

A land of paradoxes

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Nestled in the Caribbean Basin is a legendary land filled with paradoxes, an island of desire, and of hope, the protrusion of a sunken continent; a sacred land where essential primordial traditions and knowledge were deposited; the happy ending to one of the greatest quests by the Europeans of the Old World. The Ignieris, Arawaks, Tainos and Ciboneys who lived here called it Ayiti, Kiskeya, Boyo.

It is a land of delights, a land of women, the mother of all lands. It is wealth and glory, blood and sweat; the pearl of the Antilles, the first Black nation in the world, born out of an independence fiercely won by freedom-minded maroons. It is a highway for the spiritual routes of many civilisations, a land of exceptions and of the extraordinary; Haiti will surprise, subdue and charm you with the way mankind has been reshaped. This has led to a combination of spiritual, physical, intellectual and emotional characteristics – the Creole language (palé créole), Creole mentality, Creole music, Creole dance, Creole food, Creole lifestyle and Creole art.

They came from all over – Phoenician conquerors, peoples fleeing persecution and seeking a new place of refuge. In 1492, Spanish missionaries were sent here by the catholic Queen Isabella. They called it Hispaniola. French, English and Dutch pirates, corsairs, adventurers and mercenaries made it their port of call and provisioning place, a ground for every kind of pursuit. Filibusters and buccaneers of His Majesty Louis the 14th rechristened it Saint Domingue. They focused on île de la Tortue, île-à-Vache, before they established the towns of Petit Goâve in 1654, Port-de-Paix in 1666 and the future capital Cap-Français in 1670 on the *grande terre*. The Ryswick Treaty in 1697 was an acknowledgement by Spain of France's effective possession of the western third of the island. Slaves snatched from the bosom of Africa replaced the aboriginal populations wiped out by civilisation's harsh treatment. They came here for millions of reasons, and they were welcomed by the island. Today, Haiti tells us the story of the Americas and of universal mysticism.

In Haiti, tangible and intangible cultural heritage intertwine to weave a pure mixed fabric on the borders of the American continent, imbued with the enduring scent of an Africa close by yet far away.

Haiti's mountains are impenetrable, enigmatic vaulted masses, overlapping one another. These vestiges of the

past are juxtaposed throughout different periods of history. The ruins of coffee factories in the Matheux chain from the glorious colonial era, forts erected after independence at the behest of Emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines, bear tangible witness to man's greatness. With arrogant excess, bordering on the unthinkable, and typical of the genius Henri Christophe, the Citadel at Laferrière, considered the eighth wonder of the world and declared a world heritage site by UNESCO, overlooks the Sans Souci Palace of Queen Marie-Louise.

The Minguet Arch, a gem of ethnology on the south bank of the Dondon River witnessed Indian caciques celebrating the sun and the moon with their people; these deities had escaped from the caves to bring light into the world. It was believed that the first humans dared to imitate their example and were transformed by the star of light into frogs, lizards and birds. The guardians of the narrow, solitary valley were turned into stone statues.

In the north, above the Lenormand de Mézy plantation, the legend of a certain Dutty Boukman, a man of letters and a muslim, is part of the memory, which places the reality of the Bois Caïman and the symbolic end of slavery in August 1791.

During the catholic Easter celebrations, rara bands wind in and out of the back alleys of Jacmel while the appetising scents of fried foods fill the air, and aromatic elixirs are imbibed, to the rhythms of *vaccines* and *grages*.

Locals and people from other countries can be found under the arbors in the Lakor Soukri, Lakou Souvenance and Lakou Badjo close to Gonaïves. They come seeking truth, confidences, favours, judgements and the seal of the loas. Their experiences and aspirations meet and cohabit these sacred high places of Vodou (voodoo). Spiritualism levels conflicts and differences. It is the breach in which many descendants of African tribes transplanted into the new world found cohesiveness in their quest for freedom. The ancestral voodoo cult was and still is a veritable catalyst as in the time of slave revolt in Saint Domingue.

