

Haiti, the buried pearl

Each person who walks the land of Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines will have a unique tale to tell based on their experiences, writes the Ministry of Tourism

The Haitian environment is teeming with cultural experiences, particularly its famous Carnival

Ghouls gone wild: Carnival revellers in Jacmel

The world's first independent black Republic, open to the Atlantic Ocean, occupies a mere 27,750 km² of central land extending from the Caribbean Sea, sharing the Island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Haiti has a tropical climate and a rugged topography consisting of two peninsulas, with its highest peak culminating at 2,680 metres in the Massif de la Selle. With a coastline exceeding 1,500 km², the country boasts magnificent beaches, dreamt of by the most discerning visitors. Its strategic location at the heart of the Caribbean should also give it special status as an axis of trade among the States of the region.

A fascinating history

The Haitian people, who are overwhelming of African descent, are the product of a mosaic of cultures resulting from migratory movements of the colonial and postcolonial periods. "Ayiti" is the name given to this mountainous land by the Amerindians long before Christopher Columbus and his cohorts arrived on the island, which they mistook for the Indies. The Red Indians (Amerindians), who were decimated by the forced labour to which they were not accustomed, were soon replaced by Blacks from various tribes of Africa under French colonisation. Overcome by

the inhumane conditions inflicted on them by the colonists, the pride of the rebellious slaves triggered a change in the approach to human rights worldwide. The Republic of Haiti demonstrated its sovereignty vis-à-vis the colonial world from the dawn of the 19th century. Owing to this glorious past, such names as Toussaint Louverture, nicknamed the Black Spartacus by eminent professor Leslie F. Manigat, and Jean Jacques Dessalines, who conquered the Napoleonic troops, still resound across the borders, alongside other mythical heroes in the history of humanity.

A unique and authentic Culture

Haiti, despite falling under the sphere of influence of the large North American cultural industries, still maintains some authentic characteristics of its cultural identity. Tylor (1871) defined culture as "a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, law, ethics, customs and all other aptitudes acquired by man as a member of a society."

From the point of view of beliefs, this country, which is also known as Quisqueya, has managed to attain international recognition for its mastery of Vodou (voodoo) rituals, a religious practice transported by African tribes, which, today, is also fused with the Haitian cultural imagination.

Another aspect that is characteristic of Haitian culture is the constant use of the mother tongue. Creole was born out of the need for the masses of slaves on the plantations, coming from tribes using different languages, to create a common communication tool. The mother tongue of the Haitians is still the most widely spoken language in Haiti, notwithstanding the development of forms of diglossia in its coexistence with French. Nevertheless, competence in various other languages is widespread among the youth.

With regard to musical rhythm, Haiti is on a par with Jamaican reggae and Cuban salsa. The Haitian compas, a great influencer of French West Indian zouk, appeals to music lovers across the Atlantic. The drum used in Reggae music vibrates and thrills as much as Troubadour.

The immense creativity of the island's artists distinguishes the literary, hand craft and pictorial styles of Haitian designers, that reverberates with uniqueness and creativity, earning the appreciation of the most discerning critics. During their visits to Haiti, French poets André Breton (in 1943 and 1945) and Jean Paul



Photo: Thierry Bijou

Sartre (1949) did not conceal their admiration for such works, which they associated with the Surrealist approach. Just think of Franketienne's Spiralism, the fame of painter Philippe Doddard, or the mastery of papier-mâché by the craftsmen of Jacmel, a town located in southeast Haiti and considered the cultural capital of the Caribbean. Haiti has undoubtedly made a name for itself in the cultural arena. The Haitian environment is teeming with cultural experiences, particularly its famous traditional Carnival, which brings people together in the unbridled passion of a collective catharsis, animated by the popular meringues. The Carnival celebrations receives participation from both local communities and visitors, in particular members of the diaspora.

An exceptional natural and cultural heritage

There is no doubt that Haiti is one of the few Caribbean countries to possess such an original cultural and natural heritage. While the country's infrastructure is not as extensive as that of the megacities of North America and Europe, its cultural and natural heritage attests to the element of fantasy that has always been inherent in Haitian works.

Towards the 19th century, the world added to its list of brilliant works Citadel Henri "an impressive fortress situated at the summit of the northern mountains of Haiti, approximately 27 km south of the town of Cap-Haïtien and 8 km above the town of Milot. It is the largest fortress in the western hemisphere and was inscribed on the World Heritage List by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1982, together with the Sans-Souci Palace. The Citadel was built by Henri Christophe, following Haiti's independence from France at the beginning of the 19th century. Martiniquan intellectual, Aimé Césaire, said of the Citadel: "For these people, whom they wanted to bring to their knees, a monument was needed to bring them to their feet".

An excursion to the Citadel inevitably leads to the Sans-Souci Palace. The Sans-Souci Palace was the royal residence of King Henri I (Henri Christophe) of Haiti. Construction of the Palace began in 1810 and ended in 1813. It is situated in the village of Milot.


In 1842, a violent earthquake destroyed a significant part of the Palace and devastated the adjacent town of Cap-Haïtien. The Palace was never rebuilt. Prior to its destruction, it was recognised as the Caribbean equivalent of the French Palace of Versailles. In 1982, UNESCO inscribed its majestic ruins on the World Heritage List.

While civilisation invented for us these impressive works, nature also bequeathed to us magnificent sites. A dive at the Saut Mathurine falls in the south of Haiti, or a swim below the Saut d'Eau falls in the central department can fill an entire day with bliss. The

beaches of the south, particularly those in Port-Salut and Île-à-Vache or Côte des Arcadins, both delightful and memorable.

What can we say about Labadie? It is a paradisiacal land that is known to the majority of cruise passengers worldwide. This private seaside resort, which is situated 5 km northeast of the town of Cap-Haïtien, receives approximately 600,000 cruise tourists annually. In 2009, it received the maiden voyage of the largest cruise liner ever built: the Oasis of the Seas. Had Labadie existed in its current form in 1912, the Titanic may not have sunk; the reason being that there are no icebergs in the ocean washing the shores of Labadie.

Labadie offers "attractions including a flea market, numerous beaches, water sports, a water-based playing field and a zip line". It is a true dream location and getaway that allows for an enjoyable vacation in complete serenity.

Each person who walks upon the land of Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines will no doubt have a unique tale to tell, based on their authentic experiences of the Haitian imagination. Haiti's external image is caught in a spiral of silence in the sense that emphasis is placed on the setbacks that punctuate its day-to-day existence. Its natural beauty, the loyalty, dignity and hospitality of its sons and daughters are eclipsed by the writings, microphones and projectors of major news channels. We acknowledge the magnitude of the challenges and we are not giving up the fight. Indeed, Haiti continues to carry the full symbolic weight of the New World. As our friend Césaire concluded: "Our dignity, our existence, was for a long time based solely on this founding event: I found in Haiti more than a major input into the thoughts that I was trying to construct." 

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Magic bus: even Haiti's public transport is a feast for the senses

