting their fair share of the “liberte, egalite, fraternite” that the French revolution promised, killed most of the whites on the island. This revolution resulted in the coronation of Henry Christophe, a slave-born black man, as “Henry the First” King of Haiti. Christophe built the incredible La Citadelle Fortress and the Palace of Sans Souci, patterned after Versailles in France. Haiti became the first black republic in the world and declared its independence in 1804.



La Citadelle built in 1804 by Henry Christophe, born a slave, declared himself emperor of Haiti.
Photo: Central American Travel Guide



Palace Sans- Souci, patterned after Versailles near Paris, built by Henry Christophe.
Photo: Central American Travel guide

Interesting to note is that during the American Revolutionary War at the Siege of Savannah, 500 Haitians known as “gens de couleur (free men of color), fought with the Franco-Americans against the British. This fact is well known in Haiti but is seldom known in America.

After independence Haiti’s history has been a downward spiral of intrigue, coups, assassinations, political gridlock, graft, and the wholesale looting of the treasury by the dictatorships of Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier. Currently about 6-7000 U.N. troops hold a fragile peace.

Today 80% of the 9 million Haitians live in poverty on less than US \$250 to \$300 per year, less than \$1 per day! 54% live in desperate poverty. Haiti has a severe trade deficit with \$820 million dollar budget and \$965 million expenditures. Commercial Bank credits cost 46% interest and the rural water supply is nonexistent. Deforestation has wreaked havoc with erosion and water loss. Today Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere. The U.N. Human Development index ranks Haiti at 150 among 175 countries in the world.



Denuded hills with outlined small farming plots exposed to erosion during the rainy season.

Getting off the plane in Port-au-Prince is quite an experience, as it immediately transports the traveler to a new reality. There is an immediate assault of young men trying to carry bags from the luggage reception to the car. These are the privileged few of the young men that get to “hustle the tourists”. Carry a bag, earn a dollar. ”Gimme dollar” is a standard phrase everywhere in the country. If it were not for remittances, which are _ of GDP including Christian help ministries and international assistance, including international peace keepers, the country would be finished: a total quagmire or simply non-functional.



Tethered pig in a water source ravine with head collar to prevent passing trough fences.

Flying from the capital to the interior immediately shows off the perils of deforestation. Bare and eroded hills show a resource gone. Leaving the small plane on a grass runway which is serviced by a Christian aviation service gets you to the country roads of which 1000km are somewhat paved and 3000 km are unpaved. These interior roads are roads in name only, as an average speed of maybe 9 mph is possible. A 60 mile trip took 6 hours driving, maneuvering between banks, holes and ruts. And this was during the dry season! In the wet season, travel is stopped by numerous unbridged streams.

Village people carry water in 5 gallon buckets to their dwellings, often half an hour uphill. Mostly women do the carrying on their heads, (gracefully so). The lucky ones can draw water from hand pumps, drilled by aid missions. The rest get their water from ravines where during the dry season only puddles remain. These limited resources are used for washing, and by pigs and other livestock. Garbage, of which there is little, as this is no throw-away consumer nation, accumulates in these ravines as well. Numerous water borne diseases are prevalent. Plumbing is absent, so is electricity. Personal hygiene is limited to the ability of carrying water. Cooking is done in a separate hut with charcoal, the national fuel, which explains the lack of trees. The trees have all been turned into charcoal or used for lumber at one time or another in the past. Currently there are only fruit trees such as mangos, breadfruit, oranges, some avocado and bananas. Non-fruit bearing trees are practically nonexistent.



Laundry in the same ravine used for domestic water, laundry and livestock makes for poor hygiene.



Market day with used clothes from the U.S. and basic food items.

There are outhouses being built now, but not in sufficient quantity, as is evident in the center of traveled trails requiring some attention and maneuvering while hiking. Life expectancy is short, maybe 49 years due to Hepatitis, Malaria, Dengue Fever, Yellow Fever, Typhoid, Tetanus, Rabies, Diarrhea, Polio, Leptospirosis, Brucellosis, Cryptosporidiosis and other diseases. 2.2% of the population is affected with HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis is widespread as well. There are perhaps 2 doctors per 10,000 people, certainly not enough to make an impact on the overwhelming health problems. Again, the missions supply a great deal of help via nurses and rural clinics that are not

necessarily staffed by doctors.

Per capita annual income is between US\$ 250 to \$400 for 80% of the population. 45% of the people live in desperate poverty and the water supply is the worst in the western hemisphere. Haiti is the poorest nation as well. The need in every aspect of life is immense and just finding enough to eat is a major undertaking for most people.

People attend markets where staples are sold with a very few luxury items. Small quantities of used clothes and shoes (mostly from the U.S.), with some vegetables, charcoal, tobacco leaves, corn, beans, manioc, rice and some pasta and wheat are spread out on blankets for sale. Most people are subsistent farmers and any leftovers are bartered or sold at the market.

The land is divided into small plots extending up to the mountain tops where most families farm corn, manioc and beans. Some coffee is grown in the ravines along with bananas.

Land cultivation is by hand and hoe, or by oxen pulling some sort of plow to scarify the soil. Planting is with the machete or hoe cutting random furrows. Along the river bottoms there is some irrigation for vegetable crops and maybe some rice. Most food items besides the staples are imported and distributed very slowly on the horrific roads. Fertilizer is too expensive so everything is organic (aside from human waste used as fertilizer). There is a 5 month dry period putting stress on the water supply and creeks and small rivers slow to a trickle, or dry up.

People tend their “gardens”, as they are called, with hoe and machete planting corn, beans and manioc. Bananas and coffee grow in the wetter ravine bottoms. Fruit trees, mostly large mango trees, are very prevalent throughout the region supplying fruit and some of the firewood. Avocado breadfruit and orange trees are widespread. Animal husbandry, if there is such a thing, is for donkeys, small horses and some pigs, goats and chickens. There are occasional cows or oxen used for pulling carts or makeshift plows. The absence of animal feed makes the growing of livestock difficult. All food items are eaten by people with not much left over for animals.

Education in Haiti is free; however there are costs for uniforms, books and other incidentals. People with no money have a hard time sending their kids to school. Fewer than 35% of kids complete primary school. The educational system is tailored after French models geared towards higher education, which is not all that helpful since graduates have a hard time finding employment in a non-existing economy.

Faith-based missions supply a large degree of schooling, helping kids learn.

There are no vocational schools teaching useful trades that can be used in rural areas and villages. Many young men may not want to work in the agrarian “hoe” based environment



Farm house in the rural areas



Simple dwelling with cooking shed no plumbing or sanitation provisions

and move to town with higher hopes – and end up hauling luggage from the airport to the taxis!

It is difficult to predict what the future holds.

There is a tremendous need for simple things such as small animal husbandry, outhouse construction, and basic sanitation improvements. More difficult maybe is watershed protection, erosion control and reforestation. There is no vocational teaching today. Vocational teaching could demonstrate applicable skills to help create a progressive agrarian base for society. Today's inexpensive labor could be converted to good use initially in agrarian related or simple manufacturing techniques.

Good government would be a good internal start, despite a history full of violence, coups and political incompetence.

The international community needs to help and has to insist on democratic reforms that help shape a sustainable and governable future. Support for community-based economic development deserves government and international support. Up to now, this has been provided to a large degree by "Faith based Organizations" with little - if any – help from government.

Looking back to the 17th century, a Haiti with a thriving agrarian export economy, might point to a future where past glories can be reinvented without the slaves!

With a little help from humanity for humanity.

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