

Haiti

(NOTE: This was written in 1983, when Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier was in power. Having visited in the late 90s, after his exile -- and the US military intervention, nothing had really changed -- except a skyrocketing crime rate. Then the earthquake changed everything.)



It's a land so squalid and disease-ridden that the average Haitian barely lives to be 50. Yet, he conveys a sense of complacent dignity in the garbage-filled Port-au-Prince slum he calls home.

It is a country having little serious crime, but a 500-year history of death, treachery and terror. It is the site of an early 1800s slave revolt that spawned this hemisphere's first independent black republic -- later followed by yearly presidential assassinations, foreign occupations, brutal dictators, military coups, foreign interventions, corruption and fixed elections.

It is a topless French tourist in a resort swimming pool -- who later showers in water unfit to drink -- and laughing young women beating clothes on river rocks, as they do their laundry in a rural stream.

It is people, thousands and thousands of them, living in one square mile of Port-au-Prince, covered with slime filled trenches, dirt paths, gagging smells and row upon row of shacks made of tin patches, scrapes of wood and paper, lined up side-by-side like booths in a decrepit carnival.

It is a land with a deep and steadfast spirituality built on an intertwining of missionary imports and the vestiges of African heritage. The icons of Christianity -- a crucifix, a mulatto Jesus -- sharing a painting with Damballah, the loa or voodoo spirit of life and wisdom. It is a crowded road with women in pristine whites and gentle pastels, men in coats and ties in the sweltering heat, coming out of the hills to attend mass. Hills where you will hear distant ceremonial drums tonight.

It is a land of children -- they giggle and clown, they pester and charm -- having beat the odds, since one in six born don't see their first birthday. And, it is a woman, proudly putting a dirty dress on a child, smoothing it for the photographer, smiling

Haiti is at once depressing, enchanting, angering and harmonious. Because, amid the endless flood of humanity, barren treeless mountains, the pains of underdevelopment and the depths of urban poverty -- there is an immense beauty in Haiti.

Looking beyond the squalor, extreme poverty and sensational news stories, you find a land in the shadow of a rich and complex history, a people of dignity, quiet resolve and spirit; a diverse culture of strong beliefs – and a society of vibrant, effusive color.

In spite of the struggle and want, the people of Haiti are not to be pitied. They are to be wondered.

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