2016

Walking Among the Haitians: Cultural Experiences in Haiti

Chris Gonzales

Purdue University, gonza126@purdue.edu

Brendan Schneider

Purdue University, schneidb@purdue.edu

Brian Wagler

Purdue University, waglerb@purdue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl>

Part of the [Service Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gonzales, Chris; Schneider, Brendan; and Wagler, Brian (2016) "Walking Among the Haitians: Cultural Experiences in Haiti," *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

DOI: 10.5703/1288284316174

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl/vol3/iss1/11>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

WALKING AMONG THE HAITIANS:

Cultural Experiences in Haiti

Chris Gonzales, College of Agriculture, Brendan Schneider, College of Engineering, and Brian Wagler, College of Agriculture

ABSTRACT

Chris Gonzales is a senior in animal sciences and hails from Terre Haute, Indiana. Brendan Schneider is a senior in electrical engineering, originally from Kohler, Wisconsin. Brian Wagler is a junior in agribusiness management from Milroy, Indiana. In this article, they describe their journey and cultural experiences in Haiti and how they worked to exchange agricultural information with the local people to further develop agriculture in Haiti in addition to developing their own understanding of agriculture.

OUR ARRIVAL

Our insight into Haitian culture began as we approached our landing in Cap-Haïtien. In front of us stood a mountain range towering over a large area of flat land; the mountains provide a home for some of Cap-Haïtien's people. We landed, exited the plane, and walked to the building, noting the run-down concrete houses near the airport. We were greeted at the airport with music played by a group of ragged-looking gentlemen using well-worn instruments. We recognized some of the instruments, but others were unique to Haitian culture. It was through music that we began to experience the Haitian languages. Music and language were a constant presence throughout our trip and, reflecting back, greatly added to our experience.

We slowly made our way through airport security and began looking for our bags. It was there we first saw Haitians interacting. They include a lot of emotion and

volume in their speech, which we grew more used to over time. We made our way through the crowd, and a group of people helped us load our bags onto the top of a Toyota bus. This bus would transport us all over Cap-Haïtien throughout the trip. We noticed that most vehicles were old, and the various makes and models were uncommon in the United States. We left the airport and joined the army of cars and motorcycles traveling the streets of Cap-Haïtien.

THE UNIVERSITIES

For three days we visited the Université Anténor Firmin (UNAF) facilities, interacted with the students, and got to know them on a more personal level. We sat in their classrooms and learned right alongside them as their instructors taught us various lessons. We sat in wooden desks watching PowerPoints that were projected onto concrete walls, while learning about Haitian agriculture and propagating plantain plants.

The classrooms were fairly small at roughly 20 by 30 feet in length. The setting was relaxed, and the students were, surprisingly, a lot like us. Many students could understand and write in English, but could not speak it. We used an online translator that allowed us to write messages in Creole, and they responded back in English using paper and pencil. We asked them questions about their day-to-day lives, what their main concerns were, and what subjects of study they thought were the most important in improving their lives. We asked about their hobbies and sports, and they eventually added us on their Facebook and other social media. We met many people,

some from Haiti and some not, who strived to make a difference by applying their areas of expertise to community needs. We took part in many discussions and made beneficial connections.

Another purpose for visiting UNAF was to gather data about the facilities in order to help prepare for next year's team, which would consist of students like us who show an interest in learning Haitian culture and a passion for helping improve the agricultural practices in those areas. It was interesting to see the things that had been completed by previous teams in an attempt to modernize the facilities. The ideas and knowledge from previous teams had been assimilated into the university culture, and the administrators embraced those positive changes to improve student education. For example, a previous team developed chemistry lab bench designs for their chemistry room. They showed them to the Haitians, who made the designs a reality. Hopefully each team will continue to have ideas that can make a great impact on the Haitian people.

Université de la Renaissance d'Haïti (URH) is one of the newer universities in Cap-Haïtien, and their administration worked closely with UNAF to ensure up-to-date, applicable curriculum for their students. URH is a technical school where students gain hands-on experience to supplement learning in the classroom. The professors made plant genetics (agronomy) a big focus of this university since this subject matter could help improve Haiti.

We ate with the Haitian students every day in a building away from the actual classrooms. The first day, we were fed "American" hamburgers and other familiar foods. We were shuttled into our own line, and we were segregated from the other students. After that meal, we requested Haitian food. This request was received with delight, and the next day we feasted on the local fare, consisting mostly of beans, rice, local soft drinks, and water. They encouraged us to skip ahead of the other students in line because they didn't want us to have to wait to eat. This was part of their culture of treating guests with respect and honor; however, we refused and waited in line with everyone else.

