



Street workshop for those essential football repairs

Photo by Leah Gordon

MORALE-BOOSTING SOCCER TRIUMPH

While the political crisis deepened, with still no Prime Minister and half of the ministers of state also resigning, Haitians were thrilled by another sort of game. Over five days in mid-October, tens of thousands of football fans packed into the newly refurbished national soccer stadium to watch the Haitian team in a four-nation tournament.

Soccer is the number one sport in Haiti with hundreds of small club teams. Women's football is as popular with spectators as the men's game. The finest hour for the national team was when it qualified for the 1974 World Cup finals, and in its first game took a one goal lead against Italy, at that time one of the strongest sides around. Although Italy went on to win the game 4-1, soccer-mad Haitians remember the game with immense pride.

Political turmoil recently has impeded the progress of Haitian soccer, and for some years Haiti failed to field a national team. Instead, Haitians have followed foreign soccer. Until quite recently the daily newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste*, used to publish the results of the top English club games. Haitians' favourite team is Brazil, and its victory in the 1994 World Cup was a huge morale booster for the population, at that time living under military rule.

Now, the games involving Jamaica, Cameroon, Martinique and Cuba, held to mark the inauguration of the revamped Sylvio Cator stadium, seem set to reinvent the sport in Haiti. At the

opening ceremony, Roger Milla, Cameroon's World Cup hero, was the special guest. After the formalities, the Haitian team took on Jamaica in a friendly, losing one goal to nil.

The next day, the tournament proper started, and, in a thrilling game against Cuba, Haiti emerged as winners on penalties after a 2-2 draw. This was sweet revenge for last year's defeat at Cuba's hands which ended Haiti's chances of getting to the 1998 World Cup finals. In the next game, to everyone's surprise, Martinique then beat Cameroon 2-1 to set up a final against Haiti.

Haiti's young team had only been together for two months, and, although no one rated their chances after Martinique's easy victory over Cameroon, an estimated 25,000 spectators packed into the FIFA-standard stadium for the final. Some 5,000 others were locked outside. Across the capital groups gathered around radios to listen to the match commentary.

Haiti won the match 3-0 to the delight of the crowd who left the ground to party long into the night. Rara band, 'Foula', led dancing fans through the streets. One fan told Reuters, "This is an incredible thing for Haiti because all the other teams in the tournament have been playing professionally on an international level. No one expected us to win." In the euphoric atmosphere after the game another fan declared that the Haitian team will be ready to take the World Cup in the year 2002!

Sources: Libète, and Reuters

CAN HAITIANS BENEFIT FROM TOURISM?

Everyone seems to agree that Haiti needs to attract tourists. After all, how else can the country make any economic progress? Aside from coffee, mangoes, and essential oils for perfume, there is not much else to export now that all the sugar cane refineries are closed. Mining explorations, currently being carried out by Canadian companies, may or may not bring some reward. Development of free trade assembly zones will mean little, save pitifully low wages for a few. Tourism offers the chance of foreign income, a desperately needed influx of money spent on accommodation, travel, food, drink and souvenir crafts. The question is what kind of tourism should Haiti develop?

To the east, the neighbouring Dominican Republic, a latecomer to the Caribbean tourist industry, now welcomes over two million tourists each year, generating approximately one billion dollars of annual foreign income. But the DR has all the infrastructure needed for mass-market, cheap holi-

ment's Secretary of State for Tourism, Maryse Penette, who in 1995 told IPS, "We do not intend to delve into the market of mass tourism for we realise that is unrealistic...Haiti is a unique culture and we intend to focus on our strengths, our culture, our people, our artisans and our history to provide a different experience to visitors to our region."

What does Haiti offer?

Haiti is quite unlike other Caribbean nations. Its revolutionary history, the people's social and cultural links with their West African ancestry, and their vibrant Voodoo religion and associated artistic creativity, are potential selling points. In a world where one country is starting to look much like another, Haiti is still startlingly fresh to the jaded Western traveller. In many ways a trip into the countryside is like a journey back in time to eighteenth century Africa, and this only two hours flight time from Miami.

Yet, if it is the very fact of the country's cultural

tives currently being explored by the Haitian government raise more immediate issues. One is to offer tourists holidaying on northern coastal resorts in the Dominican Republic the chance to visit the northern city of Cap-Haitien and the near-by Citadelle, a massive and well-preserved fortress built atop a mountain by King Henri Christophe in the early 1800s. The other idea is to encourage Caribbean cruise ships to stop at more destinations in Haiti. The island of Tortuga, Cap-Haitien and Jacmel are rumoured to be under consideration. At present one company, the Royal Caribbean, makes twice weekly stops at Labadie, a beauty spot near Cap-Haitien.

In both cases one wonders whether many ordinary Haitians will benefit. Will visiting tourists from the Dominican Republic have the opportunity to buy artisania or food from local people as they are whisked from their resort and back by plane or coach? Will the cruise ships let their passengers off to mingle with peasants selling their wares? At Labadie the precedent is not good. When the ships arrive at the beaches, leased by the cruise line from the Haitian government, a handful of craft vendors are allowed into the grounds. A high wall around the peninsular keeps everyone else out. Food and drink are brought ashore from the ships and are served by the crew. In April this year, local people blocked the road into Labadie to protest that, while the government earns up to US\$30,000 a week in payments from the cruise line, they see no benefits at all from the visits.

