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Photo: amchamhaiti.com

Opening a new terminal at Toussaint Louverture airport in 2012 – Martelly cuts through red tape with Lamothe, Villedrouin and associates to fast-track development plans.

Tourism in Haiti

New pirates of the Caribbean

These are exciting times for foreign investors in Haiti with their eyes on the prize; business is booming and is only set to get bigger and better. Mining, Free Trades Zones, sweatshop labour and mono-cropping have been promoted as post-earthquake solutions to pull the country up by its bootstraps and boost a flagging economy. Direct foreign investment of over $250 million – over sixty times higher than it was fifteen years ago – was injected into Haiti in 2014 alone.

Proponents of private sector investment in Haiti wax lyrical about giving the country what it needs most: cash. Leading the way is the Clinton Foundation which over the past few years has facilitated the visits of more than 100 potential investors or donors. In 2011, the Haitian government launched the Presidential Advisory Council on Economic Growth and Investment to cater for growing interest in the country's economy – with Bill Clinton as its co-chair.

Taking inspiration from similar development models across the region, tourism has been touted as the solution to Haiti's economic stagnation. It is the first time the Haitian authorities have given full backing to Caribbean tourism initiatives, underlining the potential of such projects to drive growth and prosperity.

High-end tourism from North American, European and East-Asian visitors is seen as a top priority by foreign investors, the government and the Clinton Foundation. Haiti's proximity to the USA gives it an edge in that market. As one US tour operator put it, "Haiti is like the Seychelles without the jet lag."

The Pearl of the Antilles

During its "golden era", Haiti was a red-hot destination for the jet-set crowd of the 1950s. Although during the dark years of François Duvalier's dictatorship, tourism all but ceased, it enjoyed a short-lived resurgence in the 1970s. For a while, under Jean-Claude Duvalier, tourism was booming. At one point it became Haiti's second largest source of income – a magnet for the sun, sea and sex crowd who were safely barricaded into beach resorts far from Baby Doc's very real and very repressive regime.

In the 1980s, however, Haiti's reputation was irreparably tarnished when it was blamed for the spread of AIDs by health and governmental groups in the United States. Potential tourists were scared away, finding paradise on other Caribbean islands. Even when subsequent research suggested that it was in fact U.S. tourists who had introduced the disease to Haiti, and not the other way round, the damage had already been done: Haiti's tourism industry never recovered.

An important component of the "plan meriken" (American plan), the flagship project which used the country as a testing ground for U.S. neoliberal economic policy in the 1980s, tourism has remained, ever since, the "obvious" solution to boost the economy. Along with free trade, privatisation and deregulated markets, the tourism model suggested for Haiti is controlled by wider market interests.

In the past, very few Haitians benefitted from the cash tourists brought to their country and it is doubtful how far down the benefits of increased private investment would trickle this time around. Yet the renewed interest has many excited. Could Haitian tourism be on the way up once again?

President Michel Martelly has always been very vocal about his ambitions to attract people – that is, money – to Haiti. At present, most short-term travellers stay with family members, "work" as voluntourists or are off-road backpackers. Despite

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The Battle for Paradise

Land grabs, forced expulsions and

Pristine white beaches, turquoise seas, palm trees swaying in the gentle breeze. This is the very image of the tropical paradise promoted by high-end tour operators. This is Île-à-Vache.

Until quite recently, this 20-square mile island off the south-west coast had been neglected by the Haitian authorities. The island has no real road, electricity or running water, but its 20,000 residents have subsisted for over one hundred years by farming its fertile land and fishing the coastal waters.

The first cloud appeared in its limpid blue skies in 2011 when President Martelly and then Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe paid the island a surprise visit. Initially the duo had their sights set on Abaka Bay, one of the few developments on the island, a small private hotel run for the most part by its in-residence owners. Part-owned by an American, Robert Dietrich, the businessman claims that Martelly contacted him to ask about buying a fifty-one percent share in the resort. He refused, but that set-back did nothing to dampen the regime's appetite for development.