EXCURSIONS

The beaches of Haiti are beautiful geographic features. A grouping of rocks separated our area from the rest of the beach. We saw sea urchins, fish, sea turtles, and coral. The coral was bleached, likely a result of the ocean pollution from around the bend in Cap-Haïtien. The manager of the resort bought the sea turtle from some

fisherman who were going to kill it. Our group members took turns holding the turtle, and then we set it free. We videotaped it as it rushed out to sea.

One of the more exciting things we did was travel up a mountain to see a bit of Haitian culture: a place called the Citadel. We hiked up the mountain for roughly three or four miles over a three- to four-hour period. It was more physically challenging than we were led to believe. Although exhausted by the hike, we made great friends with a group of about 15 teenage boys who assisted us up the mountain. There was also a group of cowboys riding horses who offered us horseback rides up the mountain. None of us took them up on the offer, but I'm sure it would have been a wild ride. We all made it to the top of the mountain, with Dr. Mark Russell, our faculty mentor, and Mengda, a fellow classmate, bringing up the tail end. Hats off to Dr. Russell, who has made that trek many times before. We then began the tour of the Citadel, which was conducted by Dr. Javert. The structure was massive and built to withstand an attack from any angle. It was protected by a block wall several feet thick. We stopped outside to see where they stored the cannonballs that fed the 167 cannons within the structure. Inside, there were numerous stairwells leading to a number of different areas where soldiers would man the cannons when under an attack. The windows were just large enough for the barrel of the cannon to fit through. A cannon museum was under construction, and we saw rare cannons from a number of countries. The Citadel houses the largest number of cannons of any structure in the Western Hemisphere.

We visited the king's quarters, which was complete with a bathroom. They explained how human excretions were disposed of: out the side of the structure, with a 70-foot free fall to the ground. We then moved to the top of the structure, where we had an amazing view of the Haiti countryside. This was one of our favorite moments; we took several pictures of the scenic view, in addition to student and staff group photos.

After the tour, we trekked back down the mountain to the king's castle. The castle was a great example of how massive structures could be erected using little to no equipment. Most of the castle had been destroyed during a raid, but what was left made an amazing site. There was a large, old tree that grew inside the castle, which was sectioned off by several ropes. The statue of the queen still stood in the center of what was left of the castle. In the basement, there were several million dollars' worth of valuables that the king had planned on using to purchase the Dominican Republic. Although

this never happened, it was fascinating to know that so much wealth was stored in one place.

THE FOOD

In the mornings we ate at our hotel, Cormier Plage, which was a slice of paradise. It was a completely different world from the crowded streets and poverty of Cap-Haïtien, and steeped in Haitian culture. We sat 50 yards from the ocean and had eggs or French toast, local fruits, and juices. This gave us a chance to review our plan for the day. Then, in the evenings, we would drive back through Cap-Haïtien, over the side of a mountain, and return to Cormier Plage. Upon returning to the hotel, we would sneak a quick shower and gorge on Haitian dishes, many made with Creole sauce. We ate plantains, goat meat, lobster, oysters, conch, chicken, and fresh catch. Rice is a staple in Haiti, and served with most meals. Fish was often cooked and served whole, and any time we were served goat or chicken, we could count on having to pull bones out of our mouth. There was no shortage of incredible options for us to choose from at Cormier. Admittedly, however, it was hard to enjoy all the food knowing that just outside our walls, there were many locals living without it.

When dining at the Haitian cultural center, we were greeted by a lively host and Haitian band with copious amounts of traditional food. There we learned more about the history of Haiti, and Haitians' concern for the loss of their culture to the Western world. We were told that Haitians want to be more like Americans, making it difficult to retain the customs native to Haiti.

One of our more interesting dining encounters occurred in La Croissant, a small sandwich shop in downtown Cap-Haïtien. A drunk local stumbled into the restaurant, demanding to be served. The security guard attempted to

remove him, and a shouting match occurred in Creole. We allowed him to move ahead of our group in line so he could be served quickly and get on his way.

The shops in Cap-Haïtien were primarily run by middle-aged, burly men. Communicating with Haitian storekeepers is not for the faint of heart. Haggling with them is very challenging, but luckily, Gideon, the president and founder of UNAF, helped us out. We explored the markets in search of supplies and finally managed to buy lumber. Others went in search of chicken wire. We gazed at the streets filled with cars, children playing in the wells, and women carrying large quantities of goods on their heads. As everywhere in the city, loud music played at every street corner.

CONCLUSION

All of these different aspects of the trip that we encountered all came together to make up the picture we saw of the Haitian culture. There are sure to be things that we did not see and many things that could still be learned; however, there is no denying the impact our experience in Haitian culture had on all the students that traveled there. We now have a better understanding of the world and the beauty of all the different cultures within it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To our faculty mentor, Mark Russell, and our writing mentor, Patricia Darbshire.

Gonzales, C., Schneider, B., & Wagler, B. (2016). Walking among the Haitians. *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and Engagement*, 3, 42–44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284316174>