Eco-tourism

Alternative suggestions of how revenue from tourism might be spread more widely, and how the worst excesses of exploitation might be avoided, focus on eco and adventure tourism. In spite of the extensive environmental degradation, Haiti still possesses a wealth of bio-diversity. It is home to more than 6,000 species of plants (35% of them endemic) and 220 species of birds (21 endemic). The mountain ranges are dotted with dense pine forests, waterfalls, unexplored limestone cave systems and meadows filled with wild flowers. On two of Haiti's mountains, some of the highest in the whole Caribbean, national parks have been established to preserve unique mountain ecosystems. Unspoilt beaches are often surrounded by pristine coral reefs. If well-organised, there are opportunities for hiking, diving and horse-riding holidays.

isolation and economic underdevelopment that will attract foreign tourists, how will this uniqueness withstand their arrival? There are other questions that must be asked. Is it right to commodify and market a people's culture and way of life? On the other hand, isn't global homogenisation inevitable, and isn't it up to the Haitians themselves to decide how they will make a living, or find the money to send their children to school? When you live a life of abject poverty maybe the short-term benefits of tourism outweigh all other considerations.

Coaches and cruise ships

The prospect of coachloads of tourists descending on a Haitian village, camcorders at the ready for an 'authentic Voodoo show', or a 'genuine' konbit at harvest time, is still a long way off. Two initia-

*La Citadelle fortress - one of the wonders of the New World
Photo: Leah Gordon*



day, tourism. There are beach resorts and hotels with over 23,000 beds, and five international standard airports. Haiti, by comparison, is primitive. There is just one international airport in the overcrowded and dirty capital city, and just 1300 beds in a handful of hotels. What infrastructure there is has collapsed: the few paved roads are riddled with pot-holes, the water supply is at best suspect, and the telephone and electricity services struggle to cope with demand.

There is a Club Med in Haiti, up the coast from Port-au-Prince, near the town of Saint Marc, but it is the country's only resort of any size. In the short-term at least, Haiti can't hope to compete for the spoils of the package holiday sector with its neighbour, nor with the Bahamas, Jamaica, and now Cuba. This is recognised by the Haitian govern-



Jacmel carnival - cultural event/tourist attraction. Photo by Leah Gordon

Waiting for the tourists to come

Wilson was a teenager when cruise ships stopped at Port-au-Prince in the 1970s. He used to hang around by the bars and night-clubs down by the port. In time he picked up enough English from the off-duty sailors and the hustlers who tailed them, to earn a few dollars working as a guide for the cruise ship tourists. The late 1970s was the peak time for foreign visitors. This was the era when Haiti was a favourite destination for the world's jet-set. Mick Jagger, Jackie Onassis, Alain Delon and Roger Vadim were some of the glitteratti who came to relax in the capital's exclusive hotels and small beach clubs along the

coast. In 1980 the travel industry peaked with 300,000 tourists, foreign businessmen and visiting Haitians from North America.

Then Haiti started to get a bad press. World media coverage of human rights violations in 1980, unfounded accusations that Haiti was the source of AIDS in 1982, more political unrest in 1983, and the world recession, all conspired to deter visitors. Hotel and restaurant workers, artisans and artists lost their jobs and incomes.

Wilson adapted to the new situation. Mounting political unrest, the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship, and moves towards democracy brought a new type of visitor. Foreign

journalists arrived to fill the gap left by reluctant holidaymakers. They needed locals to smooth the way during their hit-and-run visits in search of stories. Wilson picked up work, here and there, fixing for journalists who stayed at the downtown Oloffson Hotel, famous as the setting for much of Graham Greene's *The Comedians*.

But the attention span of news editors was short, and the work was irregular. When Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president in 1990, Wilson hoped that political stability would herald a return of the tourists. On the day that Aristide was inaugurated, he invested in some breeze blocks, cement and corrugated iron, and built a kiosk opposite the gates of the Oloffson. He stocked his shop with wood carvings and painted metal sculptures, and brought papier-mâché masks from his hometown of Jacmel.

Eight months later, the military coup d'état destroyed his dream of a viable business. Still,

the Oloffson, now run by a Haitian-American punk musician, was a trendy hang-out for the more adventurous journalists, and Wilson made do by carving himself something of a niche as a guide for British writers like Andy Kershaw, Ian Thomson and *The Independent's* David Adams.

When the US marines invaded in 1994, a flood of journalists came with them. This was headline news. But Wilson missed out as CBS, NBC, and ABC TV crews hired the better-off guides who had their own cars. They made small fortunes working as chauffeurs. So it goes...Wilson looked forward, not back. Like most Haitians, he saw the return of Aristide, and the promises of massive foreign aid, as a new dawn for Haiti. He hoped the country would be 'open' once again to tourists. Each morning he dusted down his stock, put it on display, and waited for the tourists to come by. Three years later, he is still waiting.