The project was entrusted to the youthful and ambitious Stéphanie Balmir Villedrouin, Minister of Tourism since 2011, who survived the ministerial cull in April 2014 to have the portfolio of Creative Industries added to her title. At the start of 2013, Villedrouin put out a call for expressions of interest for Île-à-Vache.

The plan was eye-catching: 1,000 hotel rooms, 2,500 villas, a golf course, a new $13 million airport, and the dredging of the port were just some of the proposed developments. Boutique-style accommodation, a tourist village with restaurants, cafés and shops and a plan to introduce an underwater museum also featured prominently in blueprint designs.

Although local residents have resisted them, for outsiders unfamiliar with the tense situation on the island, proposals for Île-à-Vache seemingly considered their needs. They included sustainable projects promoting biodiversity and cultural patrimony as well as an internet café, community radio station, library, public market and training programmes to benefit the local population. Yet all were decided without consulting the islanders. Requests for information were ignored.

The authorities pushed ahead with their plans as quickly as possible. On 10 May 2013, the government passed a decree which declared the island and its surrounding areas to be of "public utility". That is, a zone reserved for "tourist development". In effect, the government had unilaterally annulled all existing legal possession of the land – whether through purchase, lease or inheritance. The announcement caused fear and resentment amongst the population.

"There are no political prisoners in Haiti" – Jean Matulnes Lamy imprisoned for 10 months without charge.

Photo: newsjunkiepost.com

Not long after the decree was passed, those fears were realised. When the Dominican company Estrella broke ground in August 2013, no members of the community were invited to join the celebrations. As the developers began work on the new road, farmland, plantations and homes that lay in its path were destroyed.

In May 2014 the coastal village of Madame Bernard was bulldozed and its residents expelled. The inhabitants of neighbouring village Kay Kòk have been told they are next: "We're being threatened with expulsion – said Kay Kòk resident Jenest Jérôme – This just confirms our fears that the 'Tourist Destination' project will be implemented by force."

The islanders are not taking it lying down: by the end of 2013, they had begun to mobilise. A local farmers' organisation, Konbit Peyizan Ilavach (KOPI), became heavily embroiled in the dispute and organised protests. Prior attempts to open a meaningful dialogue with Villedrouin had failed. She deflected demands for the decree to be rescinded and gave vague assurances of compensation.

In March 2014, she announced that in order to make way for resorts on Île-à-Vache, at least 100 families would have to be evicted; local estimates put the likely number of victims of expropriation and expulsion at 2,000 to 3,000 individuals.

Continuing resistance from residents – largely in the form of peaceful protest – has resulted in a number of arrests amidst accusations of police brutality. In 2014, a delegation of civil society organisations (CSOs) including Défenseurs des Opprimés (DOP), the Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organisations (POHDH), the National Network for the Defense of Human Rights (RNDDH) and the Collective for Housing Rights visited Île-à-Vache to investigate alleged human rights abuses and met with groups representing the islanders, including Action Citoyenne pour l'Île-à-Vache (ACI), KOPI, Oganizasyon Fanm Ilavach (OFAIV) as well as members of the Police

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the ecological devastation, the country is a fantastically beautiful place and rich in cultural patrimony.

Few – if any – of Haiti's visitors, however, are the high-end earners the government is seeking to attract and are certainly not there to encounter a "luxury" travel experience.

Yet high-end tourism remains firmly at the top of the government's agenda and for those with money to spend, times are certainly changing. Multi-million dollar investments are ensuring that life is becoming much more comfortable for the foreign visitor. Airports have been renovated or built, roads likely to be used by outsiders have been asphalted and accommodation that meets the "international standards" of the NGO worker, the business traveller or the potential investor is being introduced.

