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EXPERIENCING THE CULTURE OF CAP-HAÏTIEN:

A Trip to Haiti

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ABSTRACT

Alacyn Cox and Kamille Brawner, third-year students, and Kylie Echard, a second-year student, are in the College of Agriculture. In this article, they provide readers with a glimpse of their first impressions on the economy, traditions, and culture they experienced during a study abroad, service-learning experience in Haiti.

INTRODUCTION

When twenty Purdue students are suddenly immersed in a different culture, they are bound to have varied experiences. Regardless of our different nationalities and backgrounds, all of our experiences in Haitian culture had several things in common. Prior to our trip, we all had assignments that required us to study Haitian culture to prevent culture shock. Some of us had never before left the United States, others had traveled to third-world countries, and some were born and raised outside of America. There was one thing that we all had in common, though: none of us had ever been to Haiti. Although we studied Haitian culture before our travel, being there was far more surprising and engaging than researching and studying could prepare us for. Seeing it with our own eyes was much more influential than looking at pictures, watching videos, or hearing stories from our comfortable classroom at Purdue.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Upon arrival, we were greeted by a small band outside the airport entrance; they played bongo drums, tambourines, and other wooden horns—none of which we had seen before. We made our way through the small termi-

nal, which was loud and very crowded. After we picked up our bags, we were instructed to stay together. Our bus driver was waiting outside for us, and as we left the airport, we were greeted by civilians. Some people asked to carry our bags and others wanted us to buy items they were selling. Our professor had warned us this would happen, so we were not alarmed by their greetings, and we knew they were harmless. We learned that Haitians are very kind people who do not seek to hurt or steal from us, but to gain from us instead. This was the first of many times when civilians tried to bargain with us, and by the end of the trip, we were having fun with it. Between bargaining and the lack of security, this airport experience was much different than any one we had in America.

Our bus driver, who spoke no English, drove us through town. The smells coming through the window of the bus, the colorful buildings and cars, and the intense traffic made our heads turn as we tried to soak it all in. We also noticed the trash in the streets. We learned that Haiti does not have an efficient system to handle waste disposal. In order to get rid of their trash, they have “burn days” when they light the trash in the streets on fire. Since this is the system, garbage is typically thrown on the ground rather than in a garbage bin.

We became accustomed to the everyday characteristics of Haitian culture as the days passed. Haiti’s culture is colorful; many buildings were painted yellow, red, orange, blue, and green. Some also had murals painted on the side. Many trucks had similar colors, but instead of murals, they had bible verses, religious writings, or other comments painted all over them that allowed the car owner to mark their car and proudly claim it as their own (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A typical truck in downtown Cap-Haïtien.

Trust is a significant part of Haitian culture. We noticed that many trucks had large benches in the beds and were used as taxis for as many people as they could hold. We were shocked by the number of people who were willing to hop in with any driver whether they knew him/her or not. The people just trusted that the driver would actually get them to where they wanted to go. In the US, this situation rarely occurs and would be considered dangerous. It made us realize that every culture has a different norm. We also saw people frequently honking and cutting others off—there were several close calls. In America, this would upset most people, but in Haiti, everyone was calm about it and completely trusted the other drivers on the road. They never seemed angry. I think we have a lot to learn about common courtesy and trust from the Haitians.

We tried several different kinds of Haitian food during our first meal at our hotel. Some traditional Cap-Haïtien dishes included goat meat, fried plantains, native fruits and vegetables, and rice, a staple in the cuisine. We all enjoyed trying different foods and learning what we liked, wishing they were served in America. We found our hotel rooms similar to what we have experienced, but with a few differences, including a mosquito net and a water jug. This reminded us of the major issues such as disease and unclean water that still exist in Cap-Haïtien. Because of the precautions that our group took, none of us were nervous about these issues and how they would affect us, just careful.

TRADITIONAL CELEBRATION

We were in Haiti for New Year's Eve, so we were able to experience a lot of Haitian festivities and traditions, such as a buffet style dinner. The resort had performances lined up until midnight for the night's entertainment. One group really demonstrated Haitian culture with their outfits, music, and dance. Their clothes were colorful and flowing, and the women sported hairpieces that resembled tight caps, covering the majority of their hair.

The music was similar to the band we heard at the airport when we arrived. They used tambourines, wooden horns, and small drums. At first, the women sang in Creole with beautiful harmonies. Some men eventually joined them, and after they finished singing, they all began to dance with partners, moving in circles. Most of their dancing was done with their legs and feet rather than their arms. It was impressive how quickly they moved. After this group was done performing, the break-dancers began. This was similar to what we see in America, but it reminded us that it has been a part of Haiti's culture for much longer than ours. They performed many tricks, such as front- and backflips, and even ran and jumped off of a tree in the middle of the patio. This group was very entertaining and kept us occupied until midnight. We then gathered on the resort beach and counted down to midnight, a tradition in many Western countries. After midnight, we lit lanterns and let them go, watching them fly over the ocean. It was a very special experience for our class, but the night was just getting started. We continued to watch performances until 2:00 a.m., when we got to experience Haiti's New Year's Day tradition—pumpkin soup. This delicious, heavy soup left us filled up but tired, and the night ended shortly thereafter. Spending New Year's Eve in Cap-Haïtien was a great way to learn more about Haiti's culture.