To discuss these and other issues, and how Haiti might learn from the experiences of other countries in the region, the Haiti Support Group has organised a round-table debate on 21 November, 1 - 5pm, at King's College, Chelsea, London. The speakers will include Rénald Clérismé, former national secretary of the Tet Kole peasant movement, Suzanne Seitz, from the Haitian Secretariat of Tourism, Polly Pattullo, author of *Last Resorts: the Cost of Tourism in the Caribbean*, Tricia Barnett, from Tourism Concern, and Steve Wilkinson, from the Cuba Solidarity Campaign. We encourage interested readers of Haiti Briefing to participate in this debate. Contact the Haiti Support Group for details.

BTCV working party in Haiti

tion Volunteers (BTCV) ran over 65 projects overseas with people from the UK working together with groups from the host country. **Alistair Mackay**, who travelled to Haiti in September as part of the first BTCV work project in that country, here reports on his two weeks working with peasant communities in the south.

Our first day in the capital was spent stocking up on provisions, and visiting the Ministry of Agriculture for a briefing on the problems facing the rural poor. The main issue is a general confusion about land tenure - the people farming land do not necessarily own it, and hence absentee landlords can, and do, take land back at any time. As a result of this insecurity of tenure, deforestation has occurred on a massive scale. In addition, a general scarcity of farming land has resulted in the misguided, and very short term, cultivation of steep slopes in mountainous areas where soil erosion is now severe.

Our aim was to work with local people in two peasant communities to help counter some of the worst excesses of this soil loss. We arrived at the first site, Fonds des Boudins, in the mountains between Leogane and Jacmel, just as it was getting dark. What seemed like the whole population of the valley had walked up to the road to greet us. There was a great expectation that we would be able to cure all their ills, yet, as the days wore on, the gravity of their situation became increasingly stark. Some cultivated areas, which had produced a bountiful harvest only ten years ago, were now just bare rock.

We were drawn to the work site by the sound of a conch shell blown by one of the community leaders. He called himself 'Bigfoot' to subvert and reclaim the disparaging term the Haitian elite gives to peasants who have no shoes. Soon around thirty people had gathered carrying an array of tools, some of which had been donated by the Faith and Justice group of St Margaret Marys Church in Liverpool. We set about digging a series of ditches, a metre wide by a metre deep, along the contours of the hillside. These trenches, called 'kanal kontou', were designed to catch and hold excessive water run-off.



Anglo-Haitian 'konbit' (work brigade) digging anti-soil erosion ditches.

Photo by Alistair Mackay

To someone used to pen-pushing in an air-conditioned office back in London, the work was very strenuous, and there was a real possibility of suffering heat exhaustion under the intense Caribbean sun. I could only marvel at the camaraderie of these people enduring these conditions on a daily basis and witnessing the diminishing returns of their efforts year by year.

At Meyer, the second site, the local

longer, and the anti-erosion measures were more advanced. The main method was again ditches, although shallower and with a layer of vegetation to add to the stability of the structure. Meyer was also blessed with an abundance of stones which were used in the construction of numerous dry stone walls. Unfortunately, the amount of time each peasant could give up to work on these community projects was limited, so the walls were built quickly and haphazardly. As a result, walls that were just three years old had already fallen down. We were merely rebuilding old walls that were destined to suffer the same fate.

I had the impression that, unlike for example in south-east Asia, there were no traditional skills and techniques for sustainable farming on these slopes. After all, these people had only recently been pushed into farming these areas - two hundred years ago the population was nearly totally confined to the slave plantations on the coastal plains.

I came away from Haiti with many questions that have no easy answers. The degradation of the land is fast turning what was once very lush into a desert. The people, although very resilient and resourceful, have the odds stacked against them.

● *The BTCV party and the Haiti Support Group would like to thank Laurie Richardson for organising the programme, and interpreting for the British visitors.*

Book review

You, Darkness by Mayra Montero

Published by Harvill Press, £9.99

With its turbulent history and mysticism, Haiti is the ideal location for a magic realist author. So it is perhaps not surprising that Cuban writer, Mayra Montero, has set two of her three novels there. *You, Darkness* is the first of her works to be translated into English. In it, three troubled lives are bound together: an American zoologist contemplating the slow decline of his marriage; his Haitian guide reminiscing on his tangled past of sex and death; and the nearly extinct *grenouille de sang*, the frog that the two characters are searching for on a mountain in Haiti.

The chapters are headed by chilling facts about the rapid worldwide disappearance of frogs and toads. Written almost scientifically, these notes build up into a tragic elegiac poem for the global loss of bio-diversity. The narrative alternates between the voices of Victor, whose faith in scientific logic is eroded throughout his search, and of Thierry, whose memories reveal a life constrained more by the magic folklore of his country than any traditional Western morals. Political violence and a crumbling society are the backdrop for this powerful novel that charts not only the demise of amphibians but of any cultures alien to our own.

Leah Gordon