Crisis looming, bank balances booming

In the days and months following the earthquake, while hundreds of thousands of Haitians remained in makeshift camps, the Martelly administration quickly prioritised the rebuilding of Haiti's fallen hotels. In 2010, over half of the hotel rooms in Port-au-Prince were destroyed. In subsequent years, foreign cash has been used to rebuild and space has been made for new developments.

The earthquake allowed foreign companies to disaster capitalise from Haiti's misfortunes. "Reconstruction" promoted neoliberal interests in the guise of humanitarian aid, bypassed grassroots groups and their concerns and was used to push through "opportunities" for potential investors.

These are now clearly visible in Port-au-Prince. At the end of 2012, the Royal Oasis hotel opened its doors following a $2 million equity investment from the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund which also gave $275,000 to the Oasis Foundation, dedicated to training Haitians to work in the hotel industry. A Best Western and NH Rancho Hotel were inaugurated in Pétionville in 2013.

In February this year, a star-studded group attended the grand opening of a 175 room luxury Marriott hotel in Turgeau. It was hailed as a milestone in post-earthquake reconstruction, and a pivotal part of the plan to "build back better". Business executives attended the bash in the company of Sean Penn, Martelly and Bill Clinton.

The $45 million project was the fruit of an agreement between Marriott International and Digicel, Haiti's biggest employer, with the Clintons playing a key role in facilitating discussions. As well as creating over 200 jobs, the project will allegedly bring benefits to Haitian small businesses in the form of the goods and services they will provide.

For the zealous government officials keen to sell off their country to the highest bidder, the hotel spells progress. But most Haitians live in a different universe. With prices ranging from $178 – $409 per night, a stay at the new Marriott does not come cheap. Indeed it would take the average Haitian 143 days of hard graft to save up for just one night.

Haitians are struggling to afford clean drinking water, and access to sanitation and electricity is limited. The cholera epidemic continues. The cost of living is higher than ever. Rents continue to rise. Jobs are scarce and pay little more than starvation wages.

Ruling by decree since January 2015, Martelly's administration is becoming increasingly secretive and exclusionary. After the dissolution of parliament this year, the political situation in Haiti is dire and predicted to worsen as the elections draw ever closer.

Yet chairman and founder of Digicel, Denis O'Brien, remains optimistic: "If you look in Europe today, there's instability in Greece… there has [sic] been some riots here over the last weeks but that's not going to put people off from coming to Haiti because they know that's just demonstrations against the government."

So despite regular protests and general dissatisfaction with Martelly, and widespread uncertainty about the future, for the foreign investor or traveller with money to spend, Haiti remains "open for business".

protests on Île-à-Vache

Nationale d'Haïti and other groups that had been involved in the protests.

Their report demanded that the state engage more closely with residents to involve them in development plans. It identified a lack of communication between the Haitian authorities and the residents on Île-à-Vache as the principal grievance of the islanders. Most do not oppose plans to develop the island but they do deeply mistrust the Martelly government. They are suspicious that the full details about the proposed project have not been fully disclosed.

In an interview carried out by the late radio journalist Sony Esteus in March 2014, Jean Matulnes Lami from KOPI stated, "We don't want people to think that KOPI is protesting on Île-à-Vache because we don't want development. We want development, but we say that this development must be defined. We should be in it."

Lamy had himself been one of the two permanent policemen on Île-à-Vache; he was also a farmer, and was rewarded for his involvement with KOPI with almost ten months imprisonment, without charge, in a Port-au-Prince prison.

In April 2014, the CSO delegation published the paper "Investigative Report Concerning Tensions on Île-à-Vache". It stated that with Lamy out of the picture, police officers were deployed to the island to reinforce the Haitian National Police presence there. The forty officers included agents from the special police units UDMO (a kind of Departmental riot squad) and BIM (Mobile Intervention Unit).

Those who protested for Lamy's release were met with violence by the BIM. Two men accused the police of beating them brutally. More beatings, threats and intimidation followed. Activists have also reported anonymous phone calls and death threats. Lamy himself claims that some members of KOPI are on a government hit list.