We then visited Lakou Lakay, a cultural center that exhibited Haiti's rich culture through food, music, and clothing. Men were playing drums as we walked in. We washed our hands in bowls and had a wonderful meal. We all loved this place; the people were energetic and passionate in sharing their culture. The owner talked to us about how the culture of Haiti is slowly dying, but said he hopes his business, Lakou Lakay, will help sustain it. He told us that the people of Haiti see the cultures of developed countries and then no longer care so much for their own culture, which makes him sad because Haiti is very beautiful. This made us realize the fact Americans are similar to Haitians in this way: lack of passion and true understanding of their country's culture and history.

The next day we walked up a steep mountain to the Citadelle Laferrière in Nord, Haiti; it was utterly breathtaking. Some young Haitian boys walked with us every step of the way. They told us the history behind the Citadelle and the mountains. It is a fortress that was built by Henri Christophe after Haiti gained its independence in 1804, and has since been an icon of Haiti. After a four-mile hike to the top of the Citadelle, we were able to see the beautiful historical monument (Figure 2). When we made it to the top and looked over the beautiful countryside, it was hard for us to believe that we were in the same third world country that we had been at the bottom of the mountains.

Figure 2. Cannonballs at the Citadelle.

After making the hike back down from the Citadelle, we toured the Sans-Souci Palace in Milot. This palace was erected to demonstrate the power of the Black race. Currently in ruins, it was still a glorious sight. Surrounded by green grass and trees, the site is well maintained and an attraction to all who visit Haiti (Figure 3). The Haitians took pride in sharing the palace history and the events that took place there with us, this is something that more Americans can learn from.

Back in the city, we experienced four funeral processions on the streets in one day. In contrast to America, cars did not stop as those in procession walked by—they went on with their business and drove right by, as did our bus. We felt disrespectful to those who were mourning their losses. As we watched one of these processions, we saw a band playing music as they escorted those walking with the vehicle carrying the body. The procession followed the band and made their way to the cemetery. In America people follow in vehicles, but in Haiti everyone walks in procession, wearing suits and dresses. While the Haitians may have handled death and funerals differently than Americans, something we realized is that mourning the loss of a loved in is the same.

HAITIAN ECONOMY

Cap-Haïtien is vastly overcrowded, which was a culture shock for us. There were always large groups of people hanging around. There was also an abundance of stores and sellers everywhere you looked. Almost every block had a barbershop, a lottery shop, and a T-shirt shop. The majority of the products being sold in the stores were imported goods; Haiti does not have many manufacturing industries, which puts a strain on their economy.

We often wondered about the economic situation in Haiti and what might be done to improve it. Many people had smartphones, yet they did not have running water. Economic issues, agricultural sustainability, and self-dependence are looming issues in Haiti. As we visited farms and toured the countryside, we began to realize that access to water is a primary agricultural issue. Most fields are not irrigated, which is a serious problem in Haiti's year-round hot, dry climate. When we did see a field that had an irrigation system in place, the difference in productivity was noticeable. Livestock commonly suffer from water and nutrient deficiencies.

We visited a place called Meds and Food for Kids in Morin, Haiti, and witnessed how productive Haitian ground can be. This research farm, where the majority of the workers were locals, manufactured food and medicine from peanuts for children with malnutrition. Both the Meds and Foods for Kids' building and company policies seemed efficient and sustainable, and were possible models offering Haiti the potential to grow and prosper. Visiting this place reminded us of a couple things: America is blessed that not many citizens suffer from malnutrition and Americans are blessed with the resources and knowledge needed to have sustainable agriculture, which creates many job opportunities.

Figure 3. Side view of San-Souci Palace.

MEETINGS AT THE UNIVERSITIES

The most interaction we had with people was while we were at the universities, Université Anténor Firmin (UNAF) and Centre Technique d'Entreprenariat Agricole et de Développement (CTEAD). Some of their students spoke English, and our time communicating with them was one of the most memorable experiences of the trip. They were proud of their education and loved talking about their studies. They also enjoyed hearing about Purdue. As we presented our projects, it was difficult to know how much the students truly understood. We noted varying levels of understanding of the sciences and English. We listened to presentations from a Haitian professor and student, trying to put things into perspective and grasp information through a translator. All in all, we learned that it is possible to communicate with people from another culture, but it takes time and effort.

The projects that we presented on while there varied in specific topics, but they all had one thing in common: sustainable agriculture. Our goal was to teach the students studying agriculture-related programs at the universities things that we know that they would particularly benefit from. The projects originated from students or professors from previous years expressing interest in learning more about a certain topic; this way the knowledge we shared with them was more meaningful. Our specific group taught them about soil sampling. Other groups' projects varied from chicken management

to biodigesters. It was truly a great experience to be able to share with the students of UNAF and CTEAD what we have learned during our time at Purdue. This also made us realize how much we take advantage of our easy access to higher education, especially at an outstanding agriculture university like Purdue.

Overall, our experience in Haiti was life changing. Although we were well prepared through our class, we learned things that instructors, books, and the Internet could not have prepared us for or explained. We grew as individuals as well as professionals through the combined classroom learning and real-world experience we had in Haiti. Using what we had learned in class to develop projects to share with others, and learning about the culture, people, and agricultural practices in Haiti was a great academic and cultural experience. To have a full education, we believe it takes a combination of classroom learning experience with real world experiences.

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