



Celebrating the festival of Gede – Haiti's day of the dead

Photo by Leah Gordon

Danger signs after coup bid

Political tensions deepened and violence flared following an apparent coup attempt against the government on the night of 16th December. Around 30 armed men took over the Presidential Palace, but after heavy exchanges of gunfire with police who surrounded the building, most of the attackers escaped.

President Aristide, who was not at the Palace during the attack, called on the Haitian people to mobilise peacefully to prevent a suspected coup d'état, and crowds of people took to the streets to build barricades. Coming less than five months after some suspected former soldiers attacked police stations, the latest incident provoked a violent response from government supporters. Armed men threatened journalists from radio stations that have criticised the ruling party, and gangs set fire to opposition parties'

offices and the homes of several opposition leaders.

Plan hatched by exiled officers

The opposition Democratic Convergence coalition claimed the coup attempt was fabricated by the government in order to create a pretext for the repression of dissident voices. How else – the skeptics argued – could the ease with which the attackers escaped when surrounded by superior numbers be explained? The authorities countered by presenting one of the alleged attackers reportedly cap-

tured as he attempted to cross the border. The former Haitian army sergeant revealed that the coup had been hatched by former army and police officers now in exile in the Dominican Republic.

Predictably the main protagonists in Haiti's interminable political dispute both sought to turn the events to their advantage. The government, beset by corruption scandals and denied foreign aid, clearly hoped that the coup attempt would revive public memories of the brutal military coup in 1991, and so discredit Convergence leaders, some linked to the 1991-94 military regime, others in favour of the return of the army.

Prolonging the impasse

Yet the violent backlash played into the hands of the Convergence, whose strategy appears to

be to prolong the impasse in the hope that the government will eventually fall. The key here is the international lending institutions' decision to suspend some \$500 million of development aid until the two sides reach an agreement. This includes \$146 million in loans from the Inter-American Development Bank aimed at improving health care, schools, water systems, and roads. Thus it came as no surprise to hear Convergence leaders declare that further negotiations with the Lavalas Family party were now impossible.

Some representatives of the grassroots sector, seeing the dangers posed by the government's attempts to create a 'you are either with us or against us' situation, condemned the crowd violence. The PAPDA railed against the 'bands of fascists' who burnt down a library housed in the offices of an NGO run by leaders of a social democratic opposition party. Three women's organisations went further, pointing out the similarities between the Lavalas Family's use of street gangs to harass opponents, and the methods used by François Duvalier. ■

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Holiday hotspot

In *The Independent* newspaper (7th September 2001), James Henderson, author of *Cadogan's Guide to the Caribbean and the Bahamas*, wrote "Poor, benighted Haiti, it's hardly a tourist destination. But it really is one of my favourite islands. It is vibrant, compelling and relentless; tough travel but fascinating."

Haiti Briefing asked two British readers – one a tour guide, the other a tourist – to share their first-hand experiences.

Unspoilt beaches along an undeveloped coastline

Photo by Leah Gordon

The wonders and warmth of Haiti

JACQUALINE LABROM set up the Voyages Lumière tour company in Haiti in October 1997 to organise 'journeys for the enlightened traveller'

I have three main tour operators in the UK with whom I work, and also one in Paris. I do tours throughout Haiti, and I have found that Jacmel is the favourite place for my clients. They love its peacefulness and charm, and in particular find the *Cyvadier Plage Hotel* to be a little oasis. The *Hotel Florita* (a small Jacmel guest-house adorned by flowering vines and Vodou artwork, with antique four-poster beds) is another favourite resting-place for my clients.

I receive about three lots of tourists a month, mainly from the UK, and they have travelled all over the island. Recently a couple drove themselves to Cap-Haïtien, to Jacmel, around Pétionville and Port-au-Prince, and had no problems whatsoever. They thoroughly

enjoyed their stay of over two weeks. Another couple included in their itinerary – all arranged by me and their UK tour operator – Port-au-Prince's *Hotel Oloffson* (a favourite with the Brits because of the Graham Greene connection and the RAM roots music band), Jacmel, Petit-Goâve, Ile de la Tortue with its renowned Pointe Ouest beach, and Cap-Haïtien with the marvellous 'eighth wonder of the world', La Citadelle. Again, they were delighted with the warmth of the Haitian people, the wonderful culture and art, and the many beautiful sites Haiti has to offer.