Grotte Marie-Jeanne, the most imposing cave in the Caribbean, is located in the coastal town of Port-à-Piment. It is the setting for a major part of precolumbian civilisation. It is purported to be connected to Laforêt in Grand'Anse, and was one of the doorways to the earthly paradise of Les Abricots, the underground Ciboney city.

In Limbé, la Roche à l'Inde guides us to the origins of writing, through trails which pre-date the African presence. In a comparative scientific attempt, attempts to retrace Haitian and Caribbean identity have been made during this century.

In a communion somewhat unusual to the uninformed eye, catholics and Vodou practitioners rub shoulders and mix in Ville Bonheur close to Mirebalais to celebrate the Virgin of Saut-d'Eau or Mistress Erzulie in the same breath. The waterfalls at Saut d'Eau do not differentiate between the backgrounds of the pilgrims, and dispense miracles according to the will of God or the Vodou deities.

These beliefs, traditions, rituals, large chunks of Haitian history attached to places are simply tiny shreds in the journey to discover Haiti.

Haitian painting, introduced to the world in 1944, is famous and well recognised. It leads the observer to explore spaces to celebrate the unchanged or the reinvented. It will try to reach new dimensions sketched only by our limitless imagination and the pursuit of fabulous perfection. Haiti has been consecrated in the field of art by Philomée Obin, Salnave Philippe-Auguste, André Pierre, Bernard Séjourné, Jean-René Jérôme, Préfète Duffaut, Mario Benjamin, Casimir Joseph and Ludovic Booz. The shapes, hues, volumes arising from naive impulses or espousing the trends of a school, nobly convey the vibrations of a profoundly original people.

Haitian creation expressed through multimedia and on multiple backings, in handicraft, sculpture and aesthetic elements does not fail to reveal the specific, complex sources which cannot be separated from the inspiration found in a particular island identity. The currents and eras are successfully included in the large inventory of cultural and artistic heritage. Apart from human and social factors, Haitian art has undergone greater development crystallising the best of the memory of a group of individuals.

Haitian linguistic legacy includes two official languages – French and Creole. From the constructive cohabitation and productive coexistence of the essential unchanging values of French and juicy Creole in all spaces, the result is a colourful mosaic of oral and written works. Haiti is one of the few French-speaking countries in the Caribbean. Through its spectacular productivity it attempts to compensate for its near disparity in an environment dominated by English and Spanish. Again, the originality of the prolific Haitian artistic and literary productions comes from the

fusion of their origins in a unique crucible. Ida Faubert. Yanick Jean. Marie-Vieux Chauvet. René Philoctète. Georges Corvington. Frankétienne.

Around a strip of dirt road, and the lush treasure of an ageless mapou tree, the rumbling of a set of drums can be heard. They attract the attention of traveller still blinded by the rays of a scorching, impertinent sun. The sounds of a Congo ritual echo in his gut and invade his brain, inviting him to join the ceremony demanded by the goddess Erzulie Dantor. There is a convivial atmosphere among the faithful. The guest of the loas finds himself retracing the steps of the dancers in a pattern close to the vèvè of love. He soaks in the delicious, beady rhythm, and he tries to convince himself that the shot of rum he has just savoured is responsible for his warm blissful feeling. It is the season of country feasts. The pilgrim drawn in by the lakou decides to spend some more time enjoying the legendary Haitian hospitality. Under a leafy mango tree and with the complicity of the new moon, he entrusts his tired body to a vetivier mat. In another hour's time, he will leave on another trip, in the extraordinary world of Haitian spiritualism.

Encouraging cultural diversity and exposing creativity are among the most commendable alternatives for sustainable development. Because of its surprising characteristics, Haiti remains an important place of pilgrimage in the Americas. People feel a sense of curiosity, an obligation. This happens by osmosis. It is likely that they will be charmed by the cultural heritage, the outstanding history, the land, the people, the minds behind the creations.

For those seeking a renewal or an incursion into the past, Haiti offers multiple reasons for exploring its cultural universe. They always return, and they often stay here...for a long visit.

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The ruins of Sans Souci, Palace of Queen Marie-Louise, in northern Haiti



Photo: Patrick Jerome