Laurent Lamothe attempted to discredit the protestors by accusing them of involvement in marijuana smuggling, claiming that their objections were merely a ruse to divert attention from their illegal activities. In an effort to cut off protestors and stifle their demands, people navigating the small boats leaving Les Cayes to transport passengers to Île-à-Vache were reportedly paid to allow only foreigners to travel with them, effectively cutting off vital modes of transport for locals.

In a petition protesting the government's actions, CSOs called the stand-off between islanders and the Martelly regime "a David and Goliath scenario". The strong militarised presence sent a clear sign to local residents: not only was the government starting to make inroads into Île-à-Vache, it was going to stop at nothing to achieve its goal. Today, over 100 armed guards are permanently based there, contracted by the state to intimidate and threaten.

While Lamy was incarcerated, the President of KOPI, Marc Donald Laine, carried on the struggle. On his social media page he wrote: "In this country when you try to do the right thing they either kill you or put you in jail while the criminals and kidnappers are rewarded. The country is upside down." It appears that Laine might have paid the price for 'doing the right thing': in October 2014, he died from head injuries sustained in an apparent motorbike accident.

The dealings around the struggle for Île-à-Vache have been predictably opaque. This lack of transparency is not unique to tourism projects. Earlier this year CSO platforms KJM (Kolektif Jistis Min) and Observatoire Méga-Project, concerned, respectively, with mining and tourism, got together to denounce the veil of secrecy obscuring the award of contracts and concessions to foreign mining corporations, developers and tour companies alike.

In the case of mining contracts, that secrecy is even enshrined in law: the latest government Mining Bill provides for a ten-year embargo on all information deemed 'commercially sensitive' (See *Haiti Briefing* No. 77). The common denominators of these two areas of development? Expropriations, forced evictions and contracts as lucrative for the foreign corporations as they are for the Haitian officials who discreetly facilitate them.

Île-à-Vache should have been a nice little earner for Haitian officials. Not only did it present the perfect opportunity to satisfy the international community's prioritisation of tourism as an important 'development' model for the country, but it also allowed them to do so out of sight and out of mind.

In a place where they thought fewer people would be watching, the government rolled out its plans, bulldozing over the rights of local residents and destroying livelihoods in an effort to silence opposition. Rather than have to find secluded bays to welcome package tourists to its shores, the government could offer a whole island! After all, stealing land from peasants who have limited links to CSOs or resources to mobilise against the state should in theory have proved much less of a problem than elsewhere in Haiti.

But that was to count without the resistance of local residents. There are signs that foreign investors may already be getting cold feet because of the Haitian government's inability to deal with this 'little local trouble'. The residents of Île-à-Vache may yet win the day but one hopes that it will not be at the price foreseen by one resident of Kay Kòk: "If they want to take these lands, they'll have to kill everyone on the island."

Operation Rebrand Haiti, all systems go

Selling Haiti as a desirable brand to the mainstream traveller remains a huge challenge. Two years ago, the country welcomed its first group of package tourists in over 25 years. Greeting the group at the airport to music and merriment was Minister of Tourism and Creative Industries Stéphanie Villedrouin.

At the helm of efforts to lure foreigners and repackage Haiti, the Minister is quite a sensation. Villedrouin was appointed to her post in October 2011. Young and ambitious, she grew up in Venezuela, where her father served as Ambassador during the Duvalier era, and obtained her tourism degree from the Dominican Republic.

Villedrouin has learnt well from her Dominican mentors who have successfully marketed the DR as a tourist destination despite that country's abysmal human rights record. Her main goal is to change Haiti's negative image and allow the country to return to its tourism heyday.

She predicts that a cool $350 million is needed to complete the job and has plans to build tourist resorts and thousands of hotel rooms. Multilingual and a confident public speaker, she has successfully galvanised backing for her endeavours from the Haitian government and travel companies in Europe and North America and is negotiating package deals with Canada.