I recently organised a trip for eleven top Swedish businessmen who wanted to investigate Haiti as a potential destination for incentive travel, and they loved Haiti. I think we must be in the *Guinness Book of Records* for having seen the most of Haiti in four days. Apart from their disappointment about the infrastructure – namely the bad roads – they had no complaints, and are seriously considering Haiti as a new destination.

Haiti has much to offer for those who want to 'discover' an untapped tourist area – without masses of people lying on beaches. Unfortunately the US government insists on putting out warning statements for travellers, and, in fact, a couple of months ago, when there were some political disturbances in downtown Port-au-Prince, one potential client from the US cancelled his trip. However, the next day, an English couple came out for a week, had a wonderful time and didn't experience any problems at all. I think the Europeans tend to be a hardier travellers than US Americans!

I would not be working in tourism in Haiti if I didn't feel reassured for the safety for my clients. Let me recount one recent story:

In early 2001, I was working with a tourist who was over 70 years old, and he was staying at St. Joseph's Guest House on Delmas 91 near the suburb of Pétionville. One night, during a very heavy rain storm, I got a phone call at 9pm saying "Jacqui, it's Albert and I'm lost'!!!!" He had missed his turning off the

Delmas 91 street and carried on walking. He said he likes walking – that's for sure! I talked to some Haitian people who had helped him get a phone on which to call me, and they said he was actually at Delmas 16!!! (The distance between Delmas 91 and 16 is approximately two miles). So, in the dark and the rain I went down to get him, and he was perfectly safe and sound. People had been really nice and helpful. They had even opened up the bank so he could use the phone, and people kept an eye on him until I got there... I never had any doubts about the helpfulness of the people here, but it's nice to be able to prove it!! ■

Prospective travellers to Haiti might want to make contact with following Port-au-Prince based travel/tourist organisations:

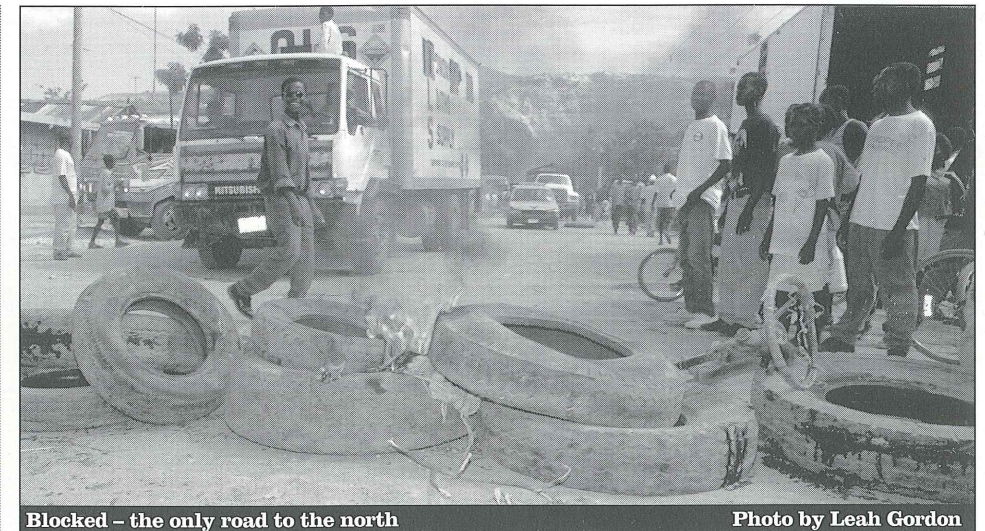
■ Voyages Lumière.

Web site: www.voyageslumierehaiti.com

■ Haiti Travels – DOA/BN.

