

# Haiti (Revisited)



Haiti is an enigma — at once beautiful and horrid, an island where daily life is a perplexing tangle of struggle, irony and contradictions.

When search-and-rescue ends, the dead are buried and the rubble moved, the real challenge of helping Haiti rebuild itself will begin. Nature's cruel and indiscriminate destruction may have brought with it a pivotal opportunity for the world to help Haiti fix what was wrong well before the disaster: a complete lack of infrastructure.

For generations, and despite billions in international aid, Haitians have struggled to survive an brutal daily existence,

exacerbated by impassable roads, washed-out bridges, few hospitals, little clean drinking water and only scattered dependable electricity.

To envision a future for the country, you have to understand the pre-earthquake past.

Haiti is a land so squalid and disease-ridden that the average man barely lives to be 60 and lives on as little as a dollar a day — unless he dies of tuberculosis. Like the most Haitians, he probably doesn't have a job, medicine, running water or electricity and can't read or write.

In one word, Haiti is people — hundreds and hundreds of thousands. An incalculable mass of humanity lives in a Port-au-Prince ghetto, crisscrossed with slime-filled trenches, dirt paths, gagging smells and row upon row of shacks made of tin patches, scrapes of wood and paper. Ironically, it's called Cite Soleil though it's one of the most dangerous ghettos in the world. (Even more bizarre, "Baby Doc" Duvalier had it called Cite Simone, after his wife.)

A world away, but really just a few miles, the upscale suburb of Petionville looks down on the capital. Here businessmen, government officials and diplomats live in \$300,000 homes and enjoy fine restaurants, hotels and golf courses. Here a topless French tourist sits by a sparkling swimming pool and later showers in fresh water for lack of which children elsewhere are literally dying.

Not far away, gossiping, laughing young women beat clothes on river rocks, doing laundry as they have for centuries — in a rural stream in one of the country's few patches of forest. (Most of the country is deforested, barren rock, the trees having been cut down to feed cooking fires.)

Haiti is a land of children — they make up 40 percent of the population. Like anywhere, they giggle and clown, they pester and charm, in the decrepit slums they call home. And they are the lucky ones. In a country where dengue, malaria and diphtheria — diseases mostly unknown in the U.S. — are endemic, about one in 20 Haitian infants die at birth, one in five children is severely malnourished and most have intestinal parasites.

From the beginning, turmoil and bloodshed found a home in Haiti. And it all began when white Europeans claimed an island nobody had lost, populated it with kidnapped black Africans, gave them Christianity, then fought to keep their island and slaves from a changing cast of other white Europeans



The indigenous Taino and Arawak people were eradicated in late 1400s by European diseases and Spanish swords. What followed was a 500-year political legacy of murder,

treachery, persecution and terror. In the early 1800s, a slave revolt against French colonialists spawned the Republic of Haiti — the Western Hemisphere's first independent black nation. Unfortunately, over the next two centuries, self-serving politics and wretched social conditions put the island nation on a spiral into hell, as the country was victimized by foreign occupations, brutal father-and-son dictators, military coups, extreme government corruption and growing gang violence.

Now there's the earthquake.

Haiti is at once depressing, enchanting, angering and harmonious. Amid the endless flood of humanity, the depths of poverty and political corruption, the country possesses an inherent beauty. Outside the urban chaos, you'll find a people of dignity, quiet resolve and spirit; a diverse culture of strong beliefs; and a society of vibrant, effusive color. Early 20th century Haitian art, coveted by public and private collectors, is both stunning and distinctive.

It is a land with a deep and steadfast spirituality built on an intertwining of missionary imports and the vestiges of African heritage. On a crowded hilly road, women in pristine whites and gentle pastels walk in the sweltering heat with men in dark coats and ties, to attend Mass. They're

coming from the same hills where, at night, you might hear ceremonial drums in the distance. The people of Haiti are not to be pitied. They are to be wondered.



From 1990 – 2010 – before the earthquake – Haiti has received more than \$1.5 billion in aid just from the U.S. and billions more from other public and private sources. Too often aid came — like the still crated X-ray machines in a university hospital — without instructions or instructors. Fostering development carries the risk of fostering dependence. Every year, hundreds of missions bring thousands of foreigners to Haiti to help. Though well-intended and a "feel good" experience for the visitors, too many of the pilgrimages end up giving away fish, when they should have been passing out poles and giving fishing lessons.

Which brings us back to the future.

For decades, Haiti has teetered on the edge of becoming a failed state. Well before the earthquake, abysmal or nonexistent infrastructure, along with an international blind eye to corruption, has allowed aid to be squandered and stolen. That needs to and can change. It's now more imperative — and possible — than ever.

In the aftermath of this horrific catastrophe, concurrent with humanitarian relief efforts, the world's governments, organizations and people have a chance to do it right. We need to provide relief and hope to the people of Haiti, but most of all guidance, tools and training, while fostering the empowerment Haitians need to rebuild their nation.