In an interview earlier this year, she stated, "We have Jacmel that will attract cultural tourism and Île-à-Vache (see inset article) which will be more high-end. And, because nature is so good, in between we have 26km of beaches where we need to create the grand tourism destination, which will be the revenue generator".

Villedrouin has been keen to promote Haiti's cultural heritage and has supported tour operators' efforts to organise visits to the Citadelle Laferrière and the Palace of Sans-Souci. But in order to get to this site, the government advocates the use of Cap-Haïtien, Haiti's second largest airport.

Close to Caracol Industrial Park, the failed $170 million flagship Clinton-backed programme paid for with emergency aid money, the airport was built by the Dominican construction firm Estrella. Offering daily direct flights to and from Miami, it was renovated with over $30 million in funds from the Petro-Caribe programme and renamed "Hugo Chávez International Airport" in 2013. Yet, while Martelly, his cronies and DR politicians such as Bautista have benefitted from the sale of oil by Venezuela, they have saddled Haiti with a debt which will take over 20 years to repay.

In October last year, Martelly, former Prime Minister Lamothe, and Villedrouin boarded the inaugural American Airlines flight to Cap-Haïtien from Miami. The flight was touted as a momentous occasion.

Haiti without Ayiti?

In addition to the high-end resort tourism, cruise ships remain firmly on the government's agenda. Haiti has maintained a very good relationship with Royal Caribbean since the 1980s and the company is one of the main foreign investors there. Royal Caribbean pays close to $200 million every year for the right to use Labadee which it describes as its "private island paradise".

Royal Caribbean leases the land – which is fenced-off and guarded by a private security force – from the government, which receives $10 for each foreign visitor to its coastline. Tourists revel in its water park, roller coaster and luxurious beach cabins. In the past, few were aware that they were visiting the island of Hispaniola and many were oblivious to the fact that they were in Haiti at all! Evidently, informing visitors of their actual location might have resulted in them going elsewhere.

After all, poverty is unfortunately something that investors and tourists – particularly at the higher end of the scale – can find somewhat off-putting.

With Operation Rebrand Haiti, though, things have improved a

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little. Villedrouin can at least be credited with pushing for tourists to travel to the Haitian mainland, and with trying to improve the reputation of the country with foreign travellers. Nonetheless, she certainly has her work cut out. As US-Cuban relations improve and travel restrictions are relaxed, Haiti may struggle to attract the investment it is seeking. She is however keen to capitalise on a triangular relationship with the Dominican Republic and Cuba, offering outsiders the opportunity to experience three very different countries in one trip.

One project recently announced by Villedrouin is a plan to develop tourism on Tortuga, off the north coast of Haiti. Of huge historical importance, the island was one of the first points of arrival for Columbus and his men in 1492. Once the hub of activity for pirates in the Caribbean, in recent years, it has acted as one of the main departure points for Haitian migrants attempting to reach the US before commencing their perilous journey.

Last year former Prime Minister Lamothe signed an agreement with Carnival cruises – based on a similar tourist model to that of Labadee – to construct a $70 million port on Tortuga. The deal will see the creation of an "authentic" Haitian market in a controlled environment which will be the only opportunity Haitians get to sell their goods or benefit from the presence of foreign visitors.

As with the Labadee model, most people the tourists will interact with will be Carnival employees and not local residents. In a recent article for Tourism Concern, Nicola Hill stated that "Beyond those 'artisans', who are the only Haitian workers present, the Haitian people are left out of the economic benefits of such a lucrative resort. Royal Caribbean shamefully exploits the Haitian landscape while paying an ineffectual and corrupt government who [sic] certainly is not trickling down economic gains to the population; Carnival is soon to do the same."

All-inclusive, all-exclusive

All-inclusive tourism is far from the model of progress it is purported to be. In Cuba, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and further afield, this type of venture has proven to be exclusionary and damaging to local industry. Similar to other models across the Caribbean, it is designed to keep visitors and their money in the same place where spending and consumption habits can be controlled.