Web site: www.haititravels.com

● Further details about travel and tourism in Haiti can be found on the Haiti Support Group web site travel section at: www.gn.apc.org/haitisupport/res_travel_index.html



Blocked – the only road to the north

Photo by Leah Gordon

Crazy stuff and burning barricades

SEBASTIAN RYPSO went looking for adventure... and found plenty of it

I got one of those last-minute deals to the Dominican Republic because I couldn't get a flight anywhere else, unless I paid an arm and a leg. I hadn't been on Hispaniola but 24 hours when I found myself walking across the border from Dajabon to Ouanaminthe in northern Haiti.

What a trip! People shouting and pulling at me from all sides. Anyway, I got into a *tap-tap* heading for Cap-Haïtien, and, while I was grilling from rare to medium rare inside, some guy got really mad because I had only paid 100 *gourdes* instead of 150, and he started tugging at my leg. Another guy proceeded to pick a fight with him, while a Culligan water-seller kid smiled reassuringly at me and signed to me not to pay the extra. Well, that was the last time I got in up front. No, I'm lying, I did it again a second time in one of those Mad-Max type lorries, and after that ride I vowed no more.

The Cap was quite a surprise too. I got there at sunset, and the charcoal-burning yard together with the bridge and the slums were quite startling. It was not quite what I had expected from Haiti's second city (it never is though, is it?). At the *La Sagesse Hotel*, I was given the bridal suite, but, as I was alone, a bride was soon provided. She knocked at the door with a romantic "bonswa mesieu, un peu de bizness?" I thanked her, but no I wasn't a businessman, just a tourist. At which she scrutinized me with as much disdain as I'd have thought imaginable, and left. Thus ended my first day in Haiti.

The festival of St. Jacques/Ogou Feray – better known as the whiskey-drinking, cigar-smoking bloke – began on the 23rd July in Plaine du Nord. I must say that was a hell of an experience. I found out that the first thing to do is to go to a *hounfort* where there's some good drumming, dance your arse off, and get loaded with coconut-milk mixed with that deadly sugarcane shit. Then, and only then, are

you ready to get dragged to the mud-pit, and face the crazy stuff that goes on there (it seemed the place to be).

I decided to leave on 29th July, but that was really creepy as, all of a sudden, barricades started jumping up all over the place, and the whispers of a coup d'état did nothing to dispel my feelings of anxiety. The night before, former soldiers attacked some police stations, and shot dead four policemen in Port-au-Prince. Anyway, the bridge and the other main road out of Cap-Haïtien were blocked by barricades of raging flames, manned by machete-swingers. After confirming that no *tap-taps* would be running that day, I was told by a group of people pressing around me that 'it might be better for me if I went back to the hotel', and that 'barricades were unhealthy places to be'. It was then – I admit I'm not the quickest of people – that I remembered the warning in the *Lonely Planet* guide that they might be right, and I agreed wholeheartedly.

I realised I didn't have enough cash to get me through the day, let alone the night, but I got bailed out by this Swiss guy I'd met. We retreated to the *Roi Christophe Hotel* – as good a place as any to wait it out.

Next morning (really early, so that all potential barricaders would still be sleepy), I got on the back of a truck, and three hours later, I arrived at the border to find, to my dismay, it was closed. The Dominicans were taking no chances. At the border gate I flapped my passport about in the air, and a Dominican soldier flapped his AK-47 (or some other big gun) about in my face. I was led by a motorcycle guy down to the river where, with my backpack on my head and water up to my arse, I crossed. Then I got led from one head of security to another, until at the Dominican customs I paid the \$10 to get me back in, and I was home free.

Next year, same time, different place. I'm going to head south, and will look for *les européens blancs negs* in the Jacmel and Les Cayes region (descendants of a Polish regiment sent to fight in Haiti's war of independence). I think I've found the subject for my thesis. ■

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Can you hear the drums?

New CD brings Vodou rhythms to your living room

Voodoo Drums of Haiti
By the Drummers of the
Société Absolutement Guinin
CD £10.99 – Soul Jazz Records
Recorded in Port-au-Prince.
<http://www.souljazzrecords.co.uk/drums.htm>

"When the sun goes down, you have no light, so you lay down on a piece of cardboard for a bed and listen to the voodoo drums, and hope no one attacks you that night. This is what it's like for most people in Port-au-Prince, Haiti! These are our brothers and sisters in Christ, just born a few hundred miles south of Miami. There but for the grace of God go you and I!" So says the Christian fundamentalist organisation, *Precious in HIS Sight*, whose web site offers US citizens the chance to adopt Haitian children and thus – we are led to believe – save them from the 'evil embrace' of Vodou.

Now, thanks to this new CD,

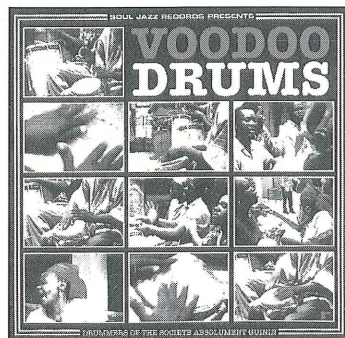
you can hear these apparently 'dangerous rhythms' in the comfort of your own home. Not quite the authentic experience, but light a few candles, take a few slugs of Barbancourt, and the drummers of the Société Absolutement Guinin will take you part of the way there. But seriously, this is a great release that will help strip away the prejudice against Haitian culture, and establish, what Soul Jazz calls "the link between the music of Nigeria and the music of Cuba (Salsa and Santería) and Brazil's African-based musics (Samba and Candomblé)."

Reviews:

Another fine left-field roots release, Voodoo Drums, comes from Soul Jazz. A collection of field recordings of Haitian drumming, this disc highlights the trance-like qualities these ritualistic rhythms possess. – Subterranean Sounds

It has a really tribal kind of feel and is quite hypnotic - extremely interesting and well worth investigating. - New Stuff

● All profits from the sales of *Voodoo Drums of Haiti* will be donated to a joint Haiti Support Group/SAKS pilot project to generate income for Haitian community radio stations by converting transistor radio sets to solar power – a much better way to help Haitians than whisking a few of them off to the USA! ■



The Female Spirits of Vodou exhibition

15th February – 9th March
at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery
28 Charlotte Street
London W1T 2NA

Nearest tube: Goudge Street
(Northern line)

Tel: 020 7255 2828

Fax: 020 7580 2828

Email: galleries@28charlottestreet.com

The exhibition contains sequin flags and metalworks, with some paintings and dolls, all representations of the female spirits of Vodou that reflect the aspirations, the reality and the myths of women's lives in past and present-day Haiti. ■

Women of Haiti photo exhibition

At the same time, at Rebecca Hossack's second gallery, just around the corner at 35 Windmill Street, there is an exhibition of photographs by Leah Gordon and Chantal Regnault that portray Haitian women in both sacred and secular settings. ■

Cointreau workers campaign update

There is still no resolution to the long-running dispute between the unions and Rémy Cointreau's Haitian partner, Guacimal. In November 2001, a Batay Ouvriye member travelled to Paris to meet Cointreau's international director. Having previously claimed to be ignorant of the local managers' repressive tactics, Olivier Charraud expressed dismay when presented with the facts. He agreed that the unions were legitimate institutions, asserted that Rémy Cointreau believed in adherence to international labour standards,

"Despite progressive statements, unions are facing renewed intimidation"

and promised a reply to Batay Ouvriye's proposal that independent monitors should assess the workers' true situation.

Despite these progressive sounding statements, Rémy Cointreau has not sent any reply in the two months since the Paris meeting, and in Haiti the unions are facing renewed intimidation. At the processing plant, the management is attempting to turn the workers against the orange pickers' union, laying the blame for the lack of work there on the strikes and work stoppages at the

plantation. Meanwhile, at the plantation itself, a union meeting at the end of November was broken up by foremen and hired heavies who threatened to burn down the house where Batay Ouvriye activists usually sleep.

In the face of this continuing intransigence on the part of Rémy Cointreau, the international solidarity campaign has been relaunched with new letter-writing appeals in France and Britain, and the staging of weekly sit-ins outside the company's office in New York. ■