While the Haitian government profits from its agreements with tour operators and private enterprises, the majority of local populations remain cut off from tourists and their spending potential. As foreign companies and local governments reap the rewards of this multi-million dollar industry, local populations remain completely isolated from any form of social or economic engagement with outsiders.

The all-inclusive model has also been criticised for the impact it has on local businesses. The few locals employed by hotels find that they are forced to work long hours and that their fundamental rights are overlooked. Pay is also notoriously poor. The right to land is arguably the most controversial aspect of the all-inclusive model. Private land means that local people are restricted from accessing their own coastline in order to sustain their own livelihoods.

Resorts often rely on their own private electricity generators and sanitation systems. Local towns do not benefit from their presence. Rather than being sourced locally, food is often purchased from international suppliers. Due to strict hygiene controls, it tends to be thrown out in huge quantities. Rather than enjoying a Haitian rum when at the bar, guests are more likely to be served a Bacardi. Equally, head management is almost always flown in from overseas, reinforcing centuries of foreign imperialism and economic domination over Haitians and local resources. The only Haitian "culture" that resort tourists are exposed to is a neatly packaged, commercialised and racialised version of how the foreigner might expect to 'see' Haitians.

Residents of Ile-à-Vache peacefully protest the theft of their land.

Photo: newsjunkiepost.com

Sustainably unsustainable

International NGOs are also seeking a slice of the tourism pie. With their post-earthquake coffers almost empty, the promotion of the tourist sector, mostly through initiatives which promote sustainable tourism, is the popular choice to help boost Haiti's development. Community-led tourism for example is an initiative which aims to bring Haitians and tourists together through an appreciation of Haiti's stunning natural beauty.

Grassroots tourism, led by Haitians for the benefit of Haitians, however, is a long way away from the high-end resort tourism being trumpeted by Villedrouin and her associates. The model pushed here has close parallels to the government's other flagship 'achievement' – Free Trade Zones.

Both are established through the expropriation of land, the destruction of local enterprise (whether it be fishing or agriculture) and both bring minimal benefit, upstream or downstream, for local populations. Sweatshops import their own raw materials and re-export 100% of their profits; the only in-flow to the Haitian economy is what they pay their workers – a subsistence wage.

Haiti: tourism ready?

Villedrouin nonetheless has positioned herself very well to achieve her goal. In February this year, the Haiti Ministry of Tourism launched its first ever U.S.-targeted advertising campaign. Facilitated through conversations with the Inter-American Development Bank, the UK-based G Adventure Tours also began taking European travellers to Haiti the same month.

Haiti also currently sits as the Vice-Chair to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) on its Commission for the Americas. The country hosted UNWTO's annual meeting of tourism authorities in Port-au-Prince in May 2015. Eager to show the world that Haiti was "tourism ready" it introduced delegates to a number of infrastructure projects that it had invested in, such as airports and roads.

For the UN, in a post-millennium development goal world, tourism is being implemented as the key strategy in allowing for economic growth and forging social cohesion. For the Secretary-General of UNWTO, Taleb Rifai, the fact that Haiti hosted the regional meeting is proof of the country's preparedness to seize growing opportunities in tourism in the region.

Although luxury tourism may not be a priority for most visitors to Haiti, it is undeniable that attracting more of the tens of millions of visitors to the Caribbean to visit the country could prove extremely beneficial. Executed effectively and in an inclusionary manner, the money and opportunities it would generate could potentially revolutionise the country. The assumption – or convenient message – is that economic development and job creation go hand-in-hand and therefore more money could only be a good thing. That is to say, the more cash the tourist has to spend, the more the local population will benefit. A better income and improved living standards would increase spending power. Families could invest in their children and their future.

And therein lies the real problem. Higher wages and increased spending power would transform the poor majority and spell disaster for the Haitian elites who cling desperately to the status quo: real opportunities for the poor to raise themselves and their children out of poverty would spell the beginning of the end of their domination of the country